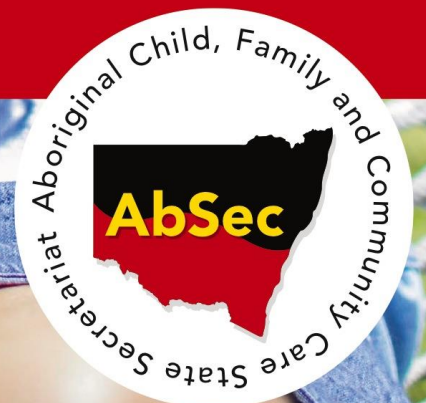




Inquiry into support for new parents and babies in NSW

November 2017



About AbSec

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

Central to this vision is the need to develop a holistic approach to Aboriginal child and family supports delivering universal, targeted and tertiary services within communities that cover the entire continuum of care and reflect the broader familial and community context of clients. Such services and supports would operate to mitigate risk factors or vulnerabilities thereby reducing the need for more intensive or invasive interventions, as well as ensuring that tailored and critical Aboriginal out-of-home care and after care services are provided to intervene in the cycle of disadvantage that continue to impact generations of Aboriginal families.

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

In working towards this vision, we are guided by these principles:

- 1) acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal communities;
- 2) acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal families;
- 3) underpinning 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;
- 4) being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering for Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
- 5) committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive

Published November 2017

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Introduction

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) is the peak Aboriginal child and family organisation in NSW. AbSec is committed to advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children, families, carers and communities, and to ensure they have access to the services and supports they need to keep Aboriginal children safe and provide them the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential through Aboriginal community controlled organisations. AbSec's vision is that Aboriginal children and young people are looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, and are raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture surrounded by holistic supports.

In this submission, AbSec outlines the broad principles and foundations of effective Aboriginal child and family supports, particularly focused on the needs of Aboriginal parents and babies. Reflecting on current statistics regarding the circumstances of Aboriginal children and families, key frameworks for targeted and effective supports for this cohort are discussed. In particular, this submission recommends:

- That the NSW Government commit to the genuine self-determination in the provision of Aboriginal child and family services, establishing a statutory Aboriginal commissioning body to administer and oversee investment in holistic Aboriginal child and family services through community controlled mechanisms, with funding aligned to identified need.
- That the NSW Government commits to the *First 1000 Days Australia* framework for Aboriginal children and families in NSW, establishing a NSW Aboriginal child and family governance mechanism made of existing Aboriginal community controlled organisations and peak bodies to drive this work in partnership with the *First 1000 Days Australia* Council
- That the NSW Government continues to build on the current Aboriginal child and family community controlled infrastructure including Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, providing additional investment to both broaden the scope of existing services as well as developing new services to provide a state-wide safety-net of holistic Aboriginal child and family supports.
- That the NSW Government resource the development of an Aboriginal Parenting Framework within the Family and Community Service Targeted Earlier Intervention strategy for Aboriginal children, families and communities, in order to support Aboriginal communities to design and deliver culturally embedded parenting supports, developing a robust evidence base to further strengthen community responses
- That the NSW birth alerts systems relating to prenatal risk of significant harm notifications be enhanced to provide Aboriginal mother's identified under this system with proactive Aboriginal child and family and advocacy supports, working intensively with expectant mothers and their families to address identified concerns prior to the birth of their child. This should include Aboriginal oversight of alerts and actions taken by services to proactively support families to address risk of significant harm concerns.

Current context of Aboriginal babies and their parents

Aboriginal children and young people remain significantly over-represented within the child protection system, including newborns. While Aboriginal children represent about 28% of all children¹ receiving child protection services in 2015-16, they represented 34% of all unborn children receiving child protection services, and 32% of all children under 1 year old (including unborn children) receiving child protection services².

