

# **Creating a better environment for children to flourish and grow in their own parents' care**

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## **Abstract**

The health and wellbeing of children in Australia are impacted by numerous factors, including social inclusion, disadvantage, and vulnerability. The early years of a child's life are essential where it has been found that the early to middle years of a child's life influence adulthood particularly. Australian children who experience different forms of disadvantage have an increased risk of social exclusion, impacting the individual's participation in society. This has been highlighted in a study by Frederico and colleagues (2008), who stated that a child's current functioning and future development are impacted by maltreatment, especially regarding the child's behavioural, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. Unfortunately, abuse and neglect are more harmful when long-lasting, more chronic, and occur earlier in an individual's life (Frederico et al., 2008). Therefore, this paper will discuss many issues affecting children and families within Australia, and the emerging information that may potentially improve the practice frameworks practitioners utilise and the child and family policies impacting them.

## **Key words**

Aboriginal; children; cultural safety

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## **Background**

This paper was written during completion of the Graduate Certificate in Human & Community Services (Interpersonal Trauma Stream) offered jointly by the NSW Health Education Centre against Violence (ECAV) and the Social Work & Policy Studies program at the University of Sydney. Students completing this program are Aboriginal workers who have completed the NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence Advanced Diploma of Aboriginal Specialist Trauma Counselling or have extensive clinical experience in NSW health sexual assault and child protection counselling services. The Graduate Certificate recognises the importance of prior learning, cultural safety and building the Aboriginal workforce.

This paper explores child focused practice in the context of government policies, the Rights of the Child and self-determination. It draws on extensive professional experience in the field as well as existing research. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for social work.

## **Government policies**

It is evident that Australian governments need to reconsider current approaches to child protection and family policies aimed at supporting First Nations people. Change is also required in the practice frameworks utilised by services and social work practitioners. The failure of current approaches is reflected in the increasing rates of child homelessness, child abuse, neglect, obesity, bullying, suicide, and mental illness (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010).

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Additionally, the key indicators recorded by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that Australian children were significantly below average when compared to other OECD countries (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010).

The current child and family policies in Australia are found to focus on intervention rather than prevention, suggesting the policies are failing in their goal of supporting families, particularly the children. A study by Le Bon & Boddy (2010) stated that the number of children being removed from their parents and placed into the child welfare system has doubled within the last decade. Aboriginal children are seven times more likely to enter the child welfare system, displaying a significant overrepresentation within the system (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010). Furthermore, 23.9 per cent of the Australian out-of-care population consists of Aboriginal children (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010). However, it is possible that the number of children being placed in out of home care may continue to increase with the improved community awareness of child maltreatment and the changes to the definition of child abuse (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010).

An individual's life may be significantly altered as a consequence of being placed into out of home care due to losing connections with their family and culture, affecting their identity (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010). This highlights the importance of changing or improving the child and family policies to ensure current and future generations of children experience a better childhood. From a purely economic perspective, the current out-of-care system is not viable as the cost increases with the growing number of notifications and placements. Investing in prevention has been shown to be economically warranted in fields such as health. Therefore, it is great social, cultural and economic importance that governments resource prevention programs specifically for Aboriginal families and children.

Prevention programs involve collaborating with the family and community to manage issues before they become serious. According to Le Bon & Boddy (2010), preventative

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programs for young children have been found to positively affect the individuals, noticing beneficial changes to their rates of social, behaviour, academic, and psychological problems. The study by Le Bon & Boddy (2010) suggests prevention programs trialled in high crime and low socioeconomic areas in the United States involved parenting programs, teacher training, health promotion activities in school and mentoring. The results were astounding, finding decreases in pregnancy rates, risky sexual behaviour, delinquency, and improved academic achievements. Therefore, Le Bon & Boddy (2010) emphasised the potential benefits of utilising prevention approaches rather than intervention. This approach would need to be utilised on a macro level to maximise success.

Failure to invest in prevention is likely to continue the negative effects on Aboriginal children and families. Silburn and colleagues (2006) studied the intergenerational effects associated with forced separation and forced relocation. They discovered that children who have been forcibly separated from their family were 1.95 times more likely to be arrested, 1.61 times more likely to report the use of alcohol that caused household problems and were less than half as likely to have social support. These are only some of the issues impacting the individuals that were forcibly separated. Additionally, nearly one-third of Aboriginal children whose primary carer was forcibly removed were at a higher risk of significant emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Forced separation and forced relocation have been a historical issue in Australia dating back to the late 1800's until the 1960's. Many generations have been impacted by this issue. The side effects of these issues may be closely related to individuals being placed into out of home care. They may have similar impacts, especially for Aboriginal people, as culture and connections may be lost. A study by Frederico and colleagues (2008) acknowledged the

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importance of culture for Aboriginal people, stating that cultural abuse and cultural safety are being recognised as a concept of abuse for Aboriginal children. This is a significant issue that affects Aboriginal children being placed in out of home care and will have intergenerational effects on their descendants. This is one of the main reasons why out of home care does not work and why other approaches should be utilised, especially preventive approaches, to keep the family together, the culture strong, and the children safe.

