

*As Eye See It*

National Report 2011-12

As

see it.

An exhibition of black and white  
photographs taken by children and  
young people living in Out of Home Care

## Acknowledgements

All the children and young people who so honestly shared their experiences through their words and photographs.

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*As Eye, See It*

**National Report 2011–12**



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Lucinda *The Right Path in Life*

# Introduction

*As Eye See It* is a black and white photographic project for children and young people living in Out of Home Care (foster care, kinship care and residential care). Young people are provided with cameras and asked to take pictures of things that are important to them. They are asked to select five, from the photos they've taken, and to provide a sixth photograph of their right eye, close up. In addition to the photographs, each young person is asked to write a screed describing the photographs, explaining what they are trying to say with their images, or talking more generally about what is important in their world. This collection of photographs and written pieces is then launched at a public exhibition to display the work of the young people, raising awareness about Out of Home Care and providing an insight into the worlds of those who live in it.



Katie, *Irish Shamrock*

# Background

In 2008 staff at Salvation Army Westcare in Victoria identified a need to provide young people living in Out of Home Care with an opportunity to express what is important to them and what it is like being in care.

Westcare then approached the Victorian Office of the Child Safety Commissioner (now the Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria) with a proposal to provide children and young people living in Out of Home Care an opportunity to participate in a photographic exhibition.

Bernie Geary, the Child Safety Commissioner (now the Principal Commissioner), personally supported the proposal as a way of:

- allowing young people to express how they see their life and what is important to them through the lens of a camera;
- enabling young people's voices to be heard through the use of a powerful medium such as photography; and
- bringing about greater public understanding about children's experiences in care.

In February 2009, the black and white photographs of 76 young people from 10 Out of Home Care provider agencies, CREATE Foundation and the Victorian Department of Human Services were exhibited at Federation Square in the heart of Melbourne.

The project was a success on many fronts. It proved a great example of cross-sector collaboration; it enabled the voices of some of our most marginalised young people to be heard in a public forum; it provided an activity that built on the connections between staff, carers and young people; and it communicated messages about the experience of care that had never before been heard so clearly.



Jasmine, *The Nature of Feet*





# *As Eye See It* 2011/2012

The success of the 2009 project led the Project Steering Committee to investigate the potential for a national event in 2011. Lauren Oliver (Berry Street), Jim Oommen (Commission for Children and Young People) and Peter Annesley (Westcare) presented the project proposal to the Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians, and *As Eye See It* photography projects and exhibitions have now been held in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Tasmania, and Western Australia.

This report has been compiled using the images and words from children and young people in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Tasmania. Data from other states was not available for analysis.

Together, participants number 128<sup>1</sup> and while not all children and young people indicated their age, those that did show a range of between six and eighteen years old. The gender of participants is not known, nor is the nature of their care experience, unless they chose to write about it.

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<sup>1</sup> The breakdown of participant numbers is: NT – 5; NSW – 50; ACT – 29; and Tas – 44.

# Reading the messages from children and young people

In 2009 a full evaluation and analysis of the Victorian project was undertaken following the exhibition. Although surveys were used to gain feedback about the project process, the messages in the images and written words of participants could only be interpreted by the report writers. This methodology is fraught with limitations and risks of misinterpretation.

In the planning process for the 2011 project a methodology was developed with the intention of enabling the young photographers to provide a deeper understanding of their images and words, thus avoiding interpretation through an adult 'lens'. The methodology asked children and young people to 'tag' their photos with a subject, the emotions the image raised for them and the strength of that emotion. All efforts were made to keep the process as simple as possible to avoid complicating the otherwise straightforward project.

With a handful of exceptions the tagging process worked well in Victoria where participating organisations had previous experience with the project and were thus able to integrate this new step.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, it proved challenging to coordinate in states and territories outside Victoria. As a result this report provides an overview of the themes and messages that have been interpreted through studying the words and pictures provided by all participants.

All efforts have been made to interpret images according to the words used by participants. Nevertheless, we cannot guarantee that we have understood all the messages as they were intended by the children and young people.



Chris, NT VIPP Abseil Trip, 2011

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<sup>2</sup> The full Victorian report provides an in-depth analysis of themes and messages from that state, based on tagging data, and can be obtained at <http://www.ccyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/publications/research.htm>

# Executive summary

As is always the case when reviewing the inspiring work of the young people who participate in *As Eye See It*, it is challenging to break the themes and messages into discrete categories and to communicate the weight of significance that is apparent in the words and images they produce. In 2009 this was done by aligning the messages with the Victorian Charter for Children in Out of Home Care. In the Victorian report for 2011 it was done using a tagging system, loosely based on that same set of sixteen charter rights.

