



Briefing to State and Territory Governments

Briefing

**Development of a *National Action Plan* and
National Indigenous Children's Well Being and Development Taskforce
to prevent and respond to Indigenous child abuse and neglect**

Prepared by

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
(SNAICC)

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Overview

SNAICC welcomes the current Federal Government focus on Indigenous child abuse and neglect in the Northern Territory. The suffering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families has been overlooked by the Federal Government or passed off as a state or territory responsibility for far too long. Unfortunately the current ‘emergency’ measures are restricted to the Northern Territory, short term and may not have a lasting impact. SNAICC therefore continues to demand a properly planned response to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across Australia.

In SNAICC’s view the way forward from here is for the Federal Government to lead the development of a ***National Action Plan to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect within all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*** with the support and involvement of states and territories, SNAICC and other representative Indigenous organisations.

This Action Plan must, among other things, fund short and long term measures and programs to reverse the over representation of Indigenous children in child protection and inadequate access to schooling and further education. This will require investment from all states and territories as well as the Federal Government.

To support the Action Plan the Federal Government must convene a ***National Indigenous Children’s Well Being and Development Taskforce*** including representation from all state and territory governments, SNAICC and other Indigenous organisations to develop measures for consideration at COAG. The Taskforce should report directly to COAG whose role should be to oversee implementation of the Action Plan on a long term basis.

In SNAICC’s view a National Action Plan should include elements which:

- Improve access to Indigenous community based early childhood, childcare, family support and child welfare programs;
- Ensure the appropriate levels and forms of policing within communities are in place to enable people to speak out against violence and abuse without placing their own safety at risk and ensure a rapid and thorough policing response;
- Ensure child protection systems are well resourced to respond when called upon to properly investigate and intervene where children are at risk of abuse or neglect;
- Focus interventions on removing the risk and perpetrators from children rather than children from their families and communities;
- Maintain children’s rights to be connected with their extended family and community and their cultural and spiritual heritage; and
- Recognise and build on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and kinship systems.

A more detailed outline of SNAICC’s views and background information about SNAICC is outlined below.

Preventing and Responding to the Abuse and Neglect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

SNAICC's views can be summarised as follows:

- ***Sustain a planned and coordinated response across and between governments at the national level***

Issues such as children's well being and development cut across all portfolios of government and involve significant policy and programs areas where States, Territories and the Commonwealth have overlapping responsibilities. It is well established that there is high population growth within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and a higher proportion of children in the population. Despite this there is little or no planning at the state, territory or national levels to take account of the increasing number of children within communities and the increasing demand for access to essential services.

The participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool services, childcare, schooling and further education is already and will continue to fall. Access to health, housing and other basic services is already falling and it will continue to fall simply due to the age structure of the Indigenous population. Equally the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that have to be removed from their families for their own protection will continue to escalate – unless we escalate our efforts in relation to prevention, early intervention and family support. This will require a nationally planned response with formal funding agreements between levels of government to significantly lift investment in early childhood and other essential services.

- ***Respond holistically to child abuse and neglect***

Child abuse and neglect need to be dealt with through supports and interventions which span the continuum of family support, primary prevention, early intervention and statutory intervention. As in the broader child protection field there is a growing recognition that insufficient emphasis has been placed on prevention and early intervention. Developing supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families which span this continuum is particularly important if long term change is to be achieved in the face of the volume, severity and complexity of presenting abuse and neglect cases and issues within remote and other communities.

- ***Focus on child well being and development***

Evidence of the value to families, children and the broader community of investing in early childhood should not be ignored yet it is arguable that despite this evidence and wide spread community concern for the well being of Indigenous children governments are failing to provide Indigenous children with equitable access to early childhood development programs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are under represented in all forms of early childhood services including preschools, kindergartens, childcare services and programs, playgroups and family support programs.

- ***Expand community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Welfare Agencies***

Whilst the late 1970's and early 1980's saw some community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare agencies (known in many locations as Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies AICCA's) established, these organisations require additional capacity. In most states and territories there has been a failure by governments to adequately support existing AICCA's or fund new AICCA's to meet community needs.