Similarly, *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* has demonstrated that Aboriginal children are exposed to significantly greater disadvantage, but also higher levels of major life events, with these factors compounding to contribute to greater social and emotional difficulties experienced by Aboriginal children and young people³. Importantly, parental mental health or resilience buffered Aboriginal children and young people from the impacts of these stressors, emphasising the important role of parent wellbeing in child development. This is consistent with developmental research emphasising that strengthening outcomes for children requires supports across generations, strengthening core skills in adults, fostering responsive relationships and supporting families to address sources of stress⁴. Providing these elements is essential to the lifelong welfare and wellbeing of children, with adverse childhood experiences associated with a range of life long health and wellbeing outcomes. Given the imperative to Close The Gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes, a greater focus on early childhood supports for Aboriginal children and families will contribute greatly to improving a range of holistic outcomes for Aboriginal communities, supporting Aboriginal children to achieve their potential and aspirations alongside their non-Indigenous peers.

Together, these statistics clearly demonstrate that investment in Aboriginal community controlled and culturally embedded supports for new parents and their babies is inadequate to meet the specific needs of this cohort. In this next section, AbSec will outline the *First 1000 Days Australia* approach.

It should be noted that the Aboriginal population has a different demographic compared to non-Indigenous Australians⁵:

- The median age of the Aboriginal population (the age at which half the population is older and half is younger) was 21.8 years, compared with 37.6 years for the non-Aboriginal population.
- Over one third (36%) of Aboriginal people were aged under 15 years of age compared with 18% of non-Aboriginal people
- People aged 65 and over comprised 3.4% of the Aboriginal population compared with 14% of the non-Aboriginal population

¹ Only children for whom their Aboriginal status was known were included

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017) *Child Protection Australia 2015-16*

³ Kikkawa, D. (2015) *Multiple disadvantage and major life events*, within Department of Social Services (2015) *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children - Report from Wave 5*, available at: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2015/multiple_disadvantage_major_life_events.pdf

⁴ [include all of the Harvard study papers, and Shonkoff and Fisher

⁵ *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Australia's mother and babies 2015 in brief*

Further, Aboriginal mothers are more likely to be teenagers and to live in remote or disadvantaged areas than non-Aboriginal mothers. The 2015 report notes that compared to non-Aboriginal mothers, Aboriginal mothers were:

- 7 times as likely to be teenage mothers (15% compared with 2%). Conversely only 9% of Aboriginal mothers were aged 35 and over compared to non-Aboriginal mothers.
- Around 14 times as likely to live in remote and very remote areas as non-Aboriginal mothers (22% compared with 1.6%)
- 2.4 times as likely to live in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) areas as non-Aboriginal mothers (almost 1 in 2 Aboriginal mothers lived in the lowest SES areas compared to 1 in 5 non-Aboriginal mothers).

Proposed approaches to strengthen outcomes for Aboriginal babies and new parents

Leading early childhood experts have challenged those within the child and family sector to “create a truly innovative, fully hybridized model that is explicitly focused on transforming the lives of both children and adults”⁶. Drawing on the existing evidence, AbSec has previously outlined a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system to best meet the needs of all Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities⁷. This model proposes a public health approach that provides critical universal, targeted and crisis level services, with considerable focus on universal and targeted supports that proactively support Aboriginal families to meet the developmental needs of their children. This model rests on three foundational principles.

Firstly, that child development occurs within the context of their social and physical environment, with relationships playing a key role in optimal development and adaptive outcomes⁸. This is, effective systems approaches to improving outcomes for vulnerable children must include supporting positive change for the child’s social network; their parents, extended families and communities. However, rather than simply coordinating separate child- and adult-focused programs, a genuine integration of services that support children both directly and indirectly through strengthening the capabilities, sustainability (including economic) and resilience of families and communities is required. In this way, interventions can become genuinely intergenerational, supporting parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles to positively contribute to the development of their children, thereby optimising the developmental context and trajectory of the next and subsequent generations of Aboriginal children and young people while maintaining access and connection to their rich cultural heritage and values.

Secondly, that Aboriginal families and communities are stronger and better able to meet the needs of their children and young people when empowered to identify and address the issues that impact on

⁶ Shonkoff, J., and Fisher, P. (2013) Re-thinking evidence-based practice and two-generation programs to create the future of early childhood policy, *Development and Psychopathology*, pp. 1635-1653.

