



REVIEW OF BEST PRACTICE IN RESIDENTIAL OUT OF HOME CARE

This review was commissioned by UnitingCare Australia to provide guidance on best practice in the provision of residential out of home care for those children and young people who need it.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the standards required for children to thrive, through the enjoyment of the rights to which they are entitled, rights which our Governments have a duty to uphold and fulfil.

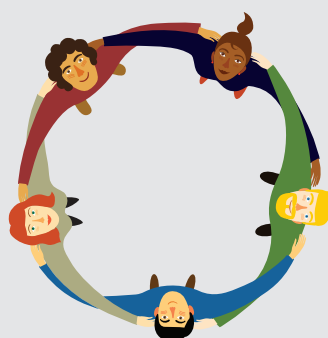
Across the English-speaking world outcomes for many children who have been placed in out of home care, particularly those placed in residential care, have been concerning. A recent Victorian report¹ highlights the strong association between contact with child protection and contact with the criminal justice

system. Many Australian jurisdictions have recently enacted or are currently enacting reforms to their out of home care systems, but it is too early to assess their impact.

The role of residential care varies across Australia and includes: short placements pending home-based care or family reunification; provision of intensive services before home-based placement or reunification; longer term care and preparation for independence and/or transition to supported disability accommodation; a substitute for home-based or kinship care where they are not available – a matter of particular concern when children under 12 are involved – or, where it is preferred by the residents themselves.

THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW

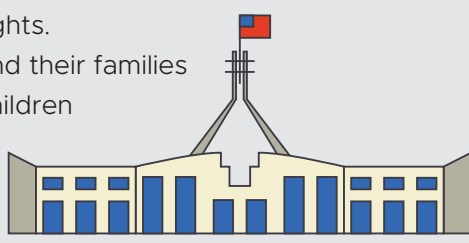
1. Strengthening the informal, community-based family support/child protection system is the key to preventing child maltreatment and working in synergy with that system is essential for the statutory child protection to be effective.



2. Preventing where possible and otherwise addressing the effects of exposure to the risk factors associated with child maltreatment is essential for reducing rates of maltreatment and removal. It is also critical for reducing developmental vulnerability, promoting physical and mental health, educational achievement and pro-social behaviour.



3. Governments at all levels need to play their part in enabling the enjoyment of recognised human rights. The rights of children and their families are interdependent – children cannot flourish if their families are denied a livelihood and shelter.



4. Arguably, our nation's most vulnerable children and young people find themselves in residential care settings.



5. State and Territory funders of residential care need to ensure that services are commissioned and resourced in a way that care providers are able to fulfil the Best Practice Principles for Therapeutic Residential Out of Home Care.



6. Organisations concerned with child welfare and child protection should advocate policy and practice that ensures that all children and young people in OOHc services, and particularly those in residential care, receive the support and engagement necessary to foster agency, healing and positive development.



The risk factors for child maltreatment cluster around conditions associated with poverty, accumulated disadvantage and social exclusion. Remedies for these conditions require significant leadership and input from government as well as concerted action across business, community and not-for profit sectors.

Jurisdictions across Australia differ in the de jure and de facto thresholds for state intervention. They differ in policy, funding and accountability arrangements. Communities within those jurisdictions differ in the incidence of maltreatment risk factors, and in the availability and effectiveness of institutions and services that assist families, particularly those that lack their own strong networks of support or have personal histories of trauma.

Given these jurisdictional and community variations, it is not possible to provide a simple prescription for the provision of effective and safe residential out of home care services, just as it is not possible to identify a particular therapeutic intervention that will meet the needs of every child or young person in care.

However, from the literature on what works and what doesn't, it is possible to describe certain essentials. In addition to meeting state or territory legal requirements, a residential service should be home-like, physically and emotionally safe, where the clinical and development needs of children are identified and met; it should keep children linked to their own community, culture and peers; it should promote continued safe contact with families where this is both possible and prudent. Above all, a therapeutic ethos should be understood and practised at all levels of the organisation providing the service as well as by front line staff.

The following set of principles applying to provision and practice of residential out of home care services, are derived from a synthesis of the literature and consultations that fed into the production of the Report.



BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR THERAPEUTIC RESIDENTIAL OOHc

Uphold the Rights of the Child
as set out in the UN Convention.

1

Do no harm and keep children safe:
use trauma-informed care and Child Safe Principles, including operation of a child-friendly complaints mechanism, to reduce risks to residents.

2

Be responsive to the voice of the child in the life and culture of the service: this means more than inviting participation in formal consultation – it means encouraging their agency in everyday life and decisions about them.

3

Forge and maintain strong links with families, significant others, communities and culture, fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging.

4

Assess and monitor the developmental health and well-being of residents, noting any history and ongoing consequences of trauma, and recording subjective indicators of health and well-being that reflect the child or young person's aspirations for their best self.

5

Develop, deliver and modify as necessary individually tailored, developmentally focused therapeutic treatment plans aimed at promoting normal growth and development, including skills, knowledge and competencies, sense of (cultural) identity, agency, and the ability to form positive relationships.

6

Identify and utilise adaptable, evidence-based models or strategies for practice that are capable of achieving good outcomes for residents, families and staff.

7

Recruit and retain staff with the necessary professional and personal skills to provide Therapeutic Residential Care through provision of appropriate working conditions and personal support.

8

Ensure that the residential facility is free of hazards and conducive to Therapeutic Residential Care.

9

Draw on evidence, reflection and feedback to enable continuous improvement.

10

Adopt systems thinking: OOHc needs to work in harmony with a strong, community orientated family support and child protection systems.

11

Only provide residential services developed, resourced and implemented in conformity with the above principles.

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