

Women's and Children's Health Network

# Working with Aboriginal Families

A Practice Resource



Government  
of South Australia

SA Health

*The Women's and Children's Health Network acknowledges Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of country throughout South Australia and we respect their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We also pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from other areas of Australia who reside in South Australia.*

Throughout this resource, we use the term 'Aboriginal' to refer to people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. We do this because the people indigenous to South Australia are Aboriginal and we respect that many Aboriginal people prefer the term 'Aboriginal'. We also acknowledge and respect that many Aboriginal South Australians prefer to be known by their specific language group(s).

The information and practice tips contained in this document are generalisations and do not reflect the opinions of all Aboriginal people and communities in South Australia. There may be exceptions to the information provided.

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## Introduction

The Women's and Children's Health Network (WCHN) is committed to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal women, children and families.

This practice resource has been developed by the Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS) to provide a consistent and culturally appropriate approach to working with Aboriginal people and families in South Australia. It has been developed to improve service delivery to Aboriginal people by providing staff across WCHN with key facts and information relevant to working with Aboriginal families. It may also be used by staff at other government departments or non-government organisations should they wish.

This resource aims to guide staff in their cultural competency journey in becoming more culturally aware, sensitive and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people and families. It also provides important information to improve knowledge and understanding of the diverse cultural dynamics that exist in Aboriginal families and communities.

Staff may find it difficult to build open and trusting relationships with Aboriginal people and vice versa. This is often attributed to a lack of cultural understanding or a lack of awareness of effective practice techniques. This resource is intended to help staff to begin to break down these barriers by providing some practical advice for engagement and communication strategies.

Many cultural and historical factors need to be acknowledged by anyone who works closely with Aboriginal people. Having a greater knowledge and understanding of these factors, places staff in a better position to appreciate the current impacts these factors have on families and communities and how best to work with Aboriginal people in the future.

**Developing cultural competence is a life-long journey**

Aboriginal cultures and communities are diverse and there are many different nations and language groups living in South Australia. In view of this, a 'one size fits all' approach will not work and we need to tailor ways of working and communicating to meet the needs of the families and communities concerned.

### *Things to consider...*

- > As an organisation WCHN provides [Aboriginal Cultural Respect Training](#) as part of the employee induction process. It is important to realise a mandatory introduction does not equip an individual with cultural competence. Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural difference. Developing cultural competence is a life-long journey in developing the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures as well as practicing self-reflection.
- > Some Aboriginal staff working within SA Health belong to South Australian Aboriginal communities. With this in mind, the information provided within the resource describes the responsibilities and commitments they may have to communities and in turn help you form relationships by working in respectful ways with colleagues.
- > Whether we realise it or not, we are all shaped by our experiences in life, our culture, values and beliefs. You may not be aware of your own values and beliefs until you are confronted with someone who is different from you. Values vary enormously, especially across cultures. We have a tendency to judge others based on our own cultural norms, the 'lens' we see through. When working with people from other cultures it is easy to misinterpret what is going on within families and such misinterpretations can lead to poor outcomes. For this reason, we need to actively recognise and monitor our own cultural bias and behaviour.



## SELF-REFLECTION 1

### Monitoring your own assumptions and biases

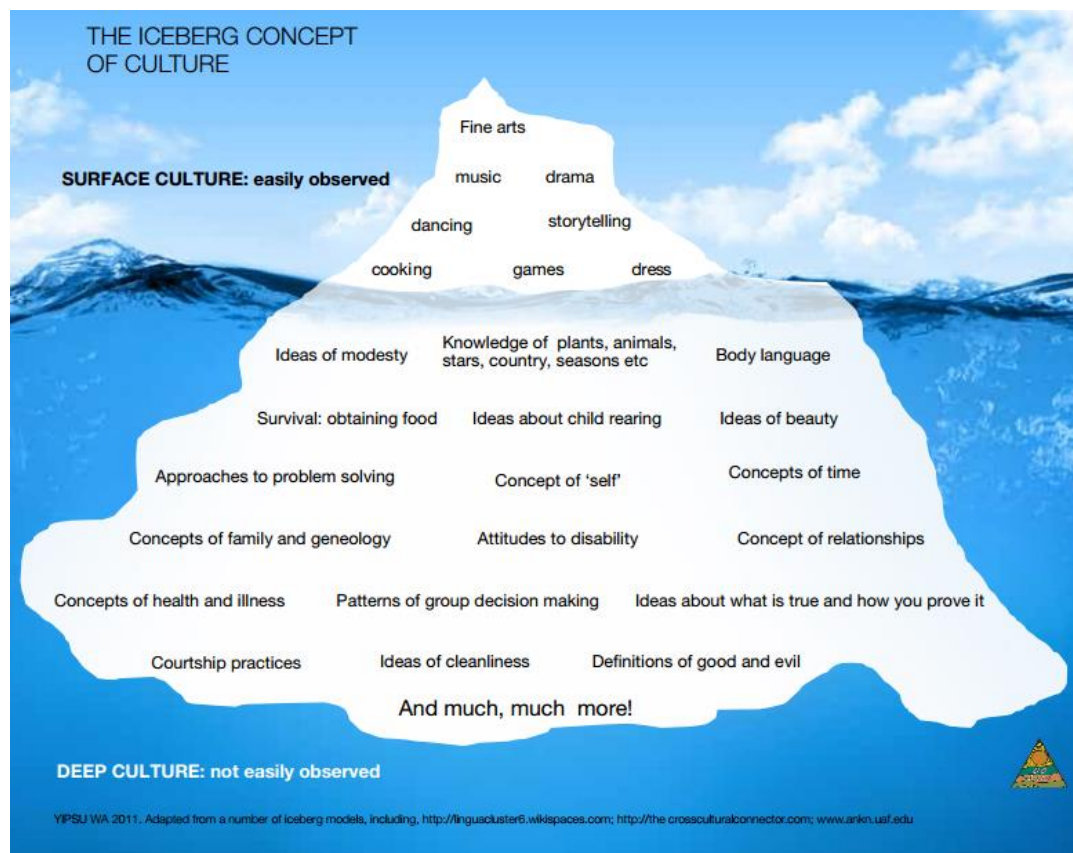
'The Cultural Iceberg' model demonstrates the assumption of what we see and reality of what we don't see in people in a clear visual diagram.

'When we see an **iceberg**, the portion which is visible above water is, in reality, only a small piece of a much larger whole. Similarly, people often think of **culture** as the numerous observable characteristics of a group that we can \*see\* with our eyes, be it their food, dances, music, arts, or greeting rituals.'

Looking at the model below, what assumptions do you hold about the following topics?

- > Discipline
- > Cleanliness
- > The 'right way' to behave
- > How respect 'should be' shown
- > Ways of communicating with others (e.g. eye contact, body language, proximity)
- > What a family 'looks like'
- > Key child rearing practices

FIGURE 1:



## Historical Overview

### Impact of history

It must be acknowledged past government legislation and practices enforced on Aboriginal people (e.g. segregation, assimilation policies) have contributed to Aboriginal people being one of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Australia. The effects of these policies have left lasting inter-generational impacts which need to be addressed.

Various government legislation and policies have contributed to:

- > Dispossession of land
- > Family fragmentation
- > Mental health issues
- > Social and emotional wellbeing issues
- > Child protection issues
- > Racism issues
- > Unresolved and ongoing grief and loss
- > Unresolved and ongoing trauma
- > High levels of poverty
- > High levels of unemployment
- > Poor health outcomes
- > Lower life expectancy
- > Poor housing standards
- > Below standard literacy and numeracy rates
- > Alcohol and substance abuse and misuse

**The damage and trauma of past laws and policies are still felt by Aboriginal people today**

Over-representation of Aboriginal people exists in the following areas:

- > Child protection systems and out-of-home care
- > Health systems
- > Juvenile and criminal justice systems
- > Homelessness rates
- > Suicide rates
- > Unemployment rates

Having said this, South Australian Government organisations and non-government organisations are putting policies and programs in place that are committed to acknowledging and attempting to change these outcomes. Government and non-government agencies are moving towards working in more coordinated and collaborative ways with Aboriginal organisations and communities to develop a range of strategies, programs and initiatives to better meet family and community needs.



