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**From tokenism to transformation: Lived experience in child and family systems**Tim Moore<sup>1</sup> \*Dave Vicary<sup>2</sup>Sharon Bessell<sup>3</sup>**Affiliations**<sup>1</sup> Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy, Vic. 3065, Australia<sup>2</sup> Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, Melbourne, Vic. 3000, Australia<sup>3</sup> Children's Policy Centre/Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia**Correspondence**

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Across Australia, the imperative to listen to children and meaningfully incorporate their lived experience into human services has never been more apparent. Over the past decade, multiple inquiries, reforms and sector-wide initiatives have underscored the value of children's insights in shaping safer, more responsive and more effective systems (Stevens & Gahan, 2024). Yet despite this momentum, the meaningful inclusion of children and young people as key stakeholders remains inconsistent across policy, practice and organisational decision making (Michail et al., 2023). Inquiries consistently reveal that despite good intentions, genuine children's participation is rarely achieved (Stevens & Gahan, 2024). This edition of *Children Australia* highlights what becomes possible when children and young people's lived experience is taken seriously – and why the sector must move beyond aspiration towards embedded, everyday participation.

Australian standards and legislation provide a strong foundation for incorporating children's lived experience within human services. The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW; New South Wales Government, 1998), *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth; Australian Government, 1975) and *Children and Community Services Act 2004* (WA; Western Australian Government, 2004) emphasise children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. The *Child Protection Act 1999* (QLD; Queensland Government, 1999) and *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (VIC; Victorian Government, 2005) contain provisions ensuring children's views and experiences are heard in child protection and welfare matters. The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* uses the language of children's voices and views and sets out principles for ensuring children's right to participate in decisions that affect them (notably in Principle 3) (Department of Social

Services, 2021). This reflects Australia's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which establishes that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with those views given due weight according to age and maturity (Article 12) (United Nations, 2007). The *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations* reinforce this by requiring organisations to actively seek and respect children's input in service design, delivery and review (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

These frameworks articulate a clear vision. However, while the principle of children's participation has been translated into policy and legislation, for example in relation to out-of-home care, there remain significant gaps (Powell et al., 2021). Moreover, the child, youth and family sector lags behind comparable fields in embedding lived experience as a non-negotiable expectation of quality practice. In disability, mental health and family violence sectors, meaningful engagement with adults who have lived experience has become a mandated feature of service design, commissioning and evaluation. Many tenders and funding processes require evidence of genuine partnership with lived experience experts, and services are often ineligible for funding without demonstrated engagement. Lived experience roles are embedded across governance, workforce structures and program development, signalling that these systems recognise the expertise of those directly affected (Jayakody & Perera, 2023).

By contrast, these expectations have not yet been systematically applied to children and young people's participation. This is particularly striking given that children's engagement has long been central to early advocacy in the child and youth sectors, shaping foundational reforms and informing the rights-based approaches that emerged from this field's earliest development. As early as the 1930s, for example, pioneers such as Janusz Korczak had established children's boards, children's newspapers and even a child-led court to manage issues in his orphanages and homes (Eichsteller, 2017).

Despite this history, lived experience engagement with children remains uneven and often dependent on individual practitioner or organisational commitment rather than embedded structural and commissioning requirements. Established participatory processes also often favour older youth, particularly those selected as youth 'representatives' or 'advocates' who may not be directly affected by the issues at hand. This approach systematically excludes younger children (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018) and disregards the expertise and knowledge of harder-to-reach groups of young people. Consequently, children's participation is too often discretionary, symbolic or intermittent, rather than integral to how child and family services operate. To realise the intent of the UNCRC and the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*, the sector must adopt the same level of expectation, accountability and investment in lived experience engagement that now characterises disability, mental health and family violence systems. So too must these more-developed sectors now consider how children and young people can also have a seat at the table. Children and young people with disability and mental health issues have much to say, as do those directly experiencing violence in their families (Lam et al., 2022; Noble-Carr et al., 2020; Robinson & Graham, 2021).

This edition of *Children Australia* demonstrates the diversity and richness of children's perspectives when they are invited to participate meaningfully in knowledge creation. In two Expert by Experience articles, children co-author papers reflecting their daily experiences of learning, relationships and community (Bessell et al., 2025; O'Sullivan et al., 2025). Their contributions speak directly to the value of lived experience, offering insights that policy frameworks or adult commentary alone cannot achieve. As the child authors in O'Sullivan et al. (2025: abstract) express, 'school is important to learning ... [but] there are also lots of things that children need to learn outside of school', emphasising the importance of adults who 'treat us with respect' and support learning in ways that are 'fun' and engaging. Their reflections remind us of the breadth of children's knowledge and their capacity to articulate what helps, what matters and what needs to change. They also demonstrate the value of alliances built between researchers and children and young people throughout the research process (Dimopoulos et al., 2024; Mendes et al., 2023; Smales et al., 2020).

