



## First 1000 Days Australia Summit 2017: Report



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**Note on Terminology** In this report the terms 'Aboriginal' and/or 'Torres Strait Islander people' or 'First Peoples' are used to identify the First Peoples of Australia and to refer to and recognise the two unique Indigenous populations in Australia. The term 'indigenous' refers collectively to the First Peoples of Australia, New Zealand, North America and other countries around the globe. 'Non-Indigenous' is used to refer to those who do not identify as a member of the community of First Peoples of their respective countries.

Further information about the First 1000 Days Australia Summit 2017, including videos and filmed interviews with some of the presenters and participants, is available at:  
**[www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/first-1000-days-australia-summit-brisbane-2017](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/first-1000-days-australia-summit-brisbane-2017)**.

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*Nunukul Yuggera Aboriginal Dance Company performing at Summit dinner*

# Welcome to Country

*Aunty Maroochy Barambah, Song-woman and Law-woman of the Turrbal people, gave a Welcome to Country with a 'blessing of the gathering' in song. Her moving song in language, and the melting pot of tribes that run in her veins, guided us in our honouring of diverse knowledges.*

## Acknowledgments

### **First 1000 Days Australia acknowledges and pays respects to the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we met in the Brisbane area.**

We also acknowledge and pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and leaders, First 1000 Days Australia scholarship award winners, and workers and community people present at the Summit. Your inspiring, and often courageous, sharing of stories and knowledge make us all stronger and able to contribute in new ways.

Also acknowledged are those visitors from other countries, who shared their knowledge and deep understanding of issues as they impact on international indigenous populations. We also thank our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters for walking beside us.

We thank students from the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts for the traditional themed Acknowledgment of Country performance on Day 2, and the Nunukul Yuggera Aboriginal Dance Company who led our celebration of culture and Country at the Summit dinner.

We also thank Karen Milward for her facilitation of the Summit, Olivia Burr for her tireless efforts in organising the event, Al Harris at Magpie Media for his communications and media work, Joe Morgan Films for the filming and development of the Summit videos, staff at Riverside Receptions, and Radio 98.9 FM for its role in sharing our success stories through the broadcast of interviews with Summit participants.

First 1000 Days Australia especially thanks our collaborative partner, Save the Children Australia, and our regional partners in Queensland – Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Services and the Stronger Smarter Institute – for their support of the Summit and commitment to our vision.

We also acknowledge our donors and sponsors whose support makes this all possible.



# About this Report

**First 1000 Days Australia (F1000DA) held its inaugural Summit in Brisbane on 18–20 October 2017, with generous support from the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, and the University of Melbourne. This report summarises the knowledge shared at the Summit, highlighting learnings from around Australia and beyond, on culturally safe ways of working together with families to give our babies the best start in life and thus lay the foundations of good health and wellbeing across their lifetime.**

The Summit theme of ‘Celebrating our Leadership, Strengthening our Families’ reflects the aim of First 1000 Days Australia to provide a coordinated and comprehensive approach to strengthen resilience, leadership and innovation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. In its work, F1000DA draws on the international First 1,000 Days movement, which recognises the importance of the first 1000 days of a child’s life as a unique window of opportunity to improve nutrition and shape healthier futures. The First 1000 Days Australia Model, however, goes beyond a focus on nutrition to a broader holistic, cultural and biological perspective, which also incorporates pre-conception, the period of time before babies are conceived.

Led by Professor Kerry Arabena at the Indigenous Health Equity Unity at the University of Melbourne, F1000DA is supported by a collaborative partnership between the University and Save the Children Australia. It is also being funded by the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services under its Empowering Families Innovation Fund. The Department sees the ‘First 1000 Days initiative’ as a way of fulfilling its purpose to strengthen and protect the wellbeing of Queenslanders, particularly those who are vulnerable and most in need.

First 1000 Days Australia is currently engaging Lead Agencies to put the F1000DA Model into practice at Regional Alliance Sites across Australia, and the Department’s support is enabling two Queensland Lead Agencies – in Townsville and in Moreton Bay – to implement the Model. Many of the Department’s priorities align with those of F1000DA, including:

- enabling children and young people in care to thrive and to transition successfully to adult life
- reducing the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders in child protection
- enabling children and families to maintain safety, wellbeing and belonging.

