

Using a Support Circles Approach



Practice Guidelines

The sand dots in the Home Stretch WA logo represent that young people's support circles will change over time.

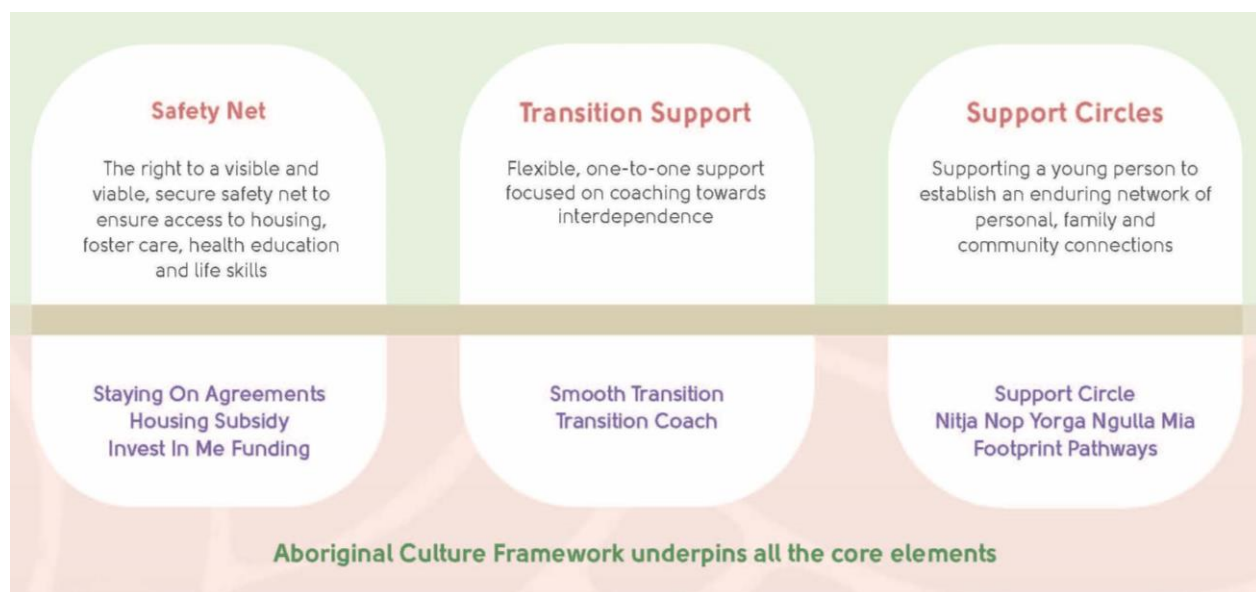
Home Stretch WA must support young people to grow their support circles



Home Stretch WA Background

Home Stretch WA provides an enhanced support system for young people transitioning from out-of-home care, providing them with additional support and resources from the ages of 18 to 21 years.

The aim is to improve care leavers' access to housing, health, education, training and employment through the provision of practical one-on-one assistance from 18 years to when they turn 21 years of age.