The current approach used by the Department of Communities & Justice (DCJ) focuses on intervention when a child's safety is at significant risk of harm. This approach is not suitable as they will only intervene once the risk of harm becomes serious. As a result, a child will be exposed to traumatising experiences before intervention. These traumatising experiences will have long term impacts and change their lives' trajectory. Frederico and colleagues (2008) hypothesised that the effects of maltreatment will occur in three stages. Firstly, post-traumatic symptoms, altered developmental trajectory, cognitive distortions, and painful emotions. Secondly, the child may develop coping strategies to persist with the enduring abuse, including strategies such as substance abuse, avoidance, and self-harming behaviour. Lastly, these experiences may become integrated into the child's sense of self and psychological development (Frederico et al., 2008).

### **Children's Rights**

The introduction of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child promoted the importance of children's voices being heard at a macro and micro level. Australia agreed to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, however, unfortunately, there has been a lack of implementation of the Rights in Australian legislation.

Internationally, there has been an increasing demand for promoting children's

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participation in decision-making in a supportive and encouraging way which will ensure their ongoing involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of services (Le Bon & Boddy 2010). Within Australia, the perspective and opinions of younger children are often not heard. Research suggests that the individuals invited to provide their views on programs and social policies are often teenagers and people in their early twenties rather than young children (Le Bon & Boddy 2010). However, it is also crucial that children are provided with platforms to voice their fears and ideas in relation to their health, wellbeing, and communities. A potential research method that could be used to involve children in service planning is photovoice. Photovoice is a creative method of data collection that is non-intrusive and can be catered to all children's learning needs (Le Bon & Boddy 2010). Another potential platform to help children voice their opinions in Australia is through the Department of Education via school settings. This has been done by creating advisory groups consisting of 8-12 children within a school or collaborating with multiple schools that work directly with an organisation. This is a way to obtain children's different perspectives to improve the future projects and decision making of the collaborating organisations. Furthermore, allowing children to provide their opinion and insight into issues affecting them promotes equality, ensuring their basic needs are met and all matters affecting them are resolved.

In relation to supporting traumatised children, the practitioner must ensure they focus on all times the client was victimised rather than only the most recent experiences. This relates to a finding by Frederico and colleagues (2008), who highlighted that abuse and neglect are cumulative and recurring incidents that will increase the severity of the impacts on the child. All experiences must be considered to allow the practitioner to capture the full extent of the individual's stressors, mental health and potential developmental issues. The

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state of Victoria, for example, has made positive changes to their legislation to ensure they have a developmental focus rather than single incidents when working with children.

Additionally, research suggests that children in out-of-home care systems require mental health support related to the traumatic events they may have experienced throughout their lives (Frederico et al., 2008).

It is likely that children who have experienced abuse will experience many symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder although they may not meet the full criteria for this diagnosis. This disorder was initially developed to capture the experiences of adults; therefore, it is likely children will not meet the criteria. Trauma can impact a child's day-to-day functioning, leading to behavioural and emotional difficulties that may affect schooling, home, placement, and relationships. This demonstrates the importance of educating families, community, students, and teachers about trauma to better understand why children may be misbehaving.

Schools are often not equipped with the skills to support traumatised children, regularly turning to punishment when a traumatised child is misbehaving. These punishments range from being sent to the principal, detentions, suspension, and expulsions. Responding to behavioural issues by punishment does not solve problems the individual is experiencing but may decrease their educational outcomes and create a disconnection at school as the child is segregated. In Victoria, there is an initiative called Take Two, which developed a guide for schools to use when working with traumatised students (Frederico et al., 2008). This approach aims to improve children's learning outcomes and help assist with their healing concerning their trauma. It highlights the importance of providing a sense of safety through positive relationships for traumatised children and acknowledging the inability to heal from

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trauma in isolation. This approach needs to be replicated across all States and Territories to ensure all schools in the nation effectively support traumatised children to optimise their educational outcomes. Importantly, the Take Two initiative partners with Aboriginal organisations and services to provide culturally safe support for Aboriginal students in addition to an Aboriginal clinical team within the Take Two initiative.

Mental health and social and emotional wellbeing are significant concerns for Aboriginal people. Working with children that have experienced abuse and neglect can be challenging as it is often a parent or an influential person involved in the mistreatment of the child (Frederico et al., 2008). Consequently, this confuses the child as they are meant to be safe people instead, they are a source of harm, which may have long term effects on the child's future relationships. Research has found that one in seven Aboriginal children experience behavioural and emotional problems impacting their educational outcomes, health, relationships, and behaviour (Le Bon & Boddy., 2010). Furthermore, researchers have identified strong predictors of mental health in children, such as parental education levels and income, circumstances as to why they were born, parenting practices, and family relationships (Le Bon & Boddy., 2010). A child's risk of mental health issues increases if they are exposed to multiple risk factors over time. These mental health issues need to be addressed successfully; otherwise, they can lead to substance abuse, criminality, and family violence in adulthood (Le Bon & Boddy., 2010).