Mr Michael Hogan, Director-General of the Department, presented the Summit opening address. In this he outlined the Queensland Government’s commitment to *Our Way: A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families 2017–2037*, developed with Family Matters Queensland, and the accompanying action plan *Changing Tracks* that was created to realise this strategy.

# Executive Summary

**The First 1000 Days Australia Summit brought together participants from across community, research, training, front-line delivery and policy areas, who are working to strengthen resilience, innovation and aspiration in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.**

The Summit's guiding topics of Caring and Parenting, Family Strengthening, Childhood Development and Nutrition, Entrepreneurship and Implementation led to a broad range of knowledge sharing and storytelling. Across these areas, several interrelated themes of honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples emerged, themes that respect and celebrate the experiences and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children and their right to self-determination.

**Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities:** 'Culture is not a perk for an Aboriginal child, it is a lifeline'. Celebrating culture and reconnecting families to their culture and communities brings healing and wellbeing. Traditional ceremonies such as Welcome Baby to Country empower families to learn and know who they are, who they belong to, and where they belong.

**Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledges:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the experts when it comes to looking after our communities. The cultural knowledge held by indigenous peoples continues to evolve and contribute to the raising of strong children across the world. Without a strong connection to culture or community, however, many young people do not understand the sacred responsibility of raising future Elders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples demand that our knowledge on what works to reconnect our communities to the strength of culture is respected: we know what works, and what does not work, in the raising of healthy and happy families and, as the Redfern Statement advocates, 'we have the solutions'.

**Honouring programs and practices:** Innovative and strengths-based solutions presented at the Summit honoured the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as problem solvers. Common enablers of sustainable practices included:

- A safe, non-judgmental space where families can build on their skills and knowledge
- Strengthening of children's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity

- Connecting families to their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and wider local community, and developing support networks and knowledge
- Honouring of culture and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to live it and share culture
- Strong community engagement and partnerships that value Elders and leaders as a strong resource of knowledge and experience
- Encouraging a child-centred focus and reflecting on a child's point of view
- Staff commitment to develop their own skills and knowledge, and bring about change.

**Honouring knowledge of the first 1000 days:** Early childhood development, especially the first 1000 days, is a window of opportunity to improve the domains of nurturing care and the conditions that enable families to better provide nurturing care to their children. The interrelated contexts of culture, community, policy, socioeconomics and the environment impact upon the important first 1000 days' window of life. Scientific research into the effects of poverty on the developing brain and poor nutrition on the microbiome of the gut, for example, show us how the first 1000 days of life can, for better or worse, last a lifetime.

Good policy can empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at a local level, and equip services to enable healing and help families to realise their aspirations. Governments can spend money on parenting and then not need so many prisons. The wider community can value the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and the important nurturing and cultural roles both women and men play in the raising of children. Indigenous peoples around the world have expertise and knowledge that must be utilised to strengthen families.



**Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-**

**determination:** Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' right to self-determination, autonomy and decision making at all levels of their lives is a vital component of early development and wellbeing. Common enablers to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to own our health and how we need to address it include:

- Honouring the diverse cultural knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and ownership of learning, research, development and implementation of solutions
- Strengths-based language that recognises ability, culture and hope
- Strong identity and connection – knowing who you are and who you are connected to
- Engaging and supporting families towards reaching their aspirations and those they hold for their children.

The First 1000 Days Australia Summit honoured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the holders of important knowledge about growing up strong children. Participants shared stories of success and celebrated the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and the passionate organisations working with them to bring about the change families want to see.

