

Section 3 - Understanding Aboriginal cultural contexts

This section outlines key concepts relating to Aboriginal history and culture. These are particularly important for organisations and agencies to be aware of, and understand, prior to undertaking participation activities with Aboriginal children and young people and their communities. While these concepts are introduced in general terms, Aboriginal communities are very diverse and the specific context of the community you intend to work with must be fully understood and considered prior to undertaking place-based work.

"I think it's very important to me because I don't want to lose my culture, I want to learn as much as I can." 17 year-old Noongar boy, Wheatbelt

1. Innate strengths of Aboriginal culture

"The things I would change would be the attitude towards my people by educating them better about my culture, language, traditions. This is because most people around here and [those] I go to school with assume rather than look at fact. They only look at the bad parts of our culture, such as crime rates, rather than good things, such as our traditions, cultures, athletes..." 14 year-old Yamatji young person, Perth

A strengths-based framework that recognises, builds and develops the existing skills and capacities of Aboriginal people will be more effective than viewing culture and knowledge from a deficit-based perspective.

Case study extract

Kids on Country – strengths-based approach

The Kids on Country program demonstrates the application of a strengths-based approach because it was founded upon Aboriginal children and young people's existing knowledge of and connection to country by utilising their local knowledge of the land and local animals.

"The Kids were interested in Malleefowl. They had seen them, knew where they crossed the road, and knew how to find their nests. Millennium Kids secured funding for a group of 30 young people from Coolgardie, based on their desire to learn more about the woodland, with a particular emphasis on traditional culture and protection of a threatened bird, the Malleefowl. The program also gave the Kids the opportunity to lead the program and found that with the recognition of their knowledge and skills and the opportunity to demonstrate leadership, they blossomed; keen to share their knowledge."

View the full Kids on Country case study in the *Case studies* section.

Some of the many strengths of Aboriginal culture that must be considered when working with Aboriginal children and young people include:

- **Community obligations:** Aboriginal children and families are more likely to have obligations and responsibility to and for their broader community including Elders, other family members (such as caring for younger siblings or relatives) and other community members. This strengthens the support systems and civic mindedness of Aboriginal children and young people but can also impact their time and autonomy and should be considered and discussed with children and young people when planning activities.
- **Reciprocity:** As part of the obligations Aboriginal young people may owe to their community, their community also owes obligations to them to ensure their health and wellbeing; this is part of the kinship system. The interest and responsibility of community members in your work with their children and young people should be taken into consideration when structuring your program, consulting with the community and determining who your stakeholders are, as well as during the feedback stage of the project.
- **Community-based decision making:** Decision making processes in Aboriginal communities are also more likely to be structured within the community, requiring individuals to consult with and gain consensus from other members of the community before being able to agree to a view or recommendations about community issues. This impacts the ability of an individual to speak for a community and selecting individuals to represent a community, without the consent, support and involvement of the community, should be avoided. Instead, consider building in time for community consultation and feedback into your process and including multiple individuals to assist in relaying the information to and from the community and to support the discussion of a reflective range of views. From the outset, the role of Elders and senior leaders in the community should also be respected through early engagement, prior to involving children and young people.

Additional information and resources

- [Families and cultural diversity in Australia - Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)
- [Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing – Child Family Community Australia](#)

"[Culture] tells me who I am and makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I belong somewhere." 13 year-old Yawuru girl, Perth

When working with Aboriginal children and young people, their wellbeing needs must be considered in the context of culture and cannot be considered in isolation.⁶

Research has shown strong cultural identity as a factor associated with resilience and demonstrated the importance of culture as a means through which Aboriginal people can overcome disadvantage. Strong cultural identity and connection is increasingly being linked to better outcomes in education, justice, health and wellbeing, and employment, as well as being a positive point of difference for economic activity.

Among young people, culture can be a vehicle for enhancing self-esteem, identity and belonging, which can help build their resilience, alongside other factors such as family support and good health.⁷ Where traditional cultural practices and structures have broken down, re-establishing these among the broader community can have a direct effect on children and young people's community connections and sense of wellbeing.

The [2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#) states that Indigenous peoples want to:

- become agents of their own development
- determine and develop priorities and strategies for development.⁸

The UNDRIP asserts that self-determination, participation, cultural rights, land rights, ownership and free and prior informed consent, are key principles for improving the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples.

⁶ KidsMatter 2012, *Cultural diversity and children's wellbeing*, Department of Health and Ageing, Commonwealth of Australia, viewed 18 December 2017, <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMP_C1_CDCW_CulturalDiversityAndChildrensWellbeing.pdf>.

