

Working and Walking Together

Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc.



What is SNAICC?

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC was established in 1981 after the creation of such a body was proposed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at The First Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar held in Melbourne in 1979. The organisation elected its first national executive in 1982 and opened its office after receiving Federal Government funding support in 1983.

SNAICC's founding members were the first Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCAs). These AICCAs were established following a study trip to the United States by the late (Auntie) Mollie Dyer from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. Inspired by the success of native Americans in reducing the rate of child removal, and in particular the Yakima Indian Nation, Mollie returned to Australia to establish the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, VACCA. Soon afterwards the NSW Aboriginal Children's Service was formed in Redfern and the South Australian AICCA in Adelaide. These organisations became a model and source of inspiration for the establishment of similar agencies across Australia.

SNAICC now operates from a membership base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based child care agencies, Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services, family support services, foster care agencies, link-up services, family reunification services, family group homes, community groups and voluntary associations, long-day-care child care services, pre-schools, early childhood education services and services for young people at risk. SNAICC also has an extensive network of subscribing community groups, mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but also non-Indigenous community-based services and individuals with an interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. SNAICC is governed by a national executive of people drawn from our member organisations.

The SNAICC Resource Service was established in 2004. The Resource Service works in partnership with other agencies to develop and distribute resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family services. Resources developed to date include tips sheets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads, posters and other materials celebrating the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, resources highlighting positive child rearing stories, the Through Young Black Eyes suite of resources designed to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities protect children from family violence and develop child safe communities, activity kits to assist organisations celebrate National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, an online resource-sharing clearinghouse, an online service directory, and many more.

For further information regarding membership, subscriptions to the quarterly SNAICC newsletter or access to the SNAICC Resource Service contact:

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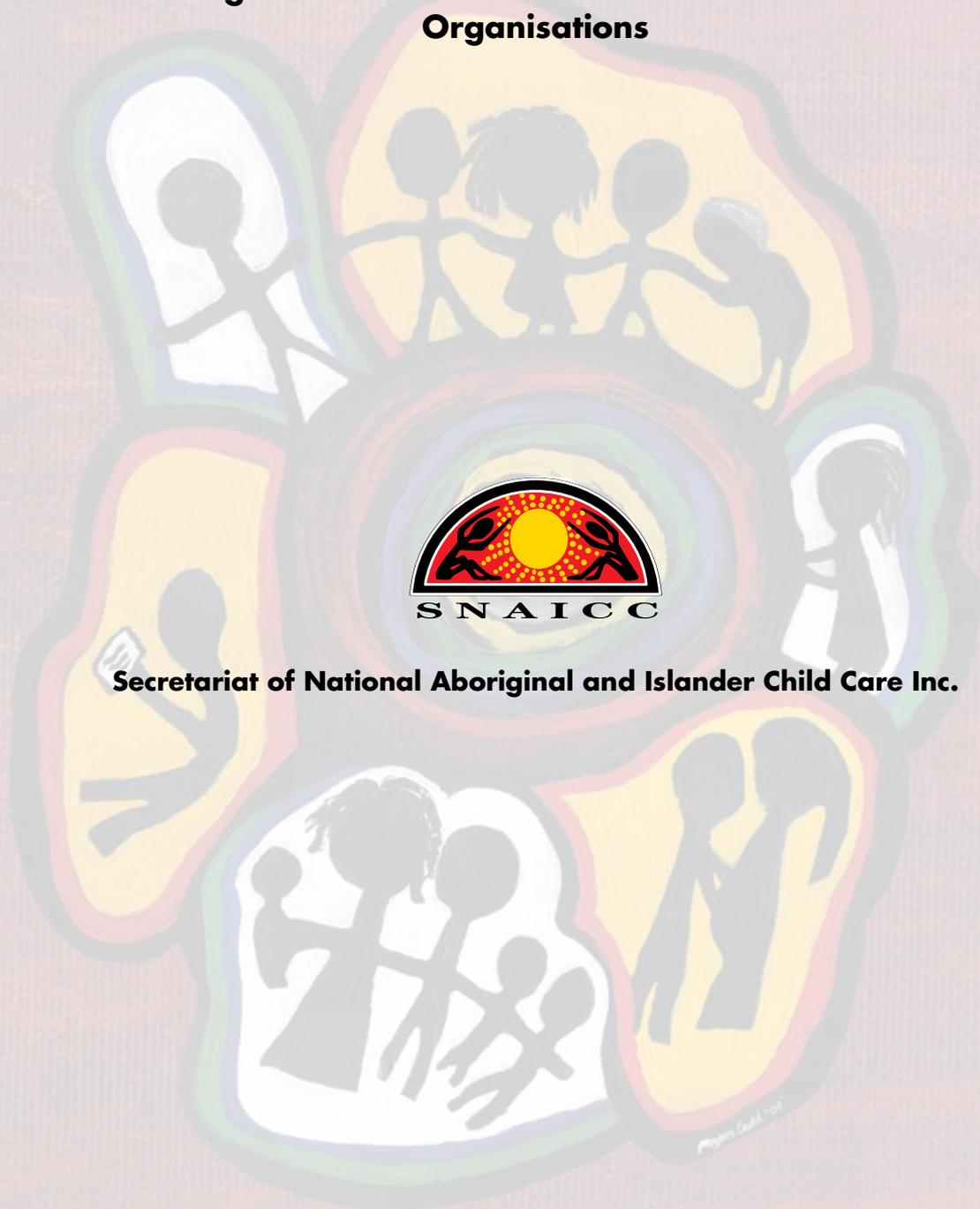
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**Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and
Organisations**



SNAICC

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Note on the cover artwork

SNAICC commissioned Aboriginal artist Megan Cadd to create the artwork for the cover of this publication, and for use throughout in its design. According to Megan:

This painting reflects on Aboriginal family connectedness, diversity and strength. It also celebrates the aliveness of culture within our families and the value our families bring to our communities. Through our families we bring growth and rejuvenation and this painting also celebrates the relationships between all members including children and Elders.

BIO

My name is Megan Cadd. I am of Aboriginal descent with my mother's people of both Yorta Yorta and Wotjabaluk heritage. I am a self-taught artist with a strong connection to art which stems from my ancestors, including my grandfather who painted boomerangs and spears in the 1950s as a way of bringing income in for the family. I have been an artist all my life but started exhibiting my work three years ago and during this time I have participated in several group shows and a solo exhibition. My art provides me with the opportunity to reflect on my life, family, community and culture and the beauty that the universe has to offer. I am drawn to land and find myself also reflecting on the history and diversity of land. I also find myself using painting to question the 'Why?', 'What?' and 'How?' on the events around me, of the past, and what they mean in the context of my life today. I see the universe through an abstract lens and am inspired by contemporary Aboriginal art that represents the stories of Aboriginal people and communities today intertwined with the richness of our culture. As long as I am creating art I will be exhibiting and sharing reflections on my land, life culture, healing and life in the past and present.

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SNAICC would like to thank the great number of people and organisations who contributed to developing this resource. It is a publication that draws on the collective wisdom, experience and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, and the family relationship services sector.

SNAICC was commissioned to develop this resource by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to support the services it funds through the Family Services Program to reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in more effective and culturally appropriate ways. The production of this publication and its associated web resources hosted by SNAICC at www.snaicc.asn.au is made possible through the SNAICC Resource Service, which is funded through the Australian Government's *Early Childhood – Invest to Grow Initiative* of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. SNAICC appreciates the continuing support provided by FaHCSIA for our work.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness resource material produced by RMIT University for FaHCSIA that we drew on in the development of this resource. SNAICC also drew on material we had previously published that was extracted from *Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out of Home Care*, developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). SNAICC expresses a special thanks to VACCA for giving us permission to once again reproduce edited extracts of their publication in this resource.

We owe a special thanks to Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA), the national peak body for Family Relationship Services across Australia, who worked with SNAICC on this publication, in particular, Bonnie Montgomery and Steve Hackett.

Thank you also to those Family Relationship Services that agreed to be interviewed and documented for the case studies. They are Interrelate Family Centre, Lismore, NSW; Mackay Family Relationship Centre, Queensland; Men's Outreach Service, Broome, WA; and Centacare Broken Bay, NSW.

Thank you to the Project Reference Group members for contributing their expertise. They are Steve Larkins, SNAICC Chairperson and General Manager of Hunter Aboriginal Children's Services, Newcastle, NSW; Garry Matthews, SNAICC Deputy-Chairperson (Child Welfare) and CEO of Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre, NSW; Lisa Coulson, SNAICC National Executive member and Director of Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association, Launceston, Tas.; Steve Hackett, Deputy Director of Family Relationship Services Australia; Karen Morris, CEO, and Jonathan Toussaint, Executive Manager, of Interrelate Family Centres; Jonathon Main, Group Manager of Family Services, Uniting Care Wesley Adelaide; and Marie Morrison, CEO of Relationships Australia NT.

We would also like to thank the counsellors, managers, administration staff, family dispute resolution practitioners, and child inclusive practitioners and other representatives of family relationship services from across Australia who participated in the focus group workshop to test this resource. Their valuable feedback was instrumental to SNAICC's efforts to make this resource responsive to the needs and concerns of those working in this sector, and – as importantly – to make it user friendly.



They represented the diversity and expertise, and professionalism and commitment, of those working in this sector. They are: James Roden of Relationships Australia, Adelaide, SA; Melissa Downie of Mount Gambier FRC, SA; Tracey Dickford of LifeCare Counselling and Family Services, NSW; Fran Quigley of Relationships Australia, Ballarat, Victoria; Lila Beamish of Upper Murray Family Care, Albury, NSW; Joe Tighe of Men's Outreach Service, Broome, WA; Olivia Rundle of Positive Solutions, Hobart, Tasmania; Samantha Moloney of Toowoomba Children's Contact Centre, Qld; Sarah McCubbin of Centacare, Darwin, NT; Shane Quinn of Greensborough FRC, Victoria; Bonnie Montgomery of Family Relationship Services Australia, based in Canberra; and Alywnne Simpson of Anglicare Shoalhaven Community Care, NSW. We also appreciate their organisations' support in releasing them from their duties to participate.

Finally, SNAICC would like to thank the SNAICC staff who contributed to this resource: Mark Lawrence, who coordinated, researched, edited, wrote and redeveloped this resource; Liz Orr, SNAICC Evaluation Manager, who redeveloped and contributed new material for the chapter on Action Research Evaluation; Catriona Elek, Deputy Director, Manager, Resources and Training, who managed the project and contributed directly to the resource's development; Jane Harrison and Chris Dunk who provided invaluable input on culture and history; Sue Beecher, whose input on counselling practice was crucial; and also, SNAICC's former Executive Officer, Julian Pocock, and current Chief Executive Officer, Frank Hytten, who both provided leadership in the direction, tone and approach of this resource.



Introduction

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter provides an overview of this resource and how to get the best use from it. It covers:

- The importance of respect
- Taking a strengths-based approach
- Why this resource?
- How to use *Working and Walking Together*
- How not to use *Working and Walking Together*
- Where to next?

Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations has been developed to support non-Indigenous Family Relationship Services develop culturally appropriate professional practice and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It provides ideas, information, tools, practical tips and encouragement to assist non-Indigenous organisations and their non-Indigenous staff to strengthen their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. The importance of respect and of taking a strengths-based approach are at the foundation of this resource.

RESPECT

The key foundation to building a relationship is respect and this is achieved through understanding. This resource provides information that is intended to foster an understanding of the fundamental importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It highlights the important need to respect the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, communities and culture that have survived in the face of over two centuries of colonisation and dispossession.

By building on a foundation of respect and accentuating strengths, Family Relationship Services can be better placed to offer services that are more responsive, effective,



sustainable and culturally appropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Developing this foundation is essential to building positive and respectful partnerships between non-Indigenous services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services in providing culturally appropriate family relationship services.

TAKING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Taking a strengths-based approach and offering culturally appropriate services is not just about getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the doors of your services. It is about ensuring that your efforts are effective and supportive in assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build their capacity, and sustain their strengths to support healthy relationships and families, and raise their children to be strong in their culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is a great source of strength to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, including the important connections to country, spirituality, family and community. It is crucially important for non-Indigenous service providers to recognise and to have this understanding and respect when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A strengths-based approach that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's family and kinship structures is particularly important. This is crucial to building parenting capacity and assisting members of the community to strengthen family and other relationships. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people draw on a wide range of kinship networks to share and co-operate in raising children who are strong in their cultural identity.

WHY THIS RESOURCE?

SNAICC, the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, was commissioned by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to develop this resource, with the express purpose of supporting and enabling non-Indigenous agencies in the Family Relationship Services sector to take this approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This resource responds to a need identified by the Family Relationship Services sector for knowledge and resources to assist in working more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. To its credit, the sector recognises that it is not reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enough.¹ Many practitioners, managers, and other workers across the sector – people like you – have requested resources, support and ideas to assist in building their capacity, skills and knowledge to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in culturally appropriate ways, and to be able to engage with their communities and families more effectively.

Nevertheless, there have been many successes – organisations that have been developing innovative and culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some have worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to do so, while others have drawn on the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to assist them. To build on these successes and examples, Family Relationship Service providers are encouraged to share with and learn from each other in a spirit of supporting and encouraging strengths and knowledge.



A series of case studies or profiles of Family Relationship Services that have had positive experiences and successes in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their organisations is included in this resource. These strengths-based examples offer inspiration and ideas, and demonstrate that it is possible to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in feasible and practical ways that are culturally respectful.

This resource also draws extensively from the experience and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – particularly from the leadership and expertise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, including organisations such as SNAICC. It shares not only cultural and community knowledge and expertise but also the critical mass of learning and experience in developing services and programs that are culturally appropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A lot of this experience and knowledge has developed through collaboration, consultation and partnerships between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and non-Indigenous services and governments across jurisdictions. These relationships develop services that are more culturally appropriate to the families in our communities – including in health, mental health, social and emotional well-being, child welfare, parenting, early childhood services, and family violence prevention.

HOW TO USE WORKING AND WALKING TOGETHER

This resource is divided into a series of chapters providing ideas, information, tools, practical tips and encouragement to assist non-Indigenous organisations, and their non-Indigenous staff, to strengthen their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

The first two chapters offer introductory information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, family structures and approaches to raising children, and on the social and historical context of issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families today. The third chapter offers insights into and practical ideas for developing positive techniques for communicating effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while Chapter 4 is on common cultural protocols of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and how a knowledge – and respect – of these can assist in your work.

These chapters are intended as general introductory chapters for all readers – from administration staff, to counselling and dispute resolution practitioners, to parenting and relationship educators, to service and program managers. We encourage all readers to engage with these chapters as they offer a crucial foundation for building one's understanding and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and culture – and can contribute to encouraging respect.

The later chapters provide further information for those who wish to support and lead their organisations' efforts to engage more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and families. Chapter 5 explores how non-Indigenous organisations can develop their cultural competence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, through building respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and communities, and create culturally welcoming and supportive services for both staff and clients. Chapter 6 outlines approaches to developing culturally appropriate programs and professional practices, including counselling, parenting education and support, and mediation.



Following these chapters is a series of case studies profiling a number of Family Relationship Services that have had positive experiences and successes in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and in developing culturally appropriate services for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These are offered as models to draw inspiration, ideas and reflection from.

Chapter 7 is an introduction to using Action Research Evaluation as a suggested appropriate methodology for organisations to document, reflect on, evaluate and adapt their practices and initiatives in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and clients. A process of community engagement requires a significant amount of time and flexibility, and Action Research Evaluation can be an effective methodology for ongoing adaptive learning and documentation, and can assist organisations in their efforts to report on their progress and to share their stories and journey with colleagues, funders and the rest of the sector.

Finally, there is a listing of various print and online resources to assist readers find further assistance, resources and ideas to support their ongoing efforts.

HOW NOT TO USE WORKING AND WALKING TOGETHER

There is much to learn from and enjoy while reading and using *Working and Walking Together*.

However, this resource should not be taken as either prescriptive or proscriptive. There are hundreds of unique and distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cultural and language groups, clans, families and kinship networks in Australia. Together they represent the living history of over 40,000 years of practice and knowledge. This publication aims to represent the diversity and richness of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures. It is not possible to represent the distinct cultural traditions and practices of each community in this publication – or any single publication.

Neither is this resource a panacea for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, communities or their organisations. Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not homogenous, no single approach, set of rules or protocols, or method can – or should – be applied uniformly. One size does not fit all – what works in one community will not necessarily work in another if it is merely transplanted wholesale. Recognising this is crucial because as the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) findings indicate, mainstream support services that “fail to recognise the nuances of the Aboriginal circumstance may not deliver significant enhancements in the overall well-being of Aboriginal families.”²

Communication, consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – in particular with their organisations – can allow non-Indigenous services to adapt programs or services to cater to the particularities of and needs identified by communities. They can also lead to the development of new initiatives or programs offered through collaboration and partnerships. This is a far cry from repackaging a program intended for non-Indigenous people with dot art and calling it an Aboriginal program or initiative.

This distinction is crucial not only because programs and services developed in partnership and consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations are more responsive and culturally appropriate. They can be



more effective and sustainable because the community will have a greater sense of ownership of the services or programs. A 'tick-the-box' approach to community consultation, cultural awareness training, or to consultation for the sake of meeting funding guidelines or expectations simply will not work.

As such, this resource is not the end of a journey. Readers should treat it as a starting point for learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and how to engage and work with the local communities and organisations in the areas in which they work. As any relationship advisor would acknowledge, to build strong and healthy relationships there needs to be respect and an investment of time and effort spent on them – it is a journey of many steps. This also applies to the relationships between non-Indigenous organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations – and their clients.

WHERE TO NEXT?

This resource is available electronically from a dedicated page on SNAICC's website (www.snaicc.asn.au), along with the listing of resources and case studies reproduced in web format. As your organisation continues this journey and develops your engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations, we invite you to share your stories of success and positive developments with others in the Family Relationships Sector. This can be through SNAICC's website, through articles and service spotlights contributed to the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, and through other avenues (more information on this is in Chapter 7). SNAICC hopes to publish more case studies of such successes through our website as they are shared with us. We are also keen to hear your feedback on this resource – has it been useful, and how, in your organisation's journey? You can also do this through our website.

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is rewarding for the non-Indigenous organisations working with them and the communities. As you pursue this journey, it has the potential to enrich you and your organisations, but also enrich how you deliver services for *all* Australian children and families. We hope you enjoy this journey.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Urbis Keys Young, *Review of the Family Relationships Services Program*, Department of Family and Community Services and Attorney-General's Department, 2004, p. 57.
- 2 Walker, Roz and Shepherd, Carrington 2008, *AFRC Briefing No. 7, 2008 Strengthening Aboriginal Family Functioning: What Works and Why?* Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne



CHAPTER 1:

Culture, Family and Community

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter provides an overview of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and communities, the significance of extended family and kinship structures to cultural identity and approaches to child rearing. This chapter provides an important underpinning to subsequent chapters.

Readers are invited to:

- appreciate the importance of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity;
- understand the importance of wide kinship structures and family networks to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and approaches to child rearing; and
- understand the significance of land, spirituality, community and family relationships to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, communities and family.

INTRODUCTION*

Culture defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate and what we value. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are diverse, distinct and complex, and vary across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is not static or uniform. Like all cultures, it is continually changing and adapting depending on the influences on the person or the community. There is also very wide cultural diversity amongst Aboriginal communities, as well as Torres Strait Islander communities. However, there are common threads and beliefs that are shared amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

European colonisation and the past policies and practices of successive governments resulted in systemic injustices to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, causing suffering, grief and loss, having a destructive effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Despite this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture remains

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resilient. It has evolved and adapted and remains a significant and distinct influence on its people today.

SNAPSHOT



According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)¹, at 30 June 2006 there were 517,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – making up 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population.

- 90 per cent of this population was estimated as being of Aboriginal origin only (463,700)
- 6 per cent were of Torres Strait Islander origin only (33,300).
- 4 per cent were of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin (20,100).

DEFINING CULTURAL IDENTITY

Someone is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander if they have one or two parents who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's identity, culture and language come from their family and their relationship with the land.

Aboriginality lies in the meaningful way in which Aboriginal people interact with their people, with their feelings about their people and their home, with the way they think, work and speak. Aboriginality lies in the identification of an Aboriginal person's relationships with their family and community. It is their relationships with their grandparents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins and Elders.

Aboriginal people can be no more 'part Aborigines' than they are part human beings.

"Being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. ... It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand."²

A Torres Strait Islander person is usually defined as a descendant of the original inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands, or a traditional inhabitant of the islands. This definition applies regardless of whether they live on the islands or on the mainland, or whether they are of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people both individually and collectively as a community, define themselves by their culture not the colour of their skin."³

There are also many people of Aboriginal descent and Torres Strait Islander descent, and they may identify as an Aboriginal and as a Torres Strait Islander.



GOVERNMENT CULTURAL DEFINITION

In the early 1980s a three-part definition based on descent, self-identification and community recognition was adopted by government departments as a 'working definition' to determine eligibility to some services and benefits. Over time, the definition has been reflected in state legislation, and High Court and Federal Court rulings and is accepted and observed by most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. According to this definition, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is someone who:

- is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent,
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and
- is accepted in the community in which he or she lives as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.⁴

This definition protects the rights and sensitivities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by ensuring that claims of false identity cannot be made by others as each requirement must be satisfied to claim Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. The physical appearance or lifestyle of a person is not relevant to their identity.

There are laws that apply in each state and territory that make it illegal to discriminate against an individual or group based on their cultural background, gender, age or religion.

REFERRING TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIANS

Before the arrival of Europeans there were some 500 different Aboriginal nations across Australia, all living within their own clearly defined territories. These culturally diverse communities spoke their own languages and had their own customs.

Aboriginal people often use different terms to refer to themselves, depending on where they are from. Broadly, these include:

Area	Name
Queensland	Murries/Murrs
South Australia	Nungas
New South Wales	Koories/Kooris
Western Australia (South-western/Perth region only)	Noongar/Nyoongahs
Victoria	Koories/Kooris
Northern Territory (top end)	Yolngu
Northern Territory (central)	Anangu
Tasmania	Palawa

It is not appropriate to assume that you can refer to Aboriginal people by these names, unless your credibility is well established and you have been granted permission to do so.

There are some situations where it may not be appropriate to use these terms, such as in the border regions between South Australia and Victoria where Aboriginal people from either side of the border may be present, or where organisations may be providing services to people from both sides of the border. It is also not appropriate



to use the term Noongar to refer to Aboriginal people in the Kimberley or Pilbara regions. It is best to always ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the local community on how they refer to themselves.

As there are many language groups within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people may use their language or clan names to refer to themselves rather than generic terms. In some communities, family or kinship network names are also common identifiers – for example “I’m a Batjala” or “My mother was a Ross and she’s Darambal from Kepple Island” and so on. Furthermore, bear in mind that while people can be living or working in one particular area, they can be from another.

Where there is doubt, asking an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person how they would like you to refer to them in this context will be a sign of respect.

Terms such as: ‘half caste’, ‘quarter caste’, ‘full blood’ directly relate to classifications based on ‘blood quantum’ which were used from 1839 until the late 1950s and formed the basis of policies to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While their use was discontinued as part of official government practice, unfortunately some of these terms continued to be used in the general community for a long while after. These terms should *never* be used as they are extremely offensive.

Do not use acronyms or shortened words to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, e.g. “ATSI”, “TIs” or “Abs” etc. These terms should be written in full and not abbreviated as it shows respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The words Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander should always be capitalised.

The term ‘Indigenous Australians’ or ‘Indigenous’ is commonly used by the federal government and various state and territory governments, and is also adopted by various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and agencies. However, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations such as SNAICC prefer the use of the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’.

DIVERSITY OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are diverse, distinct and complex. Cultural norms, values, beliefs and communication styles vary across Australia. There are, however, common threads that run through the history and present circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

COMMUNITY

Not only do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures vary across the nation, but also in any local region, town or city. It is important to understand that many Aboriginal people, and Torres Strait Islander people to an extent, were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to live elsewhere. Others have chosen to relocate from their traditional lands for a wide range of personal, economic and other reasons, while usually retaining strong connections to their ‘country’. For example, the Wathorong people are the traditional owners of land where the town of Ballarat is sited: but today the Ballarat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in Victoria comprises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many areas of Victoria and Australia. So, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person may belong to more than one community, and their sense of ‘community’ is influenced by such factors as where they come from, where their family is and where they live and work.



While many stereotypes and assumptions suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people predominantly live in isolated areas of outback Australia, the opposite is true.

About a third of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in Australia's Major Cities (32 per cent), while another 21 per cent live in Inner Regional Australia. Another 22 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live in what the ABS calls Outer Regional Australia, while the rest live in Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia.⁵

Furthermore, the majority of Torres Strait Islander people live on the mainland of Australia, predominantly in Queensland.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in a wide range of communities including:

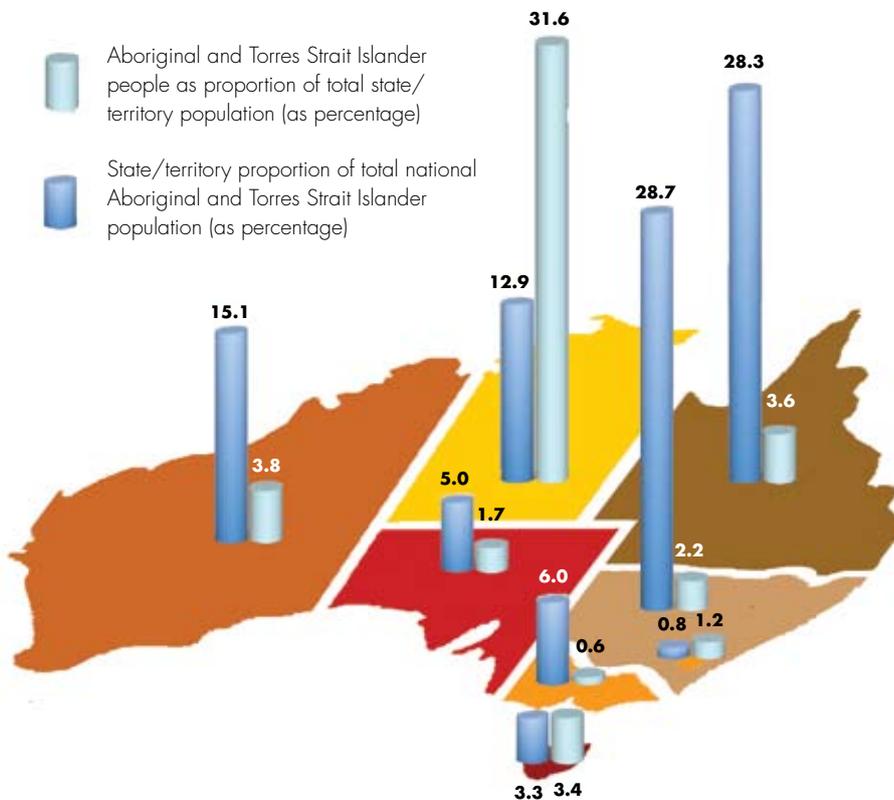
Urban – metropolitan suburbs of major cities within Australia.

Rural – regional centres and small country towns.

Missions/Reserves – places where Aboriginal people were forced to live when European occupation started and where Aboriginal people continue to reside.

Outstations and Communities – places where Aboriginal people are able to live on their traditional lands and have been granted inalienable freehold title to the land.

DISTRIBUTION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATIONS ACROSS STATES AND TERRITORIES



Source: ABS, 4704.0 – *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, 2008, 29 April 2008



ELDERS

An identified and 'respected' male or female person within the community who has the trust, knowledge and understanding of their culture and permission to speak about it is often referred to as an Elder. They are often recognised as being able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom in a confidential way with other members of the community, particularly younger members. Importantly, age alone does not necessarily mean that someone is a recognised Elder and some communities may have very few Elders because of the short life expectancy of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Young people may be given permission to talk on behalf of an Elder.

Some Elders are referred to as Auntie or Uncle, but you should only refer to these titles when given permission to do so – simply asking is the best way to find out if you can do so or not. Other terms used to refer to Elders in some communities include 'senior men' and 'senior women', and in particular communities this term may denote their status as a man or woman who has been initiated through traditional law or ceremony.

TRADITIONAL OWNERS

A traditional owner is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or group directly descended from the original inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land, sea or country. They are the clans, nations and groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have traditional connections to the land and waters relating to their area who retain decision-making powers in relation to that land or area. Although they may be, not all traditional owners are Elders, and vice versa.

Aboriginal culture*

VALUES AND BELIEFS

All cultures and societies have particular values and beliefs, which enable a sense of identity and meaning. Aboriginal peoples' values and beliefs are based on an understanding of the world that integrates the spiritual with the material and emphasises the individual's relationship to community.⁶

LAND AND SPIRITUALITY

Aboriginal people's relationship with the land is different to that of other Australians. Aboriginal people have a deep spiritual connection with the land. For an Aboriginal person, relationships are not only with people but also with their environment: the land, the animals, the plants, the skies, the waters, the weather and the spirits.⁷

"The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment and provides for our needs – economic, social and religious. We have human relationships with the land: mother-daughter, son. When the land is taken from us destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it." ⁸

Each clan or language group lives in well-defined areas that it owns according to its own ancestral law. 'Country' is a term often used to describe this area. Religion and land are the key determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, traditions, customs and beliefs.

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For Aboriginal people, land, sea and spirituality are the foundations on which their culture has been built.

In traditional Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) life, it is not only the entire Earth that is held with reverence, it is also the specific country where one was 'dreamed', that is, conceived from Ancestral Spirit, often at a sacred water site where spirits reside awaiting rebirth. This home of their spirit is of fundamental importance to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, for their 'home' or 'country' for the duration of their life is at the location of this conception spirit. Their spirit home is their home.⁹

"Land is very close to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heart and we can actually feel sorry for land, like you would feel sorry for someone who has been hurt."¹⁰

The following diagram depicts how, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, all aspects of life are interconnected through the centrality of land and spirituality.



Source: Originally produced by VACCA and re-published in SNAICC, *Foster their Culture: Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-of-Home Care*, SNAICC, 2008.

THE DREAMTIME

The Aboriginal Dreamtime¹¹ is the part of Aboriginal culture that explains the origins and culture of the land and its people. Aboriginal people have the longest continuous cultural history of any group of people on Earth. Some estimate it to be as old as 65,000 years. Dreamtime is Aboriginal religion and culture.

The Dreamtime contains many parts; it's the story of things that have happened, how the universe came to be, how humans were created, and how the creator expected humans to function within the cosmos.

In the Aboriginal world view, every meaningful activity, event, or life process that occurs at a particular place leaves behind a vibrational residue in the earth, as plants leave an image of themselves as seeds. The shape of the land, the mountains, the rocks, the riverbeds, the waterholes, and its unseen vibrations echo the events that brought that place into creation. Everything in the natural world is a symbolic footprint of the metaphysical beings whose actions created our world. As with a seed, the potency of an earthly location is wedded to the memory of its origin.

Different Aboriginal groups have different Dreamtime stories, but all stories teach aspects that impact on daily life. These stories are passed onto young children through story telling, art, music and ceremonies. Through Dreamtime stories, children's learning is staged. When children are able to fully understand the meanings behind the Dreamtime stories then the stories' relationship with life experiences are explained.



Dreamtime stories teach Aboriginal people the importance of sharing and caring for people of their own community, of nurturing the environment and the significance of the land and creatures therein. Dreamtime stories pass on stories of the history of Aboriginal people and their relationship with the environment and of their connection with their spirituality. The Dreamtime should be treated with the same respect that is given to other religions, beliefs and values.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Aboriginal culture¹² places great emphasis on the importance of social relationships and mutual obligation. People are seen as belonging to their family and clan as well as their traditional land. Aboriginal people will often ask each other when they meet, "Who is your mob?" or "Where are you from?". The focus on social relationships promotes the view that each individual is important as they have a role to play in the community. Accordingly, there is an acceptance of the individual as they are, which includes both their strengths and limitations.

Sharing is a strongly promoted value and it is seen that there is an obligation to share if others are in need. This can include one's home, wages, entitlements and possessions. The sense of family/group ownership rather than individual ownership is prevalent. Material gain is seen as less important than one's obligation to the family and the broader community.

VALUES AND BELIEFS IN MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

Aboriginal people¹³ are part of the broader Australian society. Aboriginal people intermarry and intermingle with other cultural groups. These factors have an impact on Aboriginal people's values, beliefs and culture, as they must straddle very different worlds, which in many cases have conflicting value systems. All Australians have the right to develop and retain their cultural identity – however they define, experience or express it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is living and growing, and continues to make a vital contribution to Australian society.

ABORIGINAL FLAG

The Aboriginal flag is a very important symbol for Aboriginal people. The flag represents cultural resilience, affirmation and identity.





The Aboriginal flag is divided horizontally into equal halves of black (top) and red (bottom), with a yellow circle in the centre. The black symbolizes Aboriginal people and the yellow represents the sun, the constant giver of life. Red depicts the earth and also represents ochre, which is used by Aboriginal people in ceremonies.

The flag was designed by Harold Thomas and was first flown at Victoria Square, Adelaide, on National Aborigines Day on 12 July 1971. It was used later at the tent embassy in Canberra in 1972.

Today the flag has been adopted by all Aboriginal groups and is flown or displayed permanently at Aboriginal centres throughout Australia. In 1995 the Aboriginal flag was formally recognised as a 'flag of Australia' by the Australian Government.

ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Aboriginal culture is strong, diverse and enduring. In many remote and rural communities across Australia, language and knowledge of traditional culture is still very strong, and English can be a person's second, third or fourth language. However, there has been widespread and significant loss of Aboriginal languages along with many important cultural traditions and practices. Today it is estimated that as few as five per cent of Aboriginal people speak an Aboriginal language.