## SELF-REFLECTION 2

*What way do you respond to discrimination?*

Think about how you and your workplace handle discrimination by checking out this list. Which of these approaches are used most often?

Approach	Example	Result
Head in the sand	Try to ignore discrimination and prejudice, our own and what's around us	We don't learn to think about or deal with the issues and less likely to question what you hear from others. Opportunities for building relationships and learnings are lost
Giving out	We tell people our views but don't really spend the time discussing things with them	Others may feel their views are not important and opportunities for building relationships and skills are lost
Making space	We help others explore what they think and feel as well as telling people our own views	Skills, confidence and conscience are developed
Getting support	We find out more about things we are unsure of, or unfamiliar with, by talking, discussing and finding out, so we get a clear idea of where we stand	Skills, confidence and a clear understanding are developed
Seeing the big picture	We make links with our experiences and between different types of prejudice and discrimination and we discuss these issues	We are able to make links between our lives and the lives of other people

### History of welfare based agencies

Historically the words 'protection' and 'intervention' have not been associated with positive outcomes for Aboriginal people, even where the actions of individuals offering these services have been well intentioned. There is an understandable mistrust of people who offer services based on these concepts. Some reasons for this mistrust stem from European colonisation and the subsequent forced removal of children from their families and communities, resulting in the [Stolen Generation](#).

Removing children from their families was official government policy in Australia until 1969. Taking children from their families was one of the most devastating practices of colonisation and for many Aboriginal people the impact of this

practice is still felt today. There are a number of underlying social issues faced by Aboriginal families that impact on the issue of mistrust such as power imbalances, lack of representative structures and a lack of Aboriginal people in influential positions in government.

## Apology to the Stolen Generation

In 1995, the Commonwealth Attorney General established a National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, to be conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission. The Inquiry, *Bringing them Home*, was tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament on 26 May 1997.

On 28 May 1997 in South Australia, the Hon. Dean Brown, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, stated:

**'Stolen Generation' refers to those children who were removed on the basis of their race alone**

*"I move: That the South Australian Parliament expresses its deep and sincere regret at the forced separation of some Aboriginal children from their families and homes which occurred prior to 1964, apologises to these Aboriginal people for these past actions and reaffirms its support for reconciliation between all Australians." (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008)*

On 13 February 2008, history was made when newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on behalf of current and successive Commonwealth Government/s. Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generation:

**It is important to understand the background of the Apology to understand why it's a historic step towards reconciliation**

*"We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation." (Australian Government, 2008)*

## Key messages

- > It must be acknowledged how past government legislation and practices enforced on Aboriginal people have contributed to Aboriginal people being one of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Australia.
- > Historically the words 'protection' and 'intervention' have negative meanings for Aboriginal people. There is an understandable mistrust of people who offer services based on these concepts.
- > History was made when a formal apology for the Stolen Generation was made 13 February 2008 by the Prime Minister to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on behalf of current and successive Commonwealth Government/s.

## Terminology and Identity

### Acknowledgement of land and Traditional Custodians and Welcome to Country

A 'Welcome to Country' can be conducted only by an Aboriginal traditional custodian of the land on which the meeting is taking place. For instance, a 'Welcome to Country' in the Adelaide area can be conducted only by a person of Kurna heritage. The form of a 'Welcome to Country' is to be negotiated between the Aboriginal representative/s and the meeting organisers, and may include a cultural ceremony or performance involving song, dance, traditional musical instruments, or a smoking or cleansing ceremony.

**An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is a way of showing respect and awareness to the traditional custodians of the land on which you meet**

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' can be conducted by any person in recognition of Aboriginal country. The wording may be personalized or localized to make the 'Acknowledgement' more meaningful, e.g. by direct naming and acknowledgment of the traditional owners where this is specifically known. For instance, in the Adelaide area, you would acknowledge the Kurna people as the traditional custodians but, if your meeting was taking place in another Aboriginal country, you would choose to acknowledge the traditional custodians of that area. If the traditional custodianship of a location is not known or is in dispute and/or you require information about the traditional custodians and names, please contact SA Native Title Services on (08) 8110 2800. For more information read the policy below.

The 'Acknowledgement of Country' is read out at the commencement of every meeting, conference, forum, workshop, function, event (etc.) that is convened / hosted by SA Health, as per the directive that applies to SA Health staff. To read the *Recognition of Aboriginal Country Policy* please [Click here](#). In addition it is also printed on agendas, programs or other meeting papers. Paraphrasing is acceptable provided it does not change the intended message of the acknowledgement.

'Acknowledgement of Country' and 'Welcome to Country' information cards are available to download so you can carry a printed version with you [Click here](#) to access the information cards.

### Use of the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander'

Although the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are commonly used now, it is important to note these names are the legacy of colonisation. Before, during and after colonisation the First Nations of people in Australia identified themselves by their country such as Kurna, Ngarrindjeri, and

Wiradjuri and so on. The names Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are colonial labels imposed on a range of people with diverse cultures and languages (NSW Department of Community Services, 2007). The term 'Indigenous' is generally used when referring to both First Nations people of Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. You will find Indigenous is generally used by the Commonwealth Government as they have a charter for providing services and programs to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a national level. The term 'Aboriginal' refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia's other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islanders.

**Be respectful through understanding and using acceptable terminology**

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are opposed to the term 'Indigenous' being used as it is considered too generic and because it's main origin is in describing plant and animals. (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, year unknown) It does not express the diversity of the peoples by grouping them under a generalised term. It is best not to use this term where possible, in fact it is always best to politely ask rather than assume. The use of 'Indigenous' may be used however if you are quoting or referring to another source where the term is used (e.g. Commonwealth document, National data collection).

At SA Health we only use the term Aboriginal, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of South Australia. We acknowledge and respect that Torres Strait Islander people are among the First Nations of Australia. We further acknowledge Torres Strait Islander people represent a part of the consumer and staff base. It is important to remember that while both are First Nations of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. It is respectful to give each their own identity.

## Definitions

As defined by the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW) **Aboriginal** person means a person who:

- > is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia and
- > identifies as an Aboriginal person, and
- > is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal person.

**Torres Strait Islander** as defined in Section 7 of the Torres Strait Islander Land Act 1991 (QLD) is a person who is a descendant of and Indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands.

**SA Health mainly uses the term Aboriginal, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of South Australia**



## Key messages

- > A person's Aboriginality should never be judged by their skin tone. It is inappropriate to comment on the colour of a person's skin in reference to their Aboriginality. For example, if an Aboriginal person has a fair complexion you must not comment that they 'do not look Aboriginal'.
- > Outdated terms such as full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste and quadroon are extremely offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.
- > Acronyms such as ATSI, TI, TSI or abbreviations should never be used as they are offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- > Do not use the words Aborigine or Aborigines as many people feel it is linked back to the terminology used in periods of colonisation and assimilation. Instead, use Aboriginal or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- > The first letters of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are always capitalised.
- > Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are opposed to the term 'Indigenous' being used as it generalises both cultures. Where possible it is preferred the term is not used.
- > At SA Health we use the term Aboriginal, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of South Australia.
- > Be mindful and familiar with correct terminology when using words to identify Aboriginal people.
- > A 'Welcome to Country' can be conducted only by an Aboriginal traditional custodian of the land on which the meeting is taking place.
- > An 'Acknowledgement of Country' can be conducted by any person in recognition and respect of Aboriginal country.

## Diversity

### Not 'one size fits all'

Aboriginal Australia has many cultural groups. We know this because of the diverse and complex languages that Aboriginal people use. 'There is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community' (Child Australia, 2015). Throughout Australia Aboriginal communities have their own distinct histories, politics, cultures and linguistic experiences. Today this diversity is even greater due to the influences of society and the mobility of Aboriginal people across the country. Increased mobility may be due to health, education, employment or housing. The reasons for being from a different state may simply be because of recent choices, however it must be recognised that generations on, families may have continued living away from their homelands after historical forced removal policies that uprooted entire families from their homelands. Despite movement, those that are fortunate to know their place of origin, whether born there or not, often will maintain links with their community and 'go home' to see family (Bourke & Bourke, 1995).

