



YAP



Youth Report

AbSec Youth Ambassador Program

CEO Message

The AbSec Youth Ambassador Program (YAP) is an initiative that aims to provide a platform for Aboriginal young people to engage with the child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) sector in NSW. Given the ongoing over-representation of Aboriginal children within these systems and its profound effects on many of their lives, AbSec is working to ensure the voices of Aboriginal young people are heard right across the sector, influencing services and supports to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal young people.

The purpose of the AbSec YAP is to:

- motivate and inspire the non-government sector and wider community
- pursue priority areas as identified by the Ambassadors
- influence government and decision-makers
- speak publicly, with support from AbSec, on experiences and issues impacting Aboriginal young people across NSW.

AbSec values the diverse perspectives of Aboriginal young people from different geographic locations, communities and with different life experiences. The AbSec YAP is open to any Aboriginal young person in NSW who is passionate about the Aboriginal child welfare system. Aboriginal young people with personal or family experience of the child protection or OOHC systems are particularly encouraged to nominate.

It's humbling to hear the views of Aboriginal young people and I am honoured to present the YAP report following consultations undertaken by the Ambassadors across the state with young people who have experienced the child protection and OOHC systems.

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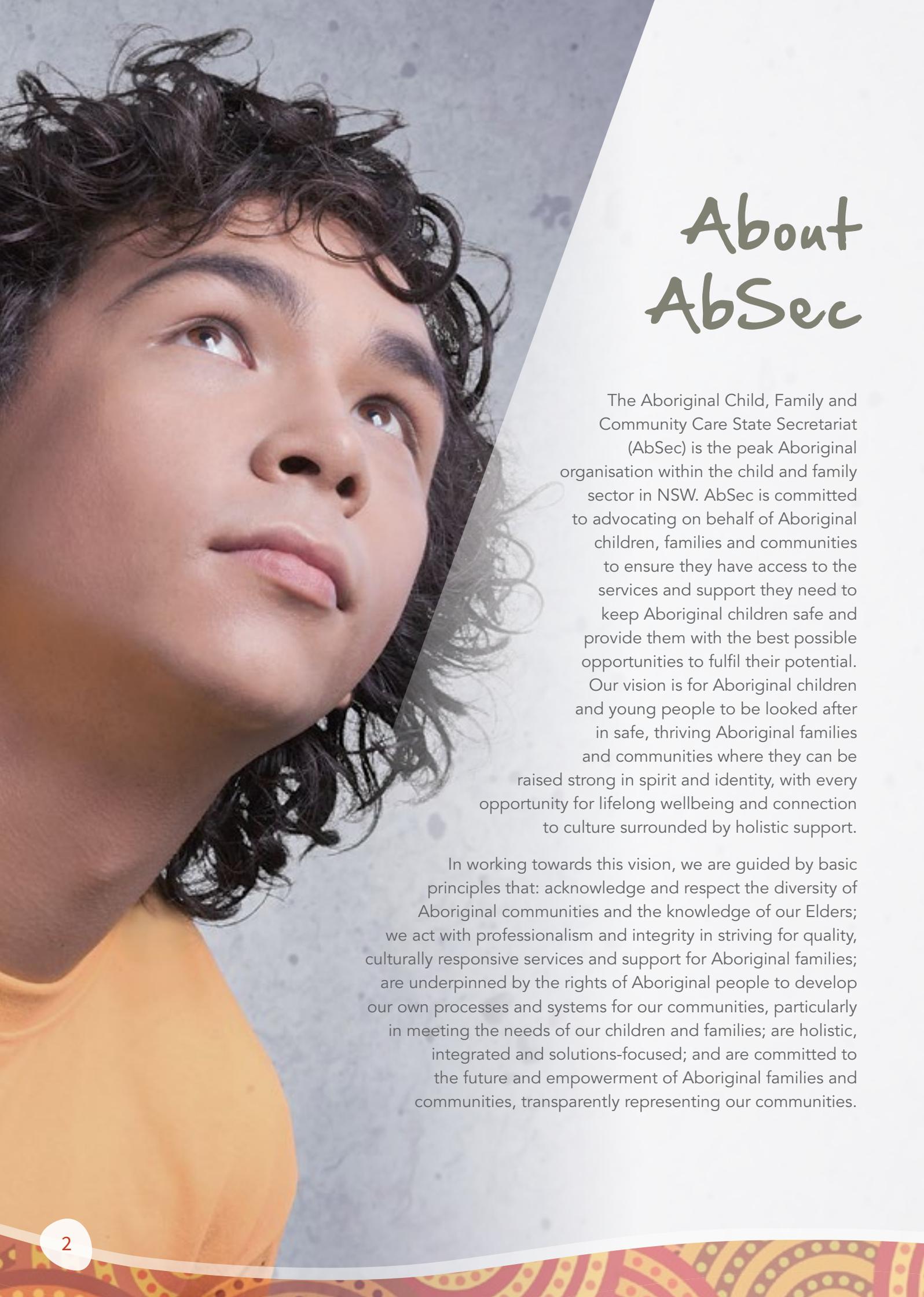
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About AbSec

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) is the peak Aboriginal organisation within the child and family sector in NSW. AbSec is committed to advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children, families and communities to ensure they have access to the services and support they need to keep Aboriginal children safe and provide them with the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Our vision is for Aboriginal children and young people to be looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities where they can be raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture surrounded by holistic support.