Although many Aboriginal languages are no longer spoken, there are patterns and influences from traditional Aboriginal languages in the way that Aboriginal people speak English. 'Aboriginal English' is the first language or home language of many Aboriginal children throughout Australia. Standard Australian English can at times be an Aboriginal child's second or even third language. This may have a major impact on the child's ability to access school curriculum and the development of literacy skills.

Using Aboriginal English is making a statement about identity. Valuing and respecting someone's use of Aboriginal English indicates to them that you value them, their Aboriginality and their history. It is important that those working with children don't correct or prevent children using Aboriginal English in normal conversation.

Here are some examples of common words:

Aboriginal English	Standard Australian English
camp	home
mob	group
big mob	a lot of
lingo	Aboriginal language
sorry business	ceremony associated with death
gammon	kidding, joking, pretending
solid	fantastic
cheeky	mischievous, aggressive, dangerous

One common Aboriginal English word is *deadly*, which translates as 'really good' in Standard English. Interestingly, this word is spreading from Aboriginal English into general Australian usage, especially among young people.¹⁴



SORRY BUSINESS

In many Aboriginal communities, when there has been an event that involves a significant experience of grief or loss to members of the community, a period of cultural practice and protocols commonly referred to as Sorry Business may be observed.

The most widespread practice of Sorry Business is conducted around the bereavement and funerals for a deceased person. However, in some communities Sorry Business may also be conducted to mark the experience of grief or loss around other circumstances, such as:

- to mourn the loss of connection to land, such as where an application for recognition of Native Title is lost;
- in ceremonies associated with the repatriation of sacred objects and artefacts;
- by members of the Stolen Generation to mourn the loss of their connections to family, land and culture; and
- in various other circumstances.

The observance of Sorry Business in such circumstances is revealing of how in some communities the grief and trauma of the loss of cultural connection or land is experienced as painfully as the loss of a loved one.

BEREAVEMENT AND FUNERALS

Aboriginal people refer to the period of mourning when an Aboriginal person dies as 'Sorry Business'. It is an important period for Aboriginal people, and involves responsibilities and obligations to attend funerals and participate in other cultural events, activities or ceremonies.

In some Aboriginal communities, the extent of obligations to participate in Sorry Business related to bereavement is dictated by the status of the deceased person and a person's kinship to them. It is very important to recognise that in many communities, there is an expectation that funerals involve the whole community and not just the immediate family and friends. Assumptions should not be made about the presumed 'closeness' or relationship of a person to the deceased in appreciating the necessity of their participation in Sorry Business.

Some Aboriginal people can feel significant distress if they are unable to fulfil their Sorry Business obligations, and may require significant support and understanding in this area. Sorry Business can also be distressing due to the fact that there can be many deaths and funerals in some communities, particularly considering average life expectancy and factors leading to high mortality rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

There are a range of protocols and prohibitions involving Sorry Business in different Aboriginal communities. These can involve prohibitions against conducting activities or other 'business' during and after Sorry Business, prohibitions against using the name of the deceased, or against displaying their images or broadcasting their voice. Such prohibitions must be observed and respected by all those working with Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Please see Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols' for further information on Sorry Business prohibitions and protocols, and how they apply to other protocols and activities.



Torres Strait Islander culture

INTRODUCTION

Torres Strait Islanders are Melanesian and part of the Pacific Islander group of kinship-based societies and are one of Australia's Indigenous communities. Approximately 33,300 people identify as of Torres Strait Islander origin and 21,100 identify as of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.¹⁵ However, the figures are uncertain due to the unreliability of the census data. Although Torres Strait Islanders live in all states of Australia, most of the population live on the mainland of Queensland.

Of the 6,000 or so who live in the Torres Strait, between the tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea, approximately half live on Thursday Island and the remainder live on the 14 outer islands in the Strait. Thursday Island is the administrative and commercial centre of the Torres Strait and was established by Europeans as the administrative hub. It has a multi-cultural population of Islanders, Asians and Australians of European origin.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) and the Island Co-ordinating Council (ICC) are the recognised Commonwealth and State peak bodies to be consulted on regional needs.

The Torres Strait Islands are divided into four regions:

- the Eastern Islands, which are volcanic in origin, have rich soil and rise sharply from the sea;
- the Central Islands, which are flat and sandy coral cays;
- the top Western Islands, situated next to the coast of Papua New Guinea, which are low-lying mangrove islands; and
- the Western Islands, which are remnants of the Australian Great Dividing Range and consist of old volcanic rock and scrub vegetation.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES

There are three main languages that are spoken on the islands of the Torres Strait and on the mainland by Torres Strait Islander people. When communicating with those from other islands, Torres Strait Islanders generally use Torres Strait Creole, or Pidgin English, to communicate with each other. Creole is widely used as a language of trade and commerce, and is also widely spoken by Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland. While English is widely understood and taught in the Torres Strait, most Islanders in the region use English as their second or third language.

Kala Lagaw (also known by several other names) is a language spoken on several western Torres Strait Islands. It has the highest speaker population of any Indigenous language within Australian territory, with between 3,000 and 4,000 people speaking the language.

Meriam (also Miriam, Meryam, Mer, Mir, Miriam-Mir, etc. and East Torres) is the language of Meriam people of Murray Island (Mer) in the Torres Strait, Queensland.



TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE

Torres Strait Islander culture places emphasis on the links between the land, the sea and traditional custom and law. In terms of spirituality, the sea is as important as the land in influencing religious practice and custom. Custom and law play a determining role in social, political and economic structures that are hierarchical in nature. The traditional law governed land tenure and justice, and maintained harmony and trade between the islands. Island chiefs are the key leaders of the community and remain so to this day, despite the influence of the missionaries, as many of the church leaders are also island chiefs.¹⁶

TRADITIONAL LIFE

Before the mid-nineteenth century the rhythm of Torres Strait Islanders' lives, their meaning systems, world view, and social processes were relatively autonomous. However, like all cultures, their various cultures were dynamic and accepting of change. Islanders lived in established communities and village life revolved around hunting, fishing, gardening, and trading relationships, with emphases varying according to local conditions. Material life was interwoven with relationships that were conducted in the language of family, kinship, home island, totemism and spirituality.

The universal principles sustaining Torres Strait Islander social structure and relationships were kinship and reciprocity. Ritual, celebration and exchange of gifts were a large part of social and spiritual life. The economy of the Torres Strait was based on subsistence agriculture and collecting food from the sea. Inter-island trading in food, weapons, and artefacts was also a key component of group relationships.

Trade occurred between the Torres Strait and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea and between the Near Western Islands and Cape York. The trading relationship with Papua New Guinea was of vital importance because it was the source of the heavy timber needed to make sailing canoes. Torres Strait Islander traditional life in the pre-contact period was heavily affected by the Papuan influence in terms of trade, social organisation and language.

AFTER COLONISATION

Due to their relative isolation, following European contact, initially by explorers and later by the London Missionary Society in 1871, Torres Strait Islanders remained in their homeland until after World War II, and their culture and traditions remained reasonably intact.

Torres Strait Islanders were able to incorporate Christianity into their existing social organisations, with island chiefs becoming church leaders. The hierarchy that controlled social and religious life adapted their pre-contact mode of operating to the new influences brought by European contact. The overall effect of these two factors has been that Torres Strait Islanders have not experienced the extent of the negative impacts suffered by Aboriginal people, as they were not forcibly removed from their traditional lands.

Although most Torres Strait Islanders have chosen to live on the mainland, they retain a strong connection to their homeland and also retain family traditions and customs.



Nonetheless, colonisation and modern influences have led to changes in Torres Strait Islander culture. Like Aboriginal peoples, Torres Strait Islanders are faced with the challenge of retaining their cultural identity, social systems and practices.

CUSTOMS, CEREMONY AND PROTOCOLS

Ceremonial activities are a significant aspect of Torres Strait Islander peoples' customs and cultural practice. Feasting is also very important to Torres Strait Islander communities, with the whole community getting involved in preparing for a feast.

Whether a Torres Strait Islander person lives on the islands or the mainland, or lives in a city or in a regional town or not, does not determine the extent to which they may observe Torres Strait Islander traditions or customary practice.

Do not assume all Torres Strait Islander people are the same culturally – especially those living on the mainland. Different Torres Strait islands and even different clans or groups on the same island can have different protocols, practices, ceremonies and duties; it is not the same for all Torres Strait Islander people. Always ask to find out what is involved and what is required.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CUSTOMARY PRACTICE AROUND BEREAVEMENT AND FUNERALS

Like Aboriginal culture, Torres Strait Islander culture places great importance on the whole community's involvement in ceremonial activities and protocols around a person's death. For example when there is a bereavement there are very strict grieving protocols. This can include:

- not using the name of a person who has passed away;
- family members remaining in their houses for a period of time when a death in the family has occurred;
- restriction on participating in non-bereavement related activities or events.

For further information see Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols'.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER TOMBSTONE UNVEILING

The tombstone unveiling is a very important Torres Strait Islander ceremony that marks the completion of the tombstone of a deceased loved one. It is usually performed about a year after the loss of a family member, but it depends on the family.

The ceremony marks the final resting place or 'home' for the loved one, and represents the family's final goodbye to their lost family member. The tombstone and gravesite is extensively decorated for the ceremony, and after many days' preparation, the ceremony lasts a whole day and ends with feasting and traditional dancing. There is a big gathering of families to celebrate.

The tombstone unveiling is a solemn occasion, with traditional singing and Christian prayers and hymns, but the rest of the ceremony is a celebration. While it can be a distressing time for the family as they revisit the loss of that loved one, the family is satisfied as they have built the home for the deceased and shown their respect.¹⁷



CUSTOMARY ADOPTION

Customary 'adoption' is a widespread practice that involves all Torres Strait Islander extended families in some way, either as direct participants or as kin to 'adopted' children. It is a significant aspect of Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practice. Further information on Torres Strait Islander customary 'adoption' is available in the section on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families', below.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FLAG

The late Bernard Namok designed the Torres Strait Islander flag. The flag stands for the unity and identity of all Torres Strait Islanders. It features three horizontal coloured stripes, with green at the top and bottom, and blue in between, divided by thin black lines. A white dhari (headdress) sits in the centre, with a five-pointed star underneath it.¹⁸

The colour green is for the land, blue represents the sea, and black stands for the people. The white dhari is a symbol of all Torres Strait Islanders, and the five-pointed star represents the island groups. Used in navigation, the star is also an important



symbol for the seafaring Torres Strait Islander people. The colour white of the star represents peace.

Along with the Aboriginal flag, the Torres Strait Islander flag was also recognised as a 'flag of Australia' by the Australian Government in 1995.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

Family is the cornerstone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, spirituality and identity. As an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child grows up, maintaining their connections to family and community forms the basis of the development of the child's identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, their cultural connectedness and their emerging spirituality.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are strong and powerful. Family provides valuable social capital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Family is often more broadly defined within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture than within white culture. Those involved in children's lives, and helping to raise them, commonly include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, and members of the community who are considered to be family. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are often larger than non-Indigenous families and provide connections that are a great strength for children and other family members.¹⁹

"Although Indigenous families are daily living with the legacy of dispossession and continuing oppression in terms of poor health, early deaths, poor housing, poor educational outcomes, high unemployment and high numbers of Indigenous



people in custody, the Indigenous family continues to survive as a site of Indigenous culture and identity. This is highly significant in the light of sustained assaults on its existence and demonstrates the strengths of Indigenous communities in spite of the devastating impact of colonisation.”²⁰

“Aboriginal families are pivotal to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and their culture and survival. Families are also important in defining identity and a sense of connectedness to kinship and culture. In turn, a feeling of spiritual and cultural belonging will strengthen the family.”²¹

SNAPSHOT



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households

- The characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are different from the majority of Australian households – they tend to be larger, non-nuclear and more fluid in composition. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have overlapping and extensive kinship networks, with both adults and children commonly moving between different households.
- 76 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are single family households as compared with 71 per cent of non-Indigenous households
- Of these single-family households, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are three times more likely than non-Indigenous ones to be single-parent families with dependent children or students.
- However, more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander than non-Indigenous households are multi-family households (5 per cent compared with 1 per cent).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are equally likely with non-Indigenous households to be couples with dependent children (37 per cent).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are also comparatively younger than non-Indigenous families – the median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers who gave birth in 2001–2004 was 25 years, compared to 30 years for non-Indigenous mothers.²²

FAMILY AND KINSHIP – THE CORE OF COMMUNITIES

“Our family is the place where we learn how to live, how to behave, how to respect people and to respect everything around us.”²³

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have communities that are built on strong cross-generational relationships and on having access to well-developed kinship networks. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families today still have strong functional kinship networks in place, built on key people who play different roles but hold overall authority and responsibility for the upbringing and overall well-being of



children and young people. Even in urban communities, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families maintain very close contact with the families and members of their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a complex system of family relations. Extended family relationships are the core of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems that are central to the way culture is passed on and society is organised. The kinship system is a feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social organisation and family relationships. It is a complex system that determines how people relate to each other and their roles, responsibilities and obligations in relation to one another, to ceremonial business and to land. These systems vary across Australia.

Kinship systems define where a person fits in to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, binding people together in relationships of sharing and mutual obligation. Kinship defines roles and responsibilities for raising and educating children, and structures systems of moral and financial support within the community. People living in a traditional setting understand things like the 'right skin' and the relationships similar to this, but people living in less 'traditional settings' may not know this information. The kinship system is a complex system and often it is the Elders or grandparents within the family who hold this knowledge in its entirety. Often there are ways of accessing it, such as by speaking to persons 'identified' within the community or family.

Relationships within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are understood as a way of including people in 'parenting' a child rather than distinct roles. Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family practices have strict rules and laws for people to live by. The keeping of the laws provides the family group with a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Past government policies of assimilation that included removing children from their families and preventing people from remaining in their communities curtailed the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures have never disappeared.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are cut off from their family, culture and spirituality are at great risk of psychological, health, developmental and educational disadvantage. They suffer as children and later as adults from the grief and loneliness of not belonging. They are also being denied their rights as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ABORIGINAL FAMILY STRUCTURES*

One aim of parenting for Aboriginal people is to let the child know who they are in relationship to their family, their kin, their people, their environment and the living spirits of their ancestors and land. These relationships define a child's identity by defining how they are connected to everything in life.

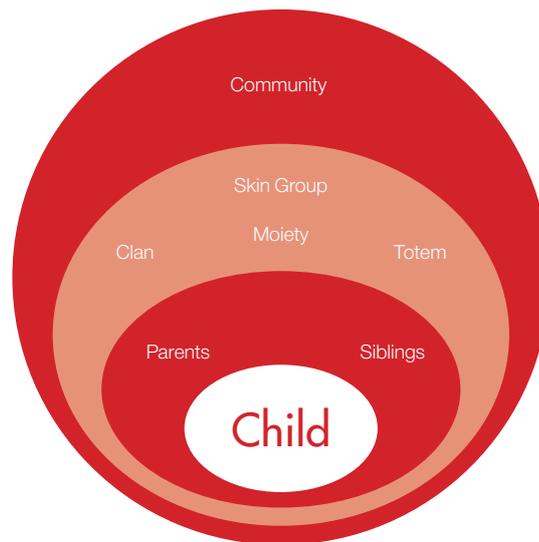
"There are a number of important differences in the ways that Aboriginal families interact compared with non-Aboriginal families. Some of these differences need to be understood within a historical and cultural context. It is important not to view these differences as deficits in family functioning and family relationships

* This section comprises edited extracts from material originally produced by VACCA and previously re-published by SNAICC, used with permission.



or parenting styles, but rather as culturally specific issues that are influenced by history, geography and experiences.”²⁴

The diagram below shows key features of a traditional family structure. These structures are still strictly adhered to in some communities, particularly in remote communities, and have ongoing importance for all Aboriginal families. In other (particularly urban) communities, strong kinship connections and networks – while not necessarily corresponding strictly to these traditional structures – are nonetheless the cornerstone of communities.²⁵



Source: Originally produced by VACCA and re-published in SNAICC, *Foster their Culture: Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-of-Home Care*, SNAICC, 2008.

SKIN GROUP

In many Aboriginal communities there are a number of skin groups within language groups, and all people in these communities are born with a skin name. Skin groups govern social behaviour and interaction, determining those whom individuals can and cannot talk to, marry and trade with, as well as identifying their natural enemies. These practices are particularly observed in remote communities in parts of the Northern Territory.

MOIETY (MOI-ETY)

As well as skin groups, in some communities all people belong to one of two basic divisions, or moieties. Children belong to the same moiety as their father; their mother belongs to the other moiety. Everything – spirit beings, plant and animal species, clan groups, areas of land and water – belong to one of these moieties. Within each moiety, people belong to smaller groups called clans.

TOTEM

For Aboriginal people, the ‘totem’ is a non-human species or phenomenon that stands for, or represents, the group. Aboriginal peoples’ ‘totems’ link people or groups through their physical and kin relatedness.



Totem relationships are embedded in a view of the world in which connectivity is the foundation of all life. In some areas totems represent individuals and groups in a broader social context. Examples include the Owl and the Possum.

CLAN

A clan usually consists of two or more family groups that share an area of land over which they have ownership. Clan boundaries are passed from one generation to the next, generally through the father.

CHILDREN

Children have a special place within family and community. Where they are born signifies connection to the land and/or sea. It identifies a child's relationship and responsibilities to law and culture, and establishes certain obligations and responsibilities according to traditional Aboriginal law. Today, many Aboriginal children are born 'outside' their country. It is their relationship and identity with their language group that gives a child the connection to their country.

Children are taught about the importance of a kinship structure. It is usually close relatives who will guide and support them from the early years, through the transition from teenager to life as an adult with their own family. Children without able parents are often accepted and cared for by others of the original family group and/or by other members of their clan group.

Today, Aboriginal communities see children as central to the life and culture of the community. In many respects, the role of children in these communities remains unchanged.

PARENTS

An Aboriginal child's identity is determined by their parents. A child is born into their tribal/clan practices, customs and law. In traditional Aboriginal communities, this may determine who they can marry and what they can eat, and identifies the part of the country for which they are responsible. This also includes their religious practices and laws to abide by. The child's kinship system determines this.

Aboriginal parents play the central role in the cultural, social and spiritual development of their children. It is understood that to 'parent' a child means to help the spirit of the child emerge as the child grows and experiences life. Although traditional aspects of child-rearing practice have changed with the impact of colonisation, most Aboriginal parents impart their understanding of culture to their children and maintain their kinship networks.

MOTHERS AND AUNTIES

In some communities, the mother's sisters (aunties) are also considered as the child's mothers. This practice is very strong in some communities. The mother's cousins are also considered sisters in some families and have a role in raising the children. The relationships, roles and responsibilities of extended family members will be different in each family.

The aunties have an obligation to support the mother in the raising of her child. The mother is the main carer for the child, but grandmothers, aunties and older siblings also share the responsibility for caring for and raising the child. Grandmothers and



aunties have responsibility for passing on traditional knowledge to girls. In some families, members of the extended family have more authority to make decisions concerning the child – this depends on the dynamics of the family.

Mothers, grandmothers and aunties also have responsibilities to teach male babies and young boys respect for women. In some, particularly remote, communities, they also teach basic hunting techniques such as tracking small animals and knowing which types of plant foods are edible.

Women's major responsibilities in child rearing have been to teach young girls important cultural information about being a woman, such as their spiritual and social well-being, ancestral laws, information on how to care for land and information on fertility and child rearing. Traditionally, a young girl learns from older women how to track and hunt small animals, traditional methods of cooking and fishing and how to collect and treat edible plants for food and medicinal use. For example, in some communities girls are taught skills in basket weaving and how to make clothing such as possum skin cloaks.

Today, traditional family child rearing structures and practices continue to varying extents despite the disconnection from land that has occurred since colonisation. The traditional interchangeable roles of mothers and aunties remain strong in many Aboriginal families, irrespective of where they live.

FATHERS AND UNCLES

The father's main role is as the protector and provider for the family. The father also has responsibility for maintaining discipline as required. Fathers may also indulge their children; they will carry their small children about visiting others, feed them, talk and sing to them and entertain them with stories and teasing. The father's brothers (uncles) play an active and recognised role and are also considered the child's fathers in some communities. While men spend less time with their daughters, the relationship is still strong and affectionate.

The uncles are required to help with raising the child, especially in the case of a young boy. There is also the passing of traditional knowledge to boys by their fathers and uncles. When boys reach a certain age and maturity, older men are responsible for training them to become men as providers and protectors of the family and clan. In remote communities, initiation ceremonies formalise this process.

Traditionally, a young boy also learns from older men how to hunt large animals such as kangaroo and emu. He will also be taught how to prepare the animals for cooking, fishing techniques, how to build a shelter and where to find water supplies. Men in traditional days, and in some communities today, would hunt for many days, and Aboriginal peoples' existence would rely heavily on the combined role of men and women in providing food. These practices are still maintained and passed on to boys in some, particularly remote, communities.

Aboriginal men have a specific role in the process of a boy's transition to manhood, and this is a very significant time for all. While it is a time for serious business, celebration as dance and song are part of the ceremony. In traditional culture, playing the didgeridoo is ceremonial and not for recreation, although the didgeridoo is often played outside of ceremonial occasions today. It is still highly offensive to Aboriginal people for women to play the didgeridoo.



Today, the interchangeable roles of fathers and uncles remain strong in many Aboriginal families, and many fathers and uncles take time to impart aspects of Aboriginal culture to their boys. However, it is clear that for many Aboriginal communities, the traditional roles of men have changed through the effects of colonisation.

GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents are very important people in the life of an Aboriginal family. They are the teachers of culture and traditional law, and are accorded a place of respect by all family and clan members. Children spend a great deal of time with their grandparents learning cultural knowledge and being cared for. Grandfathers and grandmothers often fill the role of 'boss' or protector for a child. Grandparents are sometimes required to perform certain ceremonies over a baby, particularly if the child is weak or sick. Grandparents also care for children when the mother or father are away, including when the mother is having a baby. Older children assist their grandparents with physical work and in looking after younger siblings.

Grandparents continue to be seen as respected and important members of the family. Today's Aboriginal grandparents have critical roles in imparting culture, particularly through storytelling, and in assisting parents in the raising of their children. However, one of the key issues faced by Aboriginal communities since colonisation is the shorter life span of Aboriginal Elders, which impacts on child-rearing practices.

COUSINS

In some Aboriginal languages there is no word for cousins. Cousins are often referred to as brothers or sisters. Children will refer to their older cousins as brothers or sisters. This mixed group of siblings and cousins form the peer group for the child and are the most significant influence in their daily life. The peer group is mainly made up of siblings and cousins as well as some outside their kinship structure.

Within this group a child is able to test his/her independence and develop within a caring structure. Often this group will be either all boys or all girls, and will be the same peer group all throughout their adult life.

Today, cousins continue to be important members of an Aboriginal child's peer group. While they may have a wider group of friends, Aboriginal children are still very closely connected with their cousins.

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

It is not only the Elders to whom a child is related who are respected, but also Elders within the larger clan, language group or community. The whole community holds these Elders in high regard. Elders also play an important part in a child's life through teaching, guidance and passing down traditional knowledge. Close family friends also known to the children and their parents, such as a father's or mother's best friend, play a significant role in the life of an Aboriginal child.

Today Aboriginal people still have a strong commitment to family. Families are still guided by Elders – either community Elders (people who have lived in the area for a long time and are respected community participants) or traditional Elders (people who are descendents of the area and are active in community issues).



“Children are the responsibility of the entire family rather than the biological parents alone. Many Aboriginal people have been ‘grown up’ by members of the family other than their biological mother and father and this practice of growing up children is still very widespread today... As a result of the children being encouraged to think and have responsibility at a very early age, they have a large degree of autonomy”.²⁶

Some families follow their kinship obligations quite strictly while others live according to a combination of western and traditional kinship values. Individuals who are not blood or language related may be considered family and have a role to play through their kinship relationships.

The dynamics and relationships within Aboriginal families will differ. It is good practice to ask the family how they manage rather than making assumptions based on the colour of their skin, their environment or lifestyle.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILD REARING PRACTICES

‘ADOPTION’ PRACTICES OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS

Customary ‘adoption’²⁷ is a widespread practice that involves all Torres Strait Islander extended families in some way, either as direct participants or as kin to ‘adopted’ children. One of the most significant differences in terms of child rearing practices between Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal peoples is customary ‘adoption’, which is a feature of Torres Strait Islander communities.

‘Adoption’ takes place between relatives and close friends where bonds of trust have already been established. Some of the reasons for the widespread nature of ‘adoption’ include:

- To maintain the family bloodline by adopting (usually) a male child from a relative. This is linked to the inheritance of traditional land in the islands.
- To keep the family name by adopting a male child from a relative or close friend into the family.
- To give a family who cannot have a child due to infertility the joy of raising a child. A married couple may give a child to either a single person or another couple. ‘Relinquishment’ is not restricted to single parents.
- To strengthen alliances and bonds between the two families concerned.
- To distribute boys and girls more evenly between families who may only have children of one sex.
- To replace a child who had been adopted out to another family – this may occur within extended families.
- To replace a child into the family once a woman has left home so that the grandparents would still have someone to care for.

The most common way for an ‘adoption’ to be arranged is for a promise to be made while a woman is pregnant for the child she is carrying to be adopted by another family on the child’s birth. There are other circumstances and customs under which children are adopted into other families.

The underlying principle of Torres Strait Islander ‘adoption’ is that giving birth to a child is not necessarily a reason to be raising the child. The issue of who rears a child depends on a number of social factors, such as those listed above, and is a matter of



individual consideration by the families involved. Children are never lost to the family of origin, as they are usually placed with relatives somewhere in the family network.

The main characteristics of Torres Strait Islander 'adoption' are:

- It provides a sense of stability to the social order and is seen as having a useful social function
- It is characterised by the notions of reciprocity and obligation between the families involved
- It generally occurs within the wider network of the extended family and carries with it the intention of permanency
- It occurs frequently but can have an element of instability and fragility sometimes leading to its dissolution
- The arrangements for the care of the child are usually made between the birth parent(s) and the receiving parent(s) during the course of the pregnancy.

Unfortunately, government policies affecting Torres Strait Islander children and families have not always respected traditional adoption practices. Today, Torres Strait Islanders are seeking greater recognition of customary practices in child protection policy.

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CHAPTER 2:

The Social Context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and Families

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter introduces the social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to allow readers to understand:

- the profound and continuing impact of the history of colonisation and dispossession on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- the impact of past government policies such as the removal of children from their families and communities (Stolen Generations) and the effects on cultural identity and parenting;
- the significance of unresolved grief and loss, including intergenerational trauma, in the community;
- the importance of a holistic, strengths-based approach to social and emotional well-being;
- the significance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities response to their own situation through land rights and self-determination movements and the importance of community-controlled organisations in meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the 40,000 years of a living culture thriving and growing on this continent, the relatively recent history of colonisation has had a disproportional impact on the lives and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The last two hundred years and more, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were dispossessed of their land, livelihoods, families, communities, languages and culture, has had a devastating effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – both psychologically and spiritually.

The continuing impact of the effects of colonisation, dispossession, injustice and racism – leading to significant levels of disadvantage in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community – cannot be underestimated.



"...[the] dispossession of land and culture; breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law; racism and vilifications, economic exclusion and entrenched poverty; breakdown of gender roles; intergenerational effects of institutionalisation, racism, oppression and child removal policies, have resulted in ongoing trauma, loss and unresolved grief, alcohol and drug abuse and a range of other health and well being problems and issues, including violence".¹

It is important to appreciate how this history does not only refer to things that existed in the past. It continues to have lingering and traumatic affects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities today.

"To understand issues affecting Aboriginal people today, it is not only a matter of knowing the past but appreciating its impact on the present and the future."²

This history has also been one of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's resistance of the impacts of colonisation on their communities, families and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures have, to varying degrees, survived and adapted to colonisation.

"As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we have, since invasion, defied our oppression and found meaning in our resilience and our resistance. The battles fought, the bodies broken by dispossession, the so-called protection, assimilation, and the separation of families have bloodied us but never defeated us."³

SNAPSHOT



- The gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians is approximately 17 years.
- The infant mortality rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants is three times higher than for non-Indigenous Australians.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are twice as likely as non-Indigenous adults to report high or very high levels of psychological distress. They are also more likely to be hospitalised for mental health matters.
- Unemployment amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2006 was three times higher than for non-Indigenous people (16 per cent compared with 5 per cent)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are half as likely to complete Year 12 as non-Indigenous people.⁴



LAND DISPOSSESSION

British colonisation of the land and the spread of settlement across the continent led to the dispossession of Aboriginal people, and later Torres Strait Islander people, from their lands, their livelihoods and places of cultural connection. Land dispossession meant the loss of crucial sources of food, water, bush medicine and safety and shelter – the practical connections to the land – with profound and continuing detrimental effects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The British used the principle of *terra nullius* (land without owners) as the legal framework for their occupation of the land. This was in direct contravention of the international legal principle of *terra nullius* that the land should belong to no one. This principle later formed the basis of Australian common law relating to land ownership.⁵

While the colonisers acknowledged the presence of Aboriginal people on the continent, they generally did not accept or believe that they had concrete or abiding relationships with the land, or had a social or political structure that colonial officials could negotiate with.⁶ This can be attributed largely to colonial economic and political motivations paired with European cultural attitudes about land ownership and industry, but also the colonisers' inability to appreciate the direct evidence before their eyes of the continuing relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their land.⁷

“Colonisation created the conditions for social and economic dysfunction, causing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households and economies to become fragmented. The economy was changed by land being cleared for the use of sheep and cattle and crops.”⁸

Increasing settlement saw the influx of livestock, with fences being built that cut off Aboriginal people from their traditional hunting grounds. Conflict between colonisers and Aboriginal people over livestock and land alienation grew increasingly violent, resulting in whole communities of Aboriginal people suffering greatly from violent attacks, reprisals and expulsion from the land.

Just as importantly, land dispossession also destabilised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural and spiritual connections to the land. Access to ancestor and Dreamtime story locations and places of ceremony, burial, birthing, conception and social gathering were disrupted, and communal and individual obligations to care for country were compromised.

MISSIONS

As Aboriginal people were driven from their lands, murdered and otherwise threatened by encroaching white settlements, they were increasingly isolated on missions where nearly every aspect of their lives came under stringent control and supervision of the mission managers. This control often included who Aboriginal people could see, who they could marry, how they could spend their money or use their rations, and when they could leave the missions and for what purpose. Most missions also tried to prevent Aboriginal people from practising their traditions, speaking in Aboriginal languages and observing their customary obligations. In short, missions tried to stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increasingly defied the authority of the mission managers with many leaving the stringent control of the missions, establishing new communities and moving to urban centres. In these new communities, resilient family structures, kinship lines and cultural practices continue to survive – including in urban settings.

LANGUAGE

At the time of colonisation, there were over 500 different Aboriginal languages and dialects spoken in Australia. Now there are fewer than 250 still in use. One of the major practices of colonists was to stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speaking their own languages, which interrupted the passing of language from one generation to another.

Today, many Aboriginal languages are no longer spoken as a first language; but they do live on through individual words and through varieties of Aboriginal English, which incorporate the structures of Aboriginal languages.⁹

Torres Strait Islander communities, whether on the islands or the mainland, still use their languages to varying extents, while extensively using the Torres Strait Islander Creole that draws deeply on Torres Strait Islander languages.

THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (the Stolen Generations) from their families, communities, land and heritage is of special relevance. No family was unaffected by these policies and many were devastated by them.

“With several generations of Indigenous people being denied normal childhood development, the opportunity to bond with parents and experience consistent love and acceptance, both the skills and the confidence to parent have been damaged, with over-representation in the child welfare system”.¹⁰

In 1997, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families tabled its report, *Bringing Them Home*,¹¹ in the Australian Parliament. The report highlighted the devastation of child removal not only on the children and on their families but also on the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The past forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by child and welfare services and government bodies occurred on a large scale. For those who were removed and their families and communities, removal meant “the severing of family ties, the rupturing of community and culture”¹². It has had a profound and prolonged impact on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The grief, dislocation and despair experienced by the Stolen Generations and the grief and loss of their families remains unhealed and has had terrible effects on children and families that have passed from one generation to the next, a situation that has been recognised as ‘multigenerational trauma’.

Considering that the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report identified the high rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care as a major concern and that reducing this rate should be a priority for all Australian jurisdictions, it



remains a continuing concern that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are still increasingly over-represented in the child protection system.¹³ This is an issue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations first began to alert the community to in the 1970s and 1980s, as they began organising to stem the tide of contemporary child removals, and continue to address to this day.

The formal National Apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the national parliament to the Stolen Generations and their families on 13 February 2008 recognised the anguish the Stolen Generations have experienced and offered them significant comfort. With the dignity of the occasion, it gave acknowledgement to, and respect for, the Stolen Generations' experiences and offered hope and a promise of future renewal for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

"Acknowledging what happened in the past, and saying sorry, is crucial to the healing that is needed – not only for members of the Stolen Generations, but for the whole community."¹⁴



TIP:

Demonstrate your organisation's support for the 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations. For example, you can display a poster of the text of the National Apology. Contact Reconciliation Australia for details.

Consider whether your service is part of an organisation, including possibly a church-based organisation, that has a history of involvement in the removal policies and practices that led to the Stolen Generations. This may affect whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can trust or approach your organisation, use its services or attend your organisation's premises to use the services.

- An outreach service can take your organisation's services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a location they trust.
- If an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander client is a member of the Stolen Generations, or is a family member of someone who was removed, what Stolen Generations support services can they access?
- Can your service work or network with and complement any other Stolen Generations support, healing or therapeutic service available to the client (such as Bringing Them Home workers)?

Find out what your organisation has done to address this issue. Has it pursued a path of reconciliation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and members of the Stolen Generations, such as in 'Sorry' and similar activities? Many organisations passed policies and made public apologies after the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report.



