

15 May 2018

Chair  
Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs  
House of Representatives  
Parliament of Australia

Dear Chair and committee members,

### **Inquiry into Local Adoption**

Thank you for inviting me to make a submission.

I have been research child and family welfare for more than 25 years. While my primary research has been into the prevention and responses to child abuse and neglect, I have also had the privilege of undertaking a substantial series of research and implementation projects relating to the effects of past adoption practices.

While I am absolutely committed to the need for children in out of home care to have stability, the permanency orders available can address these needs. I believe it is the capacity of the system to recruit, train and support permanent carers in their role that is the biggest challenge to the system, and better efforts to support parents to continue to care for their children, while having access to treatment, parenting supports, respite, and 'mirror families' where highly trained carers and mentors provide in-home or out-of-home care placements to entire families, not just removing children at risk, is what is needed.

The lessons from research on the impacts of past adoption practices – not only on parents, but particularly on adult adoptees, has led me to believe that there is no empirical or theoretical rational to develop local adoption as a pathway for stability/permanency for children in the out-of-home care system.

The potential negative effects of adoption are clearly outlined in these reports:

Higgins, D. J. (2014, August). Past adoption practices: Implications for current interventions. *In Psych: The bulletin of the Australian Psychological Society*, 36(4), 8-11. Available at:  
<<http://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2014/august/higgins>>

Higgins, D. J. (2011). Current trauma: The impact of adoption practices up to the early 1970s. *Family Relationships Quarterly*, 19, 6-9. Available: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/frq019/frq019-2.html>

Higgins, D. J. (2011). Unfit mothers ... unjust practices? Key issues from Australian research on the impact of past adoption practices. *Family Matters* 87, 56-67. Retrieved from: <<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/family-matters/issue-87/unfit-mothers-unjust-practices>>.

Higgins, D. J. (2010). Impact of past adoption practices: Summary of key issues from Australian research. *Australian Journal of Adoption*, 2(2) [online]. Available at:  
<<https://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aja/issue/view/142/showToc>>

Kenny, P., & Higgins, D. (2015). *National Practice Standards for Australian Government funded Forced Adoption Support Services: Discussion Paper*. Melbourne: AIFS. <https://aifs.gov.au/national-practice-standards-australian-government-funded-forced-adoption-support-services-discussion>

Kenny, P., Morley, S., & Higgins, D. (2015). *Forced Adoption Support Services: Establishing and building networks*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available:

### **Institute of Child Protection Studies**

Office of the Director, ICPS

Melbourne Campus  
115 Victoria Pde  
Fitzroy VIC 3065

**T:** +61 9953 3607  
**E:** [daryl.higgins@acu.edu.au](mailto:daryl.higgins@acu.edu.au)  
**W:** [acu.edu.au/icps](http://acu.edu.au/icps)

<[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01\\_2017/establishing\\_and\\_building\\_networks\\_final\\_for\\_publishing\\_consistent\\_table\\_font.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2017/establishing_and_building_networks_final_for_publishing_consistent_table_font.pdf)>

Kenny, P., & Higgins, D., & Morley, S. (2015). *Good practice principles in providing services to those affected by forced adoption and family separation*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available: <<https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/publications-articles/good-practice-principles-in-providing-services-to-those-affected-by-forced-adoption-and-family-separation>>.

Higgins, D., Kenny, P., Sweid, R., & Ockenden, L. (2014). *Forced Adoption Support Services Scoping Study: Report for the Department of Social Services by the Australian Institute of Family Studies*. Melbourne: AIFS. Available: <<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/forced-adoption-support-services-scoping-study>>.

Kenny, P., & Higgins, D. (2014). Past adoption practices: Key messages for service delivery responses and current policies. In A. Hayes, & D. Higgins (Eds.), *Families, policy and the law: Selected essays on contemporary issues for Australia*, pp. 29-38. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available at: <<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/families-policy-and-law/4-past-adoption-practices-key-messages-service-delivery>>

The chapter in this edited book by former Family Court judge Professor Nahum Mushin, provides a convincing argument against an expanded role for local (unknown) adoptions:

Hayes, A., & Higgins, D. (Eds.) (2014). *Families, policy and the law: Selected essays on contemporary issues for Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. [308 pp]. Available at: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/families-policy-and-law>

There is no evidence to suggest that families wishing to adopt are similar to families wishing to foster or provide supports for children living in vulnerable circumstances. Most of the children in the out-of-home care system have been born into or grown up with experiences of domestic/family violence, parental substance misuse, parental intellectual disability, poorly treated mental health, or parenting inadequacy. Children exposed to such environments need trauma-informed care, and many of them would not be seen as 'suitable' by prospective adoptive parents. This can lead to a 'pick a child' scenario, where the focus is on what prospective parents want (their wish to complete a family) prioritized over the needs of children.

I am happy to elaborate on my conclusions and recommend that that local adoption is not seen as a viable option for children in out-of-home care.

Yours sincerely



**Professor Daryl Higgins**, PhD, MAPS  
Director, Institute of Child Protection Studies  
Australian Catholic University<sup>(SEPP)</sup>  
Melbourne Campus, Level 5, 215 Spring St, Melbourne, Victoria  
T +61 (03) 9953 3607 M 0425 795 303 E [daryl.higgins@acu.edu.au](mailto:daryl.higgins@acu.edu.au) W [www.acu.edu.au/icps](http://www.acu.edu.au/icps)  
Twitter @ACU\_ICPS @HigginsDaryl  
Researchgate: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daryl\\_Higgins](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daryl_Higgins)  
ORCID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-0268-8243](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0268-8243)  
SCOPUS Author ID: 7202960352