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# Exploring trust from the voices of Australian children, young people and care networks in the Mockingbird Family

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## Abstract

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the dynamics of trust within the Mockingbird Family, a relatively new model of foster and kinship care introduced in Australia. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with children ($n$ = 21) and members of their care networks ($n$ = 33) involved in the pilot implementation of the model. Trust is examined as a multidimensional concept that spans interpersonal, organisational and societal contexts. Findings show that trust is co-produced through everyday interactions between children and carers, strengthened through collaboration among carers, agency staff and child protection workers, and reinforced by organisational coherence and political support. Drawing on the lived experiences of children, carers and professionals, the study offers insight into how trust can be intentionally built and sustained within collective care environments. The Mockingbird Family model highlights trust as an emergent process shaped through mutual engagement, peer support and structural responsiveness, rather than as a fixed attribute or predefined outcome. These insights contribute to reimagining foster care as a relationship-centred, interconnected system.

### Keywords:

child protection, child safety, foster care, kinship care, out-of-home care, social networks, support networks.

## Introduction

The Mockingbird Family model has been adopted in several states across the United States and in other countries, including Australia (Mockingbird Society, 2023}; Ott et al., 2020; Patmisari et al., 2023). It is a foster and/or kinship caring model grounded in a philosophy that advocates for an extended-family-like support structure. Depicted as a hub and spoke, six to ten families are formed into network groups called constellations. Each constellation has a lead carer, the Hub Home, who provides support to other carers in their constellation's satellite homes (Mockingbird Society, 2023; Patmisari et al., 2023). The micro network of care is argued to promote a sense of belonging, stability and improved outcomes for children and young people in care (McLaren et al., 2023, 2024; Patmisari et al., 2023). Carers value the interconnectedness among carers in the Mockingbird Family at the micro level, but they also benefit from its embeddedness in the broader child protection system (McLaren et al., 2023). The model promotes a shared responsibility for the wellbeing of the children and young people, which is supported by wider research suggesting that collective care models have potential to foster environments where trust can thrive (Galguera & Bellone, 2020; Jeon & Myers, 2017).

The Mockingbird Family model has shown promising outcomes internationally. Evaluation studies conducted by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families (2004, 2006, 2007) in the USA reported 83% of children and young people having no placement change, an 88% carer retention rate, 100% of children and young people being free from abuse and neglect, stronger connection with siblings and culturally appropriate milieus. More recent USA evaluations have demonstrated improved youth placement stability of 96% and a carer retention rate of 92% (Goodvin & Miller, 2017; Mockingbird Society, 2023). In the United Kingdom, the model enhanced peer support networks for children and young people, reduced placement instability and unplanned moves, increased access to consistent respite care and supported foster carer retention, indicating potential cost savings (McDermid et al., 2016; Ott et al., 2020).

Beginning in 2019, the Mockingbird Family program was first introduced to Australia in the state of New South Wales, then to South Australia through a partnership between the Department for Child Protection, South Australia, and the foster care agency, Life Without Barriers. In South Australia, the program involved six constellations, comprising 43 households, 69 carers and 51 children and young people (mean age 7.1 years), with three constellations located within the city of Adelaide and three situated just outside the city periphery. Early Australian evidence indicated that the Mockingbird Family had potential to enhance the protective care environment for children and young individuals by establishing social support networks (McLaren et al., 2023; Patmisari et al., 2023), with a view to fuelling reciprocity and trust. It also showed improvements to stability for children and young people associated with stronger social networks and improved professional quality of life among carers (Jones et al., 2024; McLaren et al., 2024).

Fostering trust is critical within care environments such as the Mockingbird Family. Trust stems from early experiences within the family, where individuals learn to rely on caregivers and family members. Erik Erikson's (1965) theory emphasised the critical role of trust in early psychosocial development. Trust versus mistrust is the first stage of psychosocial development that occurs in infancy (from birth to around 18 months). This stage sets the foundation for a person's healthy resilience or potential psychopathology (Ocasio & Knight, 2003). When parents or caregivers are consistently responsive to an infant's needs, offering comfort and love, the infant learns to trust the world as a safe and predictable place, feeling secure and hopeful that their needs will be met. Conversely, inconsistent or neglectful caregiving leads to mistrust, causing the infant to perceive the world as unreliable, unpredictable and potentially hostile. In sync with Erikson's trust formation, attachment theory similarly emphasises that early awareness of the external world and the development of a cohesive sense of self are heavily reliant on consistent and secure human relationships (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Bowlby, 1969). When these early relationships lack stability or are disrupted by trauma and abuse, it can result in an impaired ability to trust others (Galguera & Bellone, 2020; Uji, 2022). This breakdown of trust is often marked by difficulties in social functioning and a failure to form secure bonds with caregivers.