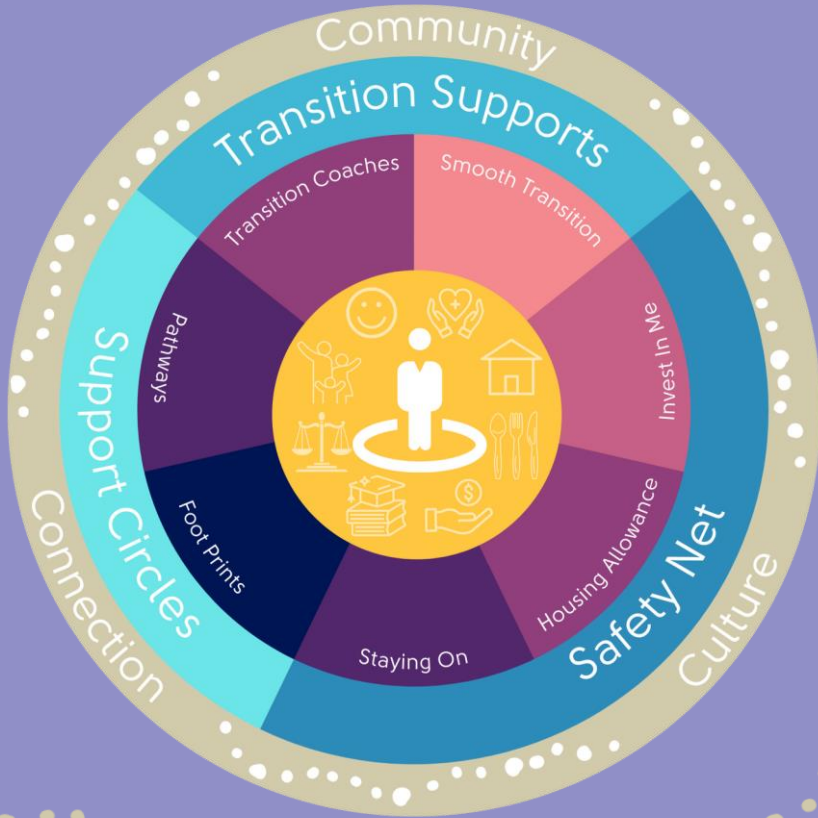
What is a Transition Coach?

A consistent, persistent and skilled youth worker who works with young people to provide flexible, one to one support focused on coaching towards independence.

The Transition Coach works from a set of practice principles ensuring support provided is consistent and focused on building a young person's self reliance, skills, capacity and connection to community, culture and country.

The Coach connects young people to resources and supports available through the Home Stretch service model and beyond, helping them navigate their journey to interdependence beyond the child protection system and being seen as a 'care leaver'.

Home Stretch WA Model



Young people are at centre of support. Everyone is treated as an individual



Support or connection is offered in all areas of life



Support is delivered in specific ways [Practice Approaches] that work for young people



Home Stretch WA focuses on 3 key elements of support



Home Stretch WA greater purpose is to connect young people with their community and culture.

A Support Circles Approach

Youth work approaches are often characterised by an emphasis on the young person as an individual (the primary client), meeting their needs by connecting them with professional services and supports.

A Support Circles approach emphasises working with young people as part of their community, strengthening or healing connections to the people and places that are important to the young person.



Positive relations with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and meaningful adults are all critical assets that help young people transition into adulthood in a healthy way. Many young people in care seek out and remain connected with these 'natural supports' even when they disengage from the child protection system and the professional supports that are offered to them.

For many young people their informal networks become their surrogate family and these relationships become foundations for their sense of belonging, identity, security, and self-esteem.

