

## Chapter 19

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# Engaging first mothers, fathers and grandparents in the care continuum

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### Introduction

Out-of-home provides a service to protect the needs of children whose parental care has been considered inadequate or unsafe. Such services have come to be increasing in demand over the last decade, particularly as a result of an escalation in the rates of reported child abuse and neglect and statutory removals of children to protective care. Although parents are usually subject to the interventions of the State, they are now increasingly being recognised as partners or participants in the child protection system who have their own needs and role to play in informing the best outcomes and interventions for vulnerable children (Farmer & Owen 1995; Ivec 2013). This perspective is consistent with a wider interest in participatory and consumer perspectives in both policy as well as child welfare research. However, despite the recognition of the important role and perspectives of birth or First Parents,<sup>1</sup> research into this area remains under-developed and in need for further investigation (Harries 2008; Ross et al. 2017; Smithson & Gibson 2017).

This chapter examines current research to understand what is known about the characteristics of birth or First Families; the state of relationships between First Families and their caseworkers; their relationship with those caring for their children and their experiences of contact with their children in care. It also examines the personal impact of being involved in the child protection decisions, and the availability of services to address their needs, particularly in relation to when children are reunified with their Families.

### ***The challenging circumstances of First Families***

Child welfare research shows that the biological parents of children in care are disproportionately drawn from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds as well as single mother households (Bebbington & Miles 1989; Fernandez 1996; Harries 2008; Lindsey 1995; Fernandez et al. 2019). Many live in poverty or are supported by welfare payments; have low education levels and limited employment opportunities; and are living in government housing, transitional accommodation or are homeless. There is also often a higher than average prevalence of physical and or intellectual disabilities; mental health problems; substance abuse; and sometimes periods of criminal activity and incarceration (Fernandez 1996; Harries 2008; Marcenko, Lyons & Courtney 2011; Palmer, Maiter & Manji 2008; Sykes 2011; Taplin & Mattick 2014; Wells 2011). Other commonly reported circumstances include domestic violence and high rates of physical, emotional or sexual

abuse in childhood as well as periods in statutory care (Taplin & Mattick 2014; Wells 2011).

It is noteworthy that most of the households with these characteristics involved single mothers without the support of a partner which is known to be a factor that increases the risk of child removal (Sykes 2011; Wells & Marcenko 2011). The cluster of problems described makes it difficult for mothers to balance caring and household responsibilities and there are usually few financial resources available to obtain the service of baby-sitters as might be the case in middle-class families (Hanmer & Statham 1988). Their situation is further exacerbated upon the removal of their children because this removes their entitlement to many government benefits and often coincides with threats to their housing security if they are offered less rental support and are currently unemployed. All of these factors are known to conspire to make the entry of children into care more likely, but also to reduce the likelihood of reunification once children are in care (Broadhurst & Mason, 2017; Welbourne 2012). On top of all these problems are the bureaucratic demands of government payments, obtaining welfare benefits and negotiating the employment market.

### ***Involvement in child protection decisions***

There are a number of particular areas where the child welfare system can have a significant impact on First Parents.

### ***Legal issues and the Court system***

In the United States, England and Australia, legislative reform in the area of child protection has seen a shift towards permanency planning, particularly in the case of young children who have been removed. In these reforms, this translates to a shorter allotted time frame for parents to demonstrate to the court that they can effect changes in the parenting environment and provide a safe, stable environment for their children (Broadhurst & Mason 2017; Fernandez 2013). For example, under the Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (NSW), while restoration to First Families is the first preference for permanency, First Families now have six months to demonstrate change if their child is under two years of age, and 12 months if their child is over the age of two. These reforms have long-term consequences for First Families arising from failure to demonstrate significant change in parenting capacity in a shorter time frame, leading to their child being placed permanently in a foster family or adopted. As a result, parental status is altered irrevocably and the parents' inability to access rehabilitative services serves to increase the risk of removal of any other children in the home (Broadhurst & Mason 2017; Ross et al. 2017).

Involvement in Court proceedings is frequently an inherently alienating experience for First Families. For example, Ross et al. (2017), using a mixed methods study of parents involved in the child protection system and court proceedings, found that parents were not commonly involved as active participants in decision-making processes. The findings of this and other studies reported that parents have few opportunities to be involved in proceedings, particularly due to the legal jargon and protocols that were unfamiliar, and a lack of knowledge about their rights during the process, including the right to have an advocate or support person or where to find information about their rights (Broadhurst

& Mason 2017; Fernandez 1996; Harries 2008; Ross et al. 2017; Thorpe 2008). Parents reported feeling misunderstood and misrepresented in documents submitted to the court detailing their inability to parent and which included sensitive details about their personal lives that could be discussed during proceedings and that they might be questioned about should they wish to contest removal (Broadhurst & Mason 2017; Ross et al. 2017). For these reasons, social workers can play an important role in supporting parents to navigate the legal system and interpret legal jargon while also providing emotional support to them in dealing with the grief and loss on removal of their child (Forrester et al. 2008; Kemp et al. 2013).

