

Policy Position: Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families

Purpose

This policy provides the Benevolent Society's public position on how governments and the service system should work to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. The Benevolent Society actively supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to self-determination and the Principles and Building Blocks of the Family Matters campaign to eliminate the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system. We also believe that mainstream service providers must ensure their workforce, corporate services and practice delivers high quality, culturally safe services and improves outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Key Messages

- The best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can only be properly determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Governments and the service system have been too slow, and reform is uneven, uncoordinated and inadequate to stop the rise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care.
- National effort is urgently needed to make sure all organisations build consistent and respectful relationships and partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, to transform services and create a culturally safe and competent service system that responds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and children families' needs.
- It is incumbent on all of us, state, territory and federal governments, and mainstream service providers to transform services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to create a culturally safe and competent service system that responds to their family and community needs.
- The Benevolent Society is building our organisational cultural capability and extending and maintaining partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations that support the economic, political and social inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their rights, needs and aspirations.

Issue

*'The choices that we make now go to the very heart of our shared obligation to heal our nation's fractured past and secure our children's future. We have a shared responsibility to ensure the right of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child to thrive in family, community and culture.'*ⁱ

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain significantly over-represented in child protection and out-of-home care systems across Australia. Alarming, it is projected that this disproportionate representation in out-of-home care will more than triple over the next 20 years.ⁱⁱ
- At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are less likely to access universal or targeted services, such as early childhood education or intensive family services, which may help prevent entry into out-of-homecare.ⁱⁱⁱ

- The SNAICC Family Matters Roadmap (2016) provides evidence-based pathways and details the policy and practice changes needed to secure improved safety and well-being outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.^{iv}
- Despite the Roadmap being endorsed by a growing number of governments and sector organisations, and evidence that some national, state and territory policies are demonstrating increased alignment with evidence-based strategies for change, reform and implementation across jurisdictions has been uneven and uncoordinated, with the scale and pace of change grossly inadequate to arrest rising overrepresentation.^v
- There is therefore, an urgent need for national effort to ensure that all organisations build consistent and respectful relationships and partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, to grow and increase the capacity of community controlled organisations and improve mainstream organisations ability to deliver culturally appropriate services that are driven by and meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What the Benevolent Society is doing

- The Benevolent Society has a long history of supporting families and communities to care safely for their children and advocating for policy reform that supports families. We provide services across the continuum from universal early years' programs, community building and parenting programs to promote family functioning and wellbeing, to more targeted and intensive family support services to strengthen families, who may be 'at risk' or experiencing disadvantage.
- The Benevolent Society's Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2019-2021 focuses on building our organisational cultural capability and extending and maintaining partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations that support the economic, political and social inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their rights, needs and aspirations.
- The Benevolent Society will seek partnership opportunities and commit resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led innovation in areas of research, high quality effective culturally safe services, and service design that tackles entrenched disadvantage and improves approaches to care.
- The Benevolent Society is a signatory to the Family Matters Statement of Commitment to work collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their organisations to achieve the goals of the Family Matters campaign. This commitment requires all signatories to work in accordance with key principles, and to implement corresponding actions.
- The Benevolent Society is in genuine partnership with the Torres Strait Women's Sorority in the delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Services. Mura Kosker is the lead service provider of culturally responsive community-led family wellbeing services in the Torres Strait Islands assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families safely care for their children at home.
- In collaboration with Elders in Wellington NSW, The Benevolent Society is working in partnership to deliver 'Buwubarra – Talking about parenting'. The project aims to reduce barriers and build on existing local leadership when talking about parenting. Buwubarra has

trained six community leaders in the 'Through Young Black Eyes' program delivered by SNAICC. Further mentoring and training will be provided in 2019.

- The Benevolent Society has worked collaboratively with the Winnam Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation and Gundala Kindergarten Association Inc to deliver interactive children and family activities for the Kunjeil NAIDOC festival in Wynnum, Qld.
- The Benevolent Society has partnered with Bila Muuji Aboriginal Corporation Health Services for the delivery of the new Rural Youth Mental Health Service in Western New South Wales. Bila Muuji will provide The Benevolent Society with cultural consultancy, recruitment options, brokered services with strong referral and support pathways.

What needs to be done?