Whilst an exploration of young people's rights, aligned with the respective rights frameworks in each state/territory, might be beneficial, collectively it seems more respectful to analyse the messages as they are articulated. Therefore, this report endeavours to articulate those messages under three main headings that reflect the frequency with which they are mentioned: Primary Themes, Secondary Themes and Additional Messages. In this way it has also been possible to discuss the context in which messages are raised and the connected themes that cross through several different areas.

It is interesting to note, that while no 'new' themes were raised that had not been seen in the 2009 Victorian project, some elements were stronger than the previous exhibition. Specifically the role of religion and spirituality was articulated by more children and young people than has been noted before, and the importance of books and reading was raised by several participants as a positive element in their lives.

As has been the case in all *As Eye See It* projects, the vast majority of written words and images reflected a positive experience. More often than not any negative feelings were expressed alongside positive

experiences, such as enjoying being connected to family, but feeling sad that they don't see them very often.

## Primary themes

The themes mentioned by the greatest number of young people and featuring strongly in images were:

### Animals and pets

Caring for, feeling loved by and feeling safe because of pets. Having fun with them, feeling a sense of home and family because of them. This is a persistent theme across all *As Eye See It* projects since inception.

### Family, in all its forms

Biological family, foster family, siblings. The connection with, or lack thereof, and the joy at feeling safe and valued within a family.

### Memories

As a way of forming identity. Positive and negative memories of childhood.

### A sense of home

Fostered by the presence of pets, having a room of one's own, being with siblings, feeling like you 'belong' and having a sense of being in control.

### Important places

Those that evoke memories, provide peace and calm, connect with a sense of home and safety. Natural environments and the outdoors.

## Safety

A sense of safety that comes from having familiar things around you: toys, books, belongings. Pets provide a feeling of safety, stability and security in a placement.

## Fun and recreation

Sports, travel, pets, books, friends, music, technology — a range of interests and activities.

## Achievement

Academic and personal, or sporting. A sense of purpose and connection to community. Participation in projects like *As Eye See It*.

## The future

Hopes, dreams, goals. Education, career, positive life, opportunities, fame, success and having an impact on community.

## Secondary themes

Themes and messages mentioned by some young people were:

- Being heard
- Health and wellbeing
- Technology
- Aboriginal culture
- Culture, religion and spirituality

## Additional messages

These messages were mentioned by one or two young people. While they don't represent a collective feeling, it is important to note that for some young people they are important in their overall experience:

- Stigma
- Life's journey
- Support
- Freedom and independence
- Life Skills
- Creativity
- Role Models

Overall these messages might be seen as largely unsurprising. They might even be considered 'normal' in the context of an adolescent's life. However, among them there are various messages that stand out as themes that could only be so clearly articulated by children and young people for whom their importance has emerged through their absence.

This collective voice, coupled with the striking visual element that *As Eye See It* offers, provides us with a unique opportunity to understand the impact of our policies and practice literally 'through the lens' of those directly affected by our work. In this sense the themes and messages that emerge from *As Eye See It* should be seen as a call to action — an opportunity to review our policy and practice and to genuinely hear the voices of the young people with whom we work.

Every second year we ask children and young people to creatively share their lives with us, and each time they do so generously. Thus the onus is on the service providers to respond with respect and similar generosity.





*Talitha, Strong, Bright and Beautiful*

# Themes and messages

In the 2009 *As Eye See It* Victorian report, themes and messages identified through analysis of the images and words from young participants were presented in relation to the Victorian Charter for Children in Out of Home Care. Without prompting, many of the messages naturally seemed to fall under one or more of the sixteen rights expressed in the Charter.

In reviewing the themes and messages contained in works from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Tasmania as part of the 2011/12 project, categorisation under a Victorian charter is clearly less relevant. In addition, it was felt that categorising the work of these young people into an expression of their rights in action would not necessarily do justice to the richness of the information they have shared.

Instead, you will find below an analysis of their work broken into Primary Themes (those raised multiple times, by multiple participants, in multiple contexts); Secondary Themes (those raised by a few young people in different ways); and Additional Messages (those raised by one or two young people). There are frequent overlaps between themes and messages and no single one sits in isolation. Every effort has been made to articulate these overlaps and identify the context in which themes are raised.

