

# Submission for the South Australia Youth Action Plan 2023-2026

*'I was profiled due to culture, I wasn't given the time and space to gain resiliency.'* (Female, 22  
quoted in CREATE, 2023c)

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## About CREATE Foundation

The CREATE Foundation is the national consumer body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. We represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people currently in care, and those who have transitioned from care up to the age of 25. Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential. Our mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care.

## Introduction

CREATE's Foundation welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of South Australia's Youth Action Plan 2023–2026. Although this consultation has a broader scope targeting the youth population in the state, our main concern is improving outcomes for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. In South Australia, according to the latest data released by AIHW, there were 5057 children in out-of-home care in 2021-2022. (AIHW, 2023). Through this submission, we would like to draw attention to the needs and perspectives of this group of young people, so that they may have access to the same levels of positive outcomes in terms of wellbeing, education, safety, positive relationships, access to resources and services, and connection to their culture. The goal is also for young people to have the opportunity to live healthy, fulfilling lives and build successful futures for themselves after leaving care.

The proposed themes in the Youth Action Plan are all very relevant topics for young people with a care experience. We are glad to see that child protection and the out-of-home care sector is included as a main section in this strategic plan, and that it is prioritised and included in broad youth policy planning. The emphasis in the proposed Youth Action Plan structure on reducing the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth and taking into account diversity is likely to have positive outcomes for young people in care, given the high number of First Nation youth in care. At CREATE, we also consider this to be a top priority, and we look forward to seeing a shift in the sector, and a reduction of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in care.


It is also very positive that the Youth Engagement Strategy for young people in care focuses on voice and participation, and that in South Australia there have been more initiatives in this direction, for example with the formation of groups such as "No Capes for Change". (Department for Child Protection SA, 2021a). CREATE is also committed to including the voices of young people in out-of-home care in decision-making processes that concern them. There are different ways through which we collect their opinions and learn from their experiences, which include youth engagement activities, formal research consultations, and through the expertise of our young consultants.

## Child Safety

### **How can the South Australian Government assist young people who are involved with, or are at risk of becoming involved with, the child protection system?**

Child safety should be paramount to the design of all service systems involving children. To ensure equity and equality in the implementation of youth services, the needs and voices of young people in care need to be taken into account in order to make provisions to remove potential barriers.

In fact, young people in care may encounter challenges that prevent them from enjoying equal life opportunities as their peers due to different factors. One of these is the complex trauma they



frequently face before entering care (Fernandez, 2019). Most young people come into out-of-home care (OOHC) as a result of emotional and physical abuse, including family violence, and neglect (AIHW, 2021). Young people may still go through abuse while in care. Recent data shows that 1442 children had been abused while in care between 2020–2021 in Australia (AIHW, 2022). Therefore, child safety is still a concern after entering the child protection system, and strategies to effectively monitor and ensure that young people are safe and not re-traumatised while in care are extremely important. (CREATE, 2023a; CREATE, 2023b)

Furthermore, because of the frequent changes, instabilities, and fragmentation of relationships when there are multiple adults involved in their care, young people have reported feeling like they had no-one they could count on, or who cared for them. This may also lead to difficulties in areas such as health, well-being, education, life skills, training and employment. Frequent changes break down the support systems and may separate young people from people they had meaningful bonds with (CREATE, 2020).

Young people in care do not always have the same level of support from adults as their peers in stable families, which means they may encounter additional difficulties accessing the resources and services they need. When they leave care, they may not have adults to rely on to address their needs (CREATE, 2023a).

Finally, young people in care may have to face stigma, bullying, and discrimination, and low expectations. These issues can also be manifested in the over-representation of First Nations young people in care, and the disconnection from their culture they experience, once they enter the care system.


*“By not supporting me that made me resilient. They neglected a lot of the kids with learning difficulties, I asked for help and by the time they came around to me class was finished or they wouldn’t even get to me. It felt like they would help others before me when I asked first. I was profiled due to culture, I wasn’t given the time and space to gain resiliency. Because we are so profiled in messing up we don’t get looked at and we get stereotyped in to the ‘kids in care’ box.”* (Female, 22 quoted in CREATE, 2023c)

All these risk factors need to be addressed to allow children involved with the child protection system in Australia, and all youth, to be safe, and have equal access to positive life outcomes.

