

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

to support learning in primary and secondary schools



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

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

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

Context

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

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

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

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

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

Reasons for OOHC placement

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

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

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

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

Learning impact

Language and literacy difficulties are highly prevalent in children in OOHC, and this is not restricted to one type of care arrangement (Trout et al. 2008). Language and neurodevelopmental disorders are strongly over-represented in OOHC children (Snow et al. 2020). Disrupted schooling is also a common feature of the lives of children in OOHC, which has academic implications, and can also lead to a lack of school engagement (Fine et al. 2018).

✓ Promising approaches



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

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

Children in OOHC, depending on the state or territory in which they are based, may also have access to additional education supports, such as education officers and private tutoring. Contact your state education department or child protection department for more information on what services may be available.

The following are some considerations and strategies to support OOHC families with learning at home.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Where possible, meet with families to gain an understanding of their context and what supports might be needed to help their child with learning. For example, a carer may not have experience with primary school-aged children and may benefit from information about resources available in the local community that link to the school curriculum.
- Once you have established a relationship with a child's family, explore opportunities to collaborate and support learning at home.
- Encourage families to talk to the children about their daily experiences in school and what they have learned.
- Support families with older children by helping to create or identify appropriate study environments.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Communicate key information to teachers in a timely manner enabling them to provide specific supports around relevant curriculum.
- Ensure you are involved in meetings between teachers and families, where appropriate and practical, to gain an understanding of the individual situations and contexts.

Reflection question

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

Reflection question

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

✓ Promising approaches



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

Effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers about children's learning needs and their development. Light touch updates from schools to families about student learning improve students' academic achievement, particularly for students at risk of falling behind.

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

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Draw on the knowledge and expertise of both families and school staff, via effective two-way communication. Families may have training or supports from child protection services that can be utilised.
- Ensure you engage with a child's family, regardless of whether the child is residing in a short- or longer-term arrangement. Gaining an understanding of a child's learning needs is critical for ensuring you can support them in the most effective ways.
- Provide families with light-touch updates about the learning progress of children in their care, just like any other parent or carer. Updates should focus on what is going well, together with areas for further support.
- When providing light-touch updates to families, discuss attendance if this is an identified issue with a child. OOHC children experience double the absenteeism of children not in OOHC (Armfield et al. 2020), which has a direct impact on a child's learning experience.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Ensure contact details are kept up to date. Children in OOHC may have experienced multiple placements and may have instability in their place of residence and their support network.
- Make sure families can nominate their preference around how to receive light touch updates – for example, text messages, phone calls or emails. This is especially important if there are restrictions around family member contact. This information could be gathered centrally and recorded at a school level, ensuring consistency and reducing individual teacher workload.
- Ask families if any other members of the child's support network should also receive light-touch updates about learning. For example, it may be appropriate to provide light-touch updates about learning to an education officer who, alongside a case worker, is also supporting the child.

Reflection questions

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

Reflection questions

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

✓ Promising approaches



Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home (primary students)

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practice their literacy skills often, in functional ways. One specific way schools can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading.

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

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Note that many children in OOHC have challenges with language and literacy, such as oral language skills and reading comprehension.
- Discuss with the families about how to best promote a literacy-rich environment at home that is also developmentally appropriate for the child. For example, the interests of an older child in your class may not necessarily be captured in many literacy-building experiences that are at their level of literacy.
- Discuss with families about how to best promote a literacy-rich environment at home, through strategies like shared reading. For children in more temporary arrangements, this could involve providing access to reading materials that a child can take home.
- Ensure you provide additional supports when sending books home in an OOHC environment, such as a letter to the family or an in-class discussion with the child about the books they are taking home, before they take them. Without these supports, learning is less likely to be successful.
- In some cases, families may seek to engage tutors to provide individualised support outside of school hours. As part of your planning, consider how these other supports can be included in communications about learning.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- It is important that shared reading efforts are sustained over months rather than weeks.
- If a child experiences high rates of instability in their home or their support network, this can increase the challenge of sustaining shared reading. Consider what systems you can put in place to reduce the negative effects of an unstable home environment. For example, identifying changes to a child's care arrangement early and prompting planning meetings may minimise any absence of shared reading at home.

Reflection question

- What might a 'literacy-rich environment' at home look like for your students? Do you have the same expectations for your students that are in OOHC?

Reflection question

- If you already encourage shared reading approaches in the home, how can you help to ensure that this is more than a short-term effort?

✓ Promising approaches



Collaboratively planning and problem solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes. Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

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

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Families and child protection workers often do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to support the educational needs of the child (SCACS 2015) just as teachers do not necessarily have the necessary skills and knowledge to assist with the complex needs of the child, including a potential trauma background. High levels of collaboration across the network of support are necessary to ensure that all needs of the child are met as best as possible.
- Ensure you are taking the time to learn about the living arrangements of each child when considering collaborative planning and problem-solving. For example, this could include meetings between school staff, families, caseworkers and the child to identify individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.
- One way of supporting collaborative problem-solving may be to ask students and their families any questions they have regarding learning progress.
- For older children soon to be graduating high school, consider how planning can support them in the transition to independence (and away from OOHC), as this may be a stressful period of change leaving both school and OOHC.

Reflection questions

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

✓ Promising approaches



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

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Many jurisdictions require children in OOHC to have education planning documentation, such as an individual education plan (IEP). When working on an IEP, ensure goals are clearly stated, achievable, measurable, and that strategies for achieving these goals are included.
- There are many variations between schools in their ability, and willingness to undertake IEPs for children in OOHC (ACWA 2017). School leadership must ultimately ensure effective development, completion and implementation of IEPs.
- Clearly articulate the responsibilities of each party in the IEP, noting that everyone plays a part.
- Ensure staff, the family and the child meet regularly to discuss and review learning needs and progress towards learning goals in the IEP.

Reflection questions

- How easy is it for families to raise issues or challenges about learning with school staff?
- Do you consider contextual background of families (for example, their knowledge of their child's academic history) when assessing how to best involve them in the collaboration process?
- How do you ensure that all staff are skilled in their capacity to develop and implement IEPs alongside families?



References

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More information

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

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