In working towards this vision, we are guided by basic principles that: acknowledge and respect the diversity of Aboriginal communities and the knowledge of our Elders; we act with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and support for Aboriginal families; are underpinned by the rights of Aboriginal people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children and families; are holistic, integrated and solutions-focused; and are committed to the future and empowerment of Aboriginal families and communities, transparently representing our communities.

Acknowledgements

AbSec would like to acknowledge the contribution of all Aboriginal children and young people reflected in this report. In particular, we acknowledge the commitment and effort of AbSec's Youth Ambassadors, who have played a central role in engaging with their peers and other stakeholders across the sector, drawing on their knowledge to advocate on behalf of Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those affected by the child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) systems.

AbSec's office stands proudly on the lands of the Cadigal people of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge the Cadigal people and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, and extend this to all Aboriginal peoples across NSW.

Welcome from AbSec

This report is the inaugural report of our AbSec Youth Ambassador program, prepared by AbSec on behalf of, and in conjunction with, the AbSec Youth Ambassadors. It reflects their work over the last 9 months, since the commencement of the AbSec Youth Ambassador program, and outlines their priorities and plans over the coming 12 months. In particular, this report presents the main themes arising from a series of conversations with Aboriginal young people in a number of communities across NSW, including a number of young people currently in OOHC. These conversations, led by the AbSec Youth Ambassadors, provided an opportunity to hear directly from Aboriginal young people in NSW about their aspirations and concerns. In respecting the voices of Aboriginal young people, it is our responsibility to provide a clear platform to elevate their voices, to listen to their views and act on their behalf, creating the social environment to meet their needs and facilitate their aspirations.



Our AbSec Youth Ambassador Program



Aboriginal children and young people continue to be significantly over-represented within the NSW child protection system, comprising approximately 29% of those involved in child protection services and almost 37% of the OOHHC population.^{1,2} However, despite the child protection system continuing to have a significant impact on the lives of Aboriginal children and young people across NSW, they enjoy little opportunity to participate in and inform the systems and processes that affect them.

All children and young people have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously in all matters that affect them.³ In NSW this is reflected in both the Child and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 and the NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care, which emphasise the need to engage with and give due weight to the views of children and young people. However, when it takes place this participation is often limited to decision-making in individual cases, with children and young people not provided with an opportunity to participate collectively in the development of the legislative and policy frameworks in which these decisions occur. With this in mind, AbSec developed the Youth Ambassador Program with the aim of providing a platform for Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those affected by the child protection system, to have their voices heard in the development of the legislative, policy and practice frameworks that affect their lives. This initiative reflects AbSec's commitment to the rights of Aboriginal children and young people and the need to support their voices for an effective Aboriginal child and family sector, and was not actively supported by government.

The AbSec Youth Ambassador Program was launched in July 2015. Following a state-wide expression of interest process, the inaugural Ambassadors were brought together in October 2015 to develop a work plan reflecting their own priorities, including:

1. the need to ensure that efforts are made to limit as much as possible any trauma as a result of the experience of removal and to acknowledge cultural protocols

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016), *Child Protection Australia 2014–15*.

2 It is noted that while this may reflect those indicated as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in official records, there are concerns within Aboriginal communities about the accuracy and rigour of existing processes to identify Aboriginal children and young people. In particular, there are significant concerns about processes that 'de-identify' Aboriginal children, often without adequate participation of Aboriginal people. This caveat must be kept in mind when reviewing such figures.

3 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2. greater focus on Aboriginal culture and identity, including a culturally informed understanding of family and community
3. greater participation in decision-making of Aboriginal people, including families, communities, and children and young people themselves.

Since then, the AbSec Youth Ambassadors have participated in a number of events and engagements around these priorities and other relevant issues, including invited discussions with FACS practitioners, NSW Police, the NSW Ombudsman and the Advocate for Children and Young People, and they have engaged with practitioners at the AbSec Statewide Conference and participated in the Ministerial Forum *Our Kids Our Way – Hearing the Voices of Aboriginal People*.

