

The Concept of Community

The concept of community is of critical importance to Aboriginal people, referring to the relationships that we share with each other. Our concept of community engenders a sense of belonging, including cultural, emotional and social ties that bind us to family, kin and Country. As such, the concept of community is important to the cultural rights and sense of identity of Aboriginal children and young people. The importance of community to Aboriginal people is recognised with the *Child and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (the Care Act), however a lack of clarity regarding the cultural meaning of this term may undermine the proper application of safeguards found within the Care Act. This paper provides guidance to the child and family sector with respect to AbSec’s interpretation of the concept of community and its application within the child protection system.

Community in the NSW Child Protection System

“Community” is mentioned a number of times within the Care Act, often in direct reference to the application of the Act within an Aboriginal context. This concept is mentioned throughout the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principles, including the need for Aboriginal communities to have an opportunity to participate in decision making¹ and in the placement hierarchy for Aboriginal children and young people in need of care², as well as featuring in care plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people³. Importantly, the continuity of relationships for all children and young people placed in out-of-home care with, among others, their community, is a central principle for the administration of the Care Act, emphasising the need for a clear and culturally informed understanding of the concept of community to properly apply the Care Act with respect to Aboriginal children and young people.

AbSec Perspective of Community

In AbSec’s view, an understanding of community from an Aboriginal perspective must appreciate the importance of relationships to Aboriginal people, as well as our collective history and lived experiences. The concept of community can refer both to nationhood for Aboriginal people, or to the connections between Aboriginal people within and across nations developed over time.

In the former, community refers to the Nation or language group of an Aboriginal family, regardless of where they reside, reflecting the sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples as distinct Nations and our right of Aboriginal people to retain our distinct cultures and connections, including obligations to Country.

¹ s. 12, *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*

² s.13 *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*

³ S.22, *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulations 2012*

However, as a result of recent history, including both the forced and voluntary movements of Aboriginal families across Nations, the concept of community for Aboriginal people can also refer to local groupings connected through various relationships other than nationhood ties. In some resources, such as the Creating Cultural Connections guide, this latter definition has been termed “Community of Belonging”, noting the sense of connectedness despite no formal nationhood ties.

Many Aboriginal people are meaningfully connected to more than one “community”, including one or multiple nationhood connections, as well as communities of belonging. It is important to recognise and appreciate the significance of both types of community when working with Aboriginal children and families. Given the significance of relationships and feelings of connectedness and belonging in resilience⁴ and identity formation, a full understanding of the concept of community for Aboriginal families is likely to support improved practice and significantly greater supports for Aboriginal children and their families, driving better outcomes.

In Practice

- An understanding of the concept of community from an Aboriginal perspective must include an appreciation of Nationhood connections and other relationships and connections in local areas involving Aboriginal people from a range of nations, referred to as “communities of belonging”. Aboriginal children and young people and their families may be connecting to a number of communities, which may play a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people
- Given the protective value of community connections in promoting resilience, it is important to retain all existing community connections for Aboriginal children and families. These community connections may represent a source of formal or informal supports for Aboriginal children and families through challenging periods, providing positive, enduring relationships for Aboriginal children and young people.
- The Nationhood concept of community is particularly important for the cultural identity of Aboriginal children and young people. However, due to past and ongoing policies that intervene in Aboriginal families, some families may have lost this connection. It is important that Aboriginal children are connected to their Nation wherever possible, with efforts to reconnect Aboriginal children and families. Local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Link-Up NSW might be able to assist in reconnecting families who have been disconnected.
- All decision making about the child must engage that child’s Aboriginal family, extended family, community and community of belonging, capitalising on any formal or informal supports that might exist. These community connections should be clearly defined in the child’s cultural information, and might also be reflected on a comprehensive genogram.

⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>