

Kinship care: Making It a National Issue

1. What is kinship care?

Kinship care is defined as family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature (United Nations, 2010).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, a kinship carer may be another Indigenous person who is a member of their community, a compatible community, or from the same language group (AIHW, 2018, p.78).

Aboriginal kinship is a diverse, complex and culturally defined system. Aboriginal kinship refers to the biological bloodlines that have been passed on from generation to generation. Consideration of who is kin to a child is the decision and responsibility of family and those with cultural authority for the child (QATSICPP, 2017).

NB: The UN definition covers all kinship care, both informal and as formal.

In Australia, the term *informal kinship care* includes care arrangements that have been formalised by the Family Court of Australia rather than a State or Territory Children's Court and are therefore not eligible for a kinship care allowance from the relevant State or Territory.

2. Vision:

What we want to achieve: Nurturing and safe family settings where children can flourish.

- Kinships care families are welcomed in the local community and supported in State and Federally funded services.
- The particular needs of children in kinship care and their carers are acknowledged and catered for.
- Children in kinship care are treated as having rights, and their views are sought.
- All children in kinship care and their carer have access to adequate support across housing, education, health and psychological domains.
- Children in kinship care are able to maintain their family relationships including with their parents, siblings and members of their extended family.
- Children in kinship care have a strong sense of identity that includes knowledge of their culture and background.
- In cases where targeted and intensive supports to address the needs of families have not enabled children to remain safely at home, kinship care is prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in line with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, and their connections to family, community, culture and country are supported and maintained.

3. *Context: Kinship care is diverse in nature*

First and foremost, kinship care is about providing care for our children:

'All services for children and young people in care need to be focused on the best interests and well being of the child. Where and with whom the child is living should not limit the resources available to support the placement.'

Kinship Care is 'family- based'

Care may be provided in extended family or through culturally defined relationships, and is not intended to invoke a nuclear family unit.

Kinship Care is a complex category

Kinship care comprises care arrangements from different scenarios e.g. arranged informally between family members, arranged as a result of State government child protection intervention, or ratified by Federal Family Court decisions. The carers may include: grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, family friends, neighbours, or those related by cultural bonds/obligations. These differences can mean that children in kinship care are not treated the same in policies, and have access to fewer resources than foster care children but have a similar level of need. We need to know more about who these children are in order to ensure the development of appropriate policy.

Aboriginal kinship care

Because of the high over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are providing kinship care at much greater rates than non-Indigenous people, and despite relatively higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The implicit value in these contributions must be recognised and supported with resourcing to ensure the success of kinship care families in providing safe and stable care.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship is not limited to biological relationship, but refers to a culturally defined relationship network, reflecting cultural bonds and obligations - it is both genealogical and sociological in nature (*AbSec Policy Brief - Kinship*, Dousset 2013). Moreover, there is no one definition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship, and Torres Strait Islander kinship may be different.

4. *The principles we endorse:*

1. All services for children and young people in care need to be focused on the best interests and wellbeing of the child: Where and with whom the child is living should not limit the resources available to support the placement.
2. Parity: children in kinship care arrangements, have access to: (federally funded) early childhood education, education and health care, AND, children who have been placed in kinship care as a result of child protection intervention, have access to the same level of financial support from the States and Territories as children in foster care. Federal and State services provide this information and implement the policies.
3. Inclusion: the definitions of kinship care in law and policy need to be reviewed, to ensure an adequate recognition of extended family as well as culturally defined concepts of kinship care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the critical role of children, families and communities with cultural authority to define kinship relationships for children.
4. Recognition: Kinship carers are acknowledged as playing a critical role in our society. We support an annual week of national recognition of kinship care and the development of a genuine partnership between the different interest groups to co-design a coherent national approach to supporting kinship carers.