At the Ministerial Forum, AbSec Youth Ambassadors shared their experiences of the OOHC system and spoke of the need for greater support aimed at strengthening families and keeping families together. In particular, some Ambassadors were keen to point out that the source of harm in their lives had been non-Indigenous people, a point they felt was important in dispelling misconceptions they saw perpetuated about Aboriginal families. Ambassadors also raised important points about the need for greater participation of Aboriginal families and communities in decision-making about the care and protection of Aboriginal children, including listening to the voices of young people themselves. Ambassadors also reflected on what they saw as a lack of commitment to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, which they described as being central to good decision-making in the best interest of Aboriginal children and young people.

Ambassadors also talked about the need for a greater focus on culture, particularly for those not placed with their Aboriginal families.

Finally, while proud of the things they had achieved, Aboriginal young people present at the Roundtable expressed strongly that these successes reflected their own efforts and that of those who cared for them, and was not a result of a planned systemic approach aimed at achieving these outcomes for young people.

More recently, the AbSec Youth Ambassadors led focus groups with Aboriginal young people, including those in OOHC, across a number of communities. Four focus groups with Aboriginal children and young people were held in three communities including South-west Sydney, Dubbo and Moree. Two additional sessions focused directly on children and young people in OOHC were also conducted, involving children and young people from four communities including Kempsey, Nambucca Heads, Taree and Tamworth. In total fifty-seven Aboriginal children and young people participated in the consultations from seven Aboriginal communities, including twenty-five children and young people in the OOHC sessions. However, it is acknowledged that community sessions likely also included young Aboriginal people who have had some experience with the care system or were currently in OOHC. The ages of participants ranged from ten years of age through to twenty-three with the median age being fourteen. Of the fifty-seven participants, about two-thirds were female.

These conversations focused on issues of safety, community concerns and their aspirations for the future, with the main themes explored in this report.

Following are the details of the questions asked and the consultation findings. Consultation questions one, two, three and four explored safety and the concerns young people have about their communities. The themes that came out from these questions form the basis of this *AbSec 2016 Youth Report*, and reflect what Aboriginal young people consider important to them.

What we heard in-depth

QUESTION

1 What does being safe mean to you?

“ Safety is an issue of significant concern for all children and young people. This was particularly important to us, as AbSec Youth Ambassadors, given our focus on Aboriginal child safety and the care and protection of Aboriginal children. We wanted to talk to Aboriginal young people about what safety meant to them, and to better understand the things that contribute to their feelings of safety.

In our conversations around this question, young people focused on the importance of relationships in helping them to feel safe, loved and supported. They spoke in particular about their relationships with family (including extended family), with peers, and with their communities, including community Elders and local Aboriginal networks.

When talking about relationships with family members, it was clear that young Aboriginal people used this term broadly to include their parents, siblings, grandparents, aunties, uncles and cousins. Many young people spoke of the importance of the relationships they have with family members, demonstrated by responses such as *'being around good people, family members, aunts, uncles, cousins etc'*, *'being safe with my brothers, sisters or friends'* and *'to have a family that wants you, to look after you and be there for you'*. In our role as AbSec Youth Ambassadors, we've discussed the need to reflect a broader definition of family within the child protection system. This is important in drawing on family networks for support, identifying placements and in maintaining a child's connection to their family in OOHC. Our conversations with Aboriginal young people in OOHC also reflected this need, emphasising the importance of connection to family and lifelong relationships: *'having someone by your side all your life'*.



Relationships with friends were also important to young people, with comments including *'being around good friends'* and *'having supportive family and friends'*. Young people spoke of their friends at school and in the community, including at local sporting clubs and other recreational groups.

The importance of close and lasting relationships, particularly with family but also within their communities was consistent across both those in OOH and those from the broader Aboriginal community. Aboriginal young people also spoke about safety, including being free from violence and protected from harm, having your physical needs met and being supported to access opportunities and recreation. Some responses also referred to the role of community organisations, including police and schools, in their ideas of safety.

“ close and lasting relationships, particularly with family but also within their communities

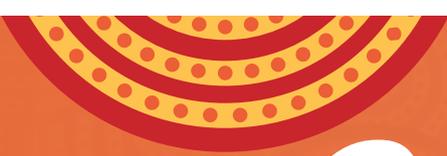
AbSec's perspective

It is clear that Aboriginal young people see strong, close and enduring relationships as being central to their experiences of safety. While other responses touched on important issues of being free from violence and protected from harm, and providing a foundation for recreational and other opportunities to promote wellbeing, it was the relationships with family, peers and their community that were seen as the central element of achieving safety.

Further, these conversations revealed a broad definition of family for Aboriginal young people, including aunts, uncles and cousins, and potentially other kin relationships.

