

Statement on the alleged sexual assault of a child in the NT

The alleged sexual assault of a two-year-old Aboriginal child in Tennant Creek is abhorrent to all Australians and raises major concerns about Australia's child protection system. Our hearts go out to this young girl, her family and community and we acknowledge the distress they will be dealing with.

Over 20 inquiries throughout Australia have examined our child protection system and found it to be failing our children. If a child protection system can't protect a child from the horror of abuse, in spite of numerous reports from the family to the department concerned about the danger to her, then the system is broken.

Is the best response to simply remove children from their family, kin and culture? The answer is no, because we already know what happens to Indigenous kids when they are forcibly removed from their families. We know what happens because of the record of the Stolen Generations and the traumatic experiences of their lives. We also know this from international evidence on childhood trauma.

Bruce Perry from the Child Trauma Academy in Houston: 'Over the last twenty years, neuroscientists studying the brain have learned how fear and trauma influence the mature brain, and more recently, the developing brain. It is increasingly clear that experience in childhood has relatively more impact on the developing child than experiences later in life. This is due to the simple principles of neurodevelopment.'

The trauma caused by psychologically stressful events reverberates down generations and across communities. Childhood trauma, or adverse experiences, has very real impacts on the developing brains of children. It causes toxic stress. As US Paediatrician, Nadine Burke Wills, founder of the Centre for Youth Wellness in San Francisco describes: 'We're not talking about failing a test or losing at a sports match. We're talking about threats that are severe or prolonged — things like abuse or neglect, or growing up with a parent who is mentally ill or substance-dependent. Our biological stress response is designed to save our lives from something threatening, and that's healthy. The problem is that when the stress response is activated repeatedly it can become overactive and affect our brain development, our immune systems and even how our DNA is read and transcribed. High doses of stress hormones can inhibit the brain's executive functioning and make it harder for kids or adults to exercise impulse control.'

The more adverse experiences a child has the greater the impact on their physical and mental health, their behaviour and their relationships in the family, in school and the community generally. It is these adverse experiences that featured in the childhoods of the Stolen Generations. The impact of trauma can last well into adulthood, affecting people's lives. It is cumulative and across generations. The impact of trauma is multi-layered and affects the social, emotional, physical, cultural and spiritual aspects of functioning (Caruana 2010; Healing Foundation 2013; Kelly, Dudgeon, Gee and Glaskin 2009)

The Stolen Generations history that we talk about finished in the mid 1970's. The Bringing Them Home report 20 years ago documented the ripple effect of their trauma across the generations and identified the extent of family support that was needed to prevent these harms occurring for children into the future.

The failure of successive governments to implement the Report's recommendations has resulted in a reliance on child protection systems that are ill equipped to understand the trauma, let alone respond effectively.

Andrew Jackomos, Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in Always was Always will be Koori Children: systemic enquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care in Victoria, 2016 found that: 'overwhelmingly, children are entering care as a result of family violence and parental substance abuse. More needs to be done to prevent and address this pathway for children entering care and to support Aboriginal families to remain together and thrive. There is no cure for a permanent loss of identity and culture; prevention is paramount.'

Attempts to use this terrible incident in the NT to argue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being left in dangerous homes to prevent another Stolen Generations, or to question the truth of the Stolen Generations policies, are unhelpful and dangerous. Sexual assault is an issue for all Australian communities, as evidenced by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. For Indigenous communities the problem is extreme.

Instead of questioning history we should be focusing on how such acts can be prevented. The protection of children is a matter for the whole community and all levels of government, across relevant departments and agencies, to do more to prevent harm to our children.

If people don't have the opportunity to heal from trauma, it's likely that their experiences and negative behaviours will impact on others and be passed onto future generations. Given the significant levels of trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, failing to understand and act on trauma will undermine efforts to prevent similar incidents occurring in the future.

The Healing Foundation