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Acknowledgement of country.

Life Without Barriers and the Reily Foundation acknowledge that the forum was held on unceded Kaurna Land. We acknowledge the harms done to the Kaurna people by child protection policies and practices, in the past and continuing today. We pay our respects to Kaurna Elders, past, present, and emerging.

We also pay our respects to all Aboriginal people who participated in the forum as organisers and participants.

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Introduction

In August 2022 a group of child and family practitioners, researchers and parents and family with lived experience of child protection processes gathered in the offices of Child and Family Focus SA at a forum organised by Life Without Barriers and the Reily Foundation. The forum was called to discuss, learn and co design **parent and family peer advocacy in child protection**. This report documents the activities and findings of this forum.

We began with a definition of parent and family peer advocacy (parent advocacy) is and a summary of its’ evidence base. The research evidence is growing and is increasingly linking parent advocacy to reunification, shorter stays in care, prevention and other positive outcomes. There are existing models and programs that could be adapted to the South Australian context. We also heard an overview of the history of parent advocacy in South Australia and current initiatives such as the work of the Reily Foundation and the Lived Experience Network at the SA Department of Human Services (DHS).

Then it was time to hear from parent advocates and other parents with lived experience. Panel members joined us from Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter, from the DHS Lived Experience Network, from the Reily Foundation and from the Family Inclusion Network of SA.

The forum then participated in co design group activities. Each group included parents with lived experience, working alongside social workers and others. The workshop generated discussion about the many potential roles parent advocates could play in our system and the organisational conditions that were needed for parent advocacy to thrive. Finally, we discussed overarching principles of parent advocacy to ensure it succeeds and is helpful.

This report summarises the forum and synthesises its findings and recommendations. It aims to build momentum for change and pave the way for the implementation and the ongoing development of parent and family peer advocacy in South Australia – because it is what children need us to do.



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What is parent and family peer advocacy in child protection?

Parent and family peer advocacy (parent advocacy) occurs when “parents who themselves have had experience of the child welfare system, help other parents to navigate it [and] help to develop strategies to change the system’ (Tobis et al. 2020:20). Parent advocacy can occur in a range of ways and levels as described in Figure one¹.



Figure one.

© Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter

Cocks et al (in press) have further described these levels of parent advocacy:

Individual parent advocacy occurs when individual parents receive help and support from parent advocates to navigate and participate in child welfare processes. It includes individual advocacy, making warm referrals, sharing personal experiences and providing information.

¹ Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH) developed this visual depiction of parent advocacy drawing on their own experience and the international research evidence. FISH is a parent and family led organisation based in Newcastle, NSW. For more information: www.finclusionh.org.

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Group advocacy occurs when parent advocates connect parents with one another for mutual support, sharing experiences and information, and strengthening as a community. Group advocacy may include workshops to empower parents with knowledge and skills related to systems, processes, and self-advocacy.

Community advocacy occurs when parent advocates share their experiences in community to raise awareness and challenge negative beliefs about parents and families involved in child welfare. It can include training for carers and staff, events and conferences, and service improvement projects with agencies.

Systems advocacy occurs when parent advocates act at an organisational and societal level to improve child welfare. It includes writing about experiences to trigger and suggest change, participating in advisory groups, policy and legislative reform, community organising, and activism.

A key concern of parent advocacy is to ensure that children’s rights are upheld. The UN Convention on Children’s Rights has several articles of relevance to parent advocacy including (but not limited to) Article 5, the child’s right to have the role of their family respected and upheld by the state and Article 18, the child’s right to their family to receive help and assistance from the state (UN, 1989).

A (quick) summary of the research evidence about parent advocacy

There is growing evidence in support of parent advocacy in child protection processes, especially for reunification and prevention of out-of-home care. Empirical research about parent advocacy is mostly from overseas and is just starting to emerge in Australia.

Prevention

One group program in the USA run by parent advocates (Parents Anonymous), has found that parents who attend are less likely to harm their children. Those parents at most high risk experience the greatest reduction in risk factors. (Polinsky et al, 2010). A more recent study has found that participation in Parents Anonymous groups is a predictor of reduced child abuse and neglect (Burnson et al, 2021). Parents Anonymous is rated as a promising practice by the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse with a high child welfare relevance rating.

Parent advocacy in child safety planning conferences is linked to reduced out-of-home care and, when child removal does occur, an increased likelihood of kinship care (Lalayants et al, 2021).



