### Office of the

# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner

Strategic Plan 2025









#### **Under the guiding stars**

This artwork honours the strength and sovereignty of First Nations children, guided by culture and community like the stars that have led our people for generations.

A young child stands beneath a vast sky, their gaze lifted to the constellations—symbols of ancestors, resilience, and belonging. The land beneath them is rich with the wisdom of Elders, grounding their identity. Silhouettes of family and community form a protective circle around them, representing love and strength.

This piece reflects the journey of First Nations youth—navigating a world that often tries to silence them but finding power in culture, language, and tradition. Like the stars before them, they will shine.

Indigenous Artist: Rachael Sarra

#### Acknowledgement of Country

The Queensland Family and Child Commission acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians across the lands, seas and skies on which we walk, live and work. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise that self-determination, healing, dignity and respect are all fundamental elements needed to improve outcomes and relationships. As an agency, we are committed to embedding culturally safe and responsive design practices and delivery in our work.





#### 1. Introduction

The Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner (OATSICC) provides leadership, oversight, and advocacy to protect and promote the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Queensland. Grounded in the principles of self-determination, cultural authority, and the right of every child to be safe, heard, and connected to kin, culture, and Country, OATSICC works to hold systems accountable and influence reform across child protection and youth justice. The Commissioner actively engages with children, young people, families, communities, and Elders to ensure their experiences and aspirations inform government policy, systemic change and service design.

This strategy outlines our approach to oversight, advocacy, collaboration and reform, reinforcing our dedication to a future where every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child grows up strong in culture, connected to family, and supported in a system that respects and values their identity.

Creating systems change based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing will benefit all children in Queensland, regardless of their background, so they can thrive and reach their full potential.

#### 2. Context

#### 2.1 Strategic Plan 2022-2026

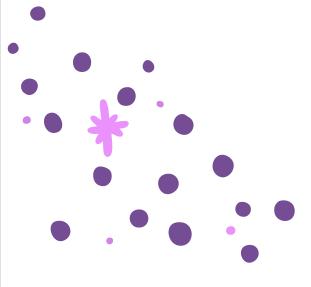
The OATSICC Strategy is a sub-strategy of the Queensland Family and Child Commission (the Commission). The workplan is a complementary document that focuses on the OATSICC'S implementation and operational effectiveness.

The Commissioner has independence in the exercise of their powers and functions.

For operational clarity within the Commission, and to position for the establishment of an independent Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner, the Commission's executive endorsed an approach to functional independence.

The key features of operational independence include:

- strategic direction setting at the team level
- the publication of independent reports, thought pieces, and dissenting perspectives
- delegations under section 35 and section 36 of the Act
- making recommendations directly to the Minister (section 18)
- appearing independently at Commonwealth and Queensland parliamentary inquiries and Queensland Government Estimates hearings to provide advice and respond to program-related work.



#### 3. Our vision

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up strong in their identity, culture, and community, free from systemic racism and discrimination. They are safe, nurtured, and thriving in their families, with systems designed to support, not separate. They exercise their rights, participate in decision-making, and contribute to solutions that are aligned to their identities and aspirations.

The child protection and youth justice systems are defined by early intervention, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family-led solutions, and culturally safe care.

The Queensland Government strengthens accountability by integrating child rights into policy, legislation and service delivery.

#### 4. Our value proposition

The OATSICC within the Commission offers a unique value proposition based on our mandate, knowledge of lived/living experience, and systems insights.

Advocacy, awareness and accountability drive and frame the OATSICC's work program.

**Advocacy:** we elevate the voices of First Nations children, and all children, while advocating for systemic change.

**Awareness:** drives our efforts to educate and inform communities, policymakers and professionals about the rights of First Nations children and the inequality and disadvantage they frequently face.

**Accountability:** we work to ensure that systems are accountable and that concrete outcomes are aligned with children's rights. Our value also lies in our distinct capacity to drive systemic change, informed by First Nations knowledge and leadership, and to engage communities, stakeholders and governments in meaningful reform efforts to advance children's rights.

