

Codesigning quality in residential and out-of-home care

by centering children, relationships and shared care

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"Who do I belong to?"
"Who listens to me?"
"Will I lose who I love?"

Quality is often defined through compliance, safety and risk reduction. Children experience it more personally: through voice, belonging, identity, relationships and whether the people who matter remain in their lives.

Through our co-design research, children often spoke less about the harm they had experienced and more about the people they had lost. This led to a critical insight: the moment of disconnection may itself be one of the most profoundly harmful experiences in a child's journey.

Our Way Home (OWH) is a restorative, child-centred model designed with children, families and communities. It reframes out-of-home care as shared care, with restoration pursued safely and at the pace and in the form right for each child.



1 What is Our Way Home?

A practice model for care that is:

- Restorative, not merely placement focused
- Built around the child's relationships and aspirations
- Grounded in culture and lived experience
- Flexible enough to change the system around the child

2 How the Model Works

Deep Co-Design

More than 250 contributors

Young people with care experience, families, Aboriginal community members, carers, practitioners, Government partners and researchers helped shape the model.

3 What We Are Learning

10%

reunited with family

1.4%

Western Australia comparison rate

85%

maintain meaningful family contact

Early implementation indicators

Four Driving Principles

Radically Personalised

Care adapts to each child's needs, strengths, preferences and future.

Connected by Default

Family, culture and community are part of care, not outside of it.

Embedded in Culture

Aboriginal culture is central and carries equal weight with clinical practice.

Heart First, Then Head and Hands

Trust and relationship come before plans, interventions and tasks.

From Principles to Practice

1

LISTEN

Children and families are treated as knowledge holders.

2

MAP

Relationships, culture, strengths and aspirations are made visible.

3

PLAN

Children and families influence goals, actions and decisions.

4

CONNECT

Care teams actively maintain and restore safe relationships.

5

LEARN

Routine data, feedback and stories guide improvement.

Qualitative Evidence

Across 23 de-identified Most Significant Change stories, recurring patterns were found:

- Connection supports wellbeing, regulation and stability
- Identity & culture strengthen confidence and belonging
- Voice & agency improve engagement and participation
- Relational safety often precedes behavioural change
- Family connection acts as a central care intervention
- Everyday care can do therapeutic work

Interpretation: these stories provide evidence of contribution and recurring practice patterns. They are not intended to establish causal attribution or represent every child's experience.

What Quality Looks Like

Children are not only safe. They are:

- heard and taken seriously
- connected to family, culture and community
- supported by consistent relationships
- able to shape their care and future
- known as a whole person

The Aim

To show how child-centred co-design can move beyond participation rhetoric and reshape the everyday experience, practice and measurement of quality in out-of-home care.

Practical Enablers

My Plan

Connection Map

Cultural Identity & Enhancement Plan

Family Link Workers

Aboriginal Practice Leads

Care Teams & Bridge Spaces

Implications

- 1 Measure relational continuity, belonging and agency alongside safety.
- 2 Treat family and cultural connection as core care, not an add-on.
- 3 Build child voice into decisions, feedback loops and evaluation.
- 4 Support workforce judgement, reflection and model fidelity.

The Central Message

Care becomes quality when children experience connection, identity, belonging and real influence over the decisions that shape their lives.

Our Way Home shows how co-design can translate these priorities into a practical model for everyday care, evaluation and systems change.