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher rates of risk factors for mental health and social and well-being problems than other Australians and these issues negatively affect their quality of life. Unique aspects of this experience include higher rates of exposure to grief, loss and trauma that is experienced collectively, not just individually. The social determinants of health and well-being – poverty, education, housing, employment, social welfare, racism and access to land, for example – also have a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s social and emotional well-being.¹⁵

“Issues of mental health and wellbeing cover a broad range of problems which can result from domestic violence, substance misuse, physical health problems, imprisonment, family breakdown and social disadvantage. For Indigenous people, there are also broader social and historic issues, such as forced separation or forced relocation, which influence mental health and wellbeing.”¹⁶

Many statistical reporting mechanisms by health agencies and governments have concentrated on health statistics rather than on the overall well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

However the policy document *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework: National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Mental Health and Social and Wellbeing (2004–2009)*¹⁷ is one example of a relevant national policy framework for community services working in the areas of social and emotional well-being. It enhances better understanding of social and emotional well-being while highlighting the important role and contribution that mainstream services can make to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

SNAPSHOT



In 2004–05, 27 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had experienced a high to very high level of psychological distress, compared with 13 per cent of non-Indigenous adults.

From 2001–02 to 2004–05, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had higher rates of hospitalisation for mental and behaviour-related disorders than non-Indigenous people.

71 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported being happy all or most of the time while 56 per cent reported feeling calm or peaceful all or most of the time.¹⁸

GRIEF, LOSS AND TRAUMA

Grief, loss and trauma are human experiences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience sadness, anger, confusion and similar emotions as any other group of people when dealing with grief. The repeated losses and injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since European colonisation have contributed to their psychological, social and economic status today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lost their land, language, aspects of their culture, and



many children – the Stolen Generations – and have suffered major disruptions to their kinship system.¹⁹

Children and adults forbidden to use their language or practise traditional rituals can experience grief that is as intense as loss of a loved one. These losses have become detrimental to the social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultural beliefs, concepts, understandings and practices for over two hundred years.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

The past trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced can have consequences across generations as adults' unresolved trauma is 'passed onto' their children.²⁰

"Trauma can interrupt not only a moment in time, or a lifetime, but can also pervade through generations. It can create a dynasty of trauma."²¹

Intergenerational trauma is best understood as "trauma passed down directly from one generation to the next," also referred to in some literature as multigenerational trauma. Transgenerational trauma is that which is "transmitted across a number of generations".²²

The whole notion of intergenerational (or multigenerational) trauma for members of the Stolen Generations is based on the notion of 'attachment theory'. Children are not born as 'blank slates' but with their own temperament and neurological make-up. Early life experiences determine how genetic potential is expressed or not.

Research in recent years shows that 'templates' are laid down in these early years, setting the pattern for the process of childhood development, which in turn influences the foundations of a healthy adulthood.²³ A child's experiences and environment affect the development of their templates. If a child's world is safe, predictable and cognitively stimulating then a child will effectively engage as a member of their family, community and society. If a child's world is "chaotic, threatening and devoid of kind words and supportive relationships, a child may become impulsive, aggressive, inattentive, and have difficulties with relationships".²⁴

Because children of the Stolen Generations were removed from their parents and community at a crucial time of child development, every sense of trust, identity, intimacy and competency in their young lives was compromised. Institutional care on missions and other such environments did not provide an adequate model of 'what to do to be cared for'. It is not surprising that without this crucial modelling and positive parenting experiences, the legacy for future generations is fraught with difficulties in their parenting styles for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who were removed from families and communities.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the historical losses that people have experienced are not simply historical events with little relevance to their lives today. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people grieve the loss of land, culture and roles, and kinship disruptions as current losses that still require mourning. Families were deeply affected by the impact of the policies of child removal and the other restrictions on cultural practice, but many families today continue to speak their language and their ties to the land are strong, particularly in remote areas.



The *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework* identified the following factors as contributing to higher risk and to higher rates of grief, loss and trauma:

- Erosion of protective family and community structures also affected by past policies of forced separation of children from their families
- On-going experience of social disadvantage and social exclusion
- Frequent deaths within kinship structures due to earlier average age at death, higher infant mortality and higher rates of deaths of young people due to suicide, self-harm, injury and violence
- Ongoing higher rates of removal of children by government authorities or within kinship structures
- Higher rates of imprisonment of both adults and young people and deaths in custody
- Higher rates of community violence and injuries.²⁵

Mental health and social and emotional well-being problems share risk factors exacerbating suicide, crime, violence, substance use, injury and chronic disease. These problems compound each other and contribute to ongoing cycles of crises, grief, loss and trauma in individuals, families and communities.



TIP:

Take a holistic approach in working to support the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recognise the wider context of unresolved trauma; approaches that focus on specific issues in isolation, such as gambling, alcohol and other substance use, financial difficulties, or even family violence, can have limited success without effort to address the wider context of unresolved trauma.

Consider to what extent you are only dealing with the symptoms, rather than significant underlying issues.

WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

At 65 years, life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females was about 17 years shorter than all Australian women. In 2001–2005, the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were 'diseases of the circulatory system' (which includes heart attacks and strokes).²⁶

Diabetes was a leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged between 35 and 54, being 37 times higher than those of other women in the Australian population.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females have higher fertility than non-Indigenous women, having 2 babies compared to 1.8 in the non-Indigenous population. They also give birth at a younger age, with the median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, at 25 years, being 5 years younger than the median age of non-Indigenous mothers. Furthermore, approximately 23 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres



Strait Islander females who gave birth were aged less than 20 years, compared with 4 per cent of non-Indigenous females.

MEN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Past government policies and practices, such as forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from traditional lands, removing children from their families and imposing non-Indigenous cultural practices on communities, have had greatly negative consequences for the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. This situation has ultimately also affected the roles of men in families.

Complex contemporary challenges including lack of employment, poor levels of educational attainment, economic disadvantage and racism have also resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men feeling disempowered and devalued. In some instances, the relatively rapidly changing role of men in communities can be an attributing factor to high levels of grief and unresolved trauma.

The high rates of incarceration and substance abuse can be considered indicators of the way in which men have handled their grief and trauma as well as the broader complexities associated with entrenched socio-economic disadvantage.²⁷

One of the most salient indicators of the situation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men face is the fact that they die 20 years earlier than non-Indigenous men.²⁸

YOUTH HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is younger than the non-Indigenous population, with more young people and smaller proportions of older people. The median age of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at 30 June 2006 was 21 years, compared to 37 years for the non-Indigenous population.²⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are over-represented in the justice system, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth under 'juvenile justice supervision' at a rate of 44 per thousand, compared with three per thousand for other Australian youth.³⁰ Meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are poorly represented in employment and further education.³¹

Transgenerational trauma and systemic issues affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people today. While not exhaustive, this includes homelessness, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, and petrol sniffing.

CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Infant mortality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants is three times that of other Australian infants, while 13 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants are of low birth weight.³²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are still over-represented in the child protection system, with more subject to substantiation and being placed in out-of-home care than other Australian children. They are six times more likely to be the subject of substantiation under the child protection system than other children, and are over seven times more likely to be placed on a care and protection order than non-Indigenous children³³. (Substantiation in most jurisdictions indicates where a report of concerns of a child's welfare to state or territory child protection authorities leads to an investigation and involvement by the authority.)



This is an area where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations are continuing to work, with child protection agencies, to support families and communities to preserve the safety and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and safeguard their continued connection to their culture, communities and families (see the section below on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare services'.)

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WACHS), one of the most comprehensive surveys of Aboriginal children's health and well-being in the country, found that in Western Australia in 2001 and 2002, "over one in five Aboriginal children aged 0–17 years were living in families where 7 to 14 major life stress events, such as death, imprisonment, violence and severe hardship, had occurred in the 12 months prior to the survey". Such 'life stress events' are identified as the "factor most strongly associated with high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties in Aboriginal children."³⁴

However, strong connections to culture, positive cultural identity, strong traditional family bonds and living with traditional ways of life in remote communities are important sources of strength for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These can be powerful preventative factors ensuring their health and well-being. For instance, the WACHS found that Aboriginal children living in remote communities had better mental health than those living in Perth, suggesting that "growing up in very remote communities, where adherence to traditional culture and ways of life are strongest, may be protective against emotional and behavioural difficulties in Aboriginal children".³⁵

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child who has the opportunity to allow his or her culture, identity and spirituality to develop and emerge during childhood has a sense of strength, confidence, pride, belonging, peace and security that has the potential to guide and protect him or her through adolescence and adulthood.³⁶

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Response

LAND RIGHTS

Land rights have been a core issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the first moments of European colonisation. There have been various struggles and movements for land rights over many years, including the iconic land rights campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond. Central to these struggles has been the recognition that securing land rights is instrumental to addressing the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' dispossession from their land, and that land rights are a central aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. It also recognises the importance of the relationship to land in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and spirituality. Some of the most nationally significant struggles for land rights include, for example, the Gurindji/Wave Hill Walk-off and the *Mabo* Native Title decision overturning the doctrine of *terra nullius*.

In August 1966 Vincent Lingiari led Aboriginal workers at Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory to walk off the station in protest against work and pay conditions (an action also known as the Gurindji strike) leading to the campaign to have Gurindji traditional land returned. Many years' struggle later, in 1975, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured sand into Vincent Lingiari's hands to symbolise handing back control and rights of the land of Wave Hill Station to the Gurindji Aboriginal people. The next



year, the federal government passed the breakthrough *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, 1976*. This was the first of the Aboriginal Land Rights Acts the federal government was to pass.

In the 1980s, the late Mr Eddie Mabo and fellow Murray Islanders David Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Salee undertook a court case for native title to the Murray Islands within the Torres Strait. After a long and arduous legal campaign, the High Court made a landmark judgement on 3 June 1992 in favour of Eddie Mabo and his co-plaintiffs that overturned the legal fiction that Australia was *terra nullius* at colonisation, and recognised the pre-existing native title rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to campaign for land rights, including through recognition of Native Title and seeking the self-determining rights to manage and control land in conjunction with other bodies.



TIP:

It is important to respect and observe any protocols around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's land rights, especially in the context of community self-management of lands and when visiting communities in remote, and some regional, areas.

When visiting remote communities, contact the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled council, cooperative, or other relevant community organisation to find out if you need permission or a permit to enter the land before you visit.

It is also important to ensure that a local organisation knows you are coming and the purpose of your visit in their community. See further information in Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols'.

SELF DETERMINATION

The development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based organisations has been an important part of the response of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to colonisation. Through these organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been able to express their collective will, advocate for their rights and needs, develop services and programs for their families and maintain their cultural traditions. Organisations have been developed at the local community, regional, state, territory and national level. Often local level organisations have formed out of the energy of extensive family, clan and kinship networks with some alignment to cultural and language groups reflecting ongoing connections to country, land and sea.

With the development of the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (1976) providing a legal framework for the establishment of Aboriginal Corporations, the number and breadth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based organisations accelerated rapidly. As part of a philosophical federal government commitment to self-determination, these organisations were used to provide the local



infrastructure through which government-funded primary health, child and family welfare, childcare, early childhood, education, housing and legal services could be delivered.

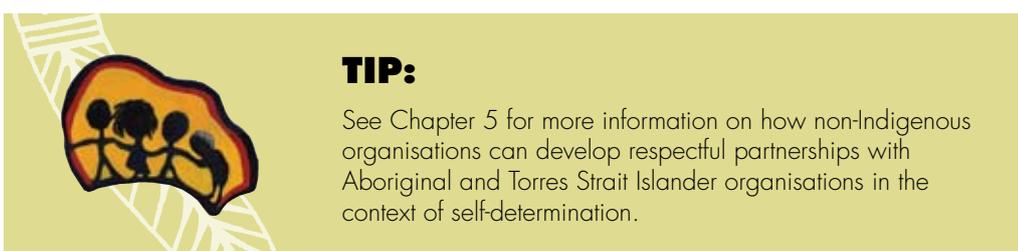
It can be reasonably argued that this developing service infrastructure was largely unplanned and poorly coordinated, in part due to the bottom-up nature of its development. It is also apparent that many governments did not allocate adequate resources to enable self-determination. There was little thought put into building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to exercise their self-determination.

For example, after some rapid expansion of child and family welfare services in the early 1980s, the number, size and scope of these services has largely stagnated for the past two decades, yet they are expected to deal “with the fallout of generations of family poverty and disadvantage, the forced removal of children and child neglect.”³⁷

“Self-determination became an ‘out’ for governments as they hand-passed responsibility for children’s welfare from state institutions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations. In a short period we went from governments assuming they had all the responsibility for the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to assuming they had no responsibility for their welfare.”³⁸

In other sectors, such as housing, some regions have produced large numbers of relatively small Aboriginal housing organisations each competing for government investment and seeking to service the same region. This competition for scarce resources has often exacerbated local community tensions.

Arising from this situation has been an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based service system that – while being somewhat fractured and under-resourced – has nonetheless continued to work valiantly in providing assistance and service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and supported the capacity of communities and families to pursue their self-determination and aspirations.



TIP:

See Chapter 5 for more information on how non-Indigenous organisations can develop respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the context of self-determination.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED ORGANISATIONS

Some of the first Aboriginal organisations advocating for the rights and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples emerged from the 1930s, while the contemporary movement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control of their community’s affairs took shape with the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in the 1970s.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are diverse. They differ in their respective histories, experiences, relationships with government and service providers;



whether they are in a remote, regional or metropolitan setting; within and between states and territories and in their roles and range of services provided as well as their operational capacities.

There are a large number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) across the country and there are also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations focusing on legal/justice issues, sport, recreation, theatre, education, child welfare, early childhood, housing, youth and so on. Community organisations are a very important part of community life. Developing and maintaining strategies for positive relationships between non-Indigenous services and relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations is vital – as indicated in the following chapters of this resource.

“Community control is about self-determination, reconciliation and providing culturally appropriate services. But it is also more than that; it is about cultural history, cultural identity and having a ‘place’ to identify with.”³⁹

While most community-controlled organisations are identified as Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, they are intended for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the state or territory. In Queensland, community-controlled services are identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services or organisations – a recognition of the large Torres Strait Islander population in that state and their Indigenous status. There are also a number of Torres Strait Islanders-specific community-controlled organisations.



TIP:

There are also a number of national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations particularly relevant to Family Relationship Services, including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Organisations (NACCHO) and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC).

These organisations provide leadership, policy direction and advocacy as well as support capacity building in their respective sectors.

HEALTH

Health has been a major focus of the earliest efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations through the provision of primary, secondary or tertiary health services, or prevention and health promotion initiatives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in health services is a key to shaping service delivery to meet the needs of the local communities they serve.

Known variously as Aboriginal Medical Services, Aboriginal and Islander Health Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services (depending on state and location), or generically as Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), these services deliver holistic and culturally appropriate care to people in their communities. They fulfil the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to have control of their health services and meet the



health needs of their communities on their own terms. In addition to medical services, many provide a range of services in aged care and disability, housing, drug and alcohol management, legal and justice support, and family violence prevention and education.

The work of these services is complemented by a wide range of preventative and health promotion initiatives undertaken by other community-controlled organisations working in social and community services.

Community-controlled services are “unique in their ability to provide culturally responsive health services to their communities, defining health as the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community”.⁴⁰



TIP:

In some remote communities, the local community-controlled health services are the only immediately available health facility.

In all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the community-controlled health service is frequently the hub of community activity, connection and organisation, and is a good first point of contact for identifying what community organisations there are and for establishing relationships.

CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE

The driving force that spurred the formation of the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child welfare agencies, generally known as the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCAs) in the late 1970s, was the need to deal with and heal the legacy of colonisation and child removal.

Inspired by the success of the Native Americans in the 1970s in establishing distinct Indian child welfare legislation and in reducing the rates of child removal through such legislation, Aboriginal and Torres communities established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled child and welfare services. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, formed in 1977, was amongst the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare service established in Australia. Today there are AICCAs in most states and territories.

AICCAs provide a range of services across the country including out-of-home care to children who have been removed from their families. They also recruit, train and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster and kinship carers; provide early intervention and support to families at risk of having children removed from their care, and assist families where children have been removed to build their parenting capacity and support their progress toward reunification with their children. AICCAs provide advice to state and territory child protection authorities on placement decisions involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

These community-controlled organisations recognised early that in order to replace existing harsh practices and policies in child welfare they would need a united national approach and to establish a national framework to protect the rights of



children. In 1981 these child welfare agencies established a peak body, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), to have a strong national voice to advocate for the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. SNAICC opened its first offices in 1983.

Through their advocacy, the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle has been implemented either through policy or legislation in all states and territories. This key framework of principles safeguards the cultural rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who need to be placed in out-of-home care for their safety. It asserts the child's right to be cared for by their extended family or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and to have continued connection to their family, community and culture.

Since the inception of these community-controlled child and family welfare services and their advocacy on behalf of families, there has been a broader recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families require services that promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing practices and are respectful of the child's culture.

"For cultural and spiritual reasons, maintaining contact or involvement with family or returning to family will always be in the long term best interests of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children. Whilst child protection interventions must place child safety as paramount for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, safety must include their cultural safety."⁴¹

The rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait families are best protected, and the best outcomes for children are achieved, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based organisations are trusted, empowered and appropriately resourced to work with and support families when children are at risk.



TIP:

Support the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child and family welfare organisations to deliver and expand early intervention, therapeutic healing, and parenting and family support services to the children and families in their care

Prioritise the development of a holistic, coordinated approach to child abuse and neglect prevention, and support parenting capacity in the community.

The AICCA in your local community can provide expertise, advice and leadership in areas such as child rearing, culturally appropriate parenting and family support, and information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures and culture.



MEDIA

Another key aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's responses to colonisation has been to develop and run their own media outlets. Community-controlled print, radio and now TV and internet media have become important outlets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to challenge the negative stereotyping and portrayal of their communities and culture in the mainstream media. These media outlets also enable the broadcasting and publishing of news, issues, opinions and events that matter to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that is not otherwise covered in the mainstream media.

The *Koori Mail* is Australia's largest national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander newspaper. It has extensive national and regional coverage and one of the widest readerships. The *National Indigenous Times* has a topical and investigative journalism base on social issues of interest to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those interested in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. Both publications are invaluable sources of information and publish classified advertising, especially jobs and funding and tender announcements, targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

There are numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled radio stations across the country, and a number broadcast syndicated national current affairs programs. While relatively new, National Indigenous TV (NITV) is taking big steps to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and stories on television.

There is also a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander publishing houses. These include Aboriginal Studies Press, an imprint of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), as well as a range of multimedia initiatives and music production organisations that publish books, music and multimedia productions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, authors and researchers, or on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.



TIP:

See the section on Media and information on related protocols in Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols' to guide any media-related work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Consider promoting your initiatives and advertising employment positions to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community through the community's local media outlets.



CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

“Our stories since colonisation have been dangerous and subversive remembrances. Even remembering our law, our dreaming stories, was a subversive practice, let alone our tales of massacres, resistance, dispossession, living on the mission and the ‘welfare’ coming to take away our children. Unlike Hollywood, we tell stories to survive, not just to entertain or sell products. We have lost some of our stories because of the brutality of colonisation but we are finding them again and learning new stories, modern stories of surviving the policies of assimilation and establishing our own organisations in law, health, education, child care and child and family services.”⁴²

In spite of the level of disadvantage⁴³, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are vibrant and actively seeking to address issues that they face. The importance of strong cultural connections is fundamental to increasing resilience in the community. Much has been lost that can never be replaced. Yet, there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled co-operatives, agencies and organisations that seek to give expression to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ desire for self-determination and provide culturally appropriate services. Some are state-wide and others are regionally based.

Throughout the year, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities hold a range of activities that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and provide a focus for families to get together and enjoy themselves. Events include National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day, National Aborigines and Islanders Day of Commemoration (NAIDOC) week, Sorry Day, Reconciliation Week and many others.



TIP:

See the section ‘Calendar of key cultural events’ below for more information.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout the nation will have events and activities in which you or your organisation can participate.

Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can be a great resource for finding out what is being held in your local area.

The newspapers *Koori Mail* and *National Indigenous Times* are also a good source for local events – they provide a calendar of events throughout the year.

Local Indigenous Coordination Centres fund NAIDOC week events and are also a good starting point for local activities happening in communities.

Chapter 5 has more information on the importance of non-Indigenous organisations participating in and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community cultural events.



A LIVING CULTURE

Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been influenced by the arrival of other people to Australia yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is enduring and resilient, and one of the reasons for its resilience is its ability to adapt to change.

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is strong, years of misunderstanding and indifference have affected it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity is kept alive by:

- passing on knowledge through arts, rituals and stories,
- speaking and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages,
- protecting cultural property, sacred sites and significant artefacts; and
- fostering cooperative partnerships and working relationships that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control and holistic concepts of health and well-being.⁴⁴

"Maintaining one's culture, values and traditions is beyond price. Human beings cannot live without that. We are glad to share our culture with Europeans and other migrants but we will never give them up."⁴⁵



Calendar of key cultural events

THE NATIONAL APOLOGY TO THE STOLEN GENERATIONS – 13 FEBRUARY

The formal apology by the national parliament to the Stolen Generations and their families has recognised the anguish the Stolen Generations have experienced and offered them significant comfort. With the dignity of the occasion, it gave acknowledgement to, and respect for, the Stolen Generations' experiences and offered hope and a promise of future renewal for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to commemorate the day to mark the significance of the event and to highlight any unfinished business in addressing the needs and aspirations of the Stolen Generations.

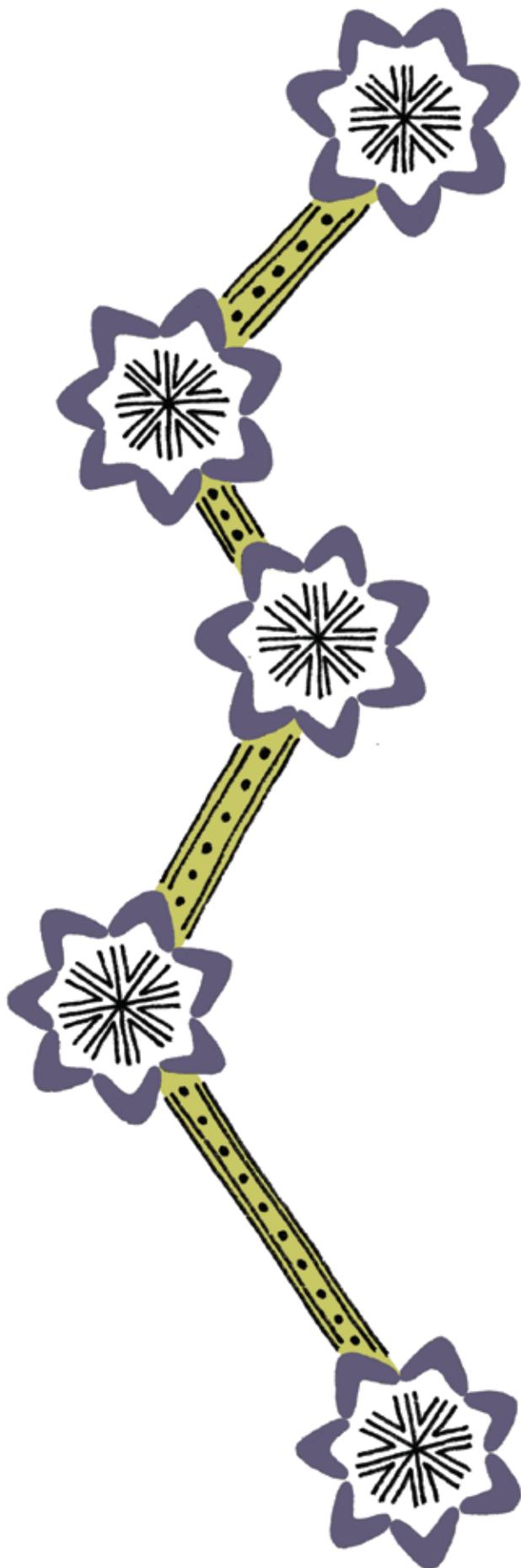
SORRY DAY – 26 MAY

This day marks the anniversary of the 1997 tabling of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* Report. Hundreds of thousands of Australians participated in the first National Sorry Day in 1998. Each year since there have been gatherings and activities across the country, including bridge walks, barbeques and concerts, to highlight the experiences of the Stolen Generations and the legacy of the policies of child removal, and to forge further steps towards healing and reconciliation.

MABO DAY – 3 JUNE

This day celebrates the efforts Eddie Mabo and his co-plaintiffs made in campaigning for recognition of native title rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It commemorates the High Court's landmark judgement on 3 June 1992 in favour of Eddie Mabo, David Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Salee, which rejected the doctrine of *terra nullius* introduced at colonisation and recognised Native Title.





COMING OF THE LIGHT FESTIVAL - 1 JULY

The Torres Strait Islanders faced significant historical, cultural and social change when Reverend Samuel MacFarlane of the London Missionary Society brought Christianity to the Torres Strait on 1 July 1871. This is referred to by the Islanders as 'Coming of the Light' and is celebrated annually on 1 July by all Torres Strait Islander communities throughout the Torres Strait and mainland Australia.

NAIDOC - JULY

NAIDOC week begins on the first Sunday in July and is a way to celebrate and promote a greater understanding of the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. During this week communities all around Australia come together to celebrate the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the continuation of culture as well as demonstrate the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made to our nation. Posters are available from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the National NAIDOC Committee, and NAIDOC Committees from each state and territory. Details are available on www.naidoc.org.au.

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILDREN'S DAY - 4 AUGUST

A SNAICC initiative, this day was first observed in 1988, with each year having a special theme. SNAICC produces an annual poster highlighting the year's theme and other resources to assist organisations and communities to celebrate the day. The day aims to demonstrate how important children are to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE - 9 AUGUST

This annual day is an opportunity for governments, non-government groups and international forums to contribute to a greater appreciation of Indigenous history, culture, language, rights and aspirations through various activities and programs. It also highlights the need to work towards addressing issues facing indigenous people internationally in the areas of culture, education, health, human rights, the environment, and social and economic development. It was first designated by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994.



Historical timeline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history

BEFORE 1788

Many nations and clans of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in harmony with the land. The 'Dreaming' is important to Aboriginal people, laying out the laws for everyone and everyday life and guiding peoples' relationships to the land. The land, sea and stars are also important to Torres Strait Islander people, whose lives are strongly guided by their spirituality and ancestral and clan laws.

1770

Captain James Cook takes possession of the 'whole eastern coast' of Australia in the name of King George III of Great Britain and names it New South Wales.

1786

The British Government chooses Botany Bay as a penal colony.

1788

Australia is occupied by the British under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip who establishes the first settlement at Botany Bay, which includes a penal colony.

1789

Smallpox decimates the Aboriginal population of Port Jackson, Botany Bay and Broken Bay. The disease spreads inland and along the coast.

1792

European colonists begin to settle land, fanning out further and dispossessing Aboriginal people of their land.

1816

Governor Macquarie announces a set of regulations controlling the free movement of Aboriginal people.

1835

John Batman attempts to make a 'treaty' with Aboriginal people for Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, by buying 243,000 hectares with 20 pairs of blankets, 30 tomahawks, various articles and a yearly tribute. Governor Bourke does not recognise the 'treaty' and the purchase is voided. This is the only time colonists attempt to sign a treaty for land.

1859-1861

The Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines is established to 'watch over the interests of Aborigines'. Many Aboriginal people are settled onto missions and reserves for better management and control.

1867-1868

Aboriginal cricket team tours England and comes to note for soundly beating the English.

1871

Reverend Samuel MacFarlane of the London Missionary Society arrives at the Torres Strait Islands to bring Christianity to the Islanders. This is celebrated as the 'Coming of the Light' by Torres Strait Islanders to this day.



1876

Truganini dies in Hobart aged 73. The Tasmanian Government does not recognise the Aboriginal heritage of people of Aboriginal descent and claims the last Tasmanian Aboriginal person has died, a falsehood many still believe today.

1886

Aborigines Protection Act changes the definition of Aborigine. Adult “half-castes” are no longer included in the *Protection Act*. Aboriginal people of mixed descent are excluded from living on missions and settle on the outskirts of towns. They are known as ‘fringe dwellers’.

1937

The Conference of State and Commonwealth Authorities adopts the concept of assimilation. Aboriginal people, except those with ‘full blood’, are to be assimilated into white society.

1958

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is formed. This national organisation’s goal was to achieve equal rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This organisation gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their first political voice at a national level.

1965

Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins and other activists tour country New South Wales with a busload of University of Sydney students in what is to be called the ‘Freedom Rides’ to highlight the widespread segregation, discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people.

1967

The people of Australia vote overwhelming ‘yes’ in a Commonwealth referendum to grant ‘Civil Rights’ to all Aboriginal people, including the right to be counted in the census, and grant the Commonwealth Government the power to take control of Aboriginal Affairs throughout Australia, overriding states if necessary.

1972

The Tent Embassy is established on the grounds of Parliament House in Canberra creating publicity for ‘Land Rights’ claims and causing embarrassment to the government of the day.

1976

The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976* (a fundamental piece of social reform for Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory) is passed. It marks the first attempt of the Australian Government to recognise the Aboriginal system of land ownership. Where Aboriginal people are able to prove their traditional relationships to ‘un-alienated crown land’, their ownership and rights to the land is legally recognised. This allows people to maintain their links and responsibilities to the land and for the dispossessed to move back to their land and set up outstations on their ancestors’ country. With the Act, land formerly known as ‘reserves’ becomes Aboriginal land.

1987

A Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody is held, making 339 recommendations in its report.



1988

The Anti-Bicentenary March is held. Thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians marched in Sydney to protest the Bicentenary celebrations because they said they cannot celebrate an event that cost many Aboriginal lives.

1991

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is established as a result of the 339th recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) publicly calls for a National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. SNAICC is the first national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation to do so.

1992

The *Mabo* judgment is delivered, in which the High Court of Australia finds that the people of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait hold and continue to hold native title. This judgement declares the notion of '*terra nullius*', which formed the basis of 200 years of land law in Australia, to be invalid.

1995–1996

A National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families is held. The inquiry concludes that "one in three Torres Strait Islander children and one in ten Aboriginal children" were removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970.

1996

The *Wik Decision* of the High Court of Australia finds that Native Title can co-exist with mining and pastoral leases. Because of this decision, at the expiration of leases, the land reverts to Native Title.

1997

National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families releases its report, *Bringing Them Home*. Amongst its 54 recommendations is the call for a formal national apology to members of Stolen Generations and other reparations, and further efforts to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations to reduce the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.

1998

Native Title Amendments Act is passed in response to the High Court's *Wik Decision*.

2000

Corroboree 2000: 'Sharing our Future' ceremony marks the end of the 10-year reconciliation process, which began with the establishment of the Council for Reconciliation in 1991.

2008

The National Apology by the Parliament of Australia to the Stolen Generations and their families is made by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of the Parliament on 13 February 2008.

If you are interested in looking at other historical or important dates, the Australian Museum website *Indigenous Australia* has a comprehensive listing of other historical or important dates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Go to www.dreamtime.net.au/index.cfm.



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CHAPTER 3:

Taking a Personal Journey and Strengthening Communication Skills

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter reinforces the importance of respect as a crucial starting point for effective cross-cultural communication skills.

Readers are invited to:

- reflect on their attitudes and be aware of cultural biases and assumptions that are obstacles to effective communication and professional practice;
- consider various strategies and tips for effective cross-cultural communication; and
- take practical steps to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

This chapter builds on the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and values outlined in Chapter 1, and the understanding of the social context of community issues in Chapter 2.

This resource should not replace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness or effective cross-cultural communication training offered by organisations to all staff, but supplement it.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing good rapport and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is too frequently viewed as discouragingly difficult, full of mine-fields, and onerous. Drawing on a strengths-based approach would allow individuals and the organisations they work in to break some of the barriers of myth, fear, stereotyping and distrust that can be obstacles to good relationships and good communication.

A good place to start in establishing good relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as with any other people, is with respect. When non-Indigenous people develop and demonstrate respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their culture and spirituality, and the strength and resilience with which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have preserved their family connections,



communities and culture, they are likely to establish respectful interpersonal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and families.

It is clear that where you have demonstrated your respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture, then mistakes you may make in interpersonal relationships and communication are more likely to be forgiven or overlooked by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. What is important is that you have integrity; that you are honest and respectful in your dealings.

BEING AWARE OF YOUR ATTITUDES

Many non-Indigenous people have had little contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Learning about the rich and continuing cultural heritage that exists can be inspiring. Equally, learning more about the history and legacy of colonisation and dispossession can be confronting. Be self-aware and reflective of your own values. Understand and challenge your own cultural assumptions and prejudices. Reflect on the negative stereotypes of different cultural groups that may (or may not) have been a strong influence in your life.

It is important that you are aware that your attitudes and values about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture will influence your perceptions and how you are perceived, and your relationships with clients and other community members.

Becoming informed about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, participating in community life and attending community events can result in a greater appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the rich role it plays in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What is important is to see the person, not the stereotype.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

It may be helpful to consider the following questions:¹

- Do I respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people differently?
- If so, how? Do I know why?
- If I feel nervous when I am talking to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, do I know why?
- Am I patronising? Am I nervous? Am I respectful? Am I controlling the process and outcomes?
- Have I made assumptions about the family or person before I have met them?
- What assumptions do I make about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture?
- On what basis am I making these assumptions?
- What does this mean in terms of establishing a working relationship?
- What are the positive features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that are known to me?
- How can I use this to assist this family?
- How can I incorporate this into my assessment/intervention?

- Do I clearly understand the intent of any protocols or policies that are in place?
- Am I aware of the laws that make it illegal to discriminate against an individual or group based on their cultural background, gender, age or religion?



TIP:

- To work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it helps to have a reasonable knowledge and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and history. This knowledge will assist you to be better able to empathise with people and the issues they face.
- Taking a genuine interest in people without being intrusive helps foster ongoing relationships.
- Torres Strait Islander people in particular place a good deal of emphasis on courtesy and kindness. This is known locally as 'Good Pasin', meaning good fashion or behaving with a degree of sophistication and charm. Failure in this area can be irreparable.²
- It is important to tell the truth at all times, no matter how unpopular this can be. Failure to do so can destroy credibility, which is unlikely to be regained.
- Above all treat people the way you would expect to be treated. Being helpful and friendly is particularly appreciated. Genuine respect for their beliefs, opinions and lifestyle is essential.

