

Child Safety Commission of Inquiry



Kay's story

Disclaimer: This is the story of a person who shared their personal experience with the Commission of Inquiry through a submission or interview. The names in this story are pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed. The person who shared this experience may not have been a witness and their account is not evidence. They did not take an oath or affirmation before providing the story.

Nothing in this story constitutes a finding of fact by the Commission of Inquiry. Instead, these stories have been published to show how people are experiencing the current child safety system in Queensland. Any views expressed are those of the person who shared their experience, not of the Commission of Inquiry.

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Introduction

I am a qualified social worker with professional experience working within the child protection system, and I am also a foster carer. Through both roles, I have developed a strong understanding of the realities faced by children entering care and the challenges experienced by foster families who are supporting them.

This submission outlines several key concerns regarding the current child protection framework, particularly in relation to placement stability, the adequacy of support for foster carers, reunification processes, and the limited availability of long-term permanency options for children who are unable to safely return to their families.

While the child protection system exists to safeguard vulnerable children, there are significant structural and practical challenges that are impacting the ability of the system to consistently provide children with the stable, nurturing environments they require to heal and thrive.

Concerns and Challenges for Children in Foster Care

One of the most significant concerns for the Child Safety Inquiry is that children entering foster care do not always have access to safe, stable, and nurturing living environments. Residential care settings, while sometimes necessary, are extremely limited in what they can offer children and are often highly challenging environments for young people to live in.

These settings do not provide one secure and consistent attachment figure—something many of these children have already lacked throughout their lives. The absence of a stable caregiver can continue to impact children significantly while they remain in residential care.

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Children entering foster care are also not always able to be placed in high-quality family-based placements. Many foster carers already have multiple children in their care, which can make it difficult to fully meet the individual emotional and developmental needs of each child, particularly those with complex trauma histories.

I am also concerned that the current child protection system is outdated in several key areas. The funding model for foster carers, and the structure of foster care itself, does not adequately reflect the realities of caring for children with significant emotional, behavioural, and developmental needs.

In modern society, most families require two working adults in order to maintain financial stability and meet the cost of living. The foster care allowance is not sufficient to support another child—particularly a child with complex needs, developmental delays, and significant trauma histories.

For foster carers to truly meet the needs of children, it is often difficult or impossible to maintain regular employment. Foster carers are frequently required to attend frequent family contact visits, manage multiple therapy and medical appointments, coordinate with support services, and respond to the emotional and behavioural needs of children who have experienced trauma.

At a minimum, counselling and therapeutic support should be a fundamental component of every child's care plan. Children entering care are doing so for significant reasons, yet many do not receive consistent or timely therapeutic intervention.

As a result, foster carers are often placed in a position where they cannot maintain employment, cannot fully meet the complex needs of the child without additional support, and cannot maintain a sustainable standard of living. This model is increasingly difficult to sustain and places considerable strain on both carers and the children who rely on them.

Need for Alternative Models and System Overhaul

Australia should consider exploring alternative models of care. As a social worker with experience working in the child protection system, and as a foster carer, I understand that the Australian system is largely designed around reunification as the central goal.

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While reunification is an important objective and should remain a priority where it is safe and appropriate, the reality is that many children do not return to safe and stable family environments. A significant number remain within the child protection system for extended periods, and some never experience a truly stable or healing environment during their time in care.

This raises the question of whether Australia's child protection system requires broader structural review. It may be beneficial to examine models used in other countries, identifying both their strengths and limitations, and considering whether elements of these systems could improve outcomes for children in Australia.

From both a professional and personal perspective, one of the most important protective factors for a child entering care is the opportunity to form a secure and consistent attachment with a caring adult. This relationship should be foundational to a child's experience in care.

Unfortunately, this is not always the reality. Many children experience multiple placement changes, overstretched carers, or environments that cannot adequately meet their emotional needs.

