

Direct contact in permanent care in New South Wales: Implications for supporting children, carers and birth families

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, Regional Research Symposium

Presented by

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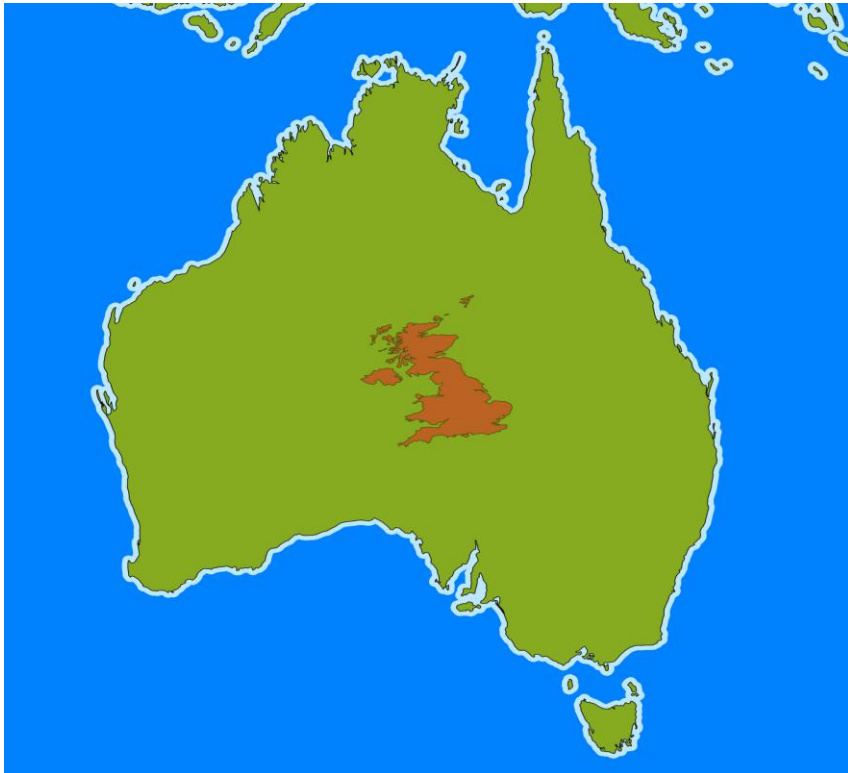
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Overview

- Introduce the Institute of Open Adoption Studies
- Australian child removal: where we are, how we got here
- NSW out-of-home-care reforms
- Australia's approach to contact
- Build evidence on direct contact across placements
- Results of two studies
- Implications & next steps

'Big' differences in size and population density



UK - 65.64 million



NSW 7.5 million

Institute of Open Adoption Studies

Established by the NSW Government as part of the legislative reforms in 2016/17

A joint venture between the University of Sydney and Barnardos Australia – is a publicly funded independent research centre set up to inform and guide good practice

Purpose - to undertake child-centred research on open adoption and other permanency pathways for children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), when reunification with their family is not possible.

Snapshot of out of home care in Australia

Year	NSW ^a	Vic.	Qld ^b	WA ^c	SA ^d	Tas. ^e	ACT ^f	NT	Total
Number									
2013	17,422	6,542	8,136	3,425	2,657	1,067	558	742	40,549
2014	18,192	7,710	8,185	3,723	2,631	1,054	606	908	43,009
2015	16,843	8,567	8,448	3,954	2,838	1,061	671	1,017	43,399
2016	17,800	9,705	8,670	4,100	3,243	1,150	748	1,032	46,448
2017	17,879*	10,312	8,941	4,232	3,484	1,205	803	1,059	47,915
Number per 1,000 children									
2013	10.4	5.2	7.4	5.9	7.4	9.3	6.7	11.6	7.7
2014	10.8	6.0	7.3	6.3	7.3	9.2	7.1	14.3	8.1
2015	9.9	6.6	7.5	6.7	7.9	9.3	7.7	16.0	8.1
2016	10.4	7.3	7.6	6.9	9.0	10.1	8.4	16.2	8.6
2017	10.3	7.5	7.8	7.1	9.5	10.7	8.8	16.8	8.7

Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies

Children in OOHC in NSW

Ageing out: Half enter under age 5; average stay 12.5 years

(Source: NSW government)

Children and young people in OOHC by length of time in current care period and number of distinct placements in the period