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When part of a multi-disciplinary team with lawyers and social workers, parent advocacy has been linked to reduced out-of-home care placement and reduced risk factors (University of Michigan, 2013).

Reunification

Group work, in the form of parent advocate run workshops to inform, educate and support parents with children in care, increases reunification rates (Bohannon et al, 2016).

When part of a multi-disciplinary team with lawyers and social workers, parent advocacy increases reunification (Gerber et al, 2019).

When parent advocates work with parents and family members to support them through ongoing casework and legal processes, reunification is more likely (Chambers et al, 2019). The Iowa Parent Partners Program is listed as a promising practice by the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse with a high child welfare relevance rating.

Parent advocacy is now emerging in systematic reviews and other literature reviews as an evidence-based practice and program component for reunification (Hood et al, 2022; LaBrenz et al, 2020)

Participation, helpfulness, and the right thing to do.

Parents tell us they find parent advocacy helpful and supportive within a harsh and sometimes cruel system. (Cocks et al, 2021; Lalayants, 2014; Summers et al, 2012).

Parent advocacy has been linked to improved parental participation and motivation in processes and case plan requirements (Rockhill et al, 2015; Summers et al, 2012). In turn participation by parents and family is linked to improved outcomes such as reunification (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011)

Parent advocacy is also an ethical response when parents, children and family are suffering. Child protection processes are regularly described by Australian parents and family as dehumanising and frightening (Newton, 2020; Davis, 2019; Ross et al, 2017). Parents experience shame, trauma and profound grief and loss that contributes to mental and physical health problems and early death (Wall-Weiler et al, 2018). We also know that the safety and wellbeing of children is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of their families – no matter how long children stay in care. Responding to parents ethically and helpfully is crucial for children and consistent with their rights.

For a more comprehensive review of the evidence about parent advocacy please read an international review (Tobis et al, 2020), available [here](#).



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Parent Advocacy in South Australia

Parent advocacy is not new to South Australia, although it may not always have been called *parent advocacy*. The forum heard a brief history of parent advocacy in South Australia. Some of the parent advocacy work in South Australia is summarised below. This is not a full list and is included only to demonstrate how diverse parent advocacy can be and that it can take many forms.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) in the **Family-by-Family** program. Family by Family links families who have navigated adversity to families who are going through tough times. By sharing experiences and offering support experienced families help struggling families to thrive. More information is here: <https://familybyfamily.org.au/>

The Family Inclusion Network of South Australia (FINSA).

FINSA was set up in 2009 and worked with CFFSA and others to write a booklet (written by parents for parents) about the child protection system. You can read the booklet here: https://www.unisa.edu.au/contentassets/af19f0a154cb4a208cef90e329ac0c5a/families_booklet_2014.pdf

The Reily Foundation offers workshops and practical support with parents who have children in out-of-home care. Reily's workshops include parents with lived experience sharing their stories and learnings from their own journey. More information about the Reily Foundation is at: <https://thereily.foundation/>.

The Lived Experience Network at the SA Department of Human Services (LEN). The LEN includes parents who have experienced child removal and other child protection processes. The LEN provides advice about systems and policy change to the Department of Human Services.





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Learning from lived experience – the parent panel

The parent panel was made up of parent advocates and other parents with lived experience of child removal. Some panellists had years of experience as parent advocates, at individual, group, community, and systems levels. Others were just beginning their parent advocacy roles, including through their participation at this panel - a form of community and systems parent advocacy. The conversation was facilitated by highly regarded consultant, Dana Shen. The panel had a discussion under the following headings.

The “why” of parent advocacy

Parent advocacy is not an easy role to take on. Panellists described their own and their children’s experiences in the system as motivating them, as well as their experiences in helping others.

Personal experience of poor practice

“I was pregnant... I met with the high-risk worker. They said I couldn’t parent because of my disabilities. I was told that meeting would be the first of many. But that wasn’t true. They had another meeting, but I wasn’t there. They didn’t allow me to be a part of it. They did a parenting capacity assessment a week before I gave birth. It was so stressful. Through the lens of my mild and borderline intellectual disability, I couldn’t do a thing right in their eyes.”

“I was raising children with health problems. Its’ not easy and is used against parents. In my case my child’s autism was listed as a “concern”. That made me so angry. My children’s developmental problems were blamed on parental neglect – without any evidence.”

A need for trauma informed policy and practice

“There was no acknowledgement of the trauma or loss that my baby experienced. Removal is supposed to be the last option but for my baby they didn’t look at anything else. They took her.”

