

Institute of Child Protection Studies



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Research to Practice Series Child Centred Practice

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families. ICPS is based within the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, in the Faculty of Education and Arts, ACU.

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Child Centred Practice

Issue 7 of this series discusses the principles of child-centred practice. It is based on the ICPS Kids Central Toolkit, which aims to assist services to place children at the centre of their work. Although Kids Central was primarily developed in response to a research project that looked at accompanying children's experiences of homelessness, the principles and tools are broadly applicable for all services wishing to work in a more child-centred way. More information about Kids Central is provided at the end of the issue, and we strongly encourage readers to access the free online resources and tools.



Section 1

Why be child-centred?

Kids Central states: 'a child-centred focus means that children are on your radar at all times, that you do not assume they are OK or not OK, and that you give their needs high priority. Ideally, it is about engaging with each child, however, you can build a child focus into your work even in situations where it has to be done indirectly. It will help you to be aware of each child's needs and will influence the way you support parents, families and children.'

In the original ICPS research project, which explored accompanying children's experiences of homelessness, researchers found that:

- It is vital to connect with children in their own right, engage with them as individuals, and listen to and acknowledge their stories. Children may need support to talk with parents about what is happening for them, and to maintain and strengthen relationships during periods of stress.
- Children need information about the events and processes affecting their lives, but this should be given in a way that recognises their developmental and emotional needs, their personality and their wishes.
- Services should have detailed and up-to-date knowledge of other relevant programs and supports, and any referrals of children to these services need to be well supported and coordinated and take place as early as possible in the life of a problem.
- High levels of change and insecurity in children's lives mean it is important for support to be sustained beyond the crisis period, and preferably provided through continuing contact.

Section 2

Principles of child-centred practice

Kids Central identifies six principles of child-centred practice:

1. **Keep me safe:** Children's safety and wellbeing are of primary importance
2. **I'm one of a kind:** Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes
3. **My family is special:** Because children are usually best supported within their family every effort should be made to assist families to support their children
4. **Make it fun:** Environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow
5. **Keep me in the loop:** Children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives
6. **Who else matters:** The best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children and families in an ongoing way.

Services seeking to build child-centred approaches into their work should address and incorporate each of these areas into their policies and practices.

Principle 1: Keep Me Safe - Children's safety and wellbeing are of primary importance

All children have the right to be safe and feel safe. Safety includes physical safety, environmental safety and emotional/psychological safety. Services have a responsibility for ensuring that children and young people are safe while engaged in their programs. They can do this by identifying and minimising environmental risks, engaging professional and adequately trained and supervised staff, and creating a setting where children and young people can discuss their concerns.

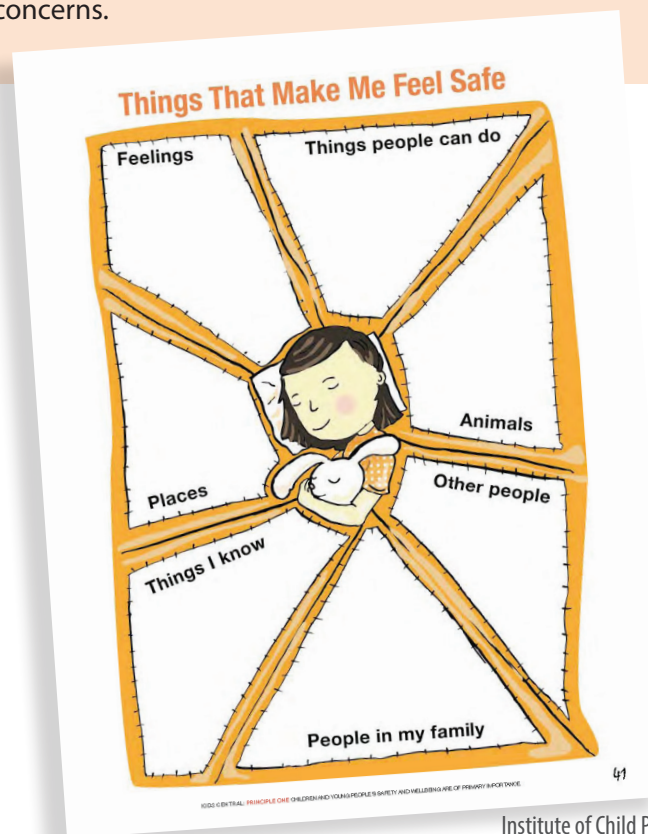
When asked about safety, children said that they see and feel safety in different ways – and that being safe, and feeling safe, are different things. To feel safe, they often need stability and predictability, involvement in finding solutions, to know what is happening to them and their families, and to know that everything will be ok.

