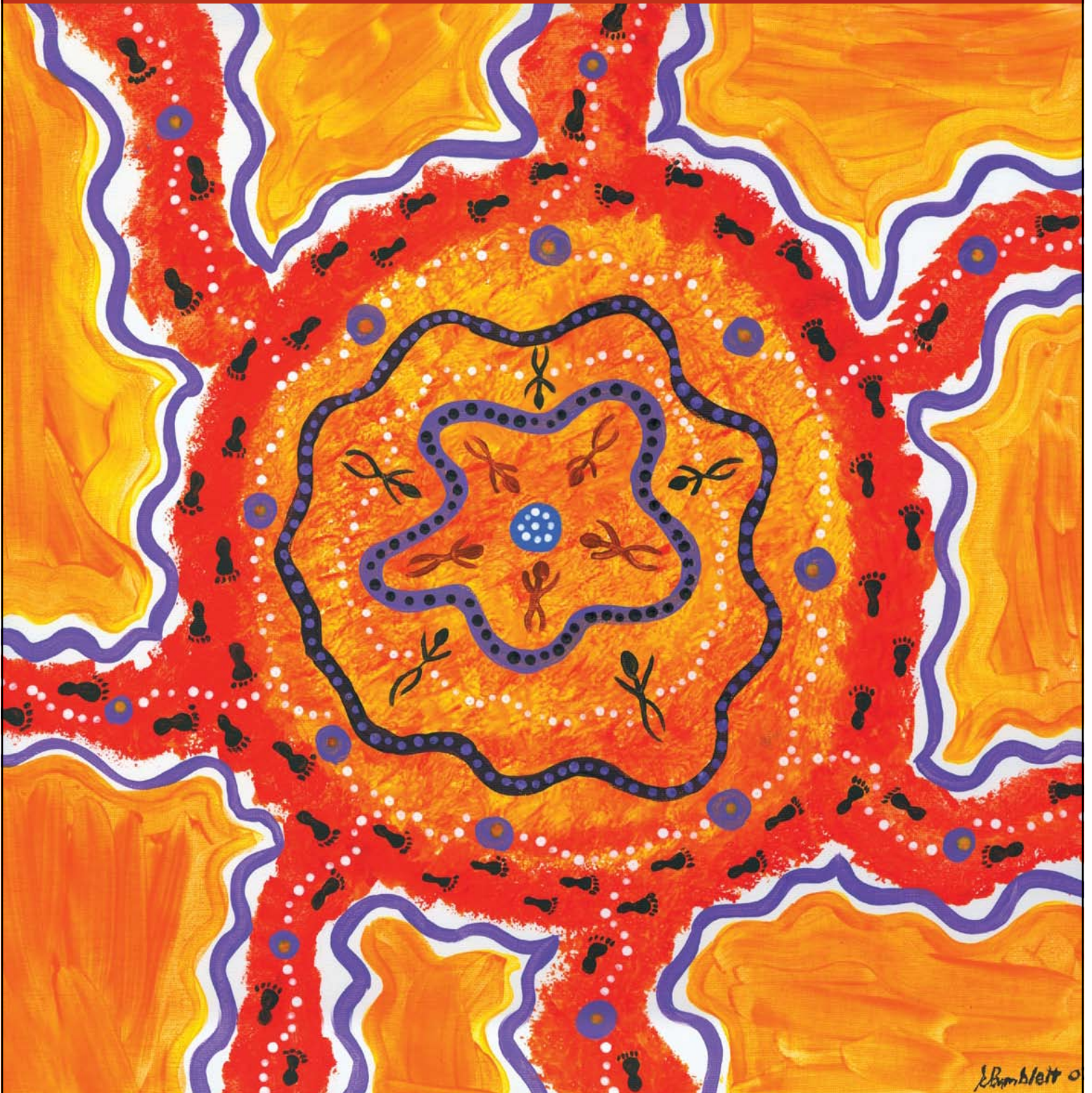


# Building Respectful Partnerships

The Commitment to Aboriginal Cultural Competence  
in Child and Family Services







## Message from the CEOs

The *Building Respectful Partnerships* project is a joint initiative between Berry Street, MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop) and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). We began the project in 2006 when Berry Street and MacKillop approached VACCA to discuss how their partnerships with VACCA could be further developed and strengthened to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families. VACCA, Berry Street and MacKillop have a strong history of working together on key reforms in child and family services in Victoria.

Throughout these processes, Berry Street and MacKillop have stood alongside VACCA, speaking up for the need to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families and to increase the state's focus and support for Aboriginal services. There has been strong respect for the expertise Aboriginal services like VACCA hold regarding Aboriginal children and families. For VACCA, the partnership for this project was established on solid ground.

Throughout the work of the project, it has been clear that **when partnerships are built on cultural respect and understanding, effective and sustainable partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations can make a difference to Aboriginal children.** To continue to improve these outcomes we need organisations that are committed to building cultural competence.

The *Building Respectful Partnerships* project has developed this Practice Guide to describe culturally competent and respectful practice across an organisation. We encourage you to read this guide, talk about its implications across your organisation and use it to assess how you are travelling on your journey to cultural competence. Most importantly, VACCA, Berry Street and MacKillop believe that this approach to cultural competence will improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families and strengthen partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations.