### *Engagement and inclusion*

While literature and policy advocates that workers treat families/parents as partners, parents are rarely involved in decision making even though they have to live with the consequence of decisions. The absence of opportunities for communication through formal or informal mechanisms compounds their alienation from the care process. Studies have found that some workers were inclined to disparage parental capacities and not involving them in decision making or giving them opportunities to express their views (Fernandez 1996; Thorpe 1980). This is despite evidence that an atmosphere of trust, openness and partnership in which workers share information, decisions and power with parents is known to contribute more effective child welfare processes and outcomes (Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings 1995). Although there is some evidence of effective collaborative relationships between child protection agencies and First Families in some jurisdictions, the overwhelming characterisation of the relationship is one of ‘us and them’, where child protection agencies and workers hold all the power and could control families’ lives (Harries 2008). This dynamic is reinforced by Thorpe’s (2008) review of the literature discussing the inclusion of First Families in the child protection system, citing one study that made reference to a parent who called child protection workers the ‘Gestapo’ based on her perception of their use of power (MacKinnon 1998 cited in Thorpe 2008). Parents felt that they were expected to be subordinate and subservient, to simply accept the decisions that were being made for them by caseworkers without eliciting their contribution (Thorpe 2008; Smithson & Gibson 2017). Evidence has shown that the fear of becoming involved with the child protection system prompts families to avoid seeking help from other organisations at the risk of being reported to the statutory child protection department and subsequently having their children removed (Thorpe 2008). Accordingly, Ankersmit (2016) suggests that to address the power imbalance between families and child protection agencies, the model of engagement should be one that works from a strengths-based foundation to build on existing capacity of parents that supports restoration.

The experiences of First Families’ inclusion in case conferences and reunification decisions reflects further concern. Smithson and Gibson (2017) conducted qualitative research that explored the perceptions of First Families’ experiences of child protection conferences and identified concerns about the expectations and demeanour of caseworkers. Caseworkers were considered to pose obstacles to reunification rather than supporting the process, suggesting they were required to undertake more actions than they felt necessary, the undertakings required were vague, the relevance of such expected actions being poorly explained. Some were of the view that caseworkers often scheduled

programs and activities that would interfere with their contact schedule (Ross et al. 2017; Smithson & Gibson 2017).

### *Relationships with caseworkers*

First Parents are usually engaged with child protection caseworkers over an extended period of time from the initial assessment before a child is removed to determine parenting capacity and safety of the home environment, to developing and implementing case plans once a child is removed, and during permanency planning processes related to either reunification or guardianship or adoption. During this process caseworkers face the dual task of supporting the family and protecting the child (Hojer 2011). In circumstances where there is a positive relationship between the caseworker and First Families, parents are usually able to identify the attributes that have fostered this good relationship. Such factors include: treating the family humanely; taking a genuine interest in them; maintaining good communication, working to build rapport; and, applying an empathic style of practice (Smithson & Gibson 2017). Parents also find it helpful when caseworkers acknowledged the limitations of the service and established a collaborative and transparent relationship with them (Palmer, Maiter & Manji 2008; Slettebø 2013).

However, the majority of parents involved in research eliciting their perspectives rarely report supportive responses from their caseworkers. Research by Hojer (2011), for example, conducted using focus groups with First Families and social workers to discuss their experiences of the child protection system, found that mothers reported feeling they were continually being punished by their caseworker for failing to take care of their child. Mothers reported having had experienced caseworkers who questioned their parental knowledge and knowledge of their child; had experienced breaches of confidentiality and broken promises particularly regarding contact schedules; had services and information withheld from them and been excluded from decisions; or had workers who failed to follow through with decisions made at case planning meetings (Hojer 2011; Fernandez 1998, Palmer, et al. 2008; Sykes 2011; Smithson & Gibson 2017; Thorpe 2008). In a similar vein, Sykes (2011) found, in a qualitative study of 16 mothers, that caseworkers prefer to work with the ‘reforming parent’ so parents take on a version of that role to appease the caseworker while still resisting the process of complying with expectations and ticking boxes on case plans (Sykes 2011).

Another qualitative study conducted by Palmer, Maiter and Manji (2008) included interviews with 61 First Parents involved in two Child Protective Services agencies in Ontario to explore the experiences of First Parents in the child protection system and how the experiences could be used to shape practice. It highlighted the low rate of caseworkers providing emotional support to First Families whose child has been removed despite it being a central tenet of social work intervention. Those who received support spoke of workers who were easy to get in touch with, who listened without judgement, and who praised them for seeking help.

