2025
Newsletter

A newsletter for participants in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

Message from the Deputy Secretary

Paul O'Reilly, DCJ

Our team is leading the current reform into the statutory child protection and out-of-home care system. I worked as a youth worker before I joined the Department 27 years ago where I have worked across housing, homelessness, disability, early intervention, prevention, child protection, out-of-home care and youth justice.

The current system reform program seeks to work with young people, families and carers with lived experience of the system. It is the best way to develop effective solutions that people truly need.

People tell us that the current system is not working for kids in so many cases. Kids in care often tell us they don't get the support when they need it in areas like staying in contact with their families, school, health, entering the workforce and housing. Part of the reform is acknowledging what is not working and hearing directly from clients, researchers, oversight bodies and advocacy organisations.

Through this reform we will provide much better support to carers, parents and families, by maintaining better connections all the way through the care process. That means working differently with carers, mums, dads and families so that kids maintain important relationships through their childhood and into adulthood.

We are committed to working with NSW Health and the Department of Education on a more integrated system and partnering with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) to change the way we work. We want the statutory system to play an important but smaller role, and we acknowledge that ACCOs are best placed to care for Aboriginal children and families.

The POCLS is one of the few longitudinal studies in the world that has followed a cohort of children since they first entered out-of-home care. The POCLS has seen the infant cohort transition from primary school to high school and has collected first-hand accounts from 18-25 year olds about their experiences, wellbeing and support needs after leaving care. Client voices collected through the POCLS are invaluable for this reform so that decisions to shift policy, practice and programs to improve the outcomes of children, families and communities can be grounded in high quality evidence.

Thank you to all the children, young people, carers and parents who have been part of the POCLS. I am optimistic we can reform the system to improve outcomes for children, families and communities through co-design, evidence-based solutions, a strength based approach and accountability.

What's on in 2026?

We will continue to analyse the data, publish reports and present at conferences to share the knowledge gained through this research. Analysts will be focussed on answering the reform team's priority policy questions.

We are close to the end of the Study!

Thank you for being part of this Study. We are hoping to conduct one more round of interviews which will see the infant cohort reach 15-17 years of age and interview more young people who have now left care. We hope you can take part and share this milestone with us in 2026-2027.

Please let us know your new contact details by phoning the POCLS researchers on **1800 997 960** or emailing Pathways@dcj.nsw.gov.au

NSW GOVERNMENT

What is the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study?

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is the first large-scale longitudinal study of children and young people who have experienced out-of-home care in Australia. The aim of the POCLS is to provide significant new knowledge that will inform policy to improve the outcomes and experiences of children, young people and their families. The POCLS is conducted by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) with expert advice from a consortium of Australian and international academic researchers and the POCLS Aboriginal Governance Panel.

For more information about this Study, please visit the POCLS webpage:

www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study.html

How is the Study tracking?

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6	Interview for 18-25 year olds
June 2011-August 2013	April 2013 - March 2015	October 2014-July 2016	May 2017-November 2018	May 2019-December 2020	May 2023-August 2024	July-December 2025*
1,285 interviews	**1,200** interviews	**1,033** interviews	**961** interviews	**862** interviews	**543** interviews	**120** interviews

* the interviews may continue for a little longer until we have interviewed everyone interested.

We hope you will join in the 7th interview in 2026-2027. With your help we can end the Study on a high note!

Organisations supporting the Study

The CREATE Foundation represents the voices of children and young people with a care experience.

Phone **(02) 9267 1999**
Email create@create.org.au

Carers for Kids NSW goal is to see that all children receive the care they deserve, and all carers receive the support and training they need.

Phone **1300 782 975**

AbSec is the peak organisation for Aboriginal children and families in NSW, particularly those impacted by the child protection system. AbSec also chairs the Study's Aboriginal Governance Panel.

Phone **(02) 9559 5299**
Email admin@absec.org.au

DCJ's Youth Consult for Change is a group of young people who give feedback on projects and issues that affect children and young people in care.

Email
youthconsultforchange@dcj.nsw.gov.au

Support for young people 18-25 years who have been in care

In 2025, the POCLS interviewed young people aged 18-25 years old and asked them about their experiences since leaving care and the support they received or needed. This provides valuable information to improve aftercare planning, supports and services.

The data collected is stored securely and published in a way that ensures that no person can be identified.

