

Honouring Kumanjayi Little Baby with compassion, not blame



Tegan Scheffe

On the 25th of April this year, an innocent five-year-old Aboriginal girl, who for cultural reasons is now known as Kumanjayi Little Baby, was abducted from her family home in Alice Springs and sadly lost her life in an act of devastating and senseless violence.

The loss of any child is heartbreaking. Her family, her loved ones, and the community around her are now carrying unimaginable grief with them that they will never truly heal from. The loss of an Aboriginal child resonates deeply across our families and communities because our children are not only loved by their parents, but by grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, Elders and community.

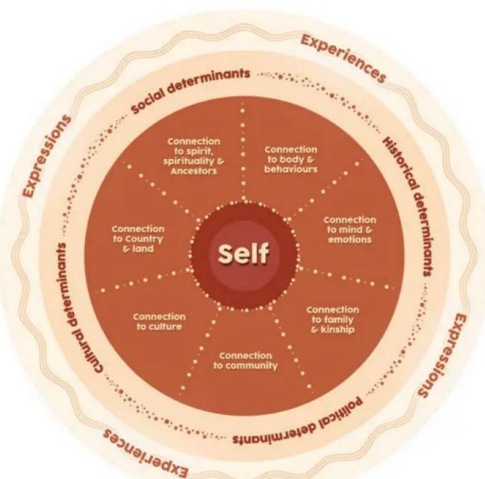
In the midst of great pain in our community, at the very least, tragic circumstances are a time when communities can come together and demonstrate great resilience, and indeed we have seen an outpouring of support from Mob as well as the wider community, expressing sadness, sorrow, and their support for a family and community that are grieving. It is during these difficult times that we learn the most about the strength of ourselves and each other.

Unfortunately, there have been others who have used their voices not to show support, but to cast blame; criticising the living conditions of town camps in Alice Springs, attacking the family, blaming child-protective services and casting judgements about the way that Aboriginal people live. Instead of showing compassion, due to the race of Kumanjayi Little Baby and the place that it happened, this tragedy has been taken out of the hands of a grieving family and community and used as a platform for political point-scoring.

The family of Kumanjayi Little Baby didn't ask for her death to be used in this way, her grandfather, Robin Japanangka Granites, told ABC News that "we didn't even say anything to anyone, except just look at them and say, we cried, we cried, nothing else". In a later statement he asked politicians to "be respectful in this sorry time...



Public memorial outside of Old Timers Camp, Alice Springs, for Kumanjayi Little Baby. Picture: AAP.



SEWB diagram adapted from Gee et al. (2014).

our little baby's passing must not become a politician's argument", and yet, her death has quickly stopped being about the grief of a heartbroken community, and has become ammunition for a political debate.

Sadly, this tragedy is being used by both sides of politics for their personal agenda; by racist people to disparage against our Mob, and by allies as an attempt to bring light to the extreme disadvantage faced by our Mob in Alice Springs. Additionally, from social media comments, to newspapers, to members of parliament, people and

organisations from all parts of Australian society seem to take no issue in using this tragedy for this self-serving purpose.

I ask all of Australia to remember that an innocent girl has died and a family and community are still deeply in mourning. Our number-one priority should always be to support each other through this incredibly difficult time, especially while things are still so raw.

From a Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) perspective, our wellbeing is not just about an individual's health and

wellbeing. It is also about our connections – to family, community, culture, Country and spirit. When a child is taken from us in such a tragic way, those connections are disrupted. The grief is carried collectively. The hurt ripples through families, communities and the nation.

At times like these, culture becomes even more important. Culture provides the strength to come together, to mourn, to support one another and to honour those we have lost. It reminds us that healing is found through connection, not isolation. Through our cultural practices, our stories, our Elders and our communities, we find ways to carry grief while continuing to care for one another.

SEWB also reminds us of the importance of looking after our minds and bodies during times of trauma. Grief affects us emotionally, spiritually and physically. It is okay to seek support, to lean on family and community, to sit with Elders, to yarn, to cry and to take time to heal. Looking after ourselves and each other is not a sign of weakness – it is a reflection of our collective strength.

The story of Kumanjayi Little Baby should not become a story about blame or how people live. It should be a story that reminds us of the value of every child, the importance of community, and the need for compassion in the face of tragedy.

As communities, we have always demonstrated resilience. Not because hardship has not

touched us, but because we continue to draw strength from our culture, our families and our connections. In honouring Kumanjayi Little Baby, may we choose empathy over judgment, support over blame, and connection over division.

Our thoughts remain with her family and her community and all those who loved her.

Tegan Scheffe is a proud Bidjara and Kamilaroi woman with a strong background in primary-health care and suicide prevention. Tegan is committed to community driven, co-designed solutions that enhance the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Tegan currently works at the Australian Research Council, Australian Research Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures, as an administrator and has close connections with the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, University of Western Australia.

This article is part of a series of Koori Mail columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.