Dr Jackie Huggins underlined that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the solutions and 'if you don't think something is right then challenge it'. Summit participants were also urged by Elder Aunty Lynne Matsen to make change where it is needed:

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*Break the ground and make our voices heard. You need to take the things you've learnt here home to your community and use it, make it work.*

Uncle Phillip Mills, Jackie Huggins, Karen Milward (MC), Kerry Arabena and Romlie Mokak



# Summit Impact



Kerry Arabena talks up the Summit

## The Summit in numbers

176

**participants** in attendance  
(including UoM staff)

9

**international** participants

31

**presentations** over 3 days

55

Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander organisations  
**represented**

25

**F1000DA Scholarship Awards** granted for partner organisations to attend the Summit

18+

national, regional and international **media interviews** about the Summit

495

**re-tweets** during the week of the Summit

### Participants' organisations

<b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing</b>	55	31%
<b>Government health</b>	21	12%
<b>Mainstream NGOs</b>	31	18%
<b>Government policy</b>	28	16%
<b>Research</b>	27	15%
<b>Other</b>	14	8%

### Participants' jurisdictions

QLD	NSW	VIC	NT	WA	ACT	SA	TAS	International
96	6	41	4	3	1	5	0	9
58%	0.3%	23%	2.4%	1.8%	0.6%	3%	0	5.4%



## Summit Highlights

### Making new connections, yarning, and being in the presence of Elders and among 'our Mob'.

*I've gone to many summits and forums where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the subject matter – it was very amazing to attend one just about us.*

*So much empowerment came from this summit for me as a younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. This reminded me why it's important to be part of this movement, assisting in brighter futures for our mob.*

*I totally gather energy from being here in this space, with black voices that are fighting this fight. Being in a room full of like-minded people with the same passion and drive for our young people.*

*Indigenous knowledge is LIVING. It is specific to the site, participants and context. I'm honoured to be a part of the Living Knowledge here.*

### Learning more about F1000DA and current work that is using the F1000DA approach.

*The importance of putting culture into practice from in utero and building stronger future families with better connection and understanding of self and community.*

*First 1000 Days Australia provides a holistic approach to prepare better generations in the future. Being able to state that the First 1000 Days is evidence based is a huge advantage for cultural roles in community.*

*Presentations were delivered with honesty... passion and reality. Our mob are smart, what people are doing in their own communities has just blown me away.*

#### *Delegate highlights also included learning more about:*

- how to influence transformation through cultural responsiveness
- the Redfern Statement with Jackie Huggins
- the F1000DA Charter of Rights for children yet to be conceived
- pre-conception health
- doing disability in a cultural way with Jody Barney
- the impact of the microbiome and diet on health
- traditional ceremonies such as Welcome Baby to Country
- early childhood services such as Bubup Wilam and programs such as Wondering from the Womb.

## Summit Themes

*I was loved by my people; they are why I am here. I honour them...*

*You need to honour Aboriginal people in your work.* **Aunty Doseena Fergie**

**Honour and the act of honouring diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture and community, voices and knowledge, as well as innovative programs and practices that respect and celebrate the experiences and strengths of families and children, were a strong focus of presentations and storytelling at the Summit.**

These honouring themes are captured by three important questions – posed by **Dr Doseena Fergie** in her presentation – that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ask of themselves: ***Who am I? Who do I belong to? Where do I belong?***

Services should also be open to hearing and understanding the answers that people choose to share in response to these questions, and even ask the questions of themselves as they meet and work together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

### **Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities**

*In our community, if we are to receive healing, our roots need to go deep into our culture.* **Aunty Doseena Fergie**

Culture wraps around everything for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; it is the worldview that encompasses relationships with the land, each other, our ancestors and the cosmos. Many presenters underlined the need to celebrate culture and keep culture at the forefront as we nurture and strengthen the family hands that hold the seed – our children, for it is they who influence how the seed grows. One precious seed also has a mob, who can all be empowered to look after our children.

As F1000DA Council member **Ms Deb Mellet** commented, 'Culture is not a perk for an Aboriginal child, it is a lifeline'. Yet many of our children have lost their story, and are not connected to their culture or the knowledge and values it provides. Diverse Aboriginal knowledge holders in Mildura went about changing this and revived the traditional ceremony of **Welcoming Babies to Country**.

*When you take people out of the landscape you have a barren landscape. Welcome Baby to Country puts people back into the landscape.* **Michael Gilby**

Local artists make headbands for the babies; Elders and young men connected to build a bark canoe that is part of the ceremony and carries knowledge through the community; women weave traditional fishing nets; and a Coolamon lined with possum skins graces the stage one day a year in NAIDOC week for Welcome Baby to Country.



