

Education for children in out-of-home care

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LIFE
WITHOUT
BARRIERS

Remember that book you loved as a kid? The one you read a thousand times? Perhaps you hid under the bed covers at night with a torch reading when your parents thought you were asleep?

These simple things that so many of us did as children, are memories many children in out-of-home (OOHC) care are missing out on because of disruption to their education and impacts to their engagement with reading and literacy. Children of all ages have a right to a consistent educational experience that recognise and fosters their unique talents, abilities and passions. However, children in OOHC often have poorer educational outcomes than their peers due to gaps in access to education due to experiences of trauma, part time enrolment, suspension, expulsion or change in placements.

What we know about barriers kids in care face in education

A positive education, at pre-primary, primary and secondary level, has the potential improve children's lives and social experiences now, and enhance opportunities as they emerge into adulthood. Education is a protective factor for vulnerable children, meaning it offers a sense of attachment, consistency, and especially reliability for children in care when the rest of their life may be quite disrupted. The protective factor is also in social relationships and how children engage, peer learn and share as they learn. However, children and young people in OOHC experience poorer life and education outcomes than their counterparts, with some of the lowest levels of educational attainment of any group of children:

82%

of students in OOHC in Year 3 meet the National Minimum Standard in NAPLAN-Reading, compared to 95% nationally.

By Year 9, the proportion is

69% vs 93%¹

81%

of students in OOHC in Year 3 meet the National Minimum Standard in NAPLAN-Numeracy, compared to 96% nationally.

By Year 9, the proportion is

61% vs 93%²

57%

of young care leavers (aged 18-25) had completed Year 12).

In comparison, the 2019 Year 12 attainment rate in Australia is 72% and the 2020 Year 12³ or equivalent (Cert III) attainment rate in Australia is 90%⁴

Access to an inclusive and welcoming educational environment is more vital than ever for positive life outcomes with an increasing complex world driving by information and technology⁵. Yet in this regard children in OOHC are considered 'one of the most disadvantaged groups in the western world'⁶. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Articles 28 and 29 recognises the necessity of education for children as a human right. The Convention outlines several areas highlighting rights children are entitled to experience in education – including from the basis of equal opportunity. Importantly, the child's personalities, abilities and talents should be recognised in the educational experience they have. For kids and young people in care, they can struggle with some even the basics of attendance, consistency and connection – let alone being at a stage where their potential is recognised and nurtured.

¹ AIHW, 2015. ² AIHW, 2015. ³ McDowall, 2020. ⁴ ABS 2020. ⁵ Foundation for Young Australians 2015
⁶ Tareen-Sweeny, M. (2008). *The mental health of children in out-of-home care*. Current Opinion in Psychiatry. Vol 21 (4). P.345-349.

Life Without Barriers Commitments

We believe children and young people in OOHC should have the same opportunities to enjoy and thrive in education as their peers and whilst educational institutions offer the primary mode of learning for students, the role of caregivers, families, OOHC agency staff and the community can be equally important.

Our goal is to partner with children, young people, families and carers to revitalise how children in care experience education with a goal to enhance their learning outcomes, to create joy and confidence in learning and foster opportunities as they emerge into adulthood. These are some of the steps we are taking to achieve that:

- Life Without Barriers Strategy 2025 commits to a minimum 5 year investment in resources and efforts that influence systemic barriers to revitalise education and enhance learning outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.
- We actively provide direct support to foster and kinship carers through our education unit, to create plans and strategies for each child or young person who is experience barriers in learning.
- Life Without Barriers is a founding member of the Children in Care Collective, a group of OOHC service providers, practitioners and academics in Australia who work in partnership on a range of issues that impact children and young people living in OOHC. Through the CCC we advocate for improved education outcomes for children in OOHC to be imbedded into government polices as the current chair of the CCC.
- Our Reconciliation Action Plan includes a number of actions and initiatives to partner with education providers and First Nations communities to enhance education, care and cultural outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
- We are developing partnerships with other NGOs and Universities to forge evidence based approaches aimed at improving access to school education for children and young people in OOHC. These partnerships will deliver a framework for supporting access to school education for kids in OOHC, including strategies for schools and education, child protection services, and for systems wide changes to better meet the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care.
- The Life Without Barriers Year 3 Literacy and Numeracy Project former aims to establish information about children in care's NAPLAN results so that Child Youth and Family key workers record this data and use this as a tool to support educational results.
- Hook Into Books is a national literacy campaign from Life Without Barriers aims to enhance literacy and nurture a love of reading for children and young people in OOHC simply by getting books into their hands and supporting carers to invest time in reading with children. It provides opportunities for children in OOHC to engage with words and to connect to storytelling, songlines, reading, and creating that all have a powerful impact on improving literacy skills.

The central intention of Life Without Barriers Education Unit is to ensure all children and young people in our care realise their full learning and education potential and transition to positive adult futures. For this to occur we must ensure that all children and young people have access to their fundamental rights as children – specifically in relation to experience a positive education.

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