

Engaging with families of children who are in out-of-home care

to support learning in early childhood education and care (ECEC)



There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's learning. This resource details strategies for engaging with families of children in out-of-home care (OOHC) to support children's learning and development outcomes. These strategies elaborate on the 'promising approaches' outlined in AERO's family engagement for early learning practice guides (which target early childhood services with 3 to 5 year-olds).

The promising approaches outlined in AERO's family engagement for learning practice guides include:

- recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home
- supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development
- promoting a literacy-rich environment at home
- collaboratively planning and problem solving with families.

Context

While the practice guides outline promising practices from the research evidence for engaging with families generally, few studies have measured the effects of different strategies for engaging with families of children in OOHC to support learning and development. This resource, therefore, offers starting points for what promising approaches for family engagement could look like in relation to children in OOHC.

Children who are unable to live in their family home may be situated in short-term, medium-term or permanent OOHC. Each living situation may look different, but could include:

- **foster care** – when a child is cared for by a foster carer with formal training and approval
- **relative/kin care** – when a child is cared for by a relative or family friend
- **residential/group home care** – when a child is cared for in a home staffed by carers.

For all AERO family engagement resources, ‘families’ includes biological parents, legal guardians, adoptive parents, kin carers and out-of-home (foster) carers. Within the context of this document, we use the term ‘family’ to describe a child’s current legal guardians, while specifying a child’s ‘birth family’ as needed. A child’s ‘home’ refers to their current living arrangement, which includes any permanent arrangements away from their biological family, a temporary carer arrangement, or a group home.

In some circumstances, there may be a goal to reunite children with their birth family. In these cases, any communication with the birth family around their child’s learning should be discussed with the child’s current legal guardians.

Reasons for OOHC placement

Children may be living in OOHC for various reasons, including:

- their primary carer (such as their birth family) has voluntarily requested support from their local child protection jurisdiction
- child safety concern exist, such as the presence or risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect.

It is important to understand that many children enter OOHC with existing experiences of trauma, on top of the potentially traumatic experience of changes in their household. Children may particularly benefit from trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches coordinated at the service level (Craig 2016). Also, as a staff member at a service, it is important to consider the privacy of key information shared with you to help support children in OOHC.

Nationally, the rate of children and young people in OOHC has remained at 8 in 1,000 children from 2017 to 2020 (AIHW 2021). Studies have shown that children growing up in this setting may require additional support in their learning and development (Townsend 2011). Effective engagement with families is critical to support learning for these important-to-reach children.

Learning impact

Language and literacy difficulties are highly prevalent in children in OOHC, and this is not restricted to one type of care arrangement (Trout et al. 2008). Language and neurodevelopmental disorders are strongly over-represented in OOHC children (Snow et al. 2020).

✓ Promising approaches



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Families who feel they are working in partnership with their child's service can be more likely to engage in practices to support learning at home.

Children in OOHC, depending on the state or territory in which they are based, may also have access to early intervention services and supports, for example, in the areas of mental and physical health and education. Contact your state education department or child protection department for more information on what services may be available.

The following are some considerations and strategies around supporting OOHC families with learning at home.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Reach out to families to develop an understanding of what additional supports may be available and collaborate on strategies to support learning at home.
- Invite the family and any support staff and agencies to discuss the child's learning needs maintaining partnership between the service and home.
- Encourage families to talk to the children about their daily experiences at the service and what they have learned.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Use meetings with families as an opportunity to get to know their context and tailor general supports. For example, a carer may not have experience with pre-school children and may benefit from information about resources available in the local community, for example about transition to school.
- Communicate key information to educators and teachers in a timely manner enabling them to provide targeted support.

Reflection question

- How do you show families that you recognise their role in children's learning and development?

Reflection question

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way of recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home. What does or could it look like in your service with families of children in OOHC?

✓ Promising approaches



Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development

Effective two-way communication draws on the combined knowledge and expertise of both families and educators, teachers and service leaders about children's learning needs and their development.

