

Submission for the Commission of Inquiry into Queensland's Child Safety System with a focus safe engagement of children and young people

"We are the generation it's got to change for. It's really important we are listened to and heard. We are the ones who are needing, and asking, and pleading, for change."

Young person, QLD, 2025

"Listen. Listen and respect."

Young person, QLD, 2025

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About CREATE Foundation

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 for children and young people with a statutory care experience and advocating for system changes to improve their experiences and outcomes.

Introduction

CREATE Foundation supports the right of children and young people to have their voices heard on matters that impact their lives. It is a concept outlined in Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and promoted through the National Standards for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care and Queensland's Charter of Rights. It is also the foundation that underpins CREATE's extensive work consulting with children and young people with an out-of-home care experience.


However, if inclusion of youth voice and lived experience is not managed in the correct way it can be, at best, tokenistic and, at worst, re-traumatizing for the young people involved. Following the recent announcement that the Commission of Inquiry into Queensland's Child Safety System intends to put lived experience at the center of the discussion, this submission addresses how children and young people can be engaged in a way that is safe, supported, and respectful of their individual needs and stories. The information contained in this report is based on young people's perspectives shared with us through our core programs and consultations.

Engagement must be genuine and move beyond tokenism.

A frequent message we receive from the children and young people we speak to is that they are unable to meaningfully participate in decisions being made about their lives. The Queensland child safety system has been set up to protect some of the state's most vulnerable people, however those same people report feeling ignored and undervalued by the very same system. Young people tell us that their views and wishes are often overlooked, and decisions are made for them, not with them.

Young people advised that this can make them feel:

"Annoyed, powerless, out of control, unsafe. The decision-making process should involve me."
- Child, Youth Advisory Group 2025



“You feel like property rather than a person. When people treat you this way, they’re making a decision about someone’s life. They’re setting out their future”.

- Young person, Youth Advisory Group 2025

It is imperative that professionals in decision-making roles consult with young people on their preferences and needs, and do not make assumptions about what works best for them. Not only are children and young people experts on their own lives, but their unique perspective can offer rich insights that may be missed by adults. In terms of the Inquiry, in CREATE’s view, it is the people who have experienced it first-hand who are best-placed to review the effectiveness of Queensland’s child safety system.

When it comes to including youth voice in important discussions, young people have told us:

“You need to think through the eyes of the child, so it makes sense to just ask them what they’re thinking.”

- Young person, Governance Group Meeting 2025

“I feel like that’s so important because we’re the ones actually living it.”

- Young person, Media Interview 2025

Genuine inclusion, however, goes beyond simply inviting young people into the room. Young people have advised that often their participation feels tokenistic and transactional. They believe that decision-makers sometimes wish to be seen as doing the right thing, without a genuine intention of incorporating feedback given. For participation to be meaningful, young people must be able to actually change the course and outcomes of the conversation. This requires decision-makers to show up in good faith, ready to take the opinions of young people seriously.

If participation is not authentic, young people tell us that it may as well not occur. We have heard:

“There’s no point us talking if they’re not actually going to listen. That doesn’t help anyone.”

- Young person, Consultation, 2025

“I gave up on voicing any frustrations to the Department as nothing I said was ever acted on.”

- Young person, Consultation, 2025

“They just tick a box to say they’ve spoken to us about it. Technically they have spoken about it but nothing is done and they haven’t listened.”

- Young person, Youth Advisory Group 2025

Further, inauthentic attempts at inclusion can be harmful for the young people involved. Recounting lived experience can bring previous trauma and its effects to the surface. If young people’s willingness to be vulnerable is not met with decision-makers’ willingness to incorporate their recommendations, not only have these young people shared their stories unnecessarily but they also report feelings of distrust and powerlessness.

When engagement has felt merely symbolic, our young people have told us:

“We are clearly political pawns. Like everyone has their own agenda and are using us for it.”

- Young person, Consultation, 2025

“Realistically they don’t give a shit about us, they give a shit about their image and how they look to the greater public.”

- Young person, Consultation, 2025



“To them, we’re a case number on a piece of paper. But to us, it’s our life.”

- Young person, Media Interview, 2025

Decision-makers also have a responsibility to be up-front about the degree to which children and young people will be able to impact the outcomes of a discussion, so that young participants will not be set up with unrealistic expectations. It is important the young people know how their information and ideas will be used, and that young people receive feedback on the outcomes of their advice.

Part of authentic engagement involves including the voices of young people with lived experience from the very beginning. Young people have told us that they don’t want to be brought in during the final stages of a project or conversation simply to review decisions that have already been made by adults. Not only does this appear as though their inclusion is an afterthought, but young people feel that the likelihood of their feedback actually being incorporated at that late stage is low. They may also feel pressure to agree with what has already been decided, so as not to disrupt the progress made.

Young people have reported:

“Lived experience needs to be included from the start.”