If you need assistance contact the DCJ Care Leavers Line
P: 1800 994 686. E: careleavers@dcj.nsw.gov.au

POCLS website has information about the Study's interview for 18-25 year olds www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study/information-for-participants/for-young-adults

Useful contacts and information for Study participants www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/about-us/facsiar/pocls/information-for-participants/useful-contacts-aftercare.pdf

If you want to make a complaint about your experiences in care www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/about-us/facsiar/pocls/information-for-participants/How-to-make-a-report-or-complaint-about-your-experiences-in-care.pdf

NSW Government Youth Hub www.nsw.gov.au/living-nsw/young-people/leaving-care

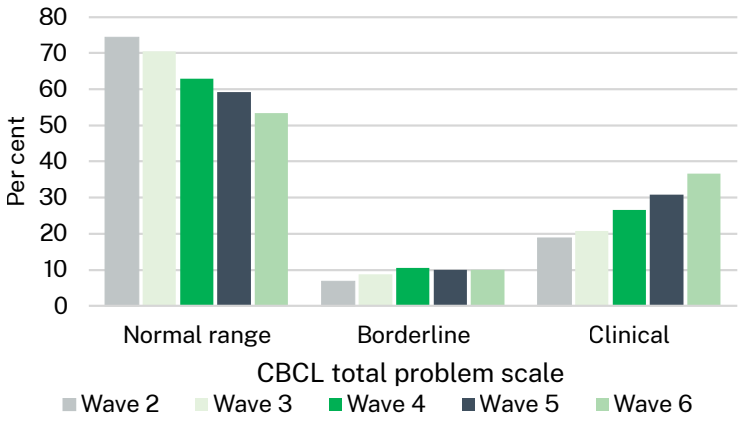
DCJ website - planning for your future and support after leaving care www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/children-and-families/out-of-home-care/children-in-out-of-home-care/planning-for-your-future-and-support-after-care

Children's developmental outcomes

At every interview the child's current caregiver reported on the child's socio-emotional wellbeing and children completed direct assessments to measure their cognitive ability (verbal and non-verbal). Below are the results.

Children's socio emotional wellbeing over time

The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) is used to assess behavioural and emotional problems in children as reported by their caregiver to identify those that may benefit from additional support.



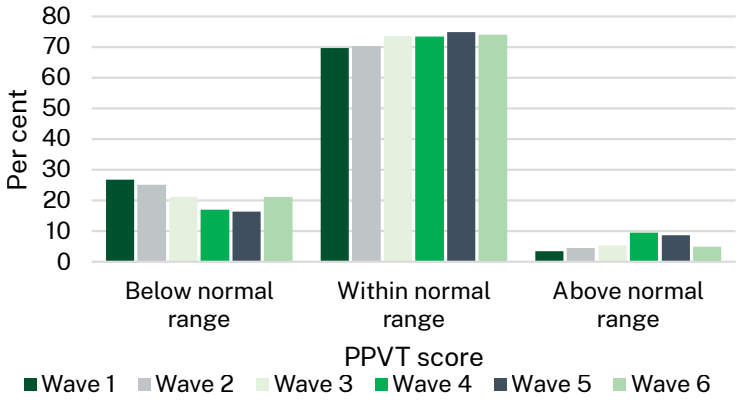
We found that children in the Study are less likely to be in the normal range for socio-emotional wellbeing over time.

By Wave 6, **36.7% of children scored in the clinical range** of the CBCL Total Problem Scale which is **2.5 times higher** than found in an Australian sample survey of the general population.

Children in the 'clinical range' should receive professional culturally appropriate assessments for wellbeing to determine the professional support and monitoring needed.

Children's cognitive learning over time: verbal ability

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test is used to measure receptive vocabulary in children 3-17 years old. The interviewer shows the child a set of 4 pictures on a page and asks them to point to the picture that matches the word spoken by the interviewer.



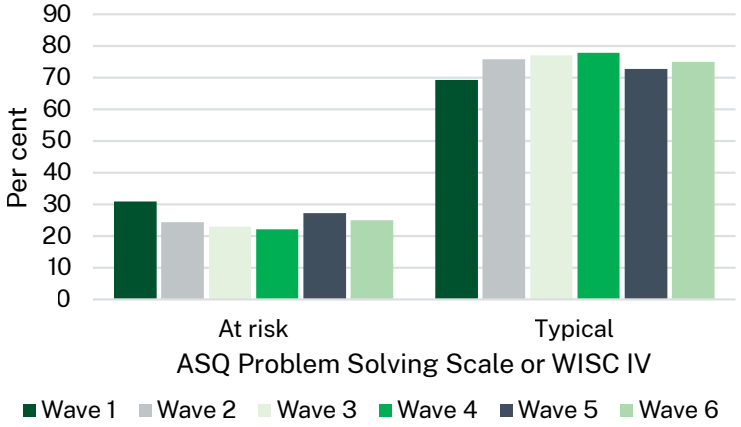
We found that children's verbal ability has remained relatively stable over time and most children in the Study are in the normal range.