Given the central role of relationships, it is apparent that meaningful attempts to promote safety for Aboriginal children and young people must start with the genuine engagement of their social networks, including family, peers and community. This has clear implications for the child protection system in particular, with greater need to empower Aboriginal families and communities, including young people themselves, in discussions about their safety needs. Aboriginal young people identified that these conversations must also include

local service providers including police and schools, developing a local network to support Aboriginal children and young people and contribute to their feeling of safety and belonging. From a child protection perspective, greater engagement with family and community is needed to support safety planning and (where needed) the alternative care of Aboriginal children and young people. This might include the development of local community engagement bodies, building on the *Guiding principles for strengthening the participation of local Aboriginal community in child protection decision-making* and AbSec conceptualisation of local Aboriginal child safety governance bodies, to engage with FACS at the local level on issues of Aboriginal child safety. Further, these responses emphasise the importance of the full implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, which emphasises the importance of family and community in the care and protection of Aboriginal children and young people. With Aboriginal children and young people clearly outlining the important role of family and community relationships in their feelings of safety, it is up to us to work more closely with these networks to promote their experience of safety.



QUESTION

2

What are the things in your community that make you feel safe and deadly?



We wanted to build on the previous question about what safety means to Aboriginal young people by asking about what the things are around them that promote their feelings of safety and help them feel deadly.⁴

In our conversations, Aboriginal young people again spoke about their relationships with family and community, including specific mention of Aboriginal community Elders in many cases. Many of these responses emphasised the importance of being connected to, and spending time with, their family, including comments like *'being connected'*, *'going to see family members'* or more simply *'family'*. As above, both those in OOH and those from the general community talked about the importance of these connections.

In some cases, these conversations were connected to culture, with responses such as *'talking with and having around our parents, Elders and relatives'* and *'knowing your language'*, or referring to specific respected Aboriginal people in their communities. Further, it was important to see their culture valued by their broader community, as reflected in responses such as *'broader community to do their best to acknowledge our culture'*, *'learning about Aboriginal history in school and from family'* and *'Aboriginal education officer and teachers'*.

As with the previous question, Aboriginal young people also commented on the importance of opportunity (education etc) and recreational activities including sport, and the important role of community services such as responsive police, health services (including, in particular, mental health services), education and Aboriginal community organisations and observances.



“ it was important to see their culture valued by their broader community

⁴ In Aboriginal English, this word refers to feeling good/great, feeling strong, confident etc.

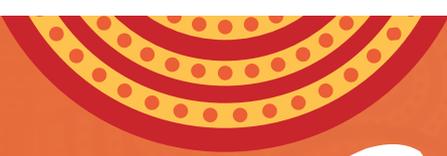
AbSec's perspective

As we discussed above, it is clear from these two questions that relationships, culture and respect are central to the safety, welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal young people. In facilitated peer conversations on the topic of safety, what helps them feel safe and promotes their wellbeing, Aboriginal young people consistently spoke about the importance of their relationships with family and community. Further, they spoke about the importance of culture, including community Elders and other Aboriginal organisations. In particular, it was important to Aboriginal young people that their culture was respected by the wider Australian community, including being valued and taught within the school system. In responding to this clear view, there is a need for greater local partnership and support for cultural strengthening, including the integration of Aboriginal culture, language and perspectives in local institutions such as school.

Going further, young people also spoke about the importance of recreational and other opportunities as being important for their wellbeing. There was a significant focus on the importance of educational opportunities, demonstrating that Aboriginal young people in this age cohort have a particular focus on their future and the opportunities that may be available to them, and the need for a strong educational foundation.

Young people also identified the importance of roles such as Aboriginal education officers in school engagement. Finally, the importance of mental health services was also identified, emphasising the need to ensure that appropriate counselling and mental health support was available and accessible for all Aboriginal young people.





QUESTION

3

Is there anything you're worried about in your community?



Next, we turned the conversation to the sorts of things that worry Aboriginal young people in their local area. We wanted to understand the sorts of challenges they faced, and get their perspective on the real issues and priorities that need to be addressed.

Across all of our conversations, the issues of drugs, alcohol and other risk-taking or criminal behaviour within their local area was their main concern. This included street violence and sexual assault, as well as family violence.

The issue of drug and alcohol use across communities was clear in all of our conversations with Aboriginal young people, with particular focus being their concerns about the drug 'ice' as seen in comments such as *'ice, drugs and the people who take them'*. These concerns focused both on the harms of drug use itself, as well as other community harms associated with drug use, including increased crime (including violent crime) and other health risks. These issues were seen to impact on the social opportunities of Aboriginal young people, reflected in comments such as *'Underage drinkers, young people taking drugs and fighting, sometimes starting on me'* and *'Not being able to go to parties without being hurt because of the use of drugs and alcohol'*.