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) reports the Aboriginal population of South Australia to be 2%. Of the proportion of Aboriginal people in South Australia 53.8% are within metropolitan Adelaide, leaving 46.2% population spread across rural and remote locations. It is not unusual for people to identify, de-identify or re-identify as Aboriginal on official documents for their own reasons.

Every Aboriginal person will inevitably develop their own connections to their Aboriginality in their own way and time. Diversity will often appear unified due to a sense of shared histories, experiences and similar circumstances, however Aboriginal people are not a homogenous group and no single person can speak for all Aboriginal people. It is therefore not right to assume all Aboriginal people agree on the same issue nor are all Aboriginal people experts on Aboriginal cultures (Horton, 2012 and Child Australia, 2015).

Therefore it is important to understand Aboriginality is not defined by skin colour or appearance but rather by the relationships and the continuation of traditions and beliefs.

**Aboriginal people and communities are extremely diverse and complex culturally and linguistically**

### Language

There is no universal Aboriginal language. It has been suggested before colonisation there were up to 300 distinct Aboriginal language groups throughout the country, speaking around 250 unique languages with up to 600 dialects.

Past policies prohibited Aboriginal people from using their language, which contributed to the breakdown in the teaching of languages between generations. Aboriginal cultures are an oral culture so this practice had a devastating effect on the preservation of language and knowledge, and many languages have been

lost as a result, However, in some communities language is still strong and is being revived and taught in schools and published in books.

Today there are 60 Aboriginal languages considered as active in use as first tongue (Korff, 2016). In the 2016 Census (ABS, 2017) 150 different Australian Indigenous languages were identified as being spoken, with the proportion of Aboriginal people speaking their language at home being one in 10 (10%).

### Aboriginal language group names

Aboriginal people refer to each other by their language group. It is important to remember an Aboriginal person living in South Australia may not be from the state originally. The most important message when considering this terminology is to simply ask an individual how they would like to be referred to. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are diverse so confirming with each individual is the best course of action and also a sign of respect.

**The best action and sign of respect when learning names is to confirm at an individual level how they would like to be referred to**

There may be several different ways of spelling language group names, so if you come across a different spelling, do not automatically think it is an error.

### South Australian Aboriginal map

This map shows Aboriginal Language groups and nations in South Australia. Have a look around and make yourself familiar with the language groups and nations in your area and around the state. Click [here](#) for the full map of Indigenous Australia where you can zoom in and explore further.

FIGURE 2:  
David R Horton is the creator of the Indigenous Language Map. This map is based on language data gathered by Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz, (1996).





### SELF-REFLECTION 3

#### *Exploring the lands:*

To highlight the diversity of Aboriginal cultures across Australia take a look at maps of Aboriginal Australia and use this opportunity to reflect on how Australia has changed over time and the cultural and language groups that exist.

Reflect on where you have been around the country, for example where you were born, grew up or spent holidays.

What are the names of the language groups in the location?

What is the natural environment like here?

Think about the different lifestyles enjoyed here, such as outdoor activities, even including different job opportunities presented because of the location?

This emphasises how diverse we are as individuals and how the environment contributes to that and therefore a window into the extent to which diversity exists among Aboriginal Australia.

#### **Getting to know your community**

Spending time getting to know the community you are working in is important. There are many things you can do to help develop your knowledge of the Aboriginal community and families in your area.

You could:

- > Ask the local Aboriginal Worker or contact the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead for cultural advice.
- > Have a look at maps and get to know the Aboriginal language groups in your area and the history of those language groups.
- > Get some basic knowledge of the main family groups, preferred names and original custodians of the area in which you work.
- > Look for posters/maps of Aboriginal language groups/nations in the workplace for reference. Contact South Australian Native Title Services (SANTS) to find out where to obtain maps and other resources.
- > Find out about local Aboriginal history and places of significance for Aboriginal people.
- > Research relevant Aboriginal organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other service providers – Refer to the Aboriginal Services Online Directory [www.aboriginalservicesdirectory.com.au](http://www.aboriginalservicesdirectory.com.au) for up to date listings of

**Develop your awareness and engage with Aboriginal people in a more knowledgeable and sensitive way by exploring Aboriginal history and culture of the local community**

Aboriginal organisations, Aboriginal businesses (owned or part owned) and non-Aboriginal organisations and businesses providing social and community services to Aboriginal people.

- > Attend local community or cultural events if you are given the opportunity as part of your role. You also have a personal responsibility to get involved in community events which can contribute to enhanced relationships and understanding of the community in which you live and work.

## Key messages

- > There is no universal Aboriginal language. It has been suggested before colonisation there were up to 300 Aboriginal nations throughout the country, speaking around 250 languages with up to 600 dialects.
- > Past oppressive policies prohibited Aboriginal people from using their language.
- > Aboriginal people may refer to each other by their language group name. It is important to remember an Aboriginal person living in a particular state may not be from that state originally. The most important message when considering this terminology is to simply ask an individual how they would like to be referred to.
- > Have a look around and make yourself familiar with the language groups and nations in your area and around the state.
- > Spending time getting to know the community you are working in is important.
- > Ask the local Aboriginal Worker or contact the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead for cultural advice.

## Social Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

### Health status of Aboriginal people

To create a complete picture of the complex issues affecting Aboriginal people, all the information provided in this section can be viewed in the context of the [social determinants of health](#). The social determinants of health are important because they explain more than just health and illness – they identify the reasons why health is poor amongst Aboriginal people. This takes into consideration the impact of contact and colonisation, racism, past oppressive policies and practices and many current issues that Aboriginal people are faced with.

The factors in the social determinants of health include, if a person:

- > has employment
- > feels safe in their community (no discrimination)
- > has access to adequate education
- > is financial enough
- > feels connected to family and friends

Social determinants that are particularly important to Aboriginal people include cultural determinants such as their connection to land, the history of being forced from their traditional lands and away from their families.

FIGURE 3: Determinants of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal people (Source: Dudgeon & Walker, 2015)



Another issue impacting on the levels of disadvantage for Aboriginal people is their access to health services. Barriers to access may be related to availability, affordability, acceptability and appropriateness (SA Health, 2012). This may be because of the proportion of Aboriginal people living in regional and remote locations compared to non-Aboriginal people, where service options may be limited and / or not culturally appropriate to Aboriginal families.

Experiences of racism in health care settings create barriers to gaining appropriate health care. In some cases Aboriginal people may not be able to use services because they are too expensive (Australian Indigenous Health *InfoNet* 2015).

For further information and details specifically for South Australia, refer to the [WCHN Aboriginal Health Improvement Updated Action Plan 2012-2016](#) or the [WCHN Discussion Plan Shaping the Future Strategic Directions for Aboriginal Health in the Women's and Children's Health Network May 2017](#).



#### SELF-REFLECTION 4

*In the context of access, can you think of a time when you felt outnumbered or in a place where you didn't feel accepted?*

Think back to a time when you visited a new and unfamiliar place, a country where you could not speak the language or when you were surrounded by a group of people you did not know.

What did it feel like?

What things would have helped you feel more at ease?

How can you apply some of these ideas to your service setting?

Aboriginal people continue to experience poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy than non-Aboriginal people. Estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show an Aboriginal boy born in 2010-2012 can expect to live around 10 years less than a non-Aboriginal boy born at the same time. The figures very similar for an Aboriginal girl compared to a non-Aboriginal girl.

In terms of health issues, Aboriginal people experience a range of health problems, some of which are listed below:

- > High rates of cardiovascular disease, including heart attacks, stroke and high blood pressure, and are amongst the leading cause of death for Aboriginal people in 2012 according to ABS (2013).
- > High incidence rates for particular cancers: 2.8 times higher rates of liver cancer, 2.3 times higher rates of cervical cancer and 1.7 times higher rate of lung cancer.
- > Diabetes Australia reports diabetes continues to be a major health problem for Aboriginal people affecting 4 times more Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people.
- > Kidney disease is a serious health problem for Aboriginal people. In 2010-2014 End-Stage Kidney disease was 7 times more common for Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people.
- > The social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people is serious issue with 7 in 10 Aboriginal people reporting one or more significant stressors in the previous 12 months (Australian Indigenous Health *InfoNet* 2015).

