

What is kinship care? Why is it favored for Aboriginal children over foster care?

April 1 2024, by Jocelyn Jones, Hannah McGlade and Sasha Moodie



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The 1997 [Bringing Them Home report](#) into the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was a turning point in Australia's history. The inquiry rejected past government policies of assimilation and endorsed the importance of keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with their families.

Reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care is now a [target](#) of the federal government's Closing the Gap policy.

Yet the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is increasing. Between 2021–2022 around [4,100 Indigenous children](#) were placed in out-of-home care nationally. The highest rates were among children under one year old.

Across all age groups, Indigenous children are placed in out-of-home care at almost [12 times](#) the rate of non-Indigenous children. In Western Australia, Indigenous children are placed in out-of-home care at [20 times](#) the rate of non-Indigenous children.

Alongside the Closing the Gap target, the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle](#) recognizes the rights of Indigenous children in maintaining connections with their culture, family and community.

Yet until recently, fewer than half of Indigenous children removed from their families were placed with kin or in their community. National efforts to better meet best-practice standards has led to a small increase in Indigenous children placed in kinship arrangements from [50% in 2017 to 54% in 2022](#). Clearly this situation must improve.

What is kinship care?

[Studies](#) show institutional racism, trauma, violence, homelessness, socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty present significant challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Out-of-home care means overnight care of a temporary or permanent nature for children under 18 who aren't able to live with their family for risk-related issues determined by the state. Common types of out-of-home care include [foster care](#), residential care and [kinship care](#).

A kinship caregiver is an Indigenous person who is a member of the child's community, a compatible community, or from the same language group. Kinship care aims to [maintain](#) a child's [social and cultural connections](#).

Compared to foster care, children in kinship care [tend to have](#) more contact with their parents, family and community. Children may visit their country, learn their languages and learn about their cultural and family background.

A kinship caregiver involved in the [Indigenous Child Removals Western Australia \(I-CaRe\)](#) study spoke about how he connects the children in his care with their culture. The grandfather, aged 60, from Perth, Boorloo, said,

"Yeah, I'll take them to sites and explain to them what the site is all about. We will go up to Yagan memorial site there. We'll go to the statue. We'll talk about the river and the Derbarl Yerrigan, and I'll tell them why that name is there. I take them downtown to [Tuyim] Park, for example, and say, this is where all the Noongars used to hang around here. Look, see here?"

[Research shows](#) Indigenous children with strong cultural identity and knowledge are less likely to experience emotional and social problems.

So, the risks of placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in non-kinship care arrangements are serious.

Indigenous children aren't always placed with kin. Why?

The [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle](#) recognizes kinship care as the preferred placement and is included in child protection laws. Child protection practices, research and policies are [increasingly promoting contact](#) with parents and family members, where possible.

All jurisdictions have committed to the principle, however, non-Indigenous departmental staff and judicial officers can readily [make contrary decisions](#) and place children in non-Indigenous care. While child protection workers across the nation must develop "cultural support plans" for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, such plans often lack content and can be tokenistic. They are no replacement for kinship care.

Aboriginal researchers [have highlighted](#) that while connection to culture is critical to Aboriginal children's health and well-being, it is poorly understood by departmental staff.

Also, child protection's reliance on western psychological theory ("attachment theory") is [being used to displace kinship care](#). Aboriginal children's placements with non-Aboriginal caregivers is given priority over the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and reunification with their Aboriginal family and kin. This is identified as systemic racism on the part of child protection systems.

The Indigenous Child Removals WA research found further significant barriers facing Indigenous kinship caregivers. This included complex

and demanding interactions with government departments, lack of support, health risks, and difficulty meeting the needs of children impacted by trauma. Kinship caregivers may receive a subsidy payment, but this depends on the nature of the care arrangement and whether it's formalized through a [court order](#).

There are considerable screening requirements including working with children clearances, health checks and criminal checks, household inspections, and screening of all family members living in the household.

Some kinship caregivers described their experiences as very hard and even traumatic. As one Aboriginal kinship caregiver, a 51-year-old grandmother from Geraldton, explained:

"Apparently, I wasn't fit enough for my grandchildren, so I had to go through the court cases and everything to prove that we were fit enough [...] I just went downhill and yeah, we just kept fighting and then it got to that stage where we're getting interrogated and I've had enough, because it went over a period of six months."

The high rate of Indigenous children in non-kinship arrangements has concerned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over many years. South Australia's Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, April Lawrie, [recently said](#) unless changes are made, Aboriginal children will enter care at rates similar to those of the Stolen Generations.

And SNAICC, the National Voice for our Children, [has warned](#) that when the Bringing Them Home report was issued more than 25 years ago, one in every five Aboriginal children were in out of home care. Today, one in every three Aboriginal children is in care.

Australia cannot continue to harm First Nations children in this way, and

kinship care must be improved urgently if we are to address this dire situation.

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