

# Family Connections and Networks - Overview

The physical, emotional and cultural wellbeing of a child or young person (child) is at the centre of all the work you do in the Permanency Support Program (PSP). The single factor most connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connections with family and kin.

Family connections and networks are the relationships children have with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family, kin, community and culture.

Relational, legal, cultural and physical permanency are all important aspects of permanency.

**Relational permanency** is about having positive, loving, trusting and nurturing relationships that are sustained over time. These include parents, carers, family, siblings, friends and the wider community.

**Cultural permanency** is about maintaining an ongoing connection to culture through taking part in cultural practices, remaining in community and learning and understanding beliefs, values and stories. For Aboriginal children, remaining on country and being raised by family or kin, where this is possible and in the child's best interests, is of fundamental importance.

**Physical permanency** is the place a child calls 'home', where they feel safe, protected, loved and accepted. A child's physical permanency can be connected to multiple households or families within a kinship structure.

**Legal permanency** supports a child to feel the security of knowing where they will live and who they will be cared for, by the making of a legal order which clarifies roles and responsibilities.

Permanent relationships last a lifetime – long after you stop working with a child. Healthy, lifelong relationships offer a child stability and support, and as their life changes, the ability to be more resilient in the face of adversity.

## Permanency and Family Connections and Networks

A fundamental element of the PSP is that a child has a safe, permanent home within two years of entering care, usually through restoration, guardianship, or open

adoption. Long-term care is also a permanency option, and, in the hierarchy of permanency, comes before adoption for Aboriginal children. Regardless of a child's permanency pathway, it is vital they stay connected with family and other important people in their life. Promoting family connections and networks alongside legal and physical permanency will help a child develop a healthy identity, strong culture, sense of belonging and lifelong connections. This helps children develop a sense of felt permanency. Supporting carers so they help a child maintain strong relationships with their birth family is essential.

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“If you do feel alone and you are in foster care, it lets you know that like, even though people may tell you that there's nobody there for you... you still got family and there's still people there to support you.” - a young person in care reflecting on finding family.

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## The Value of Family Connections and Networks For a Child

Relationships with family support children to understand their story from their family's perspective, not just from the view of the agency or carer. This will help a child make sense of their story and world.

Family connections and networks also support children to:

- have a sense of belonging and emotional security
- develop pride in their culture/s
- understand their story
- adapt and build healthy attachments
- heal from their experiences of trauma and loss
- develop their individual identity and cultural connection
- build resilience
- have established relationships that provide long-term support.

## Work to Develop a Child's Connections and Networks

Family connections and networks for children in the PSP must be continuously developed, maintained and supported. Every child has a family and has a right to connections with their family and network. For children who do not have family

networks and connections, it is your role to identify them and support those relationships to be developed. Family connections and networks must be built upon throughout the child's time within the PSP, regardless of the child's permanency goal.

Children who are in care require relationships with their birth family, their caring family and communities to support their development now, and long-term. For children who are already in care, this work needs to start immediately if this has not begun yet, regardless of the reason or potential barriers and no matter the child's age. Considering potential barriers and strategies to overcome them so you can help a child develop meaningful relationships is a part of your work.

Carers are also often the ones at the forefront in supporting family connections and networks. Carers will need your support. They can also be an important part of a child's lifelong network. Identifying and keeping children connected with past carers who have been important in their life can also help children.

There are different ways that family connections and networks can be identified, developed and nurtured. Every child, family and community are different. Your approach needs to be flexible to meet the individual needs of the child and family.

For more information see [Family Connections and Networks – Practice Tips](#).

## Connections Never End

Traditionally, when a child came into care there was a strong focus on locating family members. This work often stopped when the child was in a stable home.

You must continue to identify family and community regardless of whether a child is in a stable home. This will broaden and strengthen a child's network and is vital in achieving legal, relational and cultural permanency for a child. Connections help children to feel a sense of permanency.

The earlier connections and networks are developed, the better the outcomes for the child. The frequency of family and community connections also usually determines the quality of the relationship (Perry & Hambrick, 2008) (Dobson & Perry, 2010).

Carers will sometimes be worried that children connecting with their family can interrupt a child attaching to their caring family. Listen with empathy and help carers to understand that family time is about lifelong networks and identity. To deny a

child the chance to know their family now will have long term negative consequences for their development.