**Aboriginal people continue to experience poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy than non-Aboriginal people**

For more detailed information on Aboriginal health issues [click here](#)

## Women, pregnancy and infants

Recent studies in South Australia reveal high rates of social health issues affecting Aboriginal women and families during pregnancy and high levels of associated postpartum psychological distress. As an example these results showed 56.1% of Aboriginal women experienced three or more social health

**Aboriginal infants face large disparities in terms of health and wellbeing in comparison to non-Aboriginal infants**

issues during pregnancy and one in four experienced five to 12 issues (Weetra et al, 2016). Other contributing factors to the outcomes of their children include the age of mothers, number of children and antenatal care. In reflecting on the statistics it is clear Aboriginal infants face large disparities in terms of health and wellbeing in comparison

to non-Aboriginal infants. Unfortunately although the reality is that Aboriginal children are more likely to be afflicted with a range of health related conditions as children, they are also less likely to have access to resources and services that reduce the risk of health issues later in life (SA Health, 2012 p 21).

FIGURE 4: 2014 Perinatal data comparing Aboriginal women and babies to non-Aboriginal (Source: SA Health 2016)

Criteria	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Perinatal mortality rate	12.5 per 1,000 births	8.7 per 1,000 births
Proportion of pre-term births	17.9%	8.9%
Low birth rate babies	14.8%	6.3%
Attended at least 7 ante-natal visits during pregnancy	69%	91%
Of the women who gave birth those who were teenagers	15%	2.8%

## Grief and loss

We will all experience grief and loss over our lifetime. Grief describes how a person feels after the loss of someone or something that is very important to them. The grief experienced from a loss affects the whole person, including their mind, spirit, and body, as well as the relationships they have with other people. Many Aboriginal people refer to grief as 'sorry business'. It is important to understand grief within the social (e.g. family relationships) and cultural context in which it takes place.

Grief can also be compounded because of the long-term effects of the Stolen Generation, or a cultural separation from land, language, or knowledge. In some Aboriginal communities, the grief is ongoing because of the 'unfinished business'

of the Stolen Generation and other impacts on Aboriginal people. If this grief stays unresolved, it may be passed on through the generations of a family; this is called intergenerational grief. Grief is different for every person and a time limit cannot be put on it. When a person has a lot of grief and unresolved grief to deal with it can have negative effects on a person.

Aboriginal communities are very supportive of each other and, when a loss occurs in a community, the grief experienced is often felt by many people and can have a crushing impact on the health and the stability of the communities involved. Due to the many family and community obligations for Aboriginal people, there is a high expectation on individuals to attend funerals. Therefore in the context of colleagues, it is expected that support and tolerance for leave requests are observed in these circumstances.

**Intergenerational grief is when unresolved grief is passed on through the generations of a family**

For more information refer to key facts as outlined by *Australian Indigenous Health Info Net* <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/other-health-conditions/sewbworkers/grief-loss-trauma/key-facts>.

## Child protection

Aboriginal children are over-represented in child protection and out-of-home care services compared to non-Indigenous children. The reasons for this are complex and are influenced by past policies such as forced removals, the effects of lower socio-economic status and differences in child rearing practices and intergenerational trauma (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997).

The HREOC (1997) report, “Bringing Them Home”, concluded that some of the underlying causes for the poor outcomes experienced by Aboriginal peoples and for the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection and out-of-home care were:

- > the legacy of past policies of forced removal and cultural assimilation;
- > intergenerational effects of forced removals; and
- > cultural differences between child protection agencies’ perceptions and Aboriginal peoples’ child-rearing practices

**Aboriginal children are over-represented in child protection and out-of-home care services compared to non-Aboriginal children**

Historically, the cultural differences for Aboriginal communities’ family structure and child-rearing practices have been poorly understood by welfare agencies (HREOC, 1997). However, it is important to recognise that Aboriginal family structures and approaches to raising children can be a source of cultural strength.

Such traumatic experiences in the past has unfortunately not ended for many Aboriginal families, communities and children as tragically child protection issues continue to be very significant for Aboriginal people in the present day. A snapshot of data from a Family Matters report (SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, 2016) reveals the figures have risen from 20% in 1997 to 35% in 2015 of Aboriginal children removed by child protection authorities. In 2015 Aboriginal children were 9.5 times more likely to be removed by child protection authorities than non-Aboriginal children (SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, 2016).

### **Cycle of trauma**

The impact of trauma is a significant issue for many Aboriginal families and children. There are various ways in which trauma may be expressed. Historical experiences that have resulted in the separation and forcible removal of Aboriginal children have led to high levels of unresolved trauma and grief (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

**The experience of racism, prejudice and discrimination is still an issue today and continues the cycle of trauma**

Unfortunately the experience of racism, prejudice and discrimination is still an issue today and continuing the cycle of trauma in different ways. In recent times, expressions of racism have appeared in the notions of nationhood which are based on the view of who is and who isn't Australian. This expression consists of assumptions where the customs and beliefs of the dominant group in society are presented as

the norm, reigniting racist beliefs in a present day context. It is not uncommon nowadays to hear the phrase 'I'm not racist but...' followed by a racist comment or statement that generalises people in a negative manner, and when left unchallenged it almost takes shape as an accepted form of racism (Child Australia, 2015).



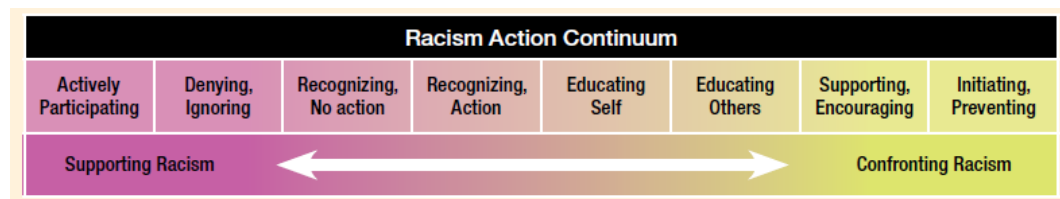
## SELF-REFLECTION 5

*Are you comfortable with being uncomfortable?*

In reference to the table and descriptions below - where do you sit on the continuum below?

Can you think of specific occasions when you have been involved or witnessed racism? Can you identify the different actions that occurred?

How does your stance change depending on your setting and who you are with? For example, a party or social gathering or a professional setting.



**Actively participating:** Telling jokes, putting down people, intentionally avoiding people, discriminating against, verbally or physically abusing

**Denying, Ignoring:** Enabling oppression by denying oppression. Does not actively oppress, but by denying that oppression exists, colludes with oppression.

**Recognising, No action:** Is aware of oppressive actions by self or others and their harmful effects, but takes no action to stop this behaviour. Inaction is the result of fear lack of information, confusion.

**Recognising, Action:** Is aware of oppression, recognizes oppressive actions of self and others and takes action to stop it.

**Educating Self:** Taking actions to learn more about oppression and the experiences and heritage of others. Joins organisations that oppose oppression, attend social action and social change events.

**Educating Others:** Moving beyond only educating self to question and dialogue with others too. Rather than only stopping oppressive comments or behaviours, also engaging people in discussion to share why you object to a comment or action.

**Supporting, Encouraging:** Supporting others who speak out against oppression or who are working to be more inclusive by backing up others who speak out, forming an allies group, joining a coalition group.

**Initiating, Preventing:** Working to change individual and institutional actions and policies that discriminate, planning educational programs or other events, working for legislative change, being explicit about making sure that organizations are inclusive.

Child Australia, 2015, *Cultural Connections Booklet*, Child Professional Support Coordinator, Child Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia, <https://childaustralia.org.au/Documents/IPSP-Section/Resource-Centre-Docs/cultural-book-complete-WEB.aspx>

## Key messages

- > Aboriginal people are generally at a disadvantage when it comes to the social determinants of health compared with non-Aboriginal people.
- > Aboriginal people may face barriers in accessing health services related to availability, affordability, acceptability and appropriateness.
- > Over-representation of Aboriginal people in all areas of disadvantage is prevalent in society, including in child protection and out-of-home care services compared to non-Aboriginal children.
- > Grief can occur because of the long-term effects of the Stolen Generation, or a cultural separation from land, language, or knowledge, whether historical or ongoing.
- > In some cases the legacy of unresolved grief exists from the 'unfinished business' of the Stolen Generation and other impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and may be passed on through the generations of a family; this is called intergenerational grief.

