



Youth Ambassador Program Report 2018-2019



About AbSec

AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation is the peak body for Aboriginal child protection and family support in NSW.

We are a not-for-profit, member-based organisation representing Aboriginal children and families, as well as the organisations that support them across the state. We work closely alongside Aboriginal agencies to help them provide the best services for our kids and families.

We also work with the NSW Government to propose policies and ways of working that put the needs of Aboriginal children first, and respect the views and rights of Aboriginal communities.

We are committed to advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children, families, carers and communities. All of our work contributes to an overall goal to build a holistic Aboriginal child and family support system, equipping our children to grow up safe and strong.

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.



Foreword

Despite consistent rhetoric from policy-makers about improving the lives of Aboriginal children and young people, the voices of Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal children and young people themselves remain pushed to the margins of the conversation.

While there has been some focus on improving the participation of young people, including Aboriginal young people, in child protection decision-making at the individual case level, this has not been matched by a focus on hearing their voices at a higher level. It is for this reason that AbSec commenced the Youth Ambassador Program to provide an appropriate platform for Aboriginal children and young people to be heard, and to respond to their priorities and perspectives.

We are committed to actively listening and raising the voices of our children and young people, and providing the necessary support to put their ideas into action. We believe it is only through paying attention to the voices of those most affected by the child protection system – those children and young people themselves, that we can move towards meaningful change and create a system that upholds their best interests from beginning to end.

We are pleased to welcome the current cohort of AbSec Youth Ambassadors through this report, and outline their priorities and focus over their two-year term. We acknowledge the efforts, commitment and strength of the Youth Ambassadors, and the contribution they are making to improve the lives of Aboriginal children and young people across the state. We encourage the sector and community at large to listen to their voices, and to take their ideas into account. By following the lead of these inspiring young people, we can move toward a future where Aboriginal children and young people can thrive, raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing.

*Family means
the most... to us
as Aboriginal people...
they build us to
who we are*

**Jade, AbSec Youth
Ambassador**

A photograph of three young people, two women and one man, wearing black polo shirts with the AbSec logo. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting. In the top left corner, there is a decorative graphic of concentric circles in red, orange, and yellow, resembling a stylized sun or a traditional Aboriginal motif.

Our Youth Ambassador Program

Participation ■ Resilience ■ Leadership

The AbSec Youth Ambassador Program brings together a group of Aboriginal young people aged 16–25 from around NSW to discuss issues facing them, and to provide advice to the child and family sector regarding policies and programs that affect Aboriginal children and young people.

Starting in 2015, the initial cohort of AbSec Youth Ambassadors engaged in a consultation process with their peers exploring concepts of safety, their communities, and their aspirations. The outcomes of these consultations were published in the inaugural AbSec Youth Ambassadors Report in 2016.

Since then, our Youth Ambassador cohort has grown and Ambassadors have engaged in a range of consultations across the sector. The Ambassadors also participated in an external review of the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program, intended to strengthen the opportunity for Aboriginal young people to participate in and influence policies and programs that affect Aboriginal children and young people. As a result of this review, we have adjusted the program in line with the views of young people. Ambassadors will serve a two-year term, implementing a youth-led work plan focused on a small number of priorities identified by the young people themselves.



Working with stakeholders and partners

In early 2018, the current cohort of 13 AbSec Youth Ambassadors gathered for the first time. Over a number of meetings, the group workshoped key priorities and opportunities for advocacy, establishing their 2018/19 work plan. The AbSec Youth Ambassadors also participated in training and engaged with other stakeholders within the sector, including:

■ NSW Police

Building on the work of the previous cohort of AbSec Youth Ambassadors, the current group wrote to the NSW Police Commissioner and the Secretary of Family and Community Services to raise their concerns about the involvement of police officers when children are removed from home by child protection authorities. The AbSec Youth Ambassadors identified gaps in processes, training and data systems regarding this issue, and noted the possible negative long-term impacts for Aboriginal children and young people. They invited the NSW Police and Family and Community Services to engage with AbSec, as well as the AbSec Youth Ambassadors, to develop improved processes and data systems regarding this area of practice.