Across a number of studies, it appears that the majority of parents reported how outward manifestations of their grief at losing their child – anger, outbursts, and emotionally loaded statements – could be used against them as evidence of being emotionally unstable and unsuitable caregivers. Depression, often resulting from the trauma of engagement with child protection services, was often seen as evidence of parents being lazy or unmotivated (Hojer 2011; Thorpe 2008). Such a tendency towards

misinterpretation and lack of attention towards the emotions of First Families is thought to be due to the bureaucratic approach to child protection that prioritises risk assessment and procedural documentation over a relational approach (Palmer et al. 2008).

Other concerns expressed in some studies is that case-worker support is often not consistent or available once children are in care. For example, parents report that, once children have been placed permanently and the case as been closed, contact with case-workers decreased or ceased despite it being a time when parents wanted more support to process the grief from permanently losing their child (Hojer 2011). As a counter-point to examples of poor practice, a study by Dumbrell (2006) highlighted how more engaged practice can lead to better outcomes for First Parents. They reported that clients reported greater satisfaction and parental engagement when social work interventions aligned with parents' goals for reunification, had clear expectations, prepared them for meetings, advocated for them, respected their culture and supported their active ongoing participation in decisions. Stronger parent–worker relationships are also identified as being beneficial outcomes for their children.

In summary, although some parents may be predisposed to view the worker apprehensively because of initial child protection interventions, it is evident that this predisposition is reinforced by interactions with caseworkers during the care experience. The anger, sadness and powerlessness they experience from coercive court interventions and being separated from their children contributes to the distortion of the relationship and their perceptions and expectations of workers. In the absence of positive encouragement from workers, parents may feel that their parenting capacity may be undermined rather than given the supportive encouragement needed to break the pattern of alienation and marginalisation they experience (Fernandez 1996). This necessitates working with parents in partnership to sustain their continuing involvement in their children's lives when they are in care and facilitating reunification or permanent forms of shared care.

#### *Relationship with carers*

When a child is removed from their First Family the foster or kinship family with whom the child is placed either temporarily or permanently becomes an important part of the placement configuration. Typically, an 'exclusive' model of care is employed, meaning that the caseworker mediates the arrangement between the carers and First Families who may never meet each other. Three studies exploring First Families' relationships with carers are of interest (Ankersmit 2016; Harries 2008; Ross et al. 2017). Harries's (2008) exploration of the lived experience of First Parents involved in the child protection system through in-depth interviews with 42 First Parents identified the issues that parents had with carers which prevented a constructive relationship from developing. Ankersmit (2016)'s research which utilised the perceptions of caseworkers regarding the relationship between parents and carers highlights the different positions in the relationship – active participant versus passive observer – that influence the potential for collaborative relationships.

The parents interviewed in the study of Ross et al. (2017) acknowledged the importance of carers in their children's lives, but often felt as though they were viewing their child's life from the outside and found the experiencing very isolating. They spoke about the difficulty of hearing their child call their carer 'mum' or 'dad', and of wanting to share important information about their child's interests or services with carers but not

being able to do so, or having it rejected. There were particular challenges for First Parents whose child was placed in kinship care placements in having to navigate a new and unfamiliar familial relationship. If a relationship had been established between carers and First Parents, it was seen to have been initiated by the carers as they held the power in the situation due to having parental responsibility of the child (Ross et al. 2017).

In comparison, a study by Ankersmit (2016) which utilised the perceptions of case-workers regarding the relationship between carers and First Families focused primarily on how to develop a positive relationship and made little mention of the emotional impact the situation can have on First Parents. It acknowledges the probability of distrust and animosity between parents and carers, further encouraged by stories featured in the media and from friends who have been in a similar situation. However, the main findings of the study were that to establish a positive relationship between carers and First Parents, foster carers must have trust in the reunification process and those involved, must be motivated and willing participants, and that clarity of the responsibilities and roles of each party will help to build trust. Foster carers can be influential in maintaining biological bonds when they are active in the visitation and reunification process (Sancho & Jablonka 2000). However, such carers need to be supported in both their task of building relationships with their foster child but also in promoting the child's need for an active relationship with their First Parents and extended family (Fernandez 2009).

### *Experience of contact*

Grounded in a theoretical understanding of attachment, family contact is viewed as essential to nurturing the parent–child connection, building and maintaining attachments (Scott, O'Neill & Ming 2005) and fostering children's identity and their wellbeing (Bullen et al. 2017; Haight, Kagle & Black 2003; Salveron & Arney 2013). As Tregeagle and Mason (2008) point out, an important element of case-work and legal decision making is determining the frequency of contact between children and their First Family and the type of contact is integral to future stability of placements and permanency outcomes.