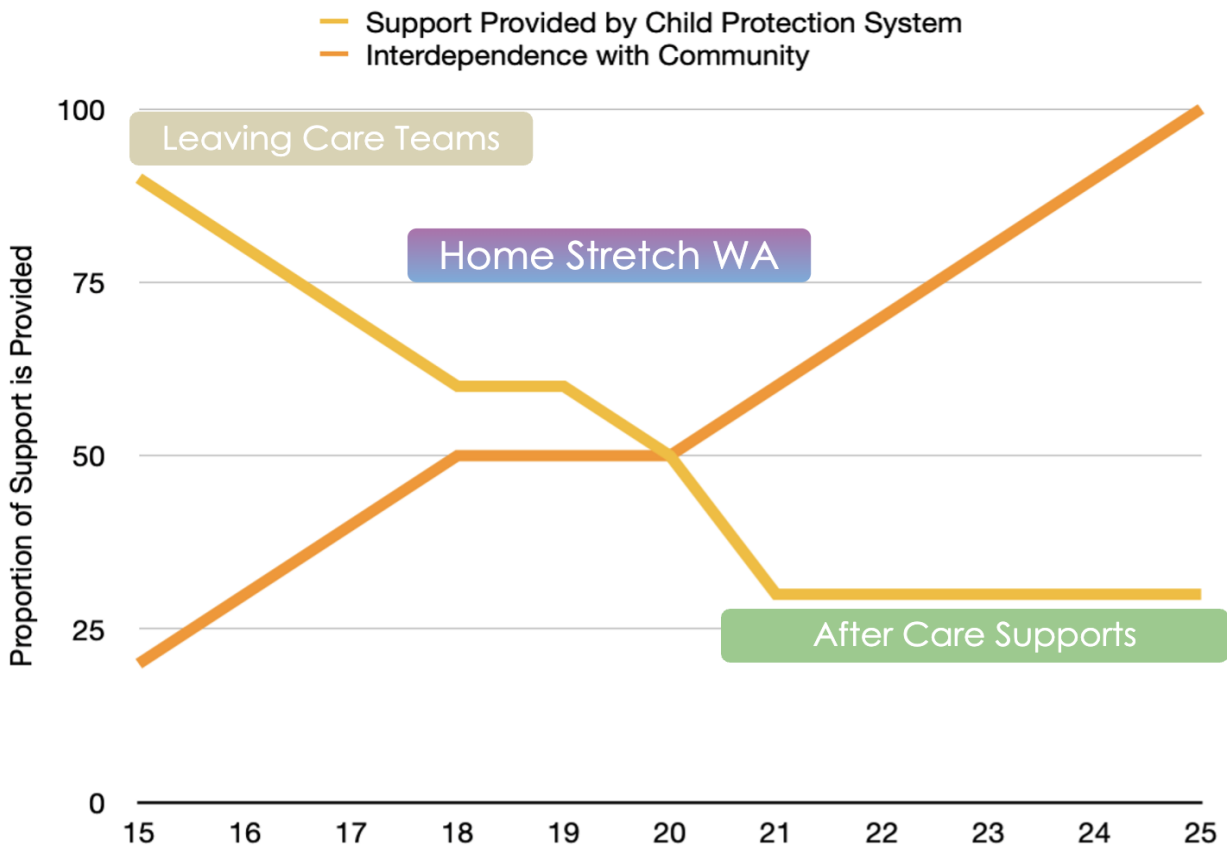
A Support Circles Approach recognises and invests in the power of these relationships to support a young person to become interdependent.

A Support Circles Approach

Home Stretch WA is about growing a young person's Interdependence - Building Connections Beyond the Child Protection System

One of the real measures of success for a Home Stretch WA service is how effective it is at building a young person's support circles.

At 21 they may not have everything sorted in their life, but they should have the confidence and connections to the people and places that are important to their future.



Young people are entitled to seek support and financial assistance from any District Office of Department of Communities, up to age of 25. By extending and then gradually reducing supports from the child protection system to the age of 21, young people are better supported to connect with supports and resources outside of the child protection system.

While some young people may need some ongoing support from specialist child protection services from 21-25, research from the United Kingdom and United States suggest that these needs are significantly reduced after introducing the equivalent of the Home Stretch WA reform.

Equipping young people with the ability to seek help independently, and advocate for themselves is part of the Support Circles Approach. As young people transition from Home Stretch it is important to help them also understand their rights, and how to approach a District Office for assistance any time up to the age of 25 if they can't access assistance through more mainstream services and supports.

A Support Circles Approach

Healthy Boundaries – An Important Foundation for Support Circles

Many young people transitioning from care will have had a number of different professional supports come in and out of their lives. This can bring about a sense of mistrust in new workers and a reluctance to want to build a connection.

The role of a Transition Coach and Home Stretch WA service is to build an authentic and positive relationship with a young person, not to act as a substitute for other relationships and connections in their life.

Having clear, transparent and healthy boundaries in your relationship with each young person is an important part of a support circles approach. If you notice that your relationship with any young people has different boundaries, talk it through in supervision with your coordinator.

Understanding Roles and Relationships

The Change Collective in Canada have created a helpful framework for understanding the nature of relationships and how they are formed.

They describe two kinds of relationships: **bonding ties** and **bridging ties**.

Bonding Ties are the strong connections between people who have shared a similar identity, experience history and/or background. These relationships pull on people in a very compelling way and give a strong sense of belonging and security. These relationships often are enduring and are long term.

For young people in care examples might include; foster carer, siblings, parents extended family, friends, young people that lived together with in residential care. Sometimes Child Protection workers may have formed **bonding ties** with young people and families they have worked with for many years.