AVOIDING BIAS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

It is important to be aware of how personal cultural bias can potentially affect your professional practice – whether this is as an office manager, counsellor, mediator or family therapist.

“Cultural bias influences our actions as our perceptions are shaped by our own cultural context and experiences. When working cross-culturally it is easy to misinterpret what is going on within families; such misinterpretation leads to poor outcomes. For this reason, we need to actively recognise and monitor our own cultural bias and behaviour.”³

An example of cultural bias affecting professional practice is where a psychological assessment may find that an Aboriginal child is 'more connected' to their grandmother than their own mother, and it is misinterpreted as suggesting that the child may be better off living with their grandmother. In a context where decisions are being made about the appropriate ongoing care of the child, this can lead to the child being removed – erroneously – from the care of their mother and placed in the care of the grandmother.⁴ Or a biased misinterpretation of such a psychological assessment can result in inappropriate services or support to the mother, the child and other members of the family.



Suspending cultural bias would enable a more holistic view of the situation that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' different approaches to child rearing, including that in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities it is normal for children to establish strong bonds with their grandmothers.



TIP:

An understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childrearing practices and taking a strengths-based approach would allow an appreciation for the bonds an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child has with other members of their family – including their mother – and support these accordingly.

It is important to work on building the individual's own capacity and resilience and use a 'holistic approach' based on a 'strengths-based' model and not a deficit model.

TAKING AN ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH

Non-Indigenous workers in non-Indigenous organisations should not be expected to take this journey alone. It is crucial that non-Indigenous organisations take an organisational approach to building a culturally aware and competent workforce. This includes:

- supporting staff to be self-reflective and culturally aware,
- actively creating opportunities for staff to learn about and adopt effective cross-cultural communication techniques, and
- encouraging creative approaches to professional practice that are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



TIP:

Individuals can support and encourage their organisations and managers to implement the necessary steps towards developing cultural competence and to support you in your personal and professional journeys.

Organisations can learn more about developing the cultural competence of organisations and effective approaches to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community organisations in Chapter 5.

What role can you play in your organisation's Action Research Evaluation initiatives to improve its services to and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? (See Chapter 7 for more information.)

Managers can incorporate cultural awareness and effective cross-cultural communication into professional practice and/or clinical supervision. For instance:

- How well are your staff team members implementing what they have learned in training or in this resource?
- How well are they being supported to implement what they have learned?

EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Some important first steps towards effective cross-cultural communication are developing a sound knowledge of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and people, and recognising that there is no 'blanket' recipe for communication that can be applied when working with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family or community. There are, however, some important principles that can be used as a foundation for good communication.

Good communication is an essential requirement for relationship building and developing trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Work practices that allow for flexibility and creativity (as opposed to getting it perfect the first time) would be of great value in allowing such communication. This requires strong leadership but it helps develop a culture of continued learning and improvement.



TIP:

Ensure that all staff receive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training in your organisation's professional development, staff training and new staff induction programs.

Incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives into effective cross-cultural communication training offered to your organisation's staff.



UNDERSTAND INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

It may be more common in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to prefer a form of communication that takes a less direct approach. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can find the direct non-Indigenous styles of communication confrontational and perhaps even rude.

In some settings and interactions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not express a firm opinion – even though they may hold one. They may discuss a topic generally while gauging others' views, before stating their own. Where an individual finds that their own views are contrary to others, they often understate their own.

A striking feature of language used by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the near absence of the reason-seeking question 'Why?'. In group settings, don't single people out with a direct question if possible.

HONESTY AND OPENNESS

As a general principle, try to be open, honest and sincere and always go into a conversation or discussion with an open mind. Actively listen to others' views and take them seriously. It may be perceived as highly offensive and disrespectful if you are viewed as not listening. Active as well as reflective listening will progress your journey of learning and understanding.

AVOID LEADING QUESTIONS

There is also a preference in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to find out what they need to know through observation or by asking in roundabout ways, rather than asking direct questions (which can be perceived as rude). Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceive non-Indigenous people as asking too many questions and not paying enough attention. This may occur more in remote areas rather than in urban situations.

Non-verbal actions, such as observation, are important for finding out the reasons for the actions of others. When communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ensure you make links between statements and non-verbal cues of communication.

However, be aware of the pitfall of interpreting the words and actions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in terms of your own understanding of a matter or situation and assuming that these are shared.

UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

A number of issues must be considered in being aware of the styles of non-verbal communication used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Use of silence:

- The use of silence should not be interpreted as "they do not understand" – people may be remaining non-committal, waiting for consensus or community support, or may just be listening.
- In the context of committee or advisory group meetings or consultation workshops, silence should not be taken as consent.



Use of body language:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use a range of gestures and signals as part of their communication. These can be specific to local cultural or language groups. They can include gestures with the mouth, hand or head.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people “tend to be very conscious of body language and consider what is not being said is as important as what is being said.”⁵
- It is important to be aware that this, “coupled with a legacy of mistrust and cynicism about ‘whitefella’ motives,” means that non-Indigenous people working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people “have to be very aware of their own body language and non-verbal communication.”⁶

See also tips on using indirect eye contact and listening below.

INDIRECT EYE CONTACT

In many non-Indigenous cultures, someone who cannot maintain eye contact may be considered ‘shifty’. Often the use of indirect eye contact implies respect – although this should not be generalised and may differ from community to community/person to person.

However, in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people will often avoid making direct eye contact with persons in conversation. They may also choose not to look at the person when speaking, particularly when the person is of the opposite gender. This does not mean that they are not listening, or not showing respect.

- Avoid staring at people – it is considered rude in some communities where people find constant eye-to-eye contact very uncomfortable.
- This can lead some people to be unable to articulate their views or concerns.⁷
- Sometimes, it can be helpful to stand or sit next to someone rather than directly facing them, but avoid being unnaturally submissive.

It is also important to avoid confusing a preference for not maintaining eye contact and the “dropping of the head which is a universal expression of ‘shame’”, which can result from the “deep seated feelings of shame and low self-esteem” that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience as part of the pervasive legacy of colonisation and dispossession.⁸ The unresolved grief, loss and trauma that so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience are also important factors.

LISTENING

As with a lack of eye contact, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may listen without looking at the speakers. This practice strongly relates to traditional culture, particularly in remote communities, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not permitted to look their Elders in the eye as this could be considered disrespectful. Although it may seem off putting to non-Indigenous people, if an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is not showing any signs of attention it does not mean that he or she is not listening. It may be counter-productive to respond to such a situation as if you have not been listened to.



BE AWARE AND SENSITIVE TO PREVIOUS CONCERNS WITH LANGUAGE

Recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced much offensive communication generally (e.g. being described as ‘half caste’ or experiencing racist language, etc).

Ask an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person how they would like to be acknowledged or addressed. Call an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person ‘Aunty’ or ‘Uncle’ only if invited to do so or ask how the person would like to be referred to. Check on what is acceptable and don’t be afraid to ask.

HEARING LOSS

There is a high incidence of hearing impediments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially in children, resulting in particular from the high rates of middle-ear infections.⁹ This is common amongst children in regional and remote communities.

It is important to not underestimate the significance of hearing loss or impediments amongst adults in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and to consider how hearing impediments can be an obstacle to effective communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, staff and the general community. Develop steps and techniques in your communications strategies to cater for the needs of clients and staff members who have hearing impediments.

SOME TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

In many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, English may be a second, third or even fourth language, so communication in English may pose some challenges. There are some tips to bear in mind in working in remote communities, or with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from remote communities who have travelled to regional centres or capital cities.

USE OF LANGUAGE

Don’t assume that your meaning will be clear to everyone you talk to. Work towards minimising jargon. In some groups it may be helpful to tell a story about the issue, project or service. A process chart or map that clarifies structures or processes can be easier to digest than information with lots of dense text.

Use your own style of speech – don’t mimic Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander patterns of talk, speech or accents! Alternatively, it can help to learn a few words of the local language and use it where relevant. This will be a positive step in improving your relationship with the local community.

Identify if you are meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for whom English is not their first language.

These principles also apply to written communication. It would be useful to get feedback from community members, interpreters or workers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations on the suitability of written materials, including the use of language and how they are structured and designed.



USE AN INTERPRETER WHERE NECESSARY

If necessary, employ the services of an interpreter. This can either be a professional/ accredited interpreter or a member of the community with strong language skills in both English and the language of the community you are engaging with. You need to be confident that what you are saying is understood and translated correctly.

- When you hold or facilitate meetings, workshops or training sessions, be aware that there may be a need for an interpreter to assist the process;
- Consult with the interpreter and the relevant community interest before devising the agenda. It is important to allow adequate time for interpretation;
- It is sometimes necessary for non-Indigenous workers to move from relying on written communication to trusting undertakings that are made verbally.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERPRETING – SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

Communicating through an interpreter can be very complex, and depending on the topics or purpose of the session or conversation, requires a great deal of skill. This can particularly be the case in the legal field and especially the health field, where “both the interpreter and the health professional need a high level of skill in communicating in complex intercultural interactions.”¹⁰

Using an interpreter also requires a significant amount of organisation before a session or appointment – both logistically, in arranging the interpreter service, and in ensuring you and the interpreter can work effectively in communicating with the client.

A key strategy to effective communication through interpreters is the pre-interview, a meeting between you and the interpreter before the appointment with the client, which is important to:

- explain what you want to achieve with the interpreter and ask about effective communication strategies;
- check the interpreter’s understanding of any key concepts and issues that may come up with the client or family and identify the best ways to talk about these concepts and any terms that may be difficult to translate; and
- learn if there are any cultural issues you should be aware of in this interaction.¹¹



TIP:

For more tips and ideas on using an Aboriginal interpreter, see:

Useful hints on working with an Aboriginal language interpreter, Aboriginal Interpreter Service (Northern Territory Government)

www.dlghs.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/6542/Useful_Hints.pdf

Sharing the True Stories: Improving Communication in Indigenous Health Care

www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts/



GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

There are rules in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that govern the relationships between men and women that should be considered in communication. In some communities, there are a number of topics considered inappropriate for people to speak about directly with people of the opposite sex. For example, it may be inappropriate for people to speak about childbirth or sexual health to people of the opposite sex.

Also, there are matters considered 'men's business' or 'women's business' that are considered inappropriate for people of the opposite sex to ask about, know of, be told or have access to. For more on this, see Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols'.



TIP:

When organising meetings, workshops or information sessions involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, effective preparation and seeking advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can assist in making this flow well:

- Find out whether the topics of conversation are suitable for everyone or issues of Men's and Women's Business will apply.
- Consider the need for another staff member of the appropriate sex to attend and run an alternative session.

WORKING AND COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

While every cultural group has its own particular ways of communicating, each child will also have his or her own patterns of communication. It is important to allow some time to get to know the child and understand how he or she likes to communicate.¹²

For example, depending on the particular community the child comes from, it may be culturally familiar for the child to be quiet in formal or group settings such as classrooms, be informal in conversation and avoid eye contact. Sharing information rather than asking direct questions may also be a more appropriate way of dealing with the child.

Listed below are some features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's communication style preferences:

- It is more usual for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child to touch an adult to communicate a need rather than verbalising what they need;
- Children will be more prepared to co-operate or undertake a task out of desire to please carers rather than respond to carers' authority;



- Formal situations are likely to stress the child and they are less likely to indicate their real feelings. If there is a meeting that a child needs to be involved in, consider holding the meeting away from an office environment, such as in a park;
- It is not uncommon for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to not make direct eye contact. This means eye contact may not be pronounced;
- The word 'yes' may not actually mean 'yes'. It can be used to mean the question was understood;
- Shyness is very common amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults. 'Big noting' oneself is not common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Humour plays a large part in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Teasing and playful conversation are valued aspects of communication; however, in the early stages of a relationship, it is important to be at the receiving end than delivering such humour.

Some other features of communication styles and behaviour could include:

- rapid and excitable talking;
- strong sense of direction;
- preference to do things by themselves;
- preference to taste and look at things;
- well-developed gross motor skills, such as climbing, running and jumping;
- underdeveloped fine motor skills, for example holding a pencil or manipulating small objects;
- eagerness to share; and
- a preference to be creative.



TIP:

In putting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at ease, it would be appropriate to consider:

- What is your communication style?
- Is the physical environment culturally welcoming and friendly?
- Do you have culturally and age appropriate toys that will help in creating rapport and communication?



PRACTICAL WAYS OF LEARNING ABOUT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE

There are many ways of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and organisations are a good source of information and ideas. Some ways of promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture include:

- Interacting and participating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture (such as local community events, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art exhibitions, films and plays that are written by and include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent);
- Learning about positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models such as sports people, artists, actors and community leaders;
- Putting up posters featuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander topics and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of art around your service's offices;
- Using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources and learning materials, including community/group education programs and story books and toys for children;
- Listening to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander music;
- Watching documentaries or movies about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and social issues;
- Participating in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events and celebrations, such as NAIDOC Week, the commemoration of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, and the Bringing of the Light Festival;
- Learning about the local culture, language and history of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are the traditional owners of the land where you live and work, as well as the culture of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who come from other areas;
- Encouraging your service to use traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and designs in its promotional and educational material in an ethical manner;
- Understanding the importance of funerals as significant events in the life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Note that there is the expectation that funerals involve the whole community and not just the immediate family and friends.



ENDNOTES

- 1 This section draws from material in VACCA, *Aboriginal Resource and Cultural Guide: Resource for Staff Working with Aboriginal Children and their Families*, Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Childcare Agency, Preston, [publication date unknown], p. 14.
- 2 Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, *Mina Mir Lo Ailan Mun: Proper Communication with Torres Strait Islander People*, Queensland Government [publication date unknown].
- 3 NSW Department of Community Services, *Working with Aboriginal People and Communities: A Practice Resource*, produced by the Aboriginal Services Branch, in consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group, NSW Department of Community Services, Sydney, 2009, p. 27.
- 4 NSW Department of Community Services, *Working with Aboriginal People and Communities: A Practice Resource*, produced by the Aboriginal Services Branch, in consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group, NSW Department of Community Services, Sydney, 2009, p. 27.
- 5 Sharon Payne and Associates, *Aboriginal Cultural Guide for ACT Family Law Practitioners*, Sharon Payne and Associates, ACT, [publication date unknown], p. 26.
- 6 *ibid*, p. 26.
- 7 *ibid*, p. 26.
- 8 *ibid*, p. 26.
- 9 SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision), *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2007.
- 10 Sharing the True Stories Project, 'Working with interpreters', *Sharing the True Stories: Improving Communication in Indigenous Health Care project website archive*, Charles Darwin University, www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts/guidelines_strategies_interp.html Accessed 5 May 2009.
- 11 Sharing the True Stories Project, 'Working with interpreters', *Sharing the True Stories: Improving Communication in Indigenous Health Care project website archive*, Charles Darwin University, www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts/guidelines_strategies_interp.html Accessed 5 May 2009.
- 12 This section is extracted from material originally produced by VACCA and re-published in SNAICC, *Foster their Culture: Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-of-Home Care*, SNAICC, 2008; used under permission and copyright license from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).



CHAPTER 4:

Cultural Protocols

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter provides basic information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols, and offers suggestions on how these protocols can be:

- observed in community activities and interactions;
- incorporated into your organisation's events and activities; and
- adopted in your organisation's policies, practices, research and consultation activities and projects.

It draws on information in previous chapters, including the importance of bereavement practices or Sorry Business, and the role of Elders, and builds on the importance of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural protocols refer to the customs, lore and codes of behaviour of a particular cultural group and a way of conducting business. Cultural protocols also refer to the protocols and procedures used to guide the observance of traditional knowledge and practices, including how traditional knowledge is used, recorded and disseminated.

"Indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge that is unique to a culture or society and is passed from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth and cultural rituals."¹

Ceremonies and protocols are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Ceremonies such as 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgment of Country' recognise the unique position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian culture and history. Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and ceremonies into official events held by your service demonstrates respect for the cultural traditions, history and diversity of communities where events are held.

By incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices or ceremonies into official events we are able to:

- recognise and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and heritage; and



- demonstrate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's unique position, which can assist in building respectful relationships and partnerships.

Remember – there are no hard and fast rules when interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Every community is unique, and different communities will have their own protocols that should be followed. The approach you will take will be different depending on the community's location; there are remote communities, communities in regional towns and major cities, and each must be recognised as culturally distinct.

Working across cultures is not always easy and requires the patience, understanding and commitment of both groups. While mistakes may be made, sincere attempts to observe the protocols of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are appreciated and demonstrate your genuine commitment to and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage. It also helps if your observance of such cultural protocols comes from your heart – not from a script or some sense of obligation.

IF IN DOUBT, ASK

Understand that the process will not always be easy because observing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander protocol has to allow for traditional discussion and decision-making. For example, not every Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person can provide a 'Welcome to Country' – it must be a recognised Elder, traditional custodian of the land, or other appropriate person within the area.

The most important thing is to take the time to find out what is appropriate and show respect for different cultural groups and practices.

SOME EXAMPLES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PROTOCOLS

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

A 'Welcome to Country' is where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Traditional Custodian or Traditional Owner (in most cases an Elder), or a senior representative, welcomes people to their land.

This is a significant recognition and is made through a formal process. A 'Welcome to Country' should always occur in the opening ceremony of the event, and be conducted by someone recognised by the local community as having the authority to do so.

A 'Welcome to Country' may consist of a single speech by the representative of the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community, or it can also include a performance of some description (which will vary according to the region and locality). Performances can include a Traditional Welcoming Song, a Traditional Dance, didgeridoo performance or other musical performances, or a combination of any of the above.

All steps should be taken to ensure the appropriate person is invited to undertake the ceremony/'Welcome to Country' and that they have been involved in and are comfortable with the arrangements. Protocols in relation to the performing of a 'Welcome to Country' ceremony are wide and diverse and can vary according to region and locality.



ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY AND ELDERS

An 'Acknowledgment of Country' is traditionally performed in public events and meetings when a person is about to address the audience. It is an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community as the traditional owners of the land, and the special respect held for their Elders.

A chairperson or speaker begins the meeting or event by acknowledging that the activity is taking place in the country of the traditional owners, and pays their respects to the Elders in the community – including those in the past and in the present. If Elders are attending the event, particular effort is usually made to acknowledge them, including by name if possible. This is usually performed by both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and has been incorporated in government protocols in many cases.

'Acknowledgment of Country' is a way that non-Indigenous people can show respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage and the ongoing relationship of traditional owners with the land. Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can provide advice on who the local traditional custodians of the land, sea and nations are.

On occasion, there may be disputes about who the traditional owners are. Those who acknowledge the country can acknowledge the traditional owners of this land without naming those people. Acknowledging country in this way will not cause offence when there is some potential or actual dispute around ownership.

A typical 'Acknowledgment of Country' statement can include one of the two examples below, as relevant:

Example One:

"I would like to show my respect and acknowledge that we are here today on the traditional lands of the (appropriate group) people and I pay my respects to the Elders both past and present of the (appropriate group) nation. I would also like to acknowledge the present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who now reside in this area and acknowledge the strength, resilience and capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this land."

Example Two:

"I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this meeting takes place, and to Elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge the present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who now reside in this area and acknowledge the strength, resilience and capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this land."

It is important to remember that these examples should not be treated as a script: use your own words as far as possible. It needs to come from your heart, not your head. Offence can be taken by some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people if they perceive your 'Acknowledgement of Country' as disingenuous, read from a script or just rattled off by rote.

**TIP:**

Ask yourself: Why do I think it is important to acknowledge the local custodians of the country?

SMOKING CEREMONY

Smoking ceremonies are undertaken in Aboriginal communities in order to cleanse the space in which a ceremony is taking place. They are also used in the context of healing, spiritual renewal and strengthening by some Aboriginal healing practitioners. This ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is undertaken by an Aboriginal person with specialised cultural knowledge. Given the significant nature of the ceremony, it is usually only performed at events regarded as appropriate by the Aboriginal community.

FEE FOR SERVICE

In providing cultural services such as 'Welcome to Country,' artistic performances and ceremonies, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are using their own intellectual property. For this reason it is appropriate that people are offered payment and appropriate remuneration for their services. Appropriate payment and remuneration should be negotiated, taking into account speaker fees, travel to and from the event as well as the public profile nature of the event.

SORRY BUSINESS AND BEREAVEMENT PROTOCOLS

There are a number of responsibilities and obligations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to attend funerals and participate in Sorry Business or bereavement protocols.

In some communities, the Sorry Business prohibitions extend to not conducting activities, events, meetings or consultations during the observance of Sorry Business, and this must be observed and respected by all those working with Aboriginal organisations and communities. These prohibitions may last for various periods of time. It is important to inquire before going to a location or visiting community members to ensure that Sorry Business protocols are not being observed.

Many Aboriginal communities have a prohibition on naming someone who is deceased that may last for months or even years. Where this is the case, a different name is used to refer to the person who has passed away. Some communities prohibit the depiction of the image of the deceased person, publishing their name, or broadcasting their voice. These should be observed in relation to media protocols and the depiction of images and voices (see below).

Many Torres Strait Islander people also observe strict protocols during a bereavement, especially around using the name of those who have passed away. In some Torres Strait Islander communities, the protocols also involve family members staying in their houses for two days, or even up to a week, when someone passes away. They may only leave when the eldest woman in the family comes to get them from the house. It may also be inappropriate to conduct other activities or business when a Torres Strait Islander community or family is observing a period of bereavement.



These bereavement protocols also involve the tombstone unveiling ceremony at the gravesite of the deceased, sometimes a year after their death, which involve obligations to participate in the ceremony.

See also the information on Torres Strait Islander bereavement protocols and the tombstone unveiling ceremony and Aboriginal Sorry Business in Chapter 1.



TIP:

Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are extensive, and observe significant obligations around Sorry Business and other bereavement protocols, assumptions should not be made about the perceived ‘closeness’ of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to the deceased in their need to attend a funeral or conduct Sorry Business. It can also be a cause of great distress if an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is unable to fulfil their bereavement obligations.

Adequate arrangements for bereavement leave should be available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to attend funerals and observe Sorry Business.

MEDIA PROTOCOLS

There are a range of protocols covering the reporting, publication, broadcasting and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the media. Some involve specific protocols around respecting the prohibitions involving broadcasting or printing the name, image and voice of a deceased person (see Sorry Business and bereavement protocols above).

There are also other protocols around reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, events and issues. These include ethical behaviour around approaching and interviewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, going onto Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander land, and reporting on or publishing information concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices or knowledge.

Please note that such protocols should also apply to organisations publishing newsletters, brochures, resources, training manuals, annual reports, websites, blogs, podcasts, email bulletins, photographs, or multimedia productions etc., and not only mass media outlets.



TIP:

The Australian Broadcasting Commission has a good model of protocols and ethics covering media reporting and broadcasting involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

See www.abc.net.au/indigenous/education/ethics_codes.htm



USE OF IMAGES AND VOICES

As mentioned earlier, Sorry Business and bereavement protocols in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities prohibit the publishing and broadcasting of the name, image and voice of a deceased person. The duration of these prohibitions vary according to the local community and also the status of the deceased person. It is important to seek guidance from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations on this matter. They can also advise you on what alternative name to use to refer to the deceased person.

Some communities or families may choose to give permission for the name, image or voice of the deceased person to be published or broadcast. However, be aware that different parts of a deceased person's extended family can have responsibility for various matters pertaining to bereavement and Sorry Business, and therefore permission cannot be sought from just any family member. Again, different communities have different practices and protocols so it is important to check with the relevant person.

Beyond the prohibitions related to the period of Sorry Business or bereavement, it is important to be aware that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience distress when viewing the images, or hearing the voices, of people who are deceased long after a period of Sorry Business. Where permission has been received to publish the image or voice of a deceased person, appropriate cultural warnings should be included with publications to alert readers and viewers that the publication includes such images, footage or voices. Because it is impossible to anticipate where or when a publication may include images or voices of people who are, or have subsequently, deceased, many organisations include such warnings as a matter of course.

Below are some examples of warnings that should be published in prominent positions in publications, including multimedia publications, or broadcasts, films, videos and DVDs.

Where the publication or film or program clearly does include footage, audio or photographs of people who are deceased, a clear warning can read:

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this [DVD/ video/ program/ website etc.] contains the voices and images of people who have passed away."

Otherwise, it is advisable to use a general warning, such as:

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this [DVD/ video/ program/ website etc.] contains the voices and images of people who may have since passed away."

Or:

"This [publication/ DVD/ video/ program/ website etc.] may contain images [and voices] of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have passed away."



TIP:

The TV program *Message Stick* on ABC 1, and its related website, is a good model of the observance of this protocol and provides good examples of warnings to be used.

See www.abc.net.au/messagestick

ACKNOWLEDGING CARETAKERS

“A Torres Strait Islander belief is that caretakers look after uninhabited islands or sea country when the Traditional Owners are absent. Caretakers are not human and could appear as birds, sharks or even as the wind. On sea country, or uninhabited islands, acknowledge the caretakers and seek their permission to access the area. If there is a group of people going together, then the permission can be sought on behalf of the group by the team leader.”²

This is an example of how to acknowledge the caretakers:

“I ask permission from the caretakers of this sea country. I am with [name of group] and I am here to ...[type of activity]. I will be working here for X days.”

When leaving the area, it is also polite to thank the caretakers, such as by saying “Thank you for looking after us today.”³

CONFIDENTIALITY AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

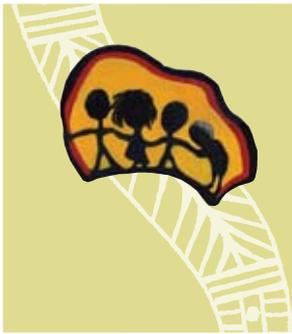
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have traditional customs, stories and sacred information that may or may not be passed on to you – and where they are, they are given in trust. That trust requires that you respect that confidentiality.

To breach community confidentiality by translating, reproducing or passing on any information, practices or cultural products without permission would be devastating to your project and erase any trust developed during your engagement or consultation process.

MEN’S AND WOMEN’S BUSINESS

‘Men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’ are very important and sensitive issues within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. This information should only be talked about or negotiated and consulted on by people of the relevant gender. Information relating to ‘women’s business’ should be stored in such a way that only women have access to it, and information that is ‘men’s business’ stored in such a way that only men have access to it.

As such, when conducting research or consultation, it is important to plan ahead as to whether you will need both male and female researchers, consultants or project workers, in the event that matters concerning men’s or women’s business may be raised.



TIP:

If you are asked to leave a meeting or consultation because the business of the opposite gender is to be discussed – **don't take it personally.**

You may also be asked to leave a meeting where customary or traditional knowledge may be discussed and it is deemed inappropriate for it to be raised in your presence.

USING ARTWORK

Displaying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and posters depicting such art on a service's offices can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel welcomed and acknowledged. This can also be the case with artwork used in promotional material, posters, publications and other resources (See Chapter 5 for more information on this). There are, however, a number of factors to consider in using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and art practices are generally tied to culturally and historically significant practices and beliefs. For example, some artists re-tell stories of their Dreaming and their country that they have custodial rights to, while others may draw on traditional imagery, symbols and stories to communicate contemporary themes and ideas.

As such, artworks can be part of deeply held cultural and spiritual practices and, as a form of traditional knowledge, be bound by protocols governing the protection of traditional knowledge (see the section on traditional knowledge above). Some artists may choose to make public depictions of Dreaming stories without revealing deeper levels of knowledge or meaning associated with it.

Artworks may also be contemporary expressions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture or individual experiences, emotions or beliefs, traditional or otherwise.

If services wish to use Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artworks in the design of promotional material, resources, website, logos, signage or information and educational material, the following issues should be considered:

1. Permission and acknowledgment

Seek permission to use the artwork from the artist (and copyright holder, if different) to ensure the artwork is not used in ways that breach traditional knowledge, such as restrictions on what the artwork is used for, who can see the works, or who has access to them.

The artist and/or copyright holder (and at times the photographer whose image you are reproducing) should be acknowledged as the artist wherever the artwork is used. This is a legal requirement, but also a sign of respect for the artist.



2. Purchasing artwork and a licence to use artwork

When using artwork, ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are appropriately remunerated for the use of the artwork, and their intellectual property rights are respected. If purchasing original art to display:

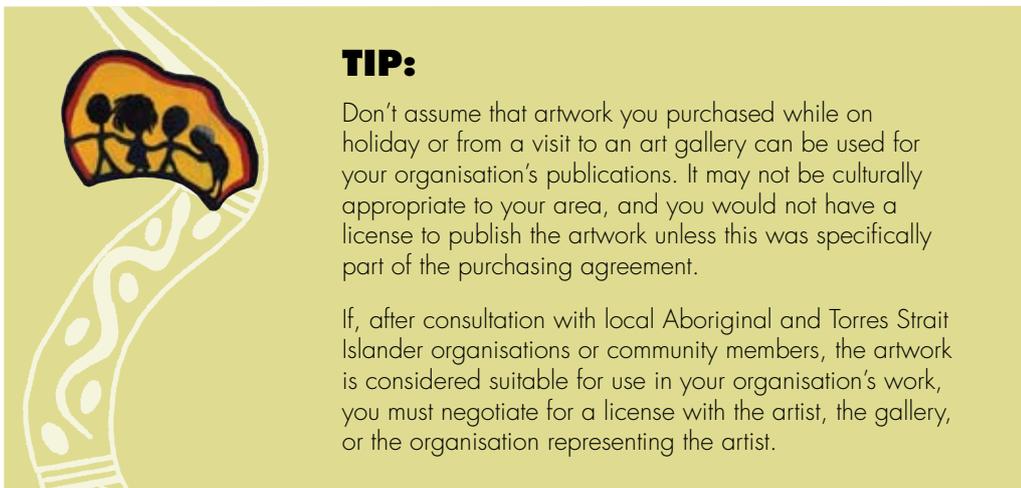
- pay a reasonable price directly to the artist, or
- work with a reputable or community-controlled gallery or art centre.

Owning art and having a license to use it are separate things. **Purchasing an artwork does not give you the right to reproduce it.** If you wish to do so, you must also pay for a license to publish the artwork in other media.

- A license must be negotiated with the artist, gallery, or artists' co-operative or organisation.
- You may purchase a licence to reproduce artwork without actually purchasing the artwork, by similar negotiation.

3. Choosing appropriate artwork for use in your service

Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork frequently draws on local styles, techniques and traditions, not all artwork may be suitable for use in the area your service operates in. It is a good idea to purchase artwork from local artists especially for your organisation's publications and resources. It is also a good way to support local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in your community or region.



TIP:

Don't assume that artwork you purchased while on holiday or from a visit to an art gallery can be used for your organisation's publications. It may not be culturally appropriate to your area, and you would not have a license to publish the artwork unless this was specifically part of the purchasing agreement.

If, after consultation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations or community members, the artwork is considered suitable for use in your organisation's work, you must negotiate for a license with the artist, the gallery, or the organisation representing the artist.



4. Commissioning artwork

You can also commission a local artist to prepare an artwork to a brief specific to the needs of a project, initiative, or publication or set of resources. Clear information should be provided in the brief to the artist, including:

- any expectations of the artist;
- the purpose of the artwork;
- how it will be used or published, including who will see the artwork or publications;
- what the project or publication is about; and
- clarification on who will have copyright over the art.



TIP:

Ensure that when commissioning artwork for use in your organisation's publications and promotional material, the fee includes a license to reproduce the art in other media. Support an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist who is local to your area, or work with a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts co-operative or organisation.

Valuing Art, Respecting Culture: Protocols for working with the Australian Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, published by National Association for the Visual Arts⁴ in 2001, sets out protocols both to guide non-Indigenous people in their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities, and to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to define their rights.

At the time of writing, the Australia Council for the Arts and the Department for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts were pursuing a process of developing a commercial code of conduct for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art industry that is designed to "strengthen fair and ethical trade in the Indigenous visual art industry." The draft code of conduct "specifies a set of minimum standards for dealers, agents and artists, and defines terms of trade, rights and responsibilities for the sale and management of artworks."⁵

Those seeking to commission, purchase, license or reproduce artwork by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist for publications, resources or promotional material are advised to consult the draft or any final Code of Conduct for guidance.



EXAMPLE: THE STORY OF THE ARTWORK IN THIS PUBLICATION

The original artwork used in this publication was commissioned by SNAICC specifically for it. SNAICC identified the Aboriginal artist who created the artwork, Megan Cadd, as someone to work with based on her reputation as an artist, samples of her other artworks and her track-record as an artist able and willing to work to a brief.

In briefing the artist, SNAICC outlined:

- the purpose of this resource;
- its target audience;
- the purpose and proposed uses of the artwork in the design and production of this resource;
- background information on the work of Family Relationship Services;
- the aim of this project to support such services to work more effectively and respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and organisations;
- the desire for colours that evoked both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
- themes and images that evoked working with families in all their forms.

SNAICC negotiated a fee to purchase the artwork on commission, including a license fee to reproduce the artwork for publication purposes.

As part of our standard practice, SNAICC clearly acknowledges the artist as the creator of the artwork, including a reference to her tribal identity, and documents the story the artist identifies with the artwork in the front pages of the publication.



TIP:

Using Rock Art

It is not appropriate to reproduce photographs or images of Aboriginal rock art unless permission has been expressly provided.

Depending on its location, Aboriginal rock art may be governed by state, territory or federal heritage or conservation laws.

Such artwork may be covered by copyright, intellectual property rights, and traditional knowledge. Note that copyright may also apply to images and photographs of rock art.

Some rock art is deemed secret or only suitable for viewing by either only men or women, or people of a certain level of initiation, or is found on sacred sites.

