What does acting in the best interests of children and young people look like to them?

Actions and decisions that impact children should always be in children's best interests. Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines children's right to have adults act in their best interests (paraphrased).

- **Children's best interests should always be prioritised as a primary consideration.**
- **Governments should make sure children have the protection and care they need, taking into account parents' and caregivers' rights and duties.**
- **Governments should make sure services responsible for children's care and protection are held accountable to clear standards.**

From April to July 2025, 54 reasons consulted with children and young people across our services to learn what adults acting in their best interests looks like to them. Our consultation questions focused on the themes of 'protection and care' which Article 3 centres on.

We chose the topic of children's best interests because it allowed us to invite children's perspectives on their rights in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways. Children's rights are interconnected and should be seen as a whole — with Article 3 being just one of four guiding principles across all 54 articles of the Convention.

WHAT CHILDREN KNOW: 5 insights that should change everything

- It's **all about relationships:** this is where care and safety starts.
- It's **more than talk:** Children are telling us what matters to them through every interaction.
- **Making space** for quality time is acting in children's best interests.
- **Doing *for* matters but doing *with* honours agency and connection.**
- **When adults listen to children we are stronger together.**

Methodology

Practitioners selected participatory data collection methods based on the individual needs of children and young people. Before facilitators introduced the consultation question or activity to children or young people, they spent time introducing them to the key concepts of 'care' and 'protection' to ensure they had a developmentally appropriate understanding of them.

The participatory data collection methods used for the consultation included:

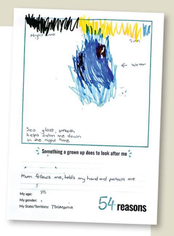
Paper people



Children identify a trusted adult in their lives and design their 'paper person' to reflect that adult. Facilitators support children to respond to a question about their trusted adult, and capture the response in children's own words.

> Mum looks after me and gives me cuddles and kisses.
>
> **QLD, 5, M**

Listening by Design



Children are guided through a process of drawing their response to a specific question with the help of a parent, caregiver or practitioner, and the facilitator captures or helps to capture their narrative in children's own words.

> My mum looks after me, she takes me for a walk. She takes me to fun places when I feel sad.
>
> **QLD, 5, M**

Play scenes



Children use toys and play resources to create their response to a specific question. The facilitator captures their 'play scene' through a photo and accompanying narrative in children's own words.

> [Grown-ups care for me when we] make pancakes.
>
> **NSW, 3, F**

Discussion

Individual, or small group.

> Even when we are young, we still know what it's like when we feel uncared for and unsafe, and feeling as though we are not being taken seriously makes the situation worse. It leads to young people not reaching out if they do need help, and can result in extremely unsafe repercussions if that continues.
>
> **NT, 17, F**

Being accountable

Being accountable to children and young people means that we seriously consider their views in decisions that impact them, that we report back to them on what we've heard and our next steps, and that we apply what we've learned in transparent, meaningful and sustainable ways.

Being accountable to children is one of the *Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation*, embedded in our *Child Participation Framework*. Some of the ways we're demonstrating accountability to children who participated in this consultation are:

+ Sharing back what we heard and what we've learned to children through child-friendly resources pitched to meet them where they're at.
+ Developing an internal consultation report that deep dives into what children told us, and how we can apply that learning within 54 reasons.
+ Developing public facing resources to share learning from children and young people with other stakeholders in their lives.
+ Integration of key learning points and contributions from children and young people into 54 reasons Child Voice Reports for special consideration by Senior Management and sharing with the whole organisation.

54 reasons

INSIGHT #1: All about relationships

Care starts with someone who sees you.

Children and young people's relationship with decision makers directly impacts decisions about their care and safety.

For children and young people, relationships are not background, they are the blueprint. Safety is felt in the arms that hold them, trust is built in the voices that listen, and worth is proven in the moments adults choose to show up. If we want children to thrive, we need to be asking: Who is showing up for them, and how? Because in every quote, every whisper, every plea they are telling us: It's the relationship that makes the difference.

