



Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

The artist is a young person who grew up in care.

"The banner shows many pathways through the care system with a carer or caseworker acting as a guide, ultimately leading to independence for every young person. Whether we live with family or strangers, study, work, or just try our best, the paths we choose and are guided through in our youth are what we use to prepare ourselves for the happiest adulthood we can achieve" Billy Black

Children's relationships in out-of-home care

Professor Judy Cashmore and Dr Alan Taylor

Research Centre for Children & Families



We acknowledge the tradition of
custodianship and law of the Country on
which the University of Sydney campuses
stand. We pay our respects to those who
have cared and continue to care for
country.

Tree of Knowledge
pokerwork on kangaroo skin
Lynette Riley, 2010

Children's relationships with their family and with their carers

To what extent do children maintain contact with their birth family and kinship network?

Children's socio-emotional well-being and their relationships with their birth family and kinship network

Managing problems – managing transitions

The importance of 'belonging' - someone who cares AND siblings

Who is important in children's lives?

Their relationships ... their choices

Positive relationship/s with at least one family member

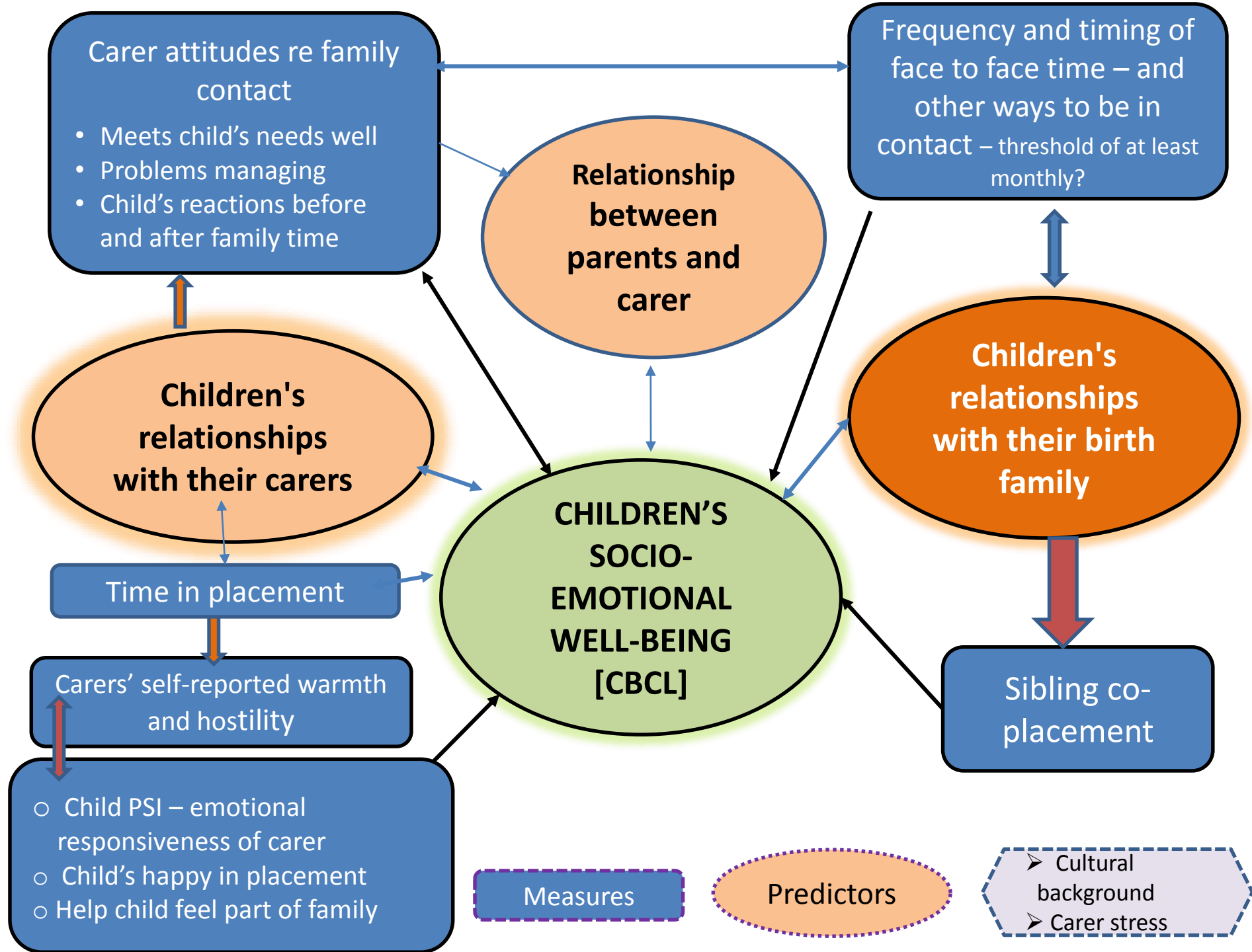
Supportive carer/s and other adults, friends, supportive caseworker