A frequent finding across our consultations and discussions with young people, is that the quality of relationships and connections can make a big difference in most, or all these areas. This includes relationships with carers, peers, caseworkers, teachers, the birth family, siblings, and even pets. Fostering the stability and quality of these relationships is therefore of paramount importance. (CREATE, 2020; CREATE, 2023b). Listening to young people’s voices is crucial to maintaining positive relationships where they feel safe and supported, as well as dealing with situations where they are unsafe. Carers, caseworkers, health staff, educators, and other support figures would need to take the time to get to know children and young people and establish relationships of trust. Good communication skills also are fundamental.

To encourage positive relationships, we recommend that anyone interacting regularly with young people need be trauma-informed and have a good knowledge of the circumstances and needs of youth in care. High quality training and support for carers, educators, caseworkers, health care professionals, among others, is crucial.

The recent *Review of the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* (Department for Child Protection SA, 2021b), *Child Protection Caseworker Summit* and the establishment of two advisory bodies in relation to child protection shows that South Australia is moving in the direction of addressing some of these crucial issues.



While the recent reforms of the care system represent positive steps, we recommend young people's voices be placed at the centre of all systems of care for young people. The implementation of youth strategies needs to prioritise the creation of social environments and placement opportunities where young people can establish stable positive relationships of trust with adults and peers, have the opportunities to express concerns and be safe and protected, and access services and opportunities to grow. Building safe social environments for young people in care also requires active programs and strategies to tackle stigma, racism, and discrimination.

### Transitioning to Independent Living

Effective support for care leavers is extremely important to help young people with an OOHC experience to achieve their full potential. As young people leave care and are expected to live and support themselves independently, they are at risk of poverty, insecurity, homelessness, being involved in the justice systems, and to face long-term negative repercussions for their lives. (McDowall, 2020)

Young people with an OOHC experience are particularly vulnerable as they transition from care and adjust to independent living (AIHW, 2021). As a result of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, and higher levels of disability and potential limitations around support networks, young people leaving care often face compounding barriers to achieving social and economic participation.

A range of studies have shown that young people leaving care experience more disadvantage than their peers in the general population with respect to main pathways to adulthood. They are less likely to graduate from high school or enrol in post-secondary education; they experience greater difficulty securing employment and housing; are more likely to be involved in the justice system; and have a greater incidence of mental health and substance use problems (McDowall, 2020; Stein, 2016). AIHW's OOHC study (2021) shows 56% of young people with an OOHC experience were on income support, which is three times higher than the general population.

For this reason, CREATE strongly advocates for substantial support for care leavers at least until the age of 25.

We welcome the steps taken by the South Australia government in this direction, with programs such as "Stability in Family Based Care Program" and currently the new "Next Steps" program (Department for Child Protection SA, 2022). We recommend expanding these programs in the future to ensure that young people receive financial assistance as well as services to help them achieve goals such as completing their education, secure housing, find employment, learning life skills needed, and being able to have high standards of health. Education regarding how to navigate the health system, including disability supports through NDIS needs to be a priority for our young people leaving care.

CREATE's position is that transition supports should be consistent, equitable, and easily accessible. Implementation and levels of access to transition supports should be closely monitored by the government and transparently reported on. Further, outcomes for young people should be evaluated in ways that meaningfully engage their lived expertise.

Literature suggests that adequate transition support for young people leaving care involves a range of critical elements. These are identified in CREATE's *Transitioning to adulthood from out-of-home-care: A review of the literature* (McDowall, 2022) and include:

- Planning across all life domains;
- Real choices for young people in relation to their housing options, including the option to stay in their current placement;
- Adequate financial supports to cover basic needs;
- Mentoring that includes support with life skills, as well as social and relational needs;

- Priority access to universal services, including health, education, and employment support;
- Supports that connect young people to family and culture, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. (McDowall, 2022, p. 14).

To support implementation of comprehensive and consistent transition supports across all Australian jurisdictions, extended care packages should be reviewed and evaluated to understand the extent to which they deliver these critical elements. Additionally, both state and federal governments should review and enhance supports and allowances to account for the sharply rising cost of living and housing crisis across many Australian cities and regional centres. Recent research in Australia has shown that 30% of the young people with a care experience surveyed, had been homeless at some stage within their first year after leaving care. (McDowall, 2020).

