

Transforming Children's Care Webinar: Companion Resource

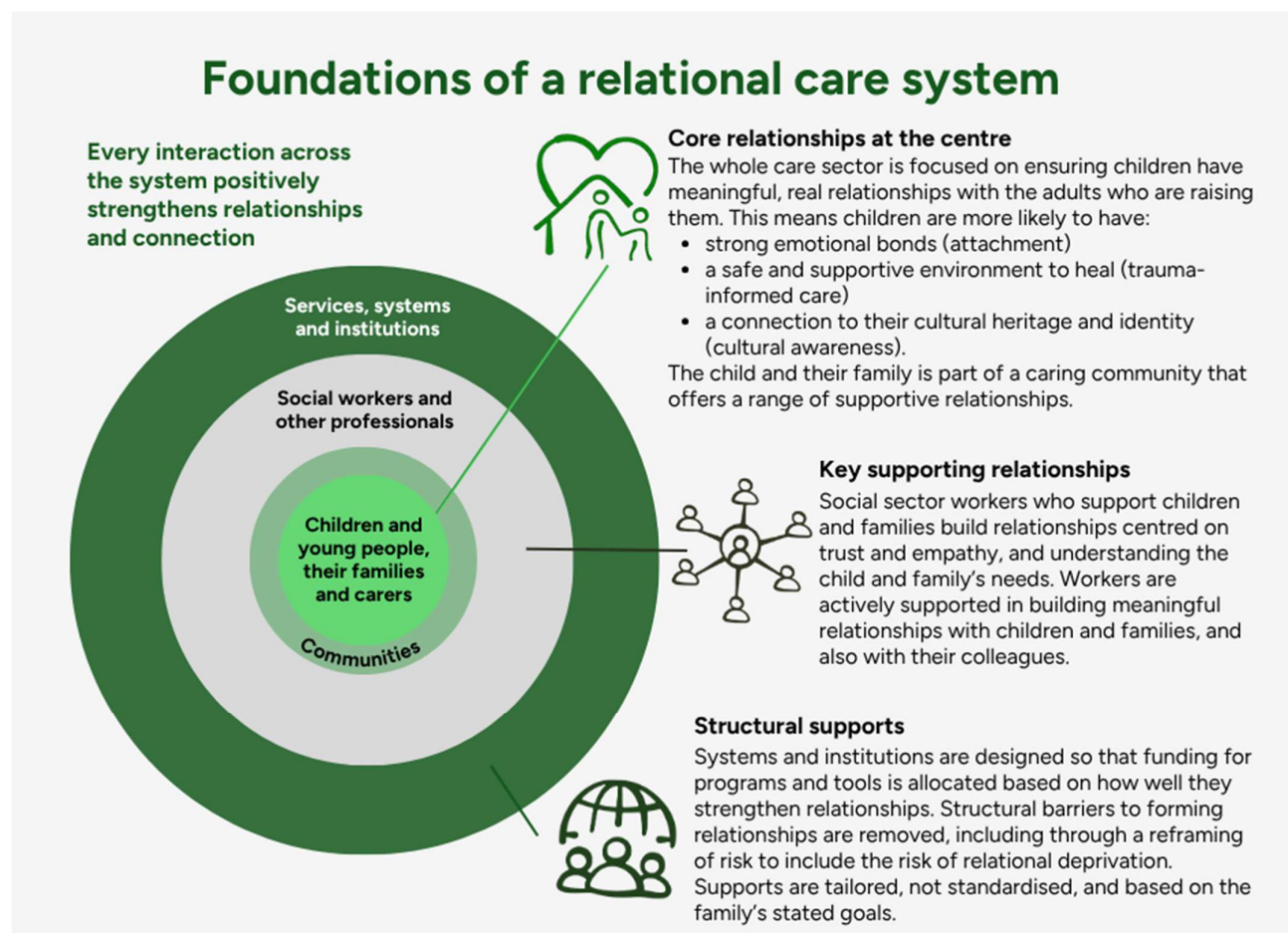
Many countries have built their child protection systems on bureaucratic, risk-based models of surveillance, investigation, reporting and removal. These systems fracture families and create relational deprivation, leaving children disconnected and care workers disempowered and demoralised.

The neuroscience of connection: Why relationships matter

The human brain develops through relationships. Disconnection is harm. When children experience pain or fear, their brains enter a threat state. Connection regulates this threat response. Every stable, attuned relationship builds the child's capacity for trust, resilience, and learning. Disconnection does the opposite: it teaches the brain that the world is unsafe.

A Child Connection System

A system grounded in relational care puts relationships, not rules, at the centre. It recognises that protection *comes through connection*, and healing for a child comes through safe, steady relationships with trusted adults.



Foundational design principles for a Child Connection System

Governments can't raise children, or guarantee their safety, but they *can* set the right conditions for systems that nurture rather than harm. Some starting points to consider:

Question	❌ What not to do:	✅ What to do:
What is the foundational story?	Promote the myth that governments can care for, and protect children, and keep them safe through laws, regulations and audits.	Build a social contract with communities that recognises families and communities can keep children safer through real relationships, with direct government intervention as a last resort.
What are we incentivising? Who benefits?	Design a system that protects anxious adults, especially managers and politicians.	Support a community-led network that protects children and families through connection.
What are we prioritising: people or paperwork?	Require workers to focus on documentation; keep adding more rules and regulations.	Reward workers who strengthen a child's relationships; avoid excessive red tape with only 'good sense' rules and guardrails.
How are we managing risk?	Manage safety risks through surveillance and paperwork. Overlook the risk of relational deprivation.	Address risk through the lens of trust and connection; balance the risk of relational deprivation against other risks.
How are we measuring success?	Focus on outputs and compliance, and what services are delivered.	Focus on the actual outcomes for a child in terms of belonging, stability and connection.
What type of relationships are we enabling?	Require workers to maintain fixed relationship boundaries based on clinical concepts of professional distance.	Adopt a flexible and responsive approach to relationship boundaries based on what makes sense in context.
Who, when and where are we funding?	Invest mostly downstream to manage consequences after they occur; use a centralised funding model that supports short-term, prescriptive and one-size-fits-all services.	Invest mostly upstream in families and community organisations for prevention; decentralise funding to support long-term, flexible, place-based approaches that let communities design what works for them.

Relational accountability

Accountability can begin with one simple question: does this help the child stay connected to their family, community and culture?

- ✳ Families and communities are the foundation of care. Systems should strengthen these natural supports.
- ✳ Practitioners are supported to learn, not punished for making mistakes.
- ✳ Government's role is to create the conditions for care:
 - Support families and carers through trusted community organisations.
 - Coordinate health, education, housing and other essential supports.
 - Step in only as a last resort, with relational models of care.
- ✳ Independent oversight should focus on a child's connections:
 - Children's Commissioners and oversight bodies measure safety *through* connection.

Global takeaway: Back to community

Across cultures, healing happens in community. From Aboriginal kinship systems in Australia to extended family and village networks around the world, children thrive when they are connected to family, kin, community, and culture. Systems should be designed to support this reality. Children don't need perfect systems; they need real relationships.

Further resources

-  [Supporting Children and Families to Flourish report - Australian Public Policy Institute](#)
-  centreforrelationalcare.org.au/child-connection-system