Key learnings from the consultation:

- **Care and safety are relational,** not just procedural.
- **Safety begins in relationship.** Children distinguish between being protected and being partnered with in their safety.
- Young people want adults to **notice and respond** to non-verbal cues.
- **Routine actions** (meals, hugs, boundaries) critically contribute to children's wellbeing but are also important because they **signal prioritisation.**
- **Advocacy** by adults deeply impacts feelings of safety, especially when advocating in adult-centric systems.

> Dad cooks me yummy dinner and we play Mountain Dad, I climb up him to the top of his shoulders!
>
> **– New South Wales, 3 years old, female**

> I felt cared for by last year's teacher. Last year's teacher didn't criticise me. He knew that it was tough for me. He was patient.
>
> **– Queensland, 12 years old, male**

> My teacher noticed my body language and asked if I was okay… it meant the world to me.
>
> **– Queensland, 16 years old, female**

> [Granny] plays with me and brings me to Playgroup. She makes me feel good.
>
> **– Queensland, 12 years old, male**

54 reasons

Relationships are the foundation for children's learning and development. Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships support children to feel safe, confident and included.

(Early Years Learning Framework, v2.0. 2022)

INSIGHT #2: More than talk

Care is felt – not just spoken.

Welcomed physical contact and proximity influences children and young people's feelings of care and safety and raises special considerations for children in their early years and for children with additional needs.

For children, safety isn't a policy — it's a presence. It's the arms that hold them when storms roll in, the hand that stays close in a crowd, the body that shows up and doesn't flinch. Welcomed touch and chosen closeness aren't extras, they're how care is felt and how trust is built. Proximity is care, safety and protection.

Key learnings from the consultation:

- **Welcomed physical contact and proximity** is a primary language that communicates care and safety to children.
- Children in their early years often described **hugs, cuddles, and being held** as central to their sense of protection.
- **For children with additional needs, connection often begins with closeness.**
- **Young people recall moments of physical comfort and proximity as transformative,** especially in distress.
- Feeling safe is **compromised when touch is absent, forced, or mis-attuned.**
- Having **boundaries respected and having a say in proximity** matters.

> My daddy gives me cuddles when I wake up.
>
> **– Queensland, 3 years old, male**

> [Adults] keep you safe by holding your hand when you are in a crowd.
>
> **– Queensland, 8 years old, female**

Why does proximity matter to young people?

It's how they know they're not alone in the moment that counts. It's the difference between being observed and being accompanied, between someone watching from a distance and someone sitting beside them, noticing the shift in their body language before a word is spoken.

It's how young people measure who's truly with them. And when someone is with them, care is evident, and safety becomes possible

Young people (13-18) described proximity as a form of emotional safety and connection:

> My teacher in that class came up to me while everyone was doing group work and asked if I was OK and if I wanted to go outside and talk for a moment.
>
> **– Queensland, 16 years old, female**

54 reasons

Touch is central to human social life. It is the most developed sensory modality at birth, and it contributes to cognitive, brain, and socioemotional development throughout infancy and childhood.
Source: Better Kid Care, Penn State Extension

Children with disability may rely more heavily on sensory cues, including physical proximity and touch, to interpret safety and connection.
Source: Emerging Minds. (2021). Parent voices: Supporting children with disability – part one [Podcast].

INSIGHT #3: Making space

Presence is protection.

Quality time together enables adults to understand children's care and safety needs, and children to work out if they can trust adults to act in their best interests.

Quality time is a language children and young people understand. It tells them they are seen, heard and valued. It communicates to children they are a priority, and that their wellbeing matters. That they matter. Quality time reinforces children's sense of worth and relational security.

Key learnings from the consultation:

- Children and young people's **examples of trust and safety largely focused on *positive* experiences** with trusted adults.
- **Experiences of quality time are largely simple** and not resource intensive.
- **Presence is most powerful when it's undivided.**
- Experiences of quality time **communicate to children that they matter.**
- Experiences of quality time are **foundational to the trusting relationships** that enable adults to act in children and young people's best interests.

