

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION FORUM 2010
Mackay Queensland

KEEPING CHILDREN, FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES SAFE 'OUR WAY'
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I would like to acknowledge the Yuibera (Yooberra) people of this land on which we meet today. I thank you all and the organisers for making it possible for me to attend this forum and look forward to sharing experiences.

A well known Territory Elder (who I respect and admire in her struggle for Aboriginal rights); stated, "Another Day, Another Time" - the same voice, the same people, the same message, reiterated time and time again". Truth is a moral obligation! Justice is a Legal Right!!!

Too often we forget the moral obligation and commitment that Aboriginal parents, families and communities have for their children's upbringing and nurturing.

We talk about the insensitive and wanton legislations that promised a better and improved way of life and opportunity for our children. Instead the Aboriginal people were deemed to become misfits of society and entrapped in socio-economic isolation with out a wholesome personal identity. Void of inherent Indigenous Rights and inability to claim Land Rights as their Birth Right.

I believe that the concept of shared responsibilities to tackling the serious social problems of abuse and domestic violence rests on the shoulders of all Governments and the Aboriginal communities.

In the current climate parents are caught up in their own social problems and too often forget the children and the impact it has on their lives. Children are the silent sufferers affected by family violence as this is experienced every day of their lives. This is the behaviour they see and often children will play out what they see and hear because to them learning is by seeing and hearing.

They too often now no longer learn by the Aboriginal way of learning things in their communities. They see continuous fighting, drinking, and sniffing petrol and drug taking from a very early age. What has become of their role models and their teachers in Aboriginal ways cultural and spiritual learning, children are caught up in the wrong examples of behaviour.

Learning in the Aboriginal way has always been by seeing, hearing and listening so it is easy for children to behave in this way because that is all that they experience in their daily lives, alcohol, drugs and violence amongst their families.

Family violence may not be inflicted on all children but seeing it as a regular occurrence in the family indicates they are the silent sufferers as they watch and learn this behaviour

Much of the violence and abuse occurring is a direct reflection of the past and current social dysfunction of Aboriginal communities developed over many decades. To tackle such serious social problems resulting from decades of neglect in housing, education, employment and other essential services for Indigenous Australians living in both urban and remote areas requires a long term focus and shared approach.

Let me remind all; that there is strength and resilience in Aboriginal culture and traditional governance to which family violence and abuse can be dealt with in partnership with Aboriginal parents, families and communities. Prevention and dealing with social dysfunction has to be in partnership with the Aboriginal people.

I would like to talk about this great system within Aboriginal families, clans and communities, that we too often tend to neglect when working with Aboriginal people.

It is important to work closely with traditional elders, families and communities to foster Aboriginal culture and traditional governance in which domestic violence is prohibited.

In the Aboriginal way of life, their systems include Aboriginal children in all aspects of life from family, ceremony, cultural and spiritual learning and customs. The parents, elders and extended families ensure children's roles and responsibilities within this system is taught, nurtured and adhered in all family and community life.

Clans and families have always used the fire place as a place to talk about activities, ceremonies, conflict – resolving conflict, singing, dancing, cooking, storytelling and spiritual teachings. Now this important place is too often forgotten and people have slowly drifted away. Many want to return and are finding innovative ways of getting families together, measuring the distance between them and the fire place.

Around many campfires in many Aboriginal countries, children from a very early age are taught about their roles and responsibilities within the family, clan and community. They learn their place in ceremony the importance of these ceremonies, their cultural and spiritual obligations and how to behave while attending these important activities. They understand you don't question business in ceremony and cultural and spiritual system's, they do what is required of them as part of their role in this clan and group.

This system has kept them safe and free of fear and conflict for many years but now in the current times and all the influences inflicted on Aboriginal communities growing concerns emerge daily. The system of sending children away from their families and communities for education, medical and other

services has played a big part in the interruption of the true teaching of the customs in which children are raised.

Many parents are disempowered, influenced by drugs, alcohol and social dysfunction and have not been empowered to reinstate the system which was once a strong and viable way of life for our people. Children have always been loved, respected, nurtured and taught the Aboriginal way of life. It is important that these values and systems are encouraged and the Aboriginal people are empowered to ensure the systems are once again taught to their children to bring back pride and dignity to the Aboriginal people and communities. Too often focus is wholly on the negative not the positives of Aboriginal child rearing and the Aboriginal practices which give young people their identity, their values, their role and purpose in life.

