Introduction

ABOUT KIDS CENTRAL

Kids Central was developed by Tim Moore and Megan Layton at the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University. It was developed in partnership with the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services with support from the ACT community sector.

The kit was developed in response to a research project conducted by the Institute on experiences of homelessness for accompanying children. Over 18 months, staff at the Institute met with children and talked to them about what life was like for them when they were homeless, what they felt they and their families wanted and needed and how they thought kids might get better support. Many of the things that children had to say are covered in the six Kids Central resources.

Researchers also spoke to a group of parents and workers about what they thought they needed, to best help kids who were experiencing homelessness, and their families. One of the key messages that came out of both the kids' and adult interviews was that services greatly benefited from adopting a child-centred approach, but that sometimes workers wanted some ideas and tools for how to do this in practice. As a result, Kids Central was born!

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Our key messages

Kids Central aims to help services place children **in the centre** of their work, and is based around six key principles:

1. Children and young people's safety and wellbeing are of primary importance
2. Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes
3. Because children are usually best supported within their family every effort should be made to assist families to support their children
4. Environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow
5. Children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives
6. The best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children and families in an ongoing way.

What's inside

Kids Central is divided into six sections, each based on one of the key messages. Each includes information on how to implement child-centred practices and how to overcome challenges that might arise, as well as a host of tools (tips for talking with children and their families about tough stuff, scenarios, activities) that can be used with children and families to build on current work. The kit also includes some exercises, called 'pulse checks' that teams can do to reflect on their practice and come up with ways to address any gaps.

Kids Central doesn't have all the answers, but will hopefully provide workers with a springboard from which to dive into child-centred practice!

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What we learned from *Finding their way home: children's experiences of homelessness*

Finding their way home aimed to answer the question: 'What does the system need to know about how children perceive and experience homelessness in order to achieve better outcomes for homeless families?' As part of the project, researchers spoke with children who had been homeless with their families and found that:

- homelessness is a subjective experience, determined more by levels of connectedness to family and to community, and the absence of fear, instability and insecurity rather than by housing status.
- children stressed the importance, when they are housed, of: having adequate space; having a sense of control over their environment; housing stability and predictability; and feeling connected to friends, supports and opportunities.
- children's experiences of homelessness are often precipitated and exacerbated by parental conflict and family violence, poverty, parental alcohol or other drug misuse and other related personal and family issues.
- children's experiences are characterised by high levels of family separation; exposure to violence; poor health outcomes; feelings of stress, anxiety, loss and grief; social isolation; and difficulties in attending and achieving at school and making and keeping friends. A number of young people in the sample experienced intergenerational homelessness and were now parents whose own children had accompanied them during periods of homelessness.
- though problematic, children reported that during periods of homelessness they felt connected and supported by their families, and that their parents mitigated some of its negative effects. They believed that having lived through difficult times they and their families had developed an appreciation of life and a sense that they could overcome future challenges.

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What we learned from *Finding their way home: children's experiences of homelessness*

We found that when working with homeless children and their families:

- It is vital to connect with children and young people in their own right, engage with them as individuals, and listen to and acknowledge their stories. Children and young people may also need support to be able to talk with parents about what is happening for them, in order to help the child and also to strengthen relationships within the family.
- Children and young people need information about the events and processes affecting their lives, but this should be given in a way that recognises a young person's developmental and emotional needs, their personality and their wishes.
- Children from families experiencing homelessness often experience problems at school, with their health, and making and retaining friends.
- Some of the factors that are recognised as 'pathways' into family homelessness – such as parental drug and alcohol use, family violence and parental mental-health issues – themselves make children more at risk during periods of homelessness. High priority should be given to supporting parents to deal with the issues contributing to their homelessness.
- Knowledge of other relevant services and supports should be strong and up-to-date, and any referrals of young people to these services need to be well supported and coordinated and take place as early as possible in the life of a problem.
- The effects of homelessness on children often persist beyond the periods of homelessness. High levels of change and insecurity in the child's life make it important that support for the young person is sustained beyond the crisis period, and preferably provided through continuing contact.
- Much of the fear and distress of homelessness for the young person is the insecure and sometimes unsafe nature of their temporary housing. Safe, secure and stable accommodation must be made available as early in the homelessness cycle as possible.
- A family's strengths and achievements should **ALWAYS** be recognised.

