

Revitalising education for children in out-of-home care

Social Policy Position

August 2021



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Children of all ages have a right to a consistent educational experience that recognises and fosters their unique talents, abilities and passions. Not all children in Australia have equal access to a quality experience of education however and for children in OOHC, they often have more disruptions due to trauma which leads to poorer educational outcomes than their peers as a result.

Life Without Barriers seeks to influence systemic barriers for the people we support, including to revitalise education and enhance learning outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC).

The current issue

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) report that as at 30 June 2020, there were around 46,000 children in out-of-home care across Australia. Education is vital for children and young people in OOHC. A positive education, at pre-primary, primary and secondary level, has the potential to not only improve their life and social experiences 'now', but also enhance opportunities as they emerge into adulthood. Education is also often framed as 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.

Access to education for children in OOHC is often affected by part-time enrolment, suspension and expulsion. Children involved with child protection services may have gaps in their access to school due to changes in placements, and many have significant experiences of trauma that result in complex behaviours. Access to an inclusive and welcoming educational

environment is more vital than ever for positive life outcomes because our world has become increasingly global, complex, and information and technology-driven (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015). 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. For example:

- 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% versus 93% (AIHW, 2015).
- 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% versus 93% (AIHW, 2015).
- 57% of young care leavers (aged 18-25) had completed Year 12 (McDowall, 2020). In comparison, the 2019 Year 12 attainment rate in Australia is 72% and the 2020 Year 12 or equivalent (Cert III) attainment rate in Australia is 90% (ABS 2020).

Education is one of primary factors contributing to the lifelong outcomes that render children in OOHC as "one of the most disadvantaged groups in the western world" (Tareen-Sweeney 2008)¹. Improving education outcomes for children and young people in OOHC is not only of benefit to them, but also for Australian society more broadly. For example, Bubonya & Cobb-Clark (2019)² demonstrate that "the primary mechanism linking welfare receipt across generations is the failure to complete high school".

There are a range of obstacles for care leavers accessing higher education and a lack of information about higher education transition, with only NSW offering any information about this on their post-care information pages³ and very little via university resources. Most universities offer equity scholarships but they are not specific to care leavers and there are multiple significant barriers to accessing appropriate career information for care experienced young people.

¹ Tareen-Sweeney, M. (2008). The mental health of children in out-of-home care. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, Vol 21 (4), P.345-349.

² Bubonya, M. & Cobb-Clark, D. (2020). Pathways of disadvantage: unpacking the intergenerational correlation in welfare. Life Course Centre.

³ As quoted in Collier Foundation Report, 2021, Care and Higher Education

Government/Sector Policy Direction

Australia is a signatory of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Articles 28 and 29 establish education as a human right. They outline several actions incumbent on signatories to ensure that this right is provided progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. Importantly, the child's personalities, abilities and talents should be recognised in the educational experience they have.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) clearly articulates the national commitment:

Australian Governments commit to ensuring the education community works to provide equality of opportunity and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Standard 7 in the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care is: "Children and young people up to at least 18 years are supported to be engaged in appropriate education, training and/or employment". These standards require states and territories to work to improve quality of care and enhance life chances for children and young people in OOHC, including through education. Australian governments and non-government organisations have invested in initiatives to support the education of children and young people in OOHC as they continue to experience relatively poor educational outcomes. The data which highlights the poorer outcomes experienced by children in care suggests that despite investment, the unique circumstances and experiences of trauma faced by children are yet to be fully embraced by educational institutions.

The Australian Government acknowledges that there is an over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, and one way they are attempting to address this is through the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has 17 national socio-economic targets and five of them directly relate to improving education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and young people. The socioeconomic outcome area 5 states that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential". The government has set the target that by 2031 they will increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent. In 2016 (the most recent data available) showed that only 63.2 per cent attained Year 12 or obtained a non-school qualification at Certificate III or above.

In most jurisdictions, education departments expect that children in OOHC will have some form of Individualised Education Plans, access to additional departmental support and priority access.

Life Without Barriers Strategy 2025

Life Without Barriers Strategy 2025 clearly commits the organisation to maximise the impact we have by influencing systemic barriers to revitalise education and enhance learning outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.

Life Without Barriers believes children and young people in OOHC should have the same opportunities to enjoy and thrive in education as their peers. Life Without Barriers acknowledges that educational institutions offer the primary mode of learning for students; however, the role of caregivers and the community can be equally important.

We believe that by partnering with carers, families, government and educational institutions, we can support children in care to have confidence in engaging in learning and change the trajectory of their future prospect and life opportunities.

For children in care, the network of their family, care agency and foster and kinship carers can play a substantial role in advocating for the child at an institutional level as well as directly influencing a child's exposure to positive learning.

Life Without Barriers approach

Life Without Barriers established a dedicated Education Unit in 2020 to specifically offer intensive support to children and young people in care as well as foster carers and families.

They have four key areas of focus:

1 Lifelong Learners – Children and Young People are engaged and inspired to participate in education

2 Confident Caregivers – Staff and carers are a driving force in setting Children and Young People up for educational success

3 Purposeful Partnerships – Our positive relationships with Government, Educators and our sector, help us to accelerate the pace of change

4 Focussed Organisation – Life Without Barriers implements the structural, systemic and cultural changes required to deliver our Educational Strategy

The Education Unit is in a development partnership phase with NGOs and the University sector establishing an ARC (Australian Research Council) Linkage Project grant to develop the evidence base aimed at improving access to school education for children and young people in OOHC. The project, if successful, will deliver a framework for supporting access to school education for this cohort, that includes strategies for schools and education, for child protection services, and for systems level changes to better meet the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care and the aspirations of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration in relation to education. It will look at statistics and data sets across education systems in all jurisdictions, looking at initiatives that work to improve access to school education, and engage with children and young people in the process. It will do this through a partnering model, recognising the value and role of carers, community, government and schools to support each individual child in OOHC.

The Year 3 Literacy and Numeracy Project and Hook Into Books are two initiatives of the Education Unit. The former aims to build a baseline of information about children NAPLAN results as a focus for Child Youth and Family key workers to start to record on our systems and use this as a tool to support educational results. Hook Into Books 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.

Life Without Barriers' updated Reconciliation Action Plan includes a number of actions and initiatives for the Education Unit 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.

Life Without Barriers is a founding member of the **Children in Care Collective**, a collective of OOHC service providers, practitioners and academics in Australia to share information and work collaboratively on a range of issues that impact children and young people living in OOHC. Life Without Barriers continues its advocacy for improved education outcomes for children in OOHC to be imbedded into government policies as the current chair of the CCC and its commitment to the ongoing sustainability of the CCC.

Our Commitment

Life Without Barriers is one of the most experienced providers of out-of-home care services in Australia. Our knowledge and expertise therefore places us in an important position to support change by advocating for all jurisdictions to revitalise education and enhance learning outcomes for children and young people in OOHC.

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 – that being access to positive education and transition supports. This aspiration stares down systemic barriers that position children and young people in OOHC as too complex to maintain engagement with learning and seeks to redress management of complex behaviour by under enrolment, suspension and exclusion as a fundamental affront to children and young people's rights.

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