In practice, parental participation in their child's life is often restricted following removal and usually only involves contact visits, phone calls and emails (Ross et al. 2017), and this is generally consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that provides that children should have the right to maintain relationships with their parents, unless it is not in their best interests (United Nations General Assembly 1989, cited in Saini, Van Wert & Gofman, 2012). In their review of the literature available regarding supervised visitation between First Parents and their child in both a custody dispute and child welfare context, Saini, Van Wert & Gofman (2012) highlighted the purpose of contact visits is to facilitate relationships between parent and child, and to allow for evaluation of interaction by caseworkers (Saini et al. 2012). First Parents play a significant role in their children's lives in care through contact. Children's right to contact is outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in article 9.3.

Studies have shown that maintaining children's contact with their biological families yields important benefits for children, including fewer placements, stability of care, lower risk of mental health difficulties, strengthened emotional and behavioural development and increased potential for reunification (Broadhurst & Sen 2011; Fernandez & Atwood 2013; McWey, Acock & Porter 2010). Contact provides an opportunity for parents to

exercise some parental responsibility and participation (Atwool 2013). Thus, by supporting parents through contact arrangements, out-of-home care systems can enable families to ‘remain an important potential source of support for their children especially when support from State care is withdrawn in later adolescence’ (Taplin 2005: 16).

Most studies of family contact have been focused on the impact that it has on the child involved, and very little attention is paid to the experience of the First Families involved in contact visits. This is true of the research studies involved in this review. Most studies drew reference to attachment theory as the principal theoretical foundation for contact visits on the assumption that family connections can assist in decreasing the distress experienced by children when they are separated from their primary caregiver, and that contact visits can help to foster a sense of identity and emotional and behavioural development in children, and help to stabilise a placement (Saini et al. 2012; Taplin & Mattick 2014). At the same time, the studies also presented the contrasting view that contact visits can also be seen to be detrimental to children’s well-being if they lead to disruptions in the development of a relationship with their principal carer and are emotionally challenging for the children contributing to disruptions in behaviour following the visits (Saini et al. 2012; Taplin & Mattick 2013).

A number of studies have examined family contact. For example, Taplin and Mattick (2013) presented findings from a larger cross-sectional study on 171 mothers who had been involved in an Opioid Treatment Program in Sydney. Through interviews and data collected from child protection records, it was found that supervised contact was likely to occur less frequently than unsupervised contact, children in kinship care were likely to have contact frequently, and that mothers who reported regular cannabis use were more likely to have supervised visitation which meant less frequent contact. However, as the study was cross-sectional in nature, it was difficult to determine whether the drug use led to supervised contact or whether supervised contact led to increased drug use (Taplin & Mattick 2013). Where parents were questioned about their experiences of contact, it was apparent that they were unsure of their role during contact, and that they tried to squeeze as much direct care into a session as the sessions were insufficient for them to help build a proper parent–child relationship (Ross et al. 2017; Saini, et al. 2012).

Bullen et al. (2017) reported that the family contact literature currently available is generally mostly descriptive. In response to this concern, the authors conducted a systematic review of the limited quantitative studies available examining supervised visitation. Of the 12 eligible studies, when examined using the model in Hudson et al. (2010) to grade the evidence according to the rigour of study design and analysis, eight studies received the lowest grade, often for not including comparison groups, clear explanation of their evaluation methods or detailed child outcomes. The study concluded that, while there are some interventions that appear to be beneficial in improving supervised visitation, more research is required with particular focus on parents who are unlikely to have their children restored (Bullen et al. 2017; García-Martin et al. 2019). Another study by Davis et al. (1996) took a more holistic view of reunification and emphasised the importance of children being able to re-establish a sense of belonging and connection to the family on an emotional, psychological and physical level. Such findings challenged the assumption that parental contact is merely important to effect reunification, overlooking its importance in enabling the child to re-establish a sense of belonging and continuing engagement. Other reported positive outcomes of contact include building long-term

attachments, better psychosocial wellbeing, fostering a sense of culture and identity and helping children resolve issues of loss and trauma (Broadhurst & Sen 2011).

### *Personal impact*

The removal of children can also impose specific personal costs on parents. Some of the most important of these are as follows.