The OATSICC brings a distinct voice to civil society in Queensland by bridging government accountability and grassroots advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We operate as a credible convenor between civil society and government and between children, young people and decision-makers. Our work reinforces commitments under Queensland Human Rights Act 2019, accountability as required by the Family and Child Commission Act 2014, and international frameworks, such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

#### 5. Guiding principles

Children are rights-holders who have agency, dignity and specific entitlements. In contrast to a traditional welfare or charity-based approach, which focuses on providing 'help' where needed, a child rights-based approach challenges systemic barriers that prevent children from enjoying their rights.

A child rights-based approach is our core methodology, and staff are guided by the following principles in all areas of their practice:

- > self-determination<sup>1</sup>
- cultural safety and strengths-based practice (that is, we do not view First Nations children predominantly through a lens of disadvantage)
- non-discrimination<sup>2</sup> (and intersectionality)
- best interests of children<sup>3</sup>
- children's development to their fullest potential4
- quality participation (space, voice, audience, influence)⁵
- evidence based and lived/living experience informed advocacy
- accountability and sustainable solutions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 1), 1976, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR

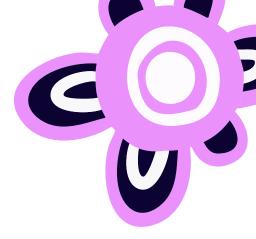
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

<sup>3</sup> UNCRC

<sup>4</sup> UNCRC

<sup>5</sup> UNCRC





#### 6. Our thematic priorities

We will have a predominant focus on youth justice, recognising the urgency created by the Making Queensland Safer Act 2024, which will have acute and disproportionate impacts for First Nations children. With 20-year mandatory minimum sentences, expanded bail laws, expanded police powers, our focus will be on addressing the over-representation of First Nations children in detention, strengthening diversion measures, addressing conditions of detention, and strengthening the coordination of oversight.

In line with our mandate, the OATSICC will focus on improving the child protection system by advocating for it to be aligned to international human rights standards. As part of our core business, we will continue to produce the Principle Focus Dashboard, measuring key indicators from a child-rights and First Nations perspective, and ensuring that data is used to highlight systemic issues and advocate for meaningful change. The OATSICC will also focus on the intersections between child protection and youth justice and the systemic failures related to children with dual orders.

The OATSICC will develop a targeted community engagement strategy because we view children, families, First Nations-led and youth-led organisations as critical partners in our work. The strategy will grow our reach and connection with children, families and community organisations across priority locations in regional and remote Queensland. We will continue to build on the success of the Young Black and Proud Scholarships, develop targeted child rights reporting, and design a First Nations Child Rights Defenders Program to mobilise children across Queensland.



#### 7. Goals

**Goal One:** The OATSICC is a trusted, go-to source for policy insights on First Nations children's rights, ensuring that legislation, programs and systemic reforms are shaped by lived experience, rigorous analysis, and a commitment to equity and self-determination.

- > **Outcome 1.1:** The Commissioner has increased policy influence and there is an increase in advice requested by government agencies, parliamentary committees and policy makers on legislation and reforms impacting First Nations children's rights and the rights of all children across Queensland.
- > **Outcome 1.2:** The OATSICC produces high-quality policy briefs, reports and submissions that are grounded in data, research and community insights.
- > **Outcome 1.3:** Key child protection and youth justice policies reflect the OATSICC's recommendations.
- > **Outcome 1.4:** The OATSICC's thought leadership and advocacy contributes to greater public awareness of First Nations children's rights issues.
- **Outcome 1.5:** The OATSICC strengthens the capability of policy makers, service providers and advocates in children's rights through training, forums, conferences and other knowledge-sharing initiatives.

**Goal Two:** Strengthen the participation and influence children's voices in policy development and decision-making in Queensland.

