



Aboriginal Child Safety

The safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people is the paramount consideration for AbSec. All children have the right to feel safe, nurtured and valued, and to grow up healthy and strong in nurturing environments. The safety of children is linked to the security of their families and communities as well as the accessibility of appropriate support systems¹. Safe and secure family and community environments can protect children from physical and emotional harm and promote life-long well-being. Cultural connection also contributes; children who are removed or become isolated from their cultural and community networks are more vulnerable to abuse and less able to seek help².

Aboriginal young people identified relationships across their families and communities, including the important role of Elders, and connection to culture as central to their experience of safety³. They emphasised the enduring nature of these connections, contributing to their feeling of safety in the present as well as supporting them into the future for lifelong wellbeing. In hearing the voices of Aboriginal young people, it is clear that approaches to safety must strengthen Aboriginal families and communities, investing in community-led, culturally embedded initiatives that build on the strengths present in communities; protective relationships (including extended family and community ties), strong Elders and cultural enrichment.

Crisis responses, while necessary in some cases to ensure the safety, welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, must also take this broader view, simultaneously safeguarding Aboriginal children in the immediate and longer term, and look to capitalise on safety conferred by enduring positive relationships with the broader family, kin and community networks. Such an approach also recognises the potential risks within the out-of-home care system with respect to child wellbeing outcomes, particularly where Aboriginal children are disconnected from their families, communities and culture, deprived of important lifelong relationships and identity.

Child Safety in the NSW Child Protection System

All children have the right to be properly cared for and safe, protected from violence, abuse and neglect. While a child's parents are responsible for the primary care of their children, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* reflects the "it takes a village" adage, identifying a role for communities and the State in supporting parents in caring for children, and the imperative to intervene effectively where a child's safety is threatened⁴. These rights are enacted in NSW through the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, which outlines the statutory requirements to uphold the safety, welfare and wellbeing of all children and young people.

This is implemented through frameworks and tools including risk and safety assessment, family and carer assessment, care and protection decision making and out-of-home care service provision which are predominantly developed by non-Aboriginal processes and delivered through organisations that are not Aboriginal community controlled or accountable to Aboriginal communities.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014) *Indigenous child safety*. Cat no. IHW 127, Canberra, AIHW

² SNAICC et al (2014) Response to Issues paper 4: Preventing sexual abuse of children in out-of-home care

³ Youth Report: AbSec Youth Ambassador Program (2017), AbSec NSW

⁴ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Articles 9, 19.

In Practice

Given that community-led approaches that reflect a deep understanding of Aboriginal families and capitalise on family, community and cultural strengths are likely to be best suited to promoting the safety, welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, significant reforms are needed to promote the immediate and long term safety of Aboriginal children and young people. This includes:

- An understanding of safety that moves beyond immediate risk but also appropriately considers the long-term safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people, and recognition of the sense of safety provided through positive relationships with family, kin and community, grounded in culture.
- Development and implementation of Aboriginal designed and validated risk and safety assessment frameworks to guide decision making with respect to Aboriginal children and young people. Such frameworks will include the participation of Aboriginal families and communities in decision making about risk and safety, including at the point of removal, and provide clear guidance for best practice. Importantly, the voices of Aboriginal children and young people must also be heard, both collectively in the design of these frameworks and in their individual circumstances, with their views given due weight.
- Development of Aboriginal Practice Standards for all organisations providing services in Aboriginal communities that outline the minimum benchmarks and expectations
- Support for Aboriginal community-controlled processes to identify priorities and develop community-led responses, particularly investing in preventative approaches at the primary (Tier 1) and secondary (Tier 2) levels to mitigate the need for crisis responses.
- Aboriginal children who enter out-of-home care must be supported to maintain positive relationships and connections to family, community and culture. Aboriginal community-controlled agencies are best placed to support Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.
- Support, assistance, counselling and services must be provided to assist vulnerable and abused Aboriginal children and young people to heal and intervene in perpetuating the cycle of trauma and abuse. These services are best positioned within accredited ACCOs, and must be expanded to create a state-wide safety net.
- Improved compliance of leaving care planning, building skills and formal and informal support networks for Aboriginal children and young people to promote resilience for young people transitioning to adulthood. Again, this is best supported within the context of a comprehensive Aboriginal community-controlled safety-net of services providing Aboriginal family and community strengthening.