"You're only safe if you know what's gonna happen next." (Male, aged 11)

Services can create safe settings for children by:

- Communicating - providing information to children and families about the service's commitment to children's safety
- Having relevant policies and procedures which articulate the service's commitment to children's safety and wellbeing, including for staff code of conduct, recruitment and assessment
- Providing adequate training and support to staff
- Developing safety plans to respond to safety concerns
- Incorporating review and monitoring mechanisms for programs, to improve safety for children
- Having clear, child-friendly complaint policies
- Collaborating with other services when needed, to develop and implement safety plans

Kids Central includes further information about safety issues, child abuse and neglect, mandatory reporting, talking with children about safety, talking with parents about child safety concerns, policies and codes of conduct, risk management and cultural considerations. It includes a 'pulse check' to support services to become more 'child safe'; and tools to assist workers to identify risks, develop safety plans, talk to children about safety, and respond to concerns.



Principle 2: I'm one of a kind – Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes

Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes. Effective services recognise that children have separate and different needs, wishes and aspirations to those of their parents, siblings and other children; and will identify each child's developmental and other unique needs and the ways they would like to be supported. It is important that workers are aware of the diversity of experiences and family contexts that children and families bring with them.

Services can ensure they are responding to children's unique needs and wishes by:

- Individually welcoming and engaging with each child who enters the service
- Using holistic and flexible assessment tools which are fun, non-threatening, identify strengths and are appropriate to the age and developmental stage of each child
- Developing individual case plans formed on the basis of each child's assessment
- Collaborating with other services to access the skills and resources needed for each child

Kids Central provides further information about working with children from a range of backgrounds, and implementing child-focused assessments. It includes a 'pulse check' to assist services to better engage with children's individual needs; and tools to build rapport and get to know children and what is important to them.

Principle 3: My family is special - because children are usually best supported within their family every effort should be made to assist families to support their children

Families play a fundamental role in the lives of children, and can provide them with a sense of belonging, connections with the broader community, a foundation on which to grow and develop, opportunities to develop proactive problem-solving skills, and clear boundaries and expectations. During periods of chaos, families may find it difficult to identify strengths and resources. Services can assist families to reveal and celebrate strengths and opportunities, and celebrate survival.

"The reason I'm so strong is because of my Mum. My Mum helped us go through lots of hard stuff... Family's what gets you through." (Female, 15 years)

For families affected by family violence, it is important to note that children may feel responsible. They may see themselves as protectors, and have concerns about their safety, including if living in alternative accommodation.

Services can ensure they are working effectively with children and their families by:

- Recognising that families are central to the wellbeing of children
- Supporting children to share their needs and views, and to address their safety needs with families
- Taking a strengths-based approach to working with families
- Implementing assessment processes which identify issues that may affect families' capacity to provide for children (e.g. AOD use, mental health issues, family violence), and supporting families to address these issues

Kids Central includes information about relationship-based practice, issues affecting families, and a 'pulse check' on working effectively with families. It also includes tools to assist families to identify their strengths, listen to each other's perspectives, understand each other's needs, and identify support networks.

Principle 4: Make it fun! - Environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow

Children thrive in environments which are safe and secure, and give them opportunities to learn, grow and develop. Engaging and stimulating physical environments provide children with opportunities to play and have fun.