⁷ Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2015, *Discussion Paper: Culture and the design and delivery of programs and services for Aboriginal young people*, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Perth, Western Australia, p.1.

⁸ United Nations 2008, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Articles 3, 43, 44, viewed 17 May 2017, <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>>.

Resources

- [Whose voice counts?: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in child protection decision-making - Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care](#)
- [Recognising the Strength of Culture, Aboriginal Cultural Response for the Child and Family Health Service Discussion Paper - Government of South Australia](#)
- [The Importance of Identity, Culture and History for Indigenous Youth Wellness - L. Wexler, University of Massachusetts Amherst](#)

In the context of the participation of children and young people, this includes respecting the autonomy of Elders and senior leaders in the community through early engagement and recognition of the need to gain their consent, by way of a fully-informed invitation to work in the community, prior to engaging with the community.

2. Cultural safety is key

“My culture is who I am, it is a part of everything I do. It connects me to my family and makes me unique...” 17 year-old Jabirr Jabirr girl, Kimberley

Cultural security is behavioural based; it is about the obligations of those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to work within policies and practices that ensure programs and services adequately meet cultural needs⁹ by recognising, appreciating and responding to the impact of cultural diversity on the effective use and provision of services.¹⁰

Developing the cultural security of your organisation or agency, together with the practice of a strength-based approach to culture, drives a better understanding of the community with which you are trying to engage and respects, values and properly acknowledges culture(s) and the community leaders who carry and impart this knowledge.¹¹

⁹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2011, *Social Justice Report 2011, Chapter 4: Cultural safety and security: Tools to address lateral violence*, Australian Human Rights Commission, viewed 17 May 2017, <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-3>>.

¹⁰ Palmerston 2003, *Aboriginal cultural security – A background paper*, Department of Health, Government of Western Australia, viewed 18 December 2017, <<https://www.palmerston.org.au/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=112992>>

¹¹ Hunt J, Closing the Gap Clearing House 2013, *Engaging with Indigenous Australia— exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities Issues paper no. 5*, viewed 18 December 2017, <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2013/ctgc-ip5.pdf>>

It is essential that organisations and agencies understand the cultural context in which they are working, and ensure their programs and services are built upon elements that strengthen cultural identity, connection and leadership capacity among the Aboriginal children and young people accessing them.

The steps towards providing cultural security include:

Cultural awareness: sensitivity to the similarities and differences that exist between two different cultures and the use of this sensitivity in effective communication with members of another cultural group.¹²

Cultural competency: becoming aware of the cultural differences that exist, appreciating and having an understanding of those differences and accepting them. It also means being prepared to guard against accepting your own behaviours, beliefs and actions as the norm.¹³

Cultural safety: shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening. It is about creating an environment that is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need.¹⁴

Reflective practice

It is important for non-Aboriginal workers to use reflective practice when engaging with Aboriginal children and young people and their communities. This means reflecting on your own perceptions and biases.

Vicary et al. explains:

“Judging Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices from a western worldview can be a barrier that prevents Aboriginal people from engaging with non-Aboriginal people. The worker must be both aware and comfortable with cross-cultural differences and ensure that these differences are valued and not negated or judged. Aboriginal people, and particularly children, can quickly detect when non-Aboriginal people are unable to disengage their western framework or are being insincere. This can result in superficial engagement or avoidance all together.”¹⁵

¹² Health Education and Training Institute (HETI) 2017, Government of New South Wales, viewed 21 December 2017, <<http://www.heti.nsw.gov.au/International-medical-graduate/Cultural-Awareness/>>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2011, *Social Justice Report 2011, Chapter 4: Cultural safety and security: Tools to address lateral violence*, viewed 17 May 2017, <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-3>>.

¹⁵ Vicary D, Tennant J, Garvie T and Adupa C 2008, *Can You Hear Me? The Active Engagement of Aboriginal Children in the Development of Social Policy by Non-Aboriginals*, Perth, Western Australian Office for Children and Youth.