### *Grief and loss*

As already noted, a significant consequence of the removal of children from the family home is the grief and loss experienced by First Families. It is common for First Families to experience ambiguous loss due to the uncertainty of the period immediately following removal, and then to experience further loss if the child is permanently placed in another family. This ambiguous loss can stall the onset of grieving and prevent coping mechanisms and decision-making skills from working (Boss 2007). Parents also grieve the loss of the daily interactions with children, especially around special events and occasions, and the loss of seeing their child grow and develop (Thorpe 2008). People grieving often look to their support networks for solace; however, parents who have had their children removed often feel very isolated from their support networks due to the stigma and shame associated with the removal of a child. This can be exacerbated when a child is placed in a kinship placement as the relationships have been forced to change (Broadhurst & Mason 2017; Ross et al. 2017). Manifestations of this grief could include anger, and emotional outbursts which, as previously mentioned, can be viewed as evidence of an emotionally unstable parent incapable of suitable parenting (Ross et al. 2017).

### *Identity*

Furthering the notion of loss is the loss of identity that a mother experiences when they are no longer taking care of their child on a regular basis. As there is a lack of available research about First fathers, it is the mother who is labelled as a 'bad parent' (Harries 2008). At the point of removal, a mother has already lost the identity of being considered a 'good mother'. This is a moniker that they will struggle to regain and the label that they are an 'unsuitable' mother will likely follow them in any other child protection cases (Broadhurst & Mason 2017). To reconcile the loss of the label of 'good mother', mothers will distance themselves from the allegations of child maltreatment and reject the child protection agency's reason for intervention. They will also distance themselves from association with what they consider to be 'bad mothers' and highlight the worse aspects of other cases (Sykes 2011). Being labelled as a 'bad mother' commonly sees mothers stigmatised by their families and communities as they seem to have 'failed' what it means to be a responsible adult. Evidence has shown that stigma can increase aggression and self-defeating behaviour which can impact the chances of reunification (Wells 2011).

### *Trauma*

Many First Parents who become involved in the child protection system have experienced trauma in their life before they have contact with child protection agencies. Adolescent



trauma has been proven to have an impact on adult relationships and parenting capacity. If unaddressed, the trauma can manifest as troublesome behaviours which may be used as evidence to support removal of their child (Broadhurst, Mason & Webb 2018; Ross et al. 2017). The removal of a child is a traumatic experience in itself and can trigger maladaptive coping mechanisms which can hinder the possibility of reunification (Broadhurst et al. 2018). Some research participants also found court proceedings to be traumatic as they compounded the impacts of other trauma experiences in their history (Ross et al. 2017). Experiences of trauma while involved in the child protection system can serve to alienate First Families from services that are trying to support their reunification with their children.

#### *Access to services*

Parents who felt they had been working with a good caseworker identified receiving good referrals to appropriate services to counselling, education and treatment, and concrete help such as food, financial assistance and shelter, as important factors that demonstrated to them that their worker was also working towards reunification of their child (Palmer et al. 2008). Unfortunately, the research reviewed demonstrated that this was an uncommon experience among parents whose children had been removed. Marcenko et al. (2011), for example, conducted a cross-sectional study of the demographic and psychosocial characteristics and service needs of primary caregivers in Washington State who had had an open welfare case within 30 to 120 days prior to the study. Their results showed that parents were more likely to have their service needs met when their child was still in the home than once the child was removed as child protection agencies were working to keep at-risk children in their home (Marcenko et al. 2011). This idea was reinforced in Broadhurst and Mason's (2017) review of the literature available regarding the impact of child removal on First Parents and the development of a comprehensive framework for practice. While children are in care, the absence of adequate services emerged as a common theme and this is known to be detrimental for parental wellbeing and reduces the prospect of reunification (Broadhurst & Mason 2017). Other problems include high worker turnover (Harries 2008; Palmer et al. 2008) or the problem of parents not wanting to ask for support as they fear it being used against them as evidence of poor parenting capability in court proceedings (Thorpe 2008).

As previously discussed, legislative reforms promoting permanency planning have led to a shortened time frame in which First Parents can demonstrate change supporting the reunification of their children, so the cessation of important rehabilitative services occurs earlier (Broadhurst & Mason 2017). This has long-term impacts for First Parents as within the shortened time frames they are unlikely to have resolved all of the issues that led to removal of their child so if they have another baby, it will likely re-involve child protection services in their life, or they may have another child already in their care removed (Broadhurst & Mason 2017).

#### *Grandparents and extended family*

As the environment of child protection services includes First Parents, grandparents, foster carers and other professionals it is crucial that social workers deliver support in a way that evaluates all ecological systems and is inclusive of all the child's networks.

As child protection services increasingly seek placements with kin, grandparents are challenged by new full-time caring responsibilities while surviving on limited economic resources and social supports. Social workers need to work closely with grandparents to support their parenting capabilities, and in particular be attuned to a gender lens, and address the needs of grandmothers who are disproportionately burdened by caring responsibilities with sparse support (Bunch et al. 2007).