This failure is in part due to the lack of discussion, negotiations and agreement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, SNAICC and state, territory and Commonwealth governments on their respective roles and responsibilities in the area of child welfare and protection. In essence there is no agreement on what AICCA's should be focussed on and no recognition from government that AICCA's and similar community based child and family welfare organisations are essential services which should be established, supported to develop and funded within all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

There are at present just over 30 such agencies operating in Australia, about the same number as two decades ago, and most of these are relatively small agencies with just a few staff and a restricted role focussed on placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have already been removed from home by state welfare authorities.

Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies need to be expanded in scope and number to provide community based services and programs focused on child abuse prevention, early intervention, family support and when required specialist advice and support for children that must be placed in out of home care.

- ***Expand and broaden Indigenous Children's Services***

By the 1980s early childhood education for Aboriginal children was becoming a national issue. The National Aboriginal Education Committee noted in 1985 that the early childhood education of Aboriginal and Islander children should strengthen their identity and the curriculum and methodology should be flexible and take account of the home life of the child.¹ Assertions such as these and the movement for self determination and community management led to the development of Indigenous models of children's services including the Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), a 1987 initiative funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community. The MACS model provided the scope for an Aboriginal managed service with Aboriginal staff to provide a range of programs for Aboriginal children according to community needs including long day care, occasional care, play groups, after school care, vacation care, transport and support and information for parents.

From the start restriction of funding, licensing requirements and staff availability meant that there was often a large gap between the ideal of the MACS model and what could actually be achieved. This remains the situation today. Much work remains to be done before MACS and similar models of multi-functional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services can achieve their potential and before all Aboriginal communities have a MACS or similar service to meet their early childhood and family support needs.

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should have access to a MACS or similar model of children's service to meet their child care, child development and family support needs, particularly during their children's early years. SNAICC is looking to the development of the Australian Government's National Indigenous Child Care Plan later this year to indicate how the gaps in children's service provision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be filled.

The ongoing development of Indigenous children's services that provide culturally appropriate programs that build on families strengths and capacities is a major goal for SNAICC and much of our work is centred on supporting and resourcing these services to deliver programs and services focussed on child abuse prevention, early intervention, family support and early childhood development.

- ***Strengths based practice, family centred programs and Indigenous culture as a source of resilience***

SNAICC believes that it is critical to work with communities, families and children in a manner which builds upon and extends their existing strengths. Even within the recently highlighted cases of remote communities gripped by the high incidence of violence and abuse there are families and programs which are achieving significant outcomes for children. The orientation of services and programs must be to support families to build on their strengths and enhance the capacity of families to care for their children. Services and programs must avoid undermining the role of families as the main source of nurturing and guidance for children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and child rearing practices should also be utilised as a key resource for building children's resilience, self esteem, sense of identity and self confidence.

- ***Focus on underlying socio-economic issues that lead to child neglect***

Whilst the recent focus on child abuse has brought national attention to the plight of many Indigenous children there is a risk that the underlying socio economic causes of child neglect will continue to escape public attention and government action. Child neglect is the most significant and common reason for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be removed from their families and placed in care. As is the case for all groups of children, family poverty, inadequate housing, poor community infrastructure, high levels of unemployment and limited or no access to support services are the major causes of child neglect. The negative impact of these issues lies largely beyond the control of individual families and communities and requires action and investment from governments to be resolved or ameliorated.

- ***Focus on Indigenous children's right to culture***

SNAICC has throughout its history undertaken research and spoken out to raise community awareness about the issues that are of central concern to our members: child abuse and neglect, child poverty, family violence, child protection and out of home care and early childhood development. SNAICC has also maintained a broad agenda and spoken out on a range of national issues including national land rights legislation, native title, child poverty, the need for a National Apology and compensation for the Stolen Generations and the application of United Nation's

human rights conventions within Australia such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

One of SNAICC's core values is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should have unique rights within Australia as the Indigenous people of this land. The birthright that each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is privileged to inherit is a unique cultural and spiritual heritage that stretches back over 40,000 years. The Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child can only inherit their culture and allow their spirituality to emerge through the experience of culture, connection to family, community and place and experiencing the spiritual awareness that evolves from these experiences and connections. All the key portfolio areas of government such as health, education, community services, employment, income support and law and justice share the responsibility with SNAICC of making sure that, whatever their family circumstances, no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child is denied this birthright.