⁷ AbSec (2016) *Achieving a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system in NSW*, available at www.absec.org.au

⁸ Shonkoff, J., and Fisher, P. (2013) Re-thinking evidence-based practice and two-generation programs to create the future of early childhood policy, *Development and Psychopathology*, pp. 1635-1653.

their lives⁹. Aboriginal communities themselves are best placed to develop and deliver services aimed at supporting Aboriginal children and families. This is consistent with the rights of Aboriginal peoples. International research has emphasised that “when [Indigenous peoples] make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they **consistently out-perform external decision makers** on matters as diverse as governmental form, national resource management, economic development, health care and social service provision” (emphasis added)¹¹.

Thirdly, that culture represents a significant protective factor in overcoming adversity and disadvantage for individuals, families and communities, strengthening our families and communities to raise strong, connected children¹². Empowering communities to develop and deliver culturally sound universal and targeted interventions will contribute to the development of a comprehensive, state-wide safety-net of Aboriginal community controlled organisations that are embedded within the communities they service, leading a community-wide response that will support Aboriginal families to keep children safe and connected to their families, communities, culture and Country.

Aboriginal communities and culture has too often acted as an addendum to the broad imposition of a non-Aboriginal framework, with the end result being the ongoing marginalisation of Aboriginal voices and perspectives when greater empowerment is needed. While attempts to address these concerns have sought to increase the representation of Aboriginal practitioners working within their communities, this unwillingness to indigenize the non-Aboriginal frameworks on which these systems operate continues to undermine more positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

As such, AbSec seeks to challenge this view, prioritising our cultural and community perspectives as the lens through which meaningful decisions about the safety, welfare and wellbeing must be made. This view demands much greater involvement of Aboriginal peoples, collectively, across all levels of the system, including differentiated and Aboriginal-led policy, community-validated safety and risk assessment tools, Aboriginal-led service delivery through community controlled organisations across the continuum of care, and greater oversight by and accountability to Aboriginal communities for the function and role played by child protection authorities as it relates to Aboriginal children and families.

It is AbSec’s belief that these principles set out the critical foundation for any successful efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families and to meaningfully “close the gap” in outcomes for Aboriginal children relative to their non-Aboriginal peers. Importantly, these principles must underlie efforts to provide better support Aboriginal parents and their babies.

Recommendation: That the NSW Government commit to the above principles in the provision of Aboriginal child and family services, establishing a statutory Aboriginal commissioning body to administer and oversee investment in holistic Aboriginal child and family services through community controlled mechanisms, with funding aligned to identified need.

⁹ Chandler, M. (2015) Cultural Wounds Require Cultural Medicines: How Cultural Continuity Reduces Suicide Youth Risk in Indigenous Communities, keynote address at Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Conference 2015, Perth, WA.

¹⁰ The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, led by Professors Stephen Cornell and Joseph P. Kalt. Information available at: <http://hpaied.org/about>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015) Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

First 1000 Days Australia

Current evidence regarding the developmental needs of children emphasise that, in addition to health and nutrition needs, new babies and children require responsive relationships with their caregivers. These elements support babies to develop core skills, as well as buffering children from toxic stress¹³. In short, responsive relationships, the development of core emotion regulation and executive function skills, and supports to address familial stressors are critical components to effective child and family supports. Further, research exploring those factors that promote resilience in the face of adversity identified the importance of stable, caring relationships that can support children to develop core life skills (executive function and self-regulation) and establish a sense of mastery over their life circumstances, as well as the protective nature of culture¹⁴. This is particularly important early in development, with the developmental trajectory of children particularly sensitive to change early in the life course.

Recognising the importance of these elements in providing the best possible start to life for Aboriginal children, *First 1000 Days Australia* articulates a comprehensive framework for meeting the early developmental needs of Aboriginal babies from the conception to their second birthday. This approach seeks to support communities to oversee a holistic approach to improving outcomes for children and families that builds on existing approaches and integrates new and emerging evidence including comprehensive early life services, multigenerational families and supported transitions to parenthood. These approaches are supported by robust data systems to inform a local evidence base, and overseen by local Aboriginal community governance processes that ensure that service system design and decision making is driven by Aboriginal communities themselves.



