

Presented by:  
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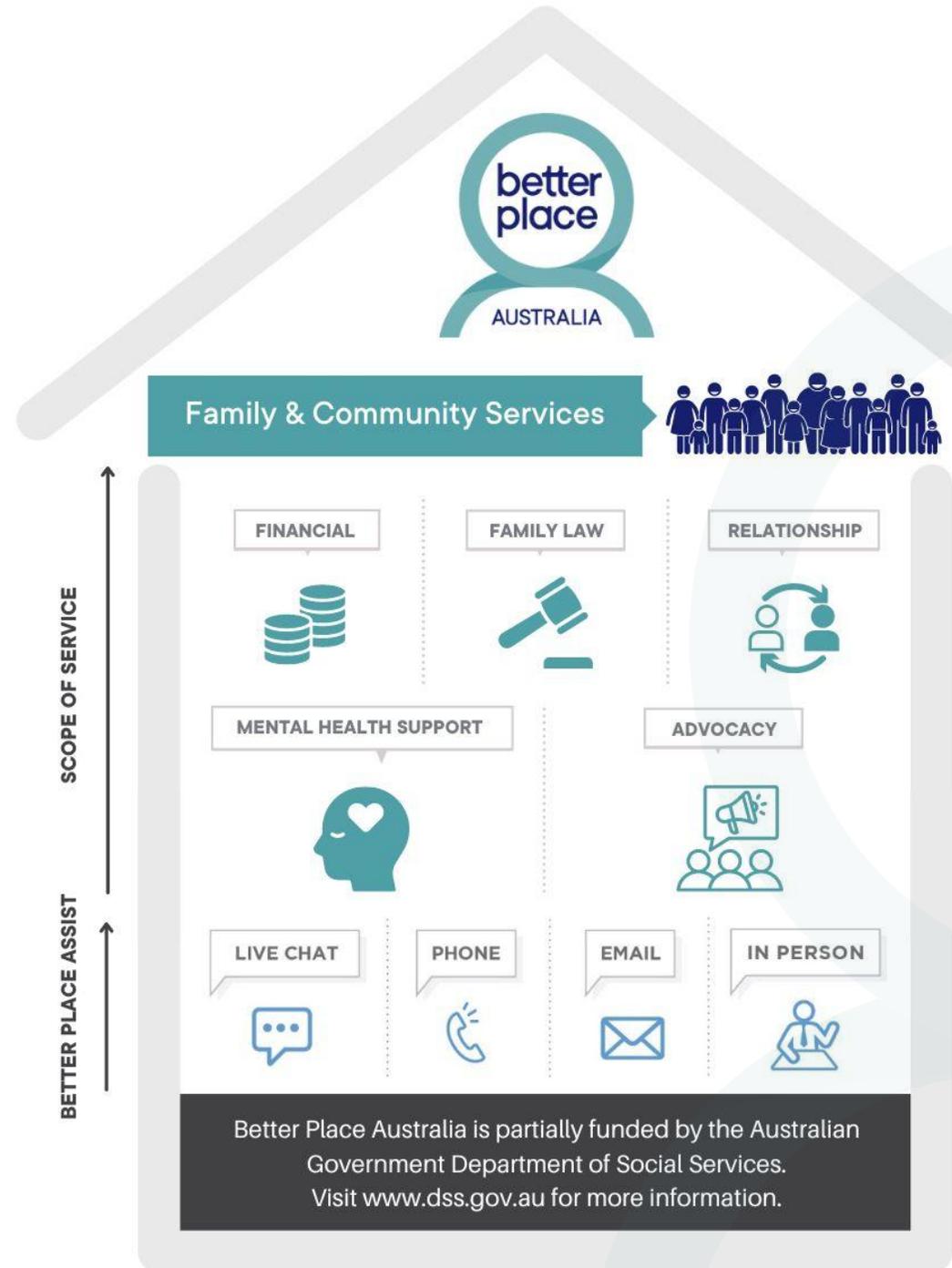
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# Highlighting children's voices: Evaluating a Children's Contact Service



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# About Children's Contact Services

Children's Contact Services are places that support families post-family separation.