Background on SNAICC

History

SNAICC is the national non-government peak body representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with a particular focus on children's well being, protection and early childhood development. SNAICC was established in 1981 by Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCAs) – agencies which directly work with families and children particularly where child protection concerns have arisen. The AICCAs established SNAICC to advocate on behalf of children at the national level and to seek a coordinated long term national approach to children's well being and development.

From the late 1990's SNAICC has broadened its membership base beyond Aboriginal agencies specialising in child and family welfare to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations working in the field of early childhood education and child care.

SNAICC Today

By 2004 SNAICC had grown to an organisation with a network and subscriber list of over 1400 community groups, mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but also significant numbers of non-Indigenous community based services and individuals with an interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.

SNAICC is governed by a national executive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people drawn from our members representing both child and family welfare services and early childhood services from all states and territories and operates from an office located in Melbourne with funding provided by the Australian Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

A major change in 2004 was the announcement of an additional four million dollars over four years (2004/05 -2007/08) under the Australian Government's National

Agenda for Early Childhood and Stronger Families and Communities Strategy to establish and manage the National Indigenous Family and Children's Resource Service (NRS). NRS projects focus on resourcing and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services to deliver programs focussed on child abuse prevention, early intervention, family support and early childhood development. This funding increase has significantly boosted SNAICC's capacity and shifted the organisation from the small group of 1-3 people that it was for its first twenty years to an organisation that has quickly grown to fourteen full and part time staff.

SNAICC Publications and Activities relating to child abuse and neglect

Listed below is an overview of some of SNAICC's recent activities and a list of some relevant resource and background material.

State of Denial

In July 2003 SNAICC published, *State of Denial: the Neglect and Abuse of Indigenous Children in the Northern Territory*. (available at www.snaicc.asn.au/publications) The report outlines serious flaws in child protection policy and practice in the Northern Territory including a lack of resourcing for Aboriginal child and family welfare agencies to deal family violence and child abuse and neglect and includes a series of reform proposals.

SNAICC Resource Service

SNAICC's 2003- 2006 Strategic Plan identified the ongoing development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based children's services as a major priority. SNAICC's key achievement in relation to this priority has been the establishment of the National Indigenous Family and Children's Resource Service launched by Senator Kay Patterson Federal Minister for Family and Community Services on 4 May 2004.

SNAICC was granted four million dollars over four years (2004/05 -2007/08) to establish and manage the SNAICC Resource Service (SRS). The SRS was funded under the Australian Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood and Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. SRS projects will focus on resourcing and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services to deliver programs focussed on child abuse prevention, early intervention, family support and early childhood development.

Our Future Generations: National Indigenous Child Welfare and Development Seminar.

As the major event to recognise SNAICC's 20th anniversary SNAICC convened *Our Future Generations: National Indigenous Child Welfare and Development Seminar* in July 2003.

- The seminar brought together a total 177 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations from all states and territories as well as representatives from other community and government agencies (a total of almost 300 people). The Seminar was an opportunity for SNAICC to gather together many of the people that have contributed to its success and for people to share ideas and hear presentations from inspiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

The Seminar led to two major publications from SNAICC:

- i) *Our Future Generations National Indigenous Child Welfare and Development Seminar - Seminar Report*: a detailed report of the

Seminar proceedings and recommendations is available at
<http://www.snaicc.asn.au>

- ii) *7 Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families*: SNAICC policy statement (enclosed).

Ngadluko Ngartunnaitya: For our Children 2007 SNAICC National Conference

In September 2007 SNAICC will convene a major national conference in Adelaide focussed on the well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The conference will bring together Australian and International speakers and four hundred community, government and industry representatives to share their energy, wisdom and commitment to the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Achieving Stable and Culturally Strong Out of Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

In November 2005 SNAICC published *Achieving Stable and Culturally Strong Out of Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* www.snaicc.asn.au/publications a major policy statement outlining an approach to out of home care that meets children's cultural and spiritual needs as well as their need for stability and security.