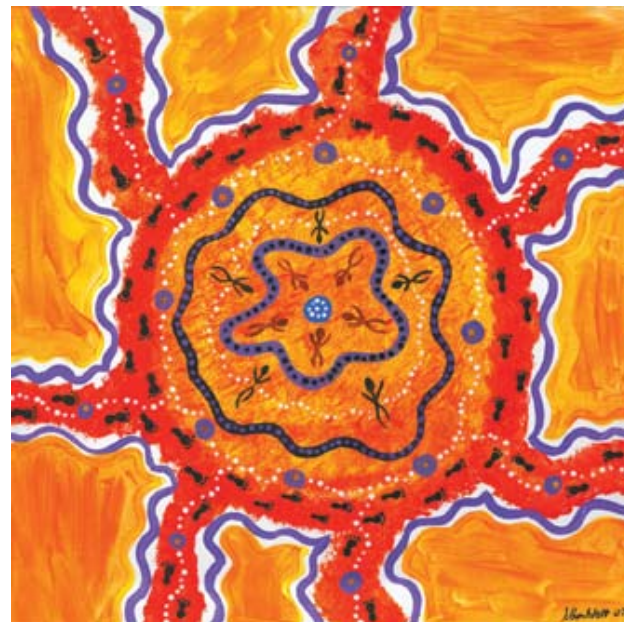
We hope that as you continue your journey to cultural competence you will realise personally and professionally the benefits of respectful partnerships and cultural competence.

Finally, we acknowledge the contributions of the many staff, carers, volunteers and board members from our individual organisations that have contributed to the development of this project. The process of consultation, discussion and debate has been robust. This Practice Guide is the outcome of a respectful partnership.

Muriel Bamblett  
CEO, VACCA

Sandie de Wolf  
CEO, Berry Street

Micaela Cronin  
CEO, MacKillop



Artist: Emma Bamblett

Title: Building Respectful Partnerships

**Artwork Statement:** The large circle represents child and family welfare workers from Aboriginal, government and mainstream organizations coming together. The footprints represent individual workers. Each footprint is different because we all bring different things to our gathering. The white dots represent the knowledge the workers bring with them.

In the centre, the white dots in the blue circle represent VACCA – VACCA has knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal children and families and a desire to bring people together to build partnerships. In the middle, people are meeting together to learn more about Aboriginal children and families, share knowledge and understanding and build partnerships.

Painting was produced in Early October 2007

Acrylic on canvas, ready to hang, 45.5 x 45.5 cm

Artist: Emma Bamblett – Yorta Yorta/Wemba Wemba



## Thanks

Many have contributed to the development of this guide to assist agencies on their journey towards cultural competence.

Strong support and guidance came from the three CEOs – Muriel Bamblett (VACCA), Sandie de Wolfe (Berry Street) and Paul Linossier (MacKillop).

Many thanks to the managers staff and volunteers from all three organizations who participated in workshops and reviewed the materials.

The Reference Group which guided the project was comprised of – Sue-Anne Hunter, Emma Bamblett, Connie Salamone and Gabrielle Burke (project officer) from VACCA; Marg Hamley and Shaune Coade from Berry Street; Helen Burt, Joleen Ryan and Melissa Brickell from MacKillop.

## Resources

The *Building Respectful Partnerships* Practice Guide is part of a collection of resources that VACCA have developed to support mainstream child and family Community Service Organisations to build Aboriginal cultural competence and work more effectively with Aboriginal children and their families. Other resources include

- A range of written documents and guides
- Training
- Cultural Consultation

This practice guide will be most effective when used alongside cultural consultancy and training. For further information regarding these resources, please contact Connie Salamone on 83881855 or [connies@vacca.org](mailto:connies@vacca.org)

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## Introduction to the Practice Guide

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal children has been a key imperative in child and family services for some years. Recently, there have been concerted efforts to lead improvements through legislation and policy development. The Victorian child and family services system is strongly committed to social justice, and this principle has guided new legislation and standards for community service organisations in Victoria. These now highlight the fundamental importance of culture, connection to family and community and Aboriginal self-determination to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children.

The *Building Respectful Partnerships Practice Guide* describes how mainstream child and family service organisations can build Aboriginal cultural competence to deliver effective services for Aboriginal children and families. The guide discusses key concepts and understandings (cornerstones) of Aboriginal cultural competence, including:

- commitment to social justice
- truth-telling about Australian history
- understanding Aboriginal cultures
- commitment to Aboriginal self-determination
- working together to build respectful partnerships with Aboriginal organisations.

The guide contains a series of questions which mainstream organisations can use to reflect on their cultural competence, alongside information explaining these questions. By better understanding Aboriginal people and cultures, mainstream organisations are more likely to embrace the inherent challenges of developing Aboriginal cultural competence.

In Victoria, 'cultural competence' is mandated by new legislation, but culturally aware and appropriate services and organisations can lift this journey beyond an exercise in compliance. For Aboriginal children and families, services that are culturally competent will lead to better outcomes. Children and families who know that their culture is recognised, respected and incorporated into all aspects of service delivery are more likely to engage with you. For staff working in your organisation, cultural competence should mean that you retain experienced Aboriginal staff, and all staff are confident in their ability to engage and deliver services to Aboriginal children and families. For your organisation, aside from the benefits of knowing your services are appropriate and effective, partnerships with Aboriginal organisations can be rewarding and enriching.

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## About the Practice Guide

This *Practice Guide* sits alongside the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework* to guide mainstream organisations in their work with Aboriginal children and families. The *Framework* was developed by VACCA, in consultation with Aboriginal Child and Family Services, and describes the 'understandings, principles and service context that underpin Aboriginal Cultural Competence for the child and family services system in Victoria'.<sup>1</sup> This *Practice Guide* explains what the *Framework* implies for your practice, your service and your organisation. It raises questions about the cultural competence of service delivery and practice across the organisation, and is useful in supervision, in team meetings to focus discussions or identify training and support needs, to assist with organisational planning and for personal self-reflection.