Services can provide child-friendly spaces for children to have fun, and which also show them they are valued and important. 'Welcome packs' for children, bright colours, kid-friendly posters and artwork, books, games and activities; as well as spaces which allow children to play freely (such as gardens) send powerful messages to children that services want them to feel comfortable. Outreach workers can create child-friendly environments by taking resources with them when visiting families.

Services can ensure they assist children to feel comfortable by:

- Providing a fun 'welcome to the service kit' to children, which includes an explanation of children's rights and what they can expect from the service
- Providing child-friendly activities, equipment and spaces
- Supporting children to maintain their usual social networks and connections

Kids Central provides information on creating safe, friendly and inclusive environments for children, ideas for engaging in playtime with children, games, and a 'pulse check' on providing fun environments for children. It also includes tools to gauge how child-friendly a space is, help children to understand what they can expect from services, and a mechanism for children to make complaints and raise concerns (see Section 3 of this issue).

Principle 5: Keep me in the loop – Children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives

Children need information about what is happening to them and their families, and they require opportunities to share their views and needs in a safe environment. Involving children in decision-making processes helps services to improve the quality and responsiveness of assistance that is provided to children and families.

'Kids should be asked about stuff that's got to do with them... They can tell you stuff you'd never think of – cos you're not a kid...' (Female, 6 years)

Children have the right to express their views and receive information under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Participation is empowering and skill-building, can increase children's safety, and leads to more responsive outcomes. Key principles of participation include: relationships of trust, recognising the unique needs of each child, providing multiple and varied opportunities for participation, taking time, making participation meaningful and beneficial, and providing feedback.

Services can work towards keeping children in the loop by:

- Developing policies that articulate the service's commitment to listening to children, engaging children, and how children's views are taken into account
- Ensuring workers have the skills, training, and a range of tools available to actively engage with children

Kids Central provides information on keeping children informed about what is happening to them, how to connect, listen and talk to children, children's participation in organisations, and a 'pulse check' on building participatory practices and processes into services. It also includes tools to build rapport with children, and talk with children about how they are feeling, and how they would like to be supported.

Principle 6: Who else matters? - The best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children and families in an ongoing way

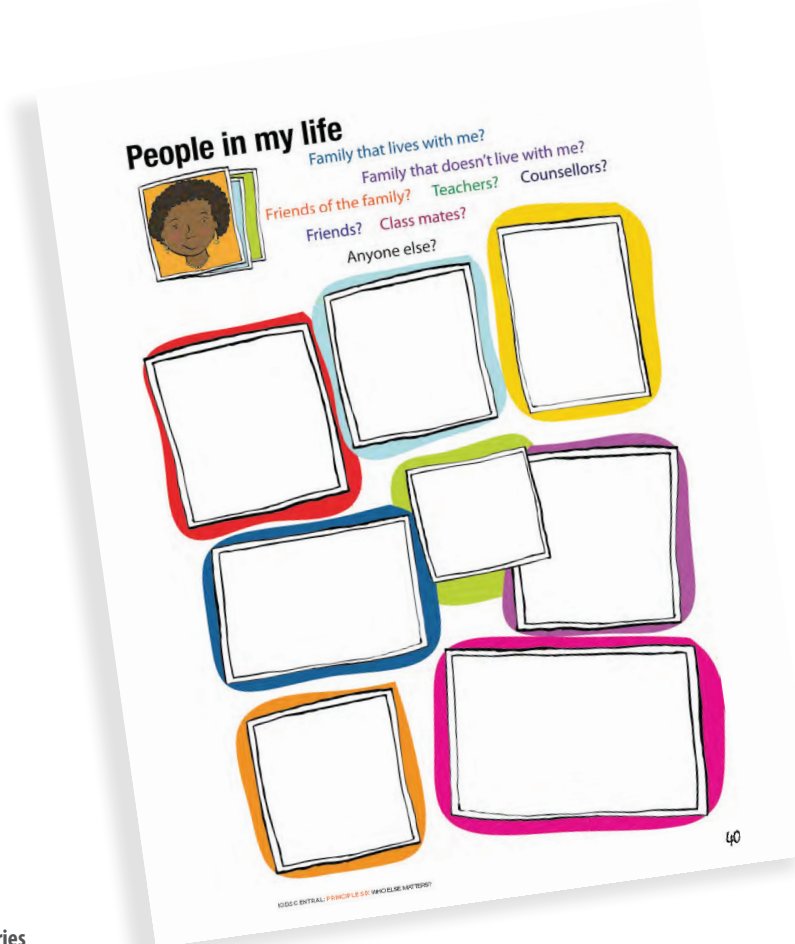
During periods of chaos, children and families can become disconnected from their formal and informal support networks, and may require assistance to re-establish or recreate these networks so that support can be sustained. Research shows that children are most likely to thrive when surrounded by groups of strong, positive, trustworthy and consistent adults who enable children to take risks and grow in a nurturing environment.

