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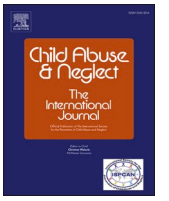

Children in out-of-home care's right to family and cultural connection: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australian children's perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children have a right to participate in decisions about their lives. They also have the right to family and cultural connection, including when they are removed due to child protection concerns. However, the literature highlights barriers children in out-of-home care experience connecting to family-of-origin and culture. Moreover, this literature is predominantly from the perspective of practitioners and carers, with children's perspectives notably absent.
Objective: This qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australian children's perspectives and experiences of family and cultural connection while in out-of-home care. It seeks to uphold children's right to express their views on matters that impact their lives.
Participants and setting: The participants were 62 children aged 4–15 years ($\bar{x}$=9 years), who were in out-of-home care in Queensland (Australia). Forty-two of the children were non-Indigenous and 20 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.
Methods: Lundy's (2007) model of participation guided the data collection approach. Art-based graphic-elicitation interviews were conducted. Verbatim transcripts were analysed thematically.
Results: Children had differing levels of understanding as to why they could not reside with their family. Most children referred to a family-of-origin member not living with them as important in their lives, but it was not always their parent/s. Siblings were mentioned frequently. Barriers to connections with family included distance and cost of travel, parents not attending visits and being uncontactable, incarcerated or deceased. Whilst most children desired increased connection with family, a few wished for reduction or cessation. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children showed varying levels of connection to culture with both siblings and carers playing key roles in enabling greater connection.
Conclusions: Graphic-elicitation interviews provided an important opportunity for children to voice their experiences of and preferences regarding family and cultural connection. The inclusion of children's voices is needed to inform responsive policies and practices that safely support their rights to family and culture when in out-of-home care.

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stipulates that children should be cared for by their family unless their safety and wellbeing needs cannot be met. In such instances, jurisdictions across the Global North may place children in out-of-home care (OOHC) to secure their care and protection. At June 2022, there were 45,400 children in OOHC in Australia—a rate of 8.0 children per 1000 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2023). Whilst other countries with similar British colonial histories, such as New Zealand and Canada, report lower rates of children in OOHC, at 4.2 per 1000 (Duerr Berrick et al., 2023) and 4.5 per 1000 respectively (Black et al., 2022), these countries have comparable over-representation of First Nations children in the OOHC system (Blackstock et al., 2020). The removal of First Nations children from their families is recognised as severing their connection to not only parents but also family/kin, community, and culture (Krakouer, 2023). This is despite international conventions and domestic child protection legislation recognising that children in OOHC should maintain rights to family and cultural connection.

While in OOHC, child protection authorities make decisions about children's lives including where they live and the extent to which they have contact with their parents and other family and community members, which have significant implications for children's wellbeing, identity, connection, and safety (Wilson et al., 2020; Woodman et al., 2023). However, international evidence suggests that children in OOHC often have limited meaningful involvement in these decisions (Toros, 2021). This contravenes Article 12 of the UNCRC, which holds that children have a right to share their views on matters that impact their lives and that their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Informed by the Lundy (2007) model of participation, this paper supports children's right to express their views on matters that impact their lives. We report on a qualitative study, conducted in Queensland (Australia), of children's views on and hopes for connection to family and culture while in OOHC. The findings have implications for how carers, practitioners, and policy makers support children in OOHC to realise their rights to both participation in decision-making and to family and cultural connection.

1.1. Children's right to participate in child protection

Advancements in childhood studies have led to increasing recognition of children as social actors with expertise and agency, capable of contributing to decisions about their lives, rather than being passive service users (James, 2007; Toros, 2021). Children's meaningful participation in child protection is recognised as not only a right. The *act* of participating promotes positive social, emotional, and psychological outcomes for children (Stafford et al., 2021). The *contribution* of children's views also leads to more responsive decisions that enhance their safety and wellbeing (Woodman et al., 2023). Most jurisdictions in the Global North have enshrined the rights of children to participate in child protection processes in legislation and policy. For example, in Queensland (Australia), where this study was conducted, the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) was amended in 2022 to strengthen requirements for their voices to shape decisions that affect them (Queensland Government, 2023).

Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of involving children in OOHC in decision-making, international evidence suggests that "persistent systemic, cultural and practice-operational barriers are preventing children to have a voice, rendering many… invisible and unheard" (Stafford et al., 2021, p. 2). Research indicates that a lack of participation in decisions disempowers children, leaves them fearful of the decisions that will be made about them and can erode their trust in future offers to participate in decisions (Toros, 2021).

1.2. Children's right to family and cultural connection

The rights of children in OOHC to family-of-origin relationships and cultural connections are enshrined across international conventions and in law. Article 9 of the UNCRC highlights that the State shall respect the rights of children to maintain personal relations and direct contact with their parents, unless it is contrary to the child's "best interests". The UNCRC (Article 30) also holds that children should not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture. Further, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples outlines that Indigenous children have a fundamental right to preserve their identity and learn about their cultures. Jurisdictions across the Global North have embedded principles from these key international agreements into their domestic legislation and policy to support cultural connection. This primarily takes the form of preferencing First Nations children living with their family/kin network or cultural community while in OOHC.