Leaving Care study

• Best predictors of how well young people faring 4-5 years after leaving care were:

- ⑩ number of supportive people they had around them and
- ⑩ having had somewhere they could call 'home' /someone who loved them
- ⑩ a stable and secure placement

Summative, not a zero-sum game



Consistent findings... What we knew/expected?

Children in **relative/kin care** *cf* children in **foster care:**

have more frequent face to face time (at least monthly) with parents, siblings, and with their grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins they were not living with

had contact with **more** family members across all waves

more likely to be living with siblings

more likely to have a good relationship with family members

Children more likely to have more frequent – at least monthly – face to face time with **siblings** than with other family members

Contact with neither parent – 10% to 20% by wave

Consistent findings... What we knew/ expected?

Fathers are less likely to have contact with their children but it seems to be positive when it occurs – to some extent a selection effect but ... may also indicate that **more effort is needed to engage fathers.**

Surprising: Fathers were more likely to have **unsupervised** contact than mothers were – much more so when children in relative / kinship care – with their carers more positive re children's reactions than foster carers.

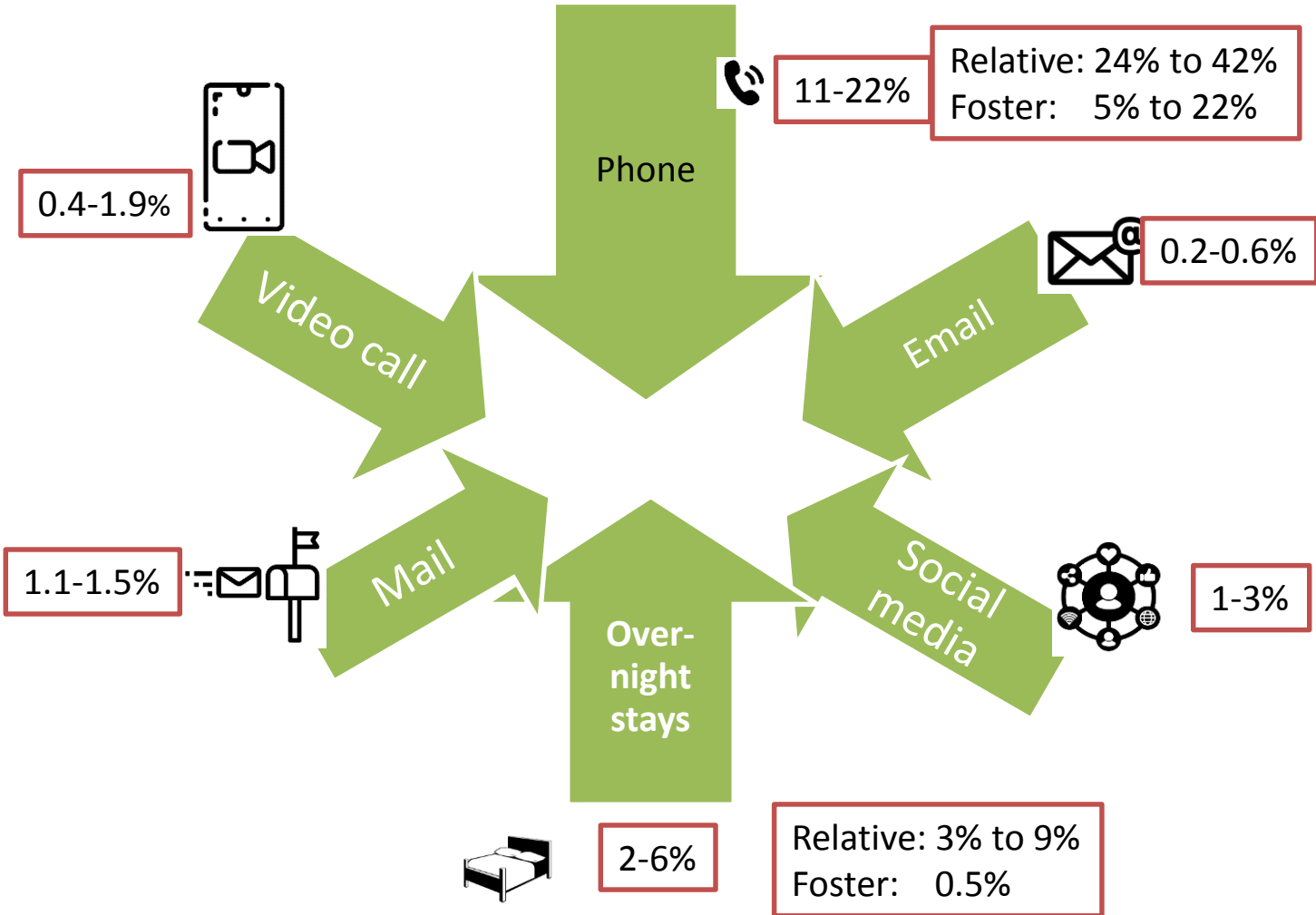
Possible interpretations and implications:

Invisibility of fathers in child welfare work; complex families

Fewer fathers with contact –selection – safety issue?

But relatives (paternal?)

Other means of 'contact' with parents and siblings: MINIMAL – for practice and policy





Carers' concerns about contact

The most common problems **across first 3 waves** were:

- Parents cancelling or not 'showing up'
- Parents' behaviour problematic – kin > foster carers
- **Adverse impact on the child** – foster > kin carers
 - * *Mentioned by 1 in 3 to 1 in 4 carers*
- **Hostility between birth parent/s and carer** – more in kinship care:
 - Kin – 15% to 11% (w1 – 3) cf foster care – 4% to 6% (w1 – 3)
- Time and distance: 10 – 18% (w1 – 3)
- Very few birth parents or children were reported to **not** want contact
- **Significant effects predicting higher CBCL scores**

Carers' perception of family time

- 80% and 90% of carers indicated that contact was meeting the child's needs 'very well' or 'fairly well', **with the exception of foster carers of Aboriginal children**
- More relative/kin carers (as well as foster carers) indicated that the child needed **more frequent or consistent time** with family members than wanted less frequent time with their mother and father, and particularly with siblings.
- Carers' reports of the extent to which contact was meeting the child's needs for maintaining family relationships and the quality of those relationships were strongly and consistently associated with the *frequency of face to face time*.
- **Not surprising**.. selection effect but ... **possible feedback loop** ie more contact, more engagement, fewer problems

Contact and children's socio-emotional development (CBCL scores)

Children who had contact with *both* or *at least one parent* had better socio-emotional wellbeing (ie lower CBCL problem scores) than those who had contact with *neither* parent.

Children living with their siblings in the care household had significantly *lower* problems scores than those who were not, whether or not they had contact with siblings outside it.

Children in relative/kin had significantly *lower* CBCL total and externalising problem scores than children in foster care.

Children whose carers said contact was meeting the needs of the children and not having an adverse impact on them had significantly lower CBCL scores.

Contact and children's socio-emotional development (CBCL)

The more emotionally responsive children rated their carers to be, the lower their CBCL internalising scores as reported by their carers.

Children who indicated they were very happy living in their current home also had lower externalising CBCL scores.

Carers' self-reported warmth and hostile parenting style were significant predictors of children's CBCL scores.



Policy and practice considerations

- **Summative** – children thrive when surrounded by people who love and care about them
- Attention to fathers and grandparents
- **Family finding** – extensive – culturally appropriate esp CALD and Aboriginal children
- **Co-placement with siblings** – as long as it is safe and wanted.
- **Alternatives to face-to-face time** – to support/options
- **Care plans** – sensitive to what works, age appropriate, flexible, children's views
- **How do children react to contact** esp F2F
- **Asking children if they are happy there...** and with birth family time



Policy and practice considerations

- **Appropriate, safe contact for children** with birth family members **is emotionally challenging** for children, birth parents and carers and does *not* just happen.
- Supporting parents, family and carers → **managing concerns and problems**
 - to mitigate the difficulties of frayed relationships, and
 - the cost and burden of travel, and
 - taking place in comfortable, congenial locations.
- **Involving carers in face-to-face visits?** appears to be associated with better outcomes but selection effect? And needs to be supported until all parties are comfortable with the arrangements
 - **Pay-off** in terms of the security of the placement and children's socio-emotional wellbeing.