

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Families Australia's policy

Vision

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures are afforded the highest level of respect as Australia's first peoples; share equally in Australia's prosperity and opportunities; have self-determination; and are able to access high quality, culturally respectful services

Introduction

Families Australia is Australia's national peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of families. Families Australia undertakes research and consults families and family and community service organisations on current family-related issues. The outcomes are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. This policy statement concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Why a policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

- Families Australia recognises its obligation and its capacity to advance the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families by working respectfully with the breadth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and other stakeholders
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians still experience significant disadvantage and marginalisation. As a result, they have poorer health, lower average education levels, high unemployment and a much shorter life span than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Their children have lower birth weights and higher infant mortality.
- For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, remoteness compounds the issues. Access to services is difficult, often involving long travel as well as cultural barriers.
- Whether in cities or rural and remote areas, as a relatively small proportion of the total Australian population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find it difficult to access culturally appropriate services. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services are the preference of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and recruitment and training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services would improve take-up of services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- There are alarmingly high levels of child abuse, child neglect and family violence in some communities, stemming from the entrenched poverty and disadvantage within these communities and the break down of traditional and cultural practices that protected children from harm
- Although the quality of the data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status varies between States and Territories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are clearly over-represented in the child protection system. Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander children are almost five times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation than other children.¹

- Across Australia, the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on care and protection orders are more than six times higher than for other children.²
- The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is over seven times the rate of other children.³
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has a higher birth rate than the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. This creates an additional economic imperative for governments to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are encouraged and supported to achieve their full potential, to contribute to Australia's worth and to share in Australia's prosperity.

Families Australia's policies

- The knowledge and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a precious, living part of Australia's heritage and deserves to be valued now and into the future. Culture is a source of strength, and respect for culture must be the basis for improving services and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child rearing, family support, kinship responsibilities and social inclusion provide valuable insights and learnings from which the broader Australian community can learn
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past and support to heal.
- The 2008 National Apology by the Federal Parliament to the Stolen Generations provided a platform for a respectful new relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, their national government and the broader community which should be built upon by providing reparations to the Stolen Generations
- The significant strengths and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians should be acknowledged and promoted
- Improved understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is a key to effective support and service delivery.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a right to self-determination and to practice and promote their cultural traditions, languages and spiritual beliefs.
- Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the local level to develop high quality services should be a high priority, along with improving the quality of programs within existing service organisations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be central decision makers in the design, delivery and management of services used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need choice: they should be able to access Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific or mainstream services in the knowledge that their culture will be understood and valued and will inform appropriate service provision.

Priorities for Action

- Building the capacity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop and manage local services and programs relevant to their cultures, families and circumstances.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child Protection Australia 2005-06*.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

- Supporting positive engagement and two-way learning between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the wider community in order to improve the well being of all Australian families.
- Building on the National Apology and providing reparations for the Stolen Generations.
- Increased health spending, beginning with an increase of 1% in the Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health budget; this would bring expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health up to the same level as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Further increases to address areas of specific medical disadvantage.
- Increased spending on early years programs and services including additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist child care and preschool services
- Universal provision of high quality, culturally sensitive, early learning and school education services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families,
- Child welfare and family support programmes that link existing services and develop new ones that provide holistic service responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Development of broadly-based programmes targeting violence within communities, acknowledging that the causes of violence often lie in dispossession and in the loss of parenting skills because of the Stolen Generation, and seeking to protect the victims, restore positive relationships and heal both victims and perpetrators.
- Reforms to State and Territory child protection systems to respect self determination, re-build community and family level capacity to protect and care and with appropriate monitoring and support to transfer back to communities formal responsibility for child protection
- National strategies to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, including full implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.
- Improved training and employment strategies to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, health care workers, child care workers, preschool teachers and other professionals.
- Improved housing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to remove overcrowding and enable residents to live in greater health and harmony.
- Appropriate health facilities and equipment easily accessible to all communities. This would include facilities such as dialysis machines.
- Education and reform of mainstream services including higher rates of employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within mainstream services to make these services more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Broader public dissemination and endorsement of the positive aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life, including acknowledgement that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, like all families, care and provide well for their children

Families Australia's activities in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Families Australia regards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family issues as one of its top areas of policy focus, along with family wellbeing, child protection and work and family.

Families Australia seeks to highlight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues as a matter of course in its national consultations and meetings, such as at the June 2007 National Family Wellbeing Symposium and the 2006 National Child Protection Forum (chaired by Families Australia's CEO).

Families Australia added its voice to those calling for an apology by the Australian Government to the Stolen Generation, and we publicly welcomed that apology, the consultation that preceded it and the Government's commitment to increase services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We also called for a process of ongoing, wide consultation leading to the design and delivery of a national compensation scheme.

Families Australia publicises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues through its publications such as *National Family News* and *Family*.

Several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are Members of Families Australia. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is a founding Member of Families Australia and has served on the Families Australia Board since Families Australia's inception in 2001.

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