The Benevolent Society supports and will advocate:

- That the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can only be properly determined with the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- That state, territory and federal governments and mainstream service providers have responsibilities to transform services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to create a culturally safe and competent service system.
- That state, territory and federal governments and mainstream service providers have responsibilities to support and develop the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family workforce and enable their participation in service design, delivery and decision-making across the child and family system.
- That state, territory and federal governments and mainstream providers have responsibilities to support the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family community controlled organisations through funding, innovation, collaboration and partnership arrangements that deliver new and enhanced services.
- State, territory and federal governments, evidence building experts and mainstream service providers have a responsibility to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations to develop an evidence-base for programs and services that are improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- That the Family Matters Principles and Building Blocks for system reform are adopted and enacted by all Australian governments and service providers.
- That all recommendations from *Priority 1 - Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at risk of entering, or in contact with the Child Protection System* from the Fourth Action Plan of the National Framework to Protect Australia's Children, are fully funded and implemented by all Australian governments .

Background

'At the core of any discussion, our strengths as cultural people lay the foundations to overcome the challenges we face'.^{vi}

- Of the 45 756 children in out-of-home care nationally in 2017/18, 17 787 or nearly 40% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids.^{vii}
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home than all other children.^{viii}

- Australian and international evidence has confirmed the effectiveness of Indigenous-led service design and delivery that consistently produces better results,^{ix} and has linked Indigenous community empowerment to broadly positive social and emotional well-being outcomes for community members.^x Culturally appropriate early intervention programs can lead to an improved and sustained long term trajectory for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, including their health, education, housing and employment.
- Available data shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are grossly over-represented on measures of disadvantage that contribute to child protection risks, and similarly under-represented in services that could respond and prevent entry to out-of-home care. Service systems have also failed to enable the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design, delivery and decision making about service responses for their children.^{xi}
- The SNAICC Family Matters Roadmap includes the following key strategies to tackle over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system:
 - strategic investment and support to increase the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services to deliver child protection services;
 - prioritisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander developed, managed and delivered services or where they are not available, genuine partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services or communities;
 - and the development of cultural competence across the child and family service sectors.^{xii}

Consultation

The following were consulted in the development of this policy:

- Child and Family Policy Reference Group
- Principal Advisor, Indigenous Development, People Learning & Engagement

Approval

This policy has been approved on 6 May 2019 by the Executive Director, Strategic Engagement, Research & Advocacy.

Principles

The following principles underpin The Benevolent Society's Child and Family Policy Framework and have been developed to guide our social policy platform.

1. All children have the right to grow up in an environment free from neglect and abuse.
2. Children have the right to have a voice in all decisions affecting them.
3. Systems and institutions must address the social determinants, including poverty and social exclusion.
4. Policy, practice and advocacy is outcome focussed, evidence based, measurable and evaluated.
5. Children are best cared for by family and kin where possible and every effort should be made so that children can remain with, and return to, their families.
6. Australian society has a responsibility to value, support and work in partnership with parents, families and communities care for children.
7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families have the right to self-determination.

8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to grow up in culture.
9. Children and families with disabilities have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.
10. Children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse families and refugees have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

End Notes

ⁱ Lewis, Natalie, The Family Matters Report, 2018. SNAICC p4

ⁱⁱ The Family Matters Report, 2018. SNAICC P5

ⁱⁱⁱ The growing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care (2018) Australian Institute of Family Studies Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2018/05/07/growing-over-representation-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children-care>

^{iv} The Family Matters Roadmap (2016), SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. P4

^v The Family Matters Report, 2018. SNAICC - National Voice for our Children P9

^{vi} June Oscar, Racism and Children, NACCHO Aboriginal Children's Health and #racism (2017). Retrieved from <https://nacchocommunique.com/2017/07/25/naccho-aboriginal-childrens-health-and-racism-speech-ms-june-oscar-ao-aboriginal-social-justice-commissioner/>

^{vii} Report on Government Services 2019, Part F, Chapter 16 – Child Protection Services

^{viii} Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, *Child Protection Australia, 2015-16* (2017)

^{ix} Flaxman, S., Muir, K., and Oprea, I. (2009). *Indigenous families and children: Coordination and provision of services*, Occasional Paper No 23, Canberra, p23; see also SNAICC. (2010). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*, Melbourne. (The Family Matters Roadmap (2017), SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. P9)

^x Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Canberra, p396. (The Family Matters Roadmap (2017), SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. P9)

^{xi} The Family Matters Report, 2018. SNAICC - National Voice for our Children P10

^{xii} The Family Matters Roadmap (2016), SNAICC – National Voice for our Children P4