As AbSec Youth Ambassadors, we have also spoken about the need for more effective interventions for drug and alcohol abuse and family violence. We have spoken about the connection between drug and alcohol abuse and family violence, and the need to provide holistic support that can address these related issues. We know that this has significant implications for Aboriginal children and young people and their entry into the child protection and OOHC systems. If we are to reduce the number of Aboriginal children entering care, we need better and more accessible services to address drug and alcohol abuse.

While most responses to this question focused on worries related to drug use and crime, a small number of young people raised other issues, including the risk of cultural loss and 'Sorry Business', discrimination, racism and inequality. Other broader issues were also noted, including deforestation and international politics.

Having asked Aboriginal young people about the things that they were worried about, we also wanted to get their views on how these challenges could be overcome. What were the critical features and who were the stakeholders that would help responses to be effective and actually make a real difference in their lives?

AbSec's perspective

It is clear that the main worries for Aboriginal young people who participated in these focus groups was the incidence of crime (including violent crime) and drug and alcohol abuse in the community. Greater effort is needed to address the exposure of young people to drugs, alcohol and crime. As noted by the AbSec Youth Ambassadors, issues of drug and alcohol abuse and family violence are often related to involvement with the child

protection system and entry into OOHC. Community-led solutions in partnership with local government and Aboriginal-community-controlled service providers are needed to address the concerns of Aboriginal young people at the local level, engaging with Aboriginal young people themselves on solutions where relevant (particularly with respect to youth crime and drug and alcohol use).



“ more effective interventions for drug and alcohol abuse and family violence

QUESTION

4

How do you think your community can overcome these challenges?

“ In general, young people identified the need for community and local services to work together on these challenges. However, there was a wide variety of ideas and suggestions, ranging from the need for a larger police presence in their local community, particularly late at night, the need for Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers to support local police efforts, through to education programs, better service relationships, and greater community control – ‘*Aboriginal people dealing with Aboriginal communities*’ and ‘*working with Elders*’. Young people suggested promoting greater community awareness of the services that were available in their communities, perhaps through open days or other community events, as well as greater investment of needed services, including drug and alcohol treatment centres and access to mental health. One suggestion was for local-level public surveys to find out what people in the area wanted and needed.

A number of suggestions also related to the issue of cultural strengthening, building on previous conversations regarding the loss of culture. This included comments about teaching culture at a young age (*‘as early as possible’*) and increasing the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in school.

“ young people identified the need for community and local services to work together on these challenges

“ cultural strengthening

AbSec's perspective

It was clear from these conversations that Aboriginal young people were absolutely engaged in trying to find suitable solutions for the concerns they had identified. Broadly, their ideas emphasised that they valued the role of local services including police and schools, but also saw a significant role for their Aboriginal community, and the need for greater community engagement in the development of effective solutions. This was particularly represented in the suggestion for locally based surveys to directly engage with local communities about their needs.

As noted above, development of local community governance processes will facilitate conversations at the local level to identify priorities and develop community-led responses that are likely to be most effective.

Community awareness and education programs were also identified, particularly with respect to addressing drug and alcohol issues, and it is likely that these services will be most effective if developed in partnership with young people themselves.

Similarly, Aboriginal children identified the need for greater investment in cultural strengthening. Given culture and community connection was identified as something that makes Aboriginal young people feel 'safe and deadly' (as outlined above), greater investment in local cultural-strengthening initiatives (including language revitalisation), and inclusion within school and other institutions is likely to be well received by Aboriginal young people, contributing to their sense of community belonging.





What hopes Aboriginal children and young people hold for their future



Having discussed with young people their perspectives on safety, their worries, and things that could be done to address these issues, we wanted to turn to their future. We wanted to know what Aboriginal young people aspired to for their future and the kind of support they felt would help them to make their vision a reality. We also wanted to know the things that Aboriginal young people wanted to see for their communities for future generations.

To start a conversation about these issues, we asked Aboriginal young people *'What are some of the deadly things you hope for your future?'* Their answers reflected themes around opportunities in employment and education, family and relationships, financial security, safety, equality and respect, and community and cultural connections.

Aboriginal young people we spoke to were clear in their view of the importance of financial security through career and education opportunity. This was demonstrated through responses such as *'having a house and car'*, *'no poverty'* and *'no financial stress'*. Similarly, many made note of their goals and aspirations, which included responses such as *'teaching degree'*, *'be successful'* or *'good career'* and *'become a superstar'* and *'football career'*.

Aboriginal young people also talked to us about their wish for greater equality of opportunity. Responses such as *'a world where everyone is treated equally and given the same opportunities i.e. school and employment'*, *'more opportunities for Aboriginal people'* and *'be respected as an Aboriginal person by [the] wider community'* reflected their belief that there are currently limited opportunities for Aboriginal people within their communities, with Aboriginal young people feeling that Aboriginal people are not respected within the broader community.