Children can have safe and supported supervised visits with parents and family members.

Children, parents and family members may also be referred to other services that will support their well-being during their time with us.



# What is supervised contact?

A trained Contact Worker is present at all times. Support contact and intervene if necessary.

May be court ordered or the result of an agreement/Parenting Plan between the parents.

Common family contexts: Family violence, mental ill health, drug/alcohol misuse, or re-establishment of parent/child relationship.



# Children's right to be heard

Article 12 of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- *“... the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”*

Principle 2 of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations:

- *“Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.”*

Putting this into practice isn't always straightforward.

# Better Place Australia's opportunity

Opening two CCS sites created opportunity to explore how children's voices can be integrated within CCS service evaluation.

Reinforced by the 2023 evaluation by the Australian Institute of Family Studies:

- Services generally safe;
- But children's own views are missing.

*“...a need for processes and measures to be developed and used to **better assess the children's experiences** of the CCS service [...] to identify **better ways to enable children using CCSs to express what they want and need** from the CCS while receiving their services (**‘the child's voice’**) and for this to inform service delivery.” [AIFS 2023]*

# Evolution of a project to capture children's voices

# Attempt 1: Traditional research approach

Very limited research into children's experiences and perspectives relating to CCSs.

Anecdotal evidence from service: some children distressed, some hesitant, some enjoy the visits (but don't want other parent to know).

No existing way to systematically capture children's perspectives.

Initial plan: Interviews, surveys, and emotional wellbeing measures.

Challenges:

- Methods too long and complex – need something to fit into a typical visit.
- Anticipated parental suspicion and reluctance – refusal or try to influence children.

# Attempt 2: Develop an evaluation framework

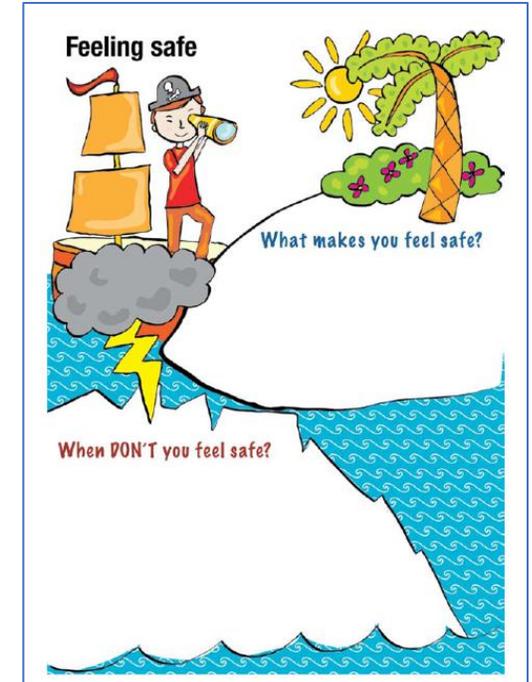
Attempt to simplify the project to fit service delivery.

Search for tools that align with the CCS purpose of providing a safe environment to develop/maintain positive relationships with their parent.

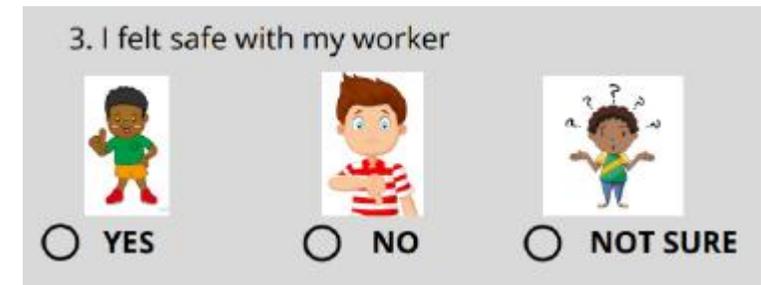
- To what extent do children feel safe at the CCS?
- To what extent do they enjoy their time at the CCS?

