

## CONNECTION TO CULTURE PLAYS CRITICAL ROLE IN POSITIVE TRANSITIONS FROM CARE

**The transition into adulthood can be daunting and abrupt for young people leaving the child protection system. The manner with which care and protection of the state ceases on their eighteenth birthday (marked by the expiration of their statutory orders) is daunting for many young people leaving care.**

This process is difficult for all children that have grown up in out-of-home care, who have often enduring complex and challenging circumstances throughout their young lives. Evicting young people with significant trauma backgrounds from state care leaves them vulnerable to a host of negative life trajectories including high risks of homelessness, imprisonment, unemployment, early parenthood, and unresolved trauma and mental health issues – and without supports in place to achieve independence.

When we consider this transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their overrepresentation in out-of-home care further compounds intergenerational trauma caused by past policies of forcible removal. Measures to preserve children's connection to culture – such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle – fail to be observed, despite our understanding that a strong cultural identity shields children from adverse life circumstances, and builds their resilience.

The presence of positive, supportive adult relationships is a strong influencer for young people, encouraging them to develop lives they see as meaningful and positive. These important relationships carry them through the difficult phase into adulthood, and are particularly important for young people who have been in care, without their families around them.

Family is the cornerstone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, spirituality and identity. Maintaining connection to family for young people in care promotes strong ties that can support them during their transition. These family relationships for young people affect their development, long-term well-being and transition from out-of-home care.

CREATE Foundation, the national peak consumer body for children and young people in out-of-home care, has developed a resource kit in consultation with young people, to support their transition from care. The resource, *Go Your Own Way*, provides important insight into the experiences of transitioning, and the issues of concern for these young people.

The report finds that the concerns identified by participants related largely to financial and housing insecurity. A number of participants also felt a lack of support and planning in the transition period. In fact, 29.1 per cent of respondents reported that they had not spoken with anyone about what they could expect after turning eighteen, which highlights how critical leaving-care planning is in setting up young people for successful transition from out-of-home care.

The *National Standards for Out-of-home Care* promotes planning as pivotal in preparing care leavers for independence. In a system that prioritises responding to crises, unfortunately leaving-care planning is often left to

the last minute. Increasing investment in crisis response (versus prevention) reduces focus on the already undervalued process of setting up expectations with young people about their future. This mental and emotional preparation is imperative, and equally important as setting up service supports.

*Go Your Own Way* provides important insight into the experiences of young people transitions from care, however, to build on specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues – including the shocking rates of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care – we look to a recent Monash University report, *Indigenous Care Leavers in Victoria*.

This report identifies concerns relating to the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care, particularly concerning the transition period. Amongst the obstacles children face in having these needs met are a lack of resources invested in cultural support planning and implementation of plans, culturally specific programs and supports, inadequate referral pathways to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and complex relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous services.

The research finds that culturally aware and sensitive service delivery, alongside cultural support planning, promotes positive outcomes for young people, linking them to strong community support upon leaving care.

Culture is central to identity. It defines who we are and what we value. All children have the right to know and celebrate their culture. SNAICC maintains that connection to culture and to community is a powerful protective factor for children and young people in care.

Fostering attachment to culture builds sense of identity, resilience and self-esteem, and strengthens young people against the uncertainty of the future. As discussed above, cultural planning must be incorporated into transition planning for young people leaving care to ensure a positive experience.

SNAICC welcomes the Victorian Government's recent investment in cultural support planning in out-of-home care that sets a benchmark for safeguarding young people's connection to culture, which they will carry with them into adulthood.

Achieving independence without a strong sense of identity, and without belonging to community, is an assignment that is doomed to fail. We must ensure young people leaving care are given the best opportunities and support to be able to go their own way.

As Andrew Jackomos, Victoria's Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, explains:

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“Culture links us to our past so we can navigate our future.” – Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

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