These themes and messages, expressed, as they are, through images and written words, are a rich and exciting form of feedback from the young people in our programs and services. As such they should be honoured and respected for the fact that they are born of

experience and honesty and the fact that they come, in many cases, from a very personal place in each participant's life. As guardians and decision-makers in the lives of these children and young people it is our responsibility to respond with respect and to understand these messages as a 'call to action'. They offer a unique opportunity to review policy and practice through the collective lens of the children and young people we care for.



Giovann, Toys

# Primary themes

## Animals and pets

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*"Ratz is my dog. This photo makes me feel loved."*

Robbie, 11, NSW

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The key role played by the presence of animals, in particular pets, has been a primary theme throughout the life of the *As Eye See It* project. It has been raised by participants in each year, and through both images and words. This is just as true of the images and words from ACT, NSW, NT and Tas in this 2011/12 project.

What is striking is the context in which young people speak of their pets and/or their connection to animals. They are mentioned as members of the family, as the primary factor that provides a young person with a sense of home, feelings of safety, being loved and a feeling of general happiness.

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*"Animals mean everything to me. I can talk to them and they won't talk back, they listen, they don't judge and they love you for you."*

Brooke, age unknown, Tas

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## Family, in all its forms

Family members are mentioned and represented collectively and individually throughout the work of the young people. While some are

very clear in defining the nature of the family to which they refer it is difficult in some cases to be sure whether a young person is referring to biological family or foster family members.

There are mixed emotions expressed in the written work when talking about family. Some refer to missing their family, being held back from them and not having as much contact as they would like to have.

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*"When I see my family I feel very happy, but also frustrated that I don't get to see them a lot."*

Danielle, age unknown, NSW

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Others make very clear statements about feeling supported by family and feeling a sense of happiness as well as understanding the value of a family that accepts them for who they are; a family that they feel has earned the right to be called 'family'.

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*"My foster family, are not my 'foster' family or guardians at all. They do everything a true family does, one bound by flesh and bone. They have made me the person I am today, and without them, I wouldn't be who I am now ... We ARE family, just differently bound from others."*

Angel, 16, NSW

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Interestingly, a handful of young people in this collection of photographs and words mentioned the role of social media in enabling them to maintain contact with family and friends. Several also expressed the role of trinkets, gifts, photographs and symbols in enabling them to feel a connection to their family or to remind them of their family.

Family was also raised in association with a sense of belonging and a context in which young people feel they can be heard.

## Memories

The theme of memories came up in several written works and was often tied in with images of places: houses, parks, natural spaces.

Mention of memories was largely positive and generally included a reflection on times when family was together, or the young person was having fun, engaging with their culture or participating in shared activities or other activities that felt positive.

In some cases, while the memory itself was positive, the evoking of the memory also caused some sadness due to the fact that life was no longer the same:

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*"This was the house I grew up in ... this was the one place that my family was one, when we were all together, living in the innocence of childhood."*

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Kiara, 16, ACT

This same young person captures the importance of memories in forming a sense of identity, which is also referenced alongside other themes:

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*"The tree in this photo is the foundation of my childhood, I grew up climbing this tree and there are many memories that I hold dear, and this tree is in most of them."*

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Kiara, 16, ACT

## A sense of home

Many of the other themes mentioned throughout this document are shown to be linked with giving young people a sense of home. Pets and animals play a key role, as does family, particularly the presence of siblings (foster and biological). Multiple young people made reference to their bedroom as a space that enables them to feel 'at home'. Some also mentioned stability and safety as factors.

Conversely, a couple of young people made specific mention of the factors that prevent them from feeling at home. One young person's written work implied that she is, in fact, the biological child in a family that fosters other children. She felt that the conflict between her parents and her foster sister made her feel like her home isn't a home. Another young woman described the impact of having little control:

Photo right: Pushkar, *Door to freedom*



TIX

EXIT



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*"I do not get to control who knows certain things about me, and sometimes that stops me from feeling 'at home' where I live."*

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Lisa, 14, NSW

### Important places

The role of 'places' in evoking and enabling young people to reflect on memories is mentioned above; however, the context in which places are mentioned and the images that contained places said a great deal more.

Nature and natural environments featured heavily in images. Trees, parks, the sky and other outdoor images indicated that natural environments play a role in young people's lives. Broadly they linked these images to their wellbeing in terms of space to exercise, locations that give them space to think, reflect, relax and meditate. They also wrote about these places in relation to fun, connection to family and a sense of freedom.

Other places that were not related to the natural environment tended to be shown in images of houses and bedrooms, indicating a connection to the locations that feature in their sense of home and security.