Aboriginal young people also talked about their relationships with their families and communities as being an important part of their future. In some cases, Aboriginal young people reflected on difficult relationships within their families and communities. Some of the comments included *'family to be all together and not to fight or exclude one another'* and *'to have family all around me'* as well as *'talk to my family'*, *'get along with my mum'* and *'have something to do with my dad'*.

The importance of family relationships was also present in our conversations with Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC.

As we noted earlier, many Aboriginal young people tended to use 'family' to refer to a broader group of people in their lives.

Lastly, some Aboriginal young people took this opportunity to build on previous questions, with some responses related to the eradication of drugs and general crime, and the hope for no violence and general wellbeing of themselves, their families and their community. *'For my family and friends to be safe'*, *'happiness, keep fit and active'* and *'low crime rates'* are a few examples of answers related to these themes.



“
greater equality
of opportunity

AbSec's perspective

Overall, answers focused around the prompt 'What are some deadly things you hope for your future?' were generally consistent across the different consultation groups with the aforementioned themes. As a general trend, the children and young people involved in the consultation seemed to hope for better education and employment opportunities, to be respected as a cultural community, to have sufficient contact with their families, to see a decrease in crime rates and drug use, and to be able to have a rewarding career doing what they love that allowed them to exercise self-determination, ultimately resulting in financial security. The question that followed explored the ideas that the children and young people offered surrounding how they could reach these goals and realise their hopes for the future.

It is clear that Aboriginal young people see significant value in education as a stepping-stone to future employment and career opportunities, which in turn are central to their desire for financial security for themselves, their families and communities. However, there was also a view that such opportunities are not equally distributed, with little respect given to their perspectives and aspirations as Aboriginal people. Although there has been significant focus on improving opportunities for Aboriginal children and young people, including those in OOHC, it appears that the efficacy of such approaches is dependent on the underlying principles of participation and self-determination. That is, the creation of opportunities for Aboriginal children and young people needs to be mindful of their cultural perspectives and basic respect and dignity as Aboriginal people, even if many of the goals are, broadly, similar (that is, financial security, economic opportunity, education and careers). To achieve this, the empowerment of Aboriginal families and communities, and by extension, Aboriginal children and young

people themselves, is central to securing the future and aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people.

Family and family relationships, noting a broad conceptualisation of family, are central to the future aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people. Clearly, Aboriginal children and young people – including those in OOHC who may not currently be placed with, or have much contact with, their families – view their families as important for their future success in life. However, these relationships can also be somewhat challenging for young people, who sometimes find them difficult or observe strained relationships within their families. As noted above, despite these challenges, stronger relationships within families is central to the aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people.

This conversation emphasises the need for significantly greater investment in Aboriginal family strengthening, both at the community level as well as targeted at those families demonstrating greater needs. Further, the full application of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, including family participation in decision-making and placement decisions that seek to build and maintain familial relationships, placing children with their family wherever possible, is a central element to facilitating connections to family for those in OOHC. This includes care plans that clearly emphasise the need for ongoing and meaningful connections between Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC and their families, with appropriate monitoring to ensure that these plans are properly implemented, particularly where children are not placed within their Aboriginal family. Such connections are also central to the maintenance of culture, which we saw above is seen as critical to the opportunities and aspirations of Aboriginal young people.

Enabling goals and aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people



Building from the previous question, we also asked Aboriginal young people about the tools and support they needed to realise these aspirations and build stronger communities for future generations by asking *'What do you need to make this happen?'* and *'What are some deadly things you'd like to see happen in your community for future generations?'*

Again, Aboriginal young people spoke about relationships, education and general support, access to services and funding, cultural strengthening and community organisations. Answers like *'a good education'*, *'pay attention in school'* and *'encourage younger generations to stay in school'* once again indicate the role that children and young people see education and school playing in having greater opportunities in the future. Similarly, many Aboriginal young people spoke about the role of strong, positive relationships, providing a support network as well as a source of knowledge and advice. *'Identify a good role model for yourself'*, *'hang with the right people'* and *'embrace and learn from one another (differences)'*, are a few examples of responses that Aboriginal young people gave that demonstrate their view of positive role models and the importance of strong relationships and community support networks in achieving their dreams.