Almost all children and young people entering the foster care system have experienced trauma, evident in the high rates of clinical problems related to posttraumatic stress symptoms and complex developmental trauma (Jee et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2018; Purvis et al., 2013; Steenbakkers et al., 2019; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2013). Studies show that children and young people in care often harbour a sense of mistrust towards others, a difficulty attributed to the inconsistency and instability they experienced during childhood (Miranda et al., 2020; Tordön et al., 2021). Moreover, the trauma of separation from their biological families may plunge them into a deeper, profound sense of loss and grief, further shaping their ability to form trust (Nolte & Forbes, 2023; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018). The cycle of placements and constant change destabilises any sense of permanency and predictability in their lives, fuelling apprehension and mistrust (Heyman et al., 2020; Konijn et al., 2021; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). The lack of control over their circumstances amplifies this struggle, as does the perceived discrimination and stigma they may face from various corners of society (Clark et al., 2023; Dansey et al., 2019; Goldfarb et al., 2021; Pastor et al., 2022; Rogers, 2017). It is against this backdrop that fostering trust within the Mockingbird Family model becomes both complex and critical for the wellbeing and socioemotional development of children and young people.

Trust, from a phenomenological perspective, is a fundamental, embodied orientation toward others that precedes conscious judgement. Logstrup and Fink (1997) described trust as an unspoken ethical demand present in all human encounters, where the other is implicitly entrusted with something of ourselves. This vulnerability is especially pronounced in contexts marked by trauma, close monitoring or relational rupture, such as the foster care system. In such settings, the system's oversight practices, presented as protection but often experienced as surveillance, undermine trust by exposing families, especially those already marginalised, to sustained scrutiny and control (Edwards et al., 2023; Musgrove & Michell, 2018). The integration of the Mockingbird Family within the Australian child protection system unfolded within a landscape already marked by longstanding

fractures in trust (Higgins & Katz, 2008; Neave, 2021). The model entered into a relational field shaped by institutional histories, systemic constraints and the everyday encounters of care. In this context, trust is not approached as a static variable or outcome, but as a lived and evolving phenomenon, formed, challenged and sustained through experience. It is encountered in moments of vulnerability, recognition and shared care, and is inseparable from the social and historical contexts in which it is embedded (Jones et al., 2024; Patmisari et al., 2024). As Stanhope and Solomon (2008) argue, trust is fundamental to environments that support healing. Research also highlights the importance of trust in fostering emotional safety and a sense of continuity for young people in care (Ullrich & Metivier, 2023; Waubanascum & Sarche, 2023). Merleau-Ponty (2012) situated trust within bodily perception, suggesting it arises not from abstract reasoning but from lived, sensory dynamics through gesture, tone and proximity. Building on this, Bredlau (2019) argued that trust is not only a feeling but also a way of perceiving. It is a relational mode of being in the world, often beginning in infancy through mutual gaze, imitation and shared attention. In this view, trust is ontological, shaping the very way individuals come to experience a shared, reliable world.

To analyse how trust is experienced and enacted within the Mockingbird Family, we applied Franzén et al. (2020)'s framework as a practical conceptualisation of trust operating across three interconnected levels: micro, meso and macro. Franzén et al.'s model synthesises multidisciplinary theories of trust into an accessible structure suitable for analysing relational, organisational and systemic dynamics within welfare systems. Specifically, Franzén et al. (2020) built on Schoorman et al. (2007) on relational trust within organisational contexts, Gilson (2003) on trust and collaboration in health systems and Rothstein (1998, {[81]2004) on trust and social capital in welfare institutions. Central to this framework is the understanding of trust as a relational process that entails risk and future expectations. It is shaped by perceptions of a party's ability, benevolence and integrity, a definition drawn from Schoorman et al. (2007) and widely applied across organisational and institutional trust research.

At the micro level, trust refers to interpersonal dynamics, such as between carers and children, and involves clients' trust in professionals and professionals' trust in clients as autonomous agents (Pearson & Raeke, 2000; Rogers, 2002; Tengland, 2008). Power imbalances and professionals' gatekeeping roles can complicate these relationships (Grimen, 2009). At the meso level, trust concerns collaboration within and between organisations, shaped by respect for professional roles, integrity in teamwork and perceptions of competence across institutions (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006; Jackson, 2008; Pullon, 2008). Trust at this level facilitates cooperation and enhances service quality (Gilson, 2003). At the macro level, trust relates to broader civic trust and societal legitimacy, where positive experiences with welfare services can strengthen confidence in democratic institutions (Rothstein, 1998, 2004). This multi-level framing provides a lens for attending to how trust is built, disrupted and restored within the relational ecologies of the Mockingbird Family model.

In this study, trust is conceptualised as a relational process, experienced through embodied interactions and revealed in the narratives of those living within the Mockingbird Family. Guided by this framing, we ask: How does the collective caring model of the Mockingbird Family shape the formation and maintenance of trust among children and young people in care, their carers and the professionals who support them? Central to this inquiry is the prioritisation of the lived perspectives of children and young people, whose voices anchor our understanding of how trust is experienced, disrupted and restored in this care context.

## Methods

This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach grounded in reflective lifeworld research as developed by Dahlberg et al. (2008). Reflective lifeworld research is rooted in the philosophical traditions of Husserl (1989) and Merleau-Ponty (2012), emphasising openness to lived experience and a commitment to understanding phenomena as they are experienced by individuals (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In this view, the lifeworld refers to the taken-for-granted, everyday world in which people live prior to reflection, a world that must be made visible through careful, reflective inquiry. In line with this, our aim was to explore how trust is experienced, enacted and interpreted by children, carers and professionals involved in the Mockingbird Family model.