- > **Outcome 2.1:** Increased direct engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in decision-making processes in the Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support, the Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety, and the Department of Education.
- > Outcome 2.2: Establish and implement an OATSICC facilitated Children's Community Cabinet in regional and remote Queensland that engages with Ministers and Members of Queensland Parliament on a rolling basis.
- Outcome 2.3: Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Rights Defenders Program, building on participants' existing advocacy and influencing skills and connecting them to strategic opportunities in which they see value.

**Goal Three:** The OATSICC will advance rights-based approaches to youth justice in Queensland (diversion, rehabilitation, restorative justice and community-led solutions).

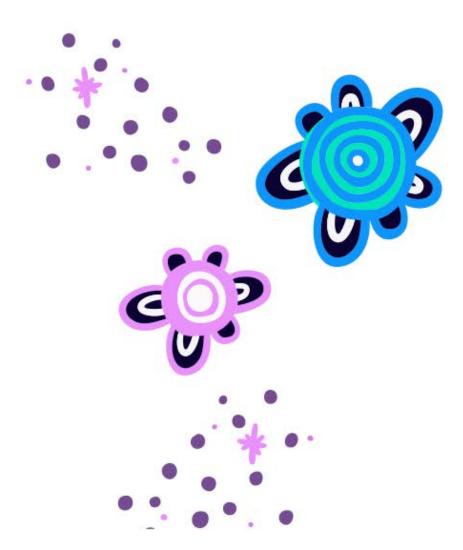
- > **Outcome 3.1:** Youth justice oversight is strengthened through statutory body cooperation and joined up advocacy.
- Outcome 3.2: Young people with lived experience of the youth justice system are shaping policy and decision-making.
- **Outcome 3.3:** The OATSICC and partners design an alternative children's court model in regional Queensland.

#### **Goal Four:** The Queensland Government's child protection laws and policies are aligned to a child rights approach and prioritise children's best interests as a primary consideration.

- > **Outcome 4.1:** The Queensland Government enshrines child rights principles in the Child Protection Act 1999, ensuring alignment with the UNCRC.
- > **Outcome 4.2:** The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care decreases due to the application of all elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, greater investment in family support, early intervention and culturally safe services.
- > Outcome 4.3: More children remain safely with their families through expanded family-led decision-making processes.
- > **Outcome 4.4:** Children and young people in the child protection system have greater opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them, supported by independent advocacy services.

#### **Goal Five:** Develop culturally safe enabling environments for the practice of First Nations and Child Rights Advocacy

- > Outcome 5.1: The OATSICC embeds culturally safe ways of working (inclusive of values, governance, strategy, methods and evaluation) that aim to eliminate racism and discrimination.
- > **Outcome 5.2:** The OATSICC's oversight approach disrupts and scrutinises individualised assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes by applying a broader rights-based perspective to the multifactorial effects of systems on communities.
- Outcome 5.3: The OATSICC maintains strong and ethical relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their communities.
- > **Outcome 5.4:** Emphasise and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's participation in regular evaluation of cultural safety within the OATSICC.





#### 8. Theory of Change

The Theory of Change provides a high-level description about how the OATSICC will contribute to advancing the rights of First Nations children, and all children, working in partnership with others.

#### 8.1 Problem statement

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in Queensland continue to experience systemic barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making processes that deeply affect their lives and life chances. Colonial approaches to law, policy and programs have disrupted self-determination and cultural continuity, leading to disproportionately high representation in child protection, youth justice and other institutional systems. This has caused serious and lasting harm.

Governments have historically taken a deficit-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in policymaking, focusing on perceived "problems" rather than recognising the strengths, knowledge, cultural authority, and self-determination of First Nations families and communities.

This approach strives to reflect and address the experiences of children and young people affected by multiple forms of discrimination and to change systems and norms in a way that is grounded in gender equity, disability rights and anti-racism.

Governments have focused on problems rather than strengths, opted for intervention over actual prevention, failed to understand and respect self-determination and cultural authority, and have not committed to meaningful power-sharing or accountability mechanisms.