The *Practice Guide* takes a whole-of-organisation approach, and raises questions and provides information across eight areas. It encourages organisations to consider where they are on the journey towards Aboriginal cultural competence, and assists them to establish priorities and identify tools and resources to build cultural competence further. While there are great benefits in reading the entire document, the guide is structured to allow staff to focus on the sections that apply to their work. Some information is repeated where it applies to more than one area.

## What's in the Practice Guide?

### 1: Key Concepts and Understandings of Aboriginal Cultural Competence

*Key Concepts and Understandings of Aboriginal Cultural Competence* discusses the concepts of

- Understanding Culture
- Cultural Competence
- Cornerstones of Cultural Competence

The cornerstones of Aboriginal cultural competence are:

- commitment to social justice
- truth-telling about Australian history
- understanding Aboriginal cultures
- commitment to Aboriginal self-determination
- working together to build respectful partnerships with Aboriginal organisations

### 2. Leading a Culturally Competent Organisation

For those in a leadership and governance role, board members and senior managers.

### 3. Culturally Competent Staff, Carers and Volunteers

For staff who supervise, have a role in recruitment, staff selection, human resources or training, and for Aboriginal staff, carers or volunteers working in a mainstream organisation.

### 4. Creating a Welcoming and Accessible Environment

For all staff and carers who hold responsibility for organisational environments—from reception and interview room to out-of-home care placements.

### 5. Culturally Competent Service Delivery

For family support and out-of-home care case workers, and their supervisors.

### 6. Culturally Competent Out-of-Home Care

For case workers and carers who take care of the child's development and wellbeing while they are in placement, and their supervisors.

### 7. Practice and Program Development

For those who work in program development, design and evaluation, and for staff and carers whose reflections on the cultural competence of their own practice inform program design and delivery.

### 8. Program Evaluation and Research

For those who initiate, develop, deliver and assess research programs, are engaged in program and service evaluation and who use research to inform their practice and service delivery.

### 9. Community and Public Relations

For those who talk about the organisation's role in community forums—from media liaison and fundraising to presentations at the local school.

<sup>1</sup> State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency), November 2008, *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, Melbourne.

## Using the Practice Guide

This guide to building Aboriginal cultural competence and work more effectively across cultures should be read with the following in mind:

### Aboriginal cultural competence relies on respectfully engaging with Aboriginal organisations

You should carefully consider how to engage and understand that the process of engaging is complex. Forming good relationships with Aboriginal organisations is more likely when mainstream organisations genuinely attempt to build cultural competence.

### Aboriginal cultural competence is built over time—not overnight

Respectful, trusting and reciprocal relationships are developed over time. You cannot rush them. Be sensitive to the competing demands that Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal staff face and responsive to the need to build trust gradually. Aboriginal organisations are unlikely to meet all your requests. This does not reflect a lack of commitment to building partnerships, but rather, a dearth of resources.

### Partnerships come from relationships between people

Genuine respect, open communication, taking time to talk with one another and being open to different ways of doing and expressing things should lead to the relationships between individuals that are critical for strong partnerships.

### Aboriginal cultural competence requires committed leadership at all levels of your organisation

This extends from the formal leadership provided by the board and senior managers of the organisation through to the informal—but equally important—leadership which can be provided by cultural champions: staff and carers who show a deep commitment to develop their own cultural competence and encourage this commitment in others.

### Aboriginal cultural competence requires sustained commitment across the whole organisation

This includes governance, policies, programs, service delivery and practice approaches.

### Aboriginal cultural competence requires personal and organisational reflection

You need to reflect on the way culture influences the attitudes and assumptions for individual staff, models of service delivery and organisational culture.

### Building cultural competence is an ongoing process

You will never 'finish building', because cultural competence requires 'continuous expansion of knowledge and resources and ongoing service and practice change.'<sup>2</sup>



### No one has to do the lot

Each section in this guide will interest different groups of people in your organisation. Cultural competence requires a whole-of-organisation approach, and each part of your organisation can benefit from hearing what others are doing, but no one has to do the lot.

### You are not expected to know it all

Building cultural competence requires that you be respectfully inquisitive, ask questions and seek clarification, whatever your role in the organisation. Identifying who to ask and understanding how to ask are important elements of cultural competence.

### Building Aboriginal cultural competence will not make you an expert in Aboriginal cultures

Aboriginal cultures are complex, diverse and dynamic. Aboriginal people know their own culture, but may not be experts in the cultures of other Aboriginal communities.

### The standards reflected throughout this document are high

Aboriginal people are the first people of Australia; they have endured a history of destruction and abuse under European settlers, have experienced the forced removal of their children and continue to be over-represented in the child protection system. Aboriginal children and families have the right to effective, high quality and culturally respectful services, and they have this right as a priority in the Victorian child and family services system.

<sup>2</sup> Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M., 1989, Towards a culturally competent system of care, volume 3, Washington, DC: Georgetown University.



## Language

Language is powerful. Throughout this document we ask you to consider the impact of your language on Aboriginal children and families. We ask you to consider whether your language and intent is clear to people you speak or write to. We ask you to consider the words you use and what they mean to Aboriginal people.

Many people consulted during the development of this document asked for clarification about how to refer to the first people of Australia. We encourage you to respectfully ask the Aboriginal people you work with and alongside, because they are in a better position to advise of their preferences.