■ UNICEF Australia

The Youth Ambassadors participated in a conversation with UNICEF Australia about Australia's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how well Australia is upholding these rights. This report was released in November 2018. The Youth Ambassadors had the opportunity to discuss their experiences as Aboriginal young people and emphasise the importance for all Aboriginal people, including those in out-of-home care, to full enjoyment of their rights.

■ Their Futures Matter

The Youth Ambassadors were engaged by Their Futures Matter regarding improvements to leaving and after-care supports for Aboriginal young people transitioning to independence. This included discussing the types of supports young people need to transition onto adulthood and how these might best be delivered. Their views helped to inform the detailed design of the Futures, Planning and Support Project.



Not one person can determine what's culture for that Aboriginal child or young person in OoHC

Jennah, AbSec Youth Ambassador



■ Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)

The Youth Ambassadors invited Andrew Johnson, Advocate for Children and Young People, to present about his role and responsibility in the sector. They heard about the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young Peoples, and other efforts to elevate the voices of children and young people in NSW, including Aboriginal children and young people. They also had the opportunity to meet and engage with the ACYP Aboriginal Participation Advisor, Rhett Burraston.

In addition, the Advocate for Children and Young People delivered media training to the Youth Ambassadors to strengthen their voices in a media setting. This provided important background and skill-building in public advocacy and media engagement for our team.

■ Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA)

A number of our Youth Ambassadors attended the 2018 ACWA conference and participated in the associated youth conference facilitated by the Advocate for Children and Young People. This provided an important opportunity to have the voices of children and young people heard by the sector.

■ CREATE Foundation

The Youth Ambassadors participated in CREATE Foundation's Speak Up program focused on building advocacy skills for children and young people. They highly valued this opportunity to build their skills in speaking out on behalf of Aboriginal children and young people.

■ Mid North Legal Centre

The Youth Ambassadors hosted Stacy McMillan, a solicitor from the Mid North Coast Legal Centre, who spoke about a range of areas including Level UP (which is a pilot project funded by Law and Justice Foundation of NSW); a special civil law project that aims to help young people with their legal needs as they move from out-of-home care to adult legal independence; empowerment of young people through gaining knowledge of legal rights; and the work of the Mid North Coast Legal Centre, including the opportunity for young people to join their steering committee.



AbSec Youth Ambassadors Work Plan 2018–19

The AbSec Youth Ambassadors have developed a work plan focused on three core areas: permanency, housing, and hotline for Aboriginal children and young people.

PERMANENCY



As of October 2017, the NSW statutory child protection system has initiated the Permanency Support Program (PSP), a large shift in service provision to children and young people and their families, with significant implications for Aboriginal children and young people. Our Youth Ambassadors identified a number of serious about the implementation of permanent care orders, including guardianship and adoption, and the rights of Aboriginal children and young people to their culture and identity.

The Youth Ambassadors wish to explore the concept of permanency from the perspective of Aboriginal children and young people. They plan to work with the relevant stakeholders to reframe the concept of permanency to take into account the rights (including cultural rights) of Aboriginal children and young people, and to meet their needs for belonging and stability.

HOUSING



The Youth Ambassadors identified issues regarding access to safe and sustainable housing for children and young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence. Too many young people are moving from out-of-home care to homelessness, an issue that particularly young people placed in residential care. They identified the need for service providers and policy-makers to have more conversations with Aboriginal young people themselves to address the significant service gap and improve outcomes for young people transitioning to independence.

HOTLINE FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE



There is a lack of knowledge and availability of culturally-informed support services for Aboriginal children and young people within the statutory child protection system. The Youth Ambassadors are aware of current helplines, but feel these aren't sufficiently aligned to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people to provide independent, culturally embedded and confidential advice. As such, they proposed developing a model for an Aboriginal child and young person hotline.