Figure 1: *First 1000 Days Australia*, Source: Arabena, K. (2016) *First 1000 Days Australia Overview*, available at: <http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/first-1000-days-australia-overview>

¹³ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

¹⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

“A radical change is required in how we think about and enhance the early outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia. Too many children and young people do not have the start in life they need...

...Not intervening will affect not only this generation of children, but also the next. Those who suffer adverse childhood events achieve less educationally, earn less and have worse health outcomes – all of which makes it more likely that the cycle of harm is perpetuated in the following generation” Professor Kerry Arabena, cited in Arabena, K. (2016) *First 1000 Days Australia Overview*, available at: <http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/first-1000-days-australia-overview>

Recommendation: That the NSW Government commits to the *First 1000 Days Australia* framework for Aboriginal children and families in NSW, establishing a NSW Aboriginal children and family governance mechanism made of existing Aboriginal community controlled organisations and peak bodies to drive this work in partnership with the *First 1000 Days Australia* Council

Aboriginal Child and Family Centres

As identified above, Aboriginal community controlled organisations delivering integrated child and family services are best placed to deliver culturally embedded supports tailored to the needs of Aboriginal children and families. There are numerous Aboriginal community controlled organisations across NSW committed to providing such services, often in the context of inconsistent and insecure funding. Despite these challenges, many of these organisations are delivering critical services and supports to their communities. Included amongst these are the Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, established in partnership with the Commonwealth government. Following a decision to discontinue funding for these essential Centres by the Federal Government, Family and Community Services continued funding Aboriginal Child and Family Centres to continue providing these critical services to Aboriginal families and communities. An evaluation completed in 2014 recommended core funding of services to enhance sustainability and build on outcomes¹⁵.

In AbSec’s view, local Aboriginal community controlled child and family centres that are adequately resourced to provide locally tailored and culturally embedded supports is essential to meeting the needs of Aboriginal babies and new parents. Such services would be essential in enacting the *First 1000 Days Australia* approach at the local level, providing a community controlled hub for holistic service delivery to Aboriginal children and their families. However, these services remain vulnerable to federal policy changes that are more likely to impact adversely on Aboriginal children and families, particularly those that stand to benefit most from these services. Already, proposed changes to early childhood education and care funding may further strain already stretched resources.

AbSec urges the NSW Government to commit to these important services long term, as well as expanding the reach and coverage of such models to additional communities across NSW. Should an Aboriginal Child and Family Commissioning body be established, AbSec is of the view that investment in locally based integrated child and family supports such as those represented by Aboriginal Child and Family Centres would be a significant priority.

¹⁵ Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (2014) *Evaluation of NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Centres – Final Report*

Recommendation: That the NSW Government continues to build on the current Aboriginal child and family community controlled infrastructure including Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, providing additional investment to both broaden the scope of existing services as well as developing new services to provide a state-wide safety-net of holistic Aboriginal child and family supports.

Aboriginal Parenting Supports

Within the *First 1000 Days Australia* framework, the importance of multigenerational families and culturally informed parenting approaches were identified as features within a holistic strategy to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. Recently, AbSec was commissioned by Family and Community Services to develop case studies of six Aboriginal-led parenting approaches to provide a starting point for the development of an evidence-base in Aboriginal parenting programs¹⁶. In our view, parenting supports often suffer from a mainstream or generalist service delivery system, in which government invests in particular approaches without significant consideration of their alignment with Aboriginal communities and cultural values, thereby undermining their effectiveness for Aboriginal parents and their children.

Across these case studies, AbSec identified a number of consistent elements, including:

- Aboriginal self-determination at the systems and process levels, through Aboriginal community controlled organisations, including the design and delivery of programs tailored to local communities
- culturally embedded and locally tailored approaches, building on community strengths
- holistic, integrated service delivery, including partnerships with other relevant service providers, to support parenting skill development and the implementation of these skills into practice within the family context
- the critical role of skilled Aboriginal practitioners in delivering culturally enriched services that are aligned with the needs and expectations of Aboriginal parents and communities
- flexibility and adaptability to meet the identified need of local Aboriginal parents and families

In doing so, AbSec recommended that Family and Community Services support the establishment of an Aboriginal Parenting Framework to guide investment in community controlled and culturally embedded parenting supports as part of a genuinely integrated child and family service system. Further, it was recommended that a library of resources and evidence be established to support communities in developing evidence informed approaches, with outcomes aligned to Aboriginal perspectives of parenting practices and child outcomes. AbSec echoes those recommendations here, noting their integration with the *First 1000 Days Australia* framework and an Aboriginal commissioning system.

