



OPINION PIECE

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We know Aboriginal children are safer in their culture – now we need to use that knowledge

By Tim Ireland, Chief Executive Officer of AbSec (Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat)

Strong connections to culture and community can help protect Aboriginal children from abuse, according to research released last week by the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse. This is old news to Aboriginal organisations and communities.

We've long known that our young people are safer, healthier and happier in their own homes, families and communities, supported by our Aboriginal organisations.

Aboriginal children often have a wide network of people they can rely on, extending beyond the immediate biological family to aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and community elders. When our kids are removed from their communities – supposedly for their own protection – they're cut off from this supportive network.

Connection to culture is also central to the identity and wellbeing of young Aboriginal people. In fact, children's right to their own culture is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. And the Convention states that when a child is removed from their family by the State, this should be done with "due regard" for their cultural background.

Royal Commission CEO Philip Reed confirmed the importance of culture and community in the research report, [*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and sexual abuse in institutional contexts*](#). "The report suggests that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are separated from culture, they are more likely to be separated from the protective factors that support high self-esteem, secure attachments and a strong and positive social network," Mr Reed said.

As CEO of AbSec, the NSW Aboriginal peak body for child and family welfare, I work every day to ensure the wellbeing of our kids. Our goal is simple, yet frustratingly out of reach: that Aboriginal children and young people should be looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, supported by Aboriginal organisations.

This goal remains beyond reach because of the staggering over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system, and over-reliance on the old method of simply removing children rather than looking at new and innovative solutions driven by our communities. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids are about 9.5 times more likely to be removed by child protection authorities than non-Indigenous children. Right now, more than 6,000 Aboriginal children are in the out-of-home care system in NSW alone, and the numbers keep increasing.



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Of course, we wholeheartedly support every child's fundamental right to safety. But no child should be made to choose between their safety and their culture. We need to explore solutions like kinship care, where a child is cared for by relatives or community members.

And we need to empower local Aboriginal organisations to drive the best and most culturally appropriate solutions for their kids. Our communities are dedicated to giving our kids a better future – but we need government support, trust from the public, and ongoing resources.

AbSec welcomes this new research from the Royal Commission, and we hope it will be strongly reflected in the Commission's final recommendations, to be delivered to government in December. Our Aboriginal kids need all the support they can get – and they deserve a better deal.

Tim Ireland is available for interview opportunities. Please direct all media enquiries to Alyssa Robinson on 0434 996 578 or alyssa.robinson@absec.org.au.