The hotline will be available to all Aboriginal children and young people, and particularly to those in out-of-home care. It will provide access to culturally embedded information, advice and practical assistance on issues such as:

- ➔ Services in their area including health, legal, education, housing and employment supports
- ➔ Support to navigate the child protection system, including advice about rights, care and cultural planning, and access to information



FOCUS AREA 1: GUARDIANSHIP AND PERMANENCY



*Children and young people should always have their connection with culture.
Family should always have the opportunity to get their kids back.*

TIMEFRAME: NOVEMBER 2018 – JULY 2019

ACTIONS

1. Invite FACS to brief the Youth Ambassadors on their interpretation of permanency and how the rights of Aboriginal children and young people are to be upheld. This might include how supports are provided to families to achieve safe restoration, how identity and cultural rights are promoted, and how ongoing safety is assured.
2. Engage with accredited Aboriginal agencies to gain views of key stakeholders about permanency for Aboriginal children and young people.

The Youth Ambassadors wished to explore the concept of permanency from the perspective of Aboriginal children and young people. The Youth Ambassadors gave insight into what they identified as important considerations to uphold the best interest of Aboriginal children and young people affected by the child protection system. The main factors identified included, that they are:

- Recognised within their Aboriginal communities
- Remain on Country and are connected to all aspects of their culture
- Connected to family and kin
- Have strong cultural supports if they are unable to stay on Country with their family/kin
- Are supported to exercise their rights as a young person
- Have access to holistic services
- Have safe, secure and stable accommodation
- Have specific and tailored Leaving and After Care plans

Overall, all children and young people have the right to be safe and supported.

ess to information
(commentator)
Advisor - Is this available
me Y.P had this provider well
nothing all Y.P are



FOCUS AREA 2: HOUSING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



*Young people deserve the right to have sustainable,
safe and secure housing options.*

TIMEFRAME: MARCH 2019 – JULY 2019

ACTIONS

1. Invite residential out-of-home care providers to present information on policies and procedures, including those to transition young people from out-of-home care to independent housing.
2. Meet with relevant out-of-home care housing providers, including Aboriginal Housing and Housing NSW.
3. Invite housing support services that assist throughout the housing process (e.g. housing specialists, youth services) to present information.
4. Host a workshop on housing for young people in out-of-home care (possibly in partnership with Homelessness NSW).
5. Develop an advocacy document outlining needs and key demands to achieve improved housing options for Aboriginal children transitioning to adulthood.

The Youth Ambassadors identified issues regarding access to safe and sustainable housing for children and young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence. The main issues identified by the Youth Ambassadors included:

- Lack of affordable, safe and secure housing options
- Current employment
- Reference history
- Age, ethnicity and disability can be a barrier
- Tenancy terms and conditions
- Utilities and unexpected costs associated with housing
- The need for 100 points of identification
- Bank statements and payslips
- Housing availability
- Location and knowledge of local supports
- Emphasised leaving care coordinators
- Practical independent living skills, such as cleaning, cooking and budgeting supports
- Bond assistance
- Budgeting

The Youth Ambassadors emphasised the barriers faced by Aboriginal young people in gaining access to housing, including systemic racism and discrimination in both the private and public housing markets.

To be successful the Youth Ambassadors highlighted the importance of tailored leaving care plans which draw upon their strengths and factors in their cultural needs.

FOCUS AREA 3: HOTLINE FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Children and young people across Australia should have 24-hour access to specialised Aboriginal support workers who can provide information on local services and programs.