“My family has had intergenerational removal. My mum was taken, I was taken, my kids were taken.”

Supporting others

“I now help in Reily’s restoration workshops. My passion is [helping] guardianship children. We need to help young parents come out of care to be good parents and break the cycle.”

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"I am here because parents get great support from other parents. I work for an organisation that is really there for parents. I do this work every day. The workers in our team support us and educate us."

"When I was at court, when my kids were removed, I had nobody. When parents are at court fighting to get their children back... we can give them some hope."

A need for change and to be the change.

"I am working towards reunification. I have a close partnership and pretty much share care with the foster carer. I'm working with the Dept to look after my kids, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. At first it wasn't like that. I was really alone, workers told me nothing."

"The system has shortened the time for parents here, it's not enough time when there is no one to guide them."

"I've taken responsibility for my crappy actions. Parents focus on the lies being told about them instead of focusing on getting their kids home. There are shitty workers out there but there are also good ones."

"An experienced social worker told me: "you are the first family I've reunified in 10 years." This shocked me. This is really worrying and sums up the system."

"Children are dying even when services know about them. The system isn't working to keep children safe, and we need to protect children."

What are some of the challenges and benefits in being a parent advocate?

Panellists talked about a range of benefits and challenges for families, for themselves and for the broader system.

Helping parents navigate the system.

"We need to help parents to navigate the system, so they are not constantly fighting the system and using up their energy in these ways. I help parents by giving them a chance to vent and get it out of their system. Then they are ready to talk to workers."

"We need to help parents fight in the right way², not come from a trauma, fight or flight place all the time."

"I'm able to create a safe space for families, they can discuss and share safely. I can help them ask direct questions from DCP."

² This parent was referring to research findings describe in Salveron and Arney (2013).

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"Removing all the jargon for people is an important role for peers – translating."

Helping workers see the trauma and not judge parents

"Why should my children be harmed and removed because I don't understand you? Even my children understand I didn't know any different. They don't blame me."

"Getting upset with the Department and during meetings and court is normal. Parents are traumatised and respond from that place of trauma. This is normal and should not be seen by workers as a problem."

"The system needs to understand what trauma looks like. It looks like fear, distress and upset. It is emotional... if they had been kinder, I may have coped better. It wasn't my parenting that was the problem. It was my self-regulation with the Department."

*"I had to put a social worker hat on and claim my rights. You have to become an expert in **their** roles. If I had emotions, I was labelled as not participating or dysregulated. My emotions were turned into a problem, even though they were normal."*

"Parents need to have space to express their emotions – they need help, to be held in the moment with their emotions, without judgement... We need to recognise that when talking to DCP parents are frightened. They are in survival /flight or fight mode."

Helping parents is rewarding

"I'm lucky I have been able to do parent advocacy, to learn and contribute."

"I can talk straight to parents and use my story to share learnings."

"Peer support is all about helping build parents up to advocate for themselves."

Bearing witness can improve practice

"Having an advocate in the room works. It makes DCP respond to questions. Advocates can bear witness."

"As soon as I had a support worker with me, DCP changed completely and were more receptive. They said: "yep OK let's take action". There's a very big difference once a parent has support with them."

"The family stayed connected because there was a peer advocate in the room to keep them (DCP and agencies) accountable."

How can the system, agencies and workers build readiness for parent advocacy?

This question brought an *ecological perspective*. It recognises that the success of parent advocacy depends on the environment it occurs in. If the conditions are not right, then

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parent advocacy may be set up to fail. Panellists provided clear direction about what conditions were needed for parent advocacy to thrive.

Reduce the fear and surveillance in the system.

Parent panellists made several comments about the *risk averse* nature of child protection processes and practices. They asked that workers and agencies open themselves up to new ways of working, being led by families. They challenged the idea of “them and us” which they felt prevailed in agency cultures.

“Stop being fearful and risk averse. Start being restorative.”

“We need to stop reacting to crises. We need to persist and stop knee jerk reactions. We need a child and family focus.”

Increase openness to learning and change.

An agency culture that is ready for parent advocacy was seen as an agency culture that is open to learning from lived experience experts.

“Be open minded and willing to give this a go. Have empathy and compassion.”

“Be open to learning from parents. Agencies need to learn the real-life issues – the lived experience reality.”

“Start to invite parents into agency processes. For example: staff and carer training.”

“Agencies and workers need to be prepared and willing to have difficult conversations. Agencies and workers need to be ready to work with lived experience as experts and be accountable to them. When we say we know what we are talking about – we really do!”