> My mum takes me to the park and sings for me when I am sad.
>
> **– Queensland, 3.5 years old, female**

> Grandma reads with me and plays with me.
>
> **– South Australia, 4 years old, female**

> [Adults look after me by] showing that they care, talking to me and spending time with me. They listen to me.
>
> **– Tasmania, 14 years old, female**

> Dad reads me books [this shows he cares about me].
>
> **– Northern Territory, 7 years old, female**

> When my teacher helps me, I feel safe.
>
> **– Queensland, 8 years old, male**

> [When an adult takes care of me they need to] check in with me.
>
> **– Western Australia, 14 years old, male**

54 reasons

Quality time with your child is a chance to: give your child your full attention, send the message that your child is the most important thing to you, see the world from your child's point of view…

Source: Raising Children Network (2025)

INSIGHT #4: Doing for vs doing with

‘Doing for’ matters but ‘doing with’ honours agency and connection.

The mode of interaction, doing something for vs with a child, shapes their experience of care, safety, and protection.

Children and young people are telling us something profound: safety is not just in the provision; it’s in the participation. Being cooked for is care. But cooking together? That’s connection. Being protected is essential and care is not a transaction. When we do for children, we meet their needs. When we do with them, we honour their personhood.

Key learnings from the consultation:

- **“Doing with” builds agency,** trust and emotional safety.
- Children feel most cared for when adults join them in **everyday moments.**
- **Young people value being consulted** and included in decisions.
- Physical proximity and shared activity **deepen relational bonds.**
- “Doing for” without explanation can feel dismissive.
- **Meals, play, and problem-solving are relational keys.**
- Children rely on co-regulation through shared action (‘doing with’).

> Dad helps me to fish, he showed me how to do it.
>
> **– New South Wales, 3 years old, male**

> Grandma takes me to swimming lessons and then she gets in and we have a swim together.
>
> **– New South Wales, 4 years old, female**

> Mummy and sister worked number blocks with me. Mummy makes a [breakfast]. Mummy takes me to the kindergarten. Daddy took us to the beach and time zone. Me and daddy ride in the car. Teacher plays choo choo train with me. Sister plays with me.
>
> **– Victoria, 4.5 years old, male**

> I feel safe when Mum takes time out of her schedule to pick me up.
>
> **– Queensland, 13 years old, female**

54 reasons

Doing things with children builds brain architecture and emotional resilience. “Serve and return… helps to build and strengthen neural connections.”

Source: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (n.d.). Serve and return.

INSIGHT #5: Stronger together

Listening to children is in their best interests.

When adults listen to children and taken children's views seriously, we make better decisions together.

When children and young people feel heard, they'll speak up when they feel unsafe. When children and young people feel taken seriously, they'll actively participate in their own care. Listening to and coming through for children and young people communicates to them that they matter to adults, and that adults can be trusted to prioritise their best interests.

Children have a right to share their views on issues that impact them, and adults should seriously consider their views. (Article 12, CRC, simplified)

Key learnings from the consultation:

- **Young children feel listened to and taken seriously when adults engage with them** in play, and experiences they enjoy.
- **Young people connect being listened to with being understood.**
- Children and young people **want adults to know** what matters to them.
- Young people **don't trust adults to know what's in their best interests when they don't engage with them** in meaningful ways.

> My dad and my mum feed me. They put me to bed. They cuddle me and kiss me. They hide me in danger.
>
> **– Queensland, 4 years old, male**

> My teacher listens to me [this makes me feel safe].
>
> **– Queensland, 10 years old, female**

> Adults make me feel safe when they try to listen/understand when I try to explain my problems and concerns even if I am bad at explaining stuff.
>
> **– Tasmania, 15 years old, female**

> For starters, listen to us. Not only listen to our words, but our body language.
>
> **– Queensland, 16 years old, female**

54 reasons

Children have the right to express their views freely on matters affecting them. Viewing children as citizens today, not as developing or future citizens, places children in the here and now.

Source: Community Early Learning Australia (CELA, 2024)