TIMEFRAME: NOVEMBER 2018 – AUGUST 2019

ACTIONS

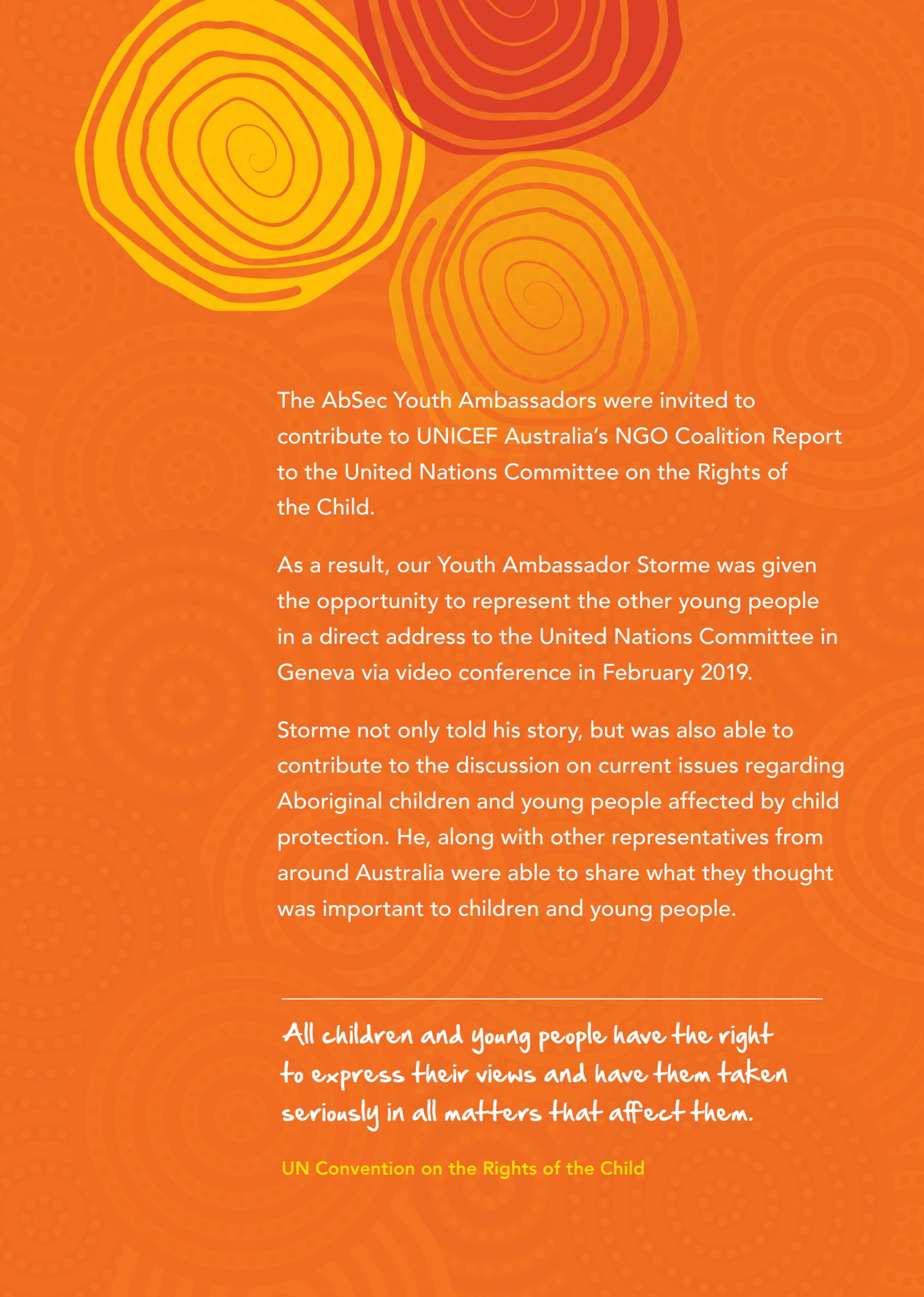
1. Explore the current issues expressed by children and young people in out-of-home care (including the process of leaving care).
2. Explore what supports and specialists are needed for the support line.
3. Develop a model around a 24-hour support line for children and young people currently in out-of-home care, leaving care, or who have exited care.

The Youth Ambassadors were aware of current helplines, but felt they did not align to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people to provide independent, culturally embedded and confidential advice. The Youth Ambassadors proposed developing a hotline specifically for Aboriginal children and young people.

Their recommendations include:

- For the hotline to be staffed by specialised Aboriginal support workers
- 24 hour access

Existing hotlines need to be tailored to provide a better localised service to Aboriginal children and young people