A colleague and I have been travelling to a number of remote communities and testing a new way for Aboriginal people to identify their own issues and assess what is and what is not working in their communities. Using the image of the central campfire, we ask local people what factors keep their community and families strong, and their children safe. What are the things that are pushing them away? What are the impacts of alcohol, violence and other problems in the community? How are men, women and children coping?

Over and over we heard that a key factor in family resilience and child safety was the strength of traditional culture in that community and the performance of ceremonies. Our long traditions have provided opportunities for children and young people to learn through ceremonies about their cultural roles and responsibilities in ways that also help them to understand their responsibilities in life and their role in the wider world they live in. We heard from people in communities that where those traditions were still maintained and respected, families were strong and children were safe. People told us that where traditional ceremonies and community events were struggling, families also struggled and children were increasingly at risk.

In the history of Aboriginal people our traditional ceremonies and practices, which we used over thousands of years to successfully socialise our children, have often been neglected and ignored. Instead, children are being removed from their families, culture and country in numbers that are higher today even than they were in the days of the Stolen Generation. We know that the removal of children in previous generations has caused many problems associated with current issues – and yet the pattern continues today, in even greater numbers. What then is the hope for the next generation? Why can we not put more resources into family support, and working with communities to strengthen them to support their children, instead of putting such a high proportion of funding and staff into child removal?

An old man my uncle from my clan once said to me, *“My girl if all you children had been allowed to stay with us, family, clan and community you would have learnt everything, the Aboriginal law side, ceremony side, kinship and your roles within your clans. This separation of you children caused no learning and no knowledge of who you are and what you are and your value to your*

people and the sense of belonging to your rich spiritual, cultural heritage as an Aboriginal child. Children have to be taught and cared for in their own way to follow blackfella law as they become lost and stay lost.”

I was so moved and realised the hurt of past policies to my mother, family, clan and community. The realisation of the importance of us growing up within our family groups and learning our ways showed me how much we had lost not only us but our families and clans.

Aboriginal people particularly the mothers were not able to cope with the pain of losing us. They could not to this day even discuss this because of the immense pain and grief and anguish. Their rights for their children were removed from them and how were their children to learn about their Aboriginal life without the proper teaching and nurturing. The Aboriginal people still feel this and need to be able to nurture their children in the right way from baby to the teens. When children reach their teens they are then young women and men in the eyes of Aboriginal law and the Elders.

With the current abuse and violence in our communities our people often in the past dealt with overwhelming problems by making it small rather than talking about it. Now they want to be part of the solution

A determination remains among many Aboriginal families, clans and communities to have greater control in matters over which they have the greatest knowledge in respect of the most intimate concern.

Education I believe remains the key issue to foster safe and well adjusted families.

Community legal education at communities and at schools is important to inform the people and children of the relevant legal framework of domestic violence scheme in the context of Aboriginal culture, customary law and traditional governance which forbids domestic violence.

Governments should encourage the setting up of cultural workshops to promote youth and educational enterprises both as empowering projects and possible employment outlets. By taking a multi-pronged approach, services could enhance the communities' involvement in the Governments attempt to tackle the issues in a holistic way, from a bottom up rather than from a top down approach.

Employment is a critical issue. I have worked pretty much all my life and I am proud of what I have been able to achieve. But a colleague and I have been researching the roles of Aboriginal people in workplaces, and their ability to use their cultural skills and the knowledge that has been developed over many centuries in appropriate ways at work. Much more could be done to encourage and integrate the skills and knowledge we bring into work, particularly our understanding of how to support children and families.

Everybody needs to be responsible for children's safety; Aboriginal families and government together need to find the best ways of doing this, and doing it in a way that helps those children build their own strong families in the future and socialise their own children successfully, No culture can survive if its children are unable to carry it on, and both the people we have spoken to and international research shows the vital role of culture in healing and building resilience.

I hope I have been able to share the importance of Aboriginal children's roles, their learning and why children have to be part of their clans, families and communities to enable them to grow into strong Aboriginal adults. Each of them has a role and responsibility within their families and groups. Many children have suffered abuse, neglect and have experienced violence within their communities, let us begin the healing process and grow a strong Aboriginal community in the next century. *Thank You*