If a child is unlikely to safely return to their biological family, it is important to consider whether remaining in long-term foster care without stability is in their best interests. In these situations, permanent care options such as adoption or long-term guardianship may provide children with the opportunity to develop stable, lifelong relationships with committed caregivers.

Children deserve the greatest possible opportunity to thrive into adulthood. Stable, permanent attachment-based relationships are not optional—they are essential for healthy emotional and psychological development with research showing the significant impacts of children who never have this relationship.

Reunification Realities and the Impact on Children

Returning children safely to their families should always be the preferred outcome where possible. Reunification should remain the goal when families are willing and able to make the changes necessary to create a safe and stable environment.

However, when families are unable to demonstrate meaningful change within a reasonable timeframe—approximately two years- four years—serious consideration should be given to alternative permanency options.

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Unless Child Safety services are able to provide intensive, long-term, and meaningful support to families—many of whom carry their own histories of trauma, disadvantage, and complex needs—it is unrealistic to expect reunification goals to consistently succeed after many years of trying.

In the meantime, children are often placed in highly unstable circumstances.

Many children move between multiple foster placements due to child safety not valuing stability for the child and prioritising their requirements over the child's need for stability, the complexity of their behaviours, the severity of their trauma histories, and a lack of adequate therapeutic support. They may also be required to attend contact visits with biological family members that directly trigger trauma responses, making emotional regulation and behavioural stability more difficult.

The system expects children to heal, yet it does not always provide the conditions necessary for healing to occur.

One of the most damaging patterns within the current system is the length of reunification processes. In some cases these processes extend for several years or even longer, some aiming for reunification at any time during the child's lifespan, even in situations where reunification has already failed and ultimately does not occur. During this time, children remain in prolonged states of uncertainty and instability.

This instability is often compounded by placement changes, disrupted attachments, inconsistent therapeutic support, and uncertainty about their future. Even when children are physically safe, they may not feel emotionally secure, wanted, or connected to a consistent caregiver causing further harm.

Research consistently shows that placement instability and disrupted attachments are associated with increased risks of mental health difficulties, educational disengagement, and involvement with the youth justice system later in life amongst many others challenges.

Placement Instability and Legislative Pressures

Another significant concern is the frequency with which children are moved between placements in order to meet departmental planning requirements or legislative processes.

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In some cases, family contact arrangements may change every few weeks or months depending on the needs or availability of biological families. While maintaining family connection is important, these changing arrangements can place unrealistic expectations on foster carers who are required to adjust their schedules frequently.

When carers are unable to meet these continually changing requirements, children may be moved from otherwise stable placements, resulting in further disruption to their living environment.

For children who have already experienced significant trauma and instability, these placement changes can be extremely damaging. A child who has begun to feel safe and secure within a foster home may once again experience uncertainty, loss, and emotional disruption due to decisions that prioritise procedural requirements over stability.

In many cases, children ultimately do not return to their biological families within the intended legislative timeframes. As a result, children may spend two to four years in extended reunification processes that expose them to ongoing instability.

Extended reunification timeframes may also occur when biological family options were not fully explored earlier in the child's time in care. When this happens, children who have spent several years in stable foster placements—often where they are thriving—may be removed from those homes in

order to trial placements with biological relatives which should have occurred in the first year or two of being in the foster care system causing further instability.

While the intention may be to preserve family connections, these decisions can result in children being uprooted from secure environments where they have formed strong attachments to their foster carers.

In some cases, these placements with biological family members later break down, and the child returns to the foster care system within six months to two years because the placement proves unsafe or unable to meet their needs. This cycle of removal, reunification attempts, and re-entry into care can be deeply destabilising and damaging for children.

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There is also a strong policy emphasis on placing children with biological family members, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in order to avoid repeating the harms associated with historical policies such as the Stolen Generations.

While cultural identity and connection to community are extremely important, there are concerns that in some cases cultural placement priorities may overshadow the broader holistic needs of the child.