It is not appropriate to publish or disseminate information in or about artworks bound by traditional knowledge protocols.

USE OF LANGUAGE

Protocols similar to those involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional knowledge and intellectual property also cover the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

If your non-Indigenous organisation, agency or government department wishes to use an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander word, phrase or term to identify or name a publication, resource, program or service targeted at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, they must seek permission and input from a relevant Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisation or person recognised as having the authority to provide that input or permission.

Similarly if you wish to have resources or display material (such as posters) translated into, or produced with text in, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.

It is important to bear in mind that:

- the language used is specific to the local traditional owners of the area in which your agency is working/located.
- it may not be appropriate to use the language of a local community in material intended for a statewide or national audience.
- it can require time and effort – even for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation – to work with Elders or others with recognised cultural authority to gain permission for language to be used, or to provide the appropriate content in language.
- recognised cultural authorities can include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are highly regarded linguists, researchers and educators,



traditional owners, Elders, or those initiated in traditional knowledge and others recognised to hold cultural knowledge.

- it is appropriate to pay a fee to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation, Elder and/or recognised cultural authorities for the contribution of their traditional knowledge expertise and intellectual property (see 'Fee for Service' above).

Contact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, cultural co-operatives or language organisations in your state or area for assistance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.



TIP:

It is not appropriate to simply take a word or phrase considered suitable from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander dictionary or linguistic resource for use.

Seek Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community input or participation in translating or developing community-specific material – this is an opportunity to work with a relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation. The organisation can assist in providing cultural expertise or organise community members and Elders to participate and contribute to the process of producing text, resources, or material in language.

Seek assistance and advice from your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations on how to correctly pronounce the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander names of organisations or services operating in your area.

VISITING REMOTE COMMUNITIES

It is important to respect and observe any protocols concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's land rights and cultural practices, especially in the context of community self-management of lands and when visiting communities in remote, and some regional, areas.

1. Permits and permission

You may require a permit from a local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation to enter some areas. For example permits and a Visiting Officer Notification (VON) is required to enter all 73 prescribed communities in the Northern Territory. However, even if permits are not required to enter the area you are visiting, it is an important courtesy to request permission to visit some areas or lands. Do not assume, ask.

When arranging to visit remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, contact the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled council, co-operative, or other relevant community-controlled organisation to find out if you need permission or a permit to enter the area **before** you visit.



This is also important to ensure that a local organisation knows you are coming and what you are going to do in their community.

2. Prohibitions and restrictions

Find out what prohibitions or restrictions may be in place in a community – for instance, is it a 'dry' area (i.e. no alcohol is allowed)?

Get advice on whether any parts of the surrounding country are restricted to various people.

- Certain areas may be sacred sites, or the sites of men's or women's business, and access restricted accordingly. This can be seasonal, so ask.
- There may be practices that are discouraged, and requiring personal responsibility. For example, the traditional owners of the land where Uluru is located discourage visitors from climbing the rock.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dr Linda Ford, quoted in 'CDU Indigenous Knowledge guide', Charles Darwin University, 2008, www.cdu.edu.au/library/subjectguides/saiks/indigenous.html Accessed 3 June 2009.
- 2 CRC Torres, 'Guidelines for Researchers', For CRC Torres Researchers, www.crctorres.com/forcrctorres/index.htm Accessed 13 March 2009.
- 3 CRC Torres, 'Guidelines for Researchers', For CRC Torres Researchers, www.crctorres.com/forcrctorres/index.htm Accessed 13 March 2009.
- 4 Mellor, Doreen, & Janke, Terri, *Valuing Art, Respecting Culture: Protocols for working with the Australian Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, National Association for the Visual Arts, Potts Point (NSW), 2001.
- 5 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Consultation on draft Indigenous art code of conduct', News item, 18 December 2008, www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/news_items/consultation_on_draft_indigenous_art_code_of_conduct accessed 5 May 2009.



CHAPTER 5:

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in culturally competent ways

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter outlines the importance of non-Indigenous organisations developing their cultural competence as the key to offering culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Key factors of cultural competence include:

- Respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination,
- Working in respectful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations – as service partners, not service competitors,
- Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations in respectful and culturally appropriate ways,
- Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in non-Indigenous organisations and creating culturally supportive workplaces.

This chapter builds on the knowledge and learning of the previous chapters, and provides an important foundation for the following chapters on developing culturally appropriate services and using Action Research Evaluation to assist your organisation's work.

INTRODUCTION

Within the community services sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are often recognised as a high priority within government program guidelines and policy. Often, however, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families find that in a non-Indigenous service setting, ways of delivering programs, assumptions about child rearing and family kinship networks and inexperience in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families result in them being excluded from services.



There is an important role for existing non-Indigenous services and government agencies to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with appropriate support and assistance. As citizens, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a right to expect that any agency funded by government to provide family support or other general assistance to the local population will provide services that are accessible and relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. This requires these services to develop culturally competent and relevant programs and practices.

Government agencies also need to play a role in supporting community service agencies to improve their practices in taking a strengths-based approach and being culturally appropriate in their dealings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Government agencies also need to acknowledge the work being done by community agencies to improve and strengthen their practices.

Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are highly localised it is also important to acknowledge that what works in one area or community may not necessarily work in others. There needs to be meaningful, respectful, consultative and equal working relationships at the local level between government agencies, non-government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to ensure that services and programs offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families meet local needs and understand cultural differences and community circumstances.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND BUILDING A FRAMEWORK OF RESPECT

Non-Indigenous services have expressed uncertainty about their role and responsibilities towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At times they have assumed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are being supported and serviced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services and that any attempt by them to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families will be seen as intrusive. Within government departments delivering relatively small Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific programs, there is concern about the ability to meet increasing demand and remaining vulnerable to intense scrutiny and review.

Supporting the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop and offer the services they require and to run the organisations that provide these services does not preclude non-Indigenous services from taking a role in the provision of these services.

Non-Indigenous services can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination by assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to build their capacity to provide necessary services. In working together, non-Indigenous services can provide leadership in practice, governance, service delivery and service innovation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. In turn, they can strengthen their expertise and practice in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and enrich their organisations' understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination requires a commitment to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations in a culturally respectful manner, to work in respectful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and to be responsive to the community's needs and aspirations.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

The following key principles can be applied to ensure early intervention, child and family support, and social and emotional well-being programs can best meet the interests, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities:¹

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have a right to expect that all government-funded agencies will be required to work with them and their children in a culturally respectful manner
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should be able to choose from a variety of culturally respectful programs delivered by competent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and culturally respectful non-Indigenous government and non-government agencies
- Government funding bodies should work respectfully and proactively with SNAICC and other stakeholders to expand the scope, capacity and number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers and assist non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers to develop and sustain culturally competent practices in their work with families and children
- Non-Indigenous community-based services that have strong relationships with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and work within a framework of respect, collaboration and negotiated partnership are more able to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- This framework of respect should extend to non-Indigenous community-based services working for long-term systemic change to strengthen the capacity, scope and reach of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community services.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURAL COMPETENCE

To develop and deliver high quality, culturally appropriate services, it is essential that non-Indigenous community services increase their organisational and worker cultural competence.

This is important because if a service does not meet the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, it can result in them going away dissatisfied and seeking support elsewhere – or even not using the service in the first place. It can also exacerbate the continuing trauma and grief suffered by people and their communities. It also means that such organisations are failing in their fundamental obligation to provide appropriate services to all Australian residents and citizens.

This approach is not just about providing services to more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is about ensuring that such services assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build their capacity and sustain their strengths to support healthy relationships, families and communities, and to raise their children to be strong in their culture.



WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural competence can be defined as:

“a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural settings.”²

For workers, it means having the understanding, values, knowledge, skills, behaviour and professional practice needed to work effectively with people from cultures other than their own. For organisations, it means having – and implementing – organisational policies and protocols, services and programs, and practices that are culturally appropriate to people from different cultures. It also means providing guidance and support to staff to work in culturally competent ways.

For services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, being culturally competent means working within a framework that recognises and respects the central importance of culture and identity to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and working in ways that safeguard the importance of culture, and supports their capacity to strengthen the place of culture and identity in promoting social and emotional well-being. This means:

- providing programs and services that are culturally appropriate;
- being responsive to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations in ensuring the services are effectively delivered; and
- playing a role in strengthening the capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.

Mutual understanding, respect, collaboration and partnership between non-Indigenous community services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities are the keys to a non-Indigenous organisation’s capacity to develop its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence.

The foundation for these partnerships is a commitment to and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.³

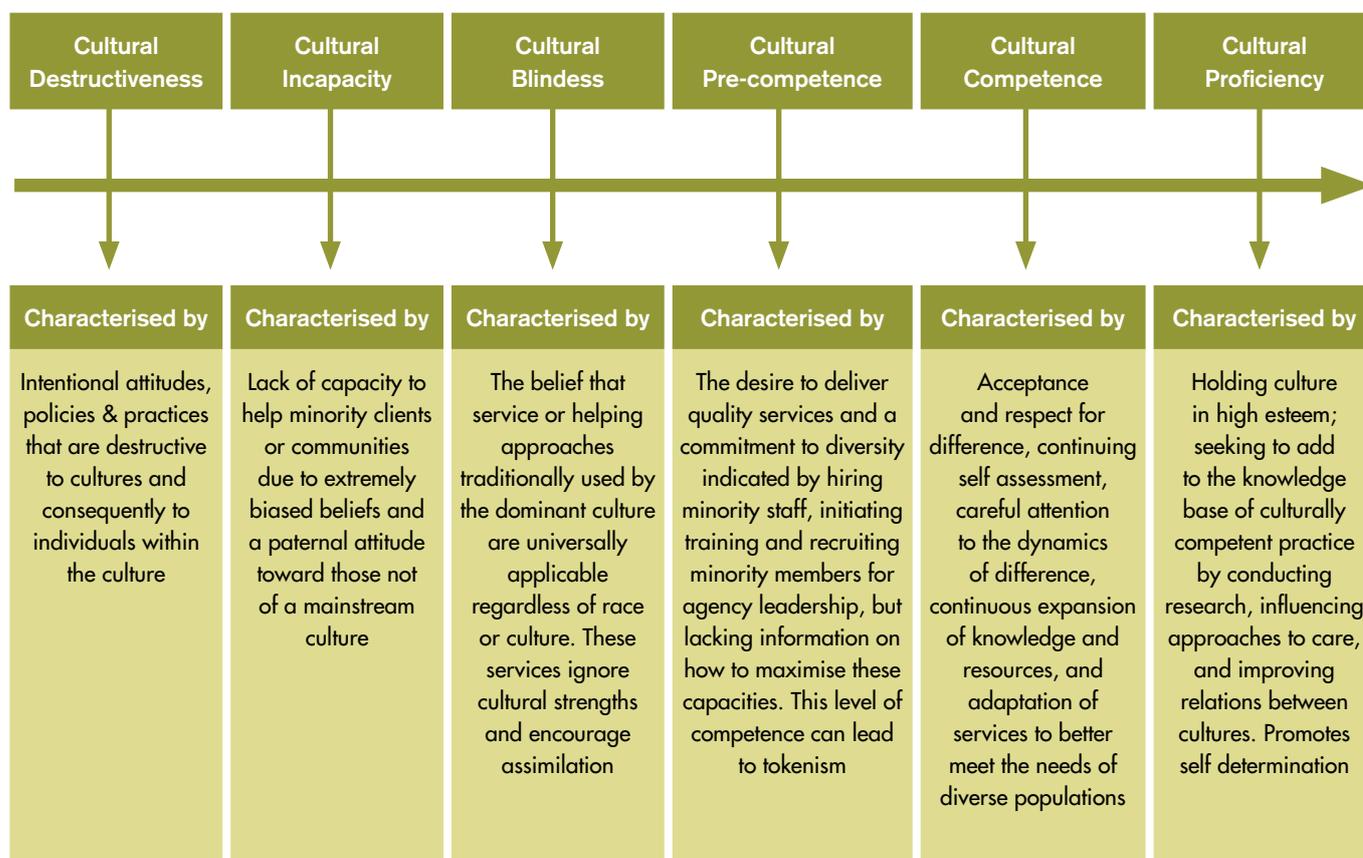
THE CONTINUUM TOWARD CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The chart below demonstrates a continuum of cultural competence. Expressed as a continuum, it ranges from Cultural Destructiveness, where an organisation’s practices or policies are intentionally destructive of a community’s culture (as seen in the policies and practices that led to the Stolen Generations), across the spectrum to Cultural Competence and then Cultural Proficiency.

The continuum allows us to perceive how community services and their staff can take a graduated journey toward cultural competence in their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families. It provides organisations an opportunity to reflect on their service delivery and practices in relation to the continuum – both historically and currently – and how they can progress towards greater cultural competence.



CULTURAL COMPETENCE CONTINUUM



Source: This diagram draws from work done by VACCA for the *Aboriginal Cultural Competency Framework* and Muriel Bamblett's Keynote Speech at SNAICC 2007 National Conference in Adelaide, which in turn drew from work by Terry Cross of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (US).⁴

It is important that the concept of 'cultural competence' should not be confused with the notion of 'competency based training' in the vocational education and training sector, where discrete skills and abilities can be assessed against specific, industry-agreed 'competencies'. Instead, it is a constant, ongoing process for non-Indigenous organisations and staff to develop their cultural competence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Staff cultural awareness or sensitivity training sessions and other activities or initiatives are only part of an ongoing process that includes regular reflection, learning, consultation, and the development, review and implementation of policies, programs, professional practice and staff training.

PRINCIPLES FOR PROVIDING CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES

These principles can assist your organisation to develop and improve its cultural competence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:⁵

- Respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as a source of strength to people, families and communities.
- Recognise the continuing impact of the history and legacies of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.
- Recognise the strengths, resilience and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



- Recognise the importance of the wider family network in parenting children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other related cultural differences in child rearing practices compared to non-Indigenous communities.
- Commit to informed and meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement in the design, development and delivery of services.
- Ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities have a sense of ownership and leadership in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of programs targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Understand that non-Indigenous services should not compete with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services but work with them to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children and families, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services having a recognised leadership role.
- Acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations are in unequal situations in forming partnerships with non-Indigenous organisations.



TIP:

There are a number of steps and initiatives your organisation can take to adopt and promote cultural competence.

- Seek out and involve appropriate representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in program design and delivery.
- Ensure that all staff receive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training.
- Develop cultural guidelines for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These guidelines can include how your organisation will observe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols (see Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols' for more information) and reflect your organisation's policies adopting values and principles such as those identified above.
- Prominently display your organisation's guiding principles for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations in your offices.
- Non-Indigenous organisations can initiate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory reference or advisory groups where they are unable to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.
- Develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific reporting and evaluation mechanisms. This would have major implications for non-Indigenous organisations in terms of program design and funding criteria.
- Conduct an audit of your organisation's cultural competence.



AUDITING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Audit your organisation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence. A useful *starting point* for an audit is how well your organisation:

- adopts and applies the principles listed in this chapter;
- applies the tips and other ideas identified here;
- establishes clear guidelines and policies for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and people;
- observes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols in practices and activities;
- develops effective and respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (see the section below);
- offers culturally appropriate programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- incorporates input and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in program development and delivery.

Rather than just a one-off audit, incorporate activities and reflection that allow your organisation to continually assess how well your organisation is working on developing its cultural competence.



TIP:

A cultural competence audit can be incorporated into your organisation's Action Research Evaluation framework. See Chapter 7 on Action Research Evaluation for ideas on how to formulate research questions and activities that can assist you in conducting such an audit.

Various resources listed at the end of this publication can provide more information on cultural competence, including detailed ideas for steps towards developing cultural competence.

As a good starting point, your organisation can also pursue a Reconciliation Action Plan, which can be approached as an ongoing process of reflection, evaluation and action to achieve identified goals for your organisation to advance reconciliation between non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. (See the section 'A matter of leadership' below.)



Engaging with organisations and communities

RESPECTFUL PARTNERSHIPS

A first step toward effective, culturally respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is to build relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.

The key to delivering services and supporting capacity building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations. Together you can identify what services are already available, identify what is needed, identify how needs can best be met, and identify what role your organisation or service can play in providing services and programs that assist in meeting those needs.

Partnerships may be formal, involve contractual or financial obligations and exchanges, or involve semi-formal or informal arrangements. Informal arrangements could include sharing information and resources through in-kind support; expertise exchanges; serving on advisory groups, boards or steering committees; co-locating a staff member at either service's offices; developing joint protocols for referring clients to each other for relevant specialist services; and forming networking relationships built around mutual trust, respect and knowledge sharing.

With respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, you can draw on their expertise, experience, leadership and deep connections with the community to allow you to work together to develop well-informed and community-led programs and services. Bear in mind that:

- Needs should be identified from within or by the communities themselves – it allows them to take ownership of the process, and ensures their needs and aspirations are met. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are in the best position to do this.
- It is essential to avoid the replication of programs and services, or repeating mistakes previously made. Very often the board members and managers of organisations have already witnessed previous initiatives that have failed or succeeded and understand why, or have many ideas for what can and needs to be done.
- New programs and services offered to communities should strengthen the capacity of individual community members and the community's organisations, rather than weaken them and take decision-making and power away from them.
- Progress needs to be at a pace set by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations – not by the expectations of tender processes or funding bodies to have impromptu or 'out of the box' partnerships created to meet funding application requirements and deadlines.
- It is also important to consider how other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations can be linked into new or existing programs and services – especially those that are identified as a priority for working with, such as early childhood services.
- Examine and assess to what extent your organisation currently works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, networks and people. Find out what your organisation has done previously and what worked and didn't work about it, and what your organisation learned from those experiences.



It is through these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that you can build awareness, trust and connections with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community itself.

When working with these organisations, there may be situations where an organisation may not yet have the capacity to articulate what it needs, or develop and deliver the services that meet identified needs. An important aspect of working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is promoting capacity building that works both ways and involves learning from each other. Capacity building can involve your service supporting an organisation to identify the needs or service gaps in the community, develop culturally appropriate programs and, in return, learning a great deal about the community and what the local organisation has to offer.

KEYS TO BUILDING SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship building and developing strategies that support and sustain culturally respectful relationships should be considered the cornerstone to successful culturally competent engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. It is important to recognise that such relationships take time to develop. The strategies outlined below, while neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, could be helpful.⁶

Be committed to developing strong and equal partnerships between your agency and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

It must be acknowledged that because of the history of colonisation and the under-resourcing of their organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations are frequently in an unequal position when forming partnerships with non-Indigenous organisations. As such, every effort should be made to tip the scales of inequality and strike a balance through the development of strong and equal partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and mainstream health and other services.

Be committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement at the beginning of any new partnership, service or initiative

Make sure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations are involved from the beginning of any proposed new service, project, program or policy development. This will ensure that there is a sense of community ownership over the process and will maximise chances for the success of any initiative and/or partnership. This principle should extend throughout the duration of the process and includes scoping, implementation and delivery, and evaluation processes.



TIP:

Reflect on your organisation’s motivations for collaborating with and forming partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations:

- Is it because a funding tender requirement indicates that you have to work in partnership with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation or community?
- Or are you demonstrating a commitment to supporting capacity building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- How willing is your organisation to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations?
- Are you clear that it will involve learning and change at your end?

A MATTER OF LEADERSHIP

A community services organisation needs to outline at its board level the direction, rationale and principles for providing culturally competent services to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and for establishing relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

It is important to have such clear and authoritative leadership from an organisation’s board and management or leadership team. Such leadership is particularly important to enable an organisation to recognise that:

- the organisation needs to acknowledge any involvement by it or its parent entities in past practices under previous policies of child removal and the impact of such practices on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, particularly as a crucial step in pursuing a journey of healing and reconciliation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community;
- the organisation has a responsibility to do all it can to support local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities;
- improving its knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing and the local community will improve the organisation’s professional practice, strengthen it and benefit all of its clients;
- it is not about ‘helping’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but working together to develop sustainable, stronger communities.

These need to be evident through all levels of an organisation’s leadership and practice, and amongst its entire staff.



TIP:

There are a number of ways the board of a Family Relationship Service could express its leadership:

Endorse SNAICC's 'Principles for justice in child well-being and protection' – SNAICC invites all organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to endorse its Policy Statement and demonstrate how they are putting it into practice.

See www.snaicc.asn.au/policy

Initiate and support the implementation of a Reconciliation Action Plan, an initiative of Reconciliation Australia – a Reconciliation Action Plan is "a tool to help your organisation build positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and gives you a format for exploring how reconciliation can advance your organisational objectives."⁷

For more information see: www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-action-plans

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TAKES TIME

There is no time frame to building healthy relationships. Whether your service is new to a local community, does not have a previous or current relationship with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation, or is beginning to establish relationships, it is important to put in the time it takes to build relationships.

It takes time to establish trust, allow ideas and plans to emerge and develop, and for organisations to consult with their boards, community leaders and Elders.

- Work towards building relationships and don't expect organisations to be accepting straight away;
- Be open minded and flexible in your practice – be responsive to feedback;
- Realise that partner organisations may be busy or experience delays – these can result from excessive workloads, insecure funding, or their need to respond to issues in the community as they emerge;
- Realise that organisations may need time to develop capacity to support or participate in the partnership – including in terms of staffing, funding or resources.

Don't be surprised if it takes some time before staff in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations take your interest seriously. Many have witnessed a number of previous overtures from non-Indigenous organisations that have gone nowhere, have seen various partnerships and networks falter, or seen outreach services or programs offered previously but have subsequently been discontinued due to poor continuity or lack of funding. The key is to take the time and continue to develop the relationship over the long term.



“I guess people are naturally wary about services visiting for the first time, wondering whether they will return, have the capacity to do anything useful in the longer term, and have the grace to work in collaboration with all of the myriad other services [in] their [community].”⁸

It also takes time to maintain and cultivate even the most well-established relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations. An adequate investment of time is required to keep lines of communication open, and to avoid pitfalls in misunderstanding. Furthermore, some relationships and partnerships can be at risk of some fatigue or difficulty, including when funding or grants for particular joint programs or services end or where there have been changes in leadership or direction in either organisation. Commitment, perseverance and some creativity are needed to keep initiatives, joint programs and other forms of cooperation going in this context.

SOME TIPS FOR FIRST STEPS

1. Get to know your local community

As a first step, getting to know your community is an essential part of establishing trust and credibility with the community.

If you don't already know, it would be useful for you to find out:

- who are the traditional owners of the land your town, service and community are on;
- what other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or groups live in your location;
- what are the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in your area;
- what services are currently being offered to the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community; and
- what towns, suburbs or areas are commonly favoured by the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Make an assessment of what relationships or connections your organisation – or staff within your organisation – already have with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and what has been learned from these connections.

2. Initiate contacts and relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations

Arrange to meet local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, including the land council, health service or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit of the local TAFE or University. The larger primary services organisations (such as the health or legal service) can be a good first point of call in assisting and guiding you in this process.



CONNECTING COMMUNITIES – NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN’S SERVICES DIRECTORY

SNAICC has an online national services directory covering over 5,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and other organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families that is invaluable in finding and contacting relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations.

The *Connecting Communities – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Services Directory* covers a range of services from early childhood services, playgroups and preschools to child and family welfare services, out-of-home care services, Aboriginal legal and health services and resource and training organisations. It can be found via SNAICC’s website at: services.snaicc.asn.au/

SNAICC has also published a print version of the services directory with a targeted selection of the services listed in the online directory. Also called *Connecting Communities – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Services Directory*, it can be purchased from SNAICC. For details see: www.snaicc.asn.au/publications

3. Let your local community get to know you

Allowing the local community organisation to get to know you – and your organisation – is also crucial. Good relationships work both ways. Take steps to build your, and your organisation’s, profile in the local community.

This can include:

- attending local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community sporting events; community events, and cultural activities open to the public;
- holding information stalls representing your organisation at such events;
- holding activities and events to mark Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander celebrations and inviting members of the community to attend, speak or perform or conduct a ‘Welcome to Country’ ceremony (see Chapter 4 ‘Cultural Protocols’ for more information);
- participating in joint working groups, consultation groups or organising committees on initiatives involving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community;
- talking to local organisations about ways your organisation can support their community events and activities; and
- speaking up about important issues such as welfare reform, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s rights and the needs of children.

This will allow the community and its organisations to know a little more about you and your organisation, but importantly know that your organisation is supportive of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community’s concerns and aspirations. This is an important step in building trust in and respect for your organisation amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and members of the community.



4. Establish a common purpose

It is important to emphasise the common purpose or interests between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and yourself and demonstrate that you are not out to hinder but to work together. If a sense of commitment and honesty is not achieved then the organisation may not continue discussions, or may do so out of courtesy but with no real interest.

However, be down to earth, honest and identify tangible, practical things – never promise or commit to something you may not be able to deliver.

5. Make an investment of time

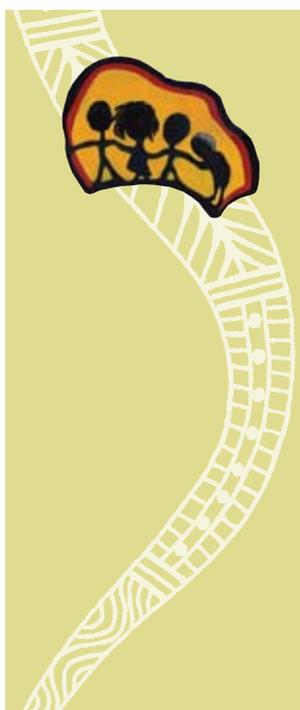
It takes a significant investment of time and perseverance to initiate, develop and strengthen relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations (See the section ‘Building relationships takes time’ above).

It is important to be aware of this at the start of any process of relationship building, and avoid unrealistic expectations from the start.

6. Stay in contact

Staying in regular contact with organisations you are working with is essential. It is important to keep relevant people in partner organisations aware of developments or potential problems in each organisation and issues that may arise in the community.

The more effort you put into keeping people informed and part of the loop the easier it will be to develop common goals and outcomes. It also helps to maintain good relations, and helps demonstrate your integrity and develop trust.



TIP:

To gain the support of a community, you need to demonstrate you have their respect and trust.

Take a strengths-based approach. It is important to focus not just on the negative issues at hand (the ‘deficits’ in a community), but on things that are occurring within the community that are relevant and advantageous to the community.

This is consistent with a ‘holistic’ approach to health and well-being and could include issues such as strengthening and rebuilding, healing, self-sufficiency, reconciliation, self-management, forming partnerships and ultimately creating positive opportunities for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Find out what the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation you are developing a relationship with wants to do and how you may support them to build on their strengths.



CONSULTATION

Consultation needs to start before the commencement of any project or initiative – not as an afterthought. It should also allow time for feedback and should continue through every stage – from project planning through to evaluation.

In working on projects or initiatives with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is very important that you try to make sure there is local involvement throughout the process, such as by:

- including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in advisory groups;
- establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory group; and
- engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander project officers, consultants, specialist support, artists etc.

Through your networking processes you should have gained contacts and established relationships with people who you can work with and who will advise you on what might be appropriate.

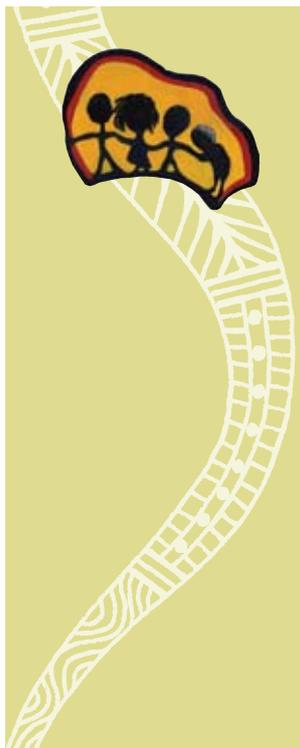
Seek to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/workers from the community as far as possible. Projects should have an allocated payment within their budgets to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people OR remunerate community organisation representatives for their time, intellectual and cultural property, and expertise.

Be aware that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have had negative experiences as a result of being intensively researched, written about and consulted in the past – and there may be scepticism about the consultation and engagement process you are undertaking. Acknowledge and work through this patiently.

Some in communities may view the term ‘consultation’ negatively as a result of:

- consultation fatigue and a view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are the most consulted, researched group in Australia with limited outcomes to show for it; and
- negative past experience with poorly managed consultative processes and/or with service providers and government agencies generally.

It may be appropriate to develop specific strategies to counter this such as linking with existing consultations or fora. More importantly, make sure you have something concrete to offer. Follow through by acting on what you learn and communicating this along the way to those who have been involved in the process. And, crucially, value and respect the role and contribution of the community members and community consultation.



TIP:

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on mainstream committees and reference groups

Where there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on non-Indigenous committees, boards or groups, respect and consideration should be taken into account of issues such as:

- language – use clear and straightforward language; avoid using jargon and unexplained acronyms.
- responses – silence does **not** mean acceptance!
- distance – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may need to travel long distances to attend meetings.
- consultation – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may wish to consult further with other members of their communities or organisations before making decisions or commitments. Allow time for this.

For more information and tips on effective cross-cultural communication, see Chapter 3.

DRAWING ON LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND LOCAL EXPERTISE

While most members of a community will have local and cultural knowledge, they may not feel qualified, or be in a position, to comment in an informed way confidently on juvenile justice, kindergarten programs, or maternal and child health (for example). Find out from people what their interests and areas of expertise are, or what matters they are interested in increasing their involvement or capacity in.

Local community leaders are frequently on numerous organisation boards, advisory groups, consultative committees and working groups, and may also feel overwhelmed by the expectations on them, so be understanding if you get a 'No'. Ask if they can recommend alternatives.

Make an effort to draw on the existing expertise within your local community – local sensitivities can be upset if Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from outside the local community are brought in to act as support specialists, advisors or consultants.

However, the community is just as likely to resent tokenism.

Your organisation is more likely to secure the support and cooperation of the local community if processes are clear and transparent and if you seek input from the local community early when inviting expressions of interest for engaging staff, consultants, advisors or support specialists. A local community will recognise the importance of having the best person to perform a role based on their ability and expertise, or their neutrality in local community issues, to the success of the initiative.



SUGGESTIONS FOR JOINT WORK, NETWORKS OR PARTNERSHIPS

There are a number of things you can do to initiate joint work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. This can range from providing direct and in-kind support to them, to exchanging outreach services, to entering partnerships. These can either be informal or formalised via Memoranda of Understanding or protocols. Following are some suggestions for building and maintaining the relationship:

- Offer your facilities or services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to hold their meetings, workshops and other activities.
- Establish referral protocols with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service organisations operating in your region to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients access to a range of other culturally appropriate support services.
- Arrange for outreach programs to be provided at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, and vice versa.
- Provide services jointly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the area.
- Offer information and group activities jointly with staff from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.
- Deliver relevant staff training and professional development sessions for staff from your and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation jointly.
- Cultivate a culture of cooperation and networking in professional practice.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR CREATING A CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE AND SERVICE

There are many things you can do to make your service's offices a welcoming place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether they be clients, community partners or staff.

- **Display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags in your office.** Whether they are large or small, displaying the flags can demonstrate your respect for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and their culture.
- **Prominently display a sign acknowledging the traditional owners of the land your organisation's office is on.** These signs usually read 'We are proud to acknowledge the (name of local community who are the traditional owners) as the traditional owners of the land we are on'. Where you are unsure of which group are the traditional owners of your area or a specific sign is unavailable, an alternative sign can read: 'We are proud to acknowledge the Aboriginal (or Torres Strait Islander where relevant) people as the traditional owners of these lands'.

Such signs are available from organisations such as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR – www.antar.org.au) or local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

- **Display posters featuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander topics and people in your offices.** It is heartening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to see people like them represented in a positive light in photographs, posters and brochures.



- **Display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of art in your service's offices.** You can be supporting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists while creating an inviting atmosphere.
- **Participate in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events and celebrations,** such as NAIDOC Week, the commemoration of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, and the Bringing of the Light Festival.
- **Use traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and designs in its promotional and educational material** intended for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, it is important to ensure that you respect the copyright and intellectual property of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and creative workers who created the artwork. For more on this, see Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols' for information on using artwork.
- **Source and use resources related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and children.** It is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to resources, community educational material and brochures that are targeted at them specifically. It is not enough to provide resources targeted at Culturally and Linguistically Distinct (CALD) audiences to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, even where such resources are rebadged or redesigned. Some may feel insulted or aggrieved at this. You can obtain culturally appropriate resources from other providers or resource agencies, engage an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or organisation to produce such resources, or work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in creating them.

WALK THE TALK

It is important not to be tokenistic in undertaking efforts such as those listed previously. It is not enough to add a 'dot art' painting to the cover of a brochure originally intended for a non-Indigenous audience, for instance. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have had negative experiences with such attempts, and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a level of scepticism of such attempts by government agencies or non-Indigenous non-government services. It can be damaging to your service's reputation and relationship with communities if your efforts are perceived as tokenistic.

Further, while decorating your office with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, posters, artwork and signs is an important first step in creating an inviting and welcoming atmosphere for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is not sufficient in itself.

It is essential to take the next steps from 'talking the talk' to 'walking the talk'. Part of this is how you forge relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, how you demonstrate your commitment to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and how your organisation's programs and services are both welcoming and culturally appropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

To a large extent, it is about demonstrating how your organisation is culturally competent and willing to work together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STAFF

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in many communities have indicated that they are often not comfortable dealing with non-Indigenous services unless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are delivering the programs. However, one of the challenges that non-Indigenous community services face is recruiting – and retaining – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers can often feel isolated, estranged or misunderstood in the cultural and institutional settings of non-Indigenous organisations. There can also be a mismatch between the institutional or procedural requirements of a non-Indigenous organisation and the preference for informal, less structured approaches to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or in communities. It is important to be flexible to help deal with this, while still expecting and supporting staff to perform and thrive at a level appropriate to their role and skills.

