

**Aboriginal Partnership in Early Child Development  
and Parenting Centres South Australia.**  
**March 2007**

## **Introduction**

The *Aboriginal Elders Roundtable* reiterated a commonly held belief within Aboriginal traditional values that ‘*the child*’ is the most important feature of the Aboriginal family and community. The *Roundtable* members acknowledged that colonisation has done much to systematically diminish Aboriginal culture and society; however, assert that Aboriginal values on the child, the family and child rearing remain intact. They expressed that concerted effort and partnership between the Aboriginal community and government is required to support the Aboriginal community preserve these values that will in turn grow and nurture the development of robust healthy Aboriginal children.

## **Background:**

The *Aboriginal Elders Roundtable* met with Dr Fraser Mustard over four meetings, which was comprised of Aboriginal people recognised locally and nationally for their leadership on matters of significant concern to Aboriginal people and communities; and their involvement in strengthening Aboriginal families, groups and organisations in their communities.

The purpose of the *Aboriginal Elders Roundtable* was to provide Dr Fraser Mustard with an understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal society in a historical context; as well as offer a contemporary view of the Aboriginal experience in Australia today, and the ongoing impact on Aboriginal children and their early years in life. The *Roundtable* provided Dr Fraser Mustard insight into the issues facing Aboriginal families and children across South Australia, including metropolitan, regional, and rural/ remote settings.

The *Aboriginal Elders Roundtable* reiterated to Dr Fraser Mustard the crisis in Aboriginal communities, and in addressing the crises it is important to deal with underlying problems, not just symptoms. The connections between land dispossession, forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, attempted extinction of Aboriginal culture and identity are contributing factors to the current crisis, and must be acknowledged.

## **Key Messages**

---

- For government to stop, turn around and ‘really’ listen for a change.
- Stop making the mistakes of the past.
- A greater focus on developing ongoing, holistic, preventative approaches, rather than only reactive approaches.
- Ensure Aboriginal parents have the necessary skills to take responsibility for their children’s health, education and wellbeing. For example; under South Australia’s current Child Protection practices “the child is *inadvertently* charged for their own neglect”, as there is little action to make parents’ accountable or responsible. The *Roundtable* would welcome Early Childhood Development and Parenting Centre (ECD&PC) programs that “stop punishing the kids by taking them away, but rather support parents to do a better job”.

- Acknowledge and take action to improve public transport – it is a major barrier to accessing services.
- Frustration at not having a voice in matters that affect our future.
- Failing of government services from past practices – we have had consultation after consultation - we need to have grass-roots people on a day to day basis to keep an eye on how the government is progressing and make sure our families are heard.

## **Principles Underpinning Action**

---

*The Roundtable state that* Aboriginal children and their families are at the core of the focus, and want to ensure that decisions and actions strive to:

- Respect cultural values and respect Aboriginal people as members of South Australia’s community.
- Maintaining that the child’s safety and wellbeing is paramount.
- Achieve Aboriginal representation across any/all child care development initiatives.
- Ensure that Government services for children are responsive to the cultural and social experiences of Aboriginal families.
- Ensure that services for Aboriginal children’s development are holistic, integrated and delivered in partnership with families.
- Improve access to early intervention programs and services that maximise children’s health, learning, development and wellbeing.
- Ensure agencies working together to ensure focus strategies are implemented and build capacities of Aboriginal families.
- Use local community expertise and knowledge in planning and decision making for integrated service delivery for Aboriginal children and families.
- Implement workforce strategies that increase and secure Aboriginal employment, training and pathways at all levels in the Centres.

## **The Ways Forward**

---

- Develop integrated services which promote and share cultural identity rather than assimilation into mainstream.
- Ensure government services are built on Aboriginal attendance and participation. At the present services are built on the dominant culture with non-Aboriginal terms, priorities, goals and aspirations.
- Build services on Aboriginal principles and philosophy and run by Aboriginal people, yet open to all cultures and races to attend.
- Maintain Aboriginal languages to support the Aboriginal children’s identity. We need to build the capacity to develop on future generations through language and culture. Acknowledge traditional problem based learning between children and parents, eg desert art and the brain development of children.
- Package services around children, rather than agencies.
- Partnerships between *health* and education. The poor health status of many Aboriginal children must be acknowledged. “You can’t teach a sick child”. Health services and health promotion must be embedded in early childhood education.

- Centres to focus on *family capacity-building* and include expertise to deal with all family issues including housing, health, and the development of family budgeting skills.
- Children are to be protected from harm and abuse; however, parents' cultural learning's, authority and capacity to effectively discipline their children should not be undermined, but rather appraised.
- Ensuring a balance of Aboriginal involvement and lead in the design and delivery of the Centre's services.
- Secure sustainable funding and resourcing for the Centres.

## **Early Childhood Development & Parent Centres**

---

*The Roundtable state that the* Early Childhood Development & Parent Centres is to be an investment in local Aboriginal children, people, families and communities.

- Bilingual and bicultural competence by staff and children.
- Non-Aboriginal staff and management must get to know Aboriginal communities, should *value Aboriginal cultures, and know the story of colonisation* and the cruelty that went with it. They should understand the privileges that allow them to be racist, so that they can consciously shift these privileges and understand their position and impact on Aboriginal people.
- The centres build on existing locally successful programs, and learn from previously successful currently unfunded models.
- Mechanisms to allow the Aboriginal employees in each centre to have the decision-making powers and the resources to act and do.

## **Recommendations**

---

*The Roundtable state the following:*

### **Whole of Government approach**

The *principles underpinning action* should be endorsed as the whole of government approach to Aboriginal children's development and learning.

Any new government social health development plan or initiative be subject to a rigorous Aboriginal community and child development impact assessment to ensure measures are in place to protect and enhance the interests of Aboriginal childhood development.

The need for a State Aboriginal leadership group regarding Aboriginal children's needs must be formalised. The representatives of Aboriginal people must be maintained at this state level and accessible to government services to be a voice for Aboriginal children and families.

Both Health and Education needs to ensure that every Aboriginal child from birth to 8 years of age should have access to child health checks every 2 years.

## **Establishing Aboriginal identified Centres:**

ECD & PCs should provide assessment and treatment programs (eg hearing, dental and optical).

The ECD & PC's must be affordable so that every child can access services.

Aboriginal people need employment pathways that are supported by higher education institutions to ensure career opportunities are enhanced.

Technically and competent qualifications should include knowledge of, respect for, and experience of Aboriginal culture and communication skills.

Recognition of Aboriginal community involvement to provide consultancy services between agencies and community will ensure ongoing community development is sustained.