Year

30 June 2016

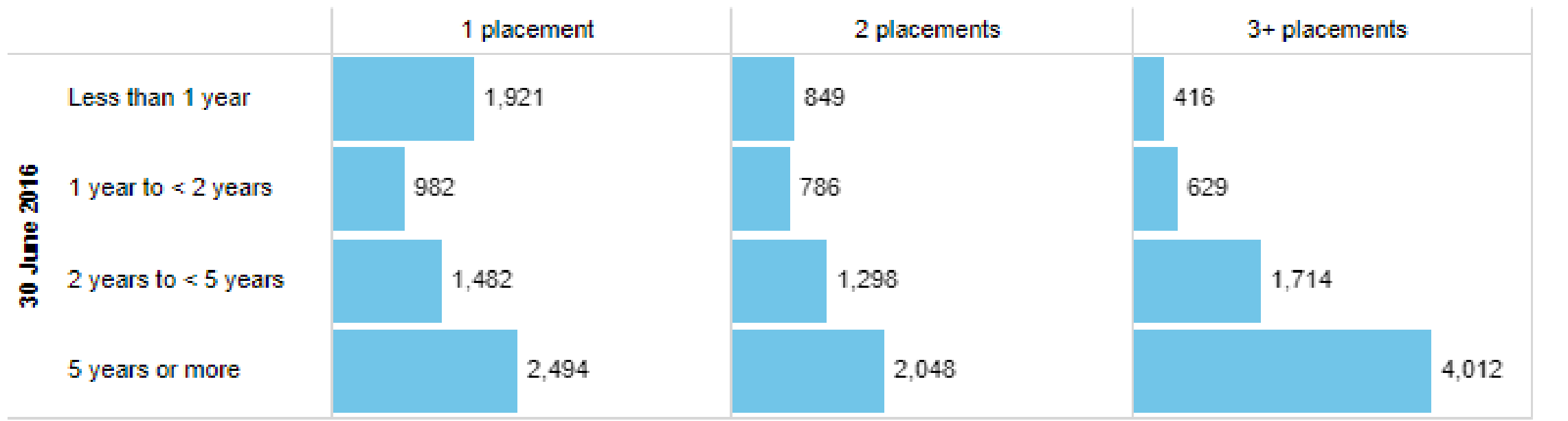
Length Of Time in Care

(All)

Number of Placements

(All)