- Young person, Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“To be smart about it, they should come to young people first to look at what isn’t really working. Otherwise, they will have already made their minds up.”

- Young person, Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“It’s so much easier to work with them to build the foundation from the start. The number of times I have been brought in on something at the end and it’s like, is everyone actually going to undo all their work if they’re told it isn’t good for young people?”

- Young person, Youth Advisory Group, 2025

Embedding these ideas demonstrates a genuine commitment to valuing young people’s perspectives and strengthens the quality and credibility of the decision-making process.

CREATE recommends:

- Involve young people early in planning and decision-making, not just at the end of a process.
- Offer collaborative processes where young people feel their voices genuinely shape decisions.
- Be transparent about how their contributions will be used and follow up with feedback on decisions made as a result of consultation with children and young people.


Engagement must be safe, supportive, and trauma-informed.

Underpinning any engagement with children and young people in this sector must be a commitment to trauma-informed practice, and an understanding of the long-lasting impacts of childhood trauma and adversity. This perspective requires adults who seek out youth voice to be sensitive to any potential triggers, to avoid practices that may re-traumatise, and to create environments where children feel respected and understood.

Young people tell us:

“Most people just don’t know how to support young people with trauma.”

- Young person, CREATE Governance Group, 2025



“Focus on understanding trauma. Be mindful of body language and facial expressions so you don’t appear threatening.”

- Young person, Training Session, 2025

Embedding trauma-informed principles such as safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment, will strengthen children and young people’s capacity to engage meaningfully in conversations about their lives. By focusing on relational safety and open communication, practitioners can create spaces that prioritise a child or young person’s wellbeing.

The importance of relational safety.

Relational safety refers to the sense of security that develops when adults demonstrate respect, transparency, and compassion over a period of time. For many children with a care experience, trust in adults is not a given and must be developed slowly. Once this trust has been established, children and young people will be more willing to participate and share their views honestly.

Young people tell us that this trust is best established by adults spending time with young people and getting to know them as individuals. It is important for young people to see the real person behind the professional, and genuine empathy and a desire to understand them.

During discussions on how to build rapport and establish relational safety, young people have told us that professionals should:

“Speak more to the young people first and learn about them before working up to big issues.”

- Young person, CREATE Governance Group, 2025

“They need to have the right mindset and come in slowly, not come in guns blazing because that will make young people feel frightened.”

- Young person, CREATE Governance Group, 2025

“Meet the young people where they’re at and get down on their level.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2024


Where time limits prevent the gradual building of trust, practitioners would benefit from inviting other trusted adults into the conversation. The role of these adults—who could be carers, support workers, teachers, family members, or other community mentors nominated by the young person—is not to speak *for* the child or young person, but to provide the scaffolding that allows that child or young person to share safely, knowing someone is in their corner.

Alternatively, young people have indicated that it can be helpful to have a professional in the room who has no agenda other than to cater to the comfort and wellbeing of the young people, for example:

“Like a mental health keyworker or nurse. You can take a break and talk to them if things get heavy.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

Decision-makers must also be mindful of real and perceived power imbalances which exist when professionals gather in spaces with young people. Children, particularly those belonging to certain cultures, are often taught to see adults as authority figures; it can therefore feel unnatural for them to speak up as equal contributors. In practice, adults can offset this by ensuring there are more young people than “officials” in the room so that they are given power in numbers, avoiding formal dress and speech, and collaborating on important group tasks such as agenda setting.



Some tips from young people include:

“Frame things like co-operation rather than trying to get them to do what you want. Plan things out together and let them come up with some questions or activities.”

- Young person, Training Session, 2025

“If you have officials in the room they need to state their reasons for being there.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“Don’t interrupt, particularly if you don’t need to.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“[Professionals] would wear expensive, fancy suits or designer clothes. This made it very difficult for me to relate to them, as things like that were so far out of my reach. The disparity was obvious and it made me think they wouldn’t understand me.”

- Young person, Training Session, 2024

Frequently, we hear from young people that seeing peers or professionals with lived experience in leadership or facilitation roles brings a sense of inclusion to discussions.

“Have someone with lived experience running the session. Not an old bureaucrat. Someone closer to their age.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“More people with lived experienced in these roles.”

- Young person, Governance Group, 2025

The importance of transparency and comfort.

Clear and simple communication is essential when safely engaging children and young people in conversations about their lives. Many report feeling anxious or uncertain when they do not know why they are being asked questions, what will happen with the information they share, or what is expected of them throughout the process. Professionals can reduce these feelings of anxiety by explaining the purpose of the young people’s involvement in simple, age-appropriate language, free from industry jargon. When children know what to expect, they are more likely to feel comfortable, participate honestly, and trust that their voice is being heard and respected.

Young people have told us that they find the following things helpful:

“Information about what’s going on and the purpose.”


- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“Things like knowing ahead of time who’s coming, how many people will be there, what to expect.”