Unfortunately, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers also frequently encounter racism and prejudice from fellow workers and non-Indigenous clients. It is important to be aware that these experiences can range from overt racism, such as derogatory name-calling, to the subtle but equally toxic prejudice and assumptions around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members and their work practices. This can include remarks or gossip about staff working hours, field visits, or leave for customary practices such as Sorry Business. Without transparency, education or cultural awareness, colleagues and supervisors can fail to recognise how much work Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are expected to do outside the office, the importance of outreach work, or the cultural obligations around matters such as bereavement or Sorry Business.

Non-Indigenous organisations need to be culturally competent to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and programs. It is the most effective way a non-Indigenous organisation can attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

To make employment a positive, successful and ongoing experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, non-Indigenous community service organisations and staff need to be aware of and appreciate both current and past Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history. It is also essential to support them to prevent burnout – making sure they have clinical supervision (where applicable), and that there are boundaries around their work. Their well-being is important.

By dealing with cultural issues, you can find better ways of working together effectively, without causing blame or guilt.

Some of the issues include:

- the diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community;
- the importance of family and community obligations; and
- the impact of past policies such as the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and the removal of children from their families which continue to affect the community.

Changing workplace culture is about making workplaces less isolating and overwhelming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. This is possible through formal and informal exchanges of knowledge, experience and perspectives within



the workplace, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, and through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness programs. Such exchanges can create an improved understanding of the issues that are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities as they:

- explore systematic disadvantage that has resulted from the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and culture;
- counter stereotyping;
- promote a greater understanding of the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage;
- improve the delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and
- seek opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to contribute to education training and employment programs within the organisation.

To attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to your workplace, you should consider:

- using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks to identify potential candidates;
- providing easily accessible information about the role, responsibilities and nature of the service agency;
- making sure you have a workplace culture that is accepting of different cultures and if it isn't, taking steps to address this;
- making sure job descriptions and selection criteria do not inadvertently discriminate, such as requiring tertiary qualifications when direct experience can in fact provide the necessary skills; and
- being proactive in identifying potential employees by initiating scholarships targeting Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander tertiary or secondary students.

STRATEGIES AND PRINCIPLES FOR SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STAFF

It may also assist to implement a number of strategies and principles:

- Give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, including Elders, a role in selection panels.
- Remote staff need adequate travel funds to visit communities frequently in order to build relationships. Visits also need to be lengthy in time. This includes ensuring travel is adequately budgeted for, staff have adequate travel allowance, and there is understanding in the organisation and amongst co-workers of the need for these trips. An implication of this is that agencies may need to employ extra staff to cover home office-based duties while others travel.
- Ensure employment policies are culturally appropriate, including allowing for adequate leave arrangements – especially for customary practices and obligations (this is important for Sorry Business and Torres Strait Islander bereavement protocols).



- Foster and encourage support networks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across various services, branches or sections of large organisations, or local support networks amongst staff from various non-Indigenous services in a town or region.
- Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mentors from outside the organisation to support staff. Enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners to *also* have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practice supervisors – e.g. for clinical supervision – from outside the organisation where needed.
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific professional development and training opportunities.
- Assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to find creative ways to document their work with clients and local communities to allow them, supervisors and the organisation to meet record keeping, documentation and reporting requirements.
- Support clear career progression for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff without setting up staff to fail.
- Support the development of professional and skilled staff by enabling them to pursue further education while working part time and recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on placements – there is a shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers, counsellors, and psychologists in Australia; what is your organisation doing to support the training of more?
- Include anti-racism and cultural awareness training regularly in professional development activities for *all* staff.



ENDNOTES

- 1 SNAICC identified these key principles in its policy document 'SNAICC Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy', 2008 www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/00208.pdf
- 2 Char Tong and Terry Cross, *Cross Cultural Partnerships for Child Abuse Prevention with Native American Communities*, Portland, Oregon, Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 1991, p. 12, quoted in Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2008, p. 23.
- 3 This section draws from Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2008, p. 23; and Muriel Bamblett, 'Protecting Culture and Protecting the Future for Our Children', Keynote Speech at SNAICC National Conference 2007, Adelaide, September 2007.
- 4 This chart is adapted from material developed by Terry Cross of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (US) and Muriel Bamblett of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and draws from material in VACCA, *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2008, p. 23; and in Muriel Bamblett, 'Protecting Culture and Protecting the Future for Our Children', Keynote Speech at the SNAICC National Conference 2007, Adelaide, September 2007.
- 5 SNAICC, 'Principles for justice in child well-being and protection', SNAICC Policy Statement, 2007
- 6 This section is drawn from material in Australian Government, Wodonga Institute of TAFE, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, and Mercy Health Service (Albury, NSW), *Providing culturally appropriate palliative care to indigenous Australians* [electronic resource]: resource kit [prepared for the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing by Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, Wodonga Institute of TAFE and Mercy Health Service Albury (Palliative Care)], Dept. of Health and Ageing, Canberra, 2004
- 7 Reconciliation Australia, 'What is a RAP?', *Reconciliation Action Plans*, Reconciliation Australia, www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-action-plans/what-is-a-rap accessed 6 April 2009
- 8 Martin, Graham, 'Editorial: On social and emotional wellbeing and Indigenous Australians', *AeJAMH: Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, Volume 7, Issue 3, November 2008, p. 3. www.auseinet.com/journal/vol7iss3/martin.pdf



CHAPTER 6:

Developing effective and culturally appropriate programs

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter outlines principles for and approaches to developing culturally appropriate family relationship programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These cover:

- Outreach programs and culturally safe locations
- Parenting programs
- Counselling
- Mediation and Family Dispute Resolution
- Working with children
- Working with adolescents

This chapter also highlights the importance of a holistic and strengths-based approach.

Drawing on the key principles of respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and family structures, understanding the social context of the communities and the learning in previous chapters, this chapter builds on the importance of cultural competence in non-Indigenous organisations outlined in Chapter 5.

The approaches outlined here can be applied to other services and programs.

INTRODUCTION

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should be able to access culturally relevant and appropriate programs delivered by a broad range of providers. There are two key factors in making this possible: one, community services should be culturally competent and two, services should deliver culturally appropriate programs in a respectful manner. In particular, there needs to be flexibility and support in allowing programs, particularly those with a focus on parenting and family support, to include relevant aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing values and practices.



Western approaches that focus on a negative, 'deficit' approach that ignores social, historical and cultural aspects, including resilience, "fail to recognise how profound and how pervasive ongoing loss is, or the contemporary consequences of transgenerational trauma".¹

In order to counter such cultural blindness, it is important for non-Indigenous services to build on people's, families' and communities' strengths, respect and reinforce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and cultural identity, and work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations.

PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

There are a number of principles that can guide the development and delivery of culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have different cultures and histories and in many instances different needs. These must be addressed by locally specific strategies best developed in consultation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations.

Following are some general principles drawn from SNAICC's policy paper, 'Guiding principles for children's well being and protection':²

- Recognition of the ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families of policy and practices in previous generations that separated children from their families, and families from their lands and country.
- Acceptance that trust and honest dialogue between governments and communities and a shared commitment to finding solutions is an essential starting point to building an effective and integrated child and family well-being system.
- Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing practices, cultures, diversity and the importance of family in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as a central tenet of service provision.
- Recognition of the need to build family capacity and responsibility as the most important life-long support system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Recognition that family is the foundation of the social, cultural and emotional infrastructure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander development.
- Recognition of the value of family and community-based decision-making with regard to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Commitment to re-building the capability and available resource base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families across generations to raise strong, healthy, happy children.
- Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child rearing and family centred strengths-based practice.
- Recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are each unique with their own histories, cultures, circumstances, needs and capabilities, meaning that program design and delivery needs to be flexible so that resources are used most effectively at the community level.



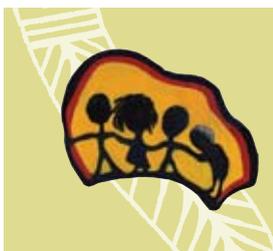
A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND HEALTH

Social and emotional well-being can be understood by recognising the range of factors that can impact positively and negatively on health, growth and development. It is important to understand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition of health in this context. The National and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation recognises that optimal conditions for health and well-being require a holistic and whole-of-life view of health, referring to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher rates of both social and emotional well-being problems and mental disorders than other Australians. Social and emotional well-being problems can result from: grief and loss (including transgenerational grief and loss); child development problems; gender identity issues; child removals; incarceration; family breakdown; cultural dislocations; racism; and social disadvantage.

Mental health problems may include crises reactions, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm and psychosis. Services must be culturally appropriate and safe, and provide continuity of care across the life span. Mental health clinicians must recognise the impact of cultural and spiritual factors on the way mental health problems develop and present, in order to provide accurate diagnosis and effective treatment.

A holistic approach to health and education incorporates a comprehensive approach to service delivery and treatment where coordination of a client's needs and total care takes priority. This approach includes an acknowledgment that economic and social conditions affect physical and emotional well-being. Care needs to take into account physical, environmental, cultural and spiritual factors for achieving social and emotional well-being.



TIP:

It is important to work on building the individual's own capacity and resilience, and use a 'holistic approach' based on a 'strengths-based' model, not a deficit model.

OUTREACH AND CULTURALLY SAFE SERVICE LOCATIONS

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may find the formal office-based setting of non-Indigenous services off-putting, while others may have had negative experiences with non-Indigenous services that leads them to be reluctant to attend counselling sessions at non-Indigenous services.

OFFER OUTREACH SERVICES IN SAFE PLACES

Outreach services can be extremely useful when offering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Outreach services can:

- suit the preference of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in counselling and similar activities in less formal settings.

- be offered in places viewed as safe spaces by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- offer opportunities for working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, for example by offering outreach services at the offices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services.

Note that different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may consider different spaces safe. For example, men may consider some spaces as ‘women’s spaces’, and vice versa. Seek advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations on this.

CREATE A WELCOMING AND SAFE SPACE AT YOUR SERVICE

It is important to ensure that the offices of a non-Indigenous service are inviting, warm and friendly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. It is very alienating to walk into a service and not see any images or photographs, such as in posters and pamphlets, that acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures. See Chapter 5 for more information on how to make your office more welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



TIP:

Does your organisation have a historical association with the policies and practices of the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families?

Many members of the Stolen Generations and their families have strong concerns with and reluctance to attend services provided by organisations such as church welfare bodies and other social services that have historical associations with child removal.

- What has your organisation, or parent organisation, done to address this issue?
- Offering outreach services at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations’ premises and other safe places is a useful strategy to address such concerns.
- These concerns can also apply to organisations that have some role in contemporary child removals, such as in providing out-of-home care or similar services.

For more information, see the section ‘Stolen Generations’ in Chapter 2.

PARENTING PROGRAMS

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to build their parenting capacity is very important. However, it is crucial that programs and initiatives to support parenting skills and capacity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are based on an understanding of the impact of colonisation and child removal practices on parenting capacity currently, and are respectful of and consistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to raising children. Parenting programs that are based solely on European biases and beliefs about parenting and



child rearing will not only be unappealing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, they can also be extremely detrimental to the self-esteem, parenting capacity and strength of families.

As explored in Chapter 2, European colonisation and past government policies, including the practices of child removal, had a significantly detrimental impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures, and led to a breakdown in the parenting capacities of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families – across many generations. This, as well as significant social and economic disadvantage, is a significant contributor to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child welfare system.

“With several generations of Indigenous people being denied normal childhood development, the opportunity to bond with parents and experience consistent love and acceptance, both the skills and the confidence to parent have been damaged, with the result that Indigenous children tend to be over represented in the child welfare system.”³

More generally, the research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family issues has found that there is a multiplicity of social, cultural and historical factors affecting the ability to parent effectively.⁴ These include:

- dispossession of land and traditional culture,
- breakdown of community kinship systems and traditional knowledge,
- racism and vilification,
- economic exclusion and entrenched poverty,
- alcohol and drug abuse and other substance misuse,
- the effects of institutionalism and child removal policies,
- inherited grief and trauma,
- the adaptation and change of gender roles – both male and female,
- society attitudes in general and stereotyping,
- incarceration,
- family violence,
- young maternal age,
- unhealthy lifestyle factors including poor nutrition,
- inadequate antenatal and postnatal care and nutrition,
- poor general health,
- inadequate housing, and
- poor educational outcomes.

The recommendations and information in this section are drawn from the findings in SNAICC’s *Indigenous Parenting Project Report*, which included consultations with practitioners, parents and carers, and a literature review of research on effective, culturally appropriate parenting information and programs.⁵



A key approach to providing culturally appropriate parenting programs would be to recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family relationships and child rearing practices in their varied forms and the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultural practices across the country. A strengths-based approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should be another overarching factor.

Other factors to consider include:

- Parenting information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should combine local content with more broadly applicable information drawn from the evidence base on child and adolescent development.
- Parenting programs based on community development principles, not just 'parenting' information in isolation, were found to be more effective in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and making an impact.
- Information and resources should be aimed at families rather than parents *per se* and recognise the broader notion of family and shared responsibility for child rearing within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Using a strengths-based approach and working to normalise activities that support and strengthen families in their child rearing are essential to securing the engagement of families in parenting information and support activities – focus on family strengths not weaknesses.
- Mainstream programs need to be adapted to be culturally appropriate otherwise they are not useful.
- Outreach services are very effective in reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It has been noted that non-Indigenous services could improve the number of outreach programs they offer, and how they are offered, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Grandparents are requesting more programs for grandparents in recognition of the number of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.
- People living in remote communities have requested programs that teach basic parenting skills to young parents, such as how to change a nappy, establish sleep routines, and understand nutritional requirements etc.



TIP:

SNAICC's *Indigenous Parenting Project Report* has many more ideas and recommendations gathered from the consultation process and literature review. It is available for download from SNAICC's website:

www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/00076.pdf



COUNSELLING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a range of preferences and expectations from counselling and other forms of therapeutic and healing services. Others have found 'Western' models of counselling ineffective, alienating, inappropriate or just not useful. Others have had negative experiences with non-Indigenous health, mental health and counselling services that influence their perception of counselling.

Flexibility must be a central principle in ensuring culturally appropriate counselling services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including flexibility around timing, location and therapeutic practices. For example, it may be appropriate to offer outreach counselling services to suit the preference of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to meet in less formal, more familiar, or 'safe' places, such as at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. There needs to be flexibility and some creativity to make this work.

There has been extensive work done in developing culturally appropriate counselling and therapeutic healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the areas of drug and alcohol rehabilitation, cultural and spiritual healing, and in therapeutic work with members of the Stolen Generations. These can provide many insights and opportunities for learning for those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness, cross-cultural counselling and culturally appropriate counselling is highly recommended for non-Indigenous counsellors working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

YARNING

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people express a preference for informal 'yarning' in relaxed settings. While the simplicity of this approach can be deceptive, there is great effect in the use of storytelling and relaxed interaction in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Storytelling or 'yarning' is an important aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander therapeutic practice. It has roots in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytelling traditions of oral culture and traditional cultural practices, and connections to the importance placed on identifying and recounting one's relationship to other people, particularly in family structures, and to country and community.

In the early stages of establishing a relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, it is important to consider the approach advocated by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers of "sharing a yarn, a joke and a cup of tea".⁶ This engagement tool helps to break down the formality of a traditional counselling session that has tended to be office-based and procedurally proscriptive.

Humour is an important aspect of yarning or storytelling. The importance of smiling, joking and laughing is especially noted amongst Torres Strait Islander people. It can also assist to minimise the shame some people feel in seeking assistance.⁷

It is also important to acknowledge that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person may also be experiencing a range of structural issues and immediate concerns that need to be addressed or acknowledged in order for emotional well-being concerns to be effectively explored. They may be worried about the health of family members, or situations involving the justice system, or practical aspects of parenting and supporting a family, or the day-to-day running of a household.



In some therapeutic practices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may express a range of emotional responses such as crying, joking and laughing (even with tears streaming down their face), anger or sorrow while expressing the same point and these can seem inconsistent at the time. It is, however, important to recognise these responses as consistent with the expression of deep grief and trauma.



TIP:

Don't assume that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will communicate their concerns in a linear manner. Stories are often circular.

Don't interrupt the 'yarn' – it is an important way of getting to the point and an important therapeutic process.

Avoid using jargon.

Ask an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person how they would like to be addressed – especially if they are an older person.

Sitting side by side is an appropriate practice, compared to sitting across a table or desk. See Chapter 3 for more information on effective cross-cultural communication.

TIME

The traditional 'one-hour' counselling session may not be appropriate when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is important to have the flexibility and commitment to make an investment of time to:

- establish the relationship;
- allow time and space for the 'yarn';
- share a cup of tea and/or food as part of initiating a conversation and entering the therapeutic process;
- identify any structural issues and immediate concerns that may be obstacles to the therapeutic process;
- recommend and make appropriate referrals to other support services.



TIP:

Consider offering fortnightly two-hour sessions rather than weekly one-hour sessions to allow sufficient time in working with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander client.

Build in travelling time when doing outreach work.

Be prepared: take some time to refresh your knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and family dynamics before an initial appointment with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander client.



DON'T ASSUME

- Don't assume that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and community knowledge;
- Don't assume that English is the first language of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person;
- Don't assume that the way an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person makes eye contact – or doesn't – is indicative of their character.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will prefer to work with a male or female counsellor specifically, or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander counsellor only. Others may prefer to see a non-Indigenous counsellor, while others may be happy to see either a non-Indigenous or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander counsellor.

This may be due to various factors, such as:

- certain issues are considered men's business or women's business;
- a person is only comfortable discussing some topics with another person of the same gender;
- a preference to work with a person of the same cultural background and perspective;
- wanting to seek assistance outside a closely-knit cultural community for reasons of anonymity or concerns with confidentiality;
- the availability of counsellors.

What is important is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are offered a choice in the counsellor they work with, and the relationship of trust that is established between the client and counsellor.



TIP:

Do not make assumptions about what type of counsellor an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person will wish to work with – ask them.

The key points to consider are giving people a choice and building trust with the community and individual clients.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold serious concerns about whether services and practitioners can or will safeguard their confidentiality, and this may deter them from seeking assistance and support services, including counselling. This distrust may stem from apprehensions that 'everyone knows everyone else', or 'everyone knows everyone else's business', in community-run services, particularly in closely-knit or remote and regional communities.



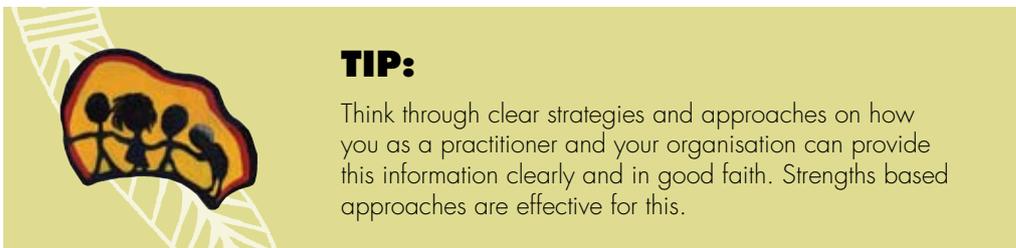
It is not just a concern that a service or practitioner may not keep a client's confidentiality (although it is a very real concern for some), but also that people may be recognised by others attending or using services, that staff in services may be relatives or friends of relatives, and that talk may carry around close-knit communities. In this regard, privacy is viewed as closely tied to confidentiality.

It is important to take various steps to address the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding safeguards over confidentiality.

- Provide clear information on how your service will safeguard a client's confidentiality;
- Ask clients if they have any concerns regarding confidentiality and privacy;
- Provide clear information on the implications of limited confidentiality; that is, why, in what circumstances, and how, your service may need to, under statutory requirements, provide information about clients to other bodies concerning the safety and well-being of a client, their children or other people.

It is important to consider many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- distrust child welfare authorities due to the policies of child removal that led to the Stolen Generations and contemporary child removals;
- have concerns in dealing with police, related to the high incidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement in the criminal justice system.



TIP:

Think through clear strategies and approaches on how you as a practitioner and your organisation can provide this information clearly and in good faith. Strengths based approaches are effective for this.

DEEP LISTENING AND 'DADIRRI'

Traditional Aboriginal practices such as 'deep listening' can be very useful in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – not only in counselling situations but in other forms of group work, workshops and other therapeutic interactions. One of a number of Aboriginal traditions of deep listening is 'dadirri'.

Dadirri is an Aboriginal word from the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Daly River in the Northern Territory of Australia. It has no direct English translation. The closest to describing it in English is a deep listening that draws on many senses beyond what is simply heard. Dadirri can take place in silence. It is about being profoundly aware and respectful. It is about being patient and taking the time that is needed. The practice of Dadirri builds community. While there are many Aboriginal languages in Australia, and the word for it changes, the concept of Dadirri appears in many of these Aboriginal languages.⁸



Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr describes Dadirri like this:

“Dadirri is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years...

Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. Today we still gather around the campfires and together we hear the sacred stories. As we grow older, we ourselves become storytellers. We pass on to the young ones all they must know. The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside. In the ceremonies we celebrate the awareness of our lives as sacred...

We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons.

Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man’s ways; we have learnt to speak the white man’s language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like people to take time and listen to us. We are hoping people will come closer. We keep on longing for the things we have always hoped for, respect and understanding.”⁹

Professor Judy Atkinson, an Aboriginal scholar on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trauma and healing, says of Dadirri:

“Listening invites responsibility to get the story – the information – right, and to be in right relationship. ... The result of Dadirri’s profound, non-judgemental watching and listening is insight and recognition of the responsibility to act with fidelity in relationship to what has been heard, observed and learnt. ... Dadirri at its deepest level is the search for understanding and meaning.”¹⁰

The practice of Dadirri and other traditions of deep listening can also offer many insights into how to communicate with each other in organisations and our working lives. It describes a way of heightening awareness and building relationships in creative and respectful ways. It invites us to work together in ways that are inclusive, sustaining and sustainable.

MEDIATION AND FAMILY DISPUTE RESOLUTION

In family mediation, and Family Dispute Resolution in particular, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families will share the same ultimate concern as other Australian families – the best interests of a child and how to best care for a child, including in situations of separation or family breakdown.

It is also important to recognise any differences in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families approach arranging the care for a child in such situations. These can pose some challenges to mediators and Dispute Resolution Practitioners that require cultural sensitivity, flexibility and creativity.



Family Dispute Resolution, under the constraints of Family Law, is focused on assisting separating parents to develop sustainable parenting plans for the care of their children. Meanwhile, it is critically important to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices in child rearing see the entire extended family involved in caring for children, and thus sharing in decisions regarding the well-being and care of children. (See Chapter 1 for more information on this.) In some, especially remote, communities, such decision-making can involve the wider community.

While the 2005 changes to the Family Law Act in Australia recognise the importance of the relationship between children and their grandparents and the rights of grandparents in raising family disputes, these changes do not easily cater to the extended family-based child rearing and decision-making practices in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is similarly the case with some families of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds with different cultural expectations and practices of child rearing.

Alternatively, there has been extensive innovation and progress in culturally appropriate practice that incorporates community and extended family input in child welfare and restorative justice deliberations involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Some state and territory jurisdictions include family decision-making in considerations of the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their removal from their parents' care for safety reasons, and their placement in kinship and out-of-home care.¹¹ In the child protection and welfare context:

“The underlying philosophy that led to the introduction of conferencing is that nuclear families and their immediate communities, such as extended family and friends, have a right to be involved in making decisions about their children, and that empowering this extended community to solve problems is more likely to result in better outcomes for children.”¹²

In some state and territory jurisdictions, family and community decision-making have also been incorporated in the justice system, particularly in working with young people in juvenile justice. There is significant opportunity for learning from these areas in culturally appropriate practices in family and group-decision making, conflict resolution and mediation.¹³



TIP:

Ask clients what roles aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and other family members have in caring for the children. How can these roles and contributions be maintained after separation?

Ask clients whether they wish to include the input of these family members in discussions regarding the post-separation care of children.

How can this input be incorporated in developing Parenting Care Plans?

Recognise that while both parents, particularly those in cross-cultural relationships, may not equally appreciate the involvement of extended family in caring for children, that continued connection to culture, country, community and family are central to the cultural identity of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child (See the section 'Working with Children' in this Chapter).

Can extended family members assist in mediating disputes between couples?

Research what approaches juvenile justice and child welfare authorities in various Australian jurisdictions have to family and community decision-making involving the children. How are these discussions facilitated and input sought?

TRADITIONAL MEDIATION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have rich traditions of conflict resolution and mediation. Many communities have mediators who are called on to assist in resolving disputes and facilitating decision-making. In some communities, including urban communities, these may be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are respected for their status, life experience and skills, cultural knowledge and expertise, and leadership in the community. Many of these are Elders. In other communities, particularly remote ones, mediators may be people whose traditional knowledge gives them cultural authority to resolve, or make appropriate interventions in, disputes or decision-making processes.

Traditional mediators are generally able to draw on extensive knowledge of cultural rights and obligations as well as of the extensive family, clan and language-group relationships and associated responsibilities.

While non-Indigenous people commonly place great value on the neutrality and detachment of mediators, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however, do not perceive, or expect, mediators to remain neutral or removed from the decision-making process.¹⁴ "The impartiality of mediators is different when mediating in Indigenous communities as relationships are vital – impartiality is gained through fairness of process".¹⁵

"Mediators are required to have detailed knowledge of the parties, even being related to one or the other or both, with the authority to enforce decisions and ensure no further discussion is entered into."¹⁶



There are great opportunities for non-Indigenous services to work with and learn from traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mediators in Family Dispute Resolution. This can include:

- seeking their assistance in mediations;
- seeking their input in cultural awareness training for staff in non-Indigenous services;
- developing processes where Dispute Resolution Practitioners assist by formalising Parenting Care Plans and other outcomes reached with the assistance of traditional mediators.



TIP:

Do not expect all traditional mediators to be qualified in assisting in family or parenting disputes. Their expertise may be specific to areas such as land rights or traditional knowledge.

Do not expect all traditional mediators to be able to mediate disputes involving any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons. Differences in clan, language group, cultural practices and historical experiences, as well as potential conflicts between clan and cultural groups, may be a factor.

WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Culture plays a key role in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's development, identity and self-esteem, and in determining the overall well-being needs of the child. The child's cultural and spiritual development is the role of their family and community.

Children who are clear about who they are and can make positive statements about themselves are better equipped to learn positive life-coping skills and are more likely to experience positive emotional and physical well-being.

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's cultural identity is a crucial feature of who they are and can provide a good basis for enhancing their self-image. Children who are strong in their culture and see that people who are important to them support their culture will be more able to engage in opportunities to achieve their life goals.

One of the best ways to develop a good rapport and achieve positive outcomes when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is to display a positive attitude to their culture.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH STRENGTHENING CULTURAL CONNECTION

If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are constantly exposed to discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotypes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their community, their self-esteem, confidence, goals, self-worth, self-respect and expectations of themselves become very low.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children know through the media, perhaps through school friendships and other influences that their culture is not held in high esteem by mainstream society. The children may be the butt of jokes at school or be bullied because of their cultural background. If children see that their culture is viewed as 'second class' they are likely to think that this means that they may be viewed as second-class citizens and come to doubt their own worth.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may also struggle to acknowledge their identity either because of their own cultural confusion or because it may have been discouraged by a non-Indigenous parent.

We know, however, that children who have a strong sense of self-worth and see that they are valued become resilient adults. While those working with children need to constantly give children a positive view of themselves, this must also extend to presenting the child's culture in a positive light so that the children can develop pride in the richness of their cultural background.¹⁷

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Maintaining connections to family and community forms the basis of the development of a child's identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, their cultural connectedness, and emerging spirituality.

There can be a number of situations where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child is cut off from their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family, community, culture and spirituality, such as in out-of-home care placements with non-Indigenous families, being placed in the care of a non-Indigenous relative carer, or being in the primary care of a non-Indigenous parent where the child does not have access or connection to their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander relatives and culture.

Situations that cut Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children off from their family, culture and spirituality put such children "at great risk of psychological, health, development and educational problems. They suffer as children and later as adults from the grief and loneliness of not belonging. They are also being denied their rights as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."¹⁸



TIP:

Ensure spaces that children use or attend at your service are friendly and welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their carers. Show that you value and respect their culture and community. You can:

- Display posters and materials with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander themes, images and languages
- Make available Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning materials, story books, toys and puzzles
- Display posters and photographs of positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models such as sports people, artists, actors and community leaders
- Display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks
- Use decorations with the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags
- Celebrate special Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community events at your service with the children and families. (See the calendar of cultural events in Chapter 2 for an example of such events.)

WORKING WITH ADOLESCENTS¹⁹

While there are many common issues that young people face as they mature and go through adolescence, there are a number of cultural factors that are important to bear in mind when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents. These are some pointers for dealing with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, adolescence is traditionally the time when they go through initiation. This can mark a passage into adulthood, or in the case of some Aboriginal communities, they are given sacred and secret cultural knowledge. This knowledge is often particular to a person's gender and eventual status or role in the community. Such cultural practices vary amongst communities – whether remote, urban or regional, and according to the extent to which traditional practices are maintained. Generally, however, it is a time when young people learn who they are in relation to family, nation or a collection of clans, ancestors and land.

For an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young person, adolescence is the time when understanding their cultural identity is critical to their development. It is important that they are given the opportunity to identify as a strong member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and to take pride in their cultural background. There may be relationships that develop between the young person and an acknowledged Elder in the community. There may be the need for the young person to spend time in their community in order to do 'cultural business'.



MOVING FROM DEPENDENCY TO INDEPENDENCE

As well as developing a stronger sense of identity, adolescence involves changes in how a young person sees themselves as an independent person and grows towards greater independence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures place a high value on learning and understanding rights and responsibilities. Learning to be responsible is balanced with the need to be aware of rights. This includes having an appreciation for cultural and family obligations and expectations.

SEXUALITY

Adolescence is a time of physical and emotional change as well as a growing awareness of sexuality. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people this involves learning one's role in the community according to gender. For instance once an Aboriginal boy attends ceremonies, he is no longer a boy but a man, and it is very offensive to treat him as a child. His relationship with women will also change from this time.

Traditionally obligations and restrictions regarding 'men's business' and 'women's business' can also apply at this stage. Some remote Aboriginal communities have a strong set of taboos that determine how a person can communicate with the opposite sex. Each community will have its own set of cultural practices that facilitate how members of the opposite sex interact with each other.



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- 17 The section on 'Working with Children' is drawn from edited extracts from material originally produced by VACCA and re-published in SNAICC, *Foster their Culture: Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-of-Home Care*, SNAICC, 2008; used with permission.
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MACKAY FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE, QUEENSLAND

Mackay Family Relationship Centre (FRC) works with the Mackay community, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, to develop Family Dispute Resolution services that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of the culturally diverse families in the Mackay region. This includes working to provide culturally appropriate Dispute Resolution services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Mackay Family Relationship Centre is delivered under a consortium consisting of Centacare in Mackay as the lead agency and Lifeline Queensland.

The Mackay FRC is funded to provide Family Dispute Resolution in the Mackay region. The Centre has two full-time and one part-time Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners. The Manager is also a part-time Practitioner.

The Centre also employs a Community Development Worker and an Intake and Referral Officer. The Intake and Referral Officer is a local Aboriginal woman, but the position is not an 'Indigenous identified' position.

When it was rolled out in July 2008, the Mackay FRC conducted consultations with the local community, government departments and community organisations to ensure its Family Dispute Resolution practices would meet community needs. The FRC sought input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and Queensland government departments to develop mediation approaches that are culturally appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the Mackay region.

This included getting advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship and child rearing, and how mediation practices can incorporate the needs and voices of extended family.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE APPROACHES TO MEDIATION

Through input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in the consultation process, contributions from the Centre's Community Advisory Panel, and cultural awareness training that staff receive, the FRC recognises the role that extended family have in child rearing.

Mackay FRC opens the mediation process to extended family members where relevant. It recognises that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would like to bring along family members as support people, and where appropriate extended family are invited to participate in the mediation process.

Staff at Mackay FRC feel confident and comfortable in dealing with extended family in the mediation process, including with large numbers of family members in a mediation session, and this helps ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receive responsive and appropriate Family Dispute Resolution services.

COMMUNITY ADVISORY PANEL

After the initial consultation process, the Mackay FRC instituted a Community Advisory Panel to allow it to gain ongoing input from the community, government and organisations to ensure its Family Dispute Resolution services are appropriate and responsive to the community. The Community Advisory Panel also supports the FRC's efforts to promote its services more widely in the community.

The stakeholders on the Panel include representatives of Queensland Government child safety and justice authorities, community legal services, other community organisations and representatives of the FRC's consortium partners. There are currently



two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations represented on the Community Advisory Panel, giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives the opportunity to flag issues with the FRC, including the appropriateness of its family mediation practice, and to support the Mackay FRC's work with the community.

The FRC's Community Development Worker is instrumental in the Community Advisory Panel's role and supports its contribution to the Centre by:

- providing secretariat support to the Panel,
- organising its quarterly meetings,
- feeding back issues or contributions flagged by the Panel to practitioners,
- reporting back to the Panel on the FRC's statistics and progress in service provision.

REACHING OUT TO COMMUNITY

The Mackay Family Relationship Centre recognises that while they did significant groundwork in developing appropriate and responsive Family Dispute Resolution practices, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people using their service does not reflect the sizeable community in Mackay. They are keen to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community awareness of the services offered by the centre.

They are continuing to cultivate connections in the local community by:

- Participating in NAIDOC Week activities in Mackay, including holding information stalls at community events,
- Offering information sessions about their services and Family Dispute Resolution at other community organisations,
- Displaying posters in their offices that reflect their connections to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, highlight NAIDOC week, and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations' services,
- Liaising with Community Advisory Panel members on strategies for increasing their profile.

In a next step in Mackay FRC's ongoing Action Research Evaluation, they will investigate the question 'What would it take to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clientele in the Centre?'. The Centre hopes this will assist them to reach the community more widely.