This approach is guided by openness, an intentional effort to stay attuned to participants' meanings without imposing premature interpretations. Rather than bracketing, which assumes researchers can set aside their preconceptions (Husserl, 1989), we followed Dahlberg and Dahlberg's (2020) concept of bridling, a reflective approach that slows down interpretation, questions emerging meanings and stays open to the ambiguity of lived experience. Through bridling, researchers engage in an open, patient and reflective stance that prioritises phenomenological openness over methodological certainty (van Wijngaarden et al., 2017). It ensures that the phenomenon leads the inquiry, not the researcher's assumptions. This orientation was particularly important in studying trust, a phenomenon shaped by prior experiences of rupture, care and institutional power. Throughout the research process, we maintained a reflective stance on our own pre-understandings of trust in child protection contexts, continuously questioning how these might shape our interpretations.

Our research team brought diverse expertise across mental health, child protection, social work and youth advocacy. These roles inevitably shaped our orientations to concepts central to this study (i.e. trust, authority and relational care). We remained conscious of the ethical and relational responsibilities involved in researching with children and young people in care, especially given our positions as adult researchers affiliated with institutions that may be viewed with ambivalence or mistrust. Power asymmetries were acknowledged as active forces shaping recruitment, rapport and the stories shared. To address this, we adopted a reflexive and trauma-aware stance, alert to how our identities, histories and institutional affiliations might influence not only what was said, but how it was heard, interpreted and represented. Trust, therefore, was positioned not only as a topic of inquiry but as a relational ethic we aimed to enact throughout the research process.

The reporting of this study adheres to the 32-item checklist of Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (Tong et al., 2007). Study approval was from the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee, Project ID 5777. Permission to recruit child protection workers was received from the Department for

Child Protection, South Australia. Permission to recruit child protection workers and children in care was obtained from the Department for Child Protection, South Australia. For children and young people in care, consent was sought from their carers, who provided permission as authorised guardians. In addition to formal consent, each child was approached individually to provide assent, ensuring they understood the study and agreed to participate. Researchers explained the study's purpose and procedures in age-appropriate language and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to withdraw at any point. Steps were taken to minimise discomfort or coercion, with participation occurring in familiar settings such as constellation gatherings, prioritising each child's comfort and autonomy.

## Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited from six constellations in the South Australian pilot of the Mockingbird Family model. The study included children and young people, carers, foster care agency staff and statutory child protection workers with direct experience of the Mockingbird model. Recruitment was purposive, targeting individuals whose experiences aligned with the study's focus. Life Without Barriers and the South Australian Department for Child Protection facilitated participant access. Convenience sampling was also applied. Interviews with children and carers occurred during pre-arranged constellation gatherings, where attendance and willingness to participate could not be guaranteed. This meant participants were effectively selected based on availability and readiness (Polit & Beck, 2014). Agency staff and statutory workers were recruited through professional networks and interviewed during available work hours. Fifty-four participants were recruited: 21 children and young people, 19 carers, 9 foster care agency staff and 5 statutory child protection workers. This group offered diverse perspectives on trust in the Mockingbird Family model.

## Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, conversational interviews focused on lived experiences of trust. Participants guided the conversation, while researchers remained open to the contexts in which trust was experienced. Children and young people were interviewed during constellation gatherings, often while engaging in art or craft activities. Most spoke one-on-one and a few chose to be interviewed in pairs. These activities were not analysed but helped build rapport. Carer interviews were conducted within constellation settings to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. Agency and statutory staff interviews were conducted in person, by phone or online, depending on participant availability.

Researchers maintained ethical reflexivity throughout. Power imbalances were considered, especially with children and young people, whose perspectives were recognised as valid expressions of lived meaning (Graham et al., 2013; Powell & Smith, 2009). Interview prompts were designed around Franzén et al.'s (2020) conceptualisation of trust at micro, meso and macro levels (see Table 1), but interviews remained open to the emergence of unanticipated meaning. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and supplemented by field notes capturing contextual nuance. Data were de-identified and securely stored.

**Table 1. Interview questions of stakeholders involved in the Mockingbird Family**

| Children | Carers | Caseworkers, agency and statutory staff |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Can you tell me about a time when you felt safe and comfortable with the people in your Mockingbird Family? What were you doing and why did it make you feel that way? | 1. How do you perceive the relationships and interactions within your Mockingbird Family in terms of supporting the children? Can you share a specific positive experience that highlights this? | 1. How would you describe the collaboration and communication among various stakeholders in the Mockingbird Family model? Can you provide an example that showcases effective collaboration and its impact? |
| 2. Do you like spending time with the people in your Mockingbird Family? What activities or things make you enjoy being with them? | 2. How important is the collaboration and support among the different families in the Mockingbird Family model? Can you share an example that illustrates its significance? | 2. How does the Mockingbird Family model influence the efficiency and effectiveness of child welfare services? Can you share a specific experience that highlights this influence? |
| 3. Can you describe a time when you felt that the people in your Mockingbird Family were there for you and cared about you? What happened and how did it make you feel? | 3. How do you see the Mockingbird Family model contributing to the wellbeing and sense of security for the children in your care? Can you describe a moment that emphasised this positive impact? | 3. How does the Mockingbird Family model promote a sense of community and support for both the children and the caregivers involved? Can you provide an example that? underscores the community aspect of this model? |

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using a phenomenologically informed thematic approach grounded in the principles of reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020; Dahlberg, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2008) alongside Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. The reflective lifeworld research approach shaped our phenomenological stance, particularly our use of bridling, where we deliberately slowed interpretation and remained open to participants' meaning making. Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework provided a structured yet flexible method for generating, reviewing and refining themes. This involved iterative cycles of reading, initial coding, collaborative theme development and reflective dialogue within the research team.