Finding their way home is available on the ICPS website at **www.acu.edu.au/icps**

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How to use the resource

The Guides

We have included information, tips and strategies for understanding, thinking about and implementing the six key messages. This makes up the bulk of the kit and includes links to other resources and materials that might be useful in considering and enhancing practice in related areas. Workers can make their way through the resource individually, or use it as a platform for discussions with their teams.

The tools

The resource includes a number of tools that can be used by practitioners working with children and families. Some are games and activities; others are worksheets and a few discussion starters that can help workers in considering family needs.

The resource has been developed for workers and services that support families who have experienced homelessness. That said, many of the tools and resources can be adapted and used with children and families experiencing a range of challenges and difficulties. Spend some time thinking about how they might be tailored for other groups, and feel free to use them alongside other programs.

Even though the issues you might discuss with children while using the tools can be very serious, it is still important to engage with children in a positive, warm and very attentive way – remember age-appropriate, serious fun!

Children need to know that you are listening carefully and taking them seriously, and that they will be supported. They may be used to taking a lot of responsibility, so it's important not to underestimate their skills, while at the same time setting up plans and supports that will mean they can begin to relax a little and begin to trust some adults. Helping children to tell the difference between unsafe and safe situations and people, and making plans for each, is a good starting point.

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When using the tools it's important that you:

- Get your head around the tools: before using them with the kids be clear about what you want to achieve and think about how they might be tailored to meet the needs, wishes and preferences of the children with whom you're working. This might mean turning written or drawing-based activities into interactive outdoor games or into drama activities or storytelling.
- Take control: the tools we've developed are designed to give you ideas on how you might engage kids in particular ways. They are by no means exhaustive and may not always be appropriate or respond to the needs and wishes of the kids or your preferred way of working. Use them as a springboard rather than as a prescription – you'll be surprised at how creative you can be when you put your mind to it!
- Be aware of your strengths and limitations: even though most of the tools engage children at a surface level, sometimes they might open up old wounds or encourage kids to talk through some pressing needs, fears and concerns. Be prepared for this – have a backup plan ready (who can I connect the kids with if they feel distressed or go somewhere I don't feel comfortable going?). Get support and talk through any tough stuff that might emerge, with a colleague or supervisor.
- Ensure you have enough time to give the kids an opportunity to talk through any issues that might arise for them, so that the message 'I want to work with you and help you through' is communicated rather than 'We've only got a bit of time so we're going to do what I want to do in the way I want to do it'.
- Use them to build up rather than knock down: kids tell us that adults should work with them to find solutions and to identify possibilities. Make sure that you allow enough time and space for you and the kids to find these opportunities before finishing up a session – the last thing you want is for kids to go away feeling down, disempowered or problem focused. This relates to the way that you engage families and think about their needs, too.
- Get feedback: check in with kids to see if particular activities are working. If they're not, talk through some alternatives: kids love to feel as if they're the experts and adults are genuinely interested in getting their ideas.
- Reflect: spend some time evaluating the tools and the way that you used them in practice. Try new ways of using them and keep a record for next time.

Scenarios:

To help services think about how the child-centred principles might affect practice, we've developed scenarios for each of the six key messages and a series of questions that might be considered by individual workers or staff teams. They are based on real life families and challenges that workers have faced.

Scenarios are best used in teams where workers come together to share their ideas and plan a way forward. The reflective questions relate to the particular case examples, but might be modified for teams wanting to consider families with whom they currently work.

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PULSE CHECKS

The 'pulse checks' have been developed to help organisations think about their practice and gauge how child-centred they are. It's important to note that they're not about testing or ranking services; we hope they give services a framework to think about where they'd like to be and how they might get there.

Pulse checks are included to help organisations by:

- promoting discussion;
- identifying strengths and any gaps that need action; and
- helping to set priorities.

The pulse check can be used whether you have already developed child-centred policies and practices or are just starting out. They are not exhaustive - you will find that as you discuss things you may think of other areas that need attention in your organisation.

Pulse checks might be used in staff meetings or planning days or as a continual process of reflection: it's up to you!

STEP 1 Go through the indicators and list how your service acts on each one.

STEP 2 Each person rates how well the service does this.

STEP 3 Brainstorm things that you are currently doing well and things that could be done to improve how the service acts on each area.

STEP 4 Develop a plan, which can be reviewed at future staff meetings or development days.

The pulse checks were designed to be used on a continuous basis – for teams to constantly refer back to them and to evaluate their progress over time. It may be useful to have a pulse check folder that the team can update over time.

THANK YOU FOR MAKING KIDS CENTRAL!