

THE AUSTRALIAN

Culture can be deadly for kids

ANTHONY DILLON THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 23, 2013 12:00AM

THE death of six-year-old Kiesha Weippeart makes me wonder whether we are creating an abused generation of Aboriginal children. An excellent article by Miranda Devine (The Sunday Telegraph, July 21) chronicled the many awful twists in Kiesha's short life and tragic death. Kiesha's mother, Kristi Abrahams, was sentenced to 16 years' jail for murdering her daughter.

While many have been outraged by what they see as a lenient sentence for the mother, I am outraged by the role Aboriginal ancestry may have played and how we as a society have been conditioned to factor in Aboriginal culture when deciding how best to help or care for Aborigines. Because Kiesha had Aboriginal ancestry, there has been speculation that this may have prevented appropriate actions that could have saved her life.

Courts in NSW and Victoria require welfare authorities to keep children with what they deem to be "culturally appropriate" carers. Most Aboriginal children live with loving families, often with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and other relatives. But when a child is in need of protection or removal and has Aboriginal ancestry, even if that ancestry is minimal, the practice of keeping that child with its own or another Aboriginal family, despite neglect or abuse, has devastating consequences. In the name of preserving culture, neglected children sometimes end up being placed in shocking environments.

Northern Territory MP Bess Price recently was banned from speaking at Griffith University by a self-appointed protector of the Aboriginal staff and students of the university's Gumurrii centre, because she intended to speak about this and

For those who hold the romanticised view of modern-day Aboriginal culture where everyone is happy and healthy, accounts of abuse and neglect of children shatter their dreams. Price is one of those brave people who dares to talk about these ugly issues confronting Aboriginal people, and is criticised for doing so. But it is women and children who pay a dear price when we don't listen.

Is it really inappropriate to place Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal carers? I don't think anyone would mind if non-Aboriginal children were placed in the care of loving Aboriginal carers. Is there a sort of racism happening here?

For far too long we have been led to believe that racism runs only one way. When I lived in Queensland a few years ago, I was a foster carer. As someone with Aboriginal ancestry, I had the opportunity to look after children with Aboriginal ancestry. I treated them exactly as other caring, loving adults would. There are many fine non-Aboriginal families who can look after neglected Aboriginal children. It needs to be emphasised that culture should be placed far down on the list of attributes for foster carers.

For those who believe culture should be placed ahead of a child's essential needs, I urge you to stop. For those who believe Aboriginality should be elevated above other racial groups, I urge you to stop. For those who think only other Aboriginal people are appropriate as carers and nurturers for Aboriginal children, I urge you to stop. Aboriginal children sometimes suffer because they are placed with inappropriate foster carers.

There are many dimensions to our lives - gender, sexual orientation/preference, religion, race. To focus on one and, in the case of Aboriginality, to obsess about it, is proving deadly to many. To think that a child with Aboriginal ancestry has a separate culture to other children vastly exaggerates any differences. Let's recognise and focus on the human culture that unites us.

Anthony Dillon identifies as a part-Aborigine He is a researcher at the University of Western Sydney and co-editor of *In Black & White: Australians All at the Crossroads*.