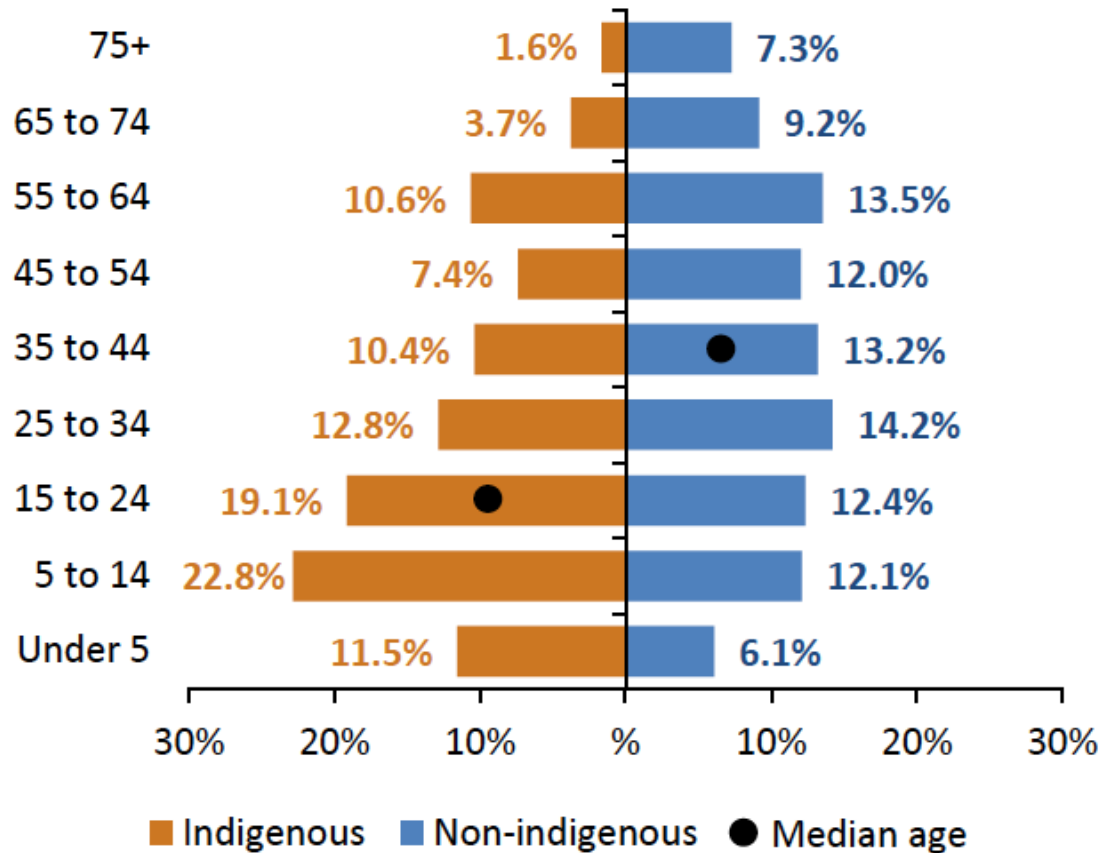
Number of Placements



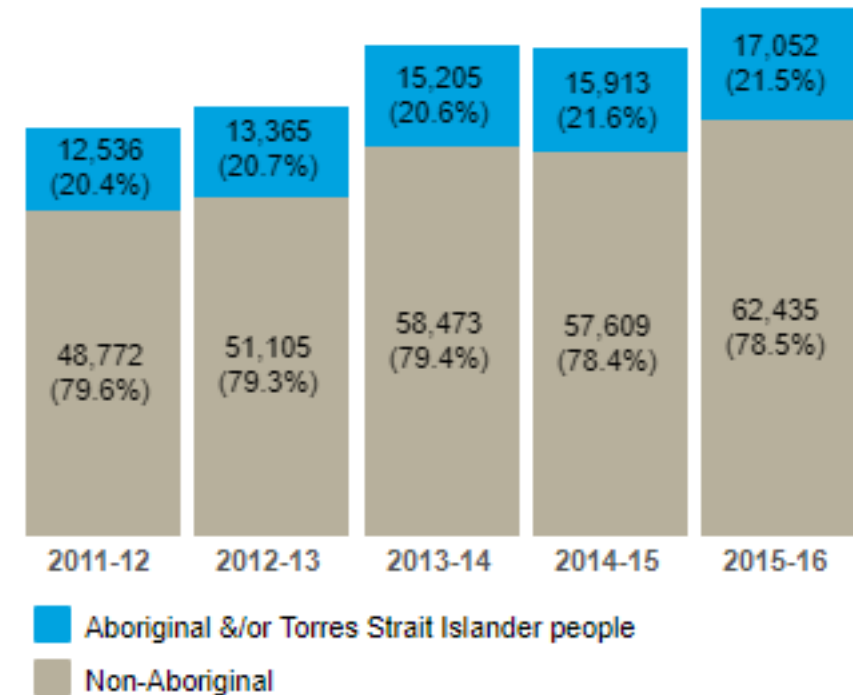
Source: NSW Family & Community Services

Aboriginal status and ROISH reports in NSW

Proportion of NSW population by age group



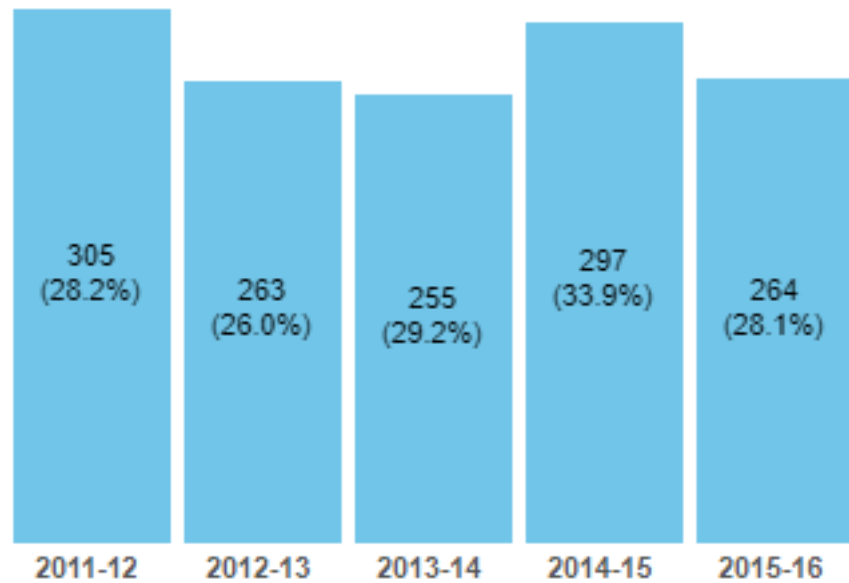
Children and young people involved in ROISH reports by Aboriginality



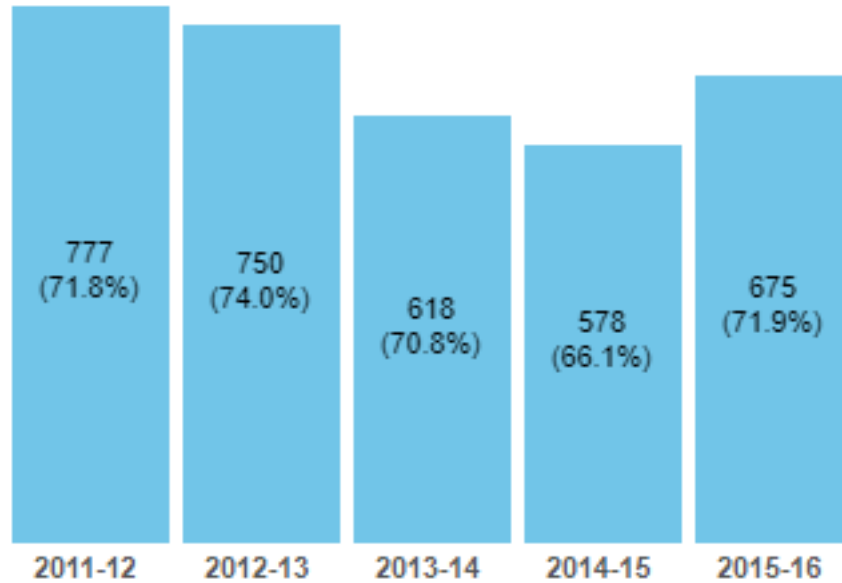
Source: Indigenous NSW: Findings from the 2016 Census; NSW FACS