Resources

- [Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework - Department of Education WA](#) sets expected standards for all staff when working with Aboriginal students, their parents and families, and communities. The framework supports staff to reflect on their behaviours, attitudes and practices with a view to progressing from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness so we can maximise learning outcomes for Aboriginal students.
- [Cultural Safety Training - Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia](#)
- [Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols - Oxfam](#)
- [Aboriginal Cultural Competence Matrix - Victorian Government Department of Human Services](#) This resource matrix is designed to be used by Community Service Agencies (CSOs) in conjunction with the Registration Standards and the Evidence Guide 2008. However it is useful as it provides detailed examples of evidence for the key components of the conceptual framework for Aboriginal cultural competence.
- [Cultural Competence: Transforming Policy, Services, Programs and Practice - Telethon Kids Institute](#) – discusses some of the complex issues surrounding the notion of cultural competence and the critical need for practitioners to develop knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes to be responsive in diverse cultural settings.
- For more information about Cultural Competence courses available in your state go to [Health Infonet](#) or [Centre for Cultural Competence Australia](#)

3. Aboriginal peoples' diversity requires place-based initiatives

"Learning your language [is important] so that you can teach your children and grannies. Language is a special thing to have, it makes you different from other tribes." 17 year-old Banyjima girl, Pilbara

Aboriginal people are not a homogenous group.

The diversity of Aboriginal groups is represented in the [Tribal Boundaries map](#) based on Norman Tindale's 1974 map, each of which have their own cultural norms and dialectal groups. [Aboriginal children and young people have also shared their diverse experiences and cultures in consultation](#), which has been captured in some of our resources highlighting the need for place-based initiatives.

To be most effective, programs and services must be highly localised and designed for each individual community. This is because Aboriginal communities, cultures and

languages are diverse and the issues experienced by a region, as well as the successful approaches in addressing those issues, will vary as a result. To be successful, you must also support and respect 'local autonomy', whereby the local community (organisations and individuals) are involved through broad consultation and active involvement in decision making; this respects the cultural process of community-based decision making.¹⁶

As highlighted in the *Understanding participation* section, capturing the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in this process is essential to recognising and supporting their rights and improving their wellbeing. This includes disengaged or hard-to-reach children and young people, who are often the target of services and resources but who are rarely given the opportunity to participate in their design, implementation and evaluation.

For more information about the potential cultural differences between groups of Aboriginal peoples and even within a specific community, continue reading Part 6 – Time and autonomy and Part 7 – Communicating with Aboriginal children and young people.

For more information on how to develop an understanding of the particular needs of your target community, go to *The engagement process, Stage 1 – Planning to involve Aboriginal children and young people, Step 2: Understanding your target community*.

4. Understanding the impact of trauma

"I would eradicate racism between black and white to build respect...It is a bit confusing growing up Aboriginal in this society because we are taught to be proud but lots of times we aren't really accepted, even when we try to be like them."

13 year-old Noongar young person, Perth

Many Western Australian Aboriginal communities and families will have experienced primary (direct or personal experience of trauma) and secondary trauma (witnessing or experiencing the impact of the trauma); through bearing witness to the traumatic experiences of their family and community members. As a result of factors such as colonisation, forced removals and other government policies, Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to have experienced trauma, particularly secondary trauma.

Without adequate opportunities to overcome trauma, young people internalise their experiences and seek to find their own means of coping. This can result in negative behaviours such as:

- high rates of drug and alcohol addiction
- violence directed at themselves and others

¹⁶ Wilks S, Lahaussé J, & Edwards B 2015, *Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives: Key Learnings project* (Research Report No. 32), Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

- criminal behaviour and interaction in the justice system
- gang membership
- homelessness
- detachment from culture and family supports
- disengagement from school.

Trauma-informed approaches are based on a deep understanding of trauma and its impact on individuals, families and communities, respecting and drawing on Aboriginal knowledge and culture. This is critical to avoid misunderstandings and disengagement and is best implemented through consultation with the community to understand any issues or trauma in that community.

The ability to adopt a trauma-informed approach is a specifically developed skill set which requires formal training, a number of training providers specialise in the presentation of this professional development. Opportunities should be provided to staff to train in this field, with a particular focus on culturally-appropriate practice, as required to meet the needs and work of your organisation or agency.

Taking the time and making the effort to build relationships that are safe, authentic and positive is an essential component of trauma-informed practice. A trauma-informed approach with Aboriginal children and young people addresses the cycle of trauma and disadvantage they have experienced and the affect this has on their wellbeing. It seeks to strengthen protective factors to increase resilience and enable recovery from trauma.

Resources

- [Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children - Closing the Gap Clearinghouse](#)
- [Guide to Culturally-Sensitive Trauma-Informed Care - Health Care Toolbox](#)

5. Duty of care and managing disclosures

"First they need good people, which they can 100 per cent, fully trust. Which will always be there, no matter what, whatever time of the day, whatever night or the day." 17 year-old boy

A duty of care is a duty to take reasonable care to:

- identify possible causes of harm
- prevent harm from occurring
- when children and young people are in your care and control.