In our work at VACCA, we use the term 'Aboriginal people' to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The phrase 'Aboriginal people and communities' (plural) 'acknowledges the diversity of Aboriginal people and communities within Australia, all of whom have different histories, political dynamics, social situations, cultural characteristics, economic resources and administrative capacities.'<sup>3</sup> Some Aboriginal people prefer to use other terms to convey their nation or tribe group; for example, some Aboriginal people from Victoria may prefer 'Koorie'.

'Indigenous' is used as a collective term to refer to people from around the world, including (but not specific to) Australia. Approximately 300 million indigenous men, women and children live on our planet, and they are extremely diverse—more than 5,000 different groups of indigenous people live in more than 70 countries.<sup>4</sup> We support the uniting force of the term 'indigenous' and the way it reflects the common experiences and history of indigenous peoples.

Some Aboriginal people express concern about using 'Indigenous Australians' to describe Aboriginal people. Lowitja O'Donohue, Aboriginal Elder and former Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), stated that 'the term Indigenous has robbed the Traditional Owners of Australia of an identity because some non Aboriginal people now want to refer to themselves as Indigenous because they were born in Australia.'<sup>5</sup>

Aboriginal organisations do not use the word 'Aborigine'. This language evokes historical memories for Aboriginal people. The *Aborigines* Protection Board, the *Aborigines* Protection Act and the *Aborigines* Welfare Board sanctioned and oversaw the mass dislocation of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands onto reserves and stations and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. We do not use the acronym 'ATSIs' to refer to Aboriginal people and people from the Torres Strait Island, because it is considered disrespectful.

We do not use the word 'mission' to define the organisation's broader purpose, because this also evokes historical memories. Consider what 'mission' means for Aboriginal people. In Victoria, from the 1830s onwards, the State Government supported the establishment of thirty-four Aboriginal missions. Life on the missions was strictly controlled: 'Many people experienced forced confinement... separation from and removal of their children, the breakdown of traditional values and the banning of their languages and cultural practices.'

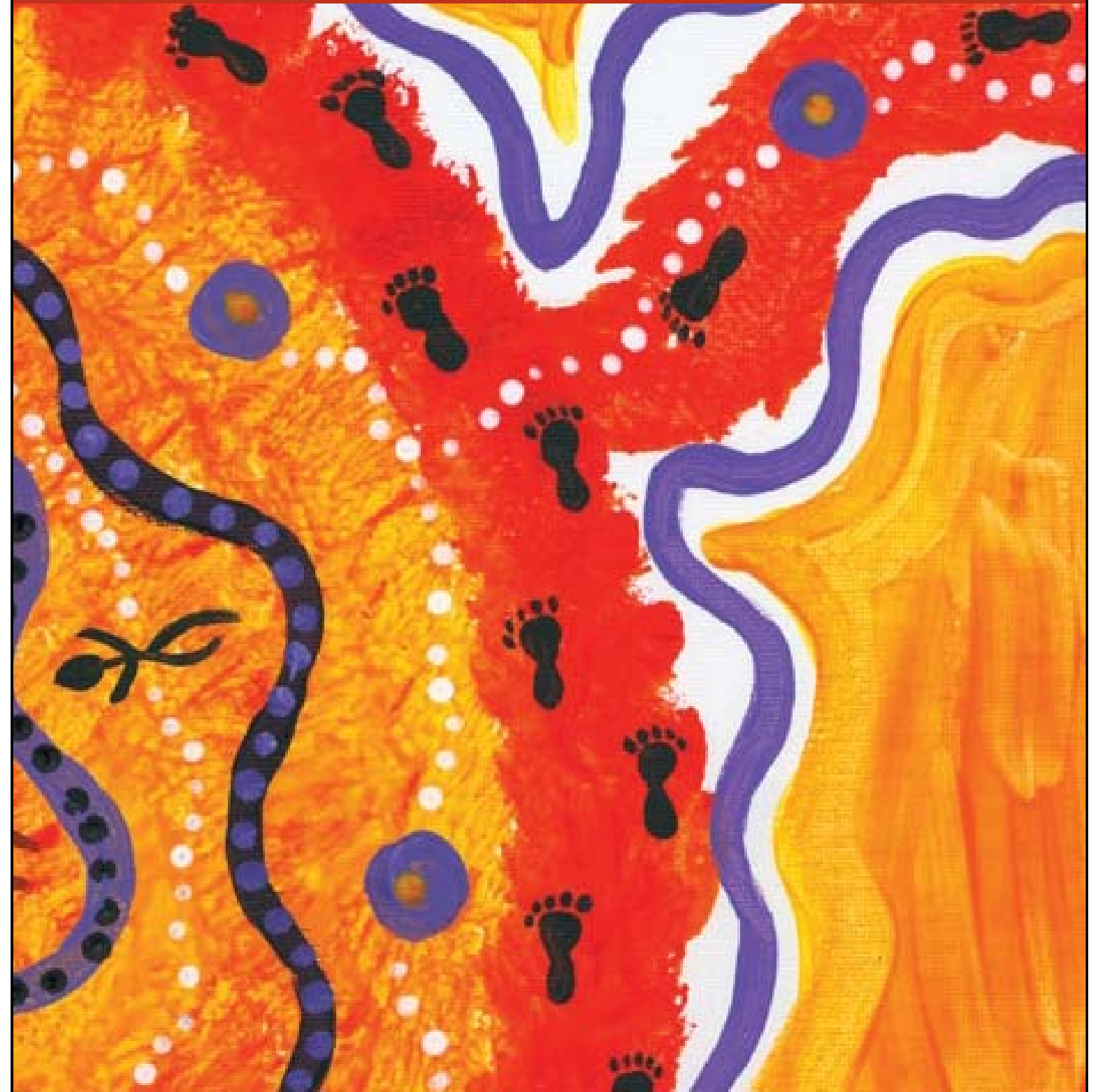
<sup>3</sup> Atkinson, J., 2002, *Trauma trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Melbourne: Spinifex Press.

