



creating a better life  
for children and young  
people in care

*Please note that this submission contains sensitive material. It is advised to read with discretion.*

# Submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence on the Issues Paper

**August 2024**

**CREATE Foundation**

**A Kurna Land**  
118 West Tce,  
Adelaide, SA 5000  
T (08) 8212 8898  
E [advocacy@create.org.au](mailto:advocacy@create.org.au)



## Acknowledgement of Country

The CREATE Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners of the lands, skies and waters where we live and work. We pay deep respect to Elders, knowledge holders and community leaders across all Aboriginal communities.

We acknowledge that Australia is culturally rich with the oldest living cultures on earth. And we acknowledge over 60,000 years of growing kids strong, connected to culture and Country.

## About CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national consumer peak body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. We represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people currently living in care, and those who have transitioned from care up to the age of 25. Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential. Our mission is to create a better life for children and young people living in care. To do this we:

**CONNECT** children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community to

**EMPOWER** children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard to

**CHANGE** the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services and increase community awareness.

## Overview

CREATE Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the [Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence \(Royal Commission\) on the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Issues paper \(the Issues Paper\)](#) (Government of South Australia, 2024a). CREATE welcomes the investigation by Commissioner Natasha Stott Despoja to deeply understand the concerning prevalence and impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence across South Australia. CREATE hopes that the Commissioner will listen to the voices of children and young people living in out-of-home care in South Australia, in relation to their experiences of either being directly targeted by abuse, or having witnessed and/or been exposed to the effects of abuse.

CREATE acknowledges Australia's international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children from violence (Article 19) (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2015; United Nations, 1989), and recognises the relevance of frameworks such as the [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children \(2022-2023\)](#) and the [Committed to Safety framework for addressing domestic, family and sexual violence in South Australia](#) (Australian Government, 2022; Government of South Australia, 2024b). Our submission, guided by the voices of young people, focuses on the needs of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience in South Australia.

As of 30 June 2023, there were 4,534 children and young people living in care in South Australia. Importantly, 39% (1,752) of these children and young people were Aboriginal, representing a significant overrepresentation of Aboriginal children living in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024a). CREATE regularly engages with many of these children and young people through state-wide consultations, Youth Advisory Groups, policy roundtables and connection events. Our membership includes the specific priority populations of children and young people, many



of whom are Aboriginal, LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, and living with disabilities and/or mental health comorbidities.

Children and young people living in out-of-home care are some of the most traumatised populations in Australia, with many having experienced disadvantage, neglect, abuse, domestic family and/or sexual violence (Baldwin et al., 2023; Mendes et al., 2012; Sacker et al., 2021). These adverse childhood experiences, trauma and lived experiences of domestic, family and or sexual violence all impact on their long-term health, including housing stability, educational outcomes and financial security (AIHW, 2024b; Baldwin et al., 2023; Mendes et al., 2012; Sacker et al., 2021). Living in care can increase their stress and anxiety, and frequent moves can make it hard for them to get the support and services they need, affecting their mental, physical, and social health over time. This also puts them at higher risk for issues like substance abuse, self-harm, and serious mental health problems (Bellis et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Tarren-Sweeney, 2017).

As a cohort within our community who have experienced challenging circumstances, children and young people living in care need wrap-around supports to improve their health and wellbeing outcomes. There is significant overrepresentation of young people with a care experience in the existing identified priority cohorts in focus for this [Royal Commission](#). In 2020–21, 53% of young people under youth justice supervision had experienced contact with the child protection system in the previous five years (AIHW, 2022). The 2023 Family Matters Report conducted by SNAICC tells us that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children represent 42.8% of the total number of children in out-of-home care but only represent 5.98% of all children in Australia” (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, [SNAICC], 2023). CREATE calls for a deliberate focus on Aboriginal children and young people living in care, in the investigations undertaken by the Commissioner.

Within this context, CREATE also calls for the inclusion of all children and young people with a care experience as a priority cohort within the [Royal Commission](#). CREATE acknowledges the recent [Inquiry](#) conducted by the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, who engaged with Aboriginal children and young people living in care, to investigate the impacts from removal and placement decisions. [Findings](#) included that the underlying issues that led to contact with the child protection system were characterised by problems associated with trauma and domestic and family violence (Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People [CACYP], 2024). Listening to the voices of children and young people living in care and understanding the intersections of their experiences of child protection and domestic family and sexual violence in South Australia, will be critical for the [Royal Commission](#).

