

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

NT Royal Commission Response Background Paper

2.3 A Public Health Approach to Youth Justice and Child Protection

Preferred approach

APO NT supports the adoption of a public health approach to both child protection and youth justice.

What is a public health approach?

A public health approach focuses on the health and wellbeing of populations or communities as a whole especially those at risk of a disease or injury or, in the context of youth justice and child protection, on those children and families at risk of poor outcomes in either area. A public health approach avoids blaming individuals and looks instead to prevent risks and vulnerabilities from occurring and to intervene quickly if they do occur. It is based on evidence that evidence based prevention will prevent later problems.

Public health interventions are talked about in terms of three levels of prevention:

- Primary – preventing the risk factors and vulnerabilities right across the population that could lead to illness or poor outcomes
- Secondary – service to support those who are already affected by risks and are experiencing illness or vulnerability and reduce or reverse the impacts
- Tertiary – interventions or treatment for people suffering an illness or poor outcomes with the aim of curing, ameliorating or addressing the problem for improved health and wellbeing.

How does the public health approach apply to child protection and youth justice

There is a large body of evidence about the social, family and structural factors that put a child or young person at risk of contact with youth justice or child protection. These factors can be modified through interventions taking a public health approach. Under a public health approach, the weight of investment will shift from the high cost statutory end of the system to the preventative measures of primary and secondary interventions.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 acknowledges the need to move from merely responding to abuse and neglect towards promoting the wellbeing of children. The council of Australian Governments was persuaded by leading experts that a public

health model would deliver better outcomes for children and young people. The Framework describes the public health approach for child wellbeing as follows:

“Under a public health model, priority is placed on having universal supports available for all families (for example, health and education). More intensive (secondary) prevention interventions are provided to those families that need additional assistance with a focus on early intervention. Tertiary child protection services are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families and governments.” (COAG, 2009, p. 7)

In practical terms, a public health model in child protection and youth justice would feature:

- **Universal interventions** - approaches aimed at large groups or the general population, such as:
 - Ante natal care
 - Child health services
 - Income support
 - Universal parenting programs and education
 - Violence prevention curricula in schools
 - Positive activities for young people,
 - Community-wide media campaigns.
- **Secondary interventions** - approaches for those with heightened risk, such as:
 - Intensive family support for families that come to the attention of child protection
 - Social and emotional wellbeing support for parents and children showing risk factors
 - Targeted parenting skills education
 - Interventions for young people coming to police attention and their families
 - Practical skills in money management, nutrition, homemaking
 - Programs for young people – school engagement, drug and alcohol services, behavioral self-regulation.
- **Tertiary interventions** – approaches that target “treating” the problems once they have occurred to lessen their impact and facilitate a return to a positive situation. Examples might include:
 - Intensive interventions for families whose children have been removed
 - Intensive interventions, family therapy, anger management, drug and alcohol services for families at imminent risk of child removal or with young people who are offending
 - Orders that require parents and young people to participate in programs to address their parenting issues and, for young people, their offending.
 - Excellent quality, culturally safe care for children who need to be removed from families incorporating therapeutic services.
 - Formal sentencing for young people who have offended including community service orders, diversion or detention. But these interventions must include therapeutic,

trauma informed care and be oriented to improving the wellbeing of the young person and his/her capacity to participate safely in society and reduce the likelihood of further offending.

Evidence

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 refers to the evidence of the potential for a public health approach to child wellbeing (COAG, 2009). This evidence is further explored by Higgins in his paper which reviews a range of evidence for the employment of a development approach to child wellbeing (Higgins, 2010). The Australian Institute of Criminology also supports the application of a public health approach in prevention of crime. (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2003).

References

- Australian Institute of Criminology. (2003). *The Public Health Approach to Crime Prevention*. Retrieved from <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/crm/1-20/crm007.html>.
- COAG. (2009). *Protecting children is everyone's business : National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 : an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments*. (9781921380358). [Canberra, A.C.T: Dept. of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs?] Retrieved from <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4660945>.
- Higgins, D. J. (2010). *Community development approaches to safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children, Resource sheet no. 1 Closing the Gap Clearinghouse* Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2010/ctgc-rs01.pdf>.