### *Gender and child protection*

The experience of mothers in the child protection system has been a concern and is the subject of a body of literature (Callahan & Lumb 1995; Swift 1991) which examines the dominant assumptions underpinning child welfare interventions, given the strong presence of women as clients, carers, frontline workers and that child welfare focuses on women's domain of caring for children. Swift (1995) argues for a reconceptualization of child welfare as a feminist issue, challenging the dominant ideologies and assumptions underpinning child welfare interventions and the institution of motherhood and its socially determined conditions. Mothers carry several visible and invisible responsibilities and are not allowed to fail these obligations. Chesler (1987) observes that the ideal mother is expected to choose married motherhood, become pregnant, give birth, bond with, assume full responsibility for her child's physical, emotional, economic and safety needs, and asserts mothers more than fathers are condemned for being psychologically imperfect, for performing parental work inadequately and for failing the parental ideal. The assessment of mothers as being inadequate reflects assumptions that 'normal' mothers cope (Parton 1990). The realities of parenting are rarely acknowledged. Material disadvantage such as poor housing, financial difficulties and the lack of emotional and social support for parenting tasks and threatened and actual violence contribute to physical and emotional stress that compromise their physical and mental health, their parenting potential and the care of their children (Fernandez 1996).

Conceptions of mothers and attitudes to them range from holding them responsible for the outcomes of their children to portraying them as inadequate and incapable of protecting them. The Social Science literature portrays them as primarily responsible for the quality of care of their children. Since Bowlby's (1953) early conceptions viewed parenting in terms of rigid sex role conceptions with mothers having continuous responsibility for child care in the early years, the psychopathology of the child is attributed to mothers. This is reinforced in the legal literature, as King and Trowell note 'It is, to mothers that the system looks as having primary responsibility for any harm that might have been caused, and to rectify that harm' (King & Trowell 1992: 21).

### *Issues in research*

Although there is limited research available on the experiences of First Families involved in the child protection system, there are common issues evident in the studies that have been conducted. Some studies utilised child protection caseworkers and client files as a means of obtaining information about the First Parent experience. This creates a risk of misinterpretation as it is a second-hand view of the client's experience, and it can be clouded by bias if the caseworker had a poor working relationship with the client. In circumstances where First Families were involved in the research study, it was common

for them to be recruited through the caseworkers or the programs they had been referred to by caseworkers. It is possible that having caseworkers involved in the recruitment process may have prevented First Parents from speaking freely about their experiences as they feared potential consequences of speaking negatively. However, it was noted that First Families were more likely to be involved in a study if they had a negative experience (Hojer 2011). Despite these potential biases, recruiting participants through caseworkers and parenting programs is currently the most effective means as First Families are a difficult population to access for research for several reasons, such as a general mistrust of the system, fear of further ‘punishment’ for speaking out, and a desire to move on from their experience (Ankersmit 2016). The sample populations of the studies reviewed which involved members of First Families predominantly consisted of mothers who had had their children removed which may be representative of the tendency of child protection agencies’ focus on mothers as primary caregivers and thus in need of the most support (Sykes 2011; Palmer et al. 2008; Sykes 2011). However, studies commonly ignore the experience of First Fathers involved in the child protection system who may have an ongoing impact in the life of their child after removal. This tendency towards samples of predominantly mothers also excludes the experience of the extended family, such as siblings and grandparents. In particular cultures, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and in some Asian cultures, the extended family has a large role in the upbringing of a child, so they are likely to have an important role in the child protection process. As there is an over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia in out-of-home care (OOHC) currently – Aboriginal children enter OOHC at ten times the rate of non-Indigenous children, it is important that research also explores the experiences of extended family members (Burns, Burns & Menzies 2004; CFCA 2019 Davis 2018).

While there is a breadth of research available in the area of child protection, and research available examining the impact of the involvement of First Families in the lives of children who have been removed, there is limited research currently available that explores the child protection process through the eyes of the First Parents. The information that is available is often informed by the views of caseworkers and official documents, or the parents that have participated in the research have been recruited through caseworkers and programs, so are unlikely to speak freely for fear of retribution. The overwhelming feeling from First Families is that they are often excluded from the system due to their lack of knowledge and power, and are not given the opportunities to demonstrate or improve their parenting capabilities. The research reviewed also demonstrated that little focus is given to the First Fathers or extended families of children who have been removed which is a significant gap in the research, particularly due to the overwhelming number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC in Australia and the importance the cultures place on the role of the extended family in raising a child (Bamblett & Lewis 2006; McDowall 2016).

