

Governments need to act now to protect vulnerable children: AASW statement on Mason Jet Lee

The brutal and painful death of 22-month-old Mason Jet Lee is a devastating tragedy and we call on all Australian governments to take immediate actions to assure no child has to ever endure what Mason went through in his short life, said the Australian Association of Social Workers National President Christine Craik, Queensland Branch President Ellen Beaumont and North Queensland Branch President Ross Murray in a joint statement released today. The Coroner's report into Mason's death details the horrific abuse and neglect he suffered, highlighting a systematic failure on every level. What was starkly evident in Mason Jet Lee's situation, was the intergenerational trauma, years of abuse and neglect that was present within the family, coupled with the significant impact of domestic and family violence. This highlights the importance of addressing these issues early and we have a family and child protection system that intervenes when it is too late, disproportionately focusing on reactionary over preventative measures. For example, across Australia only 17 per cent of overall child protection funding is invested in early intervention support services with 83 per cent for child protection services. Child protection deals with some of the most complex problems that we face as a society. There is no single solution and we need a comprehensive approach to child and family support that looks at workforce, service systems, case loads, supervision and the structural factors that perpetuate poverty, marginalisation and disadvantage. In particular, we highlight the continued over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems. This goes beyond politics and we need a commitment to appropriately and sustainably resource the full continuum of child and family support, including prevention, early intervention, along with tertiary statutory services. An immediate measure that all governments can take is to improve the training and skills of the child protection workforce. For families that come into the child protection system, it can be due to a complex set of circumstances and it is vital that they receive supports from highly trained and skilled professionals. Unfortunately, as Mason's and numerous Coroner's reports from all across Australia continue to highlight, this is not the case. In Australia, social work is not a registered profession which can lead to inadequate forms of regulation. As social workers, we are on the front lines of child and family support and see the daily reality of an inequitably regulated sector and the devastating impacts this can have. The AASW has been calling for formal registration for several decades, this has been supported in recent years by two Coroner's reports (including Chloe Valentine in South Australia). A Bill is now before the South Australian parliament for the statutory registration of social workers that would assure public safety, professional quality and accountability of the child protection workforce. The AASW is building on the progress in South Australia and meeting with child protection ministers and key stakeholders across Australia, advocating for the expansion of the South Australian model. Mason's tragic and preventable death shows how far we still have to go and fundamentally that we all have a role to play in making sure that every child across Australia is safe and has a loving and supportive environment in which to meet their full potential.

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