- Child, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

“Send questions beforehand and prepare young people for what they may be asked.”

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025



To further promote comfort, a welcoming and accessible physical setting demonstrates respect for young people's needs and contributes to safe and meaningful engagement. Small changes to a space can make a big difference, and young people have advised that they appreciate an environment that allows for plenty of personal space (including breakout rooms), flexible seating, and minimal sensory stimulants. Meeting in a neutral location, or one that has positive associations for children and young people, also helps them to feel more at ease.

Young people will have different needs and preferences in terms of information sharing, and professionals should tailor their approach as needed.

"I'm a visual person, I don't know what everyone else is like, but I need extra stuff to help me get the understanding."

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2024

"It's important for them to ask: how does that person want to be communicated with? Every kid is going to be different, so just ask them what makes them feel comfortable."

- Child, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2025

It is also essential to show young people the same respect you would any expert, and arrange for participation to take place at a time that suits them; it should not be assumed that just because they are young they do not have other important commitments and busy lives to work around. In practice, young people may take longer to be brought on board, so it is important to allow additional time for young people to gather all they need to participate comfortably in the process.

The importance of closing the loop.

Although a conversation might end when you leave the room, for children and young people who have experienced trauma, it is unlikely to leave their minds and bodies as quickly. Ongoing mental and emotional wellbeing should be considered when dealing with upsetting topics.

On how they feel following a heavy discussion, young people have told us:

"Often it's later that it hits you. Like ruminating."

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group 2025

"Especially at night when you get thinking, it can be confronting."

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group 2025

Young people have advised that in addition to frequent check-ins during a session, they appreciate having some time to process their thoughts and feelings with others following the session.

Some tips that have helped some young people regulate include:

"It might sound simple but at the very end, before everyone gets sent away, acknowledge that it's been hard and remind them that there are people or services they can call."

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group 2025

"It's nice to have someone check in with you later. Like a phone call the next day to see how you're doing."

- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group 2025



“Honestly, food. It’s the best way to calm down and have a relaxed talk with people afterwards. After a lot of my conferences we tend to go out and have a really chill lunch and debrief with the group.”
- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group 2025

CREATE recommends:

- Ground engagement in trauma-informed practice.
- Actively build trust by getting to know young people on their level.
- Prioritise the wellbeing of children and young people by creating predictable, accommodating spaces where young people know what to expect.
- Provide choice and agency in how, when, and where engagement takes place.
- Use clear, accessible communication to reduce uncertainty.
- Give feedback to show how and where young people’s ideas have been considered.
- Check in on how young people are feeling before, during, and after the engagement.
- Invest in more peer facilitators and professionals with lived experience.

Engagement must include diverse voices.

Several vulnerable minority groups are vastly over-represented within the child protection system. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 44.5% of children in out-of-home care nationally, and an estimated 41% of children within the Queensland child safety system have a diagnosed or suspected disability. Other children and young people live in regional, rural and remote communities, identify as LGBTQIA+, or come from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Young people have reported that they often feel overlooked due to their minority status, and that decisions and processes that work for most children do not work for them. They have told us:

“Having a disability and feeling judged by everyone around you, and not being included...other people don’t understand. They don’t reword things, they just expect you to understand what they’re saying, but technically you’re not understanding what they’re saying.”
- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2024

“They look at me like I don’t matter because I have a disability.”
- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2024

“Black people get judged ... It would be better if my culture was more okay and I could talk to similar people.”
- Young person, CREATE Youth Advisory Group, 2024

In order to build a system that works for all children, voices from these groups must be included. Factors such as culture and disability may impact how a young person communicates or physically engages with a space. To ensure quality, in-depth engagement, additional supports for certain children must be built in to any consultation processes.

CREATE recommends:

- Make meeting spaces, communications, and activities accessible for children and young people of all ages, abilities, language groups, and cultural backgrounds by providing necessary supports. This may include visual or hearing aids, mobility aids, assistive technology, the use of interpreters, or the presence of trusted support people.

- Ensure young First Nations children and young people’s cultural safety is supported by partnering with trusted Elders or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations to facilitate conversations. Also ensure that cultural protocols have been followed leading up to, during and after engagement with First Nations children and young people.
- Schedule sessions in regional, rural, and remote communities. When unable to participate in person, support regional communities to connect via online methods (noting that many communities lack internet access and ways of connecting, and that this too may need to be provided).

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback as a part of the Commission of Inquiry into Queensland’s Child Safety System, with this submission focused on safe engagement with children and young people with lived experience of out-of-home care. Embedding the approaches outlined above will support meaningful engagement in ways that promote safety, trust, and wellbeing. By considering the recommendations raised, professionals can create spaces where young people feel supported and genuinely able to influence the decisions that shape their lives.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Jen Hyatt, National Advocacy Director, CREATE Foundation. E: advocacy@create.org.au

References

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