While children can benefit from bonds formed with workers, workers need to be mindful about considering how the bond may be maintained, or supporting the recreation of the bond with another stable adult, who will be able to maintain a connection and support with the child after their engagement with the service has ended.

Services can ensure that children are connected to supports by:

- Supporting children to establish and maintain relationships with other trusted adults, peers, communities and schools
- Providing spaces or transport for children to build connections
- Developing positive collaborative relationships with other workers and services, which place children and families at the centre
- Planning for transitions and continuity of care for children and families who are exiting a service or program

Kids Central provides information about reconnecting children to families, with 'champions', with communities, peers, schools and culture. It also provides information on service collaboration, networking, and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and communities. It includes tools to identify resources, supports and key people in children's lives, and to celebrate their connections with others.



'When I'm not happy' – a complaints form for children

Kids Central includes over 40 tools with ideas, activities and worksheets, which workers can use to engage with children. These are free to download from the ICPS website. At the end of this issue is a sample worksheet from the Toolkit, which can assist children to make a complaint or air their concerns about their involvement in a service. Many organisations do not have complaints forms specifically for children – using a tool such as this is a useful mechanism for services to incorporate and review children's participation in their service.

This tool, 'When I'm not happy' is an extract from *Principle 4: Make it Fun*, and is appropriate for children aged 5 – 12 years. Details on the rationale for using this tool, the ways that it might be modified to respond to different groups of children and things that you might want to think about before using it are included in the Kids Central resource.

In addition to the tools, each section of Kids Central includes a detailed case study, which could be used by workers and services to discuss how they might respond to particular scenarios, and how the principles of child-centred practice could be applied.



When I'm not happy



What happened?



What I wish had happened



Why I think it happened



How did it make me feel?



What I'd like to happen now



Action Sheet

What has been done about the issue concerned?
(To be completed by the service)

I think things are better now and I don't need anything more to happen

I don't think that things have been fixed up and would like something more to happen

What I'd like to happen now

I know that if I'm still not happy about something that has happened to me or my family I can:

About the Kids Central Toolkit

The Kids Central Toolkit was developed in 2007 in response to a research project which explored experiences of homelessness for accompanying children. The project examined what life was like for children when they were homeless, what they felt they and their families wanted and needed, and how they thought kids might get better support. The Kids Central Toolkit is fully illustrated and designed by Louise Grant Illustration. Examples of the illustrations have been included throughout this issue.

More information and the full toolkit is available to download for free from www.acu.edu.au/icps.

ICPS has also developed a two-day training package to support workers and services to develop their skills and knowledge in working with children and families. The training can be delivered across Australia, and aims to provide participants with: a theoretical and practical context for why working with kids is important, an overview of the key messages from children about how they might best be supported, and a series of activities, games and tools to engage, support and enable children to talk about issues.

Over 100 workers across the ACT and Victoria have participated in this training, and 97% said they would recommend it to other workers. More information about the training is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References and Useful Resources

Moore, T., Noble-Carr, D., McArthur, M. (2007). *Finding Their Way Home: Children's Experiences of Homelessness*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

Noble-Carr, D. (2007). *The Experiences and Effects of Family Homelessness for Children*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

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