<sup>4</sup> Although Indigenous people are extremely diverse, two characteristics help define them as a group. First, they have a historical continuity with societies that resided on their land before colonisation. Second, their social and cultural identities are different from those of the dominant groups in their societies. However, Indigenous people pay a price for being different: around the world, indigenous people suffer higher rates of poverty, landlessness, malnutrition and internal displacement compared to the rest of society, and have lower levels of literacy and poorer access to health services. Information from IFAD, at: <http://www.ifad.org/pub/factsheet/ip/e.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> O'Donohue, L., 2008, 'Call Us Aboriginal', *The Age*, 21 July 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Koorie Heritage Trust, *Mission Voices—hear our stories Missions and Reserves—Lake Tyers*, at ABC online: [www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake\\_tyers/mission\\_history/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake_tyers/mission_history/default.htm)

# 1 Key Concepts and Understandings of Aboriginal Cultural Competence







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# 1 Key Concepts and Understandings of Aboriginal Cultural Competence

## 1.1 Understanding Culture

To understand the importance of cultural competence in service delivery to Aboriginal children and families, we should begin with an understanding of culture. In 1982 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) produced this definition of culture:

Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

This definition demonstrates the widespread, longstanding and far-reaching understanding of culture. It describes culture in a holistic way, requiring us to look beyond 'arts and letters' and see culture as our way of life. It asks us to look beyond the individual components of culture to the relationships between these—how our values affect the way we live our life and the way we see ourselves and others. It reinforces that culture is the basis for belonging to a group, allowing us to be connected and supported. It points to the importance of culture—what are we without our values and beliefs, our communication and relationships?

At VACCA, culture is understood like this:

Culture is central to identity. Culture defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important to us. My culture, like all Aboriginal cultures, is the longest continuing culture in the world. It is sophisticated and holistic—linking spirituality with politics, education, economics, land care and the law... Every area of human development which defines the child's best interest has a cultural component. Your culture helps define HOW you attach, HOW you express emotion, HOW you learn and HOW you stay healthy.<sup>2</sup>

### Understanding Culture can be Complicated

'Culture' is a frequently used term, but understanding culture can be complicated. Culture has been used instead of, and tangled up with, terms such as religion, nationality, ethnicity and race. When we ask someone about their culture, they often respond by telling us their national heritage (for example, 'I'm Italian') and sometimes their religion (for example, 'I'm an Irish Catholic'). These responses are understandable, because we rarely think about our culture. When we ask questions about culture, we are generally seeking information about a person's beliefs and values—in other words, what they hold dear.

Culture is passed down the generations in the complex of relationships, knowledge, languages, social organisation and life experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together. Culture is a living process. It changes over time to reflect the changed environments and social interactions of people living together.<sup>3</sup>

The *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* notes that 'Indigenous cultures change is a characteristic of nations which think of themselves as having a future as well as a past'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1982, Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, at: [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico\\_en.pdf/mexico\\_en.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico_en.pdf/mexico_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Bamblett, M., 2006, 'Speaking up not talking down: doing the "rights" thing by strengthening culture as resilience for indigenous children', Melbourne: VACCA.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2002, p. ix

<sup>4</sup> Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report, Volume 2, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, para 11.12.11, page 133, at: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/national/vol2/61.html>.





Children rely on others, including their family and carers, to develop their cultural understandings.

### Children, Culture and Identity

Children are not born with culture. Very young children may not be culturally strong or culturally inquisitive. This should not be interpreted as meaning that they are uninterested in their culture; children rely on others, including their family and carers, to develop their cultural understandings through their experiences. As they get older, and develop their own unique identity,<sup>5</sup> children become more curious about their culture; they learn about culture and begin to make judgments based on their understanding of and experiences with their own culture. Their understandings about their culture inform their developing identity. Children who are strong in their culture and see that others value their culture are more likely to develop confidence, resilience and a positive identity.

The *Looking After Children* (LAC) records emphasise the importance of identity for a child and the relationship between identity and culture. The *Records* state that we should encourage children to 'develop a positive self image and a strong sense of identity', and that they should 'have the opportunities to learn about the characteristics of their birth family and their culture'.<sup>6</sup>

### Aboriginal Children and Culture

For Aboriginal children, a range of factors influence their understanding of their culture. Consider the portrayal of Aboriginal people and communities in the teaching of Australian history, by the media and by politicians. Consider community attitudes towards Aboriginal people, including your own attitudes. All these things contribute to an Aboriginal child's understanding of their culture. As stated above, Aboriginal children are not born with culture, but rely on those around them to build their cultural understandings and experiences. Without being exposed to positive images and role models, an Aboriginal child is likely to have a negative view of their culture, which can lead to a negative self-image, a reluctance to acknowledge their Aboriginal culture and be part of their Aboriginal community.

