

SUBMISSION TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

Submitted by:

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INTRODUCTION

This submission supports the intent of the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026, particularly its emphasis on earlier intervention, child wellbeing, family responsibility, and reducing pathways into youth offending and long-term incarceration.

This submission further proposes that the Bill presents an opportunity to formally recognise and integrate culturally authorised, community-led early intervention frameworks led by Traditional Owners, Elders, and strong community leaders.

The Guardians of Earth (GOE) early intervention framework and the Elders Code of Conduct model provide a practical, culturally grounded mechanism capable of supporting the objectives of the proposed amendments while strengthening community responsibility, school engagement, and long-term behavioural change.

THE CURRENT SYSTEM INTERVENES TOO LATE

Current youth justice and diversion systems across Australia have largely failed to break the cycle of intergenerational offending.

As outlined in the paper “Youth Crime Prevention Through Early Intervention and Cultural Authority,” children as young as five are increasingly influenced by external gang culture through social media and online content. By the age of ten many children have already disengaged from school, lack literacy and numeracy skills, and have adopted antisocial behaviours that become progressively more difficult to reverse.

Traditional diversion programs often commence only after a child has entered the youth justice system. These approaches generally focus on short-term behavioural management rather than long-term prevention and environmental change.

The result is that children are frequently returned to the same environments and influences that contributed to offending in the first place.

The Bill’s focus on early intervention and family responsibility provides an opportunity to address these problems before behaviours become entrenched.

SUPPORT FOR THE BILL'S OBJECTIVES

This submission supports the Government's objectives in:

- strengthening child wellbeing and safety
- improving family accountability
- increasing earlier intervention responses
- reducing escalation into youth justice involvement
- supporting vulnerable children before crisis points occur
- recognising the importance of community and cultural supports

The proposed Family Responsibility Agreements and associated intervention mechanisms align strongly with the principles already embedded within the Elders Code of Conduct model.

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Traditional Owners, Elders, and respected community leaders possess cultural authority that government agencies alone cannot replicate.

The Elders Code of Conduct framework proposes that local Traditional Owners establish community expectations for children, including:

- mandatory school attendance
- respectful behaviour within community and town areas
- cultural engagement and responsibility
- participation in positive activities and mentoring

Importantly, these codes are community-created rather than externally imposed.

The model further proposes that communities be supported to formalise these expectations through local government by-laws or recognised community frameworks, ensuring cultural authority is supported rather than undermined by statutory systems.

This submission strongly recommends that the Government formally recognise the role of Traditional Owners and culturally authorised community structures as part of early intervention planning under the Bill.

EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH CULTURAL IMMERSION

The GOE framework proposes intervention before children become entrenched in youth offending pathways.

This includes:

- culturally supervised bush camps
- mentoring by strong men and women
- behavioural and educational assessments
- school reintegration planning
- ongoing mentoring and accountability
- family engagement and support

The purpose is not punishment.

The purpose is prevention, identity restoration, cultural connection, behavioural reset, and long-term empowerment.

The model recognises that many disengaged children suffer from undiagnosed learning difficulties, trauma, hearing impairment, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), unstable home environments, and cultural disconnection.

Early culturally grounded intervention provides an opportunity to identify and address these barriers before children progress deeper into antisocial behaviour and criminal offending.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

This submission strongly supports greater parental and family engagement.

However, family accountability mechanisms will only succeed if communities themselves are empowered to participate in solutions.

The Elders Code of Conduct framework includes strong women and respected leaders engaging directly with families of at-risk children.

Rather than relying solely on punitive responses, the model prioritises support, engagement, mentoring, and practical intervention.

Parents remain connected to children while communities help stabilise behaviour and support school attendance.

This approach aligns with the Bill's emphasis on earlier intervention and collaborative family responsibility responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission recommends that the Government:

1. Formally recognise Traditional Owners and culturally authorised community structures within early intervention frameworks established under the Bill.
2. Support pilot programs based on the Guardians of Earth and Elders Code of Conduct model in high-risk communities.
3. Allow Family Responsibility Agreements to incorporate culturally developed Codes of Conduct where supported by local Traditional Owners.
4. Invest in early intervention programs targeting children before they enter the youth justice system.
5. Support culturally supervised bush camps, mentoring programs, and community-led behavioural support initiatives.
6. Fund integrated education, health, mentoring, and cultural engagement pathways for at-risk children.
7. Ensure community-led responses operate alongside statutory child protection systems rather than outside them.

CONCLUSION

The Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 presents an important opportunity to shift from reactive youth justice responses toward genuine prevention and early intervention.

Government systems alone cannot solve intergenerational youth crime.

Long-term change requires culturally grounded leadership, community authority, family engagement, and early intervention before antisocial behaviours become entrenched.

The Guardians of Earth and Elders Code of Conduct framework provides a practical model capable of supporting the objectives of the Bill while empowering Aboriginal communities to protect children, strengthen culture, and reduce future offending.

Children must be caught before they fall.

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