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# Indigenous families missing out on disability support amid fear of child removals

By [Dana McCauley](#)

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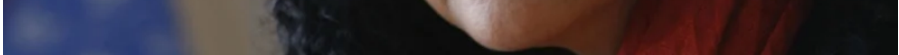
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Indigenous families are missing out on disability support amid fear of child removals despite Aboriginal children being twice as likely to have a disability as non-Indigenous children, a leading Aboriginal welfare expert says.

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency chief executive Muriel Bamblett said Australia's history of institutional racism, the complexity of disability services and a fear of being branded a "bad parent" for seeking help were impeding access to support.





Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency chief executive Muriel Bamblett says Indigenous families need more support to navigate the disability sector. JUSTIN MCMANUS

"Non-Aboriginal people believe they have a right to a service," Ms Bamblett, an adjunct professor at La Trobe University's School of Social Work and Social Policy, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

"Aboriginal people don't believe they have the same right as everyone else ... They are concerned that someone will see them as not a good parent."

The disability Royal Commission is seeking submissions from Indigenous Australians after releasing an issues paper this month noting the link between higher rates of disability among Aboriginal people and "challenges in their day to day lives."

These included access to education and higher rates of contact with the criminal justice and child welfare systems, the issues paper said.

The latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows 14 per cent of Indigenous children aged 14-or-under had a disability in 2009, compared with 7 per cent of non-Indigenous children.

Previous studies and inquiries have found that First Nations people with disability have poorer health outcomes than other Australians with a disability. Studies also found they have been removed, or had relatives removed, from their families.

Ms Bamblett, who met with Commissioner Andrea Mason at a First Nations roundtable last week, said the education system, child protection and drug and alcohol services should be tasked with helping ensure Indigenous children with disability received the support they needed.

"The National Disability Insurance Scheme is quite complex," she said. "The system navigation is a nightmare for Aboriginal people."

Aboriginal case managers were not a complete solution, she said, as the issue was not just medical, with high levels of intellectual disability intersecting with trouble at school and substance issues.

"Aboriginal people need to be involved in designing the system and institutions," she said. "We have to break the cycle of disability now."

Ms Bamblett said early intervention could help tackle high rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system among Indigenous children with intellectual disabilities.

The Victorian Commission for Children and Young People's Taskforce 1000 report in 2016 found that of Indigenous children with a disability in state care, 65 per

cent had an intellectual disability, 10 per cent had both physical and intellectual disabilities, 10 per cent had a solely physical disability and 10 per cent had another type of disability.

Grandparents looking after children whose parents were unable to care for them needed help to navigate the system, Ms Bamblett said, as did children leaving the care of the state after turning 18.

"Carers struggle, especially elders, if they're given a child with a disability or health issue," she said. "They've got so, so many doctors appointments."

Ms Bamblett also said Indigenous families tended to "see disability differently", believing they should be able to care for their children at home even when outside support could be beneficial.

She said this had happened within her own family, with a cousin with a disability who was loved and cared for within the family home, but later blossomed in a special home where "he learned independence".

"We thought we were all doing the right thing, spoiling and pampering him," she said.

In remote communities, Ms Bamblett said, the fear of having children taken into care reflected a reality where those with high needs were likely to be institutionalised, due to the lack of services and severe overcrowding in family homes.



**Dana McCauley**



Dana is health and industrial relations reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

