



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Programs for vulnerable children and families must consider impacts of trauma, says Aboriginal expert**

Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson will tell a major children's conference this week that government programs and services for distressed children and parents must consider the impacts of trauma or they will continue to fail.

Professor Atkinson, a Jiman and Bundjalung woman and an expert on trauma and healing, will run a workshop and give a keynote speech at SNAICC's Fifth National Conference in Cairns from 4 to 6 June.

"It is only in recent years that services have come to understand the impacts of trauma on a child's development. While we acknowledge the impacts of the Stolen Generations, for example, we have not clearly understood the generational distress on parenting and lifestyle," Professor Atkinson said.

"Government policies influence service development and delivery. If governments fail to understand the critical need for a trauma-informed approach to distressed children and their families services will fail.

"Further, most educational programs have not been informed, and so we graduate students from our universities who are inadequately skilled to respond to the needs of traumatised populations."

Professor Atkinson said there was a "small but significant percentage of Indigenous children who live in environments where family members may have complex trauma, perhaps because the parents themselves were removed as a child and have difficulty parenting."

"Parents with a complex trauma diagnosis may suffer depression, uncontrollable rage, suicidal feelings, addictions, overreaction to minor stress, extreme mood swings, to name a few," she said.

"Consequently such parents are less likely to be able to provide the nurturing caring environment a child needs for healthy growth, because of their own unmet needs."

Professor Atkinson said this intergenerational trauma, which includes family or domestic violence that is repeated across generations, compounds and becomes more complex down the generations unless it is healed.

**SNAICC: The national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

According to Professor Atkinson, programs and services also need to take into account developmental trauma, which may result from abuse, neglect or experiencing violence during a child's early life, as well as a change in primary care giver in the early years. Developmental trauma can have negative effects on cognitive, psychological and neurological development.

“I work from a healing model which is trauma informed, embodied within the belief I have, that ‘educaring’ is the most important response to the needs of Indigenous children,” she said.

“The use of cultural tools for healing, in art music theatre dance and story, all provide a nurturing space for children to grow and reach their full potential.

“The emphasis we have on the three 'Rs' should be balanced by the seven 'Rs': respect, rights, responsibility, relatedness, reciprocity, resilience-resonance, which support the growth of creative caring human beings.”

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