Bridging Ties are more temporary in nature and provide an opportunity to bridge a gap in needs that cannot be met by a persons' enduring support circle. These relationships are more often ways for people to connect with more enduring relationships, new ideas or ways of doing things, providing access to information and resources beyond the immediate network.

For young people in care examples might include; transition coach, teachers, counselors, youth workers, sport coaches and other professional helping relationships.

Bridging ties can evolve into Bonding Ties! The Australian Psychological Association recommends leaving at least a 2 year gap after a professional helping relationship ends, before starting a personal connection. This allows for enough time for any unhelpful power dynamics to have ended.

A Support Circles Approach

Employing a Support Circles Approach

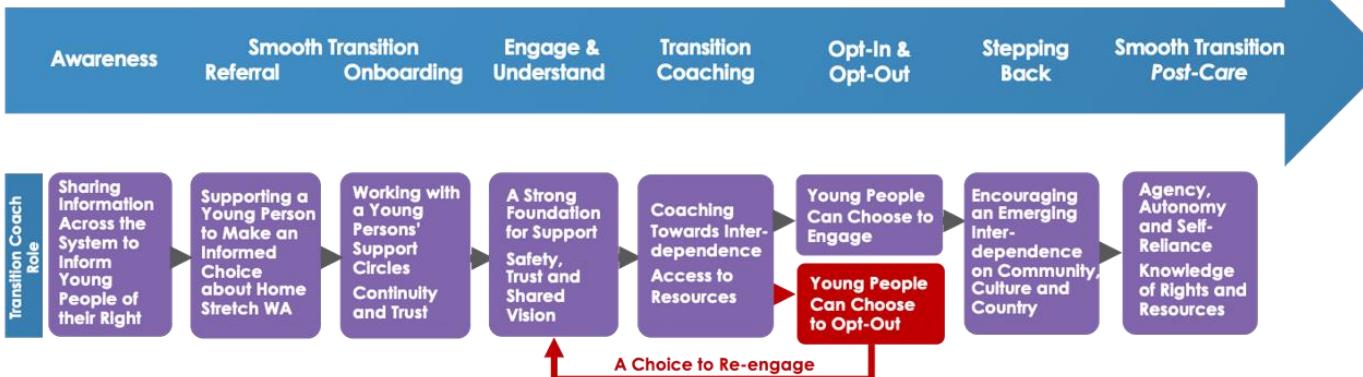
While the transition coach has access to a range of practice tools, frameworks and resources, their most powerful tool is a **persistent, consistent, reliable, strengths based, hope inducing relationship that they form with every young person.**

Employing a support circles approach means using this relationship to help a young person heal or overcome past experiences of trauma in relationships, and then using their relationship to lead a young person towards connecting and growing their support circles.

In the early stages of Transition Coaching, Transition Coaches will typically focus on building trust, safety and may provide higher levels of support. Over time, and through building a shared understanding of the young person's needs and aspirations, a Transition Coach should empower young people to be increasingly self reliant and draw on their growing resources and people from their support circles.



Stages of Transition Coaching



A Support Circles Approach

Embedding the Approach From the Start

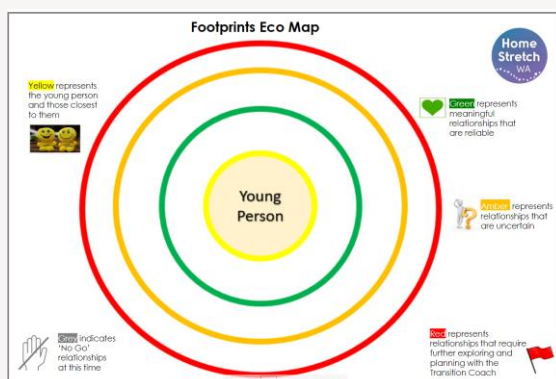
The Support Circle's approach is not a single intervention or tool that is applied, it is an overarching framework to apply to all aspects of Home Stretch

Every stage of support with young people should include some consideration of a Support Circles approach. From the point of referral, Transition Coaches should be seeking to understand who/where/what is important to the young person, and how can I strengthen their connections and sense of belonging.