The team began by reading transcripts holistically, followed by detailed line-by-line coding to identify meaning units related to participants' lived experiences of trust. Codes were then clustered into patterns through an iterative and reflective process, guided by lifeworld sensitivity rather than saturation or quantification. These clusters were refined through team dialogue, memoing and a process of returning to the data to test emerging interpretations. Throughout, we practiced bridling by intentionally slowing interpretation to remain open to ambiguity and the multiplicity of meanings (Dahlberg et al., 2008; van Wijngaarden et al., 2017). NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) supported organisation but not theme development.

While themes were developed inductively from the data, we later drew on Franzén et al.'s (2020) conceptualisation of trust as operating across micro (interpersonal), meso (organisational) and

macro (systemic) domains to situate and interpret the findings. This abductive approach, combining inductive theme development with the interpretive application of a conceptual framework, allowed us to illuminate trust as a dynamic, affective and socially embedded phenomenon. The resulting themes reflect situated meaning structures of trust across interpersonal, organisational and systemic contexts within the Mockingbird Family.

## Results

Through rich, first-person accounts, participants described how trust is cultivated, challenged and sustained within their everyday interactions. What follows are six meaning constituents that illuminate trust as a dynamic, affective and socially embedded phenomenon. These are: belonging and familiarity as foundations of trust; peer companionship and shared worlds; trust through relational continuity and mutual support; experiencing organisational trust in interconnected systems; professional confidence and trust in distributed care; and trust, social recognition and system legitimacy.

### Belonging and familiarity as foundations of trust

The close-knit microstructure of the Mockingbird Family was an environment that allowed for meaningful bonds to form, which were necessary for the formation of trust. The young people acknowledged their foster carers; for example, 'I call them parents. You don't have to be blood to be a parent' (Child 12), and likewise recognised the Mockingbird Family constellation as extended family, 'I belong to my family. They are like my mum, dad, my aunt, uncle …' (Child 7). One of the carers said, 'because we're older, we come across in the Mockingbird as grandma and grandpa' (Carer 9). By referring to their carers as parents, and other adults in their Mockingbird family as aunts, uncles or even grandparents, along with this came a level of trust that is usually formed from birth through familial bonds.

Trust by children and young people was additionally reflected in comments about their own and other Mockingbird Family carers, such as 'I can lean on them' (Child 13), 'They care, they love … being there for me through tough times' (Child 4), and 'Having somebody you can talk to about things that you can't tell other people' (Child 15). Communication was also important for trust. It enabled children and young people to make meaning about their situations, negotiate change and navigate their new environments. We heard comments such as, 'I got divorced from my other family into this one' (Child 9). While potentially a mirror of adult conversation, the narrative aimed to support sense making then provided meaning about safety, reliability and trust in the new family. Another young person said, 'I miss all my friends so bad' (Child 6), and shared his trusting reliance on members of the Mockingbird Family to help overcome his yearning. The crucial role of kindness and reciprocity for enabling trust; for example, 'They be nice to us, and we are nice to them' (Child 18), was commonly reflected in the children and young people's talk.

As a microsystem of support, The Mockingbird Family was instrumental in enabling open dialogues about the diverse needs and cultural differences among them. Building safe and reliable understanding about each other establishes the Mockingbird Family as an environment founded on trust. One of the younger children articulated, 'My friend has a disability, no one would mind what they wear, it doesn't matter, just be yourself' (Child 2). Respecting diversity was similarly reflected through guiding children and young people's cultural awareness, as a carer said,

> *They know about their Indigenous heritage, and they are aware that their* [foster] *sibling is Indian, we often engage in discussions about food, clothing, and dancing.* (Carer 8)

This heightened awareness served as the foundation for a sense of trust, where children and young people are embraced and respected for their and each other's individuality. Bringing together a mix of carers and role models with different identities and cultural backgrounds into the Mockingbird Family was healthy for the children and young. There was a common purpose among carers, and that was to educate and shape the children and young people to respect each other, be inclusive and do the right thing for others. For example, a carer said, 'I wanted to be as educated as possible, so she has a very open worldview through me' (Carer 11). Three elements of trust stemmed from the findings: emotional support and reliability, open dialogues and genuine interest and inclusivity and acceptance.