1.3. Children's connection to family and culture while living in OOHC

Literature suggests that children in OOHC benefit from maintaining and developing relationships with their family-of-origin where safe to do so, even when reunification is not a goal (Healy, Venables, & Walsh, 2023; Healy et al., 2024). Studies have found that children who had more frequent contact with their parents had better relationships with their parents (Cashmore & Taylor, 2017; Suomi et al., 2023). Children on a reunification plan were more likely to have contact and a better relationship with their parents in comparison to children on a non-reunification plan (Kertesz et al., 2022). Yet, the longer a child remained in OOHC, the more likely their parental contact decreased over time, impacting the quality of the relationship (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Suomi et al., 2023). Kinship care is believed to strengthen children's connection with family members because they can facilitate frequent informal contact between extended family members and children (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013).

Despite the importance of family connection and relationships, there are several barriers and risks associated with contact with family-of-origin. Barriers include distance, a lack of suitable contact times and locations, carer workloads, inadequate financial resources for travel, parents failing to attend visits, parents being uncontactable by carers, parents being in jail, prohibited parental contact by authorities, and deceased parents (Kertesz et al., 2022; McDowall, 2015). Contact can be risky, particularly when inadequately resourced or unsupported. For example, contact may serve to undermine a child's placement by contributing to confusion and conflicting loyalties (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013), cause distress via disappointing visits (Bullen et al., 2017), or even be associated with threats of harm to the child (Kertesz et al., 2022). Cocks (2019) indicates that such risks can be reduced when contact is well-managed and both children and their families receive emotional support.

Well managed contact is important as connection with family can improve placement stability and developmental outcomes (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). Family connection also helps to maintain cultural and community links (Luu et al., 2018). Organic processes of learning culture, often called enculturation, occur when people are exposed to, immersed in, and socialised into their culture by members of the same cultural group. Placement in OOHC can disrupt these processes, particularly if children are not placed with members of their culture (Krakouer, 2023). Children who feel estranged from their parents and unaware of their heritage and kinship ties are more likely to experience identity confusion and cultural disconnection (Moss, 2009). Further, research suggests that cultural disconnection at any point in life has ongoing, and lifelong impacts on a person's social and emotional wellbeing, cultural identity and sense of belonging (Bamblett et al., 2014; Zubrick et al., 2014).

There are very few qualitative studies that capture the perspective and experiences of children in OOHC (see McTavish et al., 2022), particularly regarding connection to family (see Baker et al., 2016) and culture. Studies that do capture the views of children in OOHC tend to include older children (10 years+) and/or are retrospective accounts from adults with an OOHC experience. McTavish et al.'s (2022) meta-synthesis only identified two studies, both conducted over 14 years ago, that included the views of children under 7-years. Most of the extant literature on family and cultural connection of children in OOHC is focused on the views of carers and practitioners, who may be biased, not well-informed about children's feelings about families or unwilling to speak about the child's views. Our paper fills a gap in knowledge by focusing on the experiences of younger children in OOHC, those aged 4 to 15-years. This paper seeks to provide children's voices with an audience (Lundy, 2007) to hear about their experiences of family and cultural connection while in OOHC.

1.4. Children's participation in research about their lives

Children's participation in research has grown since the 1990s, as has the theory, ethics, and practice of research about, with and for children (Kennan & Dolan, 2017). Yet, barriers to the inclusion of children's voices in research remain. These include complex ethical requirements, and knowledge of methods that engage children's interest in participating while allowing them control over what data they contribute (Spratling et al., 2012). Research with children requires guardian consent alongside children's capacity to assent. When children are in OOHC, further gatekeepers become involved in consent processes, including the child protection authority, support workers, and the child's carer (Vaswani, 2018).

Understanding children's experience of OOHC and the relationships that matter to them, may involve discussing sensitive topics including trauma stemming from experiences of removal, neglect and abuse (Radford et al., 2017). Evidence suggests children are interested in sharing their views and value being asked about their experiences (Stafford et al., 2021). But concerns about protecting children may lead to gatekeepers withholding consent and the sensitivity of topics will also impact whether children choose to participate (Powell et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2020). Balancing ethics, rights and agency with interesting and age-appropriate methods is a challenge for research with all children, and particularly those in OOHC. But it will lead to furthering knowledge of children's perspectives, thus informing more responsive policies and practices.

Lundy's (2007) rights-based model of participation has been adopted in research across multiple fields including child protection (Strömpl & Luhamaa, 2020) as a mechanism for realising children's Article 12 right to be heard in matters that affect them. Lundy's (2007) model suggests that child participation requires four key elements. The first two, space and voice, are associated with children's right to express their view. Here, space relates to providing a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views. Whilst voice relates to providing a range of mechanisms for children to express their views – including their decision not to participate. The final two elements, audience and influence, are associated with children's right to have their views given due consideration. Audience is about ensuring decision-makers listen to children's views. Influence is about ensuring that children's views are acted upon and taken seriously. Whilst the model has been critiqued for being generic and individualistic (Strömpl & Luhamaa, 2020), it provides a useful framework for embedding and implementing the participation of children into applied research, such as this study, which is focused on enhancing the wellbeing of children in OOHC.

1.5. Current study

Informed by Lundy's (2007) model, this paper captures the views of children in OOHC with the intention of ensuring that their views *influence* policy and practice related to their care. The paper contributes to existing knowledge by describing the connections that children aged 4 to 15-years report and desire with their family and culture whilst in OOHC in Queensland (Australia). Specifically, the paper addresses the questions: (a) What are children's experiences of family and cultural connections when in OOHC?; and (b) How would children like to connect with their families and culture whilst in OOHC?