*Welcome Baby to Country Rose Gilby, Aunty Janine Wilson and Jill Antonie at the Mildura Welcome Baby to Country workshop*



*Auntie Doseena Fergie delivers three important questions*

*There is nothing more precious in our community than our babies. Welcome Baby to Country has united our community, we have embraced a cultural belief that was lost to us... There is no textbook on how to celebrate culture, it is in us and we just need to fan the flames... Our families know there is something special about this, and we know it is bringing healing. Welcome Baby to Country is making markers in our community. Rose Gilby*

### **Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledge**

*We acknowledge all the knowledge holders of different traditions; gifting their knowledge to our families, children yet to be born, and the whole world. Kerry Arabena*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been birthing and raising children for thousands of years. Elders hold precious knowledge, and many presenters spoke of how they 'draw on the strength of those who came before'. Different cultural stories of child-raising were shared, which led to questioning how our own cultures raised their children over time, and how knowledge of the past can inform the future. New Zealand historical reports, for example, tell us that Maori children were raised 'completely free' in the nineteenth century and never beaten.

Culture is not static but forever evolving and expressed in new ways. **Professor Rizal Damanik** shared his research on Torbangun (the *Coleus amboinicus* Lour plant) and its long traditional use as a breast milk stimulant by Batakese people in Indonesia. The role of the husband in preparing the Torbangun soup for new mothers remains, yet the younger generation of mothers prefer the use of coconut milk over the traditionally used boiling water. **Dr Rina Augustina** also shared how traditional cuisine and eating our 'own way' in Indonesia may also hold the answer to moderating health and gut microbiota instead of relying on probiotics.

History's impact on indigenous peoples around the world continues to disempower many families, affecting their physical, mental and spiritual health. The issues raised at the Summit, and faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, are not new. The huge impact of family poverty, the normalisation of incarceration, family involvement in child protection and children in out of home care, lack of housing and overcrowding, and anxiety and chronic health conditions all impact on the first 1000 days of life and beyond. It was also noted that many young people do not know how to look after their bodies, and the sacred responsibility of what it means to birth a future Elder.

Several presenters firmly underlined the fact that if we keep doing what we are doing, we will continue to get what we have got. We must ask if what we are doing is working for our families and disrupt things when we know it is not right. **Dr Jackie Huggins**, Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, reiterated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the experts when it comes to looking after our families. The Congress is advocating, through the Redfern Statement, to give Australia's First Peoples a voice and demand that it is respected, because 'we have the solutions to the problems that are faced by many of our people in our communities'. The Redfern Statement is a blueprint to address disadvantage with calls for action in six key areas, including early childhood.

### **Honouring programs and practices**

Innovative and strengths-based solutions presented at the Summit honoured the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as problem solvers, with common enablers including:

- A safe, non-judgmental space where families can build on their skills and knowledge
- Strengthening of children's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity
- Connecting families to their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and wider local community, and developing support networks and knowledge
- Honouring of culture and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to live it and share culture
- Strong community engagement and partnerships that value Elders and leaders as a strong resource of knowledge and experience
- Encouraging a child-centred focus and reflecting on a child's point of view
- Staff commitment to develop their own skills and knowledge, and bring about change.

The **Core of Life program** supports local communities to deliver pregnancy and parenting education to young people, and to enable them to make smarter and healthier choices along the journey to parenthood. Core of Life facilitates community consultation and partnerships to enhance a greater understanding of local needs and how best to place the program within existing structures, language and culture.