CREATE strongly recommends that the [Royal Commission](#) investigates the experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence involving children and young people living in out-of-home care across South Australia, to gain insight from their experiences and to contribute to a knowledge base focused on prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. CREATE strongly recommends that the [Royal Commission](#) investigates targeted prevention and early interventions strengthened by trauma-informed and culturally responsive support responses that are specifically designed for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience.



# Recommendations

## Prevention

*“I would copy my brother’s emotions as a kid... He was mad, then I was mad. He threw a chair, then I would throw a chair. I feel sad that there is no-one to copy off and teach me about my emotions. I’ve done things by myself and survived. I push people away – they didn’t help me when I needed it.”*  
(Young person living in care, SA)

*‘...ask someone for help. If something is piling up, tell someone. Practice, practice, practice – everyone needs practice and can’t get their emotions out straight away.’*  
(Young person living in care, SA)

In South Australia, young people have told CREATE that they express their emotions based on the communication styles they learned from the people around them. Many have shared feelings of not being safe or lacking positive role models who could teach them about managing emotions and forming healthy relationships. Domestic and sexual violence deeply impacts their mental and physical health, development, and education, and can lead to future problems in relationships (Buchanan et al., 2023); (AIFS, 2015). It is important to teach this cohort about healthy relationships and to challenge harmful gender norms to break the cycle of abuse (Buchanan et al., 2023; Cochran et al., 2015).

Young people living in care are also at higher risk of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse [RCIRCSA], 2017; Brown et al., 2021). The 2017 report from the [Royal Commission Inquiry into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse](#), found that 35% of the children and young people experienced sexual abuse while living in care (RCIRCSA, 2017). This cohort needs targeted sexual health education to promote safety and wellbeing. Group-based programs can improve their knowledge, attitudes and reduce exploitation (Brown et al., 2021; McKibbin et al., 2022). Programs like [Power to Kids](#) help carers better support these young people (MacKillop Family Services, n.d.).

Children and young people living in care must have access to effective preventative programs. They must be provided with information on domestic, family and sexual violence. Resources provided must be in plain and accessible language with culturally appropriate messaging. For priority populations, specifically for Aboriginal children and young people living in care, preventative programs must be culturally safe and trauma-informed, ensuring they are based upon social and emotional wellbeing and culturally responsive models (Graham et al., 2022; Perera et al., 2022).

## Recommendations

To elevate the concerns raised by children and young people with a care experience in South Australia, CREATE recommends:

1. Effective and evidence-based preventative programs that teach children and young people to become critical of gender norms, stereotypes and violence-supportive attitudes, and to equip them with the skills to form healthy and respectful relationships. These programs should be funded and made available to all children living in out-of-home care across South Australia. Examples include:
  - The national [Power to Kids program](#) should be made available to upskill carers to strengthen prevention and responses for safeguarding sexual health and safety. (MacKillop Family Services, n.d.).
  - [Breaking the cycle program](#) is a program delivered by Anglicare Victoria that seeks to break the cycle of abuse for adolescents who have been exposed to violence, are displaying violent behaviours and are living with their mothers/carers.



2. Equipping carers with information and knowledge on domestic, family and sexual violence may help them to support the young people in their care with knowledge on:
  - How to teach children and young people to become critical of gender norms, stereotypes and violence-supportive attitudes.
  - How to teach children and young people to identify and choose healthy relationships through positive role modelling.
3. Resources to be co-designed with children and young people living in care. Resources must include accessible language and culturally appropriate messaging to understand the [cycle of violence](#) and to improve the safety and wellbeing for all children and young people living in care in South Australia.
4. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to lead [Community Safety and Wellbeing programs](#) for increasing knowledge and awareness on domestic family and sexual violence. These programs should be made available for all Aboriginal children and young people living in care in South Australia.

## Early intervention

### *Housing and transition support*

*“Parents house not safe. Grandparents’ house not safe. Resi [residential] care not safe. Current foster care – SAFE.” (Young person living in care, SA)*

*“I told them I need help and they told me I was just seeking attention.”  
(15-year-old young person living in care, SA)*

Young people have told CREATE about their experiences, including being moved from a safe foster family to another foster placement where they faced verbal and physical abuse. They have also described their worries about becoming homeless when they leave care, and how the South Australian housing crisis has impacted on their transitions from care, placing them at risk of not being able to access services to help protect them from risk and harm. Some young people have also said they are currently living in unsafe environments.

