

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

Seven Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, SNAICC, is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have experienced the pain and hardship of neglect, abuse and violence, and continue to face an uncertain and difficult future.

SNAICC has identified the following seven policy priorities, each of equal importance, that we believe all Australian governments should adopt to extend recent efforts to improve the health, welfare and education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Several of these priorities require leadership from the national level and co-operation from the states and territories.

SNAICC has identified the key reforms and initiatives needed to implement these policy priorities and these are available from SNAICC and on our web site. SNAICC is committed to pursuing these reforms on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. We will work in partnership with local services, state and national Indigenous bodies, governments and non-government organisations to have them implemented.

A National Apology

A national apology, which acknowledges the harsh injustices of past child removals, and the ongoing impact of these on the health, happiness, and parenting skills of current generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a foundation upon which the success of many other initiatives will depend. When we fail to recognise how the past lives on, we allow the injustices of the past to continue.

Child removal and the economic, social and political segregation of Aboriginal people throughout Australia, for a period of a hundred years or more, laid the foundations for the unemployment, poverty, homelessness, poor educational access and family dysfunction which many Indigenous people experience today. A national apology will assist both the Indigenous community, and the broader Australian community to have faith in the Government's integrity in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare.

Healing and Education

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, adults, families and communities have been affected by family violence and child abuse. The effects of this can cause misery, stress and illness for many many years and have repercussions for future generations. Individuals, families and communities need a range of well-being programs and culturally appropriate therapies to heal their pain and suffering, overcome past trauma and learn to build healthy relationships and care for and protect themselves and others.

Fewer Contemporary Removals

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are still far more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children through the child protection systems of Australia's states and territories. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are almost seven times more likely to be removed than other children. SNAICC calls on the Australian Government and state and territory governments to set targets to progressively reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in contemporary removal statistics.

Child Protection Reforms

Issues such as poverty, illness, substance abuse and the inter-generational effects of previous Stolen Generations policies mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are more likely to need the services provided by child protection departments. Reforms to the way child protection authorities respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in these circumstances are urgently needed. Minimum standards for the care, protection and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in need of care need to be developed by communities in partnership with governments and outcomes in child protection need to be independently monitored and reported on at the national level.

Early Childhood Programs

The importance of the early childhood years has been widely recognised, but too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disadvantaged at the point of commencing primary school due to preventable health and development problems and lack of access to quality child care and early childhood education. These children may get left behind and go on to become the unemployed, marginalised and impoverished young people of the next generation. SNAICC calls on all Australian governments to better respond to the health, well-being, development, education, cultural and spiritual needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early childhood years. Additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services are urgently needed to catch up with the rapidly increasing proportion of young children in the Indigenous population

Capacity Building

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are providing many successful programs and services for families and children across the country. It is now time to provide better service coverage and expand the range of services provided, with a particular focus on prevention and early intervention programs. We need to support and strengthen the programs, resources and management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care, child development and child and family welfare services of all types and implement initiatives to overcome the critical shortage of trained Indigenous staff within the children's services sector.

Better Planning

Planning for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is currently inadequately thought-through, ad hoc and uncoordinated. SNAICC, a small community based organisation is the only national body focussing on these issues. A better-planned response to the urgent problems confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is urgently needed. This response must involve governments and community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations working closely together.

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Attachment 1

Key actions, initiatives and reforms needed to implement SNAICC's seven key policy priorities.

1. A National Apology

Action needed:

- A formal apology by the Australian Government to the Stolen Generations and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the Federal Parliament for past policies of systematic removal of Indigenous children from their homes, families and culture.

2. Fewer Contemporary Removals

Initiatives should include:

- Progressive targets for the reducing the current rates of child removal by State/Territory welfare authorities and placement in substitute care for child welfare or poverty related reasons.
- Substantially expanding funding of culturally appropriate early intervention and family support services including programs that reduce stress, isolation, substance abuse, illness and disabilities and build physical and mental health, self esteem and parenting skills.
- Support from the Australian and state and territory governments for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies, including AICCAs and MACs to have a broad family support role and be funded to deliver parenting and other family support programs
- Establishment and long term funding support for men's and women's groups within all Indigenous communities;
- A national funding program for facilitated playgroups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to provide friendships, support and information for parents and carers.
- Greater efforts by state and territory governments to increase preschool attendance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

3. Child Protection Reforms

Reforms should cover:

- Reform of the current systems of child protection to effectively provide for self determination and the transfer of child protection responsibilities to accredited community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- Minimum standards for the care, protection and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in need of care developed by communities in partnership with governments.
- Independent monitoring and reporting at the national level on outcomes in child protection.
- Ensuring compliance with (and national monitoring of) the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle through strategies including improved financial and other support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers.