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Aligned with the element of *space*, we actively sought to hear children's views by recruiting a purposive sample of children who met the following criteria: (1) residing with a foster or kinship carer, or a birth parent who had participated in the larger study[1]; (2) were aged 4 years or older; (3) the child was placed in OOHC on a short-term or long-term Child Protection Order; and (4) as per ethical requirements, guardian consent as well as the consent of the carer (if they were not the guardian) was provided. Two carers did not provide consent for the child(ren) in their care to participate ($n = 5$ children). Due to the complexity of recruitment of children and the undertaking to contact parents where possible, at the point when this paper was written there were also 77 children no longer eligible for the study due to changes in their care arrangements or being unable to contact their guardian. Sixty-two children aged 4–15 years ($\bar{x}$=9 years) assented and participated in interviews. Children received a thank you note and $30 gift card. This was not an incentive as, in accordance with the study's ethical clearance, participants were not advised of the honorarium prior to assenting (see Taplin et al., 2019 for a discussion of payments for children's participation in social research).

At the time of interview, all children except one were living in either foster or kinship care placements. Two of the children were in the process of being reunified with their mother and spent time in both their carer's and mother's home. Approximately 39 % ($n = 24$) of children had at least one parent incarcerated during their time in OOHC. Table 1 presents selected characteristics for the child participants. This data was drawn from administrative data and/or interviews with the child's carer.

2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured, developmentally appropriate art-based graphic-elicitation interviews (see Cooke et al., 2018) were conducted during the period November 2022–November 2023. Our approach to conducting these interviews was trauma-informed (Voith et al., 2020.), and guided by the literature on research with children (e.g., Powell et al., 2018; Spratling et al., 2012), as well as the *space* and *voice* elements of Lundy's (2007) model. The interview process ensured: (a) building rapport was prioritised (e.g., each interview started by playing a 'getting to know you' board game as an ice-breaker); (b) the provision of pictorial aids to inform the child about the interview process prior to gaining their assent; (c) a safe interview location and access to support people; and (d) children were provided with opportunities to exercise choice about their participation (e.g., provision of 'stop', 'break', 'thumbs up/down' cards to help communicate their wishes throughout the interview).

All interviews were conducted in-person within the child's home. Whilst the children's carers or parent were at home and accessible to the child during the interview, where possible, the interview was conducted in a separate room (e.g., the lounge room or kitchen) to provide the child with privacy. However, in some cases the carer, parent or other children were present for some or all of the interview. Interviews lasted between 5 and 66 min ($\bar{x}$=37 min). In accordance with the project's cultural framework, wherever possible, interviews with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were undertaken by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander members of the research team ($n = 18$). With the permission of the child and their carer/parent, 59 were audio-recorded. Detailed notes were taken by the interviewer in the other three interviews.

Attuned to what Powell et al. (2018, p. 655) described as "contexts of sensitivity" – we recognised that the children in our study may find the topic of family connection particularly sensitive given that they were living in OOHC having been removed from their families-of-origin due to child protection concerns. As such, we elected not to directly ask children about their family-of-origin nor their contact with them. Instead, we used graphic-elicitation interviews to ask children about who they lived with and other people (e.g., family and community) who were important to them. Children were able to speak and/or create a picture (drawing and/or using animal cut-outs). This creative approach was chosen as it has been found to allow children to both feel comfortable and focus on what *they* wanted to share about their lives (Spratling et al., 2012).

As children created their pictures, the interviewer asked questions about the pictures to explore their relationships with the people they had included. For example, children were asked: who helps them and cares for them; who they would tell if they had good/bad news; what they liked and would change about their relationships; who they liked spending time with and if there was anyone, they wished they could see more of. In the second part of the interview, children were asked to draw or explain what was important to them, including their favourite memory and activities, as well as important celebrations and any special places or objects. A photo of the child's picture was taken so they could keep their artwork if they wanted to. The method was adapted to ensure it was developmentally appropriate and accommodated the preferences of the child, for example to talk without the art-based activities, reflecting the considerations of *voice* proposed by Lundy (2007).

2.3. Data analysis

A professional service transcribed the audio-recorded data verbatim. The 62 transcripts were de-identified before being uploaded into NVivo. Aboriginal members of the research team de-identified all 20 of the transcripts from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, in consultation with the project's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group.

[1] The larger study is still underway. It is a qualitative, longitudinal study with three waves of carer interviews (W1, $n = 115$; W2, $n = 106$; W3, $n = 65$); and one wave of parent interviews ($n = 16$).

Table 1
Child participant characteristics.

Item	Characteristics of participant	Total ($n = 62$)
Living in type of care	Kinship	18
	Foster	43
	Residential	1
Gender	Female	30
	Male	32
Cultural Identity of children	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	20
	Non-Indigenous	42
Age cohort at time of child's interview	4–6 Years	16
	7–9 Years	20
	10+ Years	26
Child protection orders at time of child's interview	Long-term guardianship to Queensland's child protection authority or carer	60
	Short-term custody[a]	2
Household members	Carer/s and 1 child	10
	Carer/s and multiple unrelated foster children	12
	Carer/s and sibling group	26
	Carer/s, biological children, foster sibling group	5
	Carer/s, biological children, unrelated foster children, related foster children	9
Location of child's siblings	Together with all siblings (co-placed)	11
	Living with some siblings but not all (splintered)	32
	Living without any of their siblings (split)	16
	No known/living siblings	3
Has contact with at least one parent	Yes	41
	No	19
	Not recorded	2

[a] In Queensland, short-term custody orders means that whilst the child is placed in OOHC, the parent retains guardianship of the child. These orders have a maximum duration of two years.

