



Update for VIC Partners: February 2014

Improving contact between children in out-of-home care and their birth parents: developing and trialling a contact intervention

ARC Linkage Grant 2013-16

Dear Partners,

Welcome! This newsletter is to provide an update on the progress for the study on contact that you recently signed up for. As you know, the aim of this research is to develop and trial a new model of delivering contact between children in care and their birth parents which will reduce current and future distress related to contact, improve children's relationships with their birth parents and increase successful reunifications in the long term. The study is a partnership between the Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) based in Canberra and the University of Melbourne, as Chief Investigators with ten Partner Investigators in ACT and Victoria.

This project will be conducted in two phases. Phase 1 (to be completed in 2014) will involve a number of steps to develop evidence based guidelines and a new model of contact between children in out of home care and their birth parents. We will be looking at the research literature, grey literature including policies, legislation and service reports/studies. We will conduct interviews with stakeholders in this area including magistrates, policy-makers, caseworkers responsible for making recommendations and decisions about contact. We will also seek volunteers through our partner agencies to interview a small sample of birth parents, foster and kinship carers, young people who have recently left care, and contact service providers. It will be an ongoing process of consultation because we recognise that the guidelines and the intervention need to be feasible and easily implemented with the ideal goal being to implement these guidelines nationally.

Phase 2 will involve testing the model for contact, which we develop in Phase 1. Phase 2 is planned to commence in January 2015. Partner organisations providing contact services will be randomly selected to trial the model. The remaining partner sites will provide their existing model of contact. The aim is to recruit 120 child participants and their carers, parents, and contact workers to interview them (children > 8 years only) at the commencement of the trial and nine months later, to evaluate the impact of the intervention. More information about Phase 2 will be provided in future newsletters.

Progress

- All of the research partners have formally agreed to participate by signing the agreement.
- The project team has been established: **Tracey Bullen** commenced as the Project Manager at the beginning of February 2014. She will be responsible for overseeing

the day to day running of the project and will be making regular contact with the partners of the study to develop the guidelines and the proposed intervention. She will be asking for input from you about experiences of contact, policies about contact and models of contact to help develop the guidelines. **Rhys Thorpe** has commenced his PhD in Canberra at ACU working on this project. His study will focus on the children's arm of the study. **Margaret Kertesz** commenced working in the study at the University of Melbourne. She will be the first point of contact for the key partners in Victoria and will be working with Tracey Bullen to review the existing literature about contact.

- Ethics approval has been obtained from ACU for Phase 1 to develop the guidelines and conduct the key stakeholder interviews nationwide. This application is currently being reviewed by the University of Melbourne ethics committee.
- Research methods including the methods to develop these guidelines are being developed for Phase 1.
- We are starting the review of the research literature to start developing the outline for the guidelines. We will be asking members of our partner organisations for resources such as policies and models of care regarding contact to help direct the development of the draft guidelines for contact.
- We are developing a communication strategy, which includes the establishment of email lists, sending project update newsletters and meeting with partners.
 - Please send me names and email addresses of anyone who should be on the list from your organisation who needs to be kept in the loop but is not there at the moment. We aim to send a project newsletter update every three months to let everyone know how the study is progressing.
- Governance: We have drafted terms of reference for three groups to manage the project: The Project Oversight Group, the Stakeholder Advisory Group and the Project Management Group. These groups will ensure the targets for the study are achieved on schedule. We will be holding the first planning meetings shortly.

What we hope to achieve over the next few months...

- We would like to hold meetings for the Victorian and ACT Stakeholder Advisory Groups including representatives from partner organisations contributing to this grant to discuss the project's development. We will send out an invitation for this meeting shortly.
- Draft sections of the guidelines to circulate for input including, background of OOHC, definitions of contact and scope of guidelines.
- Draft interview questions for key stakeholder interviews and circulate for input
- Start identifying potential stakeholders for interviews and sending out expressions of interest for participation

Study name

The project investigators have proposed to abbreviate the name of the project to "**The kContact Study: Keeping Contact between parents and children in care**" to help brand the project and identify the project easily. We will be commencing using this name on material associated with the project. Please feel free to contact us about the name if you have any comments. We will be developing a logo to go with the name shortly.

Meet the newest members of the team



Tracey Bullen has commenced as the project manager on the study at the ACU campus. She has a background in working with vulnerable populations and is trained as a clinical psychologist. Tracey is looking forward to applying her research experience to this very important aspect of the out-of-home care experience for children. She is employed fulltime and can be contacted anytime on 02 6209 1331 or via email Tracey.Bullen@acu.edu.au to discuss any questions or concerns about the project.



Margaret Kertesz has commenced as a research fellow working with our Victorian stakeholders at the University of Melbourne. She is a social worker with experience in the Victorian child and family sector since the mid-1990s. Most recently, she worked on a multi-disciplinary action research project - Who am I? - which investigated the relationship between records and identity for children in out-of-home care. She is looking forward to working on another important aspect of the out-of-home care experience for children. Margaret is usually at her desk on Tuesdays and Fridays and can be contacted therefore on 03 9035 8508 or anytime on 0407 052 300. Her email address is mkertesz@unimelb.edu.au.



Rhys Thorpe has commenced as the PhD candidate on the study at ACU. Rhys is a social worker and counsellor who has been working with children, young people and families for more than ten years. He has experience working in supervised contact and foster care teams. Most recently Rhys has provided counselling and therapeutic group programs to children and parents from separated families. In 2012 Rhys completed a research project in the UK, exploring the responses to participation initiatives from children in out of home care. He is thrilled to be part of the team and looks forward to playing a role in bringing the voices and experiences of children into this important project. Rhys can be contacted on (02) 6209 1190 or Rhys.Thorpe@acu.edu.au.

In the meantime, please email if there are any issues or concerns. We look forward to working with you all.

Morag, Stephanie, Cathy, Tracey, Margaret and Rhys.

Project Team

Victoria	ACT
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