CREATE’s research on [Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care \(OOHC\)](#) shows that about one in three young people leaving care experience homelessness in their first year, with 37% remaining homeless for over six months (AIHW, 2023b; AIHW, 2024b; McDowall, 2020). Australian research has also shown that cisgender females, living in residential care or having had many placements, are the most likely cohort to rely on housing services (AIHW, 2023b, 2024b).

Early and targeted intervention services to manage the risks for children and young people with a care experience must be expanded and made accessible for them. This includes evidence-based housing supports like [Youth Foyers](#) to reduce the risks of homelessness and or being faced with living in unstable situations, where young people are unsafe and at risk for a reoccurrence of domestic family and sexual violence and or the repeat cycle of substance use disorders. One young person told CREATE:

*“Priority listing is much longer than 4 years. Especially in regional areas, the priority list for people leaving care can be 6 years or more. We are expected to move metro if we can’t find housing in our regional areas. Our support systems and networks are in our home area – it’s not a safe situation to move and often make vulnerable to repeat cycle of drugs and alcohol dependency.”  
(Young person, SA)*

### *Early intervention responders for Aboriginal children and young people*

For Aboriginal communities, domestic and family violence needs to be understood in the context of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, racism, forced child removal and discrimination (AIHW, 2015). As described by the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in [the final report of the Inquiry](#), it was found that the underlying issues that led to contact with child



protection and the removal of the child were characterised by problems associated with trauma and domestic and family violence (CACYP, 2024). The Commissioner reported that change would only occur if investments were redirected to early supports to shift system responses from child removal, to preventing the need for child protection involvement, through early and robust supportive service responses (CACYP, 2024). CREATE calls for the Commissioner to investigate the intersectionality of experiences of child protection and domestic, family and sexual violence for Aboriginal children and young people living care.

Aboriginal children and young people represent 39% of the OOHC cohort in South Australia (AIHW, 2023a). It is therefore essential that culturally appropriate early interventions are implemented to manage the risks for Aboriginal children and young people identified as 'high risk' for experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence (AIHW, 2023a). The Commissioner has recommended in the Inquiry's [final report](#) that to manage the risks for this cohort, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations must lead the early support intervention services, thus creating a shift away from the Department of Child Protection being the only responder (CACYP, 2024). (See recommendation eight).

### **Recommendations**

To elevate the concerns raised by children and young people with a care experience in South Australia, CREATE recommends for the Commission to:

1. Investigate the lived experiences with children and young people from priority populations, across South Australia to provide insight into their experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence and to contribute to a knowledge base focused on prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing.
2. Investigate housing models and programs (with a view for funded joint-partnerships to expand the current service offering) for keeping children and young people with a care experience safe, and to reduce the risks of homelessness and/or being faced with living in unstable situations, where they are at risk for a re-occurrence of domestic, family and sexual violence. CREATE recommends exploring:
  - I. [South Australia's first Youth Foyer](#) in Port Adelaide which is a joint partnership between the Department of Human Services and St John's Youth Services.
3. Engage in genuine partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to understand Aboriginal cultural perspectives and advice relating to developing culturally appropriate early intervention programs and services to meet the needs of children and young people living in care.
4. Recommend for proportional, adequate and long-term funding to be allocated to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop, implement and lead early responder services for Aboriginal children and young people identified as 'at risk'. Recommendation eight from the Commissioner's Inquiry [final report](#) states that '*sustainable and adequate funding commensurate to need must be allocated to local-level Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to enable the delivery of culturally safe and appropriate Early Intervention and Intensive Family Support Services as defined at the local level*' (CACYP, 2024).
5. Investigate ways to collect reliable data on outcomes and domestic, family and sexual violence service use for young people leaving care in South Australia, to inform the development of appropriate programs and policies that will support this cohort as they transition to independence (AIHW, 2023b).
6. Collaborate with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to investigate ways to implement culturally safe data practises and to ensure Aboriginal data sovereignty.