### ***Implications for policy, programs, practice and further research***

Notwithstanding issues in the research with First Families involved with the child protection system, there is sufficient consistency among the findings of the studies reviewed to be able to identify some salient implications for improvements, not only in direct

practice with First Families but also at the levels of program development, and policy formulation.

Implications at a structural, broader policy level are particularly significant in relation to the challenging circumstances in which many First Families live before, during and following child protection intervention. Poverty is a continuing issue for families in which children are seen to be at risk and, while Parenting Payments in Australia are barely adequate for day to day living, the requirements of the *ParentsNext* program make life harder for many single parents (mostly single mothers) of pre-school aged children, and the penalties can lead many families into deepening poverty. When children are taken into care, parents are forced off Parenting Payments onto the NewStart Allowance which they find is grossly inadequate to cover shelter and food, let alone costs associated with complying with requirements laid on them to work towards their children returning home. Social advocacy with regard to securing improvements in the income security and housing systems is thus a clear, highly desirable implication for action emerging from the research. Meanwhile, programs and practice need to be ever mindful of the structural reasons for families living in poverty and, when specifying requirements placed on First Families, consider the realities of living in poverty. Judgements and unrealistic or punitive expectations are harmful rather than helpful. Moreover, the need for material and practical assistance at times (including trauma cleaning and regular ongoing home help – in the past called *Family Aides*) should be regarded as invaluable, given the structural constraints which blight families' socio-economic circumstances and may lead to debilitating depression.

With regard to direct practice, child protection workers' lack of (or limited) experience of living in poverty indicates a need to work hard at critical reflexivity in order to walk in their families' shoes to achieve a greater understanding and acceptance of physically oppressed living conditions and the possible lack of skills a worker may regard as 'common sense', like hygiene or budgeting. Clearly, cross-cultural understanding is also vital in order to appreciate the use, meaning and value of different, but culturally appropriate, strategies for coping with poverty. Far greater culturally aware practice is needed urgently as part of a range of strategies to reduce the massive over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care.

Research findings in relation to gendered issues in child protection add another important dimension to the need for greater awareness of structural forces largely beyond the immediate control of individuals. On top of living in poverty, traditional expectations of women, and superficial analyses of domestic violence and family abuse provide a 'mother blaming' pitfall for front line child protection workers and their supervisors. Hence there also is an urgent need for direct practitioners to be better informed by critical analyses of motherhood and by the latest reviews of research on family abuse (see, for example, Hill 2019) in order to work with women in strengths-based, empowering ways rather than imposing the pejorative label 'failure to protect'. In addition, moving from the personal to the political, there is a need for child protection workers to add their voices to social action campaigns for policy changes with regard to domestic violence and child protection, and for changes to the Family Court Act, given that 'mother blaming' is a salient feature in many current Family Court judgements when mothers are often typecast as liars and/or mad (Hill 2019). The need is pressing for professionals in child protection, be they social workers, police, psychologists, lawyers or Family Report writers, to have in-depth knowledge of the complexity of domestic abuse and be alert to

their own exposure to being ‘groomed’ by perpetrators, who may present as rational and calm in contrast to their ex partners who are battle worn and desperate for the welfare of their children.

Plainly, at the direct practice level, there is a need to fully understand the personal impacts which First Parents experience when child protection agencies get involved in their lives. Fear and anxiety become added to the stress of living with poverty and/or with domestic abuse, and when children are removed into care loss, grief and long-term chronic sorrow are to be expected. While for many decades research with First Families has identified loss and grief as highly significant (initially referred to as *filial deprivation* (Jenkins & Norman 1972), the recognition of trauma as important in the previous life experience of First Parents has only recently become explicit. For many, this may result from one or more of childhood abuse, childhood or adult sexual assault, and childhood or adult domestic abuse. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Parents, trauma may also result from the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generations, plus past and ongoing racism in society generally and sometimes, also, in child protection processes themselves. The need for direct practice to be trauma-informed is pressing in order to enable First Parents to become active survivors, enabled to resume care for their children (Atkinson 2002; Herman 1997).

Practitioners need understand the inevitability of First Parents becoming deeply depressed and/or angry and not label these as indications of unsuitability to care for their children. Reaching out to the distressed person behind the depression or anger is an essential, advanced skill in building a respectful relationship which, research studies consistently have found, is a key to working constructively with First Parents.

Respect for the dignity and worth (AASW 2010 clause 3.1) of First Parents is a foundation for every aspect of child protection casework, be it facilitating First Parents’ active participation in legal proceedings and case planning, having good contact with their children in care, working together with carers and, in a timely manner, accessing services which provide assistance and support. The research studies reviewed in this chapter provide clear guidance on what works more effectively and, importantly, provide insight into what doesn’t work well and should be avoided in practice.