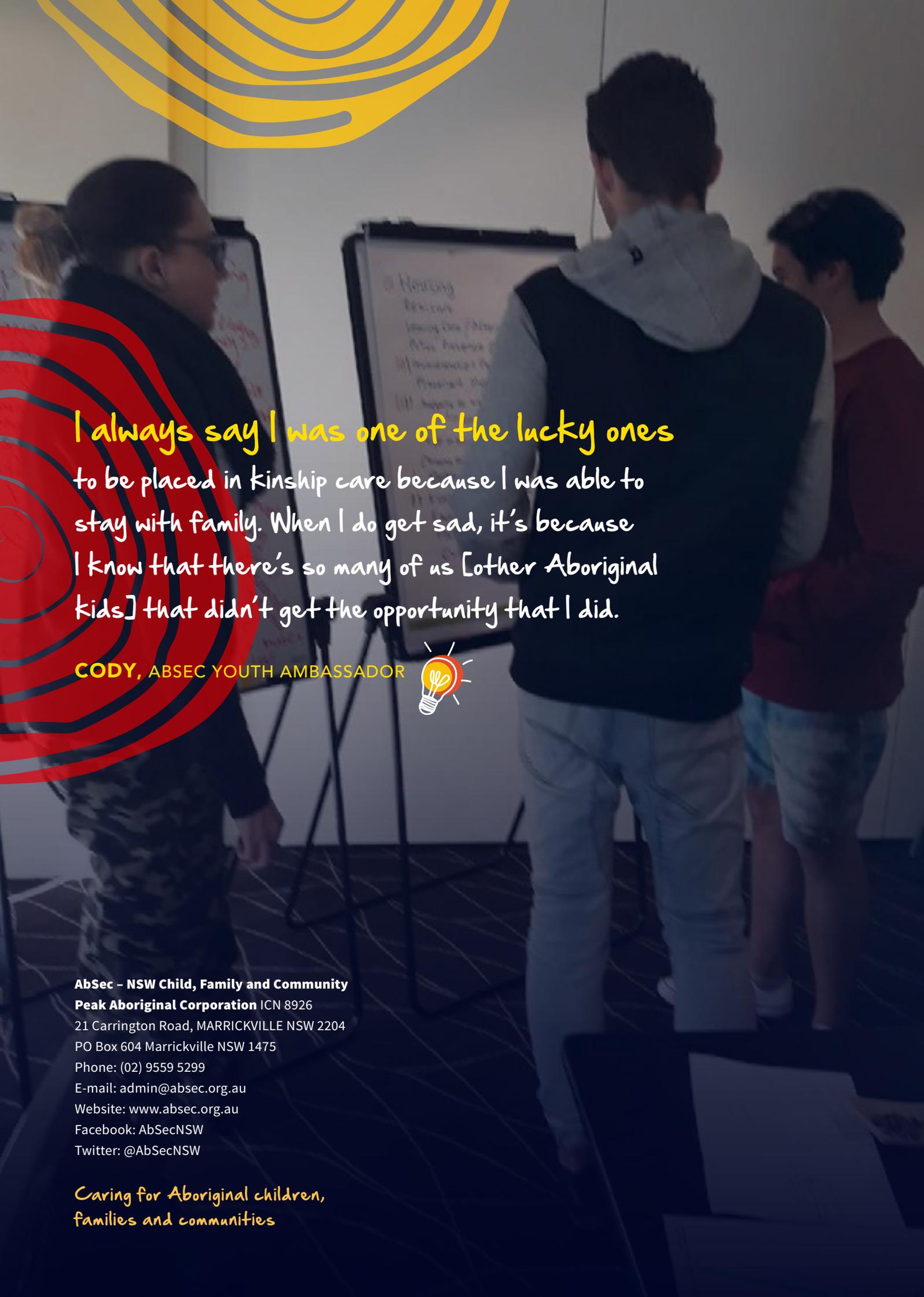
The AbSec Youth Ambassadors were invited to contribute to UNICEF Australia's NGO Coalition Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

As a result, our Youth Ambassador Storme was given the opportunity to represent the other young people in a direct address to the United Nations Committee in Geneva via video conference in February 2019.

Storme not only told his story, but was also able to contribute to the discussion on current issues regarding Aboriginal children and young people affected by child protection. He, along with other representatives from around Australia were able to share what they thought was important to children and young people.

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



I always say I was one of the lucky ones to be placed in kinship care because I was able to stay with family. When I do get sad, it's because I know that there's so many of us [other Aboriginal kids] that didn't get the opportunity that I did.

CODY, ABSEC YOUTH AMBASSADOR



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*Caring for Aboriginal children,
families and communities*