Connection to community is a powerful way for an Aboriginal child to build their cultural identity:

Our children need to not only know who they are but WHOSE they are: their connection to country and their connection to community tells them who they belong to as well as their identity. Belonging and identity is critical for Aboriginal children.<sup>7</sup>

An Aboriginal child who is connected to their community is likely to learn about their culture from a very young age. They will know about Aboriginal history and know how they are connected to their family and their community. They will be aware of the strength that exists among their Elders, and have positive Aboriginal role models. They will know where they are from and what meaning this land has for their community. This knowledge and these connections will be reinforced in daily life. Opportunities will be available to make strong friendships and share in community events and celebrations. An Aboriginal child who is connected to their culture and community can build a strong and resilient identity, which offers some protection against the racism and discrimination that exists in Australian communities today.

<sup>5</sup> Identity is an individual characteristic, distinguishing one person from another. It is the set of characteristics that somebody recognizes as belonging uniquely to himself or herself and constituting his or her individual personality for life (Encarta Dictionary).

<sup>6</sup> State Government of Victoria, Australia, Department of Human Services, Children, Youth and Families Division, *Looking After Children: Assessment and Action Record*, Age 3-4 years.

<sup>7</sup> Bamblett, M., 2006, 'Giving Aboriginal Children Every Chance: Self-determination, partnerships and cultural competency', paper presented at Department of Human Services, Child Protection Forum, Lorne 2006, at: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Resources/Submissions/Documents/T-Z/Victorian%20Aboriginal%20Child%20Care%20Agency%20Co-Op%20Ltd.pdf>

For an Aboriginal child in a mainstream placement, the need to focus on culture and connection to community is particularly acute. If culture is indeed learned, then who will be their teacher? What will they learn if their Aboriginal culture is absent from their placement? How will this protect them in their future?

An Aboriginal child's learnings about their culture may have been interrupted by their placement, and therefore, critical information that helps them to return comfortably to their community is lost. The child may have been abused or neglected by their Aboriginal parent and is fearful of Aboriginal people. Their carers may not be able to provide positive Aboriginal role models or knowledge about culture to counter this. Supporting an Aboriginal child in placement to develop and maintain their connections to their community, and demonstrating respect for and interest in Aboriginal culture helps the child to build a strong identity and assists their long-term wellbeing into adulthood.



### Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is the positive recognition and celebration of cultures. It is more than just the absence of racism or discrimination, and more than cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. A culturally safe environment does not ignore, challenge or deny cultural identity. Because a culturally safe environment is about shared respect, knowledge and understandings, it empowers people, enabling them to contribute and feel safe to be themselves. In a culturally safe environment, Aboriginal children and families define what is comfortable and safe. In a culturally safe environment, the service provider looks for guidance on how to provide the service, and considers on the impact of their culture on the way they deliver the service.

Cultural safety upholds the rights of Aboriginal children to:

- identify as Aboriginal without fear of retribution or questioning
- have an education that strengthens their culture and identity
- maintain connection to their land and country
- maintain their strong kinship ties and social obligations
- be taught their cultural heritage by their Elders
- receive information in a culturally sensitive, relevant and accessible manner
- be involved in services that are culturally respectful.

### Culture Protects through Building Resilience

Aboriginal people know that culture and connection to community builds resilience and provides protection. A recent Canadian study<sup>9</sup> into youth suicide demonstrates that the more nation/tribal groups have control over and cultural input into governance, health, education, policing, resources and seeking title to land, the lower the incidence of youth suicide. Being on your own land, having a form of self government, and having services that are culturally embedded all combine to create a sense that people have a proud past and a promising future. Culture and a meaningful sense of community have also been identified as key aspects in building resilience by the International Resilience Project.<sup>10</sup>

Indigenous child and adolescent psychiatrist, Dr Helen Milroy, makes the following observation arising from her research work with Aboriginal children in Western Australia:

I observe many psychological strengths even in some of the most traumatised children. These include children's sense of autonomy early in their life, their ability to understand psychological issues, their capacity for humour and their general creativity and playfulness evident in their love of drama acting and imagery. They have a strong sense of commitment to their siblings and family. The very fact that Aboriginal people are the oldest living culture and have survived the impact of colonisation is testimony to their resilience and the Elders must have passed this on to the children of today.<sup>11</sup>

The protection and resilience derived from being strong culturally is also evident in Victorian Aboriginal communities. Most Aboriginal families have no contact with child protection services. Many of these families are strong culturally and deeply connected to their community.

<sup>9</sup> M.Chandler & T.Proulx Changing Selves in Changing Worlds: Youth Suicide on the Fault lines of Colliding Cultures. Archives of Suicide Research, 2006;10:125-140

<sup>10</sup> International Resilience Project (2008) www.resilienceproject.org

<sup>11</sup> Milroy, Helen in De Maio, J.A., Zubrick, S.R., Silburn, S.R., Lawrence, D.M., Mitrou, F.G., Dalby, R.B., Blair, E.M., Griffin, J., Milroy, H., Cox, A. 2005, The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Measuring the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and the intergenerational effects of forced separation, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, at: [http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/files/user17/Volume2\\_Complete.pdf](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/files/user17/Volume2_Complete.pdf)



Figure 1 An Aboriginal Child's Cultural Connections

For an Aboriginal child, cultural understanding and connections can be built by exploring questions of:

- who you are (personal identity)—knowing you are an Aboriginal person, knowing your family name
- who you belong to (family, community)—knowing your family and family connections, your clan and language group
- where you belong (country)—knowing your traditional land and the stories and totems of that land
- where you come from (family history, Aboriginal history)—knowing your personal history, the history of your family and the history of Aboriginal people
- what you do (cultural expression and events)—participating in cultural events, including creative, sporting and community events, learning Koorie English and traditional Aboriginal words
- what you believe (cultural values, beliefs and practices)—values such as prioritising family relationships and responsibilities, respecting Elders and sharing
- what symbolises your Aboriginal culture—such as the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal art and music, Aboriginal role models.