While AbSec was able to explore six promising programs, AbSec acknowledges that this listing is not exclusive, with many Aboriginal communities establishing unique and innovative approaches to supporting Aboriginal parents. In particular, AbSec would like to acknowledge the *Stayin' on Track* program, which draws on technology to deliver tailored supports to young Aboriginal dads, including mobile phone supports. This approach was developed in community and supported by various organisations including Aboriginal organisations and research institutions to provide targeted

¹⁶ AbSec (2017) *Aboriginal Parenting Programs: Review of case studies*, available at www.absec.org.au

supports for this cohort. It represents an innovative solution to reaching young Aboriginal dads, drawing on technology to drive these solutions.

Recommendation: That the NSW Government resource the development of an Aboriginal Parenting Framework within the Family and Community Service Targeted Earlier Intervention strategy for Aboriginal children, families and communities, in order to support Aboriginal communities to design and deliver culturally embedded parenting supports, developing a robust evidence base to further strengthen community responses, including existing Aboriginal-led approaches

Proactive intensive supports: birth alerts

In addition to these universal and targeted supports, the data presented above demonstrates the need for an effective birth alerts system that is able to provide genuine supports for vulnerable families expecting babies. As outlined, the period from conception to the child's second birthday is considered particularly important in promoting the best possible outcomes across the life-course. However, in our conversations with communities and practitioners, there continues to be a lack of trust in the existing birth alerts system, acting more as a forensic or monitoring service rather than providing a channel for the delivery of effective intensive family supports to address identified risk of harm issues and strengthen families to give their baby the best possible start to life. In some cases, this distrust has reportedly led to reduced engagement with ante-natal supports.

In AbSec's view, antenatal supports are particularly critical for vulnerable families, and should take a preventative public health approach. In our conversations with practitioners, the importance of coordinated early intervention and prevention services was identified, alongside access to advocacy and other supports focused on family preservation. Aboriginal community oversight of such processes remains a critical feature for building trust that such processes are there to support rather than police at risk families, strengthening engagement at the earliest possible moment to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

Recommendation: That the NSW birth alerts systems relating to prenatal risk of significant harm notifications be enhanced to provide Aboriginal mother's identified under this system with proactive Aboriginal child and family and advocacy supports, working intensively with expectant mothers and their families to address identified concerns prior to the birth of their child. This should include Aboriginal oversight of alerts and actions taken by services to proactively support families to address risk of significant harm concerns.

Conclusion

The early period of a child's life, from conception to about 2 years of age, is recognised internationally as a critical period of development that is associated with a wide range of outcomes across the life course. Despite this knowledge, too many Aboriginal children continue to experience the harsh impacts of entrenched disadvantage, marginalisation and intergenerational trauma. Without greater investment in accessible, community controlled and culturally embedded supports, these adverse impacts will affect another generation of Aboriginal children, and increase the likelihood of these impacts being passed to subsequent generations.

AbSec therefore calls for a significant shift in the commissioning of Aboriginal child and family services, empowering Aboriginal communities to drive investment decisions, designing the local service system to meet their needs. This shift in commissioning would be supported by a firm commitment to the

First 1000 Days Australia framework, supporting local communities to develop holistic responses and robust data systems to drive continuous improvements in service design and delivery. Such initiatives should seek to strengthen existing Aboriginal community controlled infrastructure, including Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, broadening their scope and reach across NSW.

Finally, specific processes such as birth alerts within the statutory child protection system must be revised, providing additional supports including intensive family services and advocacy, fulfilling its role as part of a public health response, with key oversight through Aboriginal community controlled mechanisms. This will strengthen trust and engagement in critical antenatal supports for those likely to benefit most from them; vulnerable families and their children.