Restorations for Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal children

Restorations
for Aboriginal children



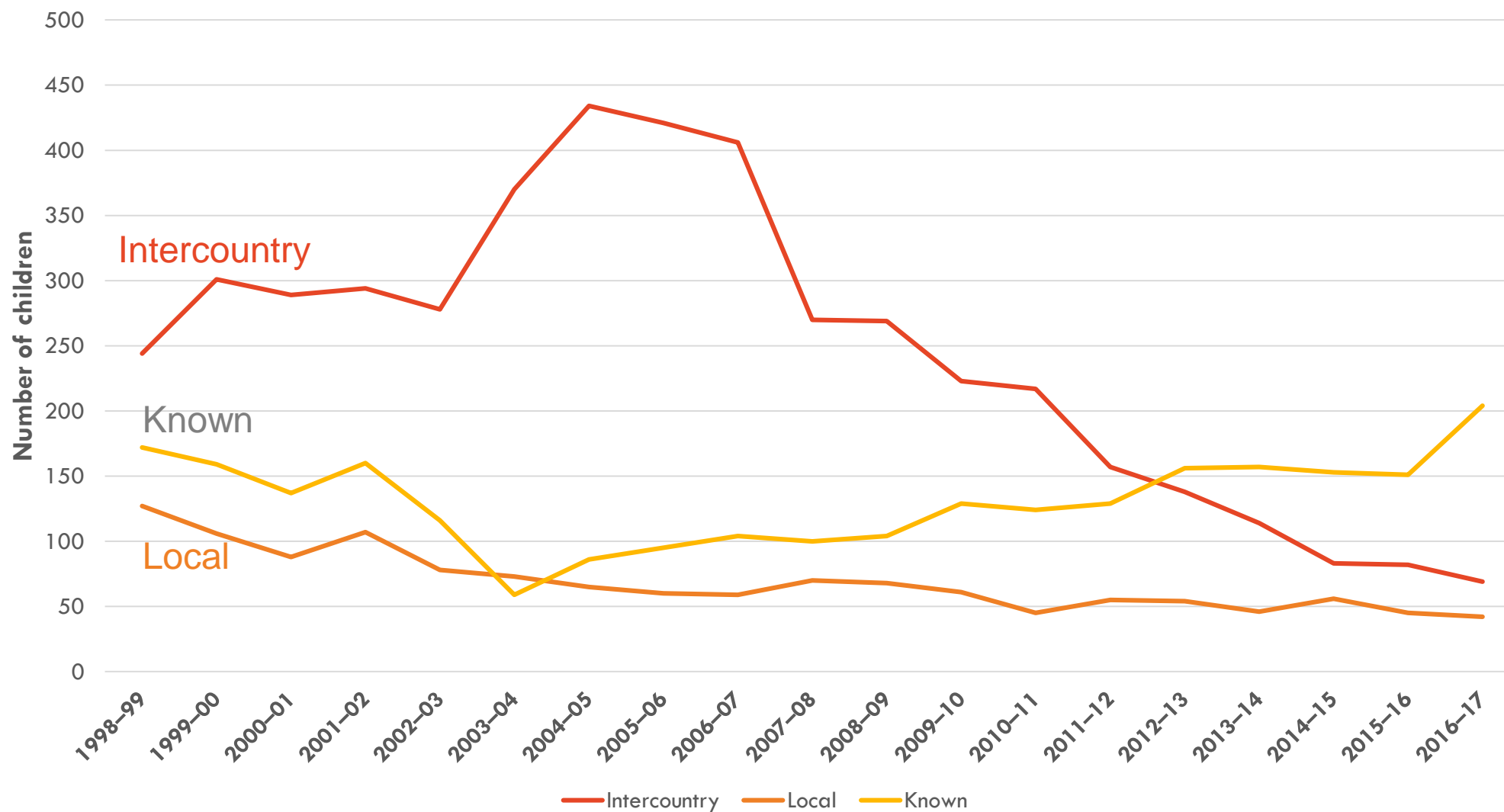
Restorations
for non-Aboriginal children



Source: NSW Family & Community Services

Historical child removal policy 'the stolen generations'