More broadly, successive Queensland and Commonwealth governments have failed to prioritise children's rights through decision-making structures, legislation and policy settings, budgeting, and in their treatment of children and young people. Concerningly, the Queensland Government has overridden human rights protections and undermined the legal safeguards designed to ensure children are treated with dignity, respect and in accordance with their best interests.

#### 8.2 The OATSICC inputs:

- Cultural and child rights-based advocacy expertise
- Applied knowledge of cultural safety
- Applied knowledge of participatory and capacity—building methodologies
- Voices and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities
- > Trusted partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led organisations and child rights coalitions
- Strategic engagement with government and other stakeholders to drive systemic reform
- > Monitoring of the statutory systems including through partnerships with other oversight bodies

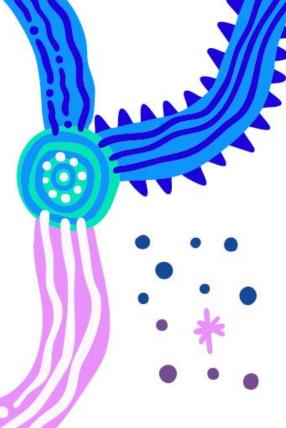


#### 8.3 Change statement

By empowering children and young people to participate in decision-making, advocating for culturally safe policies, being focused on addressing root causes, and monitoring systems, we can address systemic inequities and create relevant and lasting change.

If the OATSICC works with partners and coalitions to strengthen oversight of the child protection and youth justice systems, promotes quality child participation, and embeds a rights-based and culturally safe approach through our policy work, then:

- > systemic inequities will be reduced over time
- > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will have increased influence in decision-making
- > all children in Queensland, particularly First Nations children, will have an opportunity for healthy development in environments that are safe.



#### **Culture and Community**

This illustration represents finding strength in culture and community on the journey.



**Problem**Statement

Theory of Change explained

**OATSICC** Inputs



**Change** Statement







#### Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people face:

- > racism and other systemic barriers
- > intergenerational disadvantage
- > disproportionate over-representation in statutory systems
- > top-down and deficit-based policy approaches from governments that overreach into their lives
- > fragmented protection of their rights in legislation.

#### The OATSICC and our partners contribute the following inputs:

- > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and youth leadership
- culturally grounded, rights-based advocacy informed by lived/living experience and quality participation
- trusted partnerships, strategic influence, and system oversight to hold power to account and advance reform.

#### If

> the OATSICC and its partners elevate First Nations child and youth leadership, apply culturally grounded, rights-based advocacy, and work in trusted partnerships to strengthen oversight and influence systemic reform

#### Then

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have greater influence in decisions that affect their lives, statutory systems will become more culturally safe and accountable, and all children especially First Nations children will have the opportunity to thrive.



#### 9. The OATSICC's technical approach

#### 9.1 Our mandate

The Commission's legislated objective is to promote the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people in Queensland.

The OATSICC has a child rights-based approach as our methodology across our program of work, and this is well aligned to our functions as set out under the Commission's Act including:

- > Prioritising the best interests of the child (Article 3, UNCRC) is explicitly referenced in section 4 of the Act.
- > Ensuring child participation in accordance with (Article 12, UNCRC) and section 23 (1) (a) of the Act requiring the Commission to "engage with, and take account of, the views of children, young people and their families".
- > Articles 9 and 19 in the UNCRC respectively refer to a child's separation from their parents and addressing violence against children in all its forms, including in institutional settings. This relates to our child protection related functions under section 9 of the Act.
- > Articles 37 and 40 in the UNCRC respectively refer to protection from torture and deprivation of liberty and the right to be treated in a manner appropriate to a child's age and legal status. This relates to section 9(1)(b)(ii) of the Act, which sets out our responsibility to "promote and advocate for the safety and wellbeing of children, especially those in need of protection or involved in the youth justice system.

#### 9.2 A decolonising approach

A First Nations paradigm necessarily centres First Nations knowledges. This is of primary importance for the realisation of First Nations people's rights, especially in circumstances of colonisation.

The OATSICC acknowledges that many of the approaches we refer to and use are developed within the western tradition.