Localised delivery of the program has included Elders guiding young women through a role play of birth, with learning amid laughter and connection; a cross-cultural day to celebrate the beginning of life for newborns with ceremony; and a Mensbiz program within which young men have a safe space to explore pregnancy, birth and parenting. Young women were keen for their partners to learn this information too, so they can share the decision making and responsibilities around parenthood. As Djapirri, a leader in her community of Yirrkala, put it:

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*These stories can be told often to encourage our young people, because we are in a modern world now and we need to carry that story, that strength; who you are to the nature and what the nature is to you. It is the strength and knowledge based in making you a Yolngu person, of who you are, to stand and walk between the two worlds.*

**Wondering from the Womb** is a facilitated antenatal yarning space, developed by the Mallee District Aboriginal Service (MDAS), as an opportunity for parents-to-be to reflect and ask questions in a safe non-judgmental space. Nine yarns have been written from an unborn child's perspective, with the aim of changing outcomes well before the child is born. Each yarn was created with input from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory group, and explores the different stages of pregnancy using metaphors from the community. Parents develop the capacity to listen to the voice of their unborn child, reflect on their own childhood and fears, and wonder what the needs of their baby might be. Wondering from the Womb is part of the Early Years model practised by MDAS, a wrap-around model of engagement that becomes a safe base for families.

Infant observation work also asks parents and practitioners to truly see an infant and be curious about what is happening for that infant. **Dr Wendy Bunston** shared stories that babies have told her through infant observation, and the healing properties of this approach. Infant-led observation builds on the hope that infants bring to their families, and help parents to know their child in a different way. Parents can go back in time and imagine what was happening to them when they were infants and who made them feel safe. Infant observation work can infuse a parent's imagination about their child if they see their child as having their own life; someone delighting in their baby also delights something in the parent.

The **Queensland Pēpi-pod®**, adapted from a New Zealand program, uses a purpose-designed infant bed that is separate but adjacent to the parents' sleep space to protect babies as they sleep. Co-sleeping is a cultural and valued norm in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but the factors associated with co-sleeping that increase sudden unexpected death in infancy are much more common in indigenous families. Findings from a two-year consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities support the Pēpi-pod program as safe, acceptable to families and carers, and feasible to undertake in partnership with local service providers.

**Families as First Teachers (FaFT)** is an early learning and family support program for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children before they begin school. The program builds strong relationships with community to identify and meet their interests. The FaFT bilingual learning and play space at Yirrkala reflects local culture and people refer to each other using skin names. The program connects families to the school and the wider community, with visits to local services such as the fire and police station. Children learn on Country, attend swimming lessons, and utilise the Abecedarian learning program and Early Years Learning Framework.

**Berrimba Childcare Centre and Early Years Service** is an important part of Njernda Aboriginal Corporation, providing culturally safe child care, kindergarten and afterschool care, along with access to specialist services. Based at Echuca in rural Victoria, Berrimba aims to develop and extend children culturally, socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually and creatively. Children who attend Bush Kinder, for example, become more confident in their cultural identity, and have a higher level of engagement and development when learning about their culture and being in the bush. Community concern for local young people recently led Berrimba to establish the Dungula Yalka Youth Group. What began as an eight-week engagement program, with activities and dinner, has become a celebration of growth and a 12-week educational program focusing on health and wellbeing.

Following an investigation into evidence-based and impactful programs around the world, Oz Child introduced the **Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare program (FFT-CW)** designed to assist with placement prevention or reunification of children with their families. FFT-CW engages and motivates all extended family members to be a part of a change process by decreasing family conflict and increasing their hope for change, while teaching new skills and planning for potential challenges in the future. Oz Child also put forward **SafeCare** as a promising parent-training program, which provides weekly home visits over a 20-week period to develop parenting skills around child interaction, health care and home safety.

## Honouring knowledge of the first 1000 days

*The Lancet* 2016 series, 'Advancing Early Child Development: From Science to Scale', identified 10 key messages of early childhood development, including the importance of the first 1000 days. **Dr Selina Lo**, Senior Editor of *The Lancet*, shared with Summit participants how neuro-scientific evidence shows the association between low socio-economic status and poverty in early childhood and low cognitive, academic and behavioural performance. The burden is high with at least 43 per cent of children experiencing poverty or physical stunting globally, which will lead to high personal and social costs if nothing is done during early life.

*The Lancet* series identifies five domains of Nurturing Care – Health, Nutrition, Responsive Caregiving, Security and Safety, and Early Learning – which together make up the elements needed for a child to grow physically, mentally and socially. The series also presents enabling conditions, such as national policies and services, which will support families to provide nurturing care. We know what works, including the workable roles of the health sector and how to scale-up programs with political commitment, and we know it is affordable.