One of the most effective interventions for at-risk youth is to offer a caring and responsible adult role model who can make positive, lasting impressions. Strong social relationships, and ongoing and consistent post-care support, could be a crucial enabler of life stability and help care leavers navigate life challenges (Muir et al., 2019). CREATE Foundation recommends the South Australian Government consider trialling an appropriate mentoring program for young people with a care experience, to support them to achieve the same outcomes as their peers without a care experience.

If young people with an OOHC experience are connected to specifically selected and trained mentors, they will engage in a healthy and sustainable mentoring relationship and are more likely to successfully transition to independence and adulthood. All young people require caring adults to help them develop the resilience that they need to face the challenges of life. The presence of healthy, positive adult relationships will contribute to improved future outcomes.

## Health and Well-being

### How can we help young people to be physically, social, emotionally, and mentally healthy?


Young people in care have the right to the same levels of well-being and access to health care as their peers. Young people's health and well-being can be seen in a holistic way, where physical, emotional, social, cultural aspects are all connected. The *Outcomes Framework* developed by the Child Development Council can be a useful tool to assess the different dimensions, though more disaggregated data would be useful to have a clearer picture of how young people involved in the child protection system are doing compared to their peers (Child Development Council SA, 2019).

Unfortunately, a number of factors specific to the OOHC experience can heavily affect young people's well-being. As shown above, these include both abuse and neglect experiences before entering care, as well as experiences while in care.

Mental health is a concern for a high proportion of young people in care in Australia; research found that 68% of young people with an out-of-home care experience accessed counselling services (McDowall, 2018).

*“Support more and understand that just because stuff happened in the past, [it] still affects us to this day.”* (Young person, First Nations, 16, quoted in CREATE, 2023a)

Furthermore, the way young people access health care services, as well as their health literacy, may be different from their peers. Access to services is also another key health determinant and protective factor. Barriers to accessibility include service wait times and costs; the need for youth-focused mental health services; difficulties accessing Medicare details, obtaining past medical history, and getting permissions (McLean et al., 2020). There also is a need for accountability and monitoring in relation to timely health assessments, which are included in the Standards of Care and



which enable early identification of young people's health and wellbeing needs (McLean et al., 2022; Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2022).

The health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children involved in the child protection system deserve special attention. The experience of First Nations children and their families within this country's child protection system is characterised by an abusive and discriminatory colonial framework (Liddle et al., 2022; SNAICC 2019). Both intergenerational trauma and cultural disconnection may affect the health of young people currently in care.

In order to address these issues and improve well-being for young people in OOHC, CREATE recommends that health assessments and access to services are considered key priorities and made accessible in a timely manner. This includes providing initial health assessments as a mandatory measure; addressing the cost and accessibility of counselling services; and breaking down any other barriers to accessing mental health support (i.e., stigma, discrimination, health-care worker availability). Furthermore, both medical professionals and guardians who contribute to taking care of the child or young person (kin, foster carers, caseworkers, health professionals, school community) should be supported through training and resources to meet these needs, particularly about the childhood trauma that young people in care often go through.

Finally, First Nations health and well-being also needs to be prioritised in a culturally safe manner. The implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Child Placement Principle, as indicated in the recent reform (SNAICC, 2019), is essential and guidance of First Nation bodies in health and well-being matters would be crucial.

CREATE recommends developing strategic plans and frameworks for practice that are responsive to the specific needs of young people in out-of-home care and remove possible barriers for them.


## Education

### How can the South Australian Government improve school and study experiences and outcomes, and post-school pathways?

Education is of paramount importance for young people in care; however, youth policies in South Australia need to address the barriers they face, so that they can achieve success and have employment pathways open afterwards. The barriers that young people in OOHC encounter result in an achievement gap, school drop-out, exclusions from school, difficulties with attendance, and other issues (Chambers & Hunter, 2016; Fernandez, 2019; Clemens et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2017).

During a recent activity with youth in care, our researchers were reminded of the importance of simply *"celebrating young people's [school] attendance when it has been low or they have struggled to attend."* (Female, 20 quoted in CREATE, 2023c).