## Response

*“Not a lot of options but there are some Headspace Groups, but they seem to be targeted at older people (older teenagers and up).” (Young person, SA)*

*“I don’t understand why the past keeps affecting the future. I’m still angry sometimes and I don’t know why.” (Young person, SA)*

Therapeutic responses to children and young people exposed to domestic, family and sexual violence must be long-term and trauma-informed with a focus on attachment and bonding (AIFS, 2015). This should go hand-in-hand with preventative programs like [Power to Kids](#) which help them learn how to form healthy and respectful relationships (AIFS, 2015).

Young people have shared with CREATE how difficult it is to access the support services they need. It is also crucial for them to have reliable information for making informed decisions about their healthcare (including sexual health), mental health, and transition planning (Powell et al., 2021). Young people face many barriers, such as stigma, costs, long wait times, transport issues, and a lack of culturally appropriate and youth-friendly services (Powell et al., 2021). When asked how these barriers were affecting them young people told CREATE:

*“I felt like a liability.” (Young person, SA)*

*“Shame associated with the care system.” (Young person, SA)*

Young people are calling for better access to support and health services, especially in regional areas of South Australia. The mental health needs of children and young people living in care are more complex than the general population, and they require a specialised, trauma-informed approach (Eadie, 2017; Klag et al., 2016). To enhance and expand these specialised services, it’s crucial to develop treatment models that are both trauma-informed and culturally appropriate (Graham et al., 2022). Such models can offer safe, transparent, and comprehensive support, giving a sense of security that many young people living in care have not experienced before (Graham et al., 2022). Culturally responsive models are particularly important for Aboriginal children and young people with a care experience (Graham et al., 2022).

## Recommendations

To elevate the concerns raised by children and young people with a care experience in South Australia, CREATE recommends for the Commission to:

1. Consult with children and young people living in out-of-home care in South Australia, to gain insight for the development and evaluation of trauma-informed and treatment models.
2. Recommend education for health professionals and general practitioners that focuses on understanding the experiences of young people living in care, which may reduce stigma and improve therapeutic relationships and response outcomes (Powell et al., 2021).
3. Recommend that Aboriginal children and young people have access to a culturally safe and appropriate framework for counselling, trauma services and mental health support (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023).
4. Collaborate with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in South Australia to investigate culturally responsive and trauma-informed programs and services for priority populations including Aboriginal children and young people (Graham et al., 2022; Perera et al., 2022).



## Recovery and healing

*"I don't like it when people talk over me as well. How can you listen if you're talking when I am?"  
(Young person, SA)*

*"I want to support children, because I didn't get that support when I was in care and I feel like things would have been different if I had support." (Young care leaver, SA)*

*"I told them I need help and they told me I was just seeking attention." [Experience when having a mental health crisis.] (Young care leaver, SA)*

To support the recovery and healing of children and young people living in care, they need access to trauma-informed services. These services should empower them and ensure they feel heard, listened to, and supported. Trauma-informed approaches that are holistic, empowering, strengths-focused, collaborative, and reflective, help young people feel safe physically, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally (AIHW, 2015; Victorian State Government, 2022). Additionally, services must be culturally responsive to offer safety and transparency, providing a sense of security that many young people in this group may not have experienced before (Graham et al., 2022).

### Recommendations

To elevate the concerns raised by children and young people with a care experience in South Australia, CREATE calls on the Commission to:

1. Encourage domestic, family and sexual violence services to incorporate trauma-informed responses and practices, noting that CREATE acknowledges and respects sector colleagues who are already delivering these services with trauma-informed responses and practices.
2. Encourage domestic, family and sexual violence services to be culturally responsive to provide safety and transparency, noting that CREATE acknowledges and respects sector colleagues who are already delivering these services with culturally responsive practices.
5. Recommend for Aboriginal children and young people to have access to a culturally safe and appropriate framework for counselling, trauma services and mental health support (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023).

## Conclusion

CREATE welcomes the Commissioner's investigation and strongly recommends exploring the experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence among children and young people in out-of-home care across South Australia. This investigation should gather insights from their experiences and contribute to a knowledge base aimed at prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. CREATE also urges the [Royal Commission](#) to focus on targeted prevention and early intervention, enhanced by trauma-informed and culturally responsive support tailored specifically for children and young people in out-of-home care.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Jazmin Ealden, National Advocacy and Influencing Manager, CREATE Foundation at [REDACTED]



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