Challenges:

- Tools too invasive and unsafe within the CCS context.
- Parental suspicion – risk of subpoena or influence.
- Unclear how tools would interact with real-time decision-making and government guidelines for managing child refusal.
- Tension between CCS documentation requires and best practice in giving children control over what is shared.



Kids Central Toolkit (n.d.)



# Attempt 3 (current): Trialling tools to provide children space to raise their voice

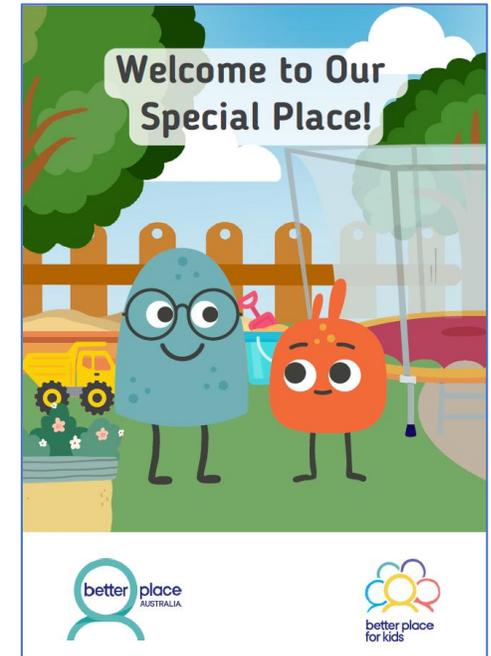
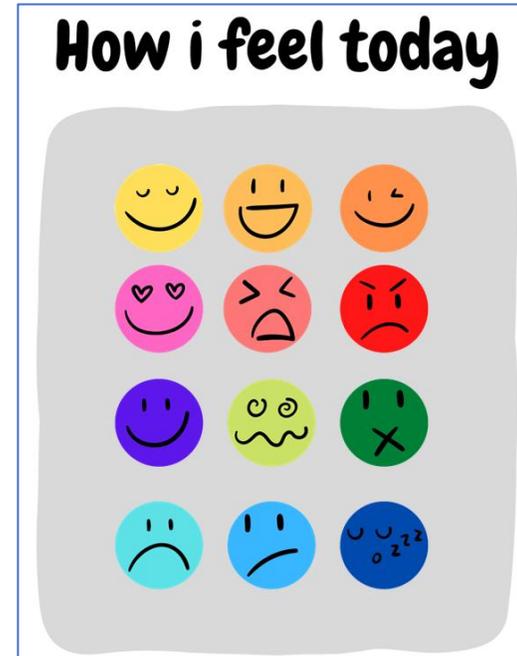
Offered before and after each visit as routine practice, with Contact Worker discretion

- To help reduce parent suspicion
- Identified benefit: Help identify children that may need additional support
- Challenge: Cannot keep responses confidential from parents

Completed during short transition between parents

Children selects a face; may also name or explain feeling, if they wish

Responses recorded in visitation notes; only used in evaluation with dual parental consent





## Children's feedback form

*Tell us what you think!*



What do you like about this place?

What do you wish was different about this place?

What advice would you give to other kids starting out at this place?



Hello!

We want to hear your thoughts about the Children's Contact Service (CCS).

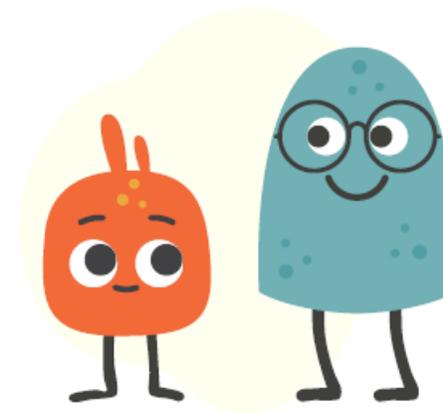
Your feedback helps us to make this a better place for all kids that visit.

Would you help us by filling in a short worksheet?

If you agree, please sign your name.