## Parenting and Families

### Strength of culture in parenting

The strengths of Aboriginal cultural traditions, as they apply to family life and raising children, revolve around four interrelated themes, including:

1. A collective community focus on child rearing helps children. The values of interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty are key features of Aboriginal family and community life, where raising children is considered to be a shared responsibility of all community members.
2. Children need the freedom to explore and experience the world. Aboriginal communities offer their children every opportunity to explore the world around them, to help them develop the necessary skills to successfully negotiate their pathways to adulthood.
3. Elderly family members are important to family functioning. The elderly are highly respected for their contributions to family life in Aboriginal communities, particularly in helping children to understand the practical aspects of life and society.
4. Spirituality helps families cope with challenges. Families and communities who engage in spiritual practices benefit from a greater sense of identity, and individuals are more likely to connect with, support and help protect one another.

**Recognise and focus on the importance of culture in parenting and the strength this provides to families**

A focus on strength and resilience of Aboriginal people and culture provides a more balanced understanding of Aboriginal families and enables services to develop positive relationships and work in partnership with Aboriginal families and communities.

Ensuring children and families have a strong connection with culture and services are responsive to cultural needs contributes to improved outcomes for Aboriginal children and families and to breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

For more information refer to publication, *Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing*  
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/strengths-australian-aboriginal-cultural-practices-fam>



## SELF-REFLECTION 6

*What are your own thoughts on culture in how it relates to parenting and child-rearing?*

*Can you think of a family you have worked with or know, and witnessed the strengths in the themes above?*

*Can you think of some core values (e.g. respect for elders) that may come out of the strengths in the themes above?*

*In practice, are beliefs or values explored as part of a discussion about recommendations (e.g. safe sleeping) rather than judgement for not following recommendations?*

### Aboriginal dads

Aboriginal dads require parenting support too. If you do encounter a dad requiring parenting support it would be highly recommended to refer them to a male Aboriginal worker. If this service is unavailable within SA Health or your organisation you may need to make a referral to a male Aboriginal health worker within another service. Above all else make sure the approach takes into consideration and acknowledges the important role of dads in parenting.

Even if you do not have a male Aboriginal worker available you can accomplish this by building partnerships with Aboriginal organisations within your region, take the time out to build these partnerships and understand what programs or services they have available. Aboriginal staff in your region or the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead can assist in linking you in to these services and building these partnerships.

Culturally the following should take place:

- > Male worker supporting male consumer/ family member
- > Female worker supporting female consumer / family member

### Grandparents

Many grandparents and great-grandparents carry out the responsibility of raising Aboriginal children today.

Grandparents and great-grandparents are, as they always have been, very important members of the Aboriginal family unit and often play a major part in child rearing practices and can sometimes be the main caregiver to their grandchildren. Grandmothers in particular are in the most highly respected position within the family and extended family. Their knowledge and opinion is highly valued and respect must be given by involving them with parenting discussions if they play a caregiver role for the child.

**Grandparents are an important link to culture and belonging**

## Extended family

For the majority of Aboriginal people family is the most important thing in their lives. This is deeply rooted in traditional aspects of social organisation. Understanding structures and concepts that exist in Aboriginal families and communities is important in building relationships. Aboriginal people place great value on belonging and family is an integral part of a person's life.

**Aboriginal people place great value on belonging and family**

The family system has an extended family structure, as opposed to the nuclear family or immediate family structure which is common in Western society. This extended family concept is rarely endorsed or understood by government authorities so it is important for workers to have an understanding of this when working with families. The concepts of extended family and 'community as family' in Aboriginal communities encompass the idea children are not just the concern of the biological parents, but of the entire community. The raising, care, education and discipline of children are the responsibility of everyone – male, female, young and old. It is important to be aware and respectful of relevant extended family and kinship structures when working with Aboriginal families.



### SELF-REFLECTION 7

*What is your own concept of family and who do you consider family?*

- > Are you originally from interstate or overseas and separated from family?
- > Have you created your own network of friends that you consider as your close family in absence of your own?
- > Who do you share family milestones with?
- > Who has shaped your views on what family is to you – yourself, your parents?



### Key messages

- > In relation to family life and raising children, the strengths of Aboriginal cultural traditions revolve around four interrelated themes.
- > Dads requiring parenting support should be referred to a male Aboriginal staff member, or referred to a male Aboriginal Health Worker within another service, to provide a culturally appropriate service.
- > Raising children may involve all family members including fathers, grandparents, great-grandparents, uncles, aunties anyone in the extended family group who has an interest in child rearing.

## Families and Community

### Understanding community structures

While community structures vary, most Aboriginal communities will operate based on traditions of extended family and community care, particularly in rural and remote areas. It is essential to develop an understanding of the diversity within different language and kinship groups living in one area, to have an awareness of the local dynamics.

Traditional custodians may not always occupy the land where we are working. Assimilation displaced many Aboriginal people from their traditional land and moved people all over the country. Aboriginal people who were placed on missions and in homes in the area other than their traditional or originating country have in many cases stayed in those areas and created family units. These people are sometimes referred to as 'historical' people.

In some communities there is a mix of traditional people and historical people, or historic people and no traditional people or vice versa. This could be very important when addressing the community in 'Acknowledgement of Country' and 'Welcome to Country' ceremonies.

### Kinship

The key difference in Aboriginal family structures is the concept of kinship. Kinship systems define where a person fits into the community. It is a complex social and family relationship structure used to determine relationships, roles, responsibilities and obligations to one another, ceremonial business and land. It is important to be aware and respectful of relevant extended family and kinship structures when working with Aboriginal people.

Traditionally the kinship system was based on equal value of same-sex siblings. Using this principle, people who were siblings of the same sex were regarded as being basically the same. Two sisters were considered to be equal, so a child of one would have two mothers; and, similarly, with males, a child would regard both his biological father and each of his father's brothers as his father. Consequently, the children of either brother were identified as brothers and sisters rather than cousins. As all the members of the group were classified under the relationship terms, anthropologists have called the system the 'classificatory system of kinship' (Australian Government, 1995).



## SELF-REFLECTION 8

*Considering the complexities of kinship systems, do you extend beyond a question of who the parents are to understand who else is involved in the care and to what extent to which the child is embedded within a community of caring?*

- > When it is identified many people (including siblings and extended family) have responsibilities to watch and care for children, what do you see as the positives and negatives when providing services?
- > In what way could you emphasise the positives as a protective factor for the child and family?
- > How can you overcome hurdles you see as negative to you delivering a service, into a positive outcome for the child and family involved?

### Elders

Elders and community leaders not only hold key community and family knowledge but they also have a great deal of influence over when, how and if the community will work with those from outside. This is also true for other representatives of the local community. An Elder or a leader may not necessarily be an older person. They may be a younger person who is well respected in their community and hold significant community knowledge.

Many people acknowledge Elders and leaders as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle', even if the person is not blood-related or kin as this is a sign of respect. Referring to an Elder or leader as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' may not be appropriate for an outsider unless a strong relationship has been established or you have permission to do so.

Always be aware of the need to consult Elders and treat them with respect. The same courtesies accorded to dignitaries should be applied to Elders.



### Key messages

- > Be aware and respectful of relevant extended family and kinship structures when working with Aboriginal people. Ensure extended family is included in important meetings and in making important decisions.
- > Show respect to Elders and leaders in the community and consult them in important decision making processes.
- > Many people acknowledge Elders and leaders as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle', even if the person is not blood-related or kin as this is a sign of respect.
- > Determine the community and family structures in place.

## Aboriginal Business

All communities are different, and depending on the community, or area there are cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business that staff should be aware of. It is important for staff to understand and respect these values, protocols and ways of doing business; not doing so can be seen as disrespectful to Aboriginal people and culture. It may be worthwhile finding out about some of the local cultural values and protocols practiced by the people in the area. Some common cultural protocols are:

**Understand and respect  
the values, protocols and  
ways of doing business**

### Women's Business

Traditionally there are subjects where women will only talk together, as well as specific gender-related, and sometimes discrete practices that occur. This is sometimes referred to as Women's Business. Women's Business pertains to female-specific health, wellbeing and religious matters that traditionally men must not observe. For example, matters relating to the female anatomy, religious ceremony and the maintenance of women's sites of significance are considered women's business and only women should be privy to these matters. Traditionally, it is taboo for men to know about women's ceremonies. Some Aboriginal people have different cultural norms and expectations about gender, which is important to think about in clinical settings.