### Peer companionship and shared worlds

Trust among peers within the Mockingbird Family acts as a powerful antidote to loneliness and indifference that a child may encounter. The strong bond is expressed by a child who mentioned that another child in a different family is like their twins: 'I am excited because I can play with my twins' (Child 14). A young individual stated, 'When you have friends, and you feel like you all are similar, and you get along' (Child 5). This sharing creates empathy and understanding, reinforcing trust as they realise they are not alone in their experiences. It is remarkable that an 8-year-old can articulate that the connection is more than skin deep: 'We like … their personality, not their look' (Child 15). The Mockingbird Family brings together families residing in close proximity to each other, providing children with ample opportunities to engage with their peers beyond the regular meetups. One child enthusiastically shared an experience of togetherness:

> *Going on electric scooters, and we went to this big house, and we went down the hill that has lots of prickles, and we got prickles on our back.* (Child 9)

Carers highlighted the children's enthusiasm for the routine get-together meetings. During these interactions, the children openly shared experiences, discussed challenges and established strong bonds of trust and friendship. One carer underscored the importance of genuine peer communication, stating, 'Connect and talk about it with each other … they don't tell people at school that they're in care' (Carer 6). The children demonstrate trust by engaging in collaborative play, as another carer noted,

> *They're chatting together, they're choosing to go and play with the waterspouts and so three or four of them might be there digging and building something together.* (Carer 10)

Their ability to coordinate and collaborate during play showcases the trust and comfort they have with each other. Additionally, the carers mentioned that the children have playdates outside of Mockingbird, emphasising that these interactions further reinforce the trust and friendship they share. Furthermore, the presence of familiar individuals creates a sense of safety, as mentioned by a carer, 'Having people around who are familiar is helping them'

(Carer 4). This familiarity, and the understanding that they are in a secure environment, help in building strong relationships among the children. Children eagerly anticipate respite care, with some defining it as their designated sleepover time. The substantial level of trust among these children is evident, given their enthusiasm for these sleepovers, as articulated by a carer:

> *They become more vocal, explore extensively, venture away from me more readily, and excitedly look forward to sleepovers.* (Carer 3)

## Trust through relational continuity and mutual support

At the interpersonal level, trust was central to how carers and frontline professionals worked together within the Mockingbird Family. Carers consistently described feeling 'well-supported', 'more confident' and 'more connected', highlighting the importance of relational trust in building emotional safety and reducing isolation. The most salient expressions of interpersonal trust were found in the relationships between carers and Hub Home providers, experienced carers who acted as mentors and confidants within their constellation. These peer-mentoring relationships were characterised by their immediacy, accessibility and emotional resonance. One Hub Home provider explained:

> *They can call me because their child protection worker is not always available, So the Hub Home just another layer that's less professional, but I guess still provide that level of assistance and confidentiality.* (Hub Home provider 1)

This statement captures a core dynamic of micro-level trust: the willingness to seek support from peers when institutional systems feel distant or unavailable. The 'less professional' nature of the Hub Home was not a deficit but a relational strength, it enabled carers to approach one another as equals, without fear of surveillance or formal judgement. This trust was built through shared caregiving realities and a felt sense of solidarity. Agency staff affirmed the legitimacy of these bonds:

> *Emotional support coming from the Hub Home provider and not needing to come from the Department for Child Protection.* (Agency Worker 3)

Trust in this context did not rely on contractual obligation or organisational roles, but on perceived availability, responsiveness and emotional containment. The emotional dimension of trust was further illustrated in stories of carers supporting each other during times of personal or caregiving stress. One agency worker recounted:

> *I've had one carer calling me almost daily for moral support and now I haven't heard from them in weeks.* (Agency Worker 5)

Such narratives reflect the presence of an informal yet potent care network that fills gaps left by overstretched formal services. The shift from daily calls to silence was not seen as withdrawal but as recovery, a signal that trust-based support had enabled the carer to regain their footing. These patterns reveal the depth of affective trust built into the everyday rhythms of constellation life. Collectively, these micro-level exchanges cultivated a culture of interpersonal care and emotional interdependence. Trust, in this sense, functioned as an enabler of vulnerability. It allowed carers to express need, disclose uncertainty and lean on one another without shame. This kind of trust is foundational in the Mockingbird Family care-based ecosystems, where the effectiveness of the model rests on the presence of safe, reciprocal human relationships.

## Experiencing organisational trust in interconnected systems

Participants' descriptions of organisational trust revealed how collaboration between agencies, statutory bodies and foster care providers shaped their everyday experience of care. Trust, in this context, was not simply about formal partnership agreements, it was a lived and evolving dynamic grounded in shared responsibility, flexible decision-making and openness to new ways of working. Many carers and agency workers reflected on the supportive role of Life Without Barriers, the license holder of the Mockingbird Family model in Australia. Its oversight and facilitation of the program created a sense of stability and guidance, as one carer articulated:

> *Life Without Barriers* [foster care agency] *effectively provides information, however, they also rely on information from the Department of Child Protection.* (Carer 1)

This comment highlighted the interdependence between agencies and departments, where relational trust was necessary to manage the flow of information and shared responsibilities. Similarly, participants described how the Department for Child Protection adapted its stance within the flexible structure of the model:

> *It worked out beautifully, the Department has been more flexible, because it's part of the Mockingbird, focusing on the child's best interests rather than hard and fast black and white rules.* (Agency Manager 2)

Statutory child protection workers also shared how this collaborative approach helped redistribute responsibilities in meaningful ways:

> *That takes a lot of workloads off me when we find a spot for them in the Mockingbird program. I know that they will sort out the arrangements and make sure that therapeutic appointments are met between them.* (Case Worker 2)

This redistribution of labour was seen not as a loss of control but, for some, a form of trust in the constellation's ability to manage care needs. However, this shift was not always seamless. One statutory worker expressed discomfort with reduced oversight in crisis situations:

> *In my job I need to know everything about the children as I am responsible for them. When the placement broke down, they went behind my back and organised where the children would go.* (Case Worker 5)

Considering the newness of the model in Australia, preliminary difficulties with trust would be expected as some statutory child protection workers take time coming to terms with changes to their own authorities and professional practice. Enabling time to engage in research and evaluation literature could assist in building trust in the Mockingbird and Life Without Barriers as its licence holder.

