



Navigating grief and loss: The impact of placement transitions on foster families

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The Grief & Loss Project



Literature review

Carer Survey N= 103

Interviews with carers N=17
& adult children of carers N=5

Focus groups with
MacKillop FC professionals N = 9

Concepts of loss and grief



Role ambiguity

Ambiguous loss

Disenfranchised grief



Carer experiences of placement transitions



- ❁ Carers know they are expected to provide a loving relationship for foster children and then be ready to relinquish them.
- ❁ Some attachments are significant
- ❁ Placement transitions are almost always difficult

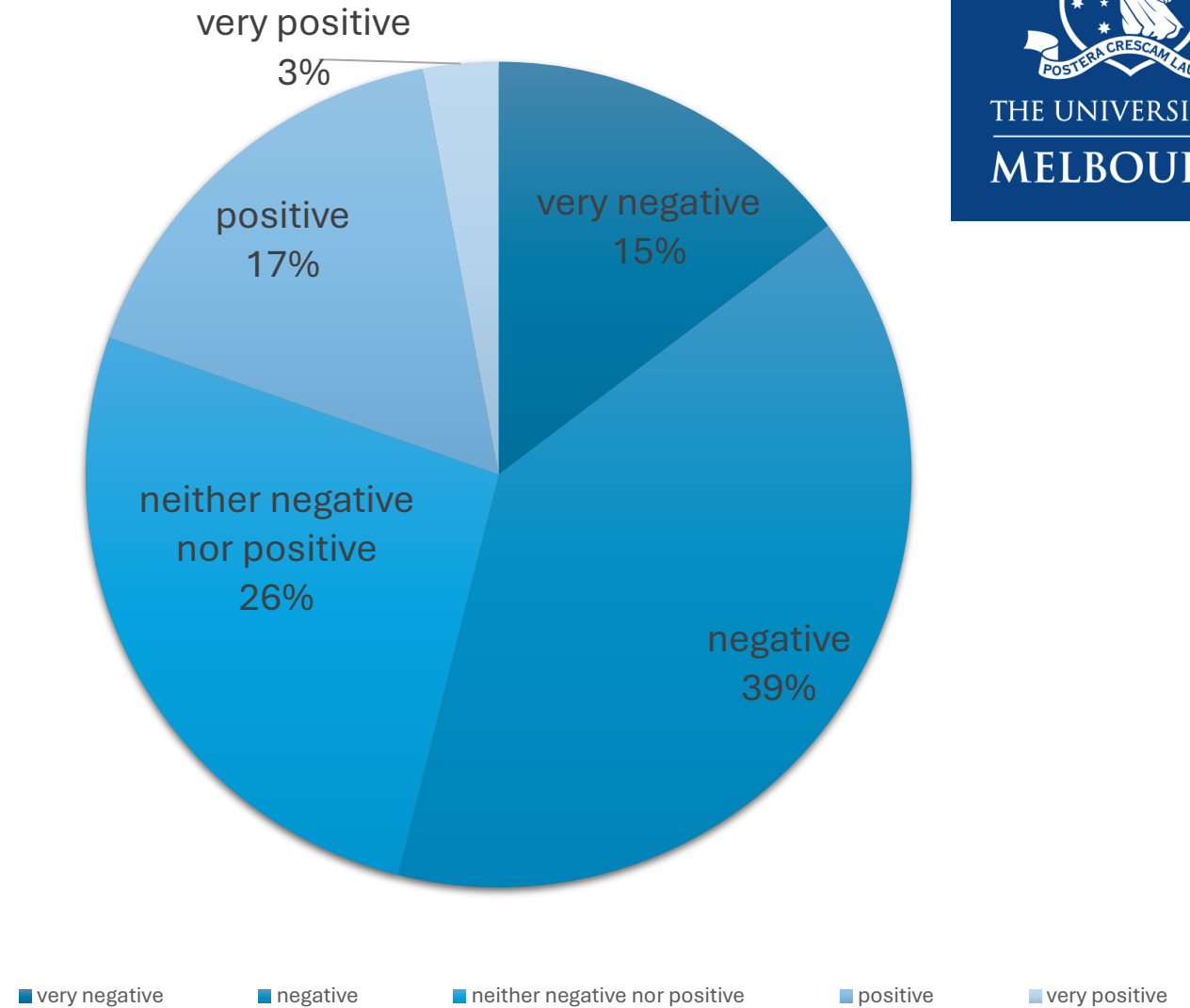


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Carer Survey

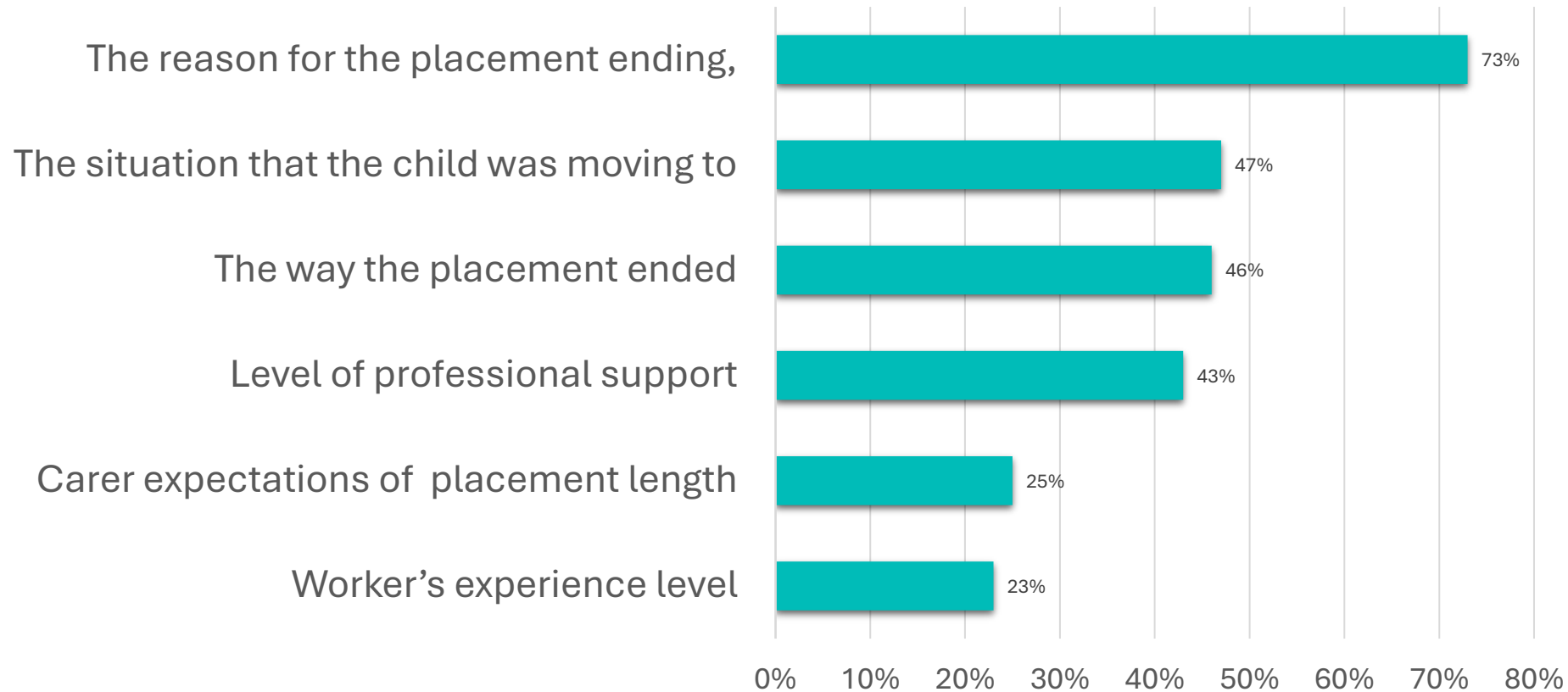
Impact of children leaving placement



Carer Survey



What made the experience difficult?



Carers feel deeply connected – “Living and breathing together”



It was harder than I thought, if I'm honest. I didn't realise... I knew that I loved her, and I knew that it was going to be hard, but it was a lot harder than I even imagined it could be. You know it was never permanent, because that's what fostering is... Yeah, the heart-wrenching...