The analysis focused on the data from the interview with the child as they discussed their artwork (elicitation method), rather than the artwork itself. Our approach to thematic analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2013) established guidelines. The existing coding frame developed for the larger project (for carer, parent, and child data) was used and adapted after familiarisation with the children's data. This coding frame was developed deductively using the research questions as the framework and within this framework, codes and categories were developed inductively. Definitions for each code were developed to ensure the data was coded consistently.

Where possible, the person who conducted the interview coded the transcript so that they could note any relevant contextual information (e.g., a carer entering the room at a certain point) on the transcript. The data from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were coded by Aboriginal team members. Team members involved in interviews, coding, and analysis held qualifications in social work, psychology, or social science. They had research and, in most cases, direct practice experience in child and family welfare. Weekly coding meetings were used to refine the coding frame and to resolve disputes and queries. Once all transcripts were coded, authors A–D undertook thematic analysis of the data. Throughout the process, similarities and differences across the data set were explored, and comparisons drawn across different participant groups (e.g., foster vs kinship placement; age group).

2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University of Queensland (2020/HE001937) and one of the project's industry partners. Queensland's statutory child protection authority also approved the project and provided consent to the participation of eligible children under child protection orders. All children provided their own assent to participate, and guardian consent was also given. In instances where the parent was not the legal guardian, all efforts were made to inform them of the study.

3. Findings

Children were asked to graphically depict through an art medium who was important to them and who they wanted to see more of. All but two children referred to at least one member of their family-of-origin (e.g., parents, siblings, and extended family[2]) that they did not live with. The children described diverse family structures in both size and composition. The extent to which children discussed their family members varied from only naming them, through to describing special memories and aspects of their relationships. The arts-based graphic elicitation method gave children the agency to include certain family members in their drawing of important people in their lives, without feeling pressured to discuss them. The method also assisted some children to share characteristics of their family

[2] A consequence of privileging children's voices is that the data reported in these findings may differ from the demographics reported in the Participant Characteristic Table (see Table 1), which was provided by carers or the statutory child protection authority.

members and/or their relationship with them. For example, Child 13 (*7–9yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster*) chose to represent their mother by an image of a cat "because I love cats", and Child 2 (*7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) chose to represent their sister as a snake because "she sneaks, be naughty, so snakes be naughty". Another child *(Ch48_10 + yrs_ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_ foster)* showed consideration of his brother's likes when he used a red pencil to draw him and shared "Red…It's his favourite colour".

3.1. How children discussed their families and culture

3.1.1. Family members discussed by children

3.1.1.1. Parents. Just over half of the children ($n = 35$) discussed one or both of their parents during the interview. Of those children, the majority ($n = 24$) mentioned both their mother and father, whilst a few only mentioned their mother ($n = 9$) or only their father (n = 2). A small number of children chose to differentiate their parents from their carers by referring to them as their "real" or "other" parents. The majority ($n = 20$) of the 27 children who did *not* mention their parents at all during the interview were in foster care. The younger children (4–6 years old) were less likely to mention their parents during the interview. Notably, there was one child who mentioned his father, but did not elaborate because "he doesn't like me talking about him" *(Ch40_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*.

3.1.1.2. Siblings. Almost all children mentioned having siblings ($n = 58$) and the number of siblings each child had, ranged from one to 18. Nearly half of these children ($n = 28$) reported that they lived with all their siblings in the same household. A similar proportion ($n = 27$) described being separated from some or all their siblings. One child mentioned their siblings but said "they don't like me to talk about them" (*Ch40_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*), interestingly, this child said the same thing about their father.

3.1.1.3. Extended family. Just under a third ($n = 18$) of the children in our sample were in kinship placements, meaning they were placed with a member of their extended family or adult sibling. During the interview, 30 children mentioned extended family members *not* living with them, namely grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Only a few children mentioned whether these extended family members were related to their mother or father.

3.1.2. Children's perceptions of why they could not live with their family

A small number of children discussed living with their parents in the past. For example, "I left my real mum when I was one" *(Ch9_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)* and "my mum that I was first with…because I was with her when I was smaller" *(Ch18_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*. Although children were not directly asked about when or why they came into OOHC, a few chose to share their perceptions of why they could no longer live with their parents. Three cited reasons related to their parent's capacity to care for them, commenting that it was because "she [mother] didn't know how to look after me" *(Ch5_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship)*; that "she [mother] was sick, but now I can't live with her till I'm 18" *(Ch9_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*; and that they were "not okay because dad [has] medical health problems…and my mum smokes drugs and my dad does…they even did it when I was in [mother's] tummy" *(Ch53_7–9yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_kinship)*. A fourth child reported that when they first entered OOHC they felt their parents "didn't want me in their life anymore and then they messed up just because I was there. So, I thought it was just all my fault" *(Ch35_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship)*.

3.1.3. Children's discussion of culture and identity

Only two of the non-Indigenous children in the study commented on their cultural identity. Their discussions were limited to sharing that they could speak a few words in the language that their parent/s spoke. As such, this section focuses specifically on how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in the study ($n = 20$) discussed their cultural identity and connections. Notably, all 20 of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were placed with non-Indigenous foster or kinship carers. Only half ($n = 10$) of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children discussed their cultural identity and/or connections. All but one of these children were in foster placements. Three of these 10 children, all in foster care, did not mention their parents during the interview.