Each of these questions is explored in greater depth later in this section. As well as guiding cultural connection for an Aboriginal child, each question represents a cornerstone of cultural competence. The questions and considerations that are important for an Aboriginal child in building their own understandings of Aboriginal culture also form the basis for mainstream organisations on their journey towards Aboriginal cultural competence.

### Aboriginal Cultural Connections

VACCA has developed a conceptual map<sup>8</sup> to describe different aspects of cultural connections for an Aboriginal child. It identifies what cultural work could be undertaken with an Aboriginal child to guide their developing understanding of their culture and enhance their sense of identity. The conceptual map is not a formula or checklist for cultural connection. Any cultural work should be guided by the child. For example, a child may not have strong connections to their extended family, but may still be interested in Aboriginal art or music. Attending cultural events could be a positive way to connect. Cultural work will also be guided by the child's relationship with you. For example, an Aboriginal Elder will be able to talk about Aboriginal history in a different way to a non-Aboriginal worker.

<sup>8</sup> Barnbett, M., Frederico, M., Harrison, J., Jackson, A. and Lewis, P., 2008. Not one size fits all—Measuring the social & emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, School of Social Work and Social Policy, La Trobe University, Melbourne.





### Culture is a Human Right

Being connected to your culture is not only increasingly recognised as a protective factor for children, it is a widely recognised and promoted human right.

Internationally, the United Nations enshrines and upholds the right of self-determination for different cultures,<sup>12</sup> and identifies, as a survival and development right,<sup>13</sup> the right of children to learn about and practise their own culture, language and religion.

The Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* recognises that Aboriginal people hold distinct cultural rights, including the right:

- to enjoy their identity and culture
- to maintain and use their language
- to maintain their kinship ties
- to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.<sup>14</sup>

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* identifies:

- The need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development by, wherever possible, maintaining and building their connections to their Aboriginal family and community.
- The need to protect the child from harm, to protect his or her rights and to promote his or her development (taking into account his or her age and stage of development).<sup>15</sup>

The *Charter for Children in Out-of-Home Care* outlines sixteen rights for children in care, including:

If I am an Aboriginal child I have the right to feel proud and strong in my culture. This means that my carers and workers will

- Understand, respect and value my own Aboriginal culture
- Help me feel good about my own Aboriginal culture
- Help me stay connected to my culture in all parts of my life.

<sup>12</sup> The right to self determination is upheld by the United Nations in the following declarations:

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2, at: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 1, at: <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/cpr.html>

The International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, Part 1, at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

<sup>13</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 30, at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#30>

<sup>14</sup> Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Section 19, at: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/cohrara2006433/s19.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/cohrara2006433/s19.html)

<sup>15</sup> Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, Section 10, at: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/cyafa2005252/s10.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/cyafa2005252/s10.html) (emphasis added).

### Racism and Discrimination<sup>16</sup>

Racism is defined as the expression of myths about 'other racial and/or ethnic groups that devalues and renders inferior those groups, and reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society'.<sup>17</sup> Freedom from racism and racial discrimination is a fundamental human right. In Australia, the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* made it unlawful to commit a racist act.

Believing that some people are inferior because they belong to a particular racial or ethnic group devalues people's culture and identity. Racism destroys community cohesion and creates divisions in society. Racism prevents people from enjoying their human rights and their fundamental and basic freedoms. Racism is the opposite of equality and the right of all people to be treated fairly.

Racial discrimination occurs in a range of ways, including the deliberately unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of their race, for example, an employer who will not hire someone because of their cultural background. Racial discrimination also occurs when practices or policies are applied that disadvantage people from particular groups, for example, a policy that allows only immediate family members to visit someone in hospital does not consider Aboriginal kinship and community relationships.

Racial discrimination also occurs when a range of practices and policies across the community leads to serious and long-term disadvantage for a particular culture/racial group. For example, racism experienced by Aboriginal students at school is likely to contribute to early school dropout and lower educational outcomes. Together with discrimination in employment, this leads to fewer employment opportunities and higher levels of unemployment for these students when they leave school. In turn, lower income levels, combined with discrimination in service provision, restricts access to housing, health care and life opportunities generally. Such disadvantage is commonplace among Aboriginal people in Victoria.<sup>18</sup>

### Cultural Abuse

Cultural abuse occurs when the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated—or worse, intentionally attacked. Cultural abuse can be overt (for example, direct racial vilification or discrimination) or covert (for example, lack of cultural sensitivity or an absence of positive images about another culture).

Cultural abuse is especially harmful for children because it strikes at their sense of identity, self-esteem and connectedness to family and community.

Cultural abuse is especially harmful for children because it strikes at their sense of identity, self-esteem and connectedness to family and community.

<sup>16</sup> This section was informed by: Understanding Racism at [www.racismnoway.com.au](http://www.racismnoway.com.au) Paradies, Y., Harris, R. Et Anderson, I. The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda, Discussion Paper No. 4, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, 2008; and Paradies, Y., Harris, R. and Anderson, I., 2008, The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda, Discussion Paper No. 4, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission of Australia, 1998, at: [www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au](http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au)

<sup>18</sup> Paradies, Y., Harris, R. and Anderson, I., 2008, The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda, Discussion Paper No. 4, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin. This document refers to several studies that found different treatment for Aboriginal people across health and employment systems.