Carers feel many different things when placements end

- Individual nature of grief
- Variables include:
 - relationship with child,
 - length of placement,
 - systems issues,
 - way / reason placement ends,
 - where the child is going.
- Pressure to appear competent





Coping with grief and loss – managing painful feelings



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Experience helps

It's that grieving process of packing everything away. I know mentally it's for the next baby, we're getting ready for the next baby, but you still grieve when that baby leaves. It's like anything, you're packing away and it's the end of that journey and it's sad. It's empty arms.



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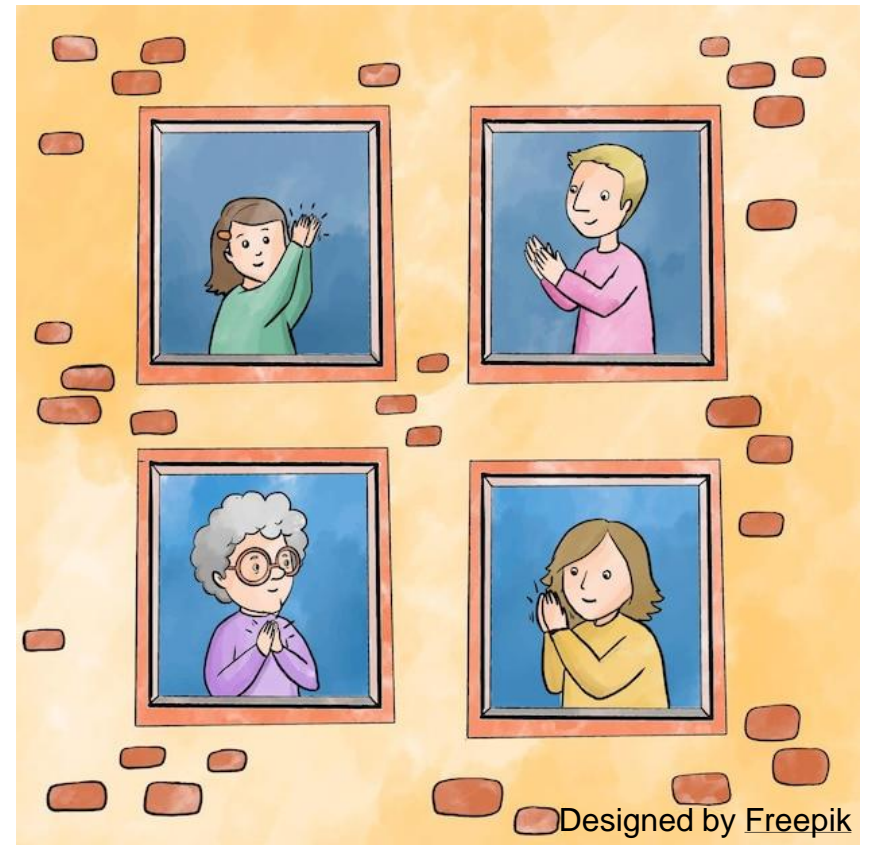
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Managing painful feelings

☼ Staying connected:

- Staying in contact with children and young people
- Staying informed about children's welfare
- Keeping the memories alive through photos and mementos

