

Media Release

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Helping young people understand their past empowers them to hope for the future

A world-first evidence-based evaluation of Therapeutic Life Story Work (TLSW) by MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop) and Deakin University has outlined how the program supports children and young people in care to heal from their trauma.

Researchers from Deakin University in Geelong worked with MacKillop over three-years to investigate the program's effectiveness.

Developed by international child trauma expert Professor Richard Rose, of the University of Northampton England, TLSW is a creative process to help young people who have experienced trauma express in pictures, words or colours, their feelings about how the loss of family and home has impacted their life.

Professor Rose says the report underlined the fundamental importance of supporting young people with a history of trauma to make sense of and create meaning from their experience which will ultimately help them to strengthen their emotional and social wellbeing and sense of identity.

“Working through TLSW helps to anchor a young person in their present, when their past may have been so difficult. Through TLSW, they learn to know who they are now, where they came from and most importantly, who they can be in the future.”

“This evaluation shows us that knowledge and understanding of your past and acceptance of who you are now brings increased social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. And we know that positive mental wellbeing and feelings of self-worth help break the cycle of children with a care experience being the parents of kids who start the cycle all over again,” adds Professor Rose.

TLSW has been in practice throughout the world for 30 years, and the key findings from this world-first evaluation reported that the program: enhanced the relationship between the young person and their carer and strengthened their relationship; reduced risk and challenging behaviours; and increased social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing.

Meisha Taumoefolau, Principal Practitioner at MacKillop, has seen firsthand how TLSW supports young people in care make sense of their past and find a renewed sense of self.

“We’ve found that as well as having a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing, young people who took part in TLSW displayed a significant increase in physical health. Making connections with extended family members and a developing sense of belonging has been beneficial to so many areas of these young people’s lives.”

Meisha adds, “Another important benefit arising from the program is that carers develop a better understanding of a young person’s story which means they are better informed to make decisions with and about the young person.”

Meisha worked through TLSW with Lara* a 13-year-old girl in foster care who had minimal understanding of her family background. During the TLSW process, they located older siblings living

overseas who previously had no contact with their sister. The siblings have since developed a close relationship, keeping in contact and supporting each other through a family bereavement.

Lara says, "TLSW has helped me so much because it's my story - it's helped me connect to my family, to my culture and it's helped me get through some really tough changes in my life. I think every child should be able to do this because it really helps me to understand who I am."

Dr James Lucas from Deakin University led the research team and outlined how the program impacted those taking part.

"The TLSW Clinician uses child development theory, attachment theory, grief and loss theory and various art therapy and play therapy interventions to support the child's reflection and understanding of their experiences. This crucial element of the work allows the child to make sense of why things have occurred for them and why their experience may be different to others."

Echoing Lara's call for TLSW to be available for all kids in care, MacKillop Family Services CEO Dr Robyn Miller says, "Evidence shows this model works. The children and young people who have had access to TLSW have gained so much out of the program. I'd like to see every child in foster care or residential care who have gaps in their history to have access to TLSW. How can you even begin to imagine a future for yourself if you have no knowledge of your past? We need funding to train more clinicians to deliver TLSW and improve outcomes for some of our most vulnerable young people."

You can watch a short video on TLSW [here](#) and read the full evaluation [here](#).

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