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*"This picture of the sun setting over the road means a lot to me because it is telling us that a new day is coming and to be prepared for what lies ahead."*

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Chris, age unknown, NT

### Safety

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*"Teddy makes me safe. I love teddy. She has been with me all my life. Wherever I go, she goes."*

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Crystal, 10, ACT

The things that represent and evoke a sense of safety among the young people who participated range from toys, books and belongings, to the feeling of acceptance within a family or friendship group.

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*"I used to share a room with my sisters and now I am in care I sleep alone and I get scared, my night light and teddies help me."*

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Kayla, Tas

Young people also mentioned the role of pets, and that having a home makes them feel safe.

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*"My home gives me shelter and protects me. I like to feel safe."*

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Giovann, 8, NSW

## Fun and recreation

An array of different images and words were linked to fun and recreation. Some of the most frequently mentioned were happiness, the importance of books and reading, the involvement of family and the creation of memories through recreational activities and fun.

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*"This photo is about having fun with my family on holidays. The most exciting holiday was to America and going to Legoland."*

Haydo, 13, ACT

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Young people also wrote about and took photographs of sporting activities, travel, pets, play, creativity, exploring interests, playing musical instruments and the role of technology in terms of games, social networking and using the internet.

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*"I took this photo because I love computer games. My favourite game is Dark Life 3 Evolution."*

Cameron, age unknown, NT

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## Achievement

Achievement was linked by various young people to education, having a sense of purpose, being connected to community, being challenged to overcome obstacles, and growing.

It was also linked to an understanding of what young people felt they were good at and how that shapes their identity. In some cases the achievements were as simple as baking a cake. In other cases they were about facing fears.

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*"Abseiling — This is my class on my year 11 integrated learning camp this changed my life the way I look at cliff faces now before I was really afraid and now I'm not as much."*

Chris, age unknown, NT

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Some young people even referenced their participation in *As Eye See It* as an achievement:

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*"It made me feel happy when I took these pictures and happy to see that I have achieved something like this ... I am proud."*

Brooke, 13, NSW

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## The future

In every *As Eye See It* project we have seen children and young people express their dreams and aspirations for the future. These are often powerful statements about determination and hope. The children and young people from ACT, NSW, NT, and Tas are no different.

They express hope for a good life and happiness, but they also specifically dream of getting their driver's licence, finishing their education, or going on to higher education. Some wish for fame and success in a sporting or artistic field, while others just want to reach people and have an impact on their community.

In some of the written words young people showed a mature understanding of life as a journey. One even quoted something a teacher had told them: "It's not where you're going; it's how you get there."

While most of the hopes and dreams expressed for the future were based in concepts over which children and young people have a certain level of control, one in particular strikes to the heart of the lack of control over their life journey that many young people in care experience:

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*"Now I am finally home with Mum and Simon where I always wanted to be. I want the court to say I can live here forever."*

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Ben, 12, NSW



Ben, *Untitled*



# Secondary themes

## Being heard

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*"When I was presented with the opportunity to take photographs and exhibit them I lunged at the idea that individuals would get to see my work from my perspective."*

Andrew, 18, NSW

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The theme of being heard also included some indications of how children and young people feel when they are not being heard. There were elements of identity formation and feeling valued in what young people wrote about the importance of being heard. Some linked the action of self-expression to their art and craft activities, while others noted the positive impact of being in a family context in which they felt heard.

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*"[My foster carers] make me feel loved and respected because they listen to what I say and take it into consideration for decisions in relation to my life."*

Justin, 11, NSW

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At the negative end of the scale one young person noted that not being heard has an impact on their mental health and their self-image.

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*"Not being heard or having my say meant I developed negative thoughts towards myself and others which led to depression."*

Jessica, 17, ACT

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Participation was also raised by some and could be linked to being heard, specifically the ability to participate in their community and/or family.

## Technology

The importance of technology in the lives of children and young people was raised both through images and through their written work. It was linked to entertainment, education and a way of staying connected to family and friends.

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*"My phone is my life. It has pictures of memories. I can text family, friends, play games when I am travelling."*

Jasmine, 13, NSW

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Young people mentioned gaming, social networking and doing research and schoolwork in their written words. In their images they showed game consoles, written lists of the technology they use, their phones, TV screens, keyboards and friends playing on computers.

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*"My laptop is the best thing ever! It helps me with a variety of things like homework/projects, to watch movies, listen to music, read and play games ... I don't know what I'd do without it!"*

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Chloe, 13, NSW

## Health and wellbeing

Sport and physical activity featured heavily in both written work referring to wellbeing, and in photographs, which included images of football ovals, young people playing football, soccer equipment, horse riding, dance and other physical pursuits.