There are many aspects of Business which are not considered to be open to the public – this is because the content of such business can only be dealt with in the realms of the secret and sacred – or private sphere.

If you want to know more about women's business you could ask an Aboriginal staff member or community member you know, if they can help you or tell you where to find the information you need.

### Men's Business

Similarly there are also many subjects only discussed between men and certain ceremonies which will only involve men. Sometimes referred to as Men's Business, these discussions should involve only men talking to men (Government of South Australia, 2013). Particularly for men it is important to encourage men talking to men and recognising this when providing services and therefore referring consumers to male workers where possible. Traditionally, it is taboo for women to know about men's ceremonies. Within traditional communities the most powerful of the males is the lore-man, they are responsible for ensuring order and discipline and are not to be directly approached. In traditional communities only certain males will have permission to approach him and he will be responsible for applying law to the tribe which may include holding ceremonies. Men are culturally required to participate and complete ceremonies when directed by lore-men.

If you want to know more about men's business, you could ask an Aboriginal staff member or community member you know if they can help you, or tell you where to find the information you need (see above).

## Sorry Business

Customs relating to death and funerals are complex and diverse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and are often called 'Sorry Business'. Sorry Business takes precedence over all other matters. The importance of family relationships means attending funerals is obligated. Aboriginal funerals can last from one day to several weeks depending on the status of the deceased. This may 'close down' the community until Sorry Business is complete. Many community councils have closures and 'stop-work' written in the bi-laws for Sorry Business to be observed and therefore respect from outside organisations must be shown. Similarly, Aboriginal services may close for a period when a respected Elder passes away, as a show of respect.

The following may also occur and are common:

- > Vacating the house after a person's death- the house may be vacated for a week, months, year or even permanently, requiring remaining family members to relocate.
- > Smoking or sweeping a house to help the departed person's spirit leave the place of death.
- > Generally, it is unfavourable to display pictures or images of deceased people.
- > Often a deceased person's name is not used again and a substitute name is used instead. Similarly, people with the same name, or a similar name, will take a different name to mean 'one whose name cannot be mentioned' (Government of South Australia, 2013).
- > Remember that deaths in the community may also affect the Aboriginal staff who you work with and the same kind sensitivity should be shown.

## Key messages

- > Respect cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business.
- > There is knowledge which is not open for public – this is what is referred to as secret/sacred business and it often relates to ceremonial rites and passage.
- > Respect the community needs during Sorry Business by not requesting meetings for a period of time, as determined by the community or advised by Aboriginal workers.
- > Remember it is sometimes more preferable for men to speak to men and women to women, especially in circumstances where you are not known by the person or community.

## Communication and Engagement

### Best practice

Best practice for engagement with Aboriginal families is for the first point of contact to be made by Aboriginal staff for those clients that are identified as Aboriginal. Aboriginal staff provide a cultural link between service delivery and the family. Supporting culturally safe practices has an integral role supporting the development of the relationship with staff providing the service. Aboriginal staff provide cultural insight, cultural context and a link to community resources and services.

Where Aboriginal staff are not allocated to an area it is understood a non-Aboriginal person will make contact with families however it is asked that the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead is contacted for cultural supports and advice if needed. If Aboriginal staff are unavailable for a scheduled visit please contact the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead for re-allocation and / or cultural assistance.

**For positive and effective engagement it is best for first connections to be made by Aboriginal staff**

If a client's Aboriginal status is not identified until first contact by the administrative staff, then administrative staff can move forward with making a booking, however should inform the client that an Aboriginal staff member will follow up with a phone call. Rather than the administrative staff offering the services of Aboriginal staff, it is best to allow the conversation to take place between the Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal client to discuss whether they would like to access cultural supports.

### First impressions

'First impressions count' and they take place even before the family step through the door of your service. After learning the complexities of the issues some Aboriginal families face it is clear that presenting services in a culturally competent and inclusive manner is an important part of connecting with families.

To begin with there are some considerations we should be mindful of to create environments that are a show of welcome.

- > What does the service look like from the outside?
- > Does it have signs or images in the window that make it look inviting?
- > Do you have acknowledgement plaques or stickers in the window acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal landowners?
- > Once the family are through the door are they met with a smile and made to feel welcome?

Don't underestimate the value of visuals. Having appropriate images depicting real life Aboriginal families and connections are important for families and

children to feel there is something they can connect with at the service. Ensure resources are always available and displayed, such as the [Aboriginal Parent Easy Guides](#), as well as providing toys, books and reading materials portraying Aboriginal stories and information. Perhaps consider creating a space to display cultural specific resources so they are highlighted, such as community information and calendar of significant events.

**Don't underestimate the value of visuals however remember the staff 'values' also need to match**

Creating a welcoming environment and using resources in meaningful ways is important but also only contributes to one part of the process in connecting with families. It is important to understand that although the environment may encourage someone to

walk in the door, it ultimately comes down to the attitude and competency of the staff that clients interact with as to whether they feel inclusive of the services offered. If relying on images alone to engage with clients it could be perceived as tokenism and therefore risk opportunities for genuine connections being lost.



## SELF-REFLECTION 9

*What is tokenism?*

Your service might display posters, artefacts, artwork, flags and welcome signs with cultural perspectives, but ask the questions:

- > Why are they there?
- > Are they reflective of the service's genuine attitudes towards inclusion and equity?

*'Inclusion is not just what you do, but also the spirit behind what you do-how and why you do it'* (Sims, 2009). If staff lack culturally competent attitudes, one can only conclude the environment resources and displays are tokenistic.

## Respect and rapport

Respect is very important in every social structure in Aboriginal communities. Respect for Elders, the land, animals and ancestors are fundamental aspects of Aboriginal culture. Like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships, engagements with Aboriginal communities need to be based on respect. We need to offer and earn respect, particularly in dealings with community Elders and leaders.

To build rapport with Aboriginal communities it is important to spend time with the local Aboriginal community, Elders, families and children. Having a cup of tea, having a yarn and getting to know the people in an informal setting and at

community events is likely to save hours of work in the long run when we invest in relationships that enable the provision of culturally responsive services.

Due to the nature of the work staff may have limited time to build a rapport with Aboriginal families and this can be challenging. Ensuring staff focus on the value of quality communication rather than quantity. Take a personal approach over a business approach. Introduce yourself in a warm and friendly way. Ask where

**Listening to their stories and sharing your own, presents opportunity for creating respectful and meaningful connections**

they are from, who their people are, share stories about yourself and where you are from or find topics of common interest. Remember to be self-reflecting in your own assumptions and be open to listen to their story. If it is a positive experience this will benefit your own reputation as well as the organisations.

Establishing relationships and connections early on is particularly important. Depending on the situation staff may be able to contact an Aboriginal worker who knows the family and discuss the best ways to engage with the family. It is also important to engage with Aboriginal workers and local Aboriginal services for advice and support when establishing and maintaining relationships and connections. Remember once relationships are built, they need to be nurtured so that they last.



### SELF-REFLECTION 10

*An approach to a conversation to find common ground which lacks thoughtfulness may limit ability to further engage with the client.*

Case scenario:

You are trying to make casual conversation with a new client while getting everything ready for an appointment. "Hey how is that new recruit they have playing for the Crows AFL now? He is certainly kicking lots of goals everyone is talking about him. I can't think of his name but you would know him he is Aboriginal." Client response: "I have no idea who you are talking about. I am from NSW and follow NRL I don't follow the AFL. I don't know any Aboriginal AFL players."

1. What assumptions can you see have been made here?
2. Consider another way in which the conversation may have been approached without leading to assumptions?
3. What assumptions could the client now have of the worker and why could this limit further engagement?
4. How could you tactfully correct yourself in this situation to not impact on further engagement?

## Verbal communication and questioning

Aboriginal workers are the preferred lead communicator when supporting Aboriginal families. They are there to support the consumer engagement process by offering the cultural supports the client may need to feel confident in understanding and navigating services available.