Put a high value on parent advocacy and ensure it is there to support families.

“Agencies and workers need to see families as resourceful and helpful. The most underused resource in child protection is the family.”

“Don’t use and abuse us. We are not here to be spies and pass information on to you. We are here for the family.”

“People with lived experience understand things better than anyone. We can explain and clarify things for family a lot better than social workers and connect with them a lot better. Sometimes all it takes is that real language, that connection. It makes your (social workers) lives easier.”

Co-design elements

These themes or elements emerged from small group discussions among all workshop participants. Parents with lived experience were part of every small group. They relate

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broadly to parent advocacy at all four levels: Individual, Group, Community and Systems advocacy – as described in Figure 1. Along with existing evidence they can help inform the ongoing implementation and development of parent advocacy in South Australia.

Design elements for the parent advocate role

WHAT DOES PARENT ADVOCACY DO?	WHAT DOES PARENT ADVOCACY NOT DO?	WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED?
Create a safe space for parents to share emotions and “breathe”.	“Spy” and report back	Supportive and relational supervision and coaching including emotional support
Provide information and check for understanding.	Speak for the family (although may help family speak for themselves).	Pay equity with experts by learning
Build parent and family self-advocacy skills	Risk assessment and management	Support from other parent advocates.
Share own experiences and learnings.	Judging	Training and team building
Strengthen parent identity	Investigating	Support from experts by learning. Allyship.
Advocate	Assess family and make notes to be used in court	Support with workplace expectations.
Help build relationships between worker, carer and parent	Be available at all hours	Steadfast leadership in support of parent advocacy and lived experience
Role model and coach family time and more.		Co-designed practice guidelines.
Translate and “de jargon” the system		High value of roles and career pathways
Teach staff and carers		Respect of lived experience expertise

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A strong theme emerging from discussions about the role of parent advocates was the importance of developing clear job roles that do not replicate the roles of child protection workers from DCP or other agencies.

Any areas of uncertainty?

There was uncertainty about the role of parent advocates in supporting family contact – the time parent and family have with children when they are in out-of-home care. Overall participants felt there was a role to play but it needed to be *supportive* of family time and a strong parent identity and role and avoid becoming a form of surveillance.

Participants worried about the impact of trauma and vicarious trauma on parent advocates. There is an important role for supportive supervision and steadfast leadership to ensure parent advocates get the support and care they need.



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Design elements for the service system.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE IN PLACE IN THE AGENCY?	WHAT STAFF ATTITUDES, VAUES AND WAYS OF WORKING ARE NEEDED?
An agency culture that values lived experience and wants to listen, learn, and change.	Commitment to ongoing learning from lived experience.
Strong leadership at the top. Lived experience on the Board.	Compassion, caring and non-judgement. A belief in deep listening.
Highly supportive supervision dedicated to parent advocates.	Teamwork and collaboration – a belief that peers are equal parts of multidisciplinary team.
A creative and caring culture	Respect and commitment to social justice and children's rights to family.
Peer to peer support processes	A belief that workers are not the only experts.
Training for all staff on the importance and place of parent advocacy.	Steadfast and willing to partner through the tough times.
Funding	<i>"No god complex – we are not saviours!"</i>
Parent advocacy roles in staff and carer training	Ability to value diversity and different ways of raising children.
Willingness to share power.	Courage and relationality – relationship-based practice
Role clarity	Understanding of power imbalances
An understanding that child protection issues are caused by underlying social conditions such as poverty, racism and trauma.	A belief that the solutions lie within families and communities
No "us and them" culture or a willingness to challenge and change this culture.	A belief that children need their parents and family in their lives.

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Any areas of uncertainty?

There was some discussion about whether parent advocacy roles could exist within the Department of Child Protection (DCP). Overall participants felt that parent advocate roles would be better situated outside of DCP but that they also needed to be influential of DCP. There was concern that locating parent advocates within DCP may be confusing and cause mistrust of parent advocates. Participants felt there needed to be a partnership with DCP including parent advocates training DCP staff (community advocacy) and DCP making referrals to parent advocates (individual and group advocacy). There is also an ongoing role for parent advocates to influence DCP policy and practice (systems advocacy).

Proposed principles to inform or underpin parent advocacy.

The final session of the workshop identified potential underlying *principles* of parent advocacy in South Australia. A broad range of words and ideas emerged from this discussion which have been distilled below.

Participation.