Since research findings indicate that less than best practice appears to be widespread, there is a need to identify the conditions which might facilitate improvements in direct practice with First Parents. Conditions in working environments – government and non-government – can often stifle good practice through managerialist requirements of workers and supervision which is largely organisational and administrative rather than professional. One implication from research findings is to focus attention within organisations on building a working environment which is conducive to and supportive of research-informed good practice. Encouraging a knowledge of relevant research findings and their application in practice through, for example, discussion lunches is a practice we have seen in one government office; enabling professional (rather than bureaucratic) supervision within or external to the organisation is another practice which some non-government agencies use. A further implication for child protection organisations might be to enable good practitioners to remain working at the front line but with remuneration which recognises their advanced skills, particularly in working with First Families. While new workers may have energy and commitment, their limited experience is often a stumbling block to good practice. Rather than expected to adapt to what may be an entrenched office culture, new child protection workers need to be enabled by the

organisation to examine their own possibly unhelpful attitudes and values, and be supported in working respectfully and in culturally appropriate ways with First Families, including First Grandparents who may become kinship carers.

Respectful relationship-based social work practices (Ruch, Turney & Ward 2018), as indicated by the findings from the research studies reviewed, not only are greatly appreciated by First Families, they also lead to better outcomes for children and families and, even when children and young people remain in care, First Families are enabled to have a more constructive approach to maintaining contact with family, community, culture and country. They also may be less prone to crippling levels of chronic sorrow and better able to rebuild their lives.

This latter hypothesis is an area for future research, since to date, it has been difficult to find enough First Parents with such positive experiences to undertake meaningful research beyond isolated qualitative case studies.

Other areas warranting further research have been identified throughout this research review, including an emerging impression that research with First Parents to date has been culturally bland. Given the huge over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed into out-of-home care there is a need for studies which focus specifically on Indigenous Australian extended First Families' experiences of the full range of child protection processes. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection workers are able to articulate the needs and interests of their people, the whole discourse underpinning new research needs to be re-framed within an appropriate non-western cultural perspective.

Another neglected area of research is that of First Fathers (Campbell et al. 2015; Gordon et al. 2012; Scourfield, Cheung & MacDonald 2014). This should include not only biological fathers who may have had little or no involvement in caring for their child/ren, but also step-fathers who may be important psychological parents of the children with whom they have highly significant attachments which, too often, may be disregarded in child protection processes. Instead, once in care, children may be introduced to their little or unknown biological father who may have perpetrated violence against their mother and even themselves. While, arguably, it is important for all children in care or adoption to know their biological origins, it also is important for their ongoing well-being to maintain important relationships with significant other father figures. The complexities surrounding fathers and stepfathers of children entering care need to be explored in detailed research in order to identify implications for practice which are in a child's best interests, emotionally as well as biologically.

A fourth area for further research identified in this review is the experience and impact of contact for First Parents themselves. Thus far, most research has focused on whether and how contact affects children, with beneficial effects identified regardless of whether reunification is accomplished. The perspective of First Parents and their wider family has yet to be explored in depth, particularly with regard to their experience when children are in long term or permanent care. As always, such research needs to be culturally appropriate in full recognition of the significance of wider family and community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and also adapted appropriately for children in care in Australia from diverse other cultural backgrounds with different values and traditions.

### Conclusion

In this chapter the state of research knowledge concerning First Parents of children at risk of entry into state care, or already in care, has been reviewed, with implications for direct practice, programs, policy and further research explored. With the trend for child protection agencies around Australia to focus on permanency planning for vulnerable children, the time frame for First Parents to change sufficiently for their children to return to their care has shortened and, accordingly, practice needs to become more intense in order to enable as many children as possible to return home safely to their First Families in a timely manner. While always there is a need for further research, already enough is known to be able to transform child protection processes to work more constructively and effectively with First Families. What is needed is vision and courage on the part of organisations and individual practitioners to implement changes to a truly family-focused approach to child-centred practice.

### Note

1 In this chapter the term First Parents is used to refer to what more commonly in academic and professional literature are called Biological parents or Birth parents. Both of these latter terms can have the effect of minimising the reality that First Parents, grandparents and significant others have ties that bind with their children way beyond biological heredity or merely the act of giving birth/life. Invariably, First Parents are the child's psychological parents and important primary attachments connect them and their children. Even when such attachments are new (as at birth) or complicated, First attachments confer a sense of belonging to family, community, culture, and country. Just as First Nations People are the custodians of the land and all that is sacred so, we argue, First Parents are custodians of a Child's identity, the sacredness of which must be supported. In our view, the term First Parents conveys the importance of this truth far more strongly than the terms used hitherto.

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316 Clare Tilbury and Natalie Lewis

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