**Showing support and trust in the Aboriginal workers will be observed and demonstrates our respect to the families we engage with**

There are a number of considerations in verbal communication with Aboriginal people that non-Aboriginal people should be aware of. An important factor to consider is that English

may be an Aboriginal person's second or third language. It is therefore important to recognise potential language barriers and make an effort to appropriately address them, use clear, uncomplicated language and avoid jargon. Making yourself familiar with effective techniques and etiquette is important for a positive communication experience.

Indirect questioning techniques are preferred in most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Use indirect, or 'round about' questions (e.g. pose a question as a statement then allow time for an answer). When asking questions respect the use of silence and leave adequate time for a response. Don't mistake it for agreement or for misunderstanding a topic or issue. Do not rush or push for an answer. Once a response is received paraphrase by summarising and repeating what the person has said. This will help show you are listening and clarify responses to questions.



### SELF-REFLECTION 11

*It's important to recognise the position of power we have as staff in asking very sensitive questions of families. It is not an expectation that we share ourselves personally with clients therefore be mindful of your approach when asking families to share information with you. Sometimes asking questions may appear intrusive especially if there is a language barrier.*

- > What techniques do you use to approach sensitive topics?
- > Without trust established in the relationship are you aware that it may take more than your first meeting to get the clients full story?
- > Do you contextualise the questions you ask by explaining why such information is useful for you to know and how it helps to care plan their family needs?
- > If an Aboriginal worker is unavailable, it may be an important gesture to offer parents the opportunity to have a trusted friend or relative present.

For more information on communication refer to the following Queensland Health fact sheet:

[https://www.health.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/151923/communicatin\\_g.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0021/151923/communicatin_g.pdf)

## Body language and eye contact

**Actions speak louder than words. Be mindful of body language.**

Remember actions speak louder than words. Whilst verbal communication is the most common form of communication, non-verbal communication should not be underestimated. Aboriginal people are very aware of non-verbal cues, body language and the message it sends about how a person is feeling.

Be sensitive to the use of non-verbal communication cues which are part of Aboriginal communication patterns. The use of silence does not mean Aboriginal people do not understand, they may be listening, remaining non-committal or waiting for community support. During discussions, Aboriginal people may delay expressing a firm opinion, preferring to listen to others' opinions first before offering their own.

Be mindful of the person or other family member's body language to gauge any moments of them feeling discomfort, for example fidgeting with objects around them. In the way they are positioning themselves, for instance not allowing you to sit and continuing to stand shows they are not willing to give you much of their time. In return be mindful that your own body language will be observed and interpreted, so in these moments be aware of what you may be portraying and respond appropriately to the situation. Be conscious of personal space and always seek permission and explain to the person reasons why you need to touch. For some Aboriginal people, avoidance of eye contact is a customary a gesture of respect. In Western society not giving eye contact can be seen as being dishonest, rude or uninterested (Queensland Health, 2015). Some (but not all) Aboriginal people may be uncomfortable with direct eye contact, especially if they are unfamiliar with you. To make direct eye contact may be perceived as being rude, disrespectful or even aggressive. If you are unsure follow the other person's lead and modify eye contact accordingly.



### SELF-REFLECTION 12

*Think about when you were growing up and teachings around eye contact. What assumptions do you think you may make based on your these perceptions?*

- > Where you taught to look at someone when they are talking to you?
- > What was your understanding of the value in making eye contact?
- > In a formal setting does strong eye contact show confidence and a lack of seen as low-confidence?

## Literacy and numeracy

Some members of the Aboriginal community may have difficulty with numeracy and literacy therefore it may be necessary to provide assistance with completing forms and reading information. It is important to approach this with sensitivity so as to not cause embarrassment to the person. When the time comes for the person to read or write something, ask them if they would like help of a family member or someone else they trust. In most cases the person will ask for help if they need it, provided the issue has been approached with sensitivity and respect. The same approach must also be considered with computer literacy when referring families to online resources or forms.

**There is great value in the history of oral traditions for developing literacy in children**

This can also be inclusive of difficulty with understanding time and calendars. Therefore punctuality with appointment scheduling may be an issue and can be misinterpreted as disorganised or uninterested if they appear not ready or surprised or bothered to see you.

It is important to recognise the value of oral traditions for the development of literacy skills in young children. Recognise value in how Aboriginal families engage their children in storytelling or songs from their family history to strengthen links with culture.

## Home visits

It is important to engage with Aboriginal families in a place they feel safe and supported. Often, but not always, this is in the home. Where possible visit with an Aboriginal Worker as this is considered best practice. Aboriginal staff are able to provide you with cultural guidance and direction, this is also a great opportunity to build cultural knowledge.

Being flexible and prepared to work around the family and anything unexpected that may arise is important. Make appointments in advance and at suitable times for the family. Provide several options being mindful some families are easier to engage from mid-morning through to the afternoon. Ensuring to explain how much time may be needed for the appointment. Follow up with a reminder or telephone call before going out to remind the family you are visiting and giving them the opportunity to reschedule if it is no longer suitable, again reminding the amount of time needed. Be prepared there may be other people present in the home or visitors dropping by. Be respectful of confidentiality and rearrange the appointment if necessary.

**Consider access to service by showing flexibility to families**

You may not be invited into the home on the first visit. For many Aboriginal families a level of trust and respect needs to be established before they feel

comfortable or safe to invite service providers into the home. Sometimes home visits take place on the front veranda until these relationships become more established, remain flexible and adapt as necessary to the family's needs. Some families may feel more comfortable with being outside in general and prefer to have gatherings/meetings outdoors, again take their lead.

Home visits offer invaluable insights into the social emotional wellbeing and experiences of Aboriginal families. Families are not obligated to host us in their homes, it is a privilege when you are invited into the home, be mindful you are a guest and remain respectful at all times. Staff safety must always be observed by gaining an understanding of the dynamics of the community at the time, should there be any disputes between family members and if there are times best to not visit.

For more information refer to the CaFHS [Home Visiting Safety and Buddy System](#) procedure.

## Key messages

- > Be mindful of your own body language.
- > Think about the language used (written, verbal and non-verbal) when communicating with Aboriginal people.
- > Sensitively offer assistance with reading and writing if it is required or you think it may be required.
- > Respect the use of silence and don't mistake it for misunderstanding a topic or issue.
- > If you are not sure about using eye contact or not, follow the other person's lead and modify eye contact accordingly.
- > Use indirect questioning techniques and repeat back what the person has said to ensure clarity.
- > Best practice is visiting with an Aboriginal Worker and following their lead.
- > Prepare to be flexible and work around the family in regards to making appointments.
- > Trust and respect needs to be established before inviting you into their home, be mindful you are a guest and remain respectful at all times.
- > For more information on communication refer to the following Queensland Health fact sheet:  
[https://www.health.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/151923/communicating.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/151923/communicating.pdf)

## Resources and Further Information

### Calendar of significant events for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Please refer to the links and websites below for more details and specific dates.

#### February - National Apology Day

This event marks the anniversary of the Apology by former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2008. The Apology related to past laws, policies and practices that have impacted on Australia's First Nations Peoples, particularly members of the Stolen Generations. The motion was supported by the Opposition and passed through both houses of Parliament. Brendan Nelson (former Leader of the Opposition) gave a formal response. Many members of the Stolen Generations were present in the Chamber to hear the Apology and thousands more filled the Great Hall of Parliament House and flowed out onto the lawns to watch it on big screens. The Apology was broadcast across Australia. Find out more about National Apology Day [here](#)

#### March - National Close the Gap Day

National Close the Gap Day is Australia's largest campaign to improve Indigenous health equity. Every year people are encouraged to hold their own event on National Close the Gap Day to raise awareness about the 10-17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Find out more about National Close the Gap Day [here](#)

#### May - National Sorry Day

National Sorry Day is a significant day for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and particularly for Stolen Generations survivors. The idea of holding a 'Sorry Day' was one of the 54 recommendations of the Bringing them home report, which was tabled in Parliament on 26 May 1997. This report was the result of a two year National Inquiry into the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families, communities and cultural identity. On 26 May 1998 the first 'Sorry Day' was held in Sydney. It is now commemorated across Australia, with many thousands of people participating in memorials and commemorative events, in honour of the Stolen Generations. Find out more about National Sorry Day [here](#)