Name:

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# Key insights and reflections

# CCS is not a simple service – it is inherently complex

Identified key service delivery considerations:

- **Neutrality:** CCS must remain impartial
- **Safety:** Tools need to be trauma-informed and child safe
- **Staff roles:** CCS workers are not in therapeutic roles
- **Parental suspicion:** High-conflict dynamics affect consent and engagement
- **Time constraints:** Limited one-on-one time with children

Creating space for children's voices in this space requires pragmatism and careful consideration

# What do we mean by children's voice in CCS?

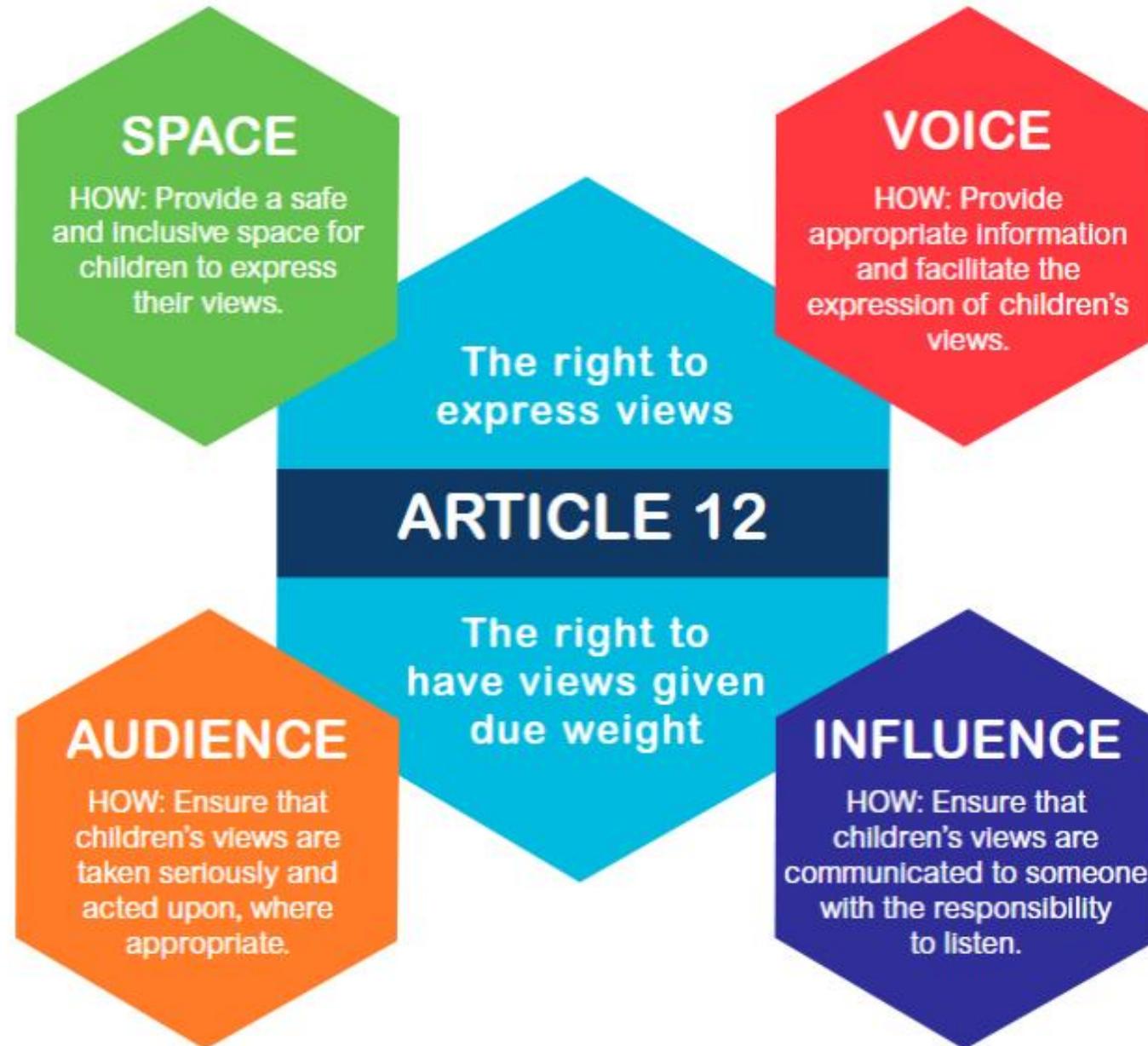
Children's voice is not a single idea:

- Expressing feelings about visits or the parent
  - Participating in decisions about attendance
- Providing input into the CCS space and environment
  - Sharing ideas to improve their experience

Each form of voice is valid but each needs different tools and responses

The sector needs a shared understanding of what children's voice means in this context

# Reflecting on participation: What is appropriate in CCS?



Lundy's model of participation – from Brotherhood of St Laurence [2020]

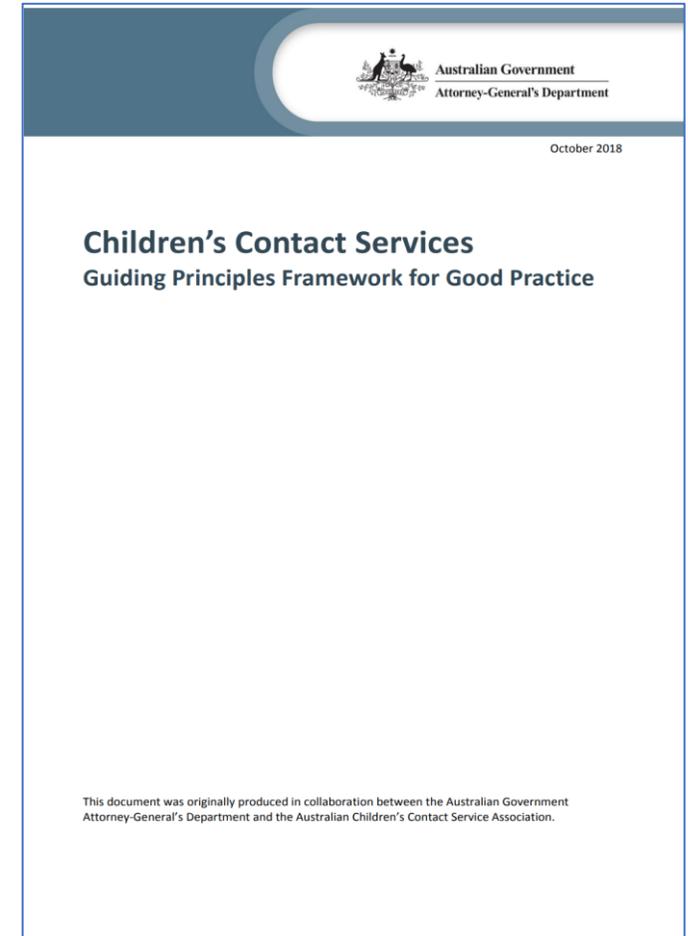
# Children's voice in a reportable service – structural tensions

CCS contact workers must record interactions as factual and observational

How can we ensure children understand that what they say can be included in court reports?

Limited opportunity for children to shape what information is shared

As we open space for voice, how do we ensure respect and agency?



# Recommendations

Clarity around what 'children's voice' actually means in the CCS context

Clarity to understand how creating space for children's voice interacts with the existing Guiding Principles Framework for Good Practice [Attorney-General's Department 2018]

More accessible ethical pathways for community organisations

Collaboration across the sector to keep momentum

# References

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Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018) [National Principles for Child Safe Organisation](#).

Attorney-General's Department. (2018) [Children's Contact Services – Guiding Principles Framework for Good Practice](#).

Brotherhood of St Laurence. (2020) [\*Engaging Children's Voices in the Early Years: Practical Guidelines\*](#). Brotherhood of St Laurence, Victoria, Australia.

Institute of Child Protection Studies (n.d.) [Kids Central tool and resources](#).

[United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). (1989, November 20)

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