

# Learning from Lived Experience

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In Victoria, there's much to be proud of about the recent changes made to out-of-home and residential care for children.

After many years of lobbying, the age young people can remain in out-of-home care has been raised from 18 to 21. Extending Home Stretch, a program focused on supporting young people to transition into independence and adulthood, will make a real difference to many lives.

Those who advocated for this change should justifiably feel that, although a long time coming, their advocacy has achieved a great outcome for young people in care.

However, true sustainable independence first requires healthy dependence. For the program to achieve positive outcomes for young people, they must first be ready to be independent. They must have had an opportunity to trust safely, to live in a stable environment, heal past trauma, and understand what it means to co-exist with others. Unfortunately for young people in out-of-home care, this is rarely their experience.

We have known for the past 25 years that adverse childhood experiences constitute a type of complex trauma and that the neurobiological impacts arising from experiences of abuse and extreme neglect cause persistent neurobiological, physiological, and psychological impacts.

Due to the impact of this trauma, these children are often unable to be successfully cared for in home-based care, frequently experiencing upwards of 20 or 30 placement breakdowns and eventually finding their way into standard residential

care. It is therefore unsurprising that not long after leaving care a substantial number of these young people experience homelessness.

As a senior practitioner who has worked in the child and family welfare sector for more than 48 years, I have seen and been part of many pilot programs and new initiatives to counter the impact of trauma on the lives of young people in care.

All of these programs were well intended and many showed positive outcomes, yet most ceased due to a lack of funding. It's important we don't lose these learnings. It's important that we, as a system, continue to use evidence-informed practice to improve the lives of all young people in care.

From the vantage point of my career, spanning both Child Protection and out-of-home care services, it is clear that no single program can provide a truly reparative care experience for the 10,000 young people living in out-of-home care each year.

What is needed is a consistent, continuum of care underpinned by trauma-informed practices. Beginning with early intervention with at-risk families and cascading through out-of-home care, family reunification and leaving care, the care journey must reflect and respond to the individual needs of each young person. Each stage is equally as important as the one that proceeds it. Harm is cumulative and compounding, and young people need to know that we won't give up on them.

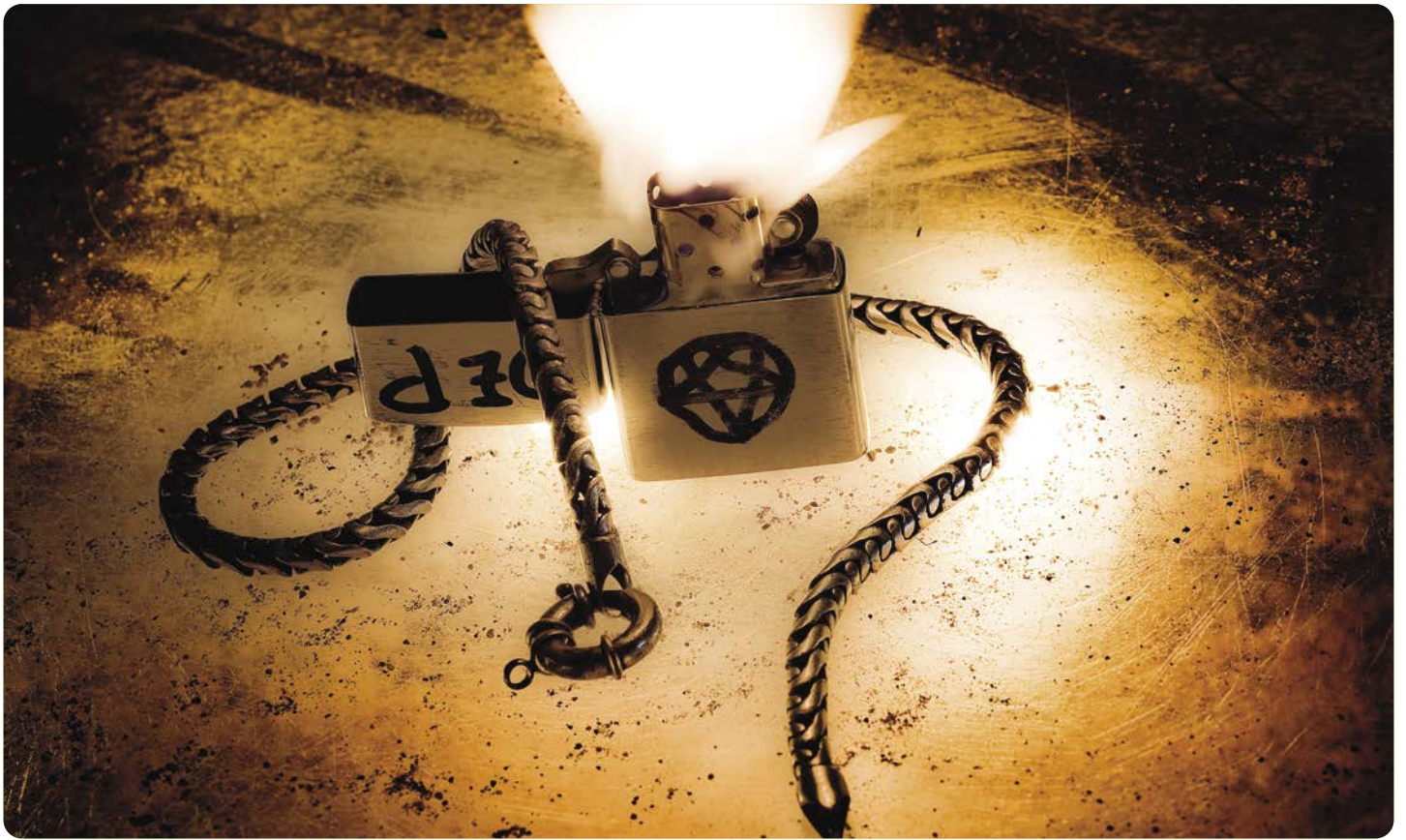
It was through my work at Uniting Vic.Tas that I first met Barry. Like most young people in residential care, his journey was long with many stops