### Reflecting on the Impact of Your Culture

The journey (to cultural competence) begins with... an awareness of an individual's own cultural values, a commitment to... understand and accept cultural differences, and an understanding of what these differences mean in practice.<sup>19</sup>

We all have a culture. Our culture provides the lens through which we live, guiding our perceptions and decisions. If you are part of the dominant culture, then your culture is everywhere—in the media, politics and underpinning the health and education systems you and your family access.

The dominant culture offers power and privileges that are taken for granted and generally invisible. White feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh, commenting on the hidden power relationship between white Americans and African-Americans, suggests that there are at least 50 ways in which white people are privileged by the dominant culture, including:

- If I need to move to rent or buy or if I need credit my skin color will not be an obstruction to getting the property.
- I can turn on the television and see my race widely and positively represented.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
- I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.<sup>20</sup>

In child and family services, mainstream organisations exist within the dominant culture. The relationship between Aboriginal children, families and communities and mainstream child and family services is powerfully influenced by culture. From colonisation, Aboriginal people have had little power in their relationships with those from the dominant culture, and have generally been portrayed by the dominant culture, through the media and politics, as a 'problem to be solved'.

Many Aboriginal people involved in child and family services today have had generations of experiences that lead them to be wary and distrustful of mainstream services. They are likely to feel disempowered and helpless in their relationships with these services.

Mainstream services continue to hold power in the relationships with Aboriginal children and families, defining both risk and protection for Aboriginal children. Mainstream service providers generally live in a world of privileges that are taken for granted. Their challenge is to understand the experiences of those from other cultures.

<sup>19</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne, page 8.

<sup>20</sup> McIntosh, P., 1988, 'White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies', working paper no 189, Wellesley MA 02181, Wellesley College Centre for Research on Women.



### Considerations for Your Practice Today

**Think about the way you respond to Aboriginal children and families and Aboriginal colleagues.** What are your expectations when you visit an Aboriginal family? Do you make assumptions about Aboriginal people based on your previous experiences of Aboriginal children and families? Do you make assumptions about Aboriginal people based on how they are portrayed in the media? Do you understand that your attitudes towards Aboriginal people contribute to an Aboriginal child's understanding of their community and culture? Do you give the same weight to advice given by your Aboriginal colleagues compared to other colleagues?

**Ask yourself about the impact of your culture on the Aboriginal children and families you work with, and on your Aboriginal colleagues.** Why would Aboriginal people be hesitant about engaging with you? Are they reluctant to say to you what they really think?

**Consider why some Aboriginal families delay seeking help from your organisation until there is a crisis.** Why do some Aboriginal families hesitate to use mainstream services, such as hospitals.

**Become informed about Aboriginal cultures to avoid making assumptions based on superficial understandings of values and practices.** Do you respectfully ask the Aboriginal children and families you work with about their culture?

**Identify the impact of your culture on the decisions you make regarding Aboriginal children and their best interests.** Do you see lack of material wealth as a sign of neglect? Do you see cultural differences as a 'source of vulnerability and risk to the child, rather than understanding that the risk lies in their minority status, not in their culture'?<sup>21</sup>

**Recognise and take up the opportunities provided by partnerships with Aboriginal organisations who are likely to see things differently.** Do you support your Aboriginal colleagues to challenge your cultural lens? Why might your Aboriginal colleagues be reluctant to do this?

**Build a detailed understanding of racism across your organisation.** Ensure that your policies, programs and practices are not inadvertently racist. Ask Aboriginal people how they experience your policies, programs and practises to expose hidden racism. Aim to build a culturally safe environment for all children and families.

Ask yourself about the impact of your culture on the Aboriginal children and families you work with, and on your Aboriginal colleagues.

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne, page 41.





## 1.2 Cultural Competence

Culture is akin to being the person observed through a one-way mirror; everything we see is from our own perspective. It is only when we join the observed on the other side that it is possible to see ourselves and others clearly—but getting to the other side of the glass presents many challenges.<sup>22</sup>

Cultural competence is an understanding of differences among groups accompanied by the knowledge, skills and abilities to translate these differences into appropriate attitudes and behaviours. Cultural competence enables you to work effectively with people from a culture different from your own—to work cross-culturally, because when:

...the impact of a family's... culture is not recognized and understood there is a risk of isolation and alienation. When the community does not offer competent services and supports, families may be less likely to participate in the community or access needed services.<sup>23</sup>

To be effective, cultural competence must be built at organisational, program and practice levels. While individuals who work in a culturally competent way should be commended, this is not sufficient by itself. Cultural competence is a widely shared commitment, reflected in all aspects of policy development, program management and service delivery.

Sometimes people ask why they should build Aboriginal cultural competence specifically; and whether we should know and understand all cultures.

First, Aboriginal cultural competence is specifically mandated through legislation and regulations. In Victoria, Section 10 of the Children, Youth and Families Act identifies 'the need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development'.

Second, the ongoing and serious disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and families indicates that services have not been effective. Mainstream organisations providing services for Aboriginal children and families should build Aboriginal cultural competence to deliver services that are accessible and effective, to 'close the gap'.

Third, Aboriginal children and families will continue to use mainstream services. This is partly because economic constraints, economies of scale, access to specialist skills and services and geographic factors all mean that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations cannot always provide the services that Aboriginal children and families need. Aboriginal families may also sometimes prefer to seek services from a mainstream organisation.

Finally, understanding Australian history and its impact on Aboriginal people, Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal experiences and Aboriginal ways is a mark of respect towards the First People of Australia.