Researchers acknowledge the importance of neighbourhoods and communities in the early years of a child's life, mainly primary school years (Le Bon & Boddy., 2010).

Neighbourhoods and communities may affect the health and wellbeing of the child and impact their development. Finding by Le Bon & Boddy (2010) states that children living in

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communities that experience disadvantage and poverty have a higher chance of having emotional, learning, physical, and social difficulties than children living in wealthier communities.

The government needs to focus on empowering Aboriginal communities as it will benefit the next generation. There should be more culturally appropriate programs that collaborate with Indigenous elders, leaders, and representatives to address specific issues impacting their communities and children.

### **Community control/self determination**

It is well documented that for Aboriginal people community belonging is a protective factor, particularly for young people which can include strong kinship and family ties. Young people build a sense of identity in their particularly community through connections. These can be formed through local Aboriginal community organisations that have programs in place to strengthen cultural identity, pride, belonging and creating a sense of community (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

It is crucial that Indigenous communities voices are helping shape the environment and circumstances Indigenous people are born into and assisting them retain the right to self-determination and sovereignty with the goal of empowering the wellbeing of families and children. However, this needs to include Indigenous leadership and governance which also includes traditional cultural practices and values. For example, First Nations communities in British Columbia, Canada, reduced suicide rates by ensuring the community played a key role in developing programs that maintained cultural beliefs and identity, supported by good community governance (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Practitioners that are working with Indigenous children and families need to develop an understanding of the importance of

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community governance and control amongst Indigenous communities, which can be done through locating and connecting with community-controlled organisations and other key Aboriginal organisations such as Aboriginal land councils (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

Furthermore, practitioners working with young children and families should utilise a holistic approach to a child's health and welfare, considering cultural and contextual factors (Le Bon & Boddy., 2010). It is important that services and programs know the needs and cultural beliefs of the communities where they operate to ensure that the service can provide adequate support to their clients. Additionally, community service organisations should have cultural awareness and sensitivity when working with Indigenous children and their families and ensure they provide their workers with adequate training regarding cultural awareness. Community organisations need to collaborate with primary schools to help identify struggling children who require support concerning behaviour, attendance, and other health-related issues. This approach is less intimidating for the child and family than government services intervening, such as the Department of Communities & Justice.

### **Implications for social work**

A study by Bennett (2011) found that experienced Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers primarily focused on improving the relationships with their Aboriginal clients and communities as they found it beneficial for the therapeutic relationship. These social workers utilised different micro-skills such as deep listening and stillness when working with Aboriginal clients. It was evident that these skills helped improve the relationship with the clients. Additionally, a strong therapeutic relationship requires a successful introduction process with the client, involving sharing their background as a person and then as a worker.

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Aboriginal social workers may consist of their family, community, country and cultural connections to help create the initial bond with the client at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship.

All social workers must be equipped with extensive knowledge of Aboriginal histories in Australia such as the impacts of colonisation, policies, the role of the social work profession in this history and the competency experienced by these individuals and communities (Bennett et al., 2011). They further argue that indirect and direct social practices can be informed by theories relating to trauma, whiteness, racism, and human rights (Bennett et al., 2011). Additionally, this study acknowledged the importance of the social workers and services being culturally respectful and providing a safe environment for the client. This is essential considering the history between Aboriginal people and government services such as the welfare system. Furthermore, the social workers must have the ability to respond with humility, and authenticity and be self-reflective. Social workers must have a knowledge of Australia's first nations people's Worldviews as there are significant differences with westernised world views; this will help the workers have a better understanding of First Nations people's ways of knowing, being and doing.

The practice framework for social work with Aboriginal peoples must entail all the requirements mentioned above to ensure cultural safety and ensure the provision of adequate support.

There is considerable evidence available to support better practice with First Nations Peoples. A study by Le Bon & Boddy (2010) suggested that when addressing the many issues affecting Aboriginal children, there needs to be an approach that utilises local and international research. Genuine collaboration with Aboriginal communities is essential.

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## **Conclusion**

In summary, there needs to be significant change within Australia concerning the child and family policies as they are failing. These individuals and services must utilise practice frameworks that are culturally aware and safe for all clients. Especially in the child protection system, the government must use prevention approaches to help support struggling parents *before* the problems become severe. Furthermore, Indigenous communities need to be included in more programs that will help empower their community with an emphasis on self-determination. These changes must be made to create a better environment for children to flourish and grow up in their own parents' care.

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