The National Indigenous Child Care Plan

SNAICC successfully advocated the Australian Government to develop a plan to guide the future development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care. The National Indigenous Child Care Plan was commissioned by the Department of Families, and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in 2005 and developed in 2006 following an extensive consultation phase involving SNAICC and many SNAICC members throughout the country. (see briefing paper on Indigenous childcare at www.snaicc.asn.au/news/briefingpapers)

National Plan of Action for Prevention of Abuse and Neglect

SNAICC produced at the request of the Commonwealth A National Plan of Action for Prevention of Abuse and Neglect. The Plan was accepted but never implemented (copies available from SNAICC).

Comparison of National and International Indigenous Child Protection Systems

SNAICC undertook a project for the Department of Human Services Victoria to assist them in the formulation of legislation, policy and programs relating to Indigenous child welfare and protection. University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Law Faculty was employed to conduct an international literature review analysing research on the Canadian and New Zealand Indigenous Child Protection models to determine an international perspective that would be appropriate to Australian child protection systems. The project looked at the strengths and weakness of Australian state and

territory child protection programs in order to determine a broad understanding of the national picture and identify any key elements that might be applied or may be constructive contributions to Australian child protection systems. It is anticipated that the final report will be available by August 2006.

National Aboriginal Family Violence Roundtable July 2003

In July 2003 Muriel Bamblett the SNAICC Chairperson attended a meeting of indigenous leaders and experts in Canberra on Wednesday 23 July to discuss the issue of domestic violence in indigenous communities. The Prime Minister indicated he wanted to “talk to those who are providing community leadership in addressing the tragic consequences of the abuse of indigenous women and children”.

He went on to say...”We are determined that out of this meeting we will initiate further action to tackle the abuse of indigenous women and children.”

The full statement from the Prime Minister about the Roundtable and list of participants is available on the COAG website (<http://www.coag.gov.au/meetings/250604/index.htm#indigenous>)

National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, (NAICD), is an annual event celebrated on August 4th each year having been established by SNAICC in 1988.

The aim of NAICD is to demonstrate how important children are to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Through focussing on a different theme each year NAICD draws attention to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and major issues SNAICC is pursuing on their behalf.

With funding and support from ATSIC and the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services SNAICC has produced posters and leaflets featuring original artwork to represent the theme with these materials distributed free by SNAICC throughout the country. At the local level community based children's services throughout the country such as the AICCA's and MACS organise local celebrations and free activities with a focus on children and families.

In 2003 National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day drew attention to the issue of child abuse with the theme: *Not Now, Not Then, Not Ever: no excuses, speak up against child abuse: break the silence, protect the kids.*

Fathers and Children Posters

SNAICC through the SNAICC Resource Service and in collaboration with the Engaging Fathers Service based at Newcastle University developed a range of local and national posters to reinforce the positive role of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, nephews, cousins, brothers in the well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and assist local communities and organisations to develop their own culturally appropriate posters and materials.

Through Black Eyes – Responding to Domestic Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

In 1991 and 1992 SNAICC produced and distributed this handbook to assist workers in community based and government agencies and community leaders to identify and respond to family and domestic violence. Over 20,000 copies were distributed and Through Black Eyes was one of the first publications to encourage communities to take responsibility for violence and respond

Through Young Black Eyes

In 2002 and 2005 SNAICC fully updated and re-published Through Black Eyes and re-titled the publication Through Young Black Eyes. The change in title was to give emphasis to the impact of violence on children. Through Young Black Eyes has been a highly successful resource to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities prevent and respond to family violence, child abuse and neglect.

Available at www.snaicc.asn.au/publications

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services Working Group

SNAICC participated as a member of the cross jurisdictional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, a national policy forum involving senior government representatives from all states and territories focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare.

ⁱ National Aboriginal Education Committee (1985), Philosophy, Aims and Policy Guidelines for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Education, AGPS, Canberra , Cited in Compulsory Years of Schooling, Schools Council National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in the Early Years, Project Paper No. 4, July 1992, AGPS, Canberra. Cited in Aboriginal Children: Back to Origins, Brian Butler, Family Matters, No. 35, August 1993, pp 7-12.