Number of children adopted, by adoption type, between 1998 and 2017



Permanency reforms in NSW

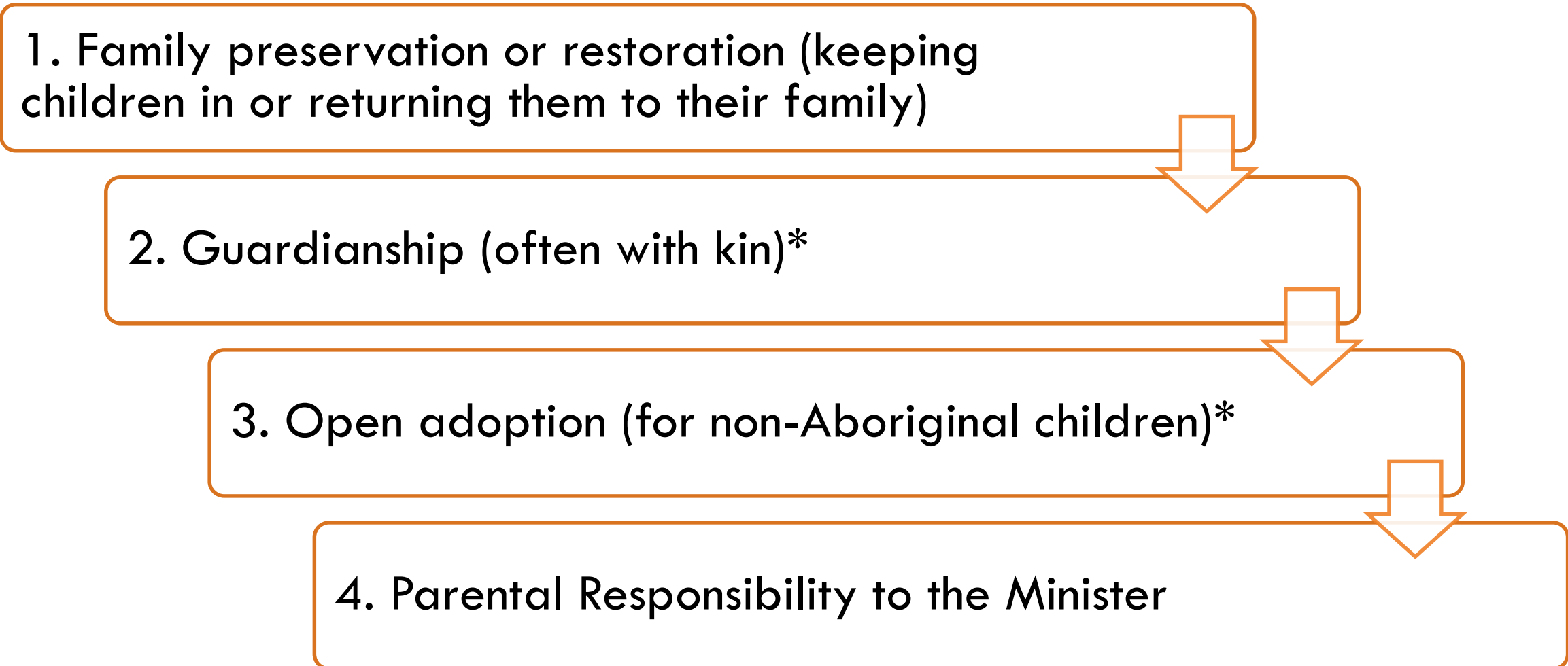
Legislative Framework

2014 Amendments to the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998:

- emphasised the importance of permanency for children (New principles for courts)
- introduced specified time frames for decisions about returning children to their parents
- streamlined the process for authorised carers to adopt a child or young person in out-of-home care.
- Financial incentives for agencies to achieve stable placements for children rather than being funded based on number of placements they arrange

Permanent Placement Principles

1. Family preservation or restoration (keeping children in or returning them to their family)



2. Guardianship (often with kin)*

3. Open adoption (for non-Aboriginal children)*

4. Parental Responsibility to the Minister

***Expectation for independent, direct contact**

Australian approach to contact

Article 9 Convention on the Rights of the Child

“the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests”

Australian approach to contact

- Maintain links with family, culture and community
- Enhance the child's self-esteem
- Reassurance birth family are ok and child hasn't been forgotten, validates reality

But

- No consensus that it achieves these aims (Boyle, 2017)
- Can cause distress/disappointment, undermine stability
- Need to look at individual child, avoid prescriptive approach
- Lack of sound evidence base for approach (Taplin et al 2015)

Purpose of our research on contact

- Challenges for carers of independently managed contact (Institute, POCLS)
- Birth parents want focus on relationship, not ‘event’ (Ross et al, 2017)
- Extend Kcontact research (supervised contact) into unsupervised arrangements
- What are the current experiences of direct contact in NSW?
- What are the implications for practice?
- **Two studies:**
 - 1 Qualitative & arts-based (Wright, Collings & Spencer)**
 - 2 Case file review – (Wright, Luu & Cashmore)**

The Family Connections and Contact Study

Exploratory, qualitative study

- Semi-structured interviews with carers (26)
- Arts-based methods with birth parents (12) & younger children (6)
- Focus group or semi-structured interviews with older children (12)

Research questions

- What are the experiences of contact for children and their families?
- How do carers and birth families build relationships?

Sample by placement type

Participant Group*	Guardian-ship	Open Adoption	Pre-adoption/ g'ship	Foster care	Kinship care
Birth parents	3	0	6	9	8
Carer/adoptive parent	2	8	10	9	11
Child	-	3	3	10	3

Birth Parent characteristics

Characteristics	No.	%
Female	12	100
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	8	67
<20 years when became parent	7	58
Did not complete high school (<4 yrs)	11	92
Intellectual disability	8	67
Mental illness	4	33
Child health issue or disability	8	67
Child not removed or restored	4	33

Overall themes

Quality=
Building
commitment
and
connection

COMMITMENT: Making sure contact happens

CONNECTION: Joining around the child

QUALITY OF CONTACT

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH	Low commitment, high connection Two worlds	High commitment, high connection Integrated worlds
LOW	Low commitment, low connection Blue moon	High commitment, low connection Disparate worlds

DISPARATE WORLDS

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH		
LOW		High commitment, low connection

- Characteristics
- Consistent
 - Low level of interaction between birth parent and child
 - No alignment between carers & birth family

Low connection and high commitment by carer and/or by birth parents (always happens but little interaction)

INTEGRATED WORLDS

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH		High commitment, high connection
LOW		

- Characteristics
- Respectful relationships
 - Responsive to the child
 - Flexible and informal
 - Clear boundaries

High connection and high commitment by carers & birth parents
Regular contact with emerging relationships and quality interactions

BLUE MOON

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH		
LOW	Low commitment, low connection	

Characteristics

- Irregular
- Children may experience distress
- Hostility/anger in birth parent/carer relationship

Low connection and low commitment by carers (any excuse to cancel, agency driven) and by birth parents (random, not fun)

TWO WORLDS

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH	Low commitment, high connection	
LOW		

Characteristics

- Irregular but exciting for child
- No relationship between birth parents and carer

Child has connection with birth parent, either no or poor relationship between carers and birth parent

CASEWORKER INTERVENTIONS

COMMITMENT

CONNECTION

Foster empathy
Promote communication
Build respect



Build engagement
Mediate conflict
Practical assistance and advocacy

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH	Low commitment, high connection	High commitment, high connection
LOW	Low commitment, low connection	High commitment, low connection

Where to from here?

- ❖ Research to understand what influences birth parent adjustment to removal
 - ❖ Administrative data on characteristics, reasons for final orders
 - ❖ Qualitative data on grief/loss and coping
- ❖ Convene a birth parent reference group to guide research & development of practical resource on respectful relationships
- ❖ Prospective longitudinal research on permanency trajectories across different placement types.
- ❖ Action research with sector to develop, test and implement practices to build relationships (with Prof Beth Neil)

Supreme Court decisions on contact after adoption

Method- case file review

- Information extracted from out-of-home care adoptions finalised by the Supreme Court of New South Wales (NSW) in 2017 ($n = 117$ children)
- Analysis of contact arrangements specified in the adoption plan
- Mixed methods quantitative and qualitative thematic analysis

Research question: *What types of arrangements are made for contact with birth family after adoption?*