- Implementing recommendations from *Bringing Them Home* in relation to National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Welfare Standards legislation and National Framework legislation
- Improvements to juvenile justice administration and a better response to a range of issues relating to detention and sentencing.
- Abolition of mandatory sentencing.
- Reforms to foster care and kinship care through the National Plan for Foster Care including
 - kinship carers (ie grandparents and other extended family members) to be provided with financial and other support, including respite care.
 - financial and other types of support for carers should be adequate and equal and based on the findings and recommendations of *The Costs of Caring*.
 - foster carers and kinship carers should be provided with accredited training and ongoing resources and support.
 - recognising the role of Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCAs) in foster care systems.
 - establish a national recruitment strategy for Indigenous foster carers
- Assessment and training for Indigenous foster carers to be managed by Indigenous agencies in accordance with agreed standards.
- State and territory governments to ensure that birth records are able to record the name of the community that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child comes from and that this information is accessible if and when alternative care is being planned.
- Development of a culturally appropriate risk assessment framework by SNAICC and government agencies for child protection systems in each state/territory which reflect local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing and cultural practices and the prevailing poor socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Arrangements for the application of permanency planning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be reviewed and the appropriateness of permanency planning negotiated with SNAICC and local AICCA agencies
- Establishment of joint government/non-government advisory bodies within each State and Territory jurisdiction, (with equal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation), to drive child protection reforms
- Staff within the government and non-government sectors with a role in child protection to be provided with systematic education and awareness of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and training in its proper implementation

4. Healing and Education

Action needed:

- SNAICC advocates that the Australian Government, in partnership between SNAICC, other national agencies a national healing and education strategy, adequately funded and supported by Government, should be put in place.

The Strategy should address:

- Healing for victims and perpetrators of family violence and child abuse,
- Education for victims and perpetrators,
- Education in protective behaviour for very young children to lessen the chance of them becoming victims,
- More education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, including those in remote communities, in sexual health, protective behaviour, life choices, rights, self esteem and parenting training.
- Empowering community leaders who are trusted and respected in their own communities to help with healing and education

- Programs addressing familial sexual abuse with elements to address the needs of the victim, the other children in the family, the non-abusive parent and the abusing parent.

5. Early Childhood Programs

Initiatives should include:

- Expanding the number and operation of the range of Commonwealth funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) Playgroups, JET Creches, Resource Agencies and other early childhood services to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to culturally appropriate quality childcare, preschool education and other early childhood supports.
- Establishment of a partnership process between SNAICC, FaCS and the National Child Care Accreditation Council to develop national quality standards and an accreditation system for Indigenous child care provision that encompasses cultural and family values. This partnership process should aim to:
 - engage the existing different service providers to Indigenous families
 - reflect the cultural base and focus on supporting child development with the Indigenous child care sector
 - develop a set of quality standards and accreditation process which builds on the existing strengths of services
 - provide for flexibility through transferable quality standards which are applicable across all the existing segmented service types ie long day care, occasional care, OSHC, family day care
 - include culturally relevant assessment and evaluation including Indigenous peer review
- Comprehensive promotion of the importance of the prenatal period generally and the issue of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome specifically within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and distribution of information on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome to all hospitals, health workers and child care services working with Indigenous children across the country – including small, rural and remote communities.

6. Capacity Building

Initiatives should include:

- Establishing an Indigenous Children's Services National Workforce Development Strategy. This Strategy should identify and respond to the workforce needs of Indigenous child and family welfare and early learning and care services. The NWDS should include the following elements:
 - Tri-lateral approach between the Australian and state and territory governments and non-government sector, (SNAICC).
 - Carriage should rest with the National Community Services and Health Industry Training Board
 - Development of nationally recognised Indigenous early learning and care qualification (Level 4 and above)
 - Nationally recognised entry level training for the Indigenous child welfare field
 - Training delivery strategies that are culturally appropriate, accessible and which address the need for replacement staff costs and on-the-job and distance education modes; and
 - Recognition of Prior Learning that is appropriate to the life experiences of Indigenous people.

- Continuing and expanding funding for the National Indigenous Family and Children's Resource Centre with a focus on developing culturally appropriate community based child abuse prevention programs, supporting program and service development within Indigenous family and children's services and promoting best practice and collaboration in service delivery.

7. Better Planning

Initiatives should include:

- National and state benchmarks for all government services to ensure planning takes account of the high proportion of Indigenous people under the age of 30 – (70%) and the increasing demand for services focused on children;
- Establishing under COAG, the Council of Australian Governments, a National Indigenous Child Welfare and Development Council as a partnership between SNAICC, other national Indigenous organisations, the Commonwealth and each state and territory government to plan and implement long term programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Council should:

- be supported by and report to the Council of Australian Governments, COAG
- pursue recommendations from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for national Indigenous child welfare standards and legislation
- monitor implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle nationwide
- provide advice in relation to the compliance and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- oversee the development of models for child protection in rural and remote Indigenous communities
- research and develop well-being outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care including in the areas of resilience, cultural identity and spirituality
- pursue child protection reforms which can effectively respond to the disproportionately high levels of child neglect linked to family poverty within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- develop a nationally co-ordinated approach to the expansion of early learning and care services, programs and support to meet the needs of the increasing population of Indigenous children