While your relationship with the young person will be important, how you use the relationship is critical.

Some simple strategies that help embed a Support Circles Approach

- Ask questions about family and supports at all stages [eco mapping]
- Invite family and supports in to help problem solve
- Use the Staying On Agreement to collaborate with a foster or family carer
- Create space for young people to talk about their hopes and needs related to their relationships
- Meet in spaces welcoming and inclusive of natural supports
- Create opportunities for young people explore cultural identity and belonging
- Ask questions or do activities that will get them thinking about their circles of support and how to strengthen them
- Integrate socio-emotional learning activities into catch ups
- Create opportunities to connect family and other natural supports to the program through targeted engagements or communications
- Seek support from the Staying On Facilitator to help young people reconnect with biological family or natural supports
- Create effective transition supports so that mentoring relationships can evolve into long lasting relationships that endure beyond
- Ask young people about natural supports, and create space for them to talk about what they want and need from these relationships
- Invite and fund the costs of natural supports to be part of events and celebrations
- Provide opportunities for young people to rehearse communication skills to connect to natural supports in positive and meaningful ways
- Help to strengthen, restore and maintain relationships with natural supports through encouragement and mentoring.



Support Circles and Trauma Informed Practice

Transition Coaches must be trauma informed at all stages of their work, but it is critical at the beginning of engagement for the young person to have safety and control in the process of choosing to engage in Home Stretch WA.

This means that coaches must be aware and sensitive to the impact of trauma on young people's ability to build trust, and a deliberate attention to working in a trauma informed way.

Safety

- The environment and location of early meetings is determined and agreed upon by the young person.
- Young people are not pressured by others, and people they trust are involved in the referral process.
- Only information that is relevant to supporting a young person is collected during referral.
- Cultural awareness and respect of protocols and boundaries around relationships are maintained. Advice is sought from practice leads and culturally competent colleagues in how best to offer services and supports to young people and their families.



Trust

- The service offer is clearly communicated, along with any expectations about conditions related to the payment of subsidies or allowances.
- The Transition Coach maintains healthy boundaries and works within their role and the needs of the young person to engage them in the service offer.
- Aboriginal families and young people have the choice to engage with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation for Home Stretch WA support.
- Aboriginal families and young people have the option to have their stories and concerns heard before they are asked to make a decision about Home Stretch.

Choice

- Home Stretch WA is not a choice made on behalf of the young person, they are to be fully informed and provided an opportunity to decide at a time that is developmentally appropriate.
- Alternative supports and options for post-care are presented at the same time during the info session, in a way that doesn't bias options.
- Young people can choose to have people from their support circle attend the info session, and this is intentionally planned through the referral process.
- Where a guardian's consent needs to be obtained, the young person must also be present and have agency in decision making.

Trauma Informed Practice

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Collaboration

- Interdependence is a critical focus of the Home Stretch WA service offer, young people's support circles are mapped and opportunities for strengthening of relationships is considered in all interventions or services provided.
- Transition Coach dedicate time and effort in building genuine relationships with young people, carefully balancing formal practice with informal engagement activities.
- Young people are provided information about their transition coach before meeting with them.
- Foster and Family carers are respected and valued, and the strengths of their families in supporting their children are a foundation for the Transition Coach to build on.
- Aboriginal family kinship structures underlie the care of all Aboriginal children. Aboriginal identity has been sustained through family life and family affiliations are at the heart of Aboriginal identity.

Empowerment

- Young people are defined by their strengths and capacities, referral information captures this information as well as the challenges they face.
- Young people are equipped with information to make informed choices about the services they receive.
- The right for a young person to Opt-In and Opt-Out of Home Stretch WA is clearly communicated to them.
- Aboriginal people have a fundamental right to self-determination, and where possible Aboriginal community should be empowered to support young people through their journey to adulthood.



Transition Coaches Typically Spend a few hours per fortnight in a nominated district office, co-locating to build trust and connections between the child protection staff and Home Stretch WA Team