This principle concerns the centrality of the role and meaningful participation of parents and family (including children and young people) to support safe care at home, reunification, and an ongoing role when children are in out-of-home care. Parent advocacy improves participation by families in their own cases and is also a valuable form of system level participation. Parent advocacy promotes participation in child protection processes and practices as inherently important for all children and families. Service navigation and translation/interpretation of language and processes are just two examples of how parent advocacy can contribute to participation.

Parent Leadership

More than participation, parent and family need to lead in the development and operation of all forms of parent advocacy. By understanding parents and family as leaders and change agents we will challenge negative and stigmatising views of parents and reframe parents as the **solution** to the policy and practice problems that we are encountering. Understanding parents as leaders and change agents in the lives of children is consistent with how society sees parents in the community. So, it's important we do this in parent advocacy.

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Trauma Informed

Most families in the child protection system have trauma histories, often stretching over generations. Child separation is inherently traumatic and many parents with children in care were also in care themselves. Having a care experience is also a source of trauma, pain, and grief. The development and implementation of parent advocacy must be trauma informed, aimed at reducing the negative impact of child protection processes and giving traumatised people safe spaces to heal.

Ensuring families voices are heard and offering families safe spaces to vent their emotions and plan how to navigate emotional situations are important ways parent advocacy can be trauma informed.

Accountability

The power imbalances in the child protection system can be overwhelming for families. This is recognised by all stakeholders including researchers, practitioners, and families. Parent advocacy can help “bear witness” to child protection processes and improve accountability of practice to families. Parent advocates are there “for families” and not for the system and need to avoid adding to oppressive practices including to the surveillance of families and writing detailed notes about their interactions which may then be used against them.

By walking alongside families, helping them ask questions and ensuring they do not add to oppressive practices, parent advocacy helps address the power imbalances and lack of transparency that families face.

Strengths Based

All families have strengths. We all need our strengths to be noticed and utilised, especially during tough times. An important part of being strengths based is having hope and belief in the capability of families to make positive changes and to succeed. Many families describe being overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and that workers and processes reinforce these negative beliefs. When families express emotions and try and make sense of their situation, this can be interpreted wrongly by workers. Parent advocacy challenges the stigma and negative stereotypes of families in the child protection system by focusing on the strengths within families and communities.

Sharing lived experience, role modelling and mentoring are some of the ways parent advocacy can be strengths based.



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Equity of roles

Parent advocacy needs to be resourced and valued as much as other roles in the child protection system. Lived experience expertise is just as valuable and necessary as learned expertise obtained through university, through books and reading and through professional experience. Many workers in the child protection system come from relatively privileged backgrounds compared to the families they work with. For example, they may not have a personal experience of poverty or racism. They may not have grown up with a fear of child protection authorities.

Ensuring parent advocates are properly paid, have job clarity, are treated as valuable members of the team, and have access to support, supervision and career pathways are some of the ways to ensure equity of roles.

Relationship-Based

The most important task for all of us is to form genuine and trusting relationships with the families and children we are working with. This is very challenging for most workers in child protection work because of the power imbalances that exist and because of the understandable distrust that many families feel. Parent advocates are uniquely placed to form trusting relationships with families, based on a shared lived experience and to help families and workers form helping relationships. By ensuring parents and family have access to a trusted advocate we help increase the trustworthiness of the system and improve relationships across the board.

Listening, showing compassion, being non-judgemental, helping parents, family and workers prepare for meetings together are important ways parent advocates can be relationship-based.

To listen deeply is to connect. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr³

³ Several participants talked about deep listening or Dadirri. Dadirri describes deep listening from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. It is concerned with deep connectedness to ourselves, each other and the land. A short video on Dadirri is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tow2tR_ezL8

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Conclusion and Next Steps

The forum has provided a valuable starting point for the further development of parent advocacy. It has begun a co design process by providing ideas and clarity around key design areas such as what parent advocates do and don't do and what supports need to be in place. It has begun to explore what conditions need to be in place in agencies and teams that will allow parent advocacy to thrive. The forum started to contemplate some uncertainties such as whether parent advocates should be integrated within the Department of Child Protection and what role (if any) parent advocates could play in specific processes, such as family time.

The forum is just the beginning of a longer journey of co design and exploration. It has provided a genuinely collaborative starting point for the expansion of parent advocacy and offers opportunities for partnership. The organising group continues to meet and will bring together interested organisation and parent advocates to plan, develop and trial new initiatives, building on the strong work already being done and underpinned by the principles and learnings identified in this report.





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