This means it is incumbent upon us to ensure work is undertaken to centre and negotiate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing within methodological approaches. This means OATSICC works from a transformative decolonising paradigm in partnership with First Nations children and young people (as customer/owner) to address issues of systemic racism, discrimination, cultural safety and rights to autonomy and self-determination.

#### 9.3 Ecological approach

UNICEF defines an ecological approach<sup>6</sup> to child rights as a framework that considers the interplay between the child and their multiple environments. This approach recognises that a child's development and wellbeing are influenced by various interconnected systems, ranging from immediate family and community settings to broader societal and cultural contexts.

An ecological approach to children's rights is essential because it recognises that children do not grow up and develop in isolation but are deeply influenced and impacted by the environments around them. The social ecological model identifies multiple levels of influence on a child's life:

- > **Individual level:** This includes the child's personal characteristics such as age, gender, health status and personal history.
- **Relationship level:** This includes interactions with family members, peer and caregivers, highlighting how these relationships can support or hinder a child's development.
- **Community level:** This refers to the regular settings with which children engage, such as schools, neighbourhoods, local community groups and services, religious groups, and how these environments impact their wellbeing.
- > **Societal level:** Involves the broader social. cultural and economic policy contexts that shape the conditions in which children and families live, including social norms, values and systems.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>UNICEF's brief on the Social and Ecological model. 2024. View at: www.knowledge.unicef.org/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support/resource/unicefs-brief-social-ecological-model

The OATSICC adopts this ecological model for several important reasons:

- > An ecological approach aligns with international human rights standards and ensures that policies are responsive to global best practice.
- > Many challenges to children's rights, such as poverty, discrimination, abuse, and neglect stem from systemic issues rather than individual choices. An ecological approach helps identify these root causes and implements interventions that tackle broader societal and structural barriers.
- > A one-size-fits-all approach has not proven effective. Recognising the different cultural, economic, and social realities of children, particularly First Nations children in Australia, ensures that rights-based approaches are tailored to the unique strengths and challenges in each community.
- > Children's wellbeing is shaped by their relationships, access to healthcare and education, economic situation, levels of social inclusion, and the legal and policy environment. By addressing all these factors together, rather than in isolation, policy settings become more effective and sustainable.
- Supporting children's rights is not just about government action. Families, schools, and communities play a crucial role in upholding children's wellbeing. An ecological approach fosters stronger support systems that empower those closest to children to be part of the solution.
- An ecological approach to children's rights is also crucial because it shifts the focus from blaming individual children and families for challenges they face to recognising the broader systemic barriers that contribute to these issues. Without this approach, policies and decision-making can risk pathologising (and criminalising) children, treating them as the problem rather than addressing the structural gaps that shape their lives.
- > An individual or deficit-based approach sees children as at risk, vulnerable, troubled, or damaged, rather than recognising the lack of support structures, services and opportunities that lead to these outcomes. Rather than treating children as problems to be fixed, an ecological approach acknowledges their rights, strengths and need for culturally safe and community led solutions.

For example, an ecological approach ensures we ask:

- > Why are First Nations children over-represented in youth detention? Instead of blaming families, we look at racism in the justice system, over-policing, intergenerational trauma and lack of diversion programs.
- Why are children being removed from families? Rather than assuming parental neglect, we analyse housing insecurity, poverty and failure of early intervention practices and services.

#### 9.4 Life cycle approach

The OATSICC applies a life cycle approach to children's rights. This involves implementing targeted initiatives that address the evolving needs of children as they grow. This approach ensures policies and programs are tailored to support children's development effectively at each phase of their lives.

While categorisation may vary based on context, we are guided by the following stages:

- **1. Pre-natal period** focusing on maternal health to ensure healthy foetal development.
- **2. Neo-natal period** addressing the critical health needs immediately after birth.
- 3. Infancy (1-2 years) emphasising nutrition, healthy attachment, immunisation and early stimulation.
- **4.** Early childhood (3–5 years) promoting quality early education and healthy social development.
- **5. Middle childhood (6–11 years)** focusing on primary education and foundational skills.
- **6.** Adolescence (12–18 years) focusing on quality secondary education and psychosocial support.