The following are some considerations and strategies around supporting two-way positive communications and providing light touch updates about children's learning.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Draw on the knowledge and expertise of both families and staff, via effective two-way communication. Families may have training or supports from child protection services that can be utilised.
- Ensure you engage with a child's family, regardless of whether the child is residing in a short- or longer-term arrangement. Gaining an understanding of a child's learning needs is critical for ensuring you can support them in the most effective ways.
- Provide families with light-touch updates about the learning progress of children in their care, just like any other parent or carer. Updates should focus on what is going well, together with areas for further support.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Ensure contact details are kept up to date. Children in OOHC may have experienced multiple placements and may have instability in their place of residence and their support network.
- Make sure families can nominate their preference around how to receive light touch updates – for example, text messages, phone calls or emails. This is especially important if there are restrictions around family member contact.
- Ask families if any other members of the child's support network should also receive light-touch updates about learning. For example, it may be appropriate to provide light-touch updates about learning to support staff and agencies who are also supporting the child.

Reflection questions

- How do you invite and encourage families to talk about children's learning and development?
- How could you personalise light touch updates, keeping them positive, accessible and to the point?

Reflection questions

- Has your service consulted with families about how they'd like to be communicated with?
- Are there any other support people who may benefit from light-touch updates about child's learning and development?

✓ Promising approaches



Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practice their literacy skills often, in functional ways.

The following are some considerations and strategies for promoting a literacy-rich environment at home for OOHC families.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Note that many children in OOHC have challenges with language and literacy, such as oral language skills and reading comprehension.
- Discuss with the families about how to best promote a literacy-rich environment at home that focuses on child's interests and their current needs. For example, the interests of an older child in the service may not necessarily be captured in many literacy-building experiences that are at their level of literacy.
- Also consider supporting the use of strategies like shared reading. For children in more temporary arrangements, this could involve providing access to reading materials that a child can take home.
- Ensure you provide additional supports when sending books home in an OOHC environment, such as a letter to family or a discussion with the child about the books they are taking home, before they take them. Without these supports, learning is less likely to be successful.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Consider how literacy-rich environments change for children as they grow and develop.
- Service leaders with knowledge of the children in the service are well-positioned to support educators and teachers with fostering literacy-rich environments at home and in the service.
- It is important that shared reading efforts are sustained over months rather than weeks.
- If a child experiences high rates of instability in their home or their support network, this can increase the challenge of sustaining shared reading. Consider what systems you can put in place to reduce the negative effects of an unstable home environment. For example, identifying changes to a child's care arrangement early and prompting planning meetings may minimise any absence of shared reading at home.

Reflection question

- What might a 'literacy-rich environment' at home look like for your children?

Reflection questions

- How might 'literacy-rich environments' change as you learn about a family's needs, and as you watch children grow and develop?
- If you already encourage shared reading approaches in the home, how can you help to ensure that this is more than a short-term effort?

✓ Promising approaches



Collaboratively planning and problem solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families and educators, teachers and service leaders has been shown to improve children's early learning and development. It can also ensure that everyone is using a consistent approach for addressing a child's unique learning and development needs.

The following are some considerations and strategies around collaboratively planning and problem solving with OOHC families.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Ensure you are taking the time to learn about the living arrangements of each child when considering collaborative planning and problem-solving. For example, this could include meetings between service staff, families and the child to identify individual goals (such as developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly between rooms), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.
- One way of supporting collaborative problem-solving may be to ask families if they have any questions regarding their child's learning.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Many children in OOHC find it challenging to access everyday spoken and written language (Snow et al. 2020).
- Access to intensive speech-language therapy services as early as possible supports positive educational outcomes and social-emotional wellbeing (Snow et al. 2020)
- Service leaders can promote and support partnership with external agencies when collaborating with families, to ensure that early intervention occurs.
- This consideration may also be extended to areas such as mental health.

Reflection questions

- What goals are your children working towards? Do you invite or encourage families to help shape some of these goals?
- How do you collaborate with families to help ensure children can achieve their goals and identify any barriers along the way?
- How do you celebrate the progress or achievement of goals with children and families along the way?

Reflection questions

- What opportunities are there to regularly collaborate and problem solve with families?
- What external agencies does your service partner with to support and facilitate early intervention for children?



References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2018) *Child protection Australia 2016-17*: Child Welfare Series No. 68, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/child-protection.

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More information

The AERO website features further guidance, including practice guides, case studies, implementation checklists and promising approaches audit tools:

- [Family engagement in schools](#)
- [Family engagement in ECEC](#)