

Beyond the Screen

Discussion Guide for the
Documentary *Belonging*



Introduction

This discussion guide is designed to support young people, carers, and professionals reflect on the experiences shared in *Belonging: The Search for Identity in the Australian Foster Care System* (watch the film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjQryrXLdbo>)

It explores key themes of meaning making, identity, access to personal history, and Life Story Work. The guide encourages open and honest conversations, with a focus on emotional well-being and the importance of strong, supportive relationships.

1. Young person and carer - Reflecting together

Young people and their foster carers can do the following reflective activities together after watching the film.

a) Putting the pieces together



HANNAH SAYS:

"I didn't know that I was in foster care or why I was in foster care when I was little... I didn't know that I would stay there forever. I was hoping I would, but I didn't trust that I would be there forever."

Everyone grows up with their own set of puzzle pieces that make up who they are. We put our puzzle pieces together with the help of those around us. Some of our puzzle pieces include our likes and interests, our important support people, our animals and places that are meaningful or special to us. For some of us our puzzle can take a bit longer to put together than for others, especially when there are lots of changes in our lives. Hannah has grown up with some puzzle pieces from her life that fit together along with missing pieces that she really wanted to find. Sam, Nigel and Shannon were key people that supported Hannah to find some of the missing pieces of her puzzle.

Activity:

- Look at the blank puzzle pieces (printed or drawn). Fill in what Hannah didn't know about her story.
- How do you think missing pieces made her feel? How do you think she made sense of the fact there was a lot about her early life that she couldn't remember at all or else didn't understand?
- What helped her start to complete her own puzzle?

Reflective questions:

- Why do you think Hannah felt unsure about her future?
- What helped Hannah start feeling secure and connected in her new home?
- How do you think Hannah's foster parents felt when they could not immediately help her with her life story?

b) The rings of Hannah's story



HANNAH SAYS:

"I used to make up stories because I didn't understand what had happened, and I was just trying to fill in what I thought had happened."

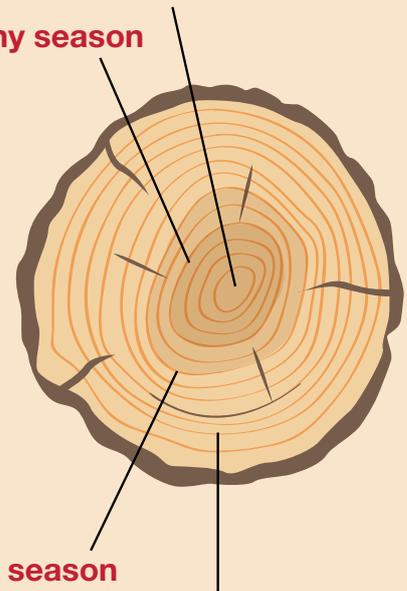
Activity: If Hannah's life was a tree...

In a way similar to how Hannah's life story was shaped by different experiences, challenges, and discoveries, the rings inside a tree tell its life history. Some rings are thinner, showing the years that were harder for the tree, while others are thicker, showing growth and security. Trees can also have scars from past events, yet they continue to grow.

- **Draw a tree trunk cross-section with rings.**
 - o Each ring represents a year in Hannah's life.
 - o Identify thin rings (times of uncertainty, when Hannah didn't know her story, e.g., moving between foster homes).
 - o Identify thicker rings (times of growth, e.g., when she started Therapeutic Life Story Work and began understanding her past).
- **Bark and heartwood reflection:**
 - o **Bark:** How do you think Hannah protected herself before she knew her story? (E.g., by making up stories or keeping people at a distance.)
 - o **Heartwood:** *Our heartwood could be considered our most inner self- who we really are at our core. This is the strongest part of ourselves.* What made Hannah strong in the end? (E.g., the support of her carers, finding out the truth about her story.)

first year growth

rainy season



dry season

scar from forest fire

Reflection questions:

- When in Hannah's life might her rings be thinner? Why?
- When did her rings **start to grow wider**? What made the difference?
- How does Hannah's story show that scars don't stop growth but become part of who we are?
- If you were to describe Hannah's heartwood, what qualities would you say make up her core strength?
- How can carers help the young person in their care grow strong rings of identity and security?

