

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, June 2011

Aboriginal children and young people speak out about culture and identity

"A strong culture; fighting for your culture." Kimberley children

What do children and young people say about being acknowledged?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research¹ into the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia. As part of the research, more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds participated in an online survey, of which 6.4 per cent were Aboriginal. Of the 300 children and young people who took part in focus groups, artwork, storytelling and interactive forums, 14.8 per cent were Aboriginal.²

Many children and young people said they wanted adults and the broader community to acknowledge the things that were important to them. Non-Aboriginal children and young people expressed the need for individualised acknowledgement. They said they wanted to feel personally valued and appreciated, such as being complimented by their parents, teachers, coaches or friends.

"Acceptance...that everyone could be different, because everyone is different from everyone else, and no typecasting or whatever." girl 15

Aboriginal children and young people had a different view. They said Aboriginal culture and traditional values, such as respect for elders, sharing and being close to family, were of great importance to them. They wanted these positive things acknowledged and appreciated, in particular being able to spend time with their grandparents, listening to stories and learning about their culture.

"Swimming, fishing, hunting and goanna shooting [with my family]." boy 14

Why is culture so important to Aboriginal children and young people?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³ states that all children have the right to practice their own culture, language and religion. Minority and Indigenous groups require special protection of this right.

Culture is fundamental to the lives of Aboriginal people. A vibrant culture and connection to community are significant factors in strengthening the resilience of Aboriginal children and young people.⁴ The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Incorporation (SNAICC) describes the identity of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child as being intrinsically connected to their family and their relationship with the land.⁵

Language, law, connection to the land and participating in cultural activities are very meaningful to Aboriginal people as they define them as a group. All are closely aligned to their wellbeing.⁶



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



"To learn to write and have a strong culture." girl 7

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people living in remote areas who speak a traditional language are less likely to experience risk factors associated with poor wellbeing.⁷ However, the ABS also reports that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia whose main language is a traditional one is declining, with only eight per cent speaking an Aboriginal language at home.

An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report found that in 2008 about one in nine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults spoke a traditional language as their main language at home. The same report noted that 62 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults identified with a clan or tribal or language group, compared to 54 per cent in 2002.⁸

For some Aboriginal families, going to the bush to hunt and camp is both a recreational and cultural activity. In the Commissioner's wellbeing research, Aboriginal children and young people said it was important to go to the bush because it allowed them to spend time with family, reconnect with their culture and practise traditional activities such as hunting and fishing.

'Living on the beach and going on a boat at One Arm Point [with my family].' girl 7

In 2009, the Australian Government undertook a longitudinal study of what makes Aboriginal children strong. Almost half of the parents surveyed said they taught their children traditional arts, such as painting, dance, singing and ceremonial dress-making. Forty-one per cent of these parents also reported that they taught their children traditional practices, including collecting food and hunting.⁹

Evidence increasingly shows that connection to culture is fundamental to Aboriginal children and young people's identity and wellbeing. The absence of culture may, therefore, contribute to low self-esteem and a poor sense of self. Studies in the USA and Canada have found that Indigenous youth suicide behaviour is not as prevalent among communities that are committed to preserving their culture through language and traditional practices.¹⁰

Some progress has been made in the recognition of culture through the Australian Government's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicator Framework*. For example, land and cultural activities have been identified as priority outcomes for a 'safe, healthy and supportive family environment with strong communities and cultural identity' and Indigenous studies have been identified in the 'education and training' strategic area for action.¹¹

Priorities for policy and program development

Service providers need to acknowledge and respect Aboriginal culture in the development and delivery of culturally-appropriate and safe practices. Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia¹² has provided some guidance on how to achieve this and SNAICC has developed a resource for services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and organisations.¹³

Strong Aboriginal communities are better able to generate new opportunities and support those who are most vulnerable. Involving Aboriginal people in more programs to strengthen culture and communities will make a significant difference to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse has established a community development framework for the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and identifies a number of promising Aboriginal practices and programs.¹⁴

Most importantly, it is essential that the planning and development of strategies to improve Aboriginal children and young people's sense of culture and identity must involve their participation, as well as that of their families and communities.



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- ¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, research Speaking out about Wellbeing
- ² Ibid, 2009
- ³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child <http://www.ohcrh.org>
- ⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Perth, Western Australia
- ⁵ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Incorporation, *Working and Walking Together, Supporting Family Relationship Services to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations*, 2010. <http://www.snaicc.asn.au/resources>
- ⁶ Australian Government, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicator Report, 2009* Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services Provision, Productivity Commission
- ⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat. No. 4725.0 – *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing: A focus on children and youth*, April 2011. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats>
- ⁸ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an overview, 2011* <http://www.aihw.gov.au>
- ⁹ Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). http://www.facsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/families/lsc/finding_our_feet/Pages
- ¹⁰ M. Chandler and C. Lalonde, 1998, cited in the Telethon Institute of Child Health Research, Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS), 2005 Vol. 2 *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. chpt.8
- ¹¹ Australian Government, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicator Report, 2009* Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Productivity Commission
- ¹² Australian Institutes of Family Studies, CAFA Communities and Families Clearinghouse Practice Sheet, March 2011, *Working with Indigenous children, families and communities, Lessons from practices* <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs/sheets/ps/ps6.pdf>
- ¹³ Secretariat of National Aboriginal Islander Child Care Incorporation (SNAICC) *Working and Walking Together, Supporting Family Relationship Services to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations*, 2010. <http://www.snaicc.asn.au/resources>
- ¹⁴ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Closing the gap Clearinghouse, resource sheet *Community development approaches to safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children*, June 2010 <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap>