The 10 children who mentioned cultural identity and/or connection varied in age from 4 to 11 years. They shared their cultural identity with varying levels of specificity, for example by sharing, "Aboriginal" *(Ch48_10–12yrs_Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander_foster),* and "Dad is Aboriginal and Mum is Torres Strait Island" (*Ch13_7–9yrs_Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander_foster*). Only one child, (*Ch14_4–6yrs_Aboriginal_kinship*), shared their Nation or language group in the interview. Notably, this child was in a kinship placement and reported having a map of Australia's First Nations displayed within the home. Whilst not using Language to name Country, one other child (*Ch27_10–12yrs_Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander_foster*), used the English name for the geographical region that held special significance for her family. When discussing their culture, some children also made references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices including dance, painting, hunting and, as noted by Child 39 (*Ch39_7–9yrs_Aboriginal_foster*), what Aboriginal peoples traditionally eat (witchety grubs), stating "Some of my mob would have that." One child *(10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)* chose to draw both the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander flag on their image of what is important to them, explaining what different elements of each of the flags represented.

3.2. Connecting to family and culture: how it is and how children would like it to be

3.2.1. Time with family: contact to support continuity of relationships

Of the 60 children who mentioned a family member during the interview. 57 reported having contact with at least 1 family member they were not living with. Most contact described by the children, occurred in public spaces like libraries, parks, and shopping centres. In-home contact was more common for sibling contact and in kinship placements. Interestingly, the 3 children who did not mention a family-of-origin member during the interviews were all in foster care.

3.2.1.1. Parents. Three children reported no current contact with their parents. Child 3 (*10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) chose not to have contact with their birth parents, while Child 54 (*4–6yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) and Child 60 (*7–9yrs_Aboriginal_and/or_Torres Strait Islander_foster*) only mentioned the parent they did not have contact with. Of the 22 children who had contact with at least one parent, 10 children saw their parent on a patterned basis (ranging from weekly to quarterly) and 12 children had irregular contact, with some children referring to this contact using vague terms like 'sometimes' or 'not that often'. Child 35 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship*) also described how limited contact with her parents made her feel both upset and jealous of other children who have parents, sharing, "it's been hard for me…I get kind of jealous when other people have their Father's Day or Mother's Day. I get very upset because it feels like my parents didn't want me".

For some children, contact with their parents was experienced as awkward or boring. Child 6 *(7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*, who had both in-person (quarterly) and telephone contact with his mother, experienced mixed emotions about the phone contact, saying "I like talking to her, but I don't know, it's just like sometimes it gets awkward, sometimes, because we don't have anything to say and it's like 'ee,ee,ee' because you 'ran out of things' to talk about". Another child (*Ch*5_*7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship*) described her in-person contact with mum as "boring", explaining that "she just talks about the news and stuff" and that she was very protective which restricted activities during the visitations.

3.2.1.2. Siblings. Two children, both in foster care and aged 10-years or over, stated that they do not have any contact with their siblings. Of the children who have siblings that do not live with them ($n = 15$), 8 reported having contact with their siblings regularly ranging from weekly to quarterly and seven reported only having occasional contact.

3.2.1.3. Extended family. Almost half of the children ($n = 30$) discussed the contact they had with extended family who did not live with them, with most visiting these family members in-person. Four children reported not having contact with extended family. Of the 15 children who mentioned if their extended family members were maternal or paternal, only one child *(Ch44_10 + yrs_ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)* was in contact with extended family members from both the maternal and paternal side. For the other children, more connected with their paternal ($n = 8$) compared to maternal relatives ($n = 6$).

3.2.2. Staying connected to family through memories and mementos

Throughout the interviews it emerged that parents remain an ongoing and important presence in children's lives, despite not living with them. For example, when recounting their favourite memories, approximately a third of the children that mentioned their parent/s during the interview described special memories involving their parents. Most of these memories centred around playing with their mother, with one child sharing her favourite memory was "my real mum, when I was at the office playing" *(Ch9_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*. Another child, whose mother was deceased, explained how she had lots of memories of her mother prior to entering OOHC and "laughed when I remember these times" *(Ch4_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship)*.

The children's attachment and emotional bonds with their siblings was also evident when they shared their favourite memories. A quarter of the children in our sample shared special memories of their siblings that they cherished, irrespective of whether the siblings were living with them. For example, Child 57 (*7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_ foster*) who is co-placed with his siblings said that his favourite memory was "just playing with my sister and my brother". For Child 3 (*10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_ foster*) it was his "last meeting, last contact" with his siblings that happened seven years ago that he cherished, and for Child 31 (*10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship*) who lived away from some siblings a fond memory was when he "saw my baby brother for the first time".

As well as cherishing memories, children who were separated from their siblings (splintered or split), recounted how they kept different items (e.g., photos, toys, or gifts) as a memory of them. For example, Child 27 (*10 + yrs_ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_ foster*) showed the interviewer her special rock her sister painted for her, explaining its significance:

> It's got a blue pond with a yellow circle in it. It reminds me of when we were playing in the pool before she moved away to her different house. It reminds me when we were playing in the pool, and I had the yellow floaty and she was the boat and she pulled me around.

Similarly, there was also a small group of children that spoke of treasuring possessions, such as soft toys or make-up, that were given to them by their parents, referring to them as "special" things *(Ch62_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)*.

3.2.3. Viewing family as a source of emotional and practical support

After drawing the important people in their lives, children were asked which of those people looks after them and helps them. There were seven children, most of whom were aged seven-years or over and had some form of contact with their parent/s, that named their parent/s, most commonly their mother, as a person in this role. Whilst most children did not explain how their parent/s helped or cared

for them, there was one child who shared that their mother "helps me with calming down" *(Ch32_7–9yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_kinship)*. Children were also asked who they would tell good or bad news to. Five children, all aged 7-years or older, identified their mother and in some cases, their father as somebody they would want to share with. For example, Child 2 *(7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)* shared that if they had sad news, they would confide in their father because even though "he gets a bit sad when [he] hears that…he would be good" at supporting them. This indicates that some children continue to consider their parents as an important source of emotional support and comfort, despite not living with them.