Life Without Barriers' collaboration with the Mockingbird Society in the US showcases a proactive approach to inter-organisational trust and partnership, driven by identified challenges in the Australian foster care system. One of the Life Without Barrier managers stated:

> *I don't believe there is something like Mockingbird Family in operation in Australia where it's specifically aligning not just peer relationships but some resources creating intentional communities.* (Agency Manager 1)

This observation highlights the unique value proposition that the Mockingbird Family presents, especially in cultivating intentional communities and structured peer relationships, a dimension not entirely replicated within the current Australian foster care system. The willingness to seek inspiration and collaboration from an international organisation reflects an acknowledgment of the need to adapt and evolve, demonstrating trust in external expertise and approaches to address critical gaps and enhance the Australian foster care landscape.

## Professional confidence and trust in distributed care

At the meso level, trust shaped how professionals across roles, including Hub Home providers, foster carers and child protection workers, collaborated within the Mockingbird Family model. Participants described a system built on confidence in one another's expertise and judgment, enabling each actor to exercise discretion while working toward shared goals. Trust in this context functioned as a governance mechanism, reducing the need for top-down oversight and fostering distributed responsibility for care decisions. As one agency manager explained:

> *I think as an organisation to where we're looking at, we don't want to be systems led … we want to be care led, child led, family led.* (Agency Manager 2)

This statement reflects a deliberate shift away from bureaucratic control, signalling a culture where decision-making authority is entrusted to those closest to the child. Rather than relying on rigid procedures, professionals were empowered to adapt creatively to meet complex and changing needs. One carer noted: 'Being creative and flexible on how to meet everyone's needs' (Carer 7). Trust enabled these professionals to act with confidence and autonomy, knowing that such decisions were supported by the broader structure. Flexibility in responding to care needs, including through informal solutions such as respite arrangements, was a practical outcome of this organisational trust, as highlighted in the quote, 'They have become so flexible for providing these ad-hoc respite' (Case Worker 3). Participants also highlighted how trust supported decentralised conflict resolution. Rather than escalating tensions or depending solely on formal mechanisms, carers and professionals worked together to mediate differences: 'It's like everybody really trusts one another to mediate' (Carer 11).

Trust in the foster care agency and the workers is pivotal in bridging the initial isolation and uncertainty, emphasising the transformative power of trust in interpersonal relationships, as one carer said, 'I got a fantastic care worker [foster care agency] who made all the difference' (Carer 1). This sense of support was echoed by agency staff, who described how inclusion in a Mockingbird Family constellation served as recognition of carers' capabilities: 'the carers are really appreciative of the opportunity to be part in a Mockingbird Family' (Agency Worker 1). This trust reinforced carers' confidence in their role and reflected organisational commitment to their development and wellbeing. Collegial trust extended to workers across roles, characterised by respect for each other's judgement and thoughtful planning. For example:

> *The* [Mockingbird Family] *liaison officer* [foster care agency worker] *will step in for the six weeks I'm away. This way, the children won't have a new person stepping into their lives that they know nothing about.* (Case Worker 5)

Such actions conveyed deep respect among colleagues, illustrating a collective approach to care that prioritised consistency and emotional security for children. Other workers similarly described high levels of mutual trust and professional regard:

> *I've got a fair few families on my caseload spread across a massive area and I've got a lot of children with complex needs as well.* (Agency Worker 6)

This kind of distributed responsibility was made possible by the confidence workers had in each other's ability to step in and collaborate effectively. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical control, agency workers demonstrated trust in colleagues' capacity to manage conflict, make sound decisions, and contribute meaningfully to team problem-solving. This professional trust enabled efficient role-sharing, improved responsiveness, and created the conditions for transparent communication across the care ecosystem.

## Trust, social recognition and system legitimacy

Implementing the Mockingbird Family amidst a backdrop of shattered trust within society is an essential yet formidable task. In such a climate, where faith in institutions and support systems has been eroded, gaining trust in a new approach becomes even more vital. The Mockingbird Family is tasked with navigating through a landscape of scepticism and cynicism, assuring individuals and communities that it offers genuine, effective and trustworthy solutions to the prevailing issues within the foster care system. A foster care agency worker witnessed, 'A paradigm shift in that … they can change their approach to their children just from exposure to different philosophies' (Agency Worker 1). The mention of 'paradigm shift' was made in reference to the collective approaches and capacity of the Mockingbird Family to mobilise change within the broader child welfare system. This is achieved through the strengthening of bonds, building social capital and influencing trust within the child welfare system.

Due to having seen strong coordination by the foster care agency, and communication between carers facilitated by the agency and Home Hub provider, the statutory worker developed trust in the model and foster care agency to facilitate stable and nurturing supports for the children and young people. Another child protection worker shared her trust in the foster care agency, stemming from strong and open communication, saying 'the social connections builds trust and makes the care model work' (Case Worker 5).

A manager from the foster care agency expressed confidence in their successful implementation of the Mockingbird Family and scalability of the model, showcasing belief in its potential to

cultivate trust and societal legitimacy on a broader scale. Acknowledgement of the value of the Mockingbird Family by workers and executives, the foster care agency and the government, provided a focal point on its perceived worth. In recognition of trust in the model, several carers and agency workers provided statements such as, 'I'm confident that the department see the value in the model' (Agency Worker 2). Others highlighted how political support underscored trust, societal legitimacy and successful scaling-up, especially when these may be contingent on endorsement at the highest levels. For example:

> *Political support is central to the ability to scale up. Political support can significantly bolster trust and social capital by validating the societal importance and relevance.* (Agency Manager 2)

These insights collectively illustrate how trust, social capital and societal legitimacy are interconnected and vital elements within the Mockingbird Family implementation, growth and overall impact on the Australian foster care system.

## Discussion

This discussion interprets the lived experiences of trust as shared by children, carers and professionals in the Mockingbird Family model. Drawing on the lifeworld-oriented themes outlined in the results, we reflect on how trust is enacted and sustained across personal, professional and systemic domains. Trust emerged not as a fixed or singular experience but as relational, dynamic and multidirectional, manifesting in child–carer bonds, peer relationships, professional collaborations and organisational alliances.

### Children's trust as relational safety

Children in the Mockingbird Family described trust as a deep, multifaceted belief in the reliability, care and support provided by their carers (vertical trust) and peers (horizontal trust). Vertically, trust was rooted in consistent care, empathy and an open communication. Horizontally, it was shaped by peer relationships grounded in mutual understanding and a sense of shared experience. Our findings suggest that the Mockingbird Family fosters a secure and inclusive relational space, where children from diverse backgrounds experience emotional safety. This exposure to difference, whether in culture, ability or personality, supports openness and reduces bias (Grütter et al., 2018; Sebastián-Enesco et al., 2020). Children's accounts resonate with Piaget's (1970) notion of them as 'little scientists', forming trust not solely through observable actions but through interpretations of intention (Koenig & Harris, 2007). Consistent with Chen et al.'s (2013) study, trust began with familiarity and evolved with exposure to difference. Children's trust is shaped by perceived knowledge and approachability, as noted by Landrum et al. (2013). It also develops through ongoing evaluation. Studies show that children are more likely to trust individuals who mirror their actions, which fosters a sense of familiarity and social connection (Clément et al., 2004; Over et al., 2013). Initial trust in individuals, particularly those perceived as knowledgeable or socially positive, along with their innate instincts (Lane & Harris, 2015; Tong et al., 2020; Vanderbilt et al., 2014), mirrors the children's trust dynamics. This inclusive harmonious concept of trust encompasses an environment where they feel safe, loved and supported and have a strong sense of unity, instilling the belief that people can be trusted and relied upon. Echoing Heyman et al. (2020), who found that trust was foundational for youth with foster care histories to access support and regain autonomy, our findings underscore that trust within the Mockingbird Family is a condition for belonging and emotional resilience.

### Carers' professional and collegial trust

For carers, trust emerged as the backbone of their relationships, both with each other and with professionals in the Mockingbird constellation. Our findings indicate that trust is an essential element in carers' collaboration, communication and interactions, serving as the basis for a cohesive and effective caring network. Carers and other adults in their support networks appeared to recognise and uphold trust as a core value in their roles and interactions. Research indicates that Australian carers shoulder significant responsibilities but lack adequate support and authority (Blythe et al., 2013; Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Randle et al., 2018). In this study, adult members of the Mockingbird Family possess a level of autonomy and authority to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions based on their expertise and experience. Akin to the notion of professional trust, this bestows carers with the power to exercise judgement and discretion (Frowe, 2005). In the Mockingbird Family, collegial trust is apparent, reflecting a belief in the competence, integrity and dependability of colleagues (Jackson, 2008; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). This trust leads to seamless coordination, effective caseload management, collective care and effective problem-solving, ensuring stability and continuous support for the children in their care (Berg et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2016). Professional trust exists within the Mockingbird Family, effectively bridging gaps present in traditional foster care structures.

### Enacting trust through organisational collaboration

Trust acts as a linchpin connecting various hierarchical levels of governance involved in the Mockingbird Family. This interorganisational trust ensures a collaborative and coordinated approach (Franzén et al., 2020; Vanneste, 2016). Life Without Barriers holds the key to the Mockingbird Family success in Australia, with their support and oversight grounded in trust. This trust operates both horizontally, emphasising cooperation and coordination among organisations at the same level, and vertically, showcasing reliance and confidence in those in different hierarchical levels of the system (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006). Trust is closely tied to a shared commitment to the best interests of the child. It supports flexible, innovative responses, even when such responses challenge traditional practices. The collaboration with the Mockingbird Society in the US, based on evidence-based practices, signifies an openness to learn and adapt, demonstrating a proactive stance to address gaps in the Australian foster care system. This collective approach signifies a culture of continuous improvement, marked by a strong element of interorganisational trust.

