



2025: Building Connections, Driving Change

As we step into 2025, we reflect with gratitude on the remarkable support we've received in our first full year of operation. To everyone who shared their time, joined our LinkedIn community, attended our events, or expressed belief in our vision, thank you. Your encouragement motivates us as we advocate for a care system centred on relationships.

At the Centre for Relational Care, we value engaging with others to listen, connect and share learning. There have been many recent opportunities for this. At the AbSec conference in November we deepened our understanding of the challenges for First Nations communities in the care system.

One theme that resonated is the reminder that "ritualism" continues to stifle outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. This ritualism in the form of a dominant and entrenched culture of compliance hinders meaningful change of the care system. It is a culture that prioritises bureaucracy over flexibility, resulting in decision-making processes that fail to meet real and relational needs.

Another perspective on dominant forces that shape our care systems came from Dr Dan Honig's visit in December, where he shared his research on empowering care systems. Dr Honig's work challenges rigid, compliance-driven frameworks, advocating for systems that empower workers to engage in relational practice, prioritising human connection over paperwork. This approach aligns with our belief that transforming care systems requires moving beyond box-ticking, toward purpose-driven action and community-led change.

Looking ahead to this coming year, we remain deeply committed to driving change from the ground up, and through to systemic reform. Key focus areas include:

- Listening to, hearing and amplifying the voices of children, families, and frontline workers by sharing lived experience stories.
- Developing our relational practice network and shared understanding of what relational practice means in theory and, more importantly, how it can inspire practical and human change in day-to-day work.
- Actively progressing the vision for an alternative out-of-home care system and the 11 key opportunities identified in the *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish* report, developed with the James Martin Institute for Public Policy.
- Steering urgent system change through dialogue, co-design, campaigns and partnership opportunities with stakeholders, research bodies and peak groups around shared purpose.

2025 is a year of mindful action, collaboration and learning. We look forward to strengthening our networks and allies to embed relational approaches across the system and enable the genuine connections that children, young people and families need to thrive.



Sophi Bruce

Sophi Bruce, CEO

Balancing rules and relationships: Empowering Change

How can we create care systems that truly support the people they are aiming to serve? Dr Dan Honig, Associate Professor at Georgetown University, shared practical insights on this question during a session hosted by the Centre for Relational Care in December. His research underscores the importance of moving away from rigid compliance frameworks and toward strategies that empower workers to focus on relational practices.

The session included a young person, Lachlan Hobman, who shared his experience in the child protection system, including residential care and 11 months in an Alternative Care Arrangement with rotating, untrained workers. Lachlan's incredibly moving story highlighted how bureaucracy interferes with relationships and healing, in a system where "kids are viewed as a case number".

Drawing from a database of civil servant surveys with 4 million individual observations across five countries, Dr Honig's study found that when management practices become more empowering, and employees are trusted to exercise their professional judgement, morale, wellbeing, and outcomes improve across the system. He discussed the importance of finding the right balance between compliance and empowerment, and described many ways to shift systems in a more positive direction.

He also highlighted the harmful effects of over-compliance. For example, in Detroit's child protection services, the most mission-motivated workers - those most dedicated to helping children - were the first to leave due to bureaucratic constraints that stifled their ability to make a meaningful impact.



Dr Dan Honig at Sydney University in December

Dr Honig's approach has three key ingredients: allowing autonomy, cultivating competence, and creating connection to peers and purpose.

The Centre for Relational Care's vision of a 'Child Connection System' embraces these principles, with a shift from risk-dominated practices to relationship-centered care. Drawing on Dr Honig's work, opportunities to empower those who work with children and families are explored in Opportunity 6 in the James Martin Institute report, *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*.

Dr Honig summed up: "There are many ways to improve public sector performance, but one of the easiest is to let the people who want to do good things do them."

For more information about Dr Honig's work and his recent book, *Mission Driven Bureaucrats*, visit danhonig.info



Dr Honig and colleague Vinuri Dissanayake join the CRC's Elder in Residence Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor, Aunty Calita and Aboriginal Cultural Ambassador Dean Kelly for an on-Country cultural welcome

Leadership roundtables: Collaborating for change



NGO service providers at our first Leadership Roundtable in October to explore reform opportunities

How can relational care reshape the future of out-of-home care? This question guided discussions during two recent leadership roundtables hosted by the Centre for Relational Care and generously supported by Deloitte. Senior leaders from OOHc service providers gathered to explore practical and actionable ways to place relationships at the heart of the NSW child protection system.

The first roundtable, held in October, focused on identifying gaps and opportunities to advance the recommendations in the James Martin Institute's report, *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*, a collaborative project with the CRC that offers a new paradigm for OOHc and child protection.