#### 27<sup>th</sup> May / 3<sup>rd</sup> June - National Reconciliation Week

Celebration of the Referendum

National Reconciliation Week is an ideal time for everyone to join the reconciliation conversation and reflect on shared histories, contributions and achievements. Find out more about National Reconciliation [here](#)

#### 3 June - Mabo Day

The Mabo decision was a legal case held in 1992. The legal decision was made by the High Court on 3 June 1992. The Mabo decision was named after Eddie

Mabo, the man who challenged the Australian legal system and fought to recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples as the traditional owners of their land. Find out more about Mabo Day [here](#)

### 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in July to 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in July -National NAIDOC Week

NAIDOC is a celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and an opportunity to recognise the contributions of Indigenous Australians in various fields. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of Aboriginal groups in the 1920s which sought to increase awareness in the wider community of the status and treatment of Indigenous Australians. NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. Activities take place across the nation during NAIDOC Week in the first full week of July. All Australians are encouraged to participate. Find out more about National NAIDOC Week [here](#)

### 4 August - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD) is a celebration of Indigenous children and is held on 4 August each year. NAICD was first observed by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in 1988. Each year SNAICC produces and sends out resources to help celebrations for NAICD. Find out more about National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day [here](#)

### Websites and key publications

Below is a list of websites and key publications that cover a range of information related to Aboriginal families and communities.

Website/Title	Description	Link
Aboriginal Services Online Directory	It will provide up-to-date listings of Aboriginal Organisations, Aboriginal Businesses (owned or part owned) and non-Aboriginal Organisations and businesses providing social and community services to Aboriginal people. Currently, over 160 organisations are listed on the Aboriginal Services Online Directory.	<a href="http://www.aboriginalservicesdirectory.com.au/">http://www.aboriginalservicesdirectory.com.au/</a>
Australian Indigenous Health/InfoNet	The Australian Indigenous Health/InfoNet is an innovative Internet resource that aims to	<a href="http://www.healthinfolnet.ecu.edu.au">www.healthinfolnet.ecu.edu.au</a>

	inform practice and policy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health by making research and other knowledge readily accessible.	
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	AIHW website containing information and statistics on Indigenous Australian's	<a href="http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-australians">www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-australians</a>
Closing the Gap: Prime Ministers Report 2016	The Prime Ministers Report 2016	<a href="http://closingthegap.dpmc.gov.au/assets/pdfs/closing_the_gap_report_2016.pdf">http://closingthegap.dpmc.gov.au/assets/pdfs/closing_the_gap_report_2016.pdf</a>
Indigenous Culture and History	Australian Government website with a range of information about Indigenous culture and history	<a href="http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/culture-and-arts/indigenous-culture-and-history">http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/culture-and-arts/indigenous-culture-and-history</a>
SA Health Aboriginal Culture and History Handbook	This handbook presents background information on Aboriginal history, culture, demography and current affairs.	<a href="https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/0205b7004289a89398b9dcd8cec31b16/SA+Health+Aboriginal+Culture+and+History+Handbook.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&amp;CACHEID=0205b7004289a89398b9dcd8cec31b16">https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/0205b7004289a89398b9dcd8cec31b16/SA+Health+Aboriginal+Culture+and+History+Handbook.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&amp;CACHEID=0205b7004289a89398b9dcd8cec31b16</a>
Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016	The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.	<a href="http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016">http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016</a>
Beyond Blue:	Information on depression and anxiety in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	<a href="https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people">https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people</a>
Raising Children Network	Information and resources on working with Aboriginal parents and families.	<a href="https://raisingchildren.net.au/aboriginal_torres_strait_islander_parents/aboriginal_torres_strait_islander_parents.html">https://raisingchildren.net.au/aboriginal_torres_strait_islander_parents/aboriginal_torres_strait_islander_parents.html</a>
Australian Indigenous Health/InfoNet	Summary of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Status 2015	<a href="http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/uploads/docs/2015-summary.pdf">http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/uploads/docs/2015-summary.pdf</a>

## Glossary

Word	Meaning
Aboriginal	An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent</li> <li>▪ who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and</li> <li>▪ is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives</li> </ul>
Assimilation	Forced to conform to English ways. A 19th century idea that Indigenous people should be 'improved' by being 'civilised' and becoming Christians and learning how to work as Europeans did. From the 1930s assimilation became government policy.
Bias	Having a preferred point of view, attitude or feeling about a person or group. Can be positive or negative.
Colonisation	The forcible takeover of the land of indigenous peoples and the exploitation of the land and the people, ignoring the rights of indigenous people.
Country	In Aboriginal English, a person's land, sea, sky, rivers, sites, seasons, plants and animals; place of heritage, belonging and spirituality; is called 'Country'.
Culture	The accepted and traditionally patterned ways of behaving and a set of common understandings shared by members of a group or community. Includes land, language, ways of living and working artistic expression, relationships and identity.
Cultural awareness/Cultural sensitivity (used interchangeably)	Focus on raising the awareness and knowledge of individuals about the experiences of cultures that are different from their own, i.e. different from the dominant culture. While they are necessary aspects of knowledge, in themselves they are generally not sufficient in leading to better care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Cultural competency	Where there is an acceptance and respect for cultural diversity within an individual and the organisation. Service delivery is reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of different population groups.
Cultural inclusion	Cultural inclusiveness addresses and supports the needs of people from diverse cultures, and values their unique contribution.
Cultural respect	The recognition, protection and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
Discrimination	When a person is treated unfairly because they are a member of a particular group.
Elder	Highly respected Aboriginal people held in esteem by

	their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and community service. They are responsible for making decisions within the community.
Heritage	That which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth.
Historical people	Australia's first peoples Aboriginal people
Indigenous	Native to a place or area, originating in and characterising a particular region or country.
Indigenous Australians	The original inhabitants of Australia; always capitalised. Includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Indigenous people	The first peoples to a land.
Institutional racism	Institutional racism (or systemic racism) describes racist beliefs or values that may be embedded within political and social institutions. This may occur overtly or covertly when cultural assumptions are held by a dominant group in society about a minority group.
Kinship	Family Group. Traditional kinship relations continue to play a role in Aboriginal communities today. While Australian family life often centres on the nuclear family made up of parents and children, Aboriginal family life includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins and the mob.
Land rights	The struggle by Aboriginal people to gain acknowledgment of prior ownership of this land both legally and morally and allowing all the accompanying rights and obligations which stem from this association.
Law	Also known as Lore. Handed down by the Creation Ancestors and upheld by Aboriginal communities for thousands of generations, Law includes the accepted and traditionally patterned ways of behaving and shared understandings relating to land, language, ways of living, kinship, relationships and identity
Lore	The learning and transmission of a cultural heritage.
Missions	Areas originally set up and governed by different religious denomination for Aboriginal people to live. Today some people use the term to refer to Aboriginal housing developments. The terms "reserves" and "stations" are used as well.
Mob	Family Group/ Nation. A way to refer to a group of Aboriginal people who have a connection to one another. For example 'My mob comes from Walgett' or 'that mob travelled a long way'.
Native title	Form of land title which recognises Aboriginal people as rightful owners of that land.
Nunga	Boundary/state/generic name for Aboriginal person from South Australia.
Prejudice	An opinion or attitude about a group of people that is based upon lack of understanding or incorrect information.

Racism	An ideology that gives expression to myths about other racial and ethnic groups, that devalues and renders inferior those groups, that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society. Racism in Australia takes on many forms - attitudinal, institutional and cultural.
Reconciliation	A Commonwealth initiative to promote reconciliation between Indigenous people and the wider community and to redress Indigenous disadvantage.
Stereotype	An over-simplified generalisation about a particular group, 'race' or sex, based on widely held assumptions, presenting a rigid view that can be difficult to change.
Torres Strait Islander	A Torres Strait Islander is a person: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ of Torres Strait Islander descent</li> <li>▪ who identifies as Torres Strait Islander and</li> <li>▪ is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives</li> </ul>
Traditional custodians	Australia's first peoples who are the owners/caretakers of the Lands and Waters within a certain area
Tribes / Nations	"Language groups", made up of people sharing the same language, customs, and general laws.

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For more information

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