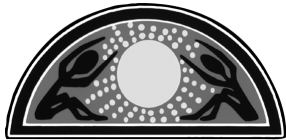




Policy Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

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A strong voice for our children and families
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SNAICC is the national non-government peak body
that advocates on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander children and families.

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and voice

The best outcomes in community well-being and development for Indigenous peoples are achieved where those peoples have control over their own lives and are empowered to respond to and address the problems facing their own communities. Numerous reports and inquiries in Australia have consistently confirmed a lack of robust and meaningful Indigenous community participation as major contributors to past failures of government policy. Broad and representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice at the national level to inform policy making and review of policy implementation is central to effective policies and programs that reflect the needs of communities and service sectors, and build on their strengths.

Priorities

Five year adequate funding to SNAICC and other key national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies.

2. Invest in the early years

Environments that support optimal early childhood development greatly increase the likelihood of a successful transition to school; positive learning outcomes at school; and enhanced life education, employment and health (Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)). Long term randomised trials show that 95% of disadvantaged children attending an effective early years program between the age of six months and three years achieved an IQ within the normal range, while 45% of those who did not fell within the same range. The impact of the program was minimal after age three. Evidence also confirms that engagement in early childhood education and support services reduces risk of harm to a child, and subsequent involvement with statutory child protection authorities, as well as reductions in remedial services and criminal behavior in the longer term. With nearly half the number of Indigenous children each year developmentally vulnerable (AEDI), a rate *twice* that for non-Indigenous children, a focus on change in the early years is fundamental to Closing the Gap.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, where they exist, are a community development engine that nurtures and protects children, and supports families to raise children healthy and proud. They prioritise children most in need and provide a culturally supportive, accessible environment that overcomes many barriers these children and their families often face. The impact of services however is multiplied in Indigenous communities with benefits to workforce development and employment, local governance, leadership, family stability, health and community empowerment.

*"I don't think we've ever thought this place is about strengthening just children, this place is about building a stronger community."
(Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre)*

Priorities

A 10-year integrated child and family service program –*Early Years Pathways*. This would support, under clear and principled program criteria:

- Demonstrated education and care models drawn from the current Budget Based Funding program, including the mobile services, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, playgroups, crèches and out of school hours care services, 80% of which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;
- The 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centres; and
- At least 40 new services in disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or remote communities across each Australian jurisdiction.

The new services would be based on capacity and needs, to provide integrated service support to children and families, including: early childhood education and care; health; additional needs; parenting support; family violence; drug and alcohol support; family outreach and transition to school etc. All services would need to comprise an evidence based education program, with clear indicators measurable for outcomes for children.

3. Education celebrating and supporting the unique strengths and needs of our children

Effective evidence based transition to school programs are a fundamental but overlooked aspect of preparing children, and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, for a successful school life. Children and families' first experiences of school have significant implications for educational and broader developmental outcomes, and for future engagement with educational institutions. This is accentuated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who experience higher vulnerability and exclusion in early childhood, including particularly low enrolment and attendance rates in preschool and early childhood programs.

Positive transition to school experiences can be facilitated through supported transition programs that focus on, amongst other elements: partnerships between schools, families and early childhood centres; children's academic, social, emotional and physical readiness for school; and applying a multidimensional, holistic approach. These programs require specific resourcing, a culturally competent and contextually targeted approach, and the active engagement of all relevant stakeholders.

Priorities

- Embed evidence on effective transition to school for Indigenous children into early childhood and primary tertiary courses;
- Establish a discrete 3 year funding program to support evidence-based transition to school programs within early childhood education and care services and schools across Australia; and
- Prioritise the transition to school as a foundational building block within educational policies, plans and programs.

4. National leadership to Close the Gap in over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection system

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their homes into out of home care at incredibly high rates - in fact nationally at a rate 10 times that for non-Indigenous children. This rate has continued to increase in recent years despite multiple child protection inquiries and reforms. These inquiries are consistent in their focus on the need for:

- (a) greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in child protection decision-making; and
- (b) greater resource allocation and focus on prevention and early intervention.

The causes of overrepresentation are recognised as complex, including the legacy of past policies of forced removal, intergenerational effects of separations from family and culture, poor socio-economic status and perceptions arising from cultural differences in child-rearing practices. Promising approaches that redress these causes and build on what we know works are available and require consistent and widespread support to see change on the ground.