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"Reaching out to family is the most urgent thing we can do. Kids need a sense of identity and belonging that can only come from the people that love them most, and this is usually their family." - Emma, caseworker

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## Always Listen to The Voice of The Child

Developing trusting relationships with the children you work with will help them feel comfortable to talk to you about who is important to them.

Children can be influenced by the adults around them. They will often feel pulled in different directions, by families, carers and even you. This can make it hard for them to truly express their wishes.

For more guidance see [Tips for talking with children and young people](#) and [Family Connections and Networks – Practice Tips](#).

## Culture is Critical

For children, their family and community networks will differ. Children from collective cultures will have networks with people who may hold significant roles in relation to learning and sharing, behaviour management and caring.

It is key a child's culture is taken into account when identifying, developing and nurturing these relationships and networks. This is to ensure that the child has all the people required in their network.

Children and families will help you identify and develop meaningful connections. Work with families so they help you understand what culture means to them and how a child can develop their cultural identity.

"From the moment I called, they were a powerhouse of love. We organised an amazing Family Group Conference and within a few weeks it was all systems go. It was a big moment for a boy who was hurting so much, to see the familiar faces he had missed united around the table. To hear their words of love and know that he mattered. Having them there gave Jalil a sense of who he was. It brought culture into the planning that was so much better than words on a page." - Joel, caseworker

## When Family Connections and Networks are Neglected

When family networks and connections are not developed, nurtured and strengthened we leave children vulnerable to feelings of disconnection, isolation and loneliness.

This in turn affects a child's:

- feelings of security
- growth and long-term development
- attachments to key people, needed for long-term emotional and social support
- feelings of grief and loss
- ability to reconnect when they return to family whether through restoration or leaving care
- identity, through connection to knowing, understanding culture and place and people of belonging.

Strong family connections and other networks can help improve a child's outcomes. Children in care generally have poorer outcomes than children who grow and develop whilst living with their birth family, kin and community. These poorer outcomes include health, education and social and emotional wellbeing.

## Challenges in Developing and Supporting Family Connections and Networks

Children need you to work hard to build their connections.

Key challenges you may have:

- not having information on the child's file about their family and networks and having to identify these
- children being disconnected and having to rebuild relationships
- trauma and mistrust within families where you will need to help rebuild positive relationships
- the time required to identify, develop and nurture children's connections and networks
- attitudes you and others in your office might hold about a child's family or family connections. For example, 'the child has no one' or 'the family are dysfunctional, they are all too troubled'.

Your determination, courage, sensitivity and skill will help you work through these challenges. When it seems too hard, remember how hard it is for a child to grow up not being connected to their family.

Use reflective practice, including group reflection, when working with children's family and community. This will help address your assumptions, unconscious bias and stereotypes.

## Key Messages

- Children have a right to know and stay connected to family members and other important people in their lives.
- Find family connections and other networks for every child you work with, never give up on this work.
- Look for connections for a child from the moment you first meet them. Continue this work during the entire time a child is in the PSP.
- Help children to know who they are. Help them feel like they belong and that they are loved unconditionally. This is a basic requirement for a child's health, development and dignity.
- Understand loneliness can be devastating and harmful to children. This is a critical issue for most children in care. Know that a sense of connection is a prerequisite to healing.
- A child's family and network help a child to understand where they come from, where they fit within their family and community structure, where they belong and that they are loved. This helps them develop a positive sense of identity.
- Connection helps a child to understand and be proud of their cultures. This helps develop a sense of permanency and can help keep a child safe.
- Form respectful relationships with families and other important people in a child's network so they can have an active role in supporting children.
- Work with the understanding that families want the best for their children.
- Reflect critically on your practice, see opportunities to fix any unhelpful assumptions or biases you may have about a child's family.
- Communicate honestly with families about the worries you have for their children. Be open and respectful. Help families explore their strengths as well as their struggles.
- Always see a child's need for connection as important and a matter of urgency.

## More Information

You might also find these factsheets helpful:

[Family Connections and Networks – Practice Tips](#)

[Genograms](#)

[Relationship-Based Practice](#)

[Tips For Talking With Children And Young People](#)

[Reflective Practice](#) and [Reflective Practice - Practice Tips](#)

### References:

Perry, B.D. and Hambrick, E. (2008), “The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT),” in *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 17 (3) 38-43

Dobson, C. & Perry, B.D. (2010), “The role of healthy relational interactions in buffering the impact of childhood trauma” in *Working with Children to Heal Interpersonal Trauma: The Power of Play*, (E. Gil, Ed.) The Guilford Press, New York, pp. 26-43.