Only three children identified extended family not living with them as the person they would tell their good or bad news to. However, almost a third of the children ($n = 19$) identified their siblings as important people in their lives with whom they would share their secrets as well as good or bad news. Generally, they shared their good news with a wide range of people including siblings, carers or friends. However, when it came to bad news some children ($n = 6$) preferred to share with their siblings first, irrespective of whether their siblings were living with them. For example, Child 7 (*10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) chose her Aunty (carer) as a person to share with if "something really good happen", but when it came to "something really bad", she would talk to her older sister first.

In addition to being an important confidant, siblings were described fondly as a companion, who would offer practical support and unconditional love. For example, the children told us "[My sister] is my favourite person to hang with. She makes me laugh and helps" (*Ch27_10 + yrs_ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_ foster*), "My brother is good at teaching me sports" (*Ch35_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship*), "[My sister] helps me to do something…[my] brothers help me to bake stuff" (*Ch47_7–9yrs_ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_ foster*). Overall, the children spoke of their siblings fondly saying things like, "[My sister] is so kind and caring. She's just a great sister" (*Ch3_10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_ foster*) or "He [brother] really loves me" (*Ch23_7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_ foster*).

3.2.4. Desiring more connection to family

Children were specifically asked if there was anyone in their lives they would like to see more. Members of their family-of-origin was a common response to this question. For example, Child 18 (*7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) responded that she wanted to see "my family; like my real family". Children's responses related to different family members are outlined below.

3.2.4.1. Parents. A fifth ($n = 9$) of the children who spoke of their parents indicated that they wanted to see more of their parent/s. These children tended to have limited or no parent contact. For example, Child 45 (*10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster*) said she wanted to see more of her mother because "I barely see her. Like barely. I haven't seen her for like a year now". Some children articulated how distressed they felt because they hadn't seen their parent. For example, Child 60 said, "I haven't seen my mum for six years…Because I moved…It's been very emotional…I cry because I haven't seen her for a long time." (*7–9yrs_Aboriginal_and/or_Torres Strait Islander_foster*).

For other children, it is in-person contact that they are seeking. Child 2 *(7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) explained that she wanted to see more of her father "because I just talk to him on the phone. I didn't even see [my father]". For some children, it was more than a desire for contact, they longed to live with their parent, as Child 9 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)* explained, "I can't live with [mother] till I'm 18. But I wish I could live with her... Because I've been waiting for ages. Want to just go see her and live with her.". In contrast, Child 3 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*) recounted that after Facetiming his father in prison, he decided he didn't want further contact with his father because of what he had done to others. This child described his father as "a really bad thief, [who] spends all of his money on drugs." and stated that he doesn't "like seeing or talking to him."

3.2.4.2. Siblings. Three children spoke longingly of their siblings, expressing their wish to have more communication with them. These children all resided in foster care and experienced restricted or no communication with their siblings. Child 3 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_ foster)*, who did not have any communication with his siblings for seven years, explained that his strong desire to regain contact with his older brothers and "just hearing their voices", had led him recently to initiate phone contact:

> Crazy coincidence. I actually rang them on my brother's birthday…I remember we used to have these contacts. I remember the last contact ever…I was very excited and nervous [to call them]. Like when you go on a ride that you want to go on, but you're so nervous. Yeah, I felt like that.

The emotional impact of sibling separation was expressed by a small number of children, such as Child 52 (*10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_ foster*), who described missing his brother "but I don't see him" even though he only lived a one-hour drive away, with his mother. He shared a photograph of himself and his brother with the interviewer.

3.2.4.3. Extended family. A few children ($n = 7$) when asked who they wanted to spend more time with, expressed the desire to connect more with extended family members, like Child 4 (*7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship*) who shared, "I wish I saw more of my cousins and my nannies, because they don't live very close to me at all".

3.2.5. Barriers to staying connected to family

Some of the children with limited or no contact with family members shared their views on barriers to connecting more frequently with them. Distance was the most cited reason, with children reporting that their family members lived in different towns, including interstate or overseas locations. For example, Child 28 did not consider sharing bad news with his sibling only because "my brother… lives somewhere else, and my sister lives somewhere else" (*Ch28_7–9yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster*). A small number

of children identified the cost of travel as the prohibitive factor, like Child 27 *(10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster),* who shared: "[father] lives a long way away…so we can't get lots of flights, because we can't use all the money for the flights".

The next most cited reason for no or limited contact was the parent being deceased or incarcerated. Three children explained that their mother was deceased, and another 3 children reported having limited contact with their father because they were in prison. For example, Child 32 *(7–9yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_kinship)* described how "someone talking about my dad" made him feel mad "because he's in jail" and "I haven't seen him in three years".

A belief that their parents were inconsistent or unreliable (e.g., cancelling or not attending scheduled face-to-face visits; not answering calls or replying to texts or emails) was another barrier to children connecting with and building their relationships with their parents. For example, Child 28 *(10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)*, reported that because her father lived far away, she tried to call him instead "but dad doesn't pick up his phone". Unreliable or inconsistent contact may have negative flow-on effects on the child's wellbeing. For example, Child 2 *(7–9yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)* mentioned that when her father "didn't even show up", it made her feel "sad".

