

ACCG statement in response to commentary about child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory

21 April 2023

Australian Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates express our strong support for the statements issued by Nicole Hucks, as the Acting Northern Territory Children's Commissioner, and Catherine Liddle, as the CEO of SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children, with respect to recent commentary about child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory.

As a collective group of National, State and Territory Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates, our singular focus is to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. We are concerned that recent commentary and assertions about child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory is lacking a considered, evidence-based mindset. The politicisation of the issue of child sexual abuse and the lives of First Nations children leaves us deeply concerned.

The sexual abuse of children and young people is a serious crime, and a matter of grave concern for children and communities. It is disgraceful that this sensitive issue, which affects children of all backgrounds, cultures and religions, has been used in a way that reinforces harmful and unsubstantiated rhetoric about First Nations peoples. These prejudices and stereotypes have formed the basis of severe human rights abuses committed against Aboriginal children and young people – including the Stolen Generation and the Northern Territory Intervention – which continue to contribute to the gross overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system.

As a group of experts dedicated to promoting the human rights of children and young people, we express our strong support for the full implementation of the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in all jurisdictions throughout Australia. Extensive child protection evidence and research shows that children and young people thrive when they grow up safe within their kinship systems and are connected to culture. This is their right. The safety of our Aboriginal children and young people is inherent in the Principle and is not a separate or detached consideration from culture; they are intertwined and ensure our children are afforded their human and cultural rights to the greatest extent possible. The child placement principles do not compromise safety; to the contrary, it supports safety.

First Nations members of the ACCG group have recently published a statement outlining 11 advocacy priorities, to improve the lives of First Nations children and young people. All members of the ACCG group are committed to advocating for these priorities. This includes:

- the introduction of properly resourced Commissioners for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People in each jurisdiction and at the national level, with independent powers to act on behalf of children and young people
- monitoring the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, placing primacy on the preservation and reunification of families
- strengthening the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, through the resources and powers to design and lead family support services and child protection responses for First Nations children and families.

We have also recently expressed our support for a voice for First Nations peoples in the highest place of decision making. This is essential to ensuring that decisions about First Nations peoples are made with the advice of the people most affected, who are the experts in their own lives.

The Australian Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates group expresses its sincere hope that all levels of government in Australia can come together, with First Nations communities, to ensure the rights of children and young people to grow up safely with their families, communities and culture. This response must be focused on the needs of First Nations children, families and communities, who have long asked for their voice to be heard and real action to Close the Gap that so clearly exists in our society.

*Endorsed by the undersigned Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates
for Australian children and young people*



OFFICE FOR ACT ABORIGINAL
& TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE
KEEPING OUR KIDS STRONG
IN FAMILY & CULTURE

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