



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The national peak body for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander children and families
www.snaicc.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

21 October 2014

We can and must do better for our vulnerable children

SNAICC Deputy Chairperson Geraldine Atkinson has told a Canberra forum celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that Australia had a legal and moral responsibility to protect the rights of its most vulnerable children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The forum at Parliament House was part of a week of celebration to mark Children's Week, which runs from 18 to 26 October, and Universal Children's Day on 22 October.

Ms Atkinson called on governments to use a human rights approach to deliver sustained improvements in the health, education, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children — some of the nation's most disadvantaged citizens.

Ms Atkinson told the forum that the 2012 Australian Early Development Index had found a staggering 43.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally vulnerable — twice the rate of non-Indigenous children.

"The impact of this vulnerability on health, child protection, justice, welfare, housing and employment outcomes is enormous," Ms Atkinson said.

"We know that despite the importance of education in improving these indicators, many of our children do not experience a positive educational trajectory."

Ms Atkinson said only 1.9 per cent of children at child care services were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, despite comprising 4.6 per cent of the child population.

"This means that many children are missing out on critical support and development opportunities in these first few years," she said.

"These trends continue throughout later schooling life...Less than half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students complete year 12, compared with 81% of non-Indigenous children."

While mortality rates had improved, Ms Atkinson said far too many Indigenous children still suffered from basic health problems, such as impaired hearing and eyesight, that impacted on their development and education outcomes.

Ms Atkinson said disadvantage and intergenerational trauma were major factors in the alarmingly high and escalating contact of vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families with the child protection system.

As of June 2013, there were 13,299 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. This is a removal rate of over 10 times that of non-Indigenous children.

Ms Atkinson called on the Australian Government to implement practical measures outlined in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2012 review of Australia, which recommended action across several key areas, underpinned by greater Indigenous participation in policy development and service delivery.

The UN committee:

- recommended action to ensure that all children enjoy the same access to, and quality of, health services, with special attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children living in remote areas
- expressed its concern that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children face difficulties in accessing education, and experience lower attendance, literacy, numeracy and other educational attainment levels
- recommended that the Government prioritise early childhood education between the age of 0 and 3 years, and that this is provided in a holistic manner that includes overall child development and strengthens parental capacity
- said the Government should consider providing free or affordable early childhood care to increase the availability of early childhood care and education for all children, and
- recommended that the Australian Government focus on prevention and intensive support services, and that it strengthen support to families in vulnerable situations to prevent or ease abuse and neglect of children, and to give preference to family-based care.

“These recommendations provide a lens through which we can see the areas where we require change and targeted attention, and direction on how to go about this,” Ms Atkinson said.

“And they remind us that what we are talking about is the fulfilment of our children’s human rights.

“In addressing these recommendations, we must therefore take a strategic, human rights based approach...(which) looks at what the causes of disadvantage are and what institutional changes are needed to address them.

“Such an approach seeks to redress power imbalances and discrimination at a systemic level — and so it works towards sustainable change.”

Media inquiries: **Frank Hytten, SNAICC CEO, on (0432) 345 652;**
 John Burton, SNAICC Policy and Resources Manager,
 (0401) 878 063
 Giuseppe Stramandinoli, SNAICC Media Officer, (0419) 508 125