along the way, each shaping his view of the world, and himself. It wasn't long before we became aware of his interest and talent for writing and his ability to represent the issues that young people in out-of-home care grapple with because of their trauma.

Residential care is now seen as a harmful and undesirable option, to be avoided at all costs, but it doesn't have to be this way. For Barry, and many young people like him, residential care can be an opportunity to learn to trust, heal, and develop healthy strategies which are critical to becoming an independent young adult. But to achieve this, young people need a committed and unified care team, a safe home environment with therapeutic interventions, and sufficient time.

These are the fundamentals of therapeutic residential care. Sadly, in Victoria, there is only capacity for 172 young people to have this experience, at any one time. The remaining 292 young people are placed in standard or what are called 'RP3' homes. They are starved of the time in a stable environment required for healing. This is due to poor placement matching and multiple placement breakdowns which mean young people are moved around from home to home, unable to form the relationships and receive the care they need.

As a practitioner involved in the development of the first therapeutic model in 2007, it's heartbreaking to know that with adequate funding all young people in care would have the same opportunity as Barry. It has been his experience of therapeutic residential care in a stable home that has been so effective in assisting him to be able to feel safe enough to begin expressing his past



Lighter (CON) by Justin

Image courtesy of Stefaan Bruce-Truglio

abusive experiences and start on a pathway to healing and change.

The importance of adopting a therapeutic approach to care is well documented by leading clinical experts, the evaluations of early pilot programs, and the success of similar models around the world. A therapeutic approach creates sufficient structure, safety, and predictability for healing. Most importantly, it increases the chance of a more optimistic life trajectory. Isn't that an opportunity all young people deserve?

If residential care was funded to operate at the therapeutic placement level necessary to genuine support healing and establishment of strong foundations for life, young people would not reach the time for them to leave care in a state of un-readiness for independence.

For leaving care programs to be successful, a young person must have had the opportunity to test and learn independence. Reaching a chronological age is not representative of maturity or readiness. The ability to drive a car or manage your finances are critical life skills, but these things alone are not indicators of independence.

As already said, to be truly independent, we must first be healthily dependent. We must learn to trust safely and co-exist with others, which is only possible when complex trauma has been resolved and healing has commenced.

It's unrealistic to expect the attainment of real dependence if a young person's care journey has meant many years of moving through multiple underfunded and unstable out-of-home care placements. In the absence of this capacity for independence, placements fail, and we know that many young people experience homelessness. Extending time in care, known as Home Stretch, has been a great achievement. However, this alone, without a focus on the best support for young people while they are in care, is not enough.

The challenges are not limited to residential care. Young people in other forms of out-of-home care such as foster care and kinship care also need to be prepared for independence and while the level of support for them may differ, the critical component remains the same: a safe, reliable, and continuous relationship with a trusted adult who cares for them 'as any good parent would'.

Genuine connection is the key and that takes time. In sharing his story, Barry acknowledges the role trusted adults have played in his healing. His care team, his former Assistant Principal, people in his life that have not just said they care, but demonstrated it. If this is what Barry can personally achieve in six months of living in a stable therapeutic environment, I am confident that when his time comes to live independently, he will be ready. There are no short cuts to healing.

While the age for young people to remain in out-of-home care has been raised, this alone does not guarantee successful safety and stability in adulthood. That outcome relies on the quality of what has come before. It's the lived experience of sustained, meaningful, and therapeutic care and support, whether in foster care or residential care, that determines and develops the capacity for a successful transition to an independent adult life.

Barry expresses his intent to be the first person in his family not to waste his life. What a compelling tribute to his healing. We, as a system, have it in our power to give him the opportunity and the means to do this. Let us make sure that we do.