This approach ensures that interventions are contextually relevant and effectively support children's development at each stage, supporting them to reach their full potential.

#### 9.5 A child rights based approach

UNICEF defines a Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA) as a framework that integrates children's rights into laws, policies, programs and decision-making processes. This approach is rooted in the principles of the UNCRC and ensures that all policies and actions affecting children respect, protect, and fulfill their rights.

Core Elements of a CRBA in policy:

#### 1. Recognition of children as rights holders

- > Policies must recognise children as individuals with rights, not just passive recipients of services or protection.
- Governments and institutions must acknowledge their obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill children's rights.

#### 2. Best interests of the child (Article 3, UNCRC)

- > All policies must prioritise the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in decision-making.
- > Policymakers should assess the potential impacts of policies on children's wellbeing.
- > If decision-making doesn't consider an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's identity, culture and community, it cannot be in their best interests.

#### 3. Non-discrimination (Article 2, UNCRC)

- > Policies must ensure that no child is excluded or disadvantaged based on race, gender, disability, socio-economic status, or other factors.
- Special attention should be given to marginalised or vulnerable children, including First Nations children, children in care, and those in the youth justice system.

#### 4. Right to participation (Article 12, UNCRC)

- > Children must have the opportunity to express their views on matters that affect them.
- > Policies should incorporate mechanisms for child and youth participation, ensuring their voices shape decisions.

#### 5. Holistic and integrated approach

- > Policies should address the full spectrum of children's rights, including survival, development, protection and participation.
- Cross-sector collaboration (for example, health, education, justice and child protection) is essential for comprehensive child-centred policies.

#### 6. Accountability and transparency

- > Governments and policymakers must be held accountable for implementing child rights-based policies.
- > Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms should track progress and ensure compliance with the UNCRC.

#### 9.6 An intersectional approach to advancing children's rights

In line with strengths-based practice, we recognise the intersectionality of children's identities as normative and a source of strength. We view all aspects of a child's identity as an important part of their holistic and healthy development. Children are not defined by a single identity and rarely experience discrimination based on any single factor.

First Nations children, and children in Queensland, are not homogenous. An intersectional approach to child rights also recognises that children's experiences of rights violations are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors, such as age, race, gender, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, social and economic status and cultural background.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Children has explicitly recognised the intersectionality in children's rights. General Comment No. 20<sup>7</sup> on the rights of adolescents stresses that children face compounded forms of discrimination and that policies should account for race, gender, disability, social and economic status and migration status.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) emphasises the importance of an intersectional approach in understanding and addressing human rights issues. Intersectionality examines how various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, interact to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege.

The OHCHR further states that an intersectional analysis provides a holistic view of human rights and is therefore key to:

- addressing systemic racism and confronting legacies of colonialism
- > identifying the compounding effects of discrimination
- > effective human rights advocacy.8

Staff will intentionally develop enhanced technical capability around the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to have greater impact for children.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2016). General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence. United Nations. www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-20-2016-implementation-rights

United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. (2022). Guidance Note on Intersectionality, Racial Discrimination, and Protection of Minorities. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/minorities/30th-anniversary/2022-09-22/GuidanceNoteonIntersectionality.pdf



At the centre of everything are our First Nations Children

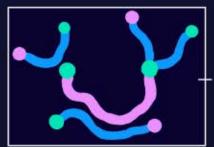
# Our **story** and our **journey**



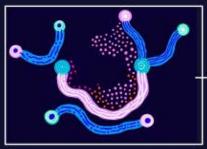
Surrounded by culture and connection



Part of diverse communities



**Navigating different** journeys



Finding strength in culture and community on the journey



## **Key** Themes

- > Children and culture first
- Sovereignty and strength
- Strength based language
- Empowering, self-determination
- Reflection of the journey
- Connection to culture and community
- Feeling heard and seen.