Many Aboriginal young people also noted that they would like improved availability of important services to better support young people in their communities. *'More counsellors/therapists'*, *'implementing more support services'* and *'youth services'* were some answers given by Aboriginal young people. Some Aboriginal young people suggested that more community events and recreational services could benefit them in the future, including suggestions such as *'get more funding for things like youth groups, community gatherings, school organisations'*, *'having a community hub where we can hold events, showcase art, traditions, have events like movie nights for teens'* and *'community kitchen – to support locals and avoid people being taken advantage of'*. Aboriginal young people wanted these services to be developed with

Aboriginal people in mind, with responses including *'Aboriginal-specific programs'*, *'more cultural options for communities'* and *'culturally appropriate services and supports'*. Related to this, Aboriginal young people wanted stronger Aboriginal organisations to best meet their needs, including responses like *'stronger Aboriginal organisations that are more connected and supportive'*.

Many Aboriginal young people also commented on their own personal responsibility to achieve their hopes and goals for the future. Some answers which were coded under this theme include *'don't make bad choices'*, *'don't follow other people'*, *'reporting young people doing the wrong thing'*, *'do the right thing'* and *'take a stand'*.

Aboriginal young people want to break the *'Centrelink cycle'* and build a stronger future for themselves and their communities, through *'Aboriginal people making decisions about their own lives'*, including their families and communities, and saw this as an important element for their future success and aspirations.



strong, positive relationships

AbSec's perspective

It was clear from these conversations that Aboriginal young people had some pretty strong thoughts and ideas as to the support needed to help them to achieve their dreams. Consistent throughout all of these conversations was the importance of relationships and connections with their families and communities. This includes immediate and extended family, community people, role models and peers, who young people saw as an important influence with respect to their future achievement. Community-based programs that build connections for Aboriginal young people with relatable peers and role models is likely to be a powerful tool in achieving better outcomes. In particular, there is arguably a need to identify Aboriginal care leavers who can serve as relatable positive role models for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC who may feel particularly isolated. Naturally, this is in addition to the need to improve the quality and implementation of cultural planning for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, aiming to build and maintain these important relationships for Aboriginal young people throughout their time in care that will endure across their lifetime.

Aboriginal young people also emphasised the importance of access to services, ranging from educational support through to youth services, recreational opportunities and health services. The accessibility of mental health services in particular appears to be a recurring theme across these conversations, and it is clear that greater investment in Aboriginal youth mental health services is a significant issue for the Aboriginal young people who participated in these focus groups led by the AbSec Youth Ambassadors.

Aboriginal young people clearly saw that education was central to their future and to achieving the aspirations they spoke of above, emphasising the need to focus more on this space at the local and state levels. This is particularly critical for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, given the significantly poorer educational attainment of this population.⁵ Accredited Aboriginal OOHC agencies have likewise raised the issue of educational support for Aboriginal children in OOHC and those that care for them, and the need for a more strategic approach to supporting the educational attainment of this group. In particular, a greater understanding of the barriers facing Aboriginal young people in OOHC in the educational setting is needed, including an understanding of school exclusions and transitions, in order to develop more effective approaches to this challenge. Importantly, data around these issues must be shared at the local level, empowering local communities and community-controlled organisations, with the support of AbSec and other relevant Aboriginal peaks, to develop local solutions.

Consistent with their early discussions, Aboriginal young people also identified their desire to see greater support for local cultural programs, allowing Aboriginal culture to be shared and celebrated within their communities. Across all of the above challenges, Aboriginal young people saw their communities, and community-controlled organisations, as being an important factor in developing and implementing effective solutions, be it cultural programs, educational support or other services, given their connection with the children, families and community they are intended to serve.

⁵ Townsend, M. (2012) *Are we making the grade? The education of children and young people in out-of-home care*. Research Report 2012, Family and Community Services NSW.

This is consistent with the principle of self-determination, and will support the development of tailored approaches that meet the needs of communities while appreciating their local context.

Finally, Aboriginal young people also spoke strongly of their own responsibility in achieving their aspirations. While the above clearly shows their understanding that social and structural support would be helpful, they saw too that they had a role to play themselves. Their responses across all questions and conversations further reflected this willingness to participate in the solutions to the challenges they had identified. In responding to this clear message, greater support for youth-led projects at the local and potentially state-level must be developed. In particular, AbSec would like to see significant support for the development of local Aboriginal youth advisories to engage with and report on local priorities, informing localised and state-wide responses. AbSec anticipates that the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program will develop into such a program, in partnership with existing local Aboriginal organisations and processes that may already be present in some communities. Connecting these programs and supporting their voices on these important issues is essential to improving the outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. To this end, AbSec will continue to develop the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program to engage with Aboriginal young people and empower their voices with respect to the systems and processes that affect their lives.