There was also a small number of children who felt that their parent/s had chosen to be absent from their lives. For example, Child 26 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster)* shared "when I was born, my father never actually came to see us…he got married somewhere else…[carer]'s going to teach me how to track him eventually", and Child 35 *(10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_kinship)* explained, "my mum's just got her own life now".

Another recurring barrier mentioned by the children, particularly when discussing connections with siblings, was the limited communication channels available to them – primarily, not having their own phone. For example, Child 41 (*10 + yrs_non-Indigenous_foster*), who identified his brother as an important person in his life, said that he "[doesn't] really get to talk to him because he doesn't have a phone or anything".

3.2.6. Practices that facilitate connection to culture

The 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children who mentioned their culture described a variety of ways they connected to culture, community and/or Country while in OOHC and living with non-Indigenous carers. This included time with family, having cultural elements embedded in the home environment, and engagement in structured cultural activities. Two-thirds ($n = 6$) of the children reported their carers facilitated opportunities for developing and maintaining cultural connections.

3.2.6.1. Time with family. Of the children who discussed their culture, two-thirds (n = 6) lived with at least some of their siblings, expressing how they shared their culture organically on a daily basis through the games they played, their artwork and stories they told. One child *(Ch27_10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)* who was splintered from some siblings, shared how "when we visit each other we normally do paintings or sometimes [sibling] dances". This child also described visiting Country with their family and reported that they felt able to talk with the grandmother, an Elder, "when I feel sad, when I visit her". Two other children also briefly discussed their connection with extended kinship networks.

3.2.6.2. Embedding and supporting culture within the home environment. Despite all children who discussed cultural connection living with a primary carer who was non-Indigenous, some of the children shared examples of how their carers had made active efforts to display cultural artifacts (e.g., artwork and photos of nature) around the home and to provide learning tools such as books about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and maps of First Nations Australia. One child (*Ch39_7–9yrs_Aboriginal_foster*), shared how their carer had created a home environment in which they felt safe and supported to ask questions about their culture, commenting:

> They support me whatever I go through, they help me whenever I need it, they do what I need…When I ask them to like, "I want to learn more about my culture," they'll get straight to it, the cultures.

3.2.6.3. Formal cultural activities. Three children described being part of formal activities, such as dance groups and cultural clubs or excursions, either as direct participants or observers of their siblings. Child 45 *(10 + yrs_Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)* shared: "I used to go to this club…where we go fishing with a spear…native Aboriginal club. There's other Aboriginal painting clubs… And they teached (sic) us how to throw boomerangs."

Four children also mentioned watching, attending or celebrating events for NAIDOC week—a national week of celebration to recognise the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, for Child 28 *(7–9yrs_Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander_foster)*, who identified as Aboriginal but didn't know their family connections or what was meant by the terms, 'clan', 'language group' or 'Elder', NAIDOC was the only mention they made of connecting with their culture.

4. Discussion

The UNCRC holds that children have a right to express their views on matters that impact their life. However, children in OOHC are internationally recognised as a vulnerable group and gatekeepers' concerns about their vulnerability and the sensitive nature of their experiences of abuse, neglect and placement in OOHC can preclude their voices from being heard in research (Powell et al., 2020). To address this gap, we drew on Lundy's (2007) model of participation to guide our study and to provide children with *space*, *voice* and

audience to share their experiences of connection while in OOHC. By sharing their views, we seek to provide evidence to *influence* policy and practice related to family and cultural connection to ensure it is responsive to the needs and wishes of children in OOHC.

This paper has extended prior studies on children's connection to family and culture while in OOHC by providing contemporary data from a large qualitative study of the experiences and perceptions of children aged 4–15 years, currently living in OOHC in Queensland (Australia). Its contribution is a description of children's self-initiated reports of their families and culture, including their experiences of and desires for family-of-origin connection.

While all but 2 children mentioned at least one family member that they did not live with, it was notable that nearly half of our sample did not discuss their parents at all during the interview. Research suggests that children in OOHC experience internal conflict due to divided feelings of loyalty between their foster and birth family (Hassall et al., 2023; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013). It is possible we activated this loyalty conflict by conducting the interviews within their current foster/kinship household, resulting in children feeling unable to discuss their parents or name them as important people in their lives.

However, like previous studies (Cashmore & Taylor, 2017; Huseby-Lie, 2023), the children in our study who mentioned their parent, continued to consider their parents as an important source of emotional support and comfort, despite not living with them. For most of the children in our study, siblings were also recognised as an important source of emotional, practical, and educational support, even when they were not co-placed (McDowall, 2015).

Of those who did discuss family, only a few children spoke of having regular contact (weekly or fortnightly) with parents, despite evidence suggesting that positive parent-child relationships are enhanced by regular weekly contact (Cashmore & Taylor, 2017; Suomi et al., 2023). Children commonly reported having different contact arrangements with different siblings, suggesting increased difficulties for carers in coordinating contact when siblings are placed elsewhere. A small number of children specifically commented that they have no contact at all with parents, siblings or extended family. One child stated having no contact with their parent was their choice. However, for the majority of children with limited or no contact, this caused distress, sadness and jealousy.