There are different reasons for this education gap, and despite the difficulties, there are also young people, as we have found through our consultations in South Australia, who do very well and have high levels of satisfaction with their schooling experiences (CREATE, 2022). In South Australia, there are already different initiatives to address this gap. In particular, young people in care have access to *One Plan*, a tailored education plan that recognises young people with a care experience are a priority group. The two main priorities of *One Plan* are inclusion and achievement (Department for Child Protection SA, 2021). Furthermore, young people in care with a First Nations background may also benefit from Aboriginal education programs implemented in the state. (Department for Education SA, 2022). For First Nations learners, in fact, it is also meaningful to have the opportunity to connect with culturally safe learning programs, particularly if the young people have been removed from their culture. It would help to provide First Nations learners with access to Aboriginal Cultural Support plans and workers; to reach out to the kin and community (where possible) of the young person to ensure wrap-around support is made a priority; and to integrate First Nations



learning resources into mainstream classrooms (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture, and languages).

We would recommend involving young people with a care experience in shaping educational reforms and planning, and making special provisions for their needs. Furthermore, these young people would benefit from a deeper and effective cross-collaboration between their carers and the education and child welfare sectors to ensure *One Plan* and Care Team strategies are meaningfully implemented.

Another priority for young people in care would be to make the school a safe haven where young people can find stable, safe, and positive relationships, as well as support. To achieve this, an important step would be to provide training and resources for teachers—particularly trauma-informed practice, and about the context and needs of children and youth involved in the child protection system. A significant proportion of young people in out-of-home care have disabilities and mental health issues, particularly in relation to their histories of complex trauma. Because of these, they frequently need extra support to be able to achieve well at school. There have been positive responses noted through our consultations to individualised education programs, particularly for students with special needs and learning difficulties. They have asked for *“Recognition for the lower achievers and kids with disability. Each individual deserves to be recognized for their achievements not as a whole group setting. Special ed classes to also be recognized for their work.”* (Male, 15 quoted in CREATE, 2023c).

Furthermore, a safe environment can only be achieved by addressing stigma and preventing bullying. Unfortunately, young people in care in South Australia have reported feeling discriminated against, bullied, and not receiving enough academic help due to their perception of being out-of-home care students (CREATE, 2023c).

An important protective factor is the role of carers and educational support at home. Carers could receive resources and support packages to guide them on how to engage young people with their homework and studies, as well as providing stimulation and encouragement.


Young people’s academic results and connection with school environments may suffer due to placement – and school – changes. Therefore, these need to be minimised, and students need support to help transition to a new school when it happens. In all cases, it is important for young people to have a voice and be consulted in decision-making that affects their lives and education.

Finally, care leavers could be better supported to have access to pursue tertiary education. Only a small proportion of care leavers continue their studies, though continuing studies could give them a chance to step out of poverty (McNamara et al., 2019). A recommended measure would be to recognise care leavers as an equity group, so that they could qualify for targeted support, scholarships and accommodation support, and targeted outreach programs, as well as enrolment support and mentorship.

Education is an important part of any young person’s growth. Unlike their peers who can count on their families while completing their studies and figuring out their career paths, young people leaving care have to support themselves from a young age, and education can make an important difference to ensure they can live successful lives away from poverty and insecurity. Thus, it is even more critical that young people in OOHCC’s needs and voices are included in strategic policies and planning for education in South Australia.

## Conclusions

In summary, CREATE recommends ensuring that the voices of young people in out-of-home care are included in all the key areas of the *Action Plan*. We strongly suggest including targeted planning for this group not only in the context of policies concerning child safety, but more broadly when planning youth strategies, such as health and well-being, education, youth engagement activities,



affordable housing, and access to services and resources, to remove any barriers that young people in care may encounter.

The key suggestions in this submission to achieve this are:

- Encouraging stable and high-quality relationships through positive communication skills training and resources for carers, caseworkers, health-care professionals, and other relevant staff in the care system;
- Minimising disruptions and consulting the young person in case of changes to placements, schooling, health care, and other support services;
- Ensuring that children and young people have their voices heard in supportive environments, while accessing services such as child protection and the care system, justice, health care, education, or other youth activities, where they can safely voice their concerns;
- Developing and distributing training, resources, and support for carers on trauma, health literacy, and education;
- Tackling stigma, racism, and discrimination in all youth environments and services;
- Expanding support for care leavers till 25 years of age;
- Improving access to health care for young people in OOHC;
- Strategic planning to reduce the educational gap for young people in OOHC;
- Encouraging access to tertiary education through funding schemes, targeted outreach, enrolment support and mentorship programs;
- Expanding First Nation services and support programs available to young people in OOHC.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the SA Youth Action Plan. We look forward to the release of the document and its implementation. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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