Age of child removal and placement

Total sample: 117 children in 89 adoption cases

22 Sibling groups: 16 with two siblings, 6 with 3 siblings

Age at removal

Mean = 7.7 months, $SD = 14.6$

Age at removal ranged from birth to 7 years

76% of removed children were under 1 year old

Age at placement with prospective adoptive parents

Mean = 17.7 months, $SD = 20.0$

Age at placement ranged from birth to 8 years

59% of children were placed with their prospective adoptive parents by age 1 year

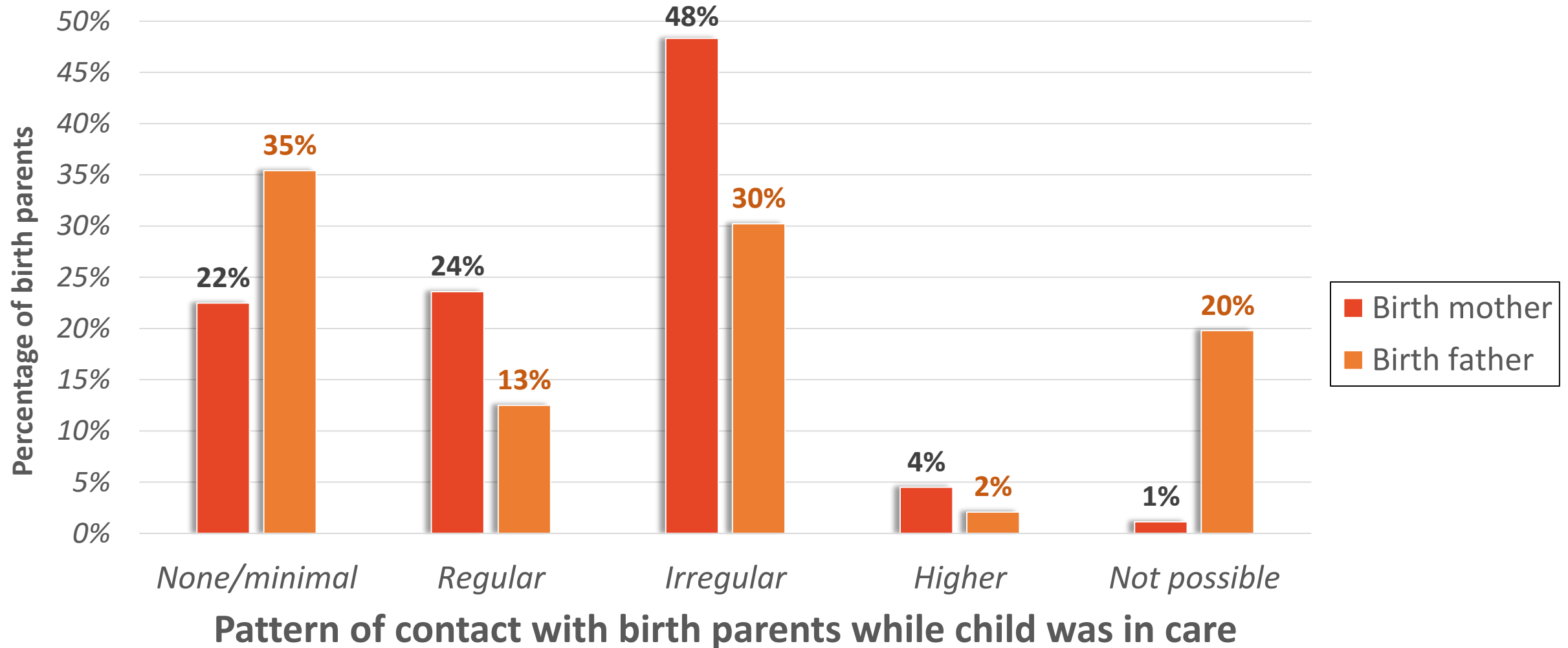
Restoration attempts and number of placements

Almost 80% of children did not have a case goal of restoration to birth parents (at any stage)