Taking reasonable care means balancing the risk of harm and the safety of yourself, workers, young people and others against providing opportunities to develop skills, responsibility and maturity.¹⁷

Working with vulnerable children and young people who are likely to have experienced trauma will also require you to have appropriate policies and practices in place for responding to potential disclosures in a sensitive and confidential manner and managing any challenging behaviours of children and young people (such as those described above) to ensure the best chance of participation from children and young people in a safe space.

Protective factors are characteristic(s) at the biological, psychological, family or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes¹⁸ and may also help to build resilience and leadership.

Key protective factors for young people that can be incorporated into your practice include:

- supporting a strong sense of identity and cultural pride
- building confidence in life skills and a strong desire to succeed
- being part of an active community with opportunities to participate in the cultural life
- empowering community self-governance and influence over key areas including health and education services.¹⁹

Resources

- [Information on child safe practices including Child Safe Organisations WA Guidelines - Commissioner for Children and Young People WA](#)
- [Risk and Protective Factors - Youth.gov](#)

¹⁷ Department of Education (WA) 2017, *Duty of Care for Students, Policy Statement*, viewed 18 December 2017, <<http://det.wa.edu.au/policies/detcms/policy-planning-and-accountability/policies-framework/policies/duty-of-care-for-students.en?cat-id=3457100>>.

¹⁸ United States Government 2017, Youth.gov website, *Risk and Protective Factors*, viewed 18 December 2017, <<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/risk-and-protective-factors-youth>>.

¹⁹ Healing Foundation 2015, *Growing our children up strong and healthy – healing for children and young people*, viewed 18 December 2017, <<https://healingfoundation.org.au/children-and-young-people/>>.

6. Time and autonomy

“We follow traditional lore in Derby. Sometimes this means it’s hard for young men to go to school though because they become a man and have other responsibilities.”
13 year-old boy, Derby

Keep in mind that concepts of time are often perceived and valued differently by Aboriginal peoples than by non-Aboriginal people. Particularly in regional and remote contexts, this can mean Aboriginal people are more fluid with their time and don't feel comfortable with fixed schedules as their priorities are guided by their obligations, not a schedule. Just because you think something is a priority doesn't mean that view will be shared.

For example:

- At certain times of the year, traditional Aboriginal lore occurs, which impacts upon the availability of key community members as well as Aboriginal children and young people.
- ‘Sorry business’, when Aboriginal people mourn the loss of a family/community member, and other cultural commitments and events may also affect the availability of Aboriginal community members even if a schedule was previously agreed.

As a result, it may take longer for you to hold meetings or deliver activities than you are used to, and you need to factor this into the timeline for your participation processes.

You should always consult with Elders and senior leaders regarding your visit and its purpose, and seek fully-informed permission and consent, by way of an invitation to enter and work with the community, ahead of time. An invitation to work in the community is an essential part of starting a respectful relationship with a community and is critical to ensuring that the community wants, understands and will benefit from, your organisation's or agency's activities. Engaging with the community in this way also represents the opening of the opportunity to support Aboriginal-led solutions and to develop and inform your practices in their community.

It may also not be appropriate for you to enter the community at certain times, particularly when there is community disruption, and you must be as flexible as possible with timeframes in order to be responsive to changes in the community.

Aboriginal children and young people often have considerable autonomy and independence compared to non-Aboriginal children and young people, and their availability to attend activities may be different. They may also be considered adults at a younger age, particularly in areas which practise Aboriginal law/lore. For example, you may find that Aboriginal children and young people will need to come and go at different times during an activity; therefore adapting your activity to incorporate this can support greater engagement. They may also have responsibility

to care for other younger children requiring thought to be put into the age range you are targeting, flexibility of the project to allow for wider participation and the other supports you may need to put in place.

Successful engagement includes asking your target group of Aboriginal children and young people about how they want to participate. This will help you understand their needs so you can adapt your activities to make it more welcoming and accessible for them to be involved and sets the tone for your relationship.

7. Communicating with Aboriginal children and young people

“Good people just know how to get on the kids’ level, help them...but don’t pretend that you’re trying to get along with them, just do get along with them, you know? You don’t pretend it. [It’s] just respect.” 17 year-old male

It is important to think through the way staff from your organisation or agency will communicate with Aboriginal children and young people and their communities about specific projects or work, both verbally and in written communication.