INSIGHT

The manager of Mackay Family Relationship Centre says that one of the service's key strengths is its staff team. "Our staff have excellent awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and issues, and are very receptive and welcoming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," she says. The staff's openness to and awareness of cultural diversity in Australia generally, and Mackay specifically, is also an important strength.

INTERRELATE FAMILY CENTRE, LISMORE, NEW SOUTH WALES

Interrelate Family Centre in Lismore, which provides family relationship services in Lismore and the surrounding region, has had significant success in providing counselling and community education services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region that has been well received.

Interrelate Family Centre in Lismore provides a range of services, including counselling, parenting and relationship education classes and groups, and children's contact services. They also have child consultants who work with children and their parents. Interrelate also offers post-separation mediation through the Family Relationship Centre it operates. The bulk of the services and programs offered are through Early Intervention Program funding from FaHCSIA. They also offer a Parenting Orders Program.

The service employs an Aboriginal woman as a part time Indigenous Counsellor, who has knowledge of the local Bundjalung culture and community. She provides outreach counselling services to the local Bundjalung Aboriginal community, as well as to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the area. She also conducts an emotional health and well-being community education program with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at various local high schools in the region that has been well received by the young people – they keep attending the program.

Keys to the service's success include its creative and supportive approach that enables the Indigenous Counsellor to deliver flexible, informal and client-driven counselling. This includes outreach services, and appropriately supporting the staff member as an Aboriginal worker in a non-Indigenous organisation.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE COUNSELLING

Interrelate Family Centre supports the Indigenous Counsellor's approach in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, which is informal, conversational and solution-focused. It is a style that caters to community members' preferences for relaxed approaches to counselling, often expressed as 'yarning'. This is alongside providing practical support to clients with the various concerns and often urgent difficulties they are facing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMAL SETTINGS AND OUTREACH WORK

The Indigenous Counsellor conducts a large number of her counselling sessions with clients through outreach work outside the service's offices in Lismore. Many members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community do not have easy access to transport to travel to the service's office in Lismore. The Indigenous Counsellor, with the support of the service, deliberately meets clients at locations convenient to them, rather than exclusively at the service's offices. Interrelate Family Centre's management recognises and supports the significance of outreach work undertaken by the Indigenous Counsellor, and the amount of travel and time away from the office this entails.

Related to this is the suitability of locations to meet with clients. Members of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expressed a preference for informal settings, preferably outdoors or in familiar surroundings, for counselling. Interrelate's manager and Indigenous Counsellor work together to identify locations outside the centre that meet the service's responsibility to comply with Occupational Health and Safety standards for staff and provide 'safe places' for clients under the service's duty of care requirements.



OFFERING PRACTICAL SUPPORT

A significant aspect of the Indigenous Counsellor's approach is responding to the client's need for practical support and information. The Counsellor provides general information as well as information about court processes and similar matters and where to seek further assistance and support. This responsive approach also recognises that clients are often not in the state of mind to deal with emotional health and well-being issues when they are experiencing crises or challenges with immediate needs.

Interrelate Family Centre supports this approach to providing counselling to the local Aboriginal community because it recognises that it meets an important community-identified need, and is aware that their client base sometimes has complex issues and concerns. The service also acknowledges that the standard one-hour counselling session does not fit this pattern, and enables the flexible, informal and solution-focused approach taken by the Indigenous Counsellor that is successful with the community.

MANAGING INTAKE

Interrelate Family Centre enables the Indigenous Counsellor to manage her own intakes. According to the service's manager, this stems from their recognition that requiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to go through the service's standard intake method would be "disastrous" to their ability to meet the community members' needs and provide counselling. This flexibility also allows the Indigenous Counsellor to receive referrals from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations directly, and strengthen the service's links with these organisations. It is also important that clients who approach the service for counselling are given the choice of seeing the Indigenous Counsellor or non-Indigenous counsellors.

SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL STAFF IN A NON-INDIGENOUS ORGANISATION

Interrelate Family Centre has taken a creative and flexible approach in supporting their Indigenous Counsellor. It recognises the different approaches to counselling work, supports the worker by encouraging flexible methods in recording and documenting their work, and – very importantly – supports the Indigenous Counsellor's participation in the Aboriginal Worker's Circle. The Circle is a support network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff from non-Indigenous organisations in the region who support each other in informal and practical ways. Interrelate Family Centre's Indigenous Counsellor has been a leading initiator of the network.

INSIGHT:

The Manager of Interrelate Family Centre, Lismore, identifies some of the strengths of how they work with the local Aboriginal community as also some of the challenges. While they have been responsive to the community's needs and preferences for informal approaches to counselling, it has been a challenge to record and document their work – especially in forms. "How do you capture and document all that?" asks Interrelate Family Centre's Manager. "There is a constant need to recognise this issue, and be mindful of it," the manager says. "As the Indigenous Counsellor is telling me [in clinical supervision], of all the work she does, I'm regularly reminding her to write it down – to document it."

"It is also important to remain respectful of the community's culture and values," she says. "It is a constant learning curve."

MEN'S OUTREACH SERVICE INC., BROOME, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Men's Outreach Service in Broome is a non-Indigenous community organisation providing family relationship services for men that has significant success in providing services to a high number of Aboriginal men in both the town of Broome and in the surrounding remote areas of the Kimberley.

The **Men's Outreach Service's** Men and Family Relationships program, funded by FaHCSIA, provides counselling and general emotional well-being support to non-Indigenous and Aboriginal men in their family relationships, including those in family and domestic violence situations. This program is a significant part of the Service's wider work with homeless, itinerant and/or unemployed men.

Men's Outreach Service is also funded by the Western Australian government to provide an integration post-release service to assist men leaving prisons to re-integrate with their communities that involves working extensively with remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley.

The key features of Men's Outreach Service's success in reaching Aboriginal men are the organisation's deep connection to the Broome community, in particular the local Aboriginal community, and its ability to attract and retain Aboriginal workers with strong local connections who are highly respected by the men they work with.

A key component of the Men and Family Relationships program is its community engagement – a drop-in service for men. Approximately 85–90 percent of the men who use the service are Aboriginal, while 85–90 percent of these men are homeless or itinerant. The drop-in centre, operating in the mornings at the Service's office, allows the Service to provide practical assistance and support to their clients. Besides access to free tea, coffee and toast, the men can make phone calls to family, and get assistance with personal hygiene, food etc, and, through company, get a break in their experiences of isolation and loneliness.

This practical assistance is crucial in creating an informal atmosphere that is familiar, comfortable and non-threatening to men who otherwise are reluctant to use services and tend to 'tough-it out'. It also sends the message that the Service is there to help. The outreach work through the drop-in centre creates the potential for further group work, anger management courses and other educational activities, and one-on-one counselling for men.

ROLE OF ABORIGINAL STAFF

While the informal atmosphere is central to building rapport with the men, the role of the Service's Aboriginal staff is crucial to the Service's ability to provide services to Aboriginal men. Of eight staff, three are Aboriginal men. Further, these men have strong connections to Broome and the local Aboriginal community. The Indigenous Outreach Worker who works with the non-Indigenous counsellor is a man from one of the traditional owner families of Broome, who is also respected for his knowledge and authority in Aboriginal lore, law and custom. His long-term role in the Service has been crucial to supporting and complementing the counsellor's work with Aboriginal men. While the Service has found that Aboriginal men they work with are comfortable to seek assistance from a non-Indigenous counsellor, and some in fact prefer it, the Indigenous Outreach Worker plays a crucial role in supporting the counsellor's work with the men and in also directly supporting the men.

His work and role in the Service also helps make it an attractive workplace for other Aboriginal staff.



WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Men's Outreach Service has also enjoyed good ongoing working relationships with local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including the Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation service, which uses the Service's premises in their pre-assessment work with men wishing to undergo rehabilitation, and the local Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), which deploys a Health Care Worker to visit the Service weekly. The AMS has found this to be the most effective means of reaching Aboriginal men who otherwise may feel uncomfortable with the clinical setting of the Aboriginal Medical Service.

Although the Aboriginal workers are Aboriginal men from the Broome area, they observe cultural protocols and use community consultation to engage with often remote Aboriginal communities outside Broome. This is in recognition that these communities are culturally distinct from the Broome Aboriginal community, with their specific needs and concerns, and that protocols and consultation with communities and Elders must be observed regardless of whether one is Aboriginal or not.

CONNECTIONS WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Part of the Service's connections with the community is the fact that its manager, and previous manager, have strong connections to the local community. Drawing on local people with good connections in the town and with the Aboriginal community has helped the service to position itself well and attract Aboriginal men to the service.

Part of their strong local connection includes having Aboriginal men, who are themselves leaders of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, on the organisation's board alongside non-Indigenous men. The current chairperson of the board of the Service is an Aboriginal man. The leadership of Aboriginal men on the board is an expression of the Service's strong connections and encourages those connections to continue and deepen.

INSIGHT:

The Manager of the Men's Outreach Service insists that roots in and connections with the local community – both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous – are important, and that there is “no formula” to success in working with Aboriginal communities. “It is an evolutionary process, not a step-by-step formula,” he says. “It is about building familiarity, trust and relationships, and this generally takes time, there are no shortcuts.” He says it is important to factor in the time and experience – of understanding, links and connections with the community – of senior staff in an organisation in the success of programs and services.

CENTACARE BROKEN BAY, NEW SOUTH WALES

Centacare Broken Bay in New South Wales worked extensively with Aboriginal community representatives to develop 'Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops', its highly regarded parenting program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. The Centacare Broken Bay Men and Family Relationships Program team collaborated with a reference group of Aboriginal men – community leaders and well-respected workers in community services and state government – to adapt Centacare Broken Bay's 'Hey, Dad!' program to ensure the program was culturally appropriate for, and met the specific needs of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.

Centacare Broken Bay in New South Wales provides a range of Family Relationships Services to families in Northern Sydney and the NSW Central Coast through their integrated Family Centres with funding from a variety of sources at federal, state and local government, including the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). Centacare Broken Bay's head office is located at Pennant Hills, NSW.

The organisation originally developed the parenting program for men 'Hey Dad!' with FaHCSIA funding, and subsequently adapted various versions of it to meet the needs of separated fathers, fathers of children with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, also with further funding from the department.

The Men and Family Relationships Program manages the 'Hey Dad!' programs. Further information, including the evaluation report, is online at www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/docs/heydadeval.pdf

Aboriginal men, in particular those from regional NSW communities, had suggested that the organisation develop culturally appropriate parenting programs and resources that meet the specific parenting needs of Aboriginal men as fathers, grandfathers and uncles. This included supporting Aboriginal men not living with their children to renew and reaffirm their positive roles as men in their families and to foster their relationships with children.

Based around facilitated group sessions, 'Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops' is a positive, strengths-based program that supports Aboriginal men to grow confident as strong role models for the children in their families. It includes topics such as being a dad today, dealing with grief and loss, and relating with kids and keeping them safe.

PASSION AND LEADERSHIP FROM THE REFERENCE GROUP

The Centacare Broken Bay team invited Aboriginal men to participate in a Reference Group that would drive the development of the program and bring cultural and community expertise to it. While the organisation at the time had limited partnerships or client involvement with the NSW Aboriginal community in its area, and had no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff or services, they

were able to draw on community sector networks for recommendations for potential Reference Group members.

Recommendations led to further recommendations, and the team was able to recruit Aboriginal men who brought professional, cultural and community expertise and experience to the Reference Group. These Aboriginal men are leaders and professionals and highly respected in their communities. The passion, expertise and heart they brought to their roles in the Reference Group and their enthusiasm for the program were essential to its success.

RESPECT AND MUTUAL LEARNING

Essential to the success of the project and the parenting program that emerged from it, was the deep respect that the Coordinator of Centacare Broken Bay's Men and Family Relationships Program (who coordinated the project and was on the Reference Group) and the Program's Project Officer, as non-Indigenous people, had for Aboriginal people and culture.



Respect was also expressed through a commitment to mutual learning, with both Centacare's staff and the Aboriginal men on the Reference Group being open to learning from each other: Centacare's non-Indigenous staff learned a lot about Aboriginal culture and the communities in New South Wales, while the Aboriginal Reference Group members had the opportunity to learn the skills and develop the experience required to put together a program.

Centacare also engaged two of the Reference Group members as consultants to re-write and adapt the program. They brought extensive knowledge and experience of the Aboriginal communities' – especially men's – issues and needs, and expertise to re-write the program's manual in language appropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In turn, Centacare's team brought expertise in working in a strengths-based approach and in program development. Each was learning from the other.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AND TIME

Community consultation is also important to the Indigenous 'Hey Dad!' program. Consultation with Aboriginal communities and organisations was crucial in developing and piloting the program. Where 'Hey Dad!' train-the-trainer training was being offered in Aboriginal communities, Centacare staff would conduct extensive consultations over a number of days before the training, listening to Elders, Aboriginal organisations and community members on the issues and concerns in the community, and explaining the program and its implementation in their community.

Commitment to community consultation was also important to Centacare successfully fostering informal partnerships and collaboration to assist the program's development. This included informal partnerships with a highly regarded Aboriginal men's group in Tamworth, a TAFE, and Aboriginal men in three NSW correctional facilities to pilot the program.

Allowing enough time for the project to be successful was also seen as crucial. Sufficient time was needed to allow Reference Group members, who were extremely busy with their own jobs and community involvements, to contribute fully to the project. Time flexibility was necessary to cater for the amount of time required to consult with Aboriginal communities, allow for pilots of the program to test and develop the program, and to cater for potential delays.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

The 'Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops' program was evaluated by an external evaluator, with the evaluation following the life of the project's development and its pilots. The evaluator's input from the pilots led to further refinement of the program. The evaluation report was strongly positive of the program, its processes and its reception by the Aboriginal community in New South Wales.

INSIGHT:

The Coordinator of Centacare Broken Bay's Men and Family Relationships Program identifies deep respect for Aboriginal people and culture as essential to their program. She says it was important to her and other non-Indigenous staff that they "listen deeply" when consulting and working with Aboriginal people. "Total unconditional respect must be communicated and demonstrated," she says, "and lived out from the heart."



CHAPTER 7:

Using Action Research Evaluation to Improve, Record and Report on Your Work

IN THIS CHAPTER:

This chapter contains a set of principles, suggestions, tools and ideas to assist family relationship program service providers to incorporate action research evaluation into everyday work practices.

You do not have to be a trained researcher to adopt an action research evaluation approach. In fact, if you are asking yourselves 'What would it take to do this better?', gathering feedback as you go along, and making adjustments to your work based on this feedback, you are already using parts of this approach.

Commonwealth-funded Family and Community Services programs have used action research to develop, implement and evaluate programs for many years. In particular, the Reconnect program and services funded under the Stronger Families and Community Strategy have used action research to evaluate local community projects.¹ For some services, using action research is a requirement.² For others, action research evaluation can help services to develop, document and report on their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, as well as help improve outcomes along the way.



WHAT IS THE VALUE OF ACTION RESEARCH FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS SERVICE PROVIDERS?

Action research can help you to:

- document and identify service delivery barriers, gaps and good practice
- contribute to policy development by governments and agencies
- contribute to improved service delivery and enhance client outcomes
- clarify local early intervention strategies
- evaluate your work and programs
- learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and incorporate their approaches to family support and child rearing into your practice.

Participating in action research will provide you with the chance to have your skill and expertise heard, and to make a difference to the service structure of organisations and programs. Action research evaluation is suited to situations where you wish to bring about change, understand what informs the change and share additional or new knowledge.

The value of action research lies in its capacity to assist you to deliver effective and relevant services and improve your services or programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families. Some significant outcomes identified as a result of using action research have included greater connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, improved community awareness among staff, creating positive relationships with external organisations, helping grandparents to see their children and grandchildren, improved ability of parents to focus on their children, improved referral outcomes and improved assessment and screening tools.³

Family Relationship Service Providers have the opportunity to contribute to the development of good practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through action research. In using this approach, you are making a commitment to doing what it takes to bring about change, and standing alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in identifying and implementing this change.

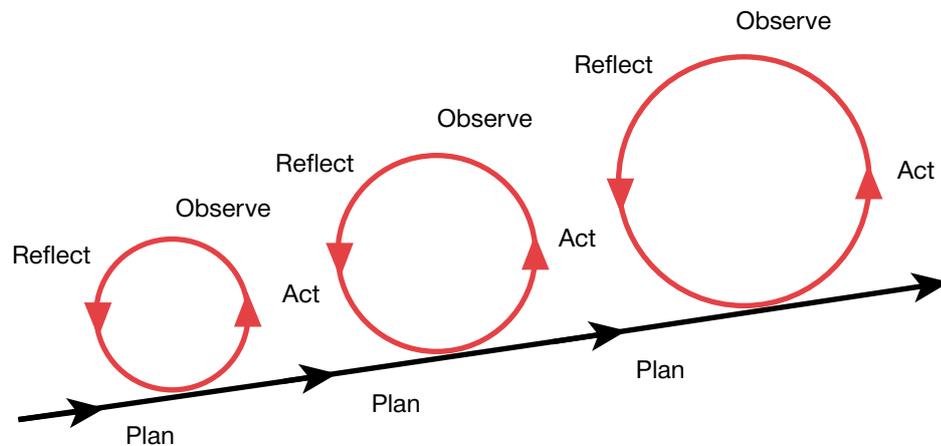
WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is a dynamic process and involves cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, then planning again for a new action.⁴

The cycles start with small questions, and when the planning stage comes around again, project teams can take account of what has been learned in previous cycles. The aim is for understanding about the local situation to increase over time. The later cycles are used to challenge and refine the results of the earlier cycles. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one. This process is commonly done by a group of people (see 'Participation aim' below).⁵



ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES



Source: Crane, P. & Richardson, L. *Reconnect Action Research Kit*, 2000 ⁶

These cycles work best if they are tied to natural project cycles, but as a guide, they might go around every six months or so. Then the cycle begins again, with more planning, this time having a fresh look at the project and taking account of what has been learned to see if any changes might be made. At this stage, the group also plans the next cycle of evaluation, either to deepen understanding of issues from the last cycle, or to research a new idea, assumption, issue, problem or question. This is followed by more action, observation and reflection, and so on. Sometimes the stages may overlap or happen in a slightly different order.

As the process becomes more familiar and comfortable, bigger questions can be asked and more people are likely to become involved. As the project progresses, as well as at the end of the project, the group can revisit the baseline data and assess how the situation has improved.

ACTION RESEARCH WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES

Action research allows service providers the flexibility to adjust their practice in relation to a particular group of people, location, community, organisation or target groups.

“The processes and techniques used must be culturally suited to the particular stakeholders involved in each situation. They are designed to accommodate participants’ comfort zone/norms, rather than those of whoever is conducting the process. Planned approaches should be abandoned, adapted or modified readily, in line with the feedback of participants. Approaches are designed to enable stakeholders to contribute both to the content and the process of Action Research.”⁷

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations are generally very experienced with consultative processes and research. Many community leaders say that they have been telling government and researchers for years what is needed to improve their communities and their lives. Shamefully, they also often note how rare it is in their experience to work alongside people who are committed to standing beside them until action is taken!



TIP:

It is important to remember that action research in this context is not about researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but about researching your services, **with and for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be seen as partners or leaders in this process, not as the 'subjects' of research.

In the context of Family Relationships Service Providers, action research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities could be used to answer a broad range of questions about the work you do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

When planning your action research, you may want to ask yourself: 'What do we need to do to undertake action research in a culturally appropriate way with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users and organisations?' We hope this resource will be a starting point in answering that question.

A useful variation on the 'plan, act, observe, reflect' model has been developed by Tjikalyi Colin and Anne Garrow in the Aboriginal community of Ernabella in South Australia, and is captured will in the title of their book: *Thinking, Listening, Looking, Understanding and Acting as You Go Along*.⁸

CORE ASPECTS OF ACTION RESEARCH: PARTICIPATION, RESEARCH AND ACTION

All research takes place within multiple sets of cultural understandings and a range of limitations. The context of the research includes the geographic place, the population groups – including different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, age, employment status, gender, family structure, literacy and technological skill levels and more. Here is a list of things to take into account – that may assist you – when designing action research projects with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

ACTION RESEARCH: "NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US"

The participation aim: to involve as many different people from the target group and other stakeholders as possible using a broad range of techniques.⁹

"It is essential that Indigenous peoples be participants in any research project that concerns them, sharing an understanding of the aims and methods of the research and sharing the results of this work."¹⁰

Participation is an important element in most action research. The people most affected by an issue play a crucial role in defining research questions, gathering data and making sense of what is to be done about the issue. For these reasons, action research is a culturally respectful and effective approach for working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and community members.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lobbied and advocated for generations to be involved in the research and decisions that affect their families,



lives and livelihoods. **Nothing about us without us** is an important principle for non-Indigenous people to understand and embrace in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

For research to be effective, people affected by research outcomes should be involved throughout the whole process. Stakeholder participation is essential to action research because:

- they are the ones who usually understand the issues and can suggest questions and answers
- they can often suggest acceptable ways to implement changes and
- they are going to be the most affected by the changes and strategies.¹¹

A stakeholder is anyone who is affected by the practices or situation that is part of the research. This can include workers, management, other agencies, community members, funders and clients.¹²



TIP:

Ways to involve stakeholders in action research¹³

Stakeholders can participate in a variety of ways:

- designing the overall study; the participants are researchers, co-researchers, or may be part of an advisory group who design the study collectively.
- managing the process; the participants are facilitators or coordinators of the entire process;
- providing data; the participants contribute their own, knowledge or information for the research
- collecting data; the participants are actively involved in gathering information;
- interpreting data; the participants are interpreters and help to make sense of the data
- planning change; the participants are planners and decision-makers;
- being kept informed about the study and its implications; the participants are recipients of information.
- funding: providing financial or in-kind support
- implementing the changes; participants are involved in acting on identified changes and recommendations
- championing the study; participants provide support in communicating findings to others or report on findings to government and others.

Developing trust and a sense of ownership among stakeholders is a very effective way of encouraging people to invest their time and energy in working for change.



Participation is most effective when people feel they can contribute significantly and that they have real influence. Building trust is about demystifying action research and showing people that not only can they participate but that it is 'worth it'. In other words, they will see results from their involvement.

Informed consent

Participants' involvement should always be on the basis of informed consent. As in any research process, ethical considerations must be taken seriously to protect participants and the integrity of the process. Informed, consensual participation is the cornerstone of ethical research practice.

For more information on ethical research practice see the section 'Ethics and action research' later in this chapter.



TIP:

How to support participation

You may need to consider allocating resources to assist people to be involved. For example, transport to and food at meetings, setting aside time for participants to be involved as part of their job role, making backfill arrangements or paying participants for their time and contribution.

The 'research' aim: to increase knowledge and understanding on the part of the researcher or the client or both.

'Research' simply means 'to find out'. The word comes from the Old French for 'to search closely'. Action research aims to find out the answer to key questions you develop and refine during your action research cycles.

What is your research question?

For tips on developing your action research questions, see the sections 'Decide on your action research questions' and 'Some sample critically reflective questions' below.

A culture of inquiry, learning and change is essential to improving. Action research is a continuous process that builds knowledge about practice. Changes and modifications are made in response to new insights and new questions as they arise. Stakeholders can share their experiences of what is happening, as it unfolds, and this can help you to find out the answer to your action research questions.

The 'action' aim: to bring about change in some community, organisation, program or intervention.

Action research is about doing things differently.

"Informed by understanding, the action provides change. Out of the attempt to produce change, a greater understanding emerges."¹⁴

An action oriented approach invites responsiveness to issues that emerge in your everyday practice. It is highly likely that it will be necessary to change the way you are working because something occurs that was not expected. It is important to be reflective without getting bogged down in talking and thinking. Instead, after careful reflection and planning, try out something and learn from it.

Implementing your Action Research Cycle



Illustration: by Astri Baker, prepared for SNAICC, copyright Astri Baker @ 2010, used under license.

PLAN

The planning stage takes a lot longer than many people expect or understand, but the time put in is well worth the while. Yoland Wadsworth¹⁵ estimates it takes at least one third of the overall time the research will take. It is worth spending this time to establish relationships and identify your key action research questions.

Most common pitfalls in relation to time:¹⁶

- Not long enough spent on planning
- Far too long spent doing fieldwork generating excessive material to analyse
- Inadequate time left for analysis and writing up
- No time planned for getting the findings out there and taking action.

IDENTIFY THE STAKEHOLDERS

Identify the stakeholders in your region or community. Making connections may not happen according to your anticipated timeline. It could take longer or happen quite quickly. It will depend on the trust and relationships you can build or already have. It will require a series of planning processes with different stakeholders and persistence on your part. Identify and involve as many stakeholder groups as you can, as there are a range of views and experience in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, just as there are in other communities.



TIP:

Getting involvement from or connection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is the most important step in your whole action research project.

DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Developing an action plan requires bringing together all the stakeholders' knowledge, concerns, thoughts and observations. If necessary, the plan can be re-negotiated and modified. The main aim is to get everyone to commit themselves to designing and implementing an agreed plan together.

DECIDE ON YOUR ACTION RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Devising your research questions is about identifying which questions your organisation seeks answers to as a result of your action research processes. Deciding on research questions will usually involve sitting down together with your stakeholders, talking about local issues and recording the concerns and strengths that people have about this area of practice. Once you've identified these issues, together you can identify the questions you would like answers to in order to respond to some of these issues or key concerns.

If you are not sure which questions to choose, don't worry. You can make a start in your action research cycle, even if you are not sure you've chosen the right question or set of questions. You will learn as you go along and can revisit the questions as you continue through the cycle. Revisiting your questions and making adjustments is all part of the action research process.

For example, you may start out thinking a good question is: "What would it take to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander clients to attend this service?" However, during the observation stage, it may become clear that staff do not know why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not coming to the service, and are having trouble finding out the answer to this questions, perhaps because no feedback is being received and there is low interaction between the service and the community. In this case, you may choose to adjust the question, and first ask: "What would it take to *know why* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients are not attending the service?"¹⁷

SOME SAMPLE CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

The questions you choose to drive your process or facilitate your discussion will vary, and we invite you to experiment. Usually, it is best to make questions less general and more specific and local. Here are some examples of potential action research questions that might be relevant to your organisation.

How can our service most effectively develop and implement good practice counselling and education models with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients?

What would it take to encourage clients to attend family dispute resolution?

What can we learn about our service provision from other services that have been successfully delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

In what ways are government reforms currently impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of funding, family law reforms, health and



employment outcomes and how can our service respond to this for the benefit of the community?

How can learnings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people assist in the systematic development of good practice frameworks?

In what ways can our service put our learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and action research into the philosophy, design and practice of new programs?

How can our service most effectively engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in counselling, mediation and education programs?

In what ways can we build trust with members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and be responsive to the expressed needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men? And women?

What are the most culturally appropriate and effective ways of training and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers?

How might we work in partnership with the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community to meet the needs of young people?

In what ways could our service address the impact of early death on family dynamics in rural communities?

In what ways can cultural sensitivity be embedded within an agency in areas such as:

- consultation with local Elders and other identified leaders regarding issues in their communities
- employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- letting go mainstream western approaches of assessment and practice
- understanding the effects of colonisation and the legacy of the Stolen Generation e.g. the relationship between drug/alcohol issues and loss of identity and feelings of demoralisation?

How might we more effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to facilitate referral and service provision in the area of family violence?

What can we learn from other service providers about recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers?

What are the enablers, barriers and success factors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients participating in programs and activities with a majority of non-Indigenous participants?

How can we best respond to diverse needs of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community (or communities) in our area?

What might we need to be sensitive to and aware of in promoting the service and responding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander callers?

What is the impact of the community/family context when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients/communities?

How can we most effectively move beyond a generic approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service delivery and work in partnership with the local community to develop local solutions to local situations?



OBSERVE

OBSERVING YOUR PRACTICES, RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPACTS

In action research, different stakeholders are sure to observe and remember events differently. This diversity contributes to a richer, more detailed perspective on what is happening. It is important to bring multiple observations together over time. This can mean combining various sorts of observation – including direct observations by workers, clients and other stakeholders, and information about services and from other sources such as reports, surveys, demographic data, etc.

Ethics

It is important to consider and plan for the ethical issues in any research, including action research evaluation. For more information see the section on 'Ethics and action research' later in this chapter.

Action research involves taking ongoing notes and recording observations. The best ideas to help you answer your action research questions often occur when they are least expected, and in some instances can be implemented immediately. In this way, observation and action can occur at the same time.



TIPS:

Methods for recording your observation¹⁸

- Whiteboard printouts of ideas shared at action research or team meetings
- Notes you've jotted down as you think of them – guesses, hunches, thoughts
- Diagrams, drawings, mind maps
- Documents that have been created to improve service delivery, e.g. flyers, brochures, intake forms
- Feedback from clients, formal or informal
- Qualitative data, such as notes from interviews, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, etc.
- Quantitative data, eg. attendance data, access rates, results of quantitative surveys

DOCUMENTING YOUR ACTION RESEARCH

Documentation is a very important part of action research because it 'captures' your information and insights. It means achievements and what is being observed and learnt can be shared with others. It helps you keep track of changes and patterns and it makes evaluation and reporting much easier.



Documentation 'beds down' your research process – that is, you are not just 'doing' – you are systematically recording the planning, acting, observing and reflecting processes in ways that suit your agency, your target groups and your questions. Documentation occurs at all stages of action research and it assists with working through each phase. The documentation of 'actions' forms a large part of 'observing'.

Having clearly recorded and well-organised information about *what* is happening, *how* it is happening and *why* also helps to bring the processes together and gives you a starting point from which to reflect and plan. Involving a range of stakeholders in documenting the research is a way of making the research processes and interpretation accessible to a range of people so they can offer comment and responses.

You can take notes after talking informally with clients and other stakeholders and recording your observations/thoughts/feelings in a journal. You can also use existing client data sheets, minutes of meetings and comments books – making sure you have considered ethical issues in accessing and using this data. You can document progress on running sheets, charts, maps and tables. You may wish to develop a colour-coded folder system to keep track of different kinds of information.

ACT

ACTING ON YOUR FAMILY RELATIONSHIP SERVICE ACTION RESEARCH

The first stage of 'action' is to share the insights, communicate with and involve others in the process of implementing plans – that is, decide what to do and do what you said you were going to do.

TAKING ACTION

Having gone through the whole action research cycle, people may already have enough information and understanding to plan a specific action, intervention or change. However, it may be that a new insight emerges mid-cycle and this leads to a new or different direction from the one originally planned. This could start another cycle that is based on new information.

"Action happens when the plan is put into place and the hoped for improvement to the social situation occurs. This action will be deliberate and strategic. It is here that action research differs from other research methods in that the action or change is happening in reality and not as an experiment 'just to see if it works'."¹⁹

There is no end to the types of changes you might try out in the action stage of this cycle.

Some sample actions taken by Family Relationship Service Providers delivering services in Family Relationship Centres during this stage of the cycle include²⁰:

- Forming a reference group for an area of service planning or activity
- Providing regular information sessions or updates on your service via community radio or local newsletter
- Researching the evidence base on a particular issue, for example, through meeting with academics or other experts in the field
- Developing new brochures or information packs



- Implementing pre-dispute resolution information sessions
- Initiating new methods to attract staff
- Developing evaluation tools to help practitioners to peer review their work
- Working with staff to increase their contribution to the organisation's newsletter
- Changing opening hours to suit the needs of the community
- Developing appropriate child consultation models
- Providing cultural awareness training for staff

BEFORE THE ACTION

Before (and after) you take action, you should draw from your observation data to reflect on your original action research questions. This reflection afterwards assists you to become aware of underlying assumptions, refine your questions if necessary and identify appropriate action to lead you into the next part of the action research cycle.

The following list of questions could help in facilitating these discussions:

What do I think are the key features of the situation?

Why do I think those are the key features? What evidence do I have for this belief?

If I am correct about the situation, what outcomes do I believe are desirable?

Why do I think those outcomes are desirable in that situation?

If I am correct about the situation and the desirability of the outcomes, what actions do I think will achieve the outcomes?

Why do I think those actions will deliver those outcomes in that situation?

What might be some other impacts on the changes being proposed, e.g. impacts on staffing, other members of the community, budget, etc.

How can any negative unintended impacts be avoided or monitored?

Be part of a new direction and commit yourself professionally to doing what it takes to get action and stand alongside your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants all the way.

SHARING THE INSIGHTS

Action research insights should be available to participants and others. This process allows findings to be affirmed or challenged. In academic research this is traditionally achieved by publishing, but, more and more, researchers – and in particular social researchers or those taking an action research approach – seek other more direct, creative or effective ways to make their findings known.

Insights can be shared in a variety of ways depending on your stakeholders. For instance:

- A simple poster up on the wall
- Hold a workshop to share your findings. This could also feed into your cycle of action research.
- Attend community meetings and ask to be put on the agenda to share your insights



- Sharing a research 'write up' with other services and community contacts
- Creating or using an existing website for your action research
- Publicising your findings and feedback mechanisms through other means, such as a community newsletter, emails or local media.

You can also use a peer review strategy, such as a good practice forum, a journal or sector newsletter, or an email group or action research website to share your 'case study' and ask for feedback.

In sharing your action research with others you need to indicate how sure you are of what you have found out. Maybe it is something quite tentative that you are keen to investigate further or something you would like others to comment on. The importance of sharing a written account should not be underestimated. It can help to clear up what you think the insights are and what the evidence is for them.

Consider publicising the good practice you have developed more widely. This would have the important function of further disseminating the models to other service providers and could also be used to argue for other avenues of funding. This would mean developing strategies to provide other agencies with 'evidence' to support good practice.



TIP:

SNAICC welcomes case studies, profiles and action research evaluation findings from Family Relationship Services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to be considered for publication online on SNAICC's website.

See www.snaicc.asn.au

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse also welcomes profiles and case studies of good practice of Family Relationship Services, for inclusion in its publications.