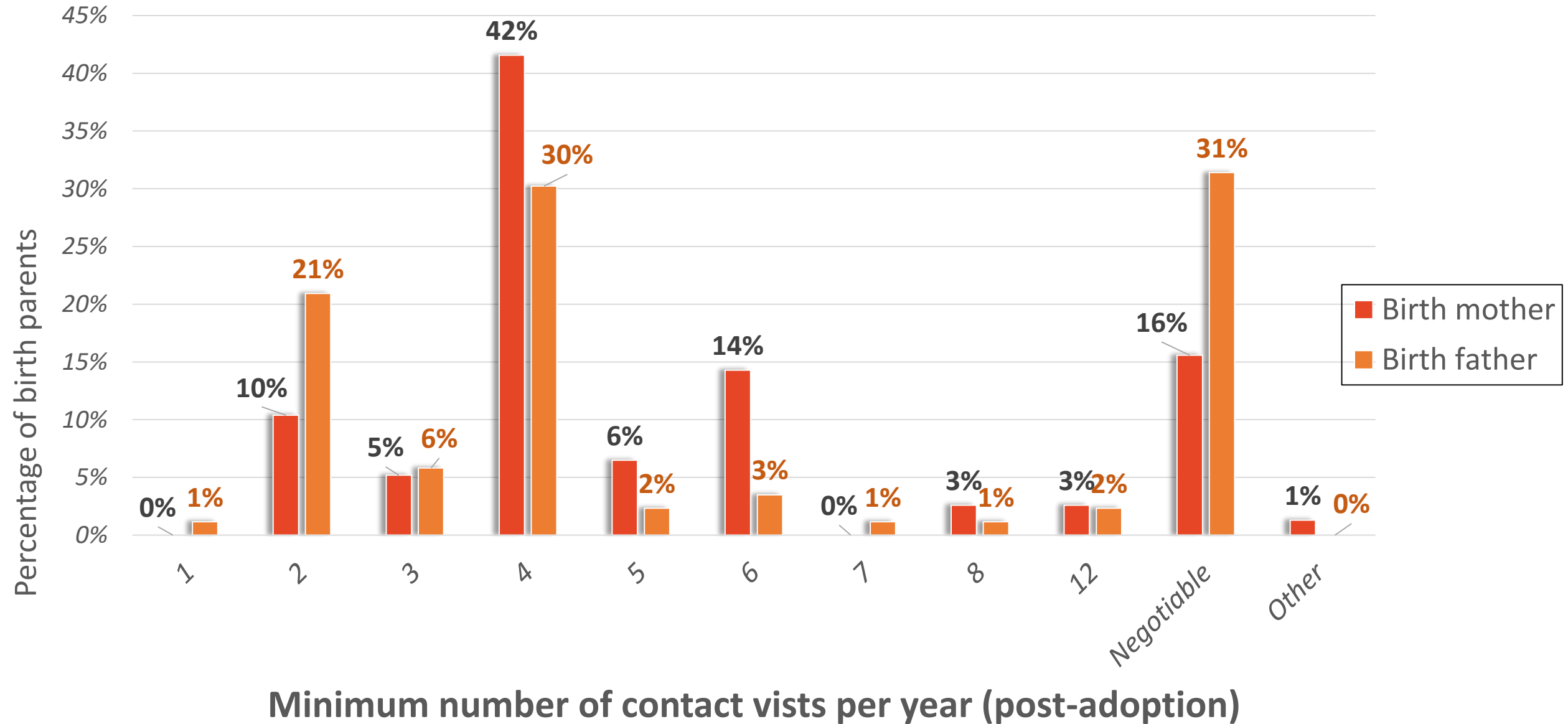
13% of children's initial plans for restoration did not eventuate

8% of children were restored once and then re-entered care

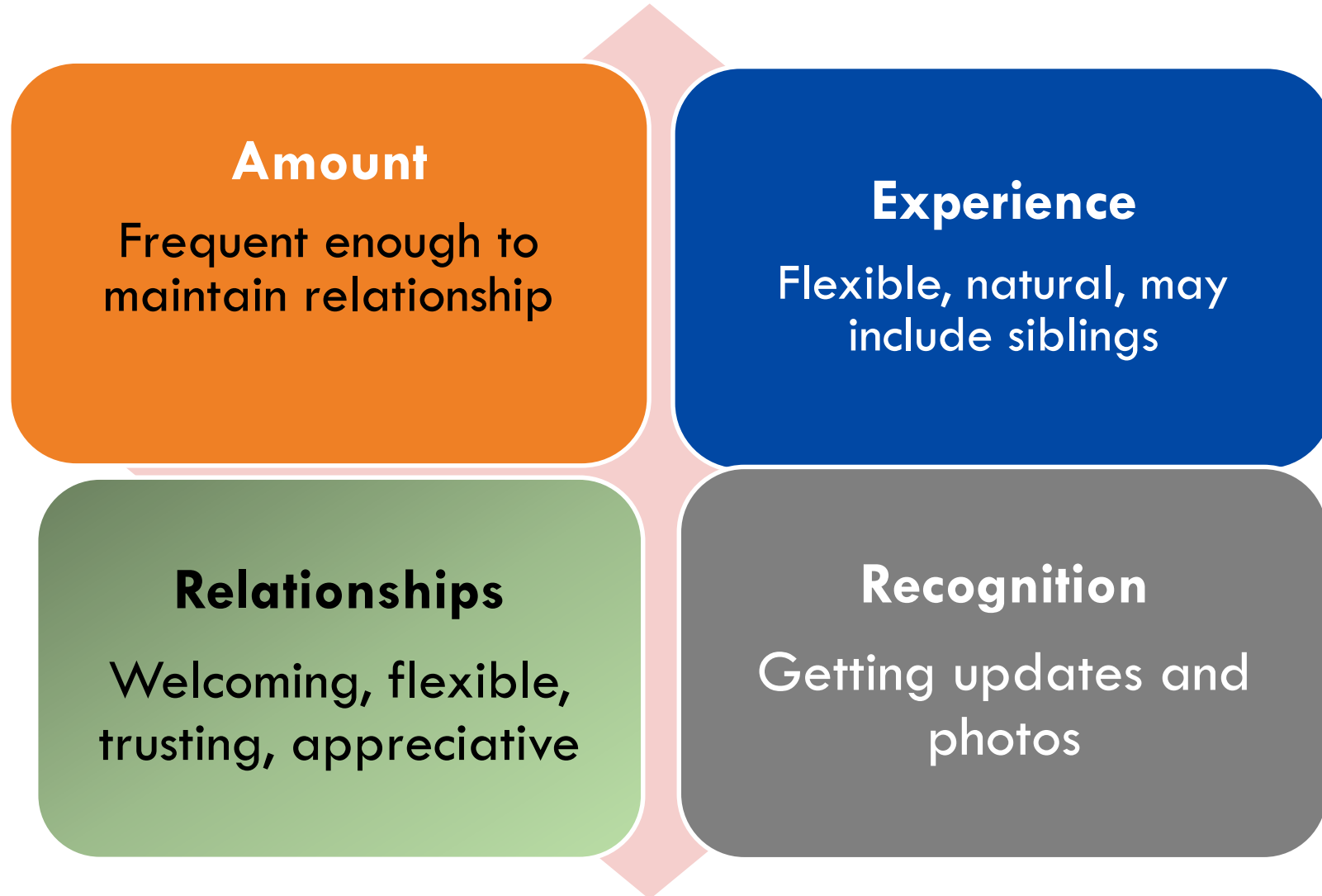
Pre-adoption contact with birth parents from Final Orders to Adoption



