

# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family-Led Decision-Making: Summary Evidence Review

## Executive Summary

This review considers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family-Led Decision-Making (AFLDM) in child protection contexts. It was commissioned by SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children and undertaken by a consortium including Lumenia, Arney Chong Consulting and the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The review brings together a synthesis of recent grey and peer-reviewed literature, alongside insights from a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Governance Group of practice experts, SNAICC and our Consortium members.

AFLDM is a rights-based approach to child protection decision-making that works best when it is culturally grounded and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. When done well, it strengthens participation, relationships and outcomes for children, families and kin. Across Australia, AFLDM is used in different ways. While the evidence base is still growing, available research points to strong benefits, especially for family engagement and culturally safe decision-making.

## What the evidence shows

- AFLDM supports active efforts to put the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle into practice, supporting self-determination, children's voices and cultural connection.
- Australian studies are limited, but national and international research on family-led decision-making shows high satisfaction, stronger family involvement and broader support networks.
- AFLDM is associated with more kin placements, better care planning, stronger family relationships, and in certain contexts fewer removals, less court use and shorter time in care. Results vary due to differences in how programs are designed, delivered and evaluated.

## Current gaps in implementation

- AFLDM differs widely between states and territories in legislation, funding, timing, referral pathways and access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led facilitation.
- Many programs are under-funded or short-term; as a result, families may access AFLDM mechanisms too late, in limited ways, or through processes that reinforce government control, rather than genuine family-led decision-making.
- Heavy workloads, workforce turnover, gatekeeping and limited authority for facilitators reduce use and weaken the original intent of AFLDM.

## What good practice looks like

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership:** AFLDM should be designed, governed and delivered by First Nations organisations, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators, Elders and cultural governance. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are the decision makers in this process, and retain authority over the implementation and facilitation of AFLDM.

- **Early and ongoing use:** AFLDM should be the standard approach to decision-making, from early intervention and pregnancy through to ongoing planning – not just at crisis points.
- **Embedding child safe standards and children’s voices:** Children and young people’s voices and wishes are central to the AFLDM process, and practitioners should be supported to uphold children and young people’s rights to participation.
- **Strong support:** Families need time, preparation, child-inclusive practice, safe and accessible venues, language support, and follow-up to put plans into action with wrap-around services.

## Policy implications – what changes are needed?

- **Stronger laws and standards:** AFLDM should be the default decision-making process for major child protection decisions, supported by clear national standards and nationally consistent training frameworks.
- **Long-term funding:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led, community-controlled AFLDM services need stable, fair funding that recognises the distinct operational realities of regional and remote service provision; supports workforce sustainability, travel, training and evaluation; and enables self-referral by families.
- **A rights-based process:** AFLDM should be treated as an ongoing human right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, not a one-off or optional program, with accountability focused on family-defined goals.
- **Culturally grounded AFLDM training:** Provide national training frameworks and training provision for AFLDM convenors that can be locally tailored and that set minimum expectations for convenor skills, cultural authority, knowledge sets and practice approaches.
- **Strengthening partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and statutory child protection agencies:** Strengthening partnership frameworks, clarifying legislative obligations and improving referral pathways are essential for embedding AFLDM as a proactive, preventative practice, rather than a crisis response tool.

## Learning and evaluation priorities

- **Integrate wise practice alongside best practice:** Training, practice frameworks and evaluation should include “wise practices” – principles grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing – alongside Western evidence-based practice.
- **Develop locally grounded theories of change** that value family voice, cultural authority, connection and empowerment as outcomes, and which recognise that some outcomes can take time to achieve.
- **Build long-term, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-governed evaluation** that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty, governance and ethics, and which tracks quality, cultural integrity and benefits for families, while avoiding surveillance or cost-cutting misuse.