See www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/

REFLECT

REFLECTING ON THE RESULTS OF YOUR ACTIONS

During the action stage, you should revisit your critically reflective questions that were developed during the planning stage and review them. The questions you asked yourself in planning your action should also be considered.

Reflection is about building a shared understanding of the meanings of what happened. It is a process of interpretation, in which a variety of information and perspectives are likely to produce different understandings. Reflection informs improvements to practice and affirms or challenges particular ways of doing things.

This building of shared meanings helps stakeholders to be actively involved in and develop 'ownership' of any changes. Reflection also requires that people think about how their own values and experiences influence the importance they attach to various 'meanings'.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will share many values and ideas but there is also a great diversity within and between different groups. It is important to show people respect and consult widely with the different age, gender and class groups or levels within organisations to establish shared meanings. You would also do this with other communities.

AFTER THE ACTION: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Reflecting on the results of the action you've taken involves asking some more questions.

Some examples are:

- Did the outcomes that we wanted occur?
- To the extent that they did, are they still the right outcomes? Why, or why not?
- Did we learn anything about the process used to achieve the outcomes?
- Why did this outcome happen? Do we need to probe further to really understand it?
- How do different groups understand what happened?
- What assumptions are we working with? What ideas are being supported or challenged?
- Who agrees or disagrees and what does this reveal?
- Who got to have a say and who didn't – and what does that mean?
- Have we developed a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened?
- Are there subtle differences between the planned actions and what actually happened? What does this tell you about the process and possible next steps?

RETURNING TO YOUR CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE QUESTION(S)

Your next step is to return to consider your questions formulated during your planning stage.

Some sample questions for this reflective stage are²¹:

- What implications do our findings have for further change or current practice?
- In what ways was I mistaken about the situation?
- Which of my assumptions about the situation misled me?
- What have I learned? What different conclusions will I reach about similar situations in future?
- In what ways was I mistaken about the desirability of the pursued outcomes?
- Which of my reasons for favouring those outcomes misled me?
- What have I learned? What outcomes will I try to pursue when next I'm in such a situation?
- Did I succeed in carrying out the planned actions? If not, what prevented or discouraged me? What have I learned about myself, my skills, my attitudes, and so on?



- If I did carry out the actions, in what ways was I mistaken about the effect they would have? Which of my assumptions about the actions misled me?
- What have I learned? What actions will I try next time I am pursuing similar outcomes in a similar situation?

MAKING ACTION RESEARCH PART OF EVERYDAY PRACTICE IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIP SERVICES

If you make changes in your work because you would like things to be better, you are already working in an action research way. Once you get the hang of it, action research is *less* work because you will have great systems and waste less time.

IMPLEMENT SOME NEW SYSTEMS TO MAKE YOUR LIFE EASIER:

- Put action research on your team meeting agenda
- Report on action research processes and findings to your management committee/board
- Include action research processes in funding submissions or contracts, allowing realistic costs and time spent on this important work
- Jot down events or tasks that will help to build in cycles of action and reflection as you think of them
- Have a graffiti board in your lunch room about action research and write comments on observations and reflections as people say them
- Write your project plans and documentation according to your action research framework for assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to use the service. For example, your project plan may have headings 'Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect'
- Have action research as part of your management with your supervisor or staff member. For example, "Are we taking an action research approach in our work? What do you need to do that?"
- Run an action research workshop for staff and/or community.
- Develop systems to record what you are doing and how you are changing your practice as a result
- Collect evidence of how things are changing as a result of your work. For example, copies of new documents you produce
- Have an action research diary or journal on your desk, write in it when you have five minutes or are reflecting on something
- In your diary, regularly mark out some time for yourself for reflection.

MAKE ACTION RESEARCH A TEAM EFFORT

Everyone changes and improves their practice, and everyone has great information and skills to contribute:

- Every month, review and focus on how your team are going with the outreach or engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations



- Document your questions and observations together
- Each team member can document a different part of the action research cycle and activities
- Each person can take the lead on a different action research question.
- Make a conscious effort to use the language of critical questioning in your everyday work ('What would it take to...?')
- Celebrate completing different parts of the cycle, or finishing off a question – people will do anything for chocolate cake!

Look for a range of ways to include people who might have something to say:

- Discuss how family relationships services are aiming to be more responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the community at your local services network meeting and write down what they say
- Form a critical reference group to inform and oversee the research – invite representatives from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations, communities and people using your service. Write up an agreed terms of reference for the group.
- Involve people doing the activities in the planning and evaluating of the activities and invite them to participate in the action research.
- Organise a community event like a BBQ and get people who attend to write down or record some ideas about improving services
- Get creative! Involve children to help collect information. They can draw pictures, take photographs and interview each other about what they like and need (remember to always get informed consent from guardians for the participation of children in research).

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN UNDERTAKING ACTION RESEARCH WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES²²

Ethics. Who is the research for and about? How will you get these people involved? Relationships, reciprocity, respect, spirit and integrity, equality, survival and protection, and responsibility are key concepts and ethical considerations identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. How will your research address these? Who will have access to the research? Are there intellectual property considerations? Don't make promises that you can't keep, or offer things you can't follow through on and always consider ongoing informed consent.

Informed consent. Remember consent is not a one-off signature on a research permission form. Build in a process for checking in about consent issues at different points of your plan. Check and re-check with all stakeholders along the way – make the time to reflect and record the reflections all along the way. Schedule in specific reflection times.

Be open to learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to this land and generally understand that this holds responsibilities in addition to rights. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture offers non-Indigenous people many opportunities to learn about how to understand and care for country and kin and about spirituality. Does your research plan have room for learning and sharing these understandings if these are shared with you?



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and workers. There are many highly skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and workers in all states and territories. Contact them and check what work is being done or has been done in your area. Invite their participation, leadership and/or employment where possible. You might be able to contact them through Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations, universities or TAFEs, for example.

Deciding on the main research questions. Who will do this and how will this happen? Has participation been built in at this early stage? How important is this issue to the community? To your organisation? Are there consequences if it is not addressed? What will community members get out of the research if this is the question you ask?

Shape, size and form of the research. Try to make it achievable and containable – bite-size bits!

Resources. People, technology, office space, publicity, equipment, paper, library resources, transport, travel and communication expenses, food and beverages. Can this project build on existing strengths and put resources into communities or organisations? If so, how and who decides?

Money. Grants, salaries, funds etc. Who will pay for the research and who will be paid?

Cultural business and protocols. Have you considered funerals, meetings, obligations, NAIDOC week, National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, local cultural events and occasions? (See Chapter 4 'Cultural Protocols' and the section on significant cultural events in Chapter 2 for more information.)

Diversity. Have you factored in diversity – of age and gender, culture, language and communication preferences?

History. Local, regional and national, formal and informal history is important. Have you looked into the history of your area? Do you know who the traditional owners are and other groups who were settled in the area? Do you know what key event may have shaped the way communities interact with your service?

Time, geography and weather. Consider the many impacts these may have on your planning.

Communication. Whose voices need to be heard? Who is best to do this talking? List the many techniques and ways of gathering and making sense of information, consider using interpreters, cultural brokers, different forums for women and elders, and different ways of communicating, such as listening circles, drawing and photographs, etc.

Local knowledge. This is crucial at all stages of research. Are local people employed, trained and/or acknowledged for contributing this important information? What are the best ways of doing this in your community?

Respect and permission. Always inform local services of the proposed work and find out a range of correct people to talk with. Get permission to visit certain places. Show and discuss issues. Explain why if you need to talk to broader groups than those suggested so that each contribution is seen as valued.

Reciprocity. Discuss what this word means for your service and project. How are you intending to give back to people involved? Are you committed to acting on what you hear? How will there be feedback and sharing of findings? Is it a two-way process? Is there a way you can give back straight away – without waiting for the research to be 'complete'?



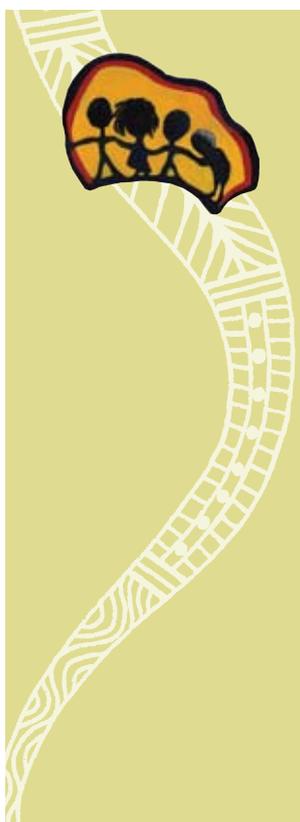
Making mistakes. When things don't go according to plan – as they won't – record and learn from the changes required. If mistakes are made, admit them and look at what happened and why. It is all learning.

Walking the talk. Do not offer things you cannot deliver and always follow through on the things you have said you will do. Discuss any changes as soon as possible – this is about building trust with all stakeholders.

Creativity. Think outside the box when looking for ways to communicate and share information

ETHICS AND ACTION RESEARCH

Being ethical in the way you do research is important. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have had negative experiences with research processes. As such, it will be important for you to be clear about your ethical approach, and to be willing to communicate that to all potential partners and participants.



TIP:

Ensuring your research is ethical

To ensure your research is ethical, it is important to involve stakeholders in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in designing your research. You may also need approval from a formal body, such as a Human Research Ethics Committee, to proceed, particularly if you are working in partnership with a tertiary research institution, some government departments or similar organisations, and are gathering personal information from community members. This can be considered essential if you are directly consulting children. For more information see:

National Ethics Application Form
<https://www.neaf.gov.au/>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
www.aiatsis.gov.au/research_program/publications

National Health and Medical Research Council publications
www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities each have their own established and respected values and protocols, and unique ways of expressing their different values. Each community or organisation has the right to express how their core values, and any unique values, will be addressed in research. Research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies must show an appreciation of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have different languages, cultures, histories and perspectives. It is also important to recognise the diversity of individuals and groups within those communities.²³

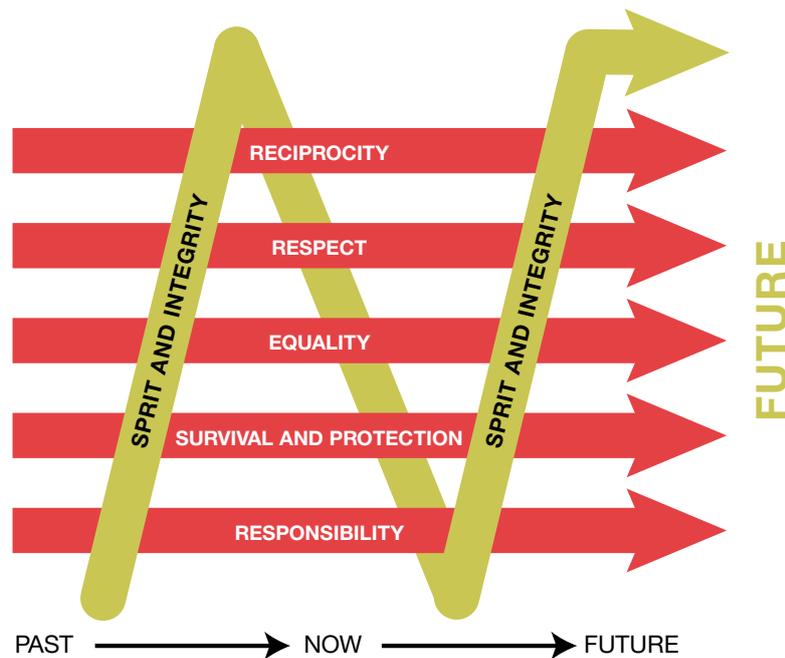


Important values in conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities include:

- Spirit and Integrity,
- Reciprocity,
- Respect,
- Responsibility,
- Survival and protection,
- Equality.²⁴

“Spirit and Integrity is the value that joins all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ values together. The first part, Spirit, is about the on-going connection (continuity) between past, current and future generations. The second part, integrity, is about the respectful and honourable behaviours that hold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and cultures together.”²⁵

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES’ VALUES RELEVANT TO HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS



Source: NHMRC²⁶

In all types of human service work and research, there are a wide range of ethical issues to consider. Legal and ethical considerations apply to workers’ and agencies’ everyday practices, including their organisational policies and the broader legislative and policy contexts in which they work.

Because action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved, the researchers must pay close attention to ethical considerations in the conduct of their work. Depending on the scope of your research and organisational type, you should consider or may



be required to apply for approval before undertaking research. This particularly applies to research which directly involves community members or accesses their personal information. Approval for such research can be obtained through university or government department ethics committees.

INFORMED CONSENT

Participants' involvement should always be on the basis of *informed consent*. That is, each person's participation should be voluntary and be on the basis of full information about the project and what their participation will involve. When research is about a community, this should also involve informing and reaching agreement with community leaders or community organisations about the research and how it will be used.

Consultation and negotiation is a continuous two-way process. Ongoing consultation is necessary to ensure free and informed consent for the proposed research, and to maintain that consent. Informed consent should be voluntary and understood as an ongoing process. One-off consent cannot be generalised to all aspects of a project or assumed for other projects or other times.²⁷ Research projects should be staged to allow continuing opportunities for the community to consider the research.²⁸

"Consultation involves an honest exchange of information about aims, methods, and potential outcomes (for all parties). Consultation should not be considered as merely an opportunity for researchers to tell the community what they, the researchers, may want. Being properly and fully informed about the aims and methods of a research project, its implications and potential outcomes, allows groups to decide for themselves whether to oppose or to embrace the project."²⁹

For example, any consent process should ensure that participants know what the aim of the research is, how the information they share will be used and what privacy provisions are in place, as well as their rights to complain or withdraw at any time. Initial consent to participate, or consent to participate in *one part* of a project should not be generalised to all aspects of a project or assumed to continue indefinitely. For example, changes in a person's circumstance may mean they no longer want a personal story to be used in your research. Alternatively, they may be willing for a quotation to be used in your report, but not published later on your website. It is good practice to seek consent at various points in a project, giving free and full information and options for participation or withdrawal at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Issues of confidentiality in research differ slightly from issues in other settings, such as in counselling or medical practice.

Research is about finding out and sharing information, but, wherever possible, identifying information should be closely protected unless prior and informed consent is given. Participants in research should have full information about how their information will be used and shared, and what identifying information, if any, will be kept or shared. Ideally when information is recorded and distributed it should be done in a way that protects privacy and confidentiality. However, in some circumstances, participants may want their names associated with their views put forward in the research. This is acceptable so long as full informed consent is given, but is one example where gaining informed consent should be considered an ongoing collaborative process with the participants.



TIP: Information and consent forms

Participants should always have access to an information sheet in plain English and give their consent before agreeing to participate in your research. An information sheet should include answers to the following questions:

- Who is doing the research (e.g. name of organisation)?
- Why is the research being done (e.g. to improve service delivery)?
- What information will be gathered (e.g. suburb, surname, opinions)?
- How will the information to be used (e.g. in a report, on a website, for discussion in staff meetings)?
- Who will own the information? (e.g. who will hold the intellectual property in a final report?)
- Who will have access to personal identifying information (e.g. the project officer, the researcher)?
- How will information be stored (e.g. in a locked filing cabinet, on a password-protected computer)?
- Who will have access to the other information (e.g. all staff will have access to de-identified information about the opinions of people in your suburb)?
- Are there any risks involved? (e.g. there might be a risk that findings of the research could impact on service delivery in a negative way)
- Who can participants contact for more information about the research or to make a complaint?
- Any other information that is needed before consent can be considered fully informed.

OWNERSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All knowledge, including research findings, is 'intellectual property' (IP). When doing action research, you must respect the cultural property rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to knowledge, ideas, cultural expressions and cultural materials.

"Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights are part of the heritage that exists in the cultural practices, resources and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples, and that are passed on by them in expressing their cultural identity. Indigenous intellectual property is not static and extends to things that may be created based on that heritage."³⁰

It is a fundamental principle of research to acknowledge the sources of information and those who have contributed to the research.³¹ Agreement in writing on issues of ownership should be reached – preferably in writing – before research is commenced, often as part of an agreement with community leaders, community-controlled organisations or as part of the process of obtaining informed consent.



BENEFIT

Research participants and their community should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by, the research project. Researchers have an obligation not just to 'take' information, but to 'give back' to the community.³²

Before you invite participation, you should be able to answer the question "What's in it for us?" with respect for, and acknowledgement of, all that the participants will be bringing to your research.

Participants in research make a significant contribution to research by providing knowledge, resources or access to data, often of a very personal nature. As such, your research should benefit Aboriginal or Torres Strait communities at a local level, and more generally.

Among the tangible benefits that a community should be able to expect from a research project is the provision of research results in a form that is useful and accessible. Immediate benefit can also often be made available, such as access to information resources, a chance to have their questions answered, some food or refreshments or payment for time and contribution.³³

PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER IN ACTION RESEARCH WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES³⁴

- **Maximise the opportunities for involvement of all participants.** For example, in the family relationship services context, invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and representatives from community-run organisations to be involved in a critical reference group to design and oversee all aspects of the work and research.
- **All participants must be allowed to influence the work,** and the wishes of those who do not wish to participate must be respected.
- Ensure **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are kept informed** even if they are unable to participate. Offer to put them on the mailing list or email list about the research – ensure they get regular information about the project.
- The development of the **work must remain visible** and open to suggestions from others.
- **Permission must be obtained** before making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes.
- Descriptions of others' unpublished work and points of view must be **negotiated with those concerned** before being published.
- The researcher must accept **responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.**
- Decisions made about the direction of the research and the probable outcomes are **negotiated with all stakeholders** and agreed to where possible in advance of being implemented
- Researchers are **explicit** about the nature of the research process from the beginning, including all **personal biases and interests.**
- There is **equal access to information** generated by the process for all participants.



CASE EXAMPLE

A 'DAY IN THE LIFE' OF A RECONNECT WORKER USING ACTION RESEARCH³⁵

This case example is drawn from the action research experiences of Reconnect. It is not intended as a model to be copied exactly, but is an example of how action research was used in practice.

Being a Reconnect worker means that on any given day you can work across a huge spectrum of areas, using a number of interventions and with goals ranging from individual client change to long-term systemic change.

The use of action research in everyday work is imperative to the continued development of the Connect service in Darwin. With such a large emphasis put on the action research process in the pilot, Connect now has ingrained the use of action research questions and ways to develop/change how the program is run in response to client/community feedback into every aspect of its service provision.

This is a typical (if you could call it that) day in a Connect workers' life:

8.30AM–9.15AM

Begin work, receive a message on the answering machine from Rita (Joanne's Mum who I provide case support to) requesting an immediate response. A phone call is made back to her after speaking with the other Connect worker, who supports the young person. Rita is asked for her preferred way of receiving support. The result was that the other Connect worker finds out if Joanne would be okay about a meeting between them all.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

An ongoing action research question is "whether it is more viable for the young person and their parents to have separate workers". It was found in the pilot that this was often the case, but with the recognition that every client is different, this is a question that is asked of clients and ourselves every time we engage with a family.

10.00AM–12.00PM

Meeting with a youth detention centre social worker and other key stakeholders regarding the development of a 'Community of Origin Visitors Scheme'. This meeting is to discuss the draft Background Paper created by a Connect worker and the creation of a timeline that allows for the optimum amount of consultation and contribution by relevant community members.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

Within the pilot, it was identified through client feedback and service assessment processes that there was a need for Aboriginal young people in detention to receive visits from other members of their communities with language, family or just community ties. This would be seen as a way to ease the feeling of dislocation and isolation from their communities and families, who are sometimes 2,000 km away. In response to this need and in partnership with the detention centre, Connect has drawn together a few key stakeholders in an effort to secure funding and put the beginnings of a model together, before further consultation is undertaken with members of the sector and the community.



1.00PM–2.30PM

Meeting with a young woman who is 14 years old. Went to shopping centre food court and discussed current issues. These included school truancy, self-harming behaviour and violent behaviour towards other people. On returning from meeting, a few observations regarding our meeting are placed in the 12 to 15 file.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

The key to making action research successful in terms of client work has been the ability to make it accessible on a daily basis. An example of this is creating a file titled 'what works with 12 to 15 year olds?' This came about as a result of observations by workers and in dialogue with local agencies. This age group's support needs seemed to be different. The aim of this file is that when a worker has dealings with someone in this age group, they jot down what was effective, whether it be 'meeting for shorter times' or 'driving the whole time', and drop this in the file. This was a time-effective way of collecting information that was later collated. Then it was used at the service level and fed into an inter-agency process for improving access of under 15s. This helped to support services and improve their capacities to respond effectively.

2.45PM–3.00PM

Return from client visit and receive a message (amongst others) from the school counsellor at a local high school. Return her call to accept a referral for a 15-year-old male requiring assistance with a mix of issues including extreme conflict with parents and the need to look at income support needs. Time made to meet with him and the school counsellor tomorrow.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

The school counsellors and Connect workers have jointly agreed to use action research to look at the best ways the service and school can work together to have the optimum result for the young person. This is at an early stage and tomorrow's meeting will be a good opportunity for observation and reflection on how collaborative early intervention casework can happen. At a practical level, we are asking "What would it take for the young person and their family to have more options for referral, advocacy and support?"

3.00PM–4.30PM

Pick up another client from school and take her to Centrelink in relation to a breach that has been imposed. Exceptional circumstances have come to light in our work with her. During this interview, it strikes me that Connect staff have been regularly providing additional information to Centrelink at the time of a breach and that a collaborative look at communication processes between the agencies might improve the information base for decision-making. I make a note to follow this up with Centrelink.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

Anecdotal evidence indicated it was worth looking at this area. This insight led to communication with Centrelink and it was later decided we would look collaboratively at how the service and Centrelink could improve communication, particularly at the time of breaches. A page in the back of the service daybook (a book used between workers to communicate information during the day) was created to record client experiences and worker communications with Centrelink. This information was then



able to go to the regular collaborative meeting we have with Centrelink staff as a basis for improving practice between the agencies and identifying any emerging issues. From the meetings, collective decisions could be made.

4.30PM–5.00PM

Message in daybook from other Connect worker saying that Joanne says that she will meet with her Mum tomorrow night. Contacted Rita and told her that a meeting time has been made for tomorrow night after work at the office with her daughter. I help her prepare for the meeting and clarify with her the main issues she wishes to raise and discuss with her the potential impact on her daughter of speaking about these issues. The conversation ended with Rita being asked how she found phone contact as a way of getting support and indicating that face-to-face was always an option. Rita said she was happy with phone support as the main way of communicating, as it was very convenient for her.

ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

Another action research question constantly being explored by Connect is “What is the most effective way to support families?” One strategy for exploring this is for phone support to be actively offered to parents, as well as face-to-face meetings. There was some anecdotal evidence that parents often find phone contact a more viable and practical means of support. The worker records Rita’s feedback on the action research observation sheet which has been set up to look at phone support (a one month focus). So far this is showing that phone support is a viable form of client work and not ‘just a phone call’.



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- 20 Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *General Feedback Report on Action Research for Family Relationship Centre*, July 2006-2007, p. 9.
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- 22 This list of tips is based on the research and work of Liz Orr, SNAICC Evaluation Manager as compiled by her in March 2009.
- 23 The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*, 2000, p.3.
- 24 National Health and Medical Research Council, *Values and Ethics: Guidelines in Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.
- 25 National Health and Medical Research Council, *Keeping Research On Track: A Guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about health research ethics*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, p. 8.
- 26 National Health and Medical Research Council, *Values and Ethics: Guidelines in Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 9.
- 27 Orr, E. and Walker, J. (unpublished paper) *Collaborative Research Practice with Indigenous Communities in a Volatile Political Australian Landscape*.
- 28 The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*, 2000, p. 3
- 29 *ibid*, p. 3
- 30 *ibid*, p. 3.
- 31 *ibid*.
- 32 *ibid*.
- 33 *ibid*.
- 34 Winter, R. 'Some principles and procedures for the conduct of action research,' in O. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.), *New directions in action research*, London: The Falmer Press, 1996, pp. 13-27. www.web.net/~robrien/papers/afinal.html#_edn11 Accessed online 18 March 2009
- 35 This case example was contributed by Reconnect in Darwin.



Useful Resources

We hope this list of resources, organisations and publications is a useful guide and introduction for readers and organisations. Items are included as suggestions for further reading and research, and as sources for support and assistance. It is not intended as a comprehensive listing, and the inclusion of items should not be taken as indicating endorsement of their content or comment by SNAICC.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ORGANISATIONS

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)

The national non-government peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child and family services. SNAICC publications are available online.

PO Box 1445, Fitzroy North, VIC 3068
Tel: (03) 9489 8099
Email: snaicc@vicnet.net.au
www.snaicc.asn.au

Connecting Communities – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Services Directory, SNAICC

SNAICC’s online service directory is a comprehensive searchable directory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, including child and family welfare services, family and parenting support and education services, health and legal services, and early childhood services such as preschools and kindergartens, child care centres and playgroups. A hard copy directory of the same name is also available to order from SNAICC.

www.snaicc.asn.au

The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)

The national peak Aboriginal health body representing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services throughout Australia.

PO Box 5120, Braddon, ACT 2612
Tel: (02) 6248 0644
www.naccho.org.au

Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA)

PO Box 261, Thursday Island 4875
1st Floor, Torres Strait Haus Victoria Pde, Thursday Island
Tel: (07) 4069 0700
Email: info@tsra.gov.au
www.tsra.gov.au



OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Family Relationship Services Australia

National peak body for family relationship service providers

PO Box 326, Deakin West, ACT 2600

Tel: (02) 6162 1811

Email: admin@frsa.org.au

www.frsa.org.au

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

Institution for information and research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

AIATSIS, GPO Box 553, Canberra 2601

Tel: (02) 6246 1111

Email: communications@aiatsis.gov.au

www.aiatsis.gov.au

Families Australia

Families Australia is Australia's independent, peak, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the needs and interests of families.

PO Box 83, Campbell, ACT 2612

Tel: (02) 6273 4885

Email: admin@familiesaustralia.org.au

www.familiesaustralia.org.au

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR)

Non-government organisation advocating for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and supporting reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Besides the national organisation, there are also state and territory organisations.

www.antar.org.au

GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

Indigenous Portal

The Australian Government's portal to resources, contacts, information, and government programs and services for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

www.indigenous.gov.au

Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)

AIFS is a national and international leader in identifying, developing and providing timely and reliable information about issues affecting families in Australia.

www.aifs.gov.au



Community.gov.au – Information and Services for Australians

This website provides access to online services and information for Australian community organisations, communities and individuals.

www.community.gov.au

Family Relationships Online

Family Relationships Online provides all families (whether together or separated) with access to information about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution.

<http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/familyrelonline.nsf/AllDocs/C923408E4AE4285DCA257441000CC950?OpenDocument>

The Family Relationship Advice Line

Freecall telephone: 1800 050 321

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE AND HISTORY

First Australians

Television series broadcast on SBS – available on DVD (SBS)

Companion website to the television series

www.firstaustralians.com.au and www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians

Companion book

First Australians: An Illustrated History, Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton (editor), 2008, Miegunyah Press, Carlton.

Indigenous Australia

Australian Museum website on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, society and history.

www.dreamtime.net.au

Dust Echoes

A series of 12 online animated Dreaming stories produced by the ABC.

www.abc.net.au/dustechoes

UsMob

Set in Central Australian Aboriginal communities, *UsMob* is an online, interactive multimedia series with young Aboriginal characters who spark an exchange of culture, creativity and experience between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

usmob.com.au

Further information on the situation of Indigenous Australians is available in the report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* on the website below

<http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous>



HISTORY – BOOKS

Attwood, Bain *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation*, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Roadmap for Reconciliation*, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, HREOC, Sydney, 1997.

Manne, Robert 'In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 1, Black Inc./Schwartz Publishing, 2001.

Read, Peter *The Stolen Generations: the removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*, NSW Government Printer, Sydney, 1982.

Reynolds, Henry *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

Reynolds, Henry *The Other Side of the Frontier: an Interpretation of the Aboriginal Response to the Invasion and Settlement of Australia*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1981.

Reynolds, Henry *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal search for the Truth about Our History*, Viking, Ringwood, 1999.

Ryan, Lyndall *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Allen & Unwin, 2nd Edition, St Leonards, 1997.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework

Including accompanying *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Matrix* (November 2008)

A useful resource on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence with specific focus on child welfare, developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and published by the Victorian Government.

Victoria Department of Human Services website:

cyf.vic.gov.au/indigenous-initiatives/publications2/aboriginal-cultural-competence-framework

Making Two Worlds Work: Building the capacity of the health and community sector to work effectively and respectfully with our Aboriginal community

Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and Women's Health Goulburn North East
www.whealth.com.au/ourwork/making_two_worlds_work.html

AHMAC Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, 2004–2009

Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council. Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Working Party, published by Department of Health, South Australia, March 2004



Reconciliation Action Plans

Reconciliation Australia supports non-Indigenous organisations, corporations and government departments to undertake their own *Reconciliation Action Plans* to develop strategies for reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-action-plans/what-is-a-rap

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

The Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network

'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Families & Communities Hub'

www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/aboriginal_tsi_indigenous_hub/loss_grief

Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health (Auseinet)

'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information'

An online guide to information and resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and related issues.

auseinet.com/atsi/index.php

Promotion, prevention and early intervention for mental health: for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Auseinet

An overview of social and emotional wellbeing, influences on mental health, and general principles for promotion, prevention and early intervention.

auseinet.com/atsi/resdetail?id=3307&tid=5&fromid=276

'What do Indigenous experiences and perspectives mean for transcultural mental health? Towards a new model of transcultural teaching for health professionals'

Diane Gabb and Dennis McDermott, 2007

Paper presented at the NSW Rural Mental Health Conference

archive.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html_community/social_health_community/publications/social_conference.htm

or download PDF: tinyurl.com/yhyqnr3

Social and emotional wellbeing policy

Social Health Reference Group, (2004) *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework. A National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Mental Health and Wellbeing 2004–2009*, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council and National Mental Health Working Group.



APS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Psychology Interest Group

Australian Psychological Society Interest Group concerned with promoting best psychological practice for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Website includes resources, news on professional development and other events, links and contact details.

www.groups.psychology.org.au/atsipp

Guidelines for the provision of psychological services for, and the conduct of psychological research with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People of Australia

APS members can download these guidelines from the APS Website at www.psychology.org.au/membership/ethics/guidelines

P. Dudgeon, H. Pickett, & D. Garvey (Eds.), *Working with Indigenous Australians: A Handbook for Psychologists*, Gunada Press, Perth, 2000.

MEDIA

Cultural protocols for reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in the media

Ethics and Codes of Conduct – Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC)

www.abc.net.au/indigenous/education/ethics_codes.htm

ABC Indigenous

Multimedia online resources and portal for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs.

www.abc.net.au/indigenous

Koori Mail

A fortnightly national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander newspaper – Aboriginal owned and run.

www.koorimail.com.au

National Indigenous Times

Fortnightly national newspaper on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues – non-Indigenous owned.

www.nit.com.au

COMMUNICATION

Sharing the True Stories: Improving Communication in Indigenous Health Care

Information on improving intercultural communication to improve health care delivery for Aboriginal people in the Top End. Includes suggestions for guidelines and strategies for effective communication, research and other resources.

www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts



Aboriginal Interpreter Service

The Aboriginal Interpreter Service helps to alleviate the language barriers faced by Indigenous persons throughout the Northern Territory particularly in relation to health and legal issues.

24 hours 7 days a week central booking service:
Darwin Tel: (08) 8999 8353
Alice Springs Tel: (08) 8951 5576
www.dlghs.nt.gov.au/ais

Useful hints on working with an Aboriginal language interpreter

Aboriginal Interpreter Service, Northern Territory Government

www.dlghs.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/6542/Useful_Hints.pdf

ARTS PROTOCOLS

Valuing Art, Respecting Culture. Protocols for working with the Australian Indigenous visual arts and craft sector (2001)

Protocol both to guide non-Indigenous people in their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities, and to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to define their rights. Published by National Association for the Visual Arts.

Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct

A draft commercial code of conduct for the Indigenous art industry is available for public comment, developed by Department for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. Consultations conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts.

www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/news_items/consultation_on_draft_indigenous_art_code_of_conduct

ACTION RESEARCH EVALUATION

ONLINE RESOURCES

Action Learning Action Research and Process Management Association

www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/index.html

Participatory Action Research Evaluation

SNAICC and AHCSA *Participatory Action Research Evaluation Workbooks One and Two* srs.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/00149.pdf and srs.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/00151.pdf

Crane, Phil and Richardson, Leanne, 2000, *Reconnect Action Research Kit*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra. www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/housing/pubs/homelessyouth/reconnect_action_research_kit/Pages/default.aspx



Family Relationship Services Research and Evaluation

Commonwealth Attorney General's Department

www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Families_FamilyRelationshipServicesOverviewofPrograms_ResearchandEvaluation_ResearchandEvaluation

Catherine Caruana and Robyn Parker, 2009, 'Embedding research in practice: Research within Family Relationship Centres in Australia', *AFRC Briefing No. 14*, Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/briefing14.html

Research Ethics

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2000, *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*.

www.aiatsis.gov.au/research_program/publications

Values and Ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research (NHMRC, 2003)

www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Freire, Paolo, 1972, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK.

Lewin, Kurt, 1946, 'Action research and minority problems', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 2, pp. 34-46.

Tjikalyi, C. and Garrow, A. 1996, *Thinking, Listening, Looking, Understanding and Acting as You Go Along: Steps to Evaluating Indigenous Health Promotion Projects*, Council of Remote Area Nurses (CRANA), Alice Springs, NT.

Alston, Margaret and Bowles, Wendy, 1998, *Research for Social Workers: An Introduction*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Wadsworth, Y. 1997, *Do It Yourself Social Research*, 2nd ed., Allen & Unwin Australia, St Leonards, NSW.

Kemmis, S., and McTaggart, R. (Eds.) 1988, *The Action Research Planner* (3rd ed., substantially revised), Deakin University Press, Geelong, Victoria.