Children require not only cultural connection, but also safety, emotional security, stable attachments, and environments that support their overall development and wellbeing. When decisions focus primarily on cultural placement without equal consideration of the child's stability, safety, and emotional needs, the broader goal of holistic care can be lost.

A truly child-centred approach must balance cultural identity with the child's need for long-term stability, safety, and secure relationships.

Community Willingness and the Lack of Permanent Care Pathways

There are many individuals and families within the Australian community who genuinely want to help vulnerable children and are willing to provide stable homes.

However, many prospective carers become hesitant when they realise that the system may require them to care for a child for a relatively short period of time before the child is returned to biological family circumstances that may still appear unsafe or unstable.

The emotional impact of caring deeply for a child only to potentially return them to an environment that may not support their wellbeing discourages many people from becoming foster carers.

At the same time, many of these individuals would be willing to provide permanent homes through adoption or other long-term permanency arrangements. However, adoption pathways in Australia are extremely limited, and permanent care options are not commonly offered for many children who may benefit from them.

This creates a significant gap within the current system. Australia faces a severe shortage of foster carers while many prospective adoptive families are waiting to provide permanent homes.

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Expanding access to permanency pathways for children who are unlikely to safely return home after a sufficient reunification process has been trailed not at any time throughout the child's life could help address both the shortage of foster carers and the ongoing instability experienced by many children in care.

System Priorities and Implementation Challenges

Another concern within the child protection system is the way legislative requirements and procedural priorities can sometimes overshadow the broader emotional and developmental needs of children in care.

While legislation and policy frameworks are essential for ensuring accountability and protecting children, rigid adherence to procedural requirements can sometimes take priority over maintaining stable caregiving relationships.

Children require more than physical safety. They need consistent relationships, stability, and the opportunity to develop secure attachments with caring adults.

However, strict requirements regarding contact arrangements and placement criteria can sometimes result in placement disruptions or decisions that prioritise compliance over stability.

Another challenge is the lack of comprehensive information sharing with foster carers. Carers are responsible for supporting a child's daily wellbeing, yet they are not always provided with complete information about the child's trauma history, behavioural triggers, health needs, or developmental concerns.

Without this information, carers are placed in extremely difficult situations and may struggle to provide the informed, trauma-sensitive care the child requires.

Carers can also feel undervalued within the system. Their concerns and observations may not always be given sufficient weight bring foster carers being known as volunteers with minimal rights despite foster carers being the individuals who spend the most time with the child and understand their day-to-day needs.

There are also significant gaps in the training provided to foster carers. Training often focuses heavily on system processes and policy requirements rather than equipping carers with the practical parenting strategies required to support children who have experienced trauma.

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Carers would benefit greatly from training that includes trauma-informed parenting approaches, understanding developmental trauma, supporting a triggered child, responding to emotional dysregulation, supporting children through grief and loss, and managing complex behaviours.

Without practical preparation and ongoing support, carers are often left to navigate extremely complex parenting situations without sufficient guidance.

Key Recommendations for System Improvement

To better support children in care and the foster families who care for them, several key reforms should be considered.

The foster care funding model should be reviewed to ensure it more accurately reflects the complexity of caring for children with significant trauma histories and higher needs.

All children entering care should have timely access to trauma-informed therapeutic support including children's counselling at a bare minimum as a standard component of their care plans.

Greater emphasis should be placed on placement stability and the development of secure attachment relationships.

Reunification processes should be reviewed to ensure children are not left in prolonged periods of uncertainty when meaningful progress toward reunification has not occurred.

Permanency pathways such as adoption or long-term guardianship should be more accessible for children who are unlikely to safely return to their biological families.

Information sharing between child safety services and foster carers should be strengthened so carers are equipped with the knowledge required to provide informed care.

Finally, foster carer training should place greater emphasis on practical trauma-informed parenting strategies and managing complex emotional and behavioural needs.

Together, these reforms would help create a more stable, child-centred system that prioritises healing, secure attachment, and long-term wellbeing for children who enter the child protection system.