

# Cultural matching in Out-of-Home Care Research Summary

## Background

This research was conducted as a partnership between Macquarie University's Department of Educational Studies, and Settlement Services International (SSI). NSW legislation requires that agencies work to maintain cultural connections for children and young people in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC). The research was designed to produce findings which help government and non-government stakeholders in foster care to develop service systems that maintain cultural identity, for culturally diverse children and young people in care.

## Key Messages

- The research explores how cultural identity - in terms of ethnicity, language and religion - is maintained and supported for children and young people in foster care placements.
- At the time of the research, SSI Multicultural Foster Care (MFC) provided care to more than 130 children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- SSI MFC recruits culturally diverse carers and matches them, where available, with children and young people in care who share cultural identity, language and religion.
- SSI MFC gives attention to matching children with a caseworker or Bicultural Support Worker (BSW) who also share these cultural elements.
- The research gathered qualitative evidence from 17 caseworkers and 25 foster carers with MFC, providing care to children and young people from African, Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese backgrounds in culturally matched and unmatched placements.
- Data was collected through five focus groups and ten semi-structured interviews.
- The data analysis identified three themes which supported cultural maintenance of children in care:
  - **Foster care practices** that maintain cultural identity include: being responsive to cultural identity; being open about cultural differences; providing access to cultural texts and activities; speaking or teaching language; practicing or instruction in religion; maintaining networks with community; providing familiar food; being responsive to social customs.

- **Foster carer attributes** that support cultural maintenance include: commitment to maintain the child's culture; ability to maintain culture in complex care; respect for the child's right to participate in decisions about engagement with their birth culture.
- **Service systems and procedures** that support cultural maintenance include: Cultural matching of the child and carer, caseworker or BSW; well planned and active Cultural Care Plans; balancing cultural and other considerations in placement decisions; foster carer support groups; responding to complexities in the child's cultural identity; access to accurate information on cultural identity.
- The research also identified issues including: the practical advantages of culturally matched placements; some complexities of cultural matching in mixed or hyphenated identities; some challenges of unmatched placements; preserving language skills; supporting cultural maintenance from a very young age; and the importance of contact with birth parents and families.

## Conclusion

This study found that caseworkers and foster carers with MFC maintain and develop the cultural identity of culturally diverse children in care, through a range of practices, service systems and procedures, and building on carer skills and attributes.

Key strategies included: placements where the child is culturally matched with the foster carer; unmatched placements where the child is culturally matched with a caseworker or BSW; and Cultural Care Plans implemented for all culturally diverse children in care.

These practices and systems can inform a framework for foster care agencies caring for culturally diverse children and young people in NSW and other jurisdictions.

## Reference:

Waniganayake, M, Hadley, F, Johnson, M, McMahon, T, Karatasas, K & Mortimer, P. (2017). *Cultural matching in out-of-home care: Maintaining and supporting cultural identity among children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Final Report*. Sydney: Macquarie University.

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