There has not been significant, consistent take up of recommendations in the different state and territory inquiries. Clear and strong leadership from the Federal Government has potential to have a significant impact. A base has been provided through the National Framework for the Protection of Australia's Children. The next step is a direct link to the Closing the Gap agenda, where community safety remains a major gap. A clear target and monitoring mechanisms would see renewed focus and commitment to empower communities to ensure child safety, well-being and development.

Priorities

Introduce a Closing the Gap target on child protection.

5. Priority for early intervention

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's children 2009-2020* recognises the need for a systemic shift to preventive measures to achieve a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia. This is in line with the evidence that a public health model weighted to preventative service delivery is critical to better outcomes for children and families. Despite this acknowledged priority, expenditure on reactive and remedial statutory child protection services continues to increase relative to expenditure on family support and other preventative measures. This must change if the objectives of the National Framework are to be realised.

Even where services are available, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are substantially disengaged from service systems. Evidence is clear that community-controlled, Indigenous specific and culturally competent services enhance access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Supporting community-based and led service development and delivery is critical to quality service provision and to promote community development, empowerment and employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Priority actions:

- National early intervention reinvestment targets adopted through COAG of at least equal expenditure on early intervention family support to expenditure in the statutory system within 5 years.
- Put in place contracts to ensure that each place-based initiative is led by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisation or is governed by a partnership agreement that supports capacity development and transfers control and authority to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation with clear timelines.

6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in child protection decision-making

The central importance of Indigenous participation to quality and effective child protection decision-making for Indigenous children is strongly supported by Australian and international evidence, and informed by human rights standards. Independent and representative participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is critical to ensure an alternative cultural lens that reflects the importance of family, culture and community in deciding the best interests of children. Participation also promotes broader goals of community development and empowerment.

Research indicates limited implementation of participatory policy and legislative requirements, and significant compliance and accountability gaps where Indigenous organisations do have a role in child protection decisions. Despite the evidence, and in-

principle commitment to participation, only two Australian jurisdictions resource local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to contribute to child protection decisions state-wide. This represents a significant failure of Australian Governments to implement core recommendations of the *Bringing them Home* report (1997).

Priority Actions:

- Measures to strengthen independent and representative participation incorporated into a national strategy for improving compliance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle adopted under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*.
- Fund SNAICC to work with 20 communities to develop local governance structures to identify and manage child protection risks within community, including referrals to integrated family support and statutory child protection service partnerships.

7. Cultural competence of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Access to family services for vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families requires strong commitment to the development of capacity for Indigenous led and managed services; the development of cultural competency; and the development of genuine partnerships that promote both of these aims. In particular, a recent Australian National Audit Office report highlighted that building the role and capacity of Indigenous organisations is not only important for effective service delivery, but an important policy objective in its own right to promote local governance, leadership and economic participation, building social capital for Indigenous peoples.

Positively, in recent years the FaHCSIA Family Support Program (FSP) has introduced Indigenous Access Plan requirements for service providers. However, these plans place the onus on mainstream service providers to set access targets when they may not have the skills, expertise or relationships needed to develop cultural competence. SNAICC recognises the importance of not over-burdening services with 'red tape'. Cultural competence should be built through an integrated framework that directly informs organisation practice and development. This is in line with the broader understanding of cultural competence as an ongoing developmental process of building relationships, trust, knowledge, skills and attitudes.

We see the strongest development in cultural competence where mainstream services are establishing genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. These are contributing to local empowerment, capacity growth and employment, for example the promising approach in the out-of-home care sector in NSW (See *Developing Capacity Through Partnerships*, SNAICC & AbSec).

Priority actions

- Incorporate a developmental cultural competence framework into:
 - (a) contracts for Family Support Program providers, such as that developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency for community services accreditation standards in Victoria; and
 - (b) the National Quality Standard for early childhood education and care services;
- Support FSP and ECEC service providers through training, such as SNAICC's *Working and Walking Together* training, with additional support for mentoring and facilitating relationships at the community level;
- Identify gaps in community-led family service capacity and adopt a capacity-building partnership model to empower local communities to deliver services.