



Opinion piece

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Our Kulunga (children)

As the oldest existing culture in the world, Aboriginal society is, by definition, resilient. Over more than 40,000 years, Aboriginal communities across Australia used a complex system and clear community rule to provide our children and young people with a safe and caring community, a strong sense of identity and pride, and a pathway to adulthood.

It had to be an effective system, as the survival of Aboriginal people depended on it – creating resilient young Aboriginal people who are ready to play their part in the community was essential.

However, European colonisation and subsequent government policies have made a permanent change to the lives of Aboriginal West Australians and their society. In the brief 185-year European history of WA, generations of Aboriginal people have experienced much trauma that, in many cases, is yet to be healed, but I am uncertain how many West Australians know what really happened in the first 100 to 150 years of British settlement.

A good read in this regard is Tom Austen's *A Cry in the Wind: Conflict in Western Australia, 1829-1929*.

Today, Aboriginal society in Western Australia is stressed but holding firm.

Most Aboriginal West Australians are doing very well and have great family environments where Aboriginal children and young people have the support they need for their healthy development through to adulthood.

They are bucking the perception that many still hold of Aboriginal people, and are contributing positively to the communities they live in.

There is however a noticeable minority of Aboriginal children and young people living in unacceptable home or community environments where multiple issues affect their health and security.

For example, poor quality housing and overcrowded dwellings are a significant problem in some Aboriginal communities. That these circumstances are being accepted as 'normal' is sad indeed. Our society needs to understand and support the needs of Aboriginal children and young people who live in deprived circumstances.

Another issue affecting Aboriginal children living in many urban and rural areas is a lack of connection with or knowledge of their traditional culture. This was one of the

issues I discussed with visiting child resilience expert Dr Michael Ungar during his visit to Perth as the 2014 Thinker in Residence.

Dr Ungar's research has found that a powerful identity and cultural or spiritual roots are among the things all children and young people need for their healthy development.

Unfortunately this 'connection' is not available and the results can include poor self-esteem, lack of purpose and infrequent and irregular school attendance.

So where do we start to overcome these problems and re-establish a robust, resilient population of Aboriginal children and young people?

A healthy pregnancy is crucial to the early years of a child's life. Tragically, alcohol and drug consumption during pregnancy does occur – quite often out of ignorance.

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a significant issue and we should be on constant lookout to prevent it occurring.

Parenting programs for Aboriginal women and men must be a priority, and health services must be able to step in to assist young mums and dads and their unborn child.

The approach to building resilient young people in traditional times was universal, and so, too, must we establish a holistic approach to the development of resilience today.

Government departments and Aboriginal services must work together, initially to target families or communities that are known to justice and child protection agencies.

Programs for these families must be culturally appropriate and address the hard issues including alcohol and substance abuse, mental health and the social determinants of health.

The services themselves must be sustained, perhaps for a generation – too often the benefits of successful programs are lost because there is no follow up after the initial intervention.

These services are intensive but they are essential if we are to address the disadvantage that has been passed through generations. We must make this generation the cycle-breaker.

This needs a concerted effort across the State and Commonwealth governments in partnership with Aboriginal people and the broader community.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged populations will not come out of their abyss unless the children escape. We must work to do this in a generation if we are to truly save and build lives and resources and give our children and Aboriginal Australians a fair go.

With these measures, I have hope that the strength of Aboriginal life and relevant parts of our culture can be returned so our young generation are supported to be highly resilient and play their part in a dynamic and healthy community.