At Wave 6, **21.1% of children were below the normal range** which is higher than 15% found in the sample of the general population.

Children in the 'below normal range' should receive professional culturally appropriate assessments for cognitive development to determine the professional support and monitoring needed.

Children's cognitive learning over time: non-verbal ability

The Ages and Stages Questionnaire Problem Solving Scale or the Matrix Reasoning Test (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV) are used to measure non-verbal ability and logical reasoning/ problem solving for children 6-16 years old. For the Matrix Reasoning Test the interviewer shows the child a set of pictures with 1 missing square and asks them to choose from 5 options the picture that best fits the missing square.



We found that children's non-verbal ability has remained relatively stable over time and most children in the Study are in the typical range.

At Wave 6, **24.9% of children were in the 'at risk' range** which is higher than the 15% found in the sample of the general population.

Children in the 'at risk' range should receive professional culturally appropriate assessments for cognitive development to determine appropriate services and support and monitoring needed.

POCLS findings show child wellbeing in out-of-home care is positively associated with:

- Culturally sensitive developmental assessments for all children and young people on entry to out-of-home care, access to appropriate services, and routine ongoing monitoring.
- Understanding how early risk and protective factors impact longer-term wellbeing.
- Placement stability.
- Effective and tailored support for carers, satisfaction in their caring role, and carer psychological wellbeing.
- Children and young people having emotionally responsive carers with a warm parenting style.
- Children and young people in relative/kinship care and placements with siblings.
- Cultural connections for Aboriginal children and young people through socialising with their birth communities.
- Family time with both or at least one parent and siblings.
- Educational engagement and performance.
- Providing clear information to children and young people, parents and carers.

POCLS publications and resources

POCLS Snapshot 2025 *What does ten years of data tell us about children in NSW*

Summarises the world class evidence base created with client voices, academics, researchers, policy and practice colleagues. The publications and resources cover a range of topics to inform decision making to support children and families. The Snapshot is available on the POCLS webpage: www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/about-us/facsiar/pocls/pocls-publications/POCLS-snapshot.pdf.

International Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect Special Issue on the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

www.sciencedirect.com/journal/child-abuse-and-neglect/vol/149/suppl/C

List of POCLS research reports, technical reports, and resources

Are available to download from the webpage www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study/poclspublications

Information on past and future research webinars

Hosted by DCJ are available on the webpage www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/facsiar-research-seminars

POCLS dashboards

Are available on the POCLS webpage, allowing users to explore key POCLS de-identified aggregated data www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study/interactive-dashboards

For more information visit the POCLS webpage

www.dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study

Ethics approvals for the Study

- University of NSW (HC210985)
- Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW (766/10)
- State Education Research Application Process (SERAP) NSW Department of Education (2012250)
- NSW Population and Health Services Research Ethics Committee (HREC/14/CIPHS/74 Cancer Institute NSW: 2014/12/570)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (EO2019-1-406).

Translating POCLS evidence into practice

Placement stability in focus

Briony Foster,
Executive Director, High Cost Emergency Arrangements Executive Lead

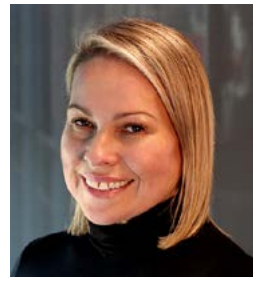
The POCLS findings provide critical evidence to shape policy and practice responses aimed at improving placement stability for children and young people in out-of-home care.

Placement stability in out-of-home care influences children and young people's physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive/learning ability over time. Placement stability increases the probability of being in the typical range on socio-emotional, cognitive (non-verbal) and gross and fine motor development.

A number of other factors were also found to be associated with positive development including placement type, carer wellbeing/psychological distress levels, carers' satisfaction with their caring role and carer support. These POCLS findings have:

- informed the high cost emergency care review.
- informed and guided the design of the Placement Stability Project implementation in November 2024.
- highlighted the negative impact of placement instability on socio-emotional and motor development, shaping key messaging and training across all DCJ districts.
- identified risk factors for placement breakdown (such as prior placement changes), leading to early intervention strategies including enhanced carer training and support.
- demonstrated that caregiver satisfaction reduces placement breakdown, driving policy and practice changes to strengthen carer support and feedback mechanisms.