Courtney (2000) suggests that older children may experience the absence of birth parents more acutely than very young children, as they have internal working models of their parents which are "rooted in memories" (p. 33). In our study, children identified family-of-origin, most notably parents and siblings, as key actors in important and treasured memories from their past. The literature suggests that children should be supported to renegotiate their relationship with their families in a way that fits with their day-to-day experience of living away from them while in OOHC (Graham & Truscott, 2019). Drawing on the work of Courtney (2000), Graham and Truscott (2019) suggest this can involve supporting children to: "keep in touch with [family] – symbolically or actually; have the opportunity to reminisce; and retain linking objects" (p. 8). Several of the children in our study shared important material objects (e.g., toys, artwork, photographs, gifts) that linked them to and reminded them of their parents and siblings. The importance of such objects to children's sense of identity, security, belonging and continuity of self is recognised within the literature (Watson et al., 2020). So too is the need for professionals to acknowledge the value children ascribe to these objects; to help keep the objects safe; and to encourage children to share stories about their lives through the objects (Watson et al., 2020). However, such work may not be prioritised by practitioners due to competing demands and limited resources (Watson et al., 2020).

Reflecting previous findings (e.g., Kertesz et al., 2022), the children in our study noted several barriers to more regular connection to parents. These included distance and cost of travel, parents not attending visits and being uncontactable, incarcerated or deceased. Whilst children discussed similar barriers to contact with siblings, children in our study also highlighted a lack of communication channels, namely phones, for direct sibling connection. This is important given that almost a third of the children in our study indicated siblings were trusted people that they want to share their experiences with. This raises questions about the extent to which children in OOHC are able to connect with their family members that do not live with them, without the prior approval and/or coordination of contact by adults in their lives. While children should always be supervised in phone or online contact, this needs to be balanced with the agency of the child to reach out to people that are important to them.

Finally, it is of note that of the 20 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in our study, all of whom resided with non-Indigenous carers, half did not mention their culture. Those that did, shared varying levels of cultural knowledge and connection. Krakouer (2023) warns that placement in OOHC, particularly when not living with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander kin, can disrupt children's organic processes of learning culture. The children in our study who were co-placed with or had contact with their siblings explained how this family connection allowed them to organically engage in cultural activities (e.g., storytelling, art and dance). This supports previous findings (McDowall, 2015) which suggest that siblings play an important role in reinforcing children in OOHC's cultural identity. Whilst some of the children described being exposed to cultural artifacts and learning resources regularly *within* their home, for many the cultural connection they described occurred *outside* the home as part of structured activities like 'cultural clubs' or NAIDOC week events. As all children lived with non-Indigenous primary carers, these opportunities were dependent on the willingness of the carer to provide them. Only one child discussed returning to Country.

4.1. Limitations and strengths

A key strength of our study was that it privileged children's voices and provided a child-centric and developmentally appropriate way for children in OOHC to share their experiences and perceptions of connection to family and culture. Our trauma-informed approach to the interviews meant that the children led all discussions about their relationships with people in their lives and we did not prompt them to discuss particular people (e.g., their parents). As such, we may not have systematically captured data about children's family or cultural connections as is possible with other approaches where participants are prompted to provide responses to the same issues or topics. Nevertheless, we feel the strengths of our approach outweigh this limitation by allowing children to speak spontaneously and safely about potentially sensitive and traumatic circumstances.

4.2. Implications for research and practice

Adopting Lundy's (2007) model of participation and a graphic-elicitation approach, allowed children to share their views on people and connections that were important to them while in OOHC. Whilst this paper has focused on children's discussions of their family and culture while in OOHC, in the interviews children also raised important relationships within their OOHC household and community. The importance of these relationships to children's sense of identity and belonging will be explored in a forthcoming paper.

Whilst recognising the need to mitigate the burden on the child arising from repeat interviews, we suggest that longitudinal research with this cohort of children be conducted for two reasons: (1) it is possible that repeated interviews may allow children to develop relationships with the researchers (see Powell et al., 2018) and feel more comfortable sharing information about their families; and (2) to gain further insights from the children who did discuss their families and culture about how these connections are sustained or change over time. Future research must also include children who are placed with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander kin or foster carers in order to investigate similarities and differences in children's reports of cultural identity, knowledge and connection.

The views of children reported on here also have implications for practice and policy. We found that most children in the study viewed their family-of-origin as a source of emotional and practical support and desire more opportunities to connect with them. These findings echo those of other authors (Collings et al., 2020; Healy, Walsh, et al., 2023) who suggest further efforts and resourcing to support continued family connection, including when reunification is not a goal, should be prioritised to support children's relationships with family. We recognise that carers may need a range of emotional and practical support to co-ordinate family contact particularly when it involves contact with siblings placed across multiple households (Collings & Wright, 2022; Healy et al., 2024).

Further training and support for carers to encourage children to keep mementos and discuss memories of their family members should be endorsed. Recent work by Deitz et al. (2024) highlights the potential of digital life story work for storing memorabilia and supporting identity for children in OOHC. Existing strategies integrating online technology, deployed by the Queensland child protection authority, to allow young people to securely store their mementos and memories is a step in this direction.

Additional support for carers to embed organic cultural experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and to provide them with a safe space to ask questions about and to explore their cultural identity is also required. This may involve community-based culturally responsive education, led by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities to develop culturally relevant learning experiences grounded in specific local knowledge and traditions. Support for children to (re) connect with Country, irrespective of their placement location is also needed.

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Ethics approval and compliance with ethical standards

This study received approval from the University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee (2020001937). It also received ethical clearance, from UnitingCare's Ethics Committee (Healy 02092020). The study complied with ethical standards and the conditions outlined in the approval.

Informed consent

All participants provided either written or verbal consent to take part in the study, in accordance with the study's ethical clearance.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jemma Venables: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jenny Povey:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Iryna Kolesnikova:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Kate Thompson:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Madonna Boman:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation. **Juli Richmond:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation. **Karen Healy:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Janeen Baxter:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Isobel Thwaite:** Writing – original draft. **Aariyana Hussain:** Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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