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*"I love to dance and dancing makes me feel good."*

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Carlatina, age unknown, Tas

Other activities linked to wellbeing included eating healthily and meditating.

Where wellbeing was raised young people showed a strong understanding of what contributes to their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. One very strong theme that emerged was that of reading and the role of books, which young people saw as a form of escapism and learning.

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*"[The State Library] is my chill place — it's always quiet so I can relax with a book ... I go there to do my own thing and think sometimes ... it's just a library but if you take notice you can learn different stuff."*

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Jake, age unknown, Tas

## Aboriginal culture

Connection to Aboriginal culture was raised by a few young people. They referred to creating artworks, pride in their culture and excitement in connecting with their culture through art and music.

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*"This photo is my Aboriginal flag that I painted on the wall at my school. This represents me as I am Aboriginal. This photo makes me feel very happy."*

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Mathew, 15, NSW

In previous years, we have noted that there are very few references to Aboriginal culture. This may be the result of low numbers of Aboriginal young people participating, but it may also reflect a lack of connection with Aboriginal culture for those who do participate. From the images and words alone it is very difficult to define and thus poses an opportunity for further development.

Photo left: Lucinda, *Standing Tall and Strong*





## Culture, religion and spirituality

Several young people mentioned the role of spirituality, religion, tradition and culture.

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*"I love reading the Bible because it tells me a lot of good things."*

Sia, 13, ACT

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Spirituality, religion and culture are mentioned in the context of providing guidance, education, support and a sense of calm.

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*"My stones are used for meditation and healing ... I have been brought up with many different cultures but I must say that this whole healing and stones and stuff would have to be my most favourite."*

Arizona, 14, NSW

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Jamie, *Where I am now*



# Additional messages

Many of the themes and messages overlap. In some cases there are aspects of their lives that young people mentioned that, while having a connection to the above, also merit being mentioned separately.

## Stigma

Some mention was made of the impact of stigma attached to being in care and how that can negatively affect a young person's ability to find acceptance and a sense of belonging.

## Life's journey

As with the expressions of hope for the future, some young people made specific mention of an idea of 'life's journey', which they see as containing challenges alongside good times. In some cases they related this specifically to the journey in Out of Home Care, which they feel can sometimes have more ups and downs than the lives of others.

## Support

Recognition of the role of agencies and of CREATE Foundation in providing support was expressed by some young people in a positive light.

## Freedom and independence

The ability to drive and have access to nature and open spaces was mentioned as factors that enable young people to feel free and independent.

## Life skills

Reference was made to life skills such as driving, cooking and engaging with the community.

## Creativity

Creativity in the form of art, music and dance was mentioned as an important pastime and activity by some young people. In some cases this was about the ability to express themselves, in other cases it was a meditative tool and in some cases it was a link to their culture.

## Role models

While the importance of role models is implied in the value that many of the young people applied to the significant adults and friends in their lives there was specific mention of a celebrity role model (who also featured in the images). In articulating her admiration, Arizona, 14 (NSW), clearly expresses the power of a strong role model in the life of a young person:

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*"I get up every morning and look at her and I am determined that I am going to reach all my goals today."*

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# Conclusion

There are significant overlaps between the themes and messages in this report and those revealed through the Victorian data:

- The importance of animals and pets;
- A sense of safety and stability;
- Having fun;
- The things that enable a young person to feel 'at home'.

While it is of interest to note these common themes, perhaps even more interesting is to begin to pick apart exactly what they mean and how their importance can be reflected in our policy and practice.

It is significant to note that the four themes mentioned above each play a significant role in enabling the other — pets were indicated as a factor in feeling safe and 'at home'; feeling safe makes it more likely that a young person will benefit from fun activities; a home feels like a home if it is a place where a young person feels safe and stable; etc.

As is so often the case with *As Eye See It*, the themes and messages raised by the work of the young participants are not entirely surprising. In many ways they are symbolic of the things that one might expect to comprise elements of a typical childhood or adolescent experience — such as family, friends, pets and fun.

Perhaps what distinguishes the responses from young people who have lived in Out of Home Care is the addition of other themes. These include: safety; stigma; the conscious articulation of the role of memories; the need for a sense of 'home'; and the development of 'life skills'. These might be themes in the lives of any young person, but their role and inclusion would likely be more subconscious for those living outside the statutory system.

Through their creativity, honesty and willingness to share their experience with us these young participants from ACT, NSW, NT, Tas and WA offer us an opportunity to reflect on the way in which we provide care and enable healing for those most vulnerable in our communities.

Photo left: Melissa, *Shadow at Play*