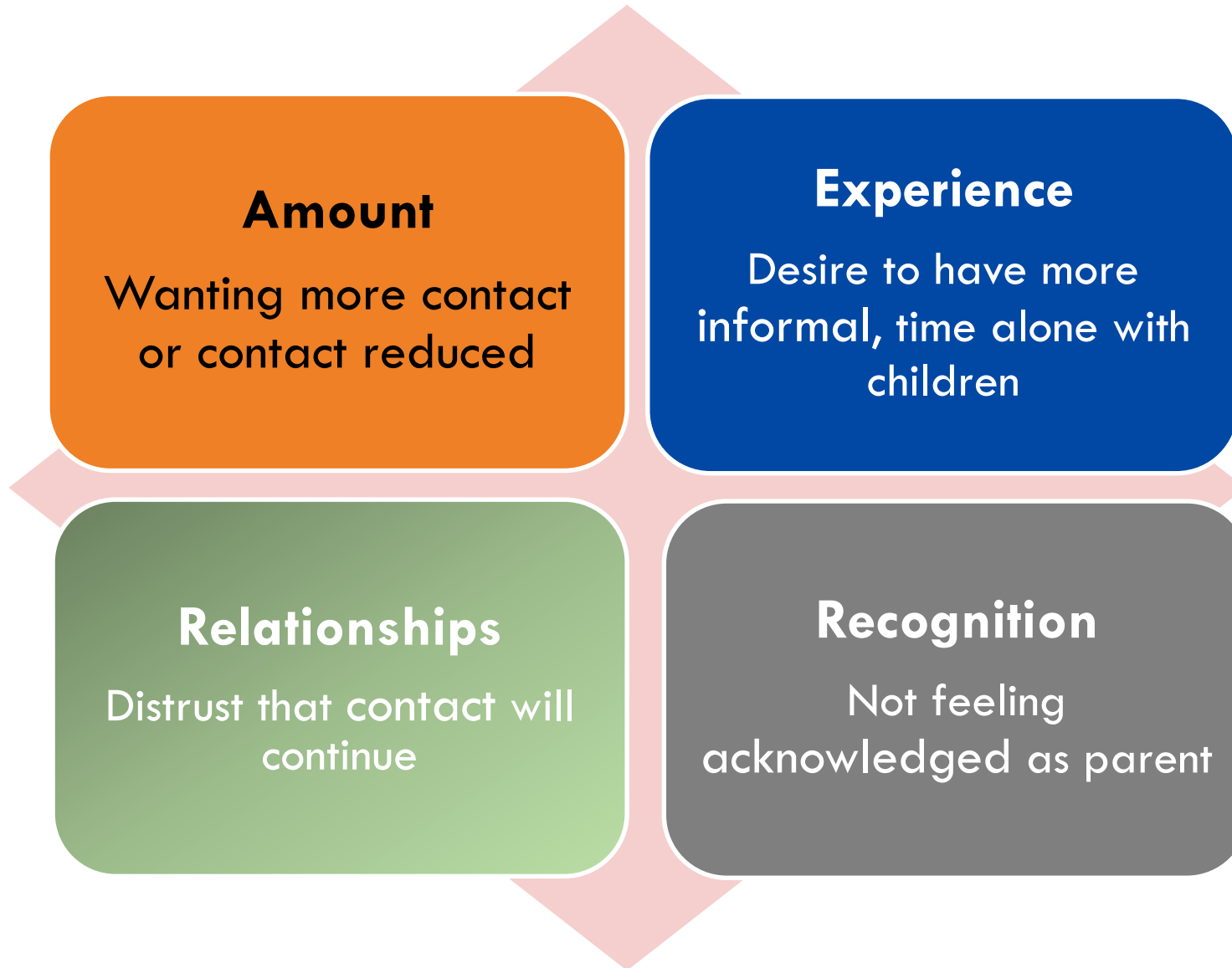
Proposed frequency of contact in adoption plan – Birth parents



Birth parent satisfaction with contact arrangements



Dissatisfaction with contact arrangements



When contact is positive

Child

- Predictability
- Integrated into child's life
- Child-centered activities

Adoptive Parents

- Feeling of being an extended family
- Informal and easy
- Trust, respect and safety

Birth Parents

- Trust adoptive parents will follow contact plan
- Flexible, natural experiences
- Feeling welcomed
- Regular updates and photos
- Appreciation that the child is well-cared for

When contact is challenging

Child

- Requests not to have contact
- Reports of distress during or after contact

Adoptive Parents

- Distrust what the parents will say or do
- Concerns about birth parents engagement
- Inconsistent attendance
- Concerns about inappropriate behaviours

Birth Parents

- Expression of dislike or hostility
- Feeling minimised, not recognised as parents
- Distrust contact will continue
- Intrusiveness by adoptive parents

Implications

- Post-adoption contact arrangements are informed by the contact arrangements currently in place and the views of children, birth parents and adoptive parents
- Prospective adoptive parents understand they must appear to support contact and are expected to manage contact independently
- Further research is needed to determine how patterns of contact change over time and effective practices to support contact

Thank You – any questions?

For more information about the Institute of Open Adoption Studies and to sign up for our newsletter: http://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/research/centres_and_networks/IOAS

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