Good communication includes checking that you understand people and that you have been understood by those you are working with.²⁰ The use of language can potentially be a problem where unfamiliar words and jargon are used in a community, meaning the language is not inclusive or easily understood.

Keep in mind that, for some communities, an understanding of English, particularly written, may be limited. If you are unsure of the Aboriginal children and young people’s proficiency with English, or the best way to ensure equal opportunity to engage in a particular community, then speak with local community members with knowledge and experience in this area.

You may need to seek the assistance of proficient family members or interpreters (as appropriate) to ensure understanding of processes and an equal opportunity to participate and contribute. The approach may vary from community to community or language group to language group.

Some useful tips include:

- use inclusive and appropriate language for Aboriginal children and young people to reduce the risk of misunderstanding, frustration and distrust
- ensure people understand what is being said by repeating information in different ways or check for meaning with people

²⁰ Government of South Australia and Youth Affairs Council of South Australia 2015, *Better Together: A practical guide to effective engagement with children and young people*, Government of South Australia, viewed 18 December 2017, <<http://www.officeforyouth.sa.gov.au/resources/working-with-young-people>>.

- use multiple methods of delivery, including written, verbal and visual methods, to cater for different ways of learning and different levels of language proficiency
- be aware of and recognise non-verbal communication styles that may be used by Aboriginal people.

Examples of Aboriginal communication styles:

Communication Style	Comment
Being reserved when meeting people, often staying silent and making minimal eye contact.	In Aboriginal culture, extended periods of silence during conversations may be considered the 'norm' and valued as an opportunity for reflection. Silent pauses may be used to listen, show respect or consensus. Silence itself may be part of the response and should be allowed to take its course. For Aboriginal people, avoidance of eye contact may be a gesture of respect, making insistence on eye contact inappropriate.
Relying on body language to understand what is being said.	Think about the messages you are sending through your non-verbal communication. Are you open to engagement? Interested in the speaker? Paying attention?
Only revealing part of the problem or story until trust has been gained.	Ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions to extract additional information.
Using he/she (and other pronouns) interchangeably.	This is common in Aboriginal English (AE), dialects of English that are spoken by Aboriginal people and that differ from Standard Australian English in systematic ways. It is not lazy or poor English, but rather its own distinct dialect. Heavy AE is spoken mainly in the more remote areas, where it is influenced by Kriol, while light varieties of AE are spoken mainly in metropolitan, urban and rural areas. ²¹

²¹ Eades D 1993, *Aboriginal English*, viewed 29 May 2017, <http://www.nacalc.org.au/cb_pages/files/Aboriginal%20English%20in%20the%20Legal%20System%20-%20Diane%20Eades.pdf>.

<p>Saying 'yes', which could mean many things, including not understanding the question.</p>	<p>Aboriginal peoples may say yes to avoid conflict or disagreement, rather than truly agreeing with your proposal. Open-ended questions such as, "What do you think about...." "How would you...." may be more effective than questions limited to a "yes" or "no" response.</p>
<p>Preferring to engage in a non-confrontational manner, such as standing side-by-side or sitting together, rather than facing each other directly.</p>	<p>Yarning circles are a great example of an engagement method that allows everyone to be on the same level, not be placed in the spotlight and to participate equally.</p>

These are just some examples and shouldn't be generalised to all contexts.²² There are cultural differences between metropolitan, regional and remote areas and between different cultural and language groups, as well as significant diversity within and between Aboriginal language or community groups. Every Aboriginal person is an individual, which must be taken into account when considering how your organisation or agency will engage effectively.

You should also be aware that even within one region, there may be a number of distinct language and cultural groups that you are required to work with at any one time.²³ It is important to listen, ask and learn about local Aboriginal communication protocols. Where the usual or natural ways of learning in a community or language group emphasise peer-to-peer, oral, interactive and visual ways of learning, rather than written communication, your organisation's or agency's communication style will need to adapt accordingly.

²² For additional examples as well as strategies for improving learning outcomes, see Perso T & Hayward C 2015, *Teaching Indigenous Students: Cultural Awareness and Classroom Strategies for Improving Learning Outcomes*, Allen & Unwin.

²³ A good starting place to develop an understanding of the rich diversity of Australian Indigenous culture and language at the time of European contact is by examining the N Tindale (1974a) map of Aboriginal tribal and language territories, viewed 12 May 2017, <<http://archives.samuseum.sa.gov.au/tribalmmap/>>.