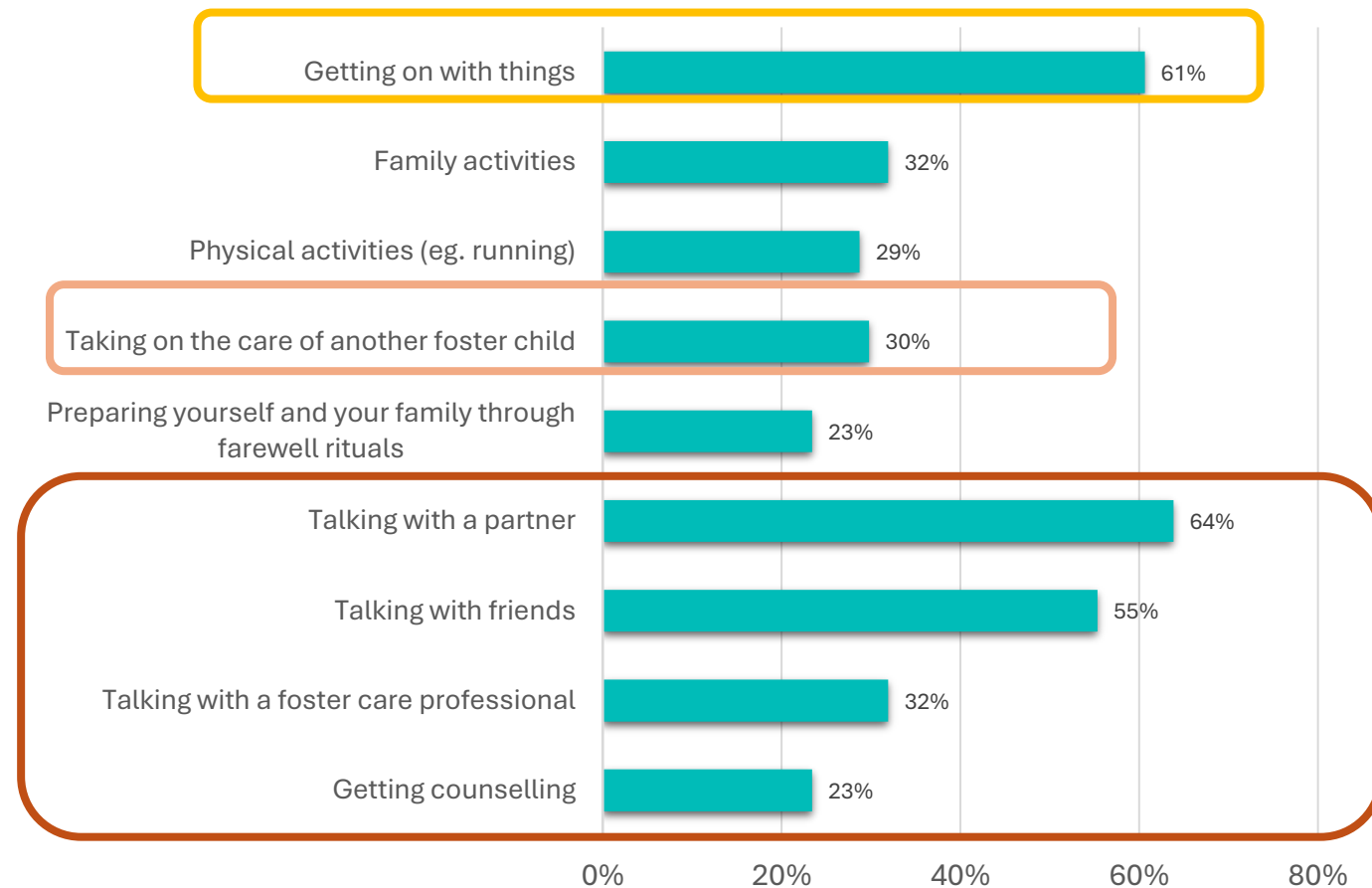
☼ Reconnecting with normal life outside fostering



Managing painful feelings



- Keeping busy
- Taking time to reflect and regroup
- Reconnecting with normal life outside fostering
- Talking and debriefing



“Preparing our hearts” for placement transitions



- Pre-Accreditation Training
- Online resources
- Experiential Learning
- Coaching
- Planning the end of a placement



Biological Children of Carers



- ❁ Children are part of the foster family care team
- ❁ Children's experiences are individual
- ❁ Most carers believed they understand their children and are best placed to support them
- ❁ Children may hide their feelings from their parents
- ❁ Children want information / training / debriefing too
- ❁ Sometimes carers prioritise their own needs over their children's.
- ❁ Professionals need to consult with children too



Tailored support from professionals in the context of authentic relationships



- ❁ A listening ear
- ❁ Practical help with packing up a child's room and transporting their belongings
- ❁ flowers / food / hobby-related gifts
- ❁ A personal memento, such as a framed drawing done by the child leaving, or a photo
- ❁ Delayed debriefing for carers who need time or space
- ❁ Knowing when a placement transition doesn't need a full debrief
- ❁ Checking the welfare of all family members affected



MacKillop Family Services commissioned this research and has been responsive to the findings.

“

It must hurt each time a child leaves. It's like a part of you is gone ... we need to acknowledge that just because the placement ended badly doesn't mean that there's no sadness around it. ... You know, in terms of really meaningful grief and loss, ... We do need to listen to what they have to say. We need to be guided by them. If they've going to be seen truly as our partners, we have to treat them as that.

Thank you to MacKillop carer families for helping with the research.