Participants shared concerns about systemic challenges, such as compliance activities that are consuming too much time, leaving caseworkers with less time for meaningful relational work.

The group also began envisioning actions that service providers can take independent of government reform.

The November session built on these conversations, by mapping current relational practices with successful outcomes for children and young people. The group shared ideas for enhancing relational practice, including ensuring policies, procedures and language are relationship-oriented, creating time for building relationships over paperwork, and enabling open, genuine connections between workers and young people.

Roundtable participants also explored opportunities for larger system-level collaborative projects to embed effective relational care and support the shift to a Child Connection System. We look forward to continuing the work with sector leaders and organisations as these ideas are turned into actions.

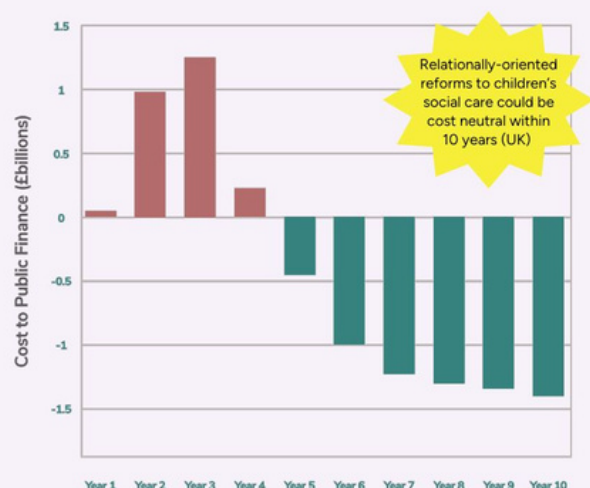
Submission to Review of out-of-home care costs in NSW

The Centre for Relational Care submitted ideas to IPART's review of out-of-home care costs and pricing in NSW. Drawing from our recent collaboration with the James Martin Institute, we advocated for a shift toward relationship-focused care and early intervention.

Key recommendations include increased funding for preventative support services, enhanced foster carer allowances, and revised mandatory reporting processes. We emphasised that international evidence suggests investing in relational early intervention can be cost-neutral over time by reducing the need for OOHc.

The submission also called for new metrics to better capture what matters to children, families and carers in the system. A draft IPART report is due in February 2025.

Read our full submission at centreforrelationalcare.org.au



Sharing ideas on relationship-based practice

Neuroscience tells us that relationships and connections are at the heart of healing and growth. Inspiring programs are showing how relationship-based approaches can transform the lives of children and families who are at risk or in the statutory care system. By prioritising relationships, they offer a roadmap for more compassionate and effective support.

Below are some services and programs we have showcased over the past year which practice relationship-based care.

BackTrack



Based in Armidale NSW, BackTrack supports at-risk young people with education, training, housing and wraparound care. Using the Circle of Courage model - Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity - BackTrack helps young people build skills, find purpose, and thrive in a safe, supportive environment. backtrack.org.au

Professional Individualised Care

PIC offers an innovative, relationship-based model of out-of-home care with qualified therapeutic carers, such as social workers and psychologists. Unlike traditional foster care, PIC carers are supported full-time to prioritise relational connection and healing. An evaluation revealed that PIC costs 50% less than other care options while delivering significantly better wellbeing outcomes. pic.care

Family by Family

Family by Family pairs families experiencing tough times (Seeking families) with families who have overcome challenges (Sharing families). Guided by Family Coaches, they build trust, work toward goals, and celebrate progress. This peer-to-peer approach reduces child protection notifications and helps break cycles of disadvantage. familybyfamily.org.au

OurSPACE

Run by the Australian Childhood Foundation, OurSPACE is a specialist trauma service supporting children in foster and kinship care. By prioritising the relationships around children, OurSPACE helps stabilise placements and improve developmental outcomes. childhood.org.au

Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter

Founded by parents with lived experience, FISH works to ensure children in care maintain meaningful relationships with their families. Through advocacy, peer support and workshops, FISH empowers parents to stay engaged in their children's lives. finclusionh.org



These organisations show what's possible when we focus on relationships. By walking alongside families, empowering carers, and prioritising connection, they are creating meaningful change for children and families.

How can you incorporate relational care into your work? Whether through amplifying family voices, supporting peer advocates, or allowing the time to foster genuine, enduring connections, each step brings us closer to a Child Connection System. For more information about these programs, visit the Resources section on our website.



Conversations on relational care

Listen to our Chair, Jarrod Wheatley, share his thoughts on relational models of care and the vision for a Child Connection System:

- **Stories from Berry Street** podcast: Episode 8 *Bringing a New Model of Care to Victoria*
- **Leading to Learn** podcast: Episode 2 *More Connection in Child Protection*
- **Portable** webinar: *Redesigning care services with relationship-centred practice at portable.com.au*



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