“ Aboriginal young people also spoke strongly of their own responsibility in achieving their aspirations

In summary

A In summary, the themes that were drawn from the consultations reflecting what is important to Aboriginal young people include:

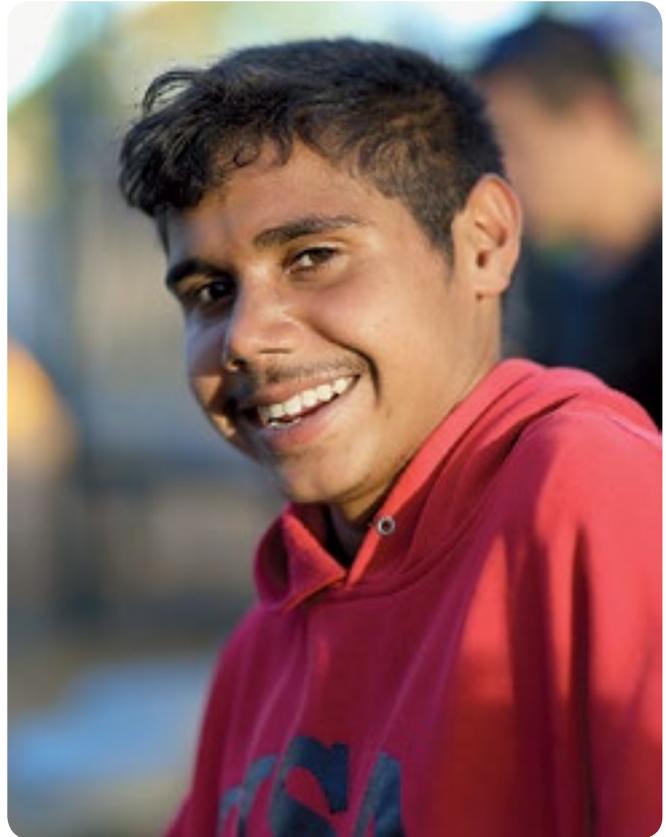
- ⊙ Respectful relationships, both formal and informal, with family, peers, in community and with institutions such as the police and schools are important for children and young people to feel safe and supported.
- ⊙ Violence and other crime cause young people to feel unsafe in their communities, hence there is a need to reduce violence and crime through local community solutions that involves the participation of young people. Important to this is the need for communities and police to work in partnership.
- ⊙ Young people are concerned about the availability and abuse of drugs and alcohol in their communities. This needs to be addressed to reduce its impacts. Effective support for those with addiction requires local community solutions. Prevention programs require partnerships with young people to get their perspectives, including their cultural values.
- ⊙ Better access to and engagement with services is needed, with a particular focus on the police and the education system, and services that are culturally appropriate. Young people want positive relationships with their teachers. There is also a need for more Aboriginal positions in schools for young people to feel safe and supported. In relation to the police, young people want to see better relationships developed. There is a need for more Aboriginal people to be working in the police department, and for there to be a focus on building the relationship many young people have with their local PCYCs. Young people also want more appropriate mental health services available to them in their communities and schools.
- ⊙ Aboriginal young people want to revitalise their languages and strengthen their cultural knowledge, therefore they want to learn the languages and culture that are relevant to them in their schools. Respectful recognition and regular celebration of their culture, both in their communities and at school, is also important for young people, as is having more cultural programs including language, art, dance, music and camps that are led by their Elders and cultural educators from their communities.

Conclusion

This report presents the voices of Aboriginal young people from across NSW gathered through a number of focus groups led by the AbSec Youth Ambassadors. The discussions were insightful and allowed for their voices to be heard, reflecting the fundamental rights of children and young people to participate in the decision-making process that impacts on their lives. It is now the responsibility of government and the NGO sectors to listen to their voices, reflect on what Aboriginal young people are telling us and use this information, in partnership with young people themselves, to respond accordingly.

In the coming months and years the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program will continue to focus on the priorities identified in their work plan, engaging with relevant partners to influence the systems and processes that affect the lives of Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those involved with the child protection system. Their priorities include improved practice with respect to the process of removals, ensuring the cultural rights of Aboriginal children and young people are protected, and improving the participation and self-determination of Aboriginal children and families across the child protection system.

With the recent completion of an expression of interest process, over the next 12 months we will see more AbSec Youth Ambassadors advocating on the rights of Aboriginal young people in NSW and engaging in these and other conversations, including ongoing engagement with other young people around NSW. AbSec will continue to support the AbSec Youth Ambassadors to build the capacity of Aboriginal young people across NSW to engage with the child and family sector and have their voices heard in the design and delivery of programs that affect their lives. It is our hope that the AbSec Youth Ambassadors' Report will become an annual report that is eagerly anticipated by the sector, and one that gains a thoughtful response from government and non-government partners that reflects our commitment, as a sector, to hear the voices of Aboriginal children and young people and give their voices due weight in decisions that affect their lives.



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All children and young people have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously in all matters that affect them.*

* UN Convention on the Rights of the Child



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Caring for Aboriginal children, families and communities