Aboriginal children's connection to family and culture, and restoration, in focus



Bianca Jarrett,
Executive Director, Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes

Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes has been a partner in the POCLS since its inception and has played an active role in the POCLS Scientific Working Group, Evidence to Action Working Group and broader collaborative governance efforts.

The POCLS findings provide evidence to reinforce that Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care with strong connection to family and culture have better outcomes. This has informed the:

- design of the Active Efforts policy which places a strong emphasis on family-centred practice, and cultural planning that prioritises connection to family and culture.
- creation of new Aboriginal Family Time workers in Child Protection Practice to focus on ensuring Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care have consistent and regular contact with their families to increase the prospects of restoration.

The POCLS has also provided critical evidence to inform key initiatives and system reform, including the restoration of Aboriginal children. In particular, findings from this research have led to a Ministerial commitment to establish an Aboriginal Restoration Taskforce, which will focus on increasing the number of Aboriginal children and young people being restored to parents or family. DCJ is working in partnership with the lead researcher, Associate Professor BJ Newton, who is scoping the development of an Aboriginal restoration model.

9th World Congress on Family Law & Children's Rights, Cambridge, UK

Professor Judy Cashmore from the University of Sydney presented findings from the POCLS at the 9th World Congress on Family Law & Children's Rights held at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom on the dynamics and effects of children's relationships with carers and birth family while in out-of-home care.

The Study found that co-placing siblings, and fostering warm supportive relationships with carers and birth family, can greatly improve children's socio-emotional wellbeing.

Relative/kinship care does make a difference to children's relationships with their family.

The Study offers recommendations for practitioners and policymakers to improve positive relationships and stronger support systems for children while in care.

Cambridge University, UK

POCLS Aboriginal-Led or Partnered Research

Ten grants were awarded to Aboriginal-led or partnered research projects to address priority policy questions focussed on improving the lives of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. The successful projects were selected by a Steering Group chaired by the DCJ Deputy Secretary Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes and will be completed early in 2026.

Policy area	Lead researcher	Research focus
Health		**Professor Sandra Eades**, Rowden White Chair and Assoc Dean - Indigenous, Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, University of Melbourne. Supporting the mental health of Aboriginal children in care and leaving care.
		**Associate Professor Natalie Strobel**, Centre for Improving Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, Edith Cowan University. Describing primary health care utilisation and medication uptake amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care.
		**Adjunct Associate Professor Emily Hindman**, Faculty of Health, Southern Cross University. Improve understandings of the factors influencing the neurodevelopmental trajectory and poor outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people who have entered out-of-home care.
Cultural and relational permanence		**Elder Ted Fields,** Uraah Innovations and Cultural Services, University of New South Wales. Exploring the cultural health and care gap among Aboriginal children and young people in the out-of-home care system.
		**Dr Wendy Hermeston**, ALIVE National Centre for Mental Health Research Translation, Melbourne Medical School, University of Melbourne. Cultural continuity and stability for Aboriginal children and young people.
Carers		**Associate Professor BJ Newton**, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Understanding the potential impact of carers on the experiences and care outcomes of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.
Child protection reporting & removal		**Associate Professor BJ Newton**, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Exploring how parental and family characteristics influences child protection reporting and removal, and out-of-home care experiences for Aboriginal children under two years of age.
Restoration		**Associate Professor Natalie Strobel**, Centre for Improving Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, Edith Cowan University. Developing profiles to support the restoration of Aboriginal children to their families.
Contact with the criminal justice system		**Dr Phillipa Evans**, School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales. Exploring the experiences of Aboriginal girls that go missing from out-of-home care then have contact with the criminal justice system.
Data ecosystem		**Professor Marcia Langton**, Indigenous Studies Unit, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. Configuring an Indigenous data ecosystem for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in NSW. Social and cultural factors that influence Aboriginal outcomes guided by Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Message from the Chief Executive Officer, AbSec

I was a member of the Steering Group that selected the projects listed above. Aboriginal-led or partnered research projects within the POCLS are crucial. They help us understand the factors that influence the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people and identify the supports needed to ensure they are flourishing in society. It is imperative that the findings are not static but dynamic—fuelling policies and practices that honour our children and young people's rights to thrive within their culture and community bonds.

John Leha