2. Carer reflection

Carers can use these activities to reflect on the film, individually or with others.

c) Navigating relationships and belonging



**SHANNON, TLSW PRACTITIONER
EXPLAINS THAT:**

“Hannah was battling demons in her mind because she couldn’t work out how to continue to love her birth mother and still let Sam into her heart.”

Activity: Circles of connection

- Draw a series of overlapping circles or other connected shapes if that is what they feel like.
- In the centre, write “Hannah” or “Me” (if doing this as a personal reflective exercise).
- In the different circles/shapes, write the names of important people and supports (rather than just people, consider opening it up to all kinds of supports which might include pets, animals, the land, places) along with birth family, foster/kin family, caseworkers, friends.
- Reflect on how these relationships influenced her journey (or your journey) – where was there connection, tension, or support?

Reflective questions:

- Why do you think Hannah felt unsure about her future?
- What helped Hannah start feeling secure and connected in her new home?
- How do you think Hannah’s foster parents felt when they could not immediately help her with her life story?

d) The locked file



HANNAH SAYS:

“I constantly asked my caseworkers questions, and they said they would come back to me with an answer, and they never did. I’d always get pushed aside, told to wait till I turned 18.”

Reflection questions:

- How did delaying access to her records (information) impact Hannah’s ability to understand her identity and who she was?
- Why might professionals hesitate to share certain information with young people?
- What are the risks of not telling young people their life history in a timely and appropriate way?
- What steps can carers take to advocate for young people’s right to know their own story?

3. Professional reflection

Professionals can complete these activities on their own or as a team to reflect on the film.

e) The emotional journey map



PRACTITIONER, SHANNON SAYS:

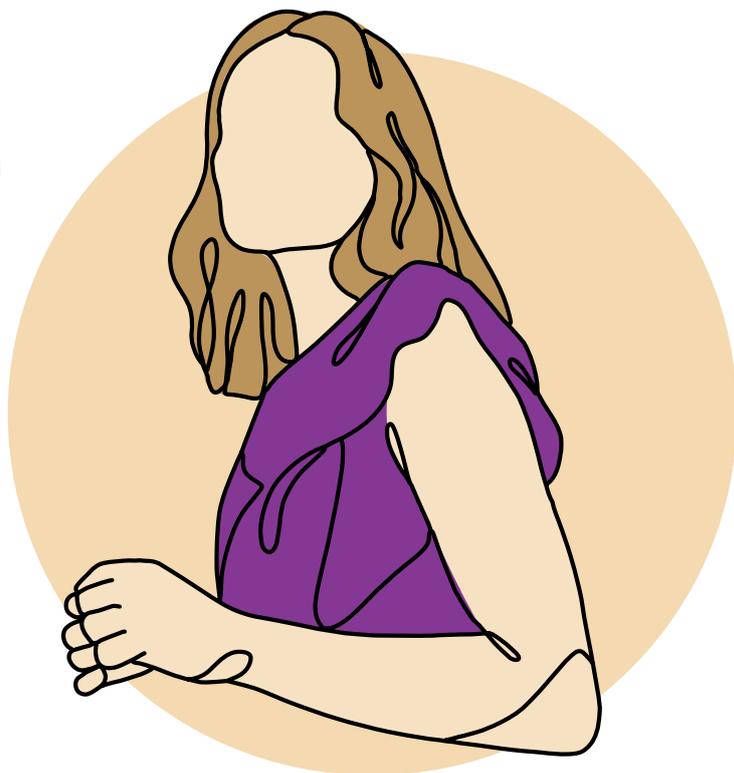
“The whole process was extremely healing for Hannah—she could understand the past, deal with the past, express her emotions.”

Activity: Mapping the journey

- Create a winding road showing the terrain of a young person’s emotional journey.
- Label key moments where support is needed.

Reflective questions:

- What are the emotions, realisations and difficulties young people face when learning their life story?
- What does Hannah's journey tell us about the importance of gradual and supported information sharing?
- How can professionals better prepare carers and young people for difficult conversations about their past?
- How can we advocate for changes in policy, funding and practice that ensure young people have access to their story in ways that are safe and supportive?



4. Making meaning



HANNAH SAYS:

"I finally learned my story... I was able to walk down the street in my community and feel proud of who I am."

- What were some of the key things that made a difference for Hannah?
- What concrete changes can we make to ensure all young people in care feel this sense of identity, self-worth and confidence?
- How can we shift the system so that young people don't have to wait until they are 18 to understand their own lives?

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