**Professor Kerry Arabena** reiterated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are knowledge holders, and we must continue to empower our people to share the long-held experiences they bring to culture, family and relationships. She called for indigenous-led decolonisation strategies to heal us from the biological imprint of chronic stress – stress that has been confounded by racism, the deficit media representations of indigenous peoples, the destruction of healthy environments and connection to Country, and the toxic fast food diets that are negatively affecting our microbiome.

Professor Arabena explained that our human microbiome is a complete ecosystem that needs to be highly diverse to remain healthy. Yet our microbiome communities are at risk of being colonised from the inside out as we lose our diversity to modern lifestyles and fast food diets. The **Yolngu Child Nutrition project** underlined how poor microbiota in the first 1000 days of life can lead to lifelong health consequences, such as stunted growth and anaemia. **Dr Augustina** explained how increased maternal agency in Indonesia, however, leads to better choices around nutrition and breastfeeding, which results in increased diversity of gut microbiota, less disease and better health. F1000DA is currently leading a project to begin researching the role of the microbiome in narrating intergenerational influences on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Fearful memories are passed down between generations through biosocial pathways, such as environmental, policy and genetic contexts, which can determine the health status of our children. Professor Arabena recommended decolonising strategies to combat damaging life contexts including privileging and engaging in indigenous philosophies, practices, beliefs and values, which restore and strengthen our families' ceremonial brain and self-determination.



*Michael Hogan presents the Summit's opening address*

**Mr Michael Hogan** spoke of the Queensland Government's aim of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at a local level through equipping services to enable healing, and helping families to realise the aspirations, dreams and futures they hold for their children. The Queensland Government and Family Matters Queensland strategy, '**Our Way: A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families**', acknowledges the importance of family in raising strong children, and expects that all families can overcome challenges with the right support at the right time. Queensland is the first State to get behind F1000DA, with funding to support the implementation of the F1000DA Model and to build the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The Queensland Government is challenging the current system and developing strategies informed by cultural transmission, the voices of children and evidence.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission works to improve the child protection and family support system through reviews, research and education by listening to children, families and communities. Chief Executive and Principal Commissioner **Ms Cheryl Vardon** explained that the values of the Commission align with those of F1000DA, with a focus on the health of mothers, family poverty, and providing a second chance for children. To achieve this, the Commission consults with children as to what type of support they need in their lives to help them work out their potential.

**Dr Johan Morreau's** presentation on the importance of increasing parent-child attachment during the first 1000 days, reducing child poverty, and reframing our views of vulnerable families to 'needing to be valued' families, spoke to the way policy and systems can honour families. His well-received suggestion for countries to 'spend our money on parenting and then not need prisons' highlighted how we cannot keep doing things the way we are.

**Mr Romlie Mokak**, CEO of the Lowitja Institute, reminded participants that the wellbeing of men and the role of fathers are often missing from policy and research. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are instead portrayed as representing all that is dire, problematic and deficit in our families. In challenging this, the Lowitja Institute convened a workshop to share knowledge on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men and the supporting role they play, and aspire to play, in their relationships, families and communities. Workshop participants understood the difficulty of finding your way in the world, and continuing to learn from each other in order to help others and support the journey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men. Personal experiences of loss, trying to fit in or escape circumstances, being shown a different way of thinking, becoming parents or being involved in research continued to drive participants to build knowledge and make change.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are crucial to the first 1000 days of a child's life and the future wellbeing of our families. In closing, Mr Mokak asked participants to reflect on:

***What did my ancestors want me to be?***

***What kind of ancestor do I want to be?***

***What kind of ancestor do I want my children to be?***

### **Honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination**

*We can't change what's happened, but we can do things differently. Heather Lee*

**Uncle Phillip Mills'** presentation stressed that a decolonisation process is about **honouring the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** and putting them in charge. What works is simply caring for people and wanting them to get well; and 'the only gap we need to close is the one between our heart and our head'.

Summit participants gained knowledge from self-determined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services that are teaching, training, generating evidence, advocating for social justice, and supporting families and



*Wendy Bunston, Romlie Mokak and Kerry Arabena listen to a presentation at the Summit*

communities to be self-determining and strong. **Dean Foley**, for example, explained how supporting the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander **entrepreneurship** has real potential to deliver positive change for families by putting them in the driver's seat to determine their own financial wellbeing.

**Aboriginal Disability Cultural Safety Consultant Jody Barney** works to empower and grow the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living with disability and their families, and to help services unpack how they can engage, support and guide them towards their aspirations. She explained that those who make the diagnoses of disability need to understand the language they are using. With many only seeing the disability, and not an individual's ability to do many things, they use language that does not acknowledge culture, and does not consider the implication of a diagnosis for families and the negative impact it can have on an individual and a family's self-determination.

**Bubup Wilam for Early Learning** is a self-determined, community controlled Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in Melbourne, Victoria. In partnership with families, Bubup Wilam aims to nurture strong, proud and healthy kids in a culturally rich and supportive environment. It does this by ensuring that every child learns who they are and who they are connected to – because knowing who you are is how you move forward. Young people are supported to take a lead responsibility in owning and developing their play and learning; quality training is given to ensure that Aboriginal people will have the qualifications to take up leadership positions; and the development and implementation of their own curriculum is underpinned by Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. Bubup Wilam advocates for the rightful place of Aboriginal people to run their own program, and challenges have not stopped them finding a way forward and doing what is right for their families.

#### **Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Services**

(TAIHS) spoke about the challenges of providing innovative prevention for families in a complex policy and funding environment aimed at tertiary responses rather than prevention. The work of TAIHS is underpinned by values of cultural responsiveness, reciprocity, individual and collective identity that are both an essential part of culture, and the utilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in finding solutions. TAIHS see the First 1000 Days Australia Model as an opportunity to reflect and to do its work more effectively, as long as it is managed well to ensure it is not just another program added to an already heavy workload. F1000DA will help TAIHS identify issues earlier, increase young people's knowledge of developing positive relationships, mentor families to build resilience, and develop partnerships focused on shared learning.

**Rowena Brown** explained that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers at TAIHS identify culture as a unique advantage for working with their 'mob and to learn from Elders and how to use the elements of this earth'. Workers 'know each family, who are not cases to be managed; we are not case managers, we are wellbeing workers'. Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) provides support and advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health professionals and students, and works with the health sector and communities to improve connections, curricula, leadership and access to allied health services. Together with its members, IAHA is advocating and asserting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 'to own our health and how we need to address it'. Increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce will bring unique cultural knowledges, holistic views of health, and empower communities to find solutions to improve health and wellbeing in a sustainable and meaningful way.

The **More than a Landlord** pilot project, which incorporated a research partnership between F1000DA and Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV), has encouraged the families involved to identify their aspirations, and will support them to make the decisions and changes needed to meet these aspirations. The project employed and trained Peer Researchers to undertake a household survey within their own AHV tenancy community. Peer Researchers were then assigned Life Coaches by AHV to support them in their return to training and work, leading one to comment that 'work meant that I spoke to the community and I found my family, I found my people'. Three Peer Researchers presented to the Summit about their experiences on the project, which included building their own self-esteem through working, supporting each other (e.g. juggling family responsibilities) and connecting to their community.

The household survey results found that, despite challenging health and living circumstances, individuals' attitudes to life in general were positive with most aspiring to be healthy and happy. Many reported that they would like support to be job ready and to help with budgeting and menu planning. The results are now guiding AHV's expansion of the Life Coach service to help tenants navigate services, to become more self-sufficient and resilient to challenges, and to achieve their aspirations. AHV is using the engagement process to change the way it is seen by their tenants, because it wants to be viewed as more than just a landlord.

Bringing about change is challenging, but **Aunty Lynne Matsen** urged Summit participants to make change:

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*Sometimes the ground is hard to break and it's hard to be heard. Imagine how hard this is for a baby; we need to soften it for them. We need to break the ground and make our voices heard. You need to take the things you've learnt here home to your community and use it, make it work. There is still a lot of work to do in the journey of birthing our Elders.*

## Shared Learnings

*Never forget where you've come from and the journey you've had, and where you stand.* **Heather Lee**

**The Summit was a meeting place of sharing and honouring all knowledges. Knowledge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is not just facts and information, or even skills gained from experience or education. Knowledge is understanding who you are, who you belong to and where you belong. Knowledge is honouring the connection you have with others. Knowledge is a living thing that will continue to change and grow as it moves forward carrying the past, present and future for our children.**

Participants' reflections underline the importance of the first 1000 days to our health and wellbeing, and the imperative to get the early years right thereby giving our children the best start in life. Reflecting on how our ancestors raised strong children who were connected to their community, culture and land reminded participants that experience and cultural knowledge can also guide us today, and that 'our children can be free and not burdened with our own burdens and expectations'. Ceremonies such as Welcome Baby to Country are reconnecting families to the landscape and to their community, in a celebration of who they are as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Self-determining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs are working in partnership with families to nurture strong and proud children in culturally rich and supportive environments.

The three key questions – **'Who am I? Who do I belong to? Where do I belong?'** – resonated deeply with participants, some of whom shared their intention to carry them into their everyday conversations with children and ensure

they form the basis of understanding their needs. One participant noted that living cultural practice is carried through positive role modelling for families and community members, and that 'putting culture into practice from in utero is building stronger future families with better connection and understanding of self and community'.

Learnings from the Summit will inform First 1000 Days Australia's training curricula and research themes of Generational Family Health and Wellbeing; Preconception, Pregnancy and Child Development; and Innovative Practice and Implementation. Participants understood the importance of generating evidence about what works to grow children up strong in the first 1000 days, noting that having an evidence base 'is a huge advantage for cultural roles in community'.

In response to feedback, F1000DA will also work to provide more clarity about what our Model looks like in practice and how other organisations can work collaboratively with us. We will also continue to engage family and community in conversation and activities to unpack new ideas and creatively explore viewpoints, attitudes and aspirations for our children.

The Summit culminated in the launch of **'The charter of rights for children yet to be conceived'**, which outlines the aspirations that the First 1000 Days Australia Council holds for all children and families. The Charter will guide First 1000 Days Australia as it works to support families in identifying their own aspirations and strengths, and to have agency over the solutions they use in striving to meet them.



*Summit participants hold aloft the First 1000 Days Australia 'Charter of rights for children yet to be conceived'*



# The Charter of rights for children yet to be conceived

The First 1000 Days Australia Council appreciates that parenting is a skill learned from being parented and is specific to the demands of a particular way of life. The Council also understands there are families who experience social and health inequities.



FIRST  
1000  
DAYS  
AUSTRALIA™

## However, every child can rightfully expect to be born into families who:

- 1 Seek appropriate preventative and early intervention medical and cultural supports prior to, during and after the First 1000 Days.
- 2 Seek appropriate preventative and early intervention medical and cultural supports prior to, during and after the First 1000 Days.
- 3 Can nourish them in the mother's womb with good quality nutrition, free from alcohol, smoke and the experience of violence.
- 4 Have loving expectations of them, are hopeful about their future and help them to achieve their life aspirations in powerful and tender ways.
- 5 Participate in their education from birth to ensure that personal aspirations are nurtured and aligned with our people's cultural values, responsibilities and entrepreneurial spirit.
- 6 Provide an appropriately stimulating environment, age-appropriate games, and the ability to grow with siblings and family members who themselves are capable of experienced and knowledgeable caring and parenting.
- 7 Know who they are, where they come from, who they are connected to, who loves them, who advocates for them, who listens to them, and who is responsible for them – culturally, morally, physically, spiritually and emotionally.
- 8 Are part of a healthy, vibrant society shaped by strong kinship relationships and a resilient culture, in which all members thrive, flourish and enjoy the same opportunities as other Australians – without being made the same.
- 9 Have healed and broken free from trans-generational trauma, and are able to transform harmful experiences into a positive future for their children and grandchildren.
- 10 Have the capacity to celebrate their children and offer them ceremonies, rituals, language, songs, stories and environments that strengthen their resilience, encourage their growth and support their choice of identity.

