

# ABC NEWS

OPINION

## Aboriginal children need loving, safe and culturally appropriate homes

By Christine Craik and Linda Ford

Updated Wed 4 Apr 2018, 10:09am



PHOTO: Children and young people who come into the care of the state are amongst the most vulnerable members of society. (Supplied: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency)

**Recent arguments about the removal of Indigenous children from their families fail to appreciate the complexity of the issue. Reducing the debate to oversimplified understandings of the factors that contribute to the devastating disparity in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children will only further entrench this inequality.**

The rates of child sexual abuse among Indigenous children is a serious issue that needs action. Calls for the increased removal of children as the main solution are part of the problem and symptomatic of the inter-generational and systemic policies of discrimination that have contributed to the situation we witness today.

All children have the right to a safe, happy and emotionally supported childhood where they are nurtured and loved. This is beyond debate.

Children and young people who come into the care of the state are amongst the most vulnerable members of society and their best interest and safety is of the utmost importance in all decision making. This should include attention to their physical, emotional, social, educational and cultural needs.

Aboriginal children should be placed with Aboriginal families. This is the central idea of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in all states and territories. Having learnt from history and the significance of cultural identity for healthy development, the principle states that children who are removed from their families must be housed with Indigenous family members or Indigenous foster carers.

In reality, the proportion of children placed according to the principle decreased from 74 per cent in 2007-08 to 67.6 per cent in 2016-17.

### System creates barriers for Aboriginal families

The argument is often made that there are not enough Aboriginal families to foster or adopt, but there are many Aboriginal families that could foster and adopt, however are unable to due to the barriers and lack of support provided. This needs to be acknowledged so that the systems change in order to increase Aboriginal fostering and adoption capacity.

The reality is that the bureaucratic process to foster or adopt is based on what is comfortable for white, middle class families, and this can create huge barriers for members of the Aboriginal community. It is also full of systemic bias.

For example, you need a certain literacy level and decent formal education just to be able to comprehend and complete the application that is required. These things do not equate with being able to provide a safe and loving home.

Additionally, there are significant barriers for those who speak another language or who may not have had the opportunity to reach a certain level of formal education.

Another example of a systemic barrier in this process is that of requiring a police check, without a thorough understanding of the contributing factors to any positive screens in Aboriginal families. Statistics show us that Aboriginal people currently make up 27 per cent of the prison population, while only being 3 per cent of the general population, and we know that many of the same behaviours that see Aboriginal people incarcerated, do not see white people incarcerated.

The onerous process of justifying why their criminal history is no longer relevant at a later stage of their life is often a deterrent to them attempting to foster or adopt.

The systems are confusing and hard to navigate, as well as creating barriers. Other systemic issues faced by members of the Aboriginal community, such as significant overcrowding in housing and other social housing problems, can also impact on these processes.

When applying to foster or adopt, every person living in the household undergoes a background check and this can also work against Aboriginal families, with multiple generations living under one roof and a cultural expectation that you don't refuse a member of the family who needs a home.

What kind of choice do we leave these families when they have to decide between a young man who may have been incarcerated for a trivial offence and an application to foster or adopt?

Other examples of systemic bias include the assumption that everyone has a birth certificate and identification; many of these families include older family members whose births may not have even been registered. The application process also includes a household safety assessment, based very much on white, middle class notions of household safety. Of course there are basic standards that must be met, but the inability of the process to understand culture creates significant barriers for many Aboriginal families.

### Alienation lasts a lifetime

We need to start by listening to those who have been removed from family and culture and the impact that this has had on their lives. Children who do not continue to live in Aboriginal communities and subsequently lose their culture need to negotiate this alienation for the rest of their lives, leading in part to the poorer outcomes we continue to see in the Close the Gap and other reports.

Governments have a responsibility to concentrate efforts and services on creating environments in which families are supported so that the various factors that increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect are substantially reduced.

Indigenous children are 10 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children. We currently have a situation where state and territory governments spend only 17 per cent of total child protection funding (\$700 million a year) on family support services for children and their families, compared with 83 per cent (\$3.5 billion) on child protection services. The system is punitive and intervenes when it is too late.

There is no single solution to addressing this issue, but any action must begin by working with Indigenous communities in partnership and collaboration, respecting culture and drawing upon their knowledge and expertise.

It also means understanding the historical and social contexts with a commitment from all levels of government to better supporting and resourcing Indigenous services so we can ensure that every child has a loving, safe and culturally appropriate home.

**Christine Craik is the national president of the Australian Association of Social Workers. Linda Ford is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative director of the Australian Association of Social Workers.**

Topics: indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, indigenous-culture, indigenous-policy, child-health-and-behaviour, children, child-abuse, australia

**RELATED STORY:** Justice system overhaul needed to address Indigenous incarcerations, inquiry finds

**RELATED STORY:** 'Blood, sweat and tears' as Victoria moves closer to Aboriginal treaty