In this study, trust is embedded in the alignment of professional judgement in the core mission of providing compassionate care and prioritising the needs of the children and families they serve. Individuals, and the organisations involved in the Mockingbird Family, exercise their creativity and flexibility in meeting diverse stakeholder needs. Aligning with Zand's (1972) spiral reinforcement model, trust is built through a continuous cycle of

open communication, acceptance of influence and the exercise of control. This reciprocity reinforces trust and encourages further open behaviour, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of trust and cooperation (Mollering et al., 2004). Our findings showed that carers, foster care agency workers and statutory child protection workers had faith in each other's capabilities to handle conflicts and challenges. This trust-driven collaboration enables a decentralised approach to conflict resolution and decision-making, promoting shared responsibility and collective control in finding resolutions.

### Cultivating systemic and societal trust

This study sheds light on the critical importance of trust, societal legitimacy and social capital in the successful implementation of the Mockingbird Family, especially in the context of a child protection system marked by fractured institutional trust (Balu & McLean, 2019; Higgins & Katz, 2008; Neave, 2021). Calls for reform in the Australian foster care system have underscored systemic gaps that this model seeks to address (Fergeus et al., 2019a, 2019b; Harnett et al., 2014; Kiraly et al., 2020; McKeough et al., 2017). The Mockingbird Family represents a paradigmatic shift, from siloed and transactional care to extended, child-centric constellations rooted in community, collaboration and inclusivity. This vision includes enhanced support networks, shared resources and relational adaptability, all of which foster nurturing environments that resemble the dynamic structure of a family. In this context, trust is not imposed by mandate but cultivated through daily acts of care and recognition, reflecting Logstrup and Fink's (1997) view of trust as an ethical demand in human encounters and Merleau-Ponty's (2012) emphasis on trust emerging through embodied interaction and shared vulnerability.

At a structural level, political endorsement plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the model's legitimacy. This study affirms that political support is central to scaling up the model, as higher-level recognition enhances public trust and validates the societal relevance of the approach (Rienzo et al., 2000). Such endorsement communicates confidence in the model's principles, helping to position trust as a systemic value rather than an individual attribute. Franzén et al. (2020) conceptualised trust as a multidimensional and multidirectional construct that operates across multiple levels, from individual to societal. Likewise, our analysis of the Mockingbird Family model emphasises the importance of trust at similar levels, illustrating how trust facilitates collaboration and contributes to the effectiveness and acceptance of the model, specifically within the Australian foster care system. Trust indeed acts as a foundational element that breaks down barriers, enabling cooperative behaviour and enhancing the success of welfare programs (Gilson, 2003). Our qualitative study refines Franzén et al.'s (2020) concept of trust by providing a context-specific and in-depth exploration of trust dynamics within the Mockingbird Family model, enhancing the understanding of how trust operates and influences outcomes within this unique child welfare framework.

## Limitations

While this study provides important insights into the role of trust within the Mockingbird Family model, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. As with many qualitative studies, findings are context-specific and not intended to be generalised beyond the South Australian pilot. The interview format may have introduced response bias, particularly given the relational nature of the topic and participants' awareness of the researchers' institutional affiliations. Sampling bias is also possible, as participation was voluntary and may have favoured those with more positive experiences. Additionally, despite efforts to ensure reflexivity and analytic rigour, interpretation of the data is inherently subjective. These limitations underscore the need for cautious application of findings across broader settings and highlight opportunities for further research into trust in alternative foster care models.

## Conclusions

This study deepens understanding of how trust is lived, built and sustained within a collective care model such as the Mockingbird Family. By drawing on reflective lifeworld research and a layered conceptualisation of trust, it addresses a critical gap in the foster care literature: how trust operates as both a lived experience and a structuring force within alternative care systems. The study centres the perspectives of children and young people as primary knowledge holders, while also recognising the co-constructed nature of trust across care networks, including carers, peers, professionals and institutions. Trust here is not treated as a fixed trait, but as an evolving relational dynamic that shapes daily practices, enables shared decision-making and affirms distributed responsibility. The findings illustrate how trust is enacted through embodied interactions, mutual support and professional judgement, and how it is reinforced through organisational coherence and political commitment. In demonstrating that trust can be intentionally cultivated across interpersonal, organisational and systemic domains, the study offers both a conceptual and applied contribution to reimagining foster care. It proposes a shift from fragmented placements to an integrated ecosystem sustained by consistent, reciprocal and inclusive practices, spanning peer support, child-centred relational constellations and inter-agency collaboration. This reconceptualisation positions trust not as a by-product of good care, but as its precondition. As interest grows in network-based and relationship-driven models of care, these findings provide timely insights for policy, practice and system reform. Future research should continue to foreground the voices of young people and examine how trust-based frameworks can be adapted across diverse cultural and institutional care settings.

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Data availability

Not available due to ethical and legal restrictions involving sensitive information from children.

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