Other articles in this edition reinforce the centrality of lived experience to effective service design. Chalmers and Cartmel (2025) propose a practice framework for enhancing children's participation in family law contexts, urging the field to move beyond procedural inclusion toward approaches that honour children's relational, emotional and developmental needs. Patmisari et al. (2025) examine trust within the Mockingbird Family model, illuminating how children, carers and professionals assess relational safety – a critical dimension of children's experience in care. Wainwright and colleagues (2025) explore transition planning for young people leaving residential care, highlighting the limitations of processes that do not adequately involve young people in shaping their own pathways to adulthood. Bunston et al. (2025) contribute evidence that practitioners supporting infants and young children strengthen their work when they intentionally attend to children's cues and expressions – reinforcing that lived experience is not confined to verbal communication. McVeigh's (2025) review of therapeutic interventions for young survivors of violence and abuse offers critical reflection on the dominance of adult-defined understandings of trauma and recovery. She argues that to be effective, therapeutic models must more fully incorporate young survivors' perspectives, recognising them as experts in their own lives. Across these papers, a consistent throughline emerges: meaningful engagement with children's lived experience enhances understanding, strengthens relationships and improves system responsiveness.

Although many models exist for assessing children and young people's participation, most evaluate the extent to which children are engaged – from tokenistic to meaningful – but may unwittingly fail to consider how children and young people's insights are acted upon. We suggest, instead, that children and young people assess the value of their participation in terms of what it achieves (Viterbo, 2025). They have told us they would want to be involved 'if it was going to improve the situation for other people and help out people who are facing these situations' (Moore et al., 2021: p. 696).

Embedding lived experience in child and family services requires sustained cultural, structural and relational change (Suomi et al., 2017). It requires us to position meaningful engagement as central

to our work – not something done only when time and resources permit, or when we feel confident and willing to listen and act. This requires us to develop different ways of engaging lived experience, tailored to the needs of children and young people, and moving from activities of 'listening' to meaningful collaboration that leads to change (Ward & Lundy, 2024). Practitioners need support, time and training to engage with children in developmentally appropriate, relationally attuned and culturally responsive ways (Staley, 2015). Organisations must establish the systems, expectations and feedback loops that make participation routine rather than exceptional (Woodman et al., 2018). Policymakers and leaders must embed participation requirements into commissioning, program design, regulatory frameworks and evaluation mechanisms, ensuring the sector aligns with contemporary standards in adjacent fields (Staley, 2015; Suomi et al., 2017).

At its core, lived experience is a form of expertise – grounded in the realities of children's lives, relationships and environments (Staley, 2015). It challenges systems to measure success through children's sense of safety, belonging, connection and possibility, rather than through compliance or outputs alone. When children's insights are overlooked, services risk responding to assumptions rather than realities. When they are embraced, the potential for transformation is substantial: transformation for the organisation, the policy or practice, the practitioner and the child (Moore, 2012).

As this edition demonstrates, progress is being made. Children are contributing to scholarship, informing frameworks and shaping program development. Researchers are partnering with children as knowledgeable contributors. Practitioners are adopting approaches that prioritise listening, relational safety and responsiveness. Yet to fully realise the intent of our legislative and

policy frameworks, lived experience must become embedded, expected and structurally supported – not a discretionary enhancement but a defining feature of quality in child and family services (Michail et al., 2023; Suomi et al., 2017).

## Our commitment

From the outset, we as co-editors in chief and the *Children Australia* board have been committed to practicing what we preach. We have encouraged papers from not only researchers and practitioners but from children, young people and families. We believe that their contributions fill missing gaps and encourage us, as practitioners and researchers, to not only ensure that our work is driven by robust, ethical research and practice wisdom but by the needs and wishes of those we support.

Presently, the board is working to develop a set of child-friendly guidelines to encourage papers written in partnership between adults and children and young people or by young authors themselves. We will be taking these guidelines to groups of children for their feedback. Watch our journal website for more detail!

We've also been delighted to have already published a powerful artwork by 'Jack' (Jack, 2025) and the two papers in this edition (Bessell et al., 2025; O'Sullivan et al., 2025). We look forward to hearing more, learning more and providing a platform for children and young people to continue to guide, challenge, critique and inform all that we do.

We hope the contributions in this edition encourage practitioners, organisations and policymakers to continue strengthening this work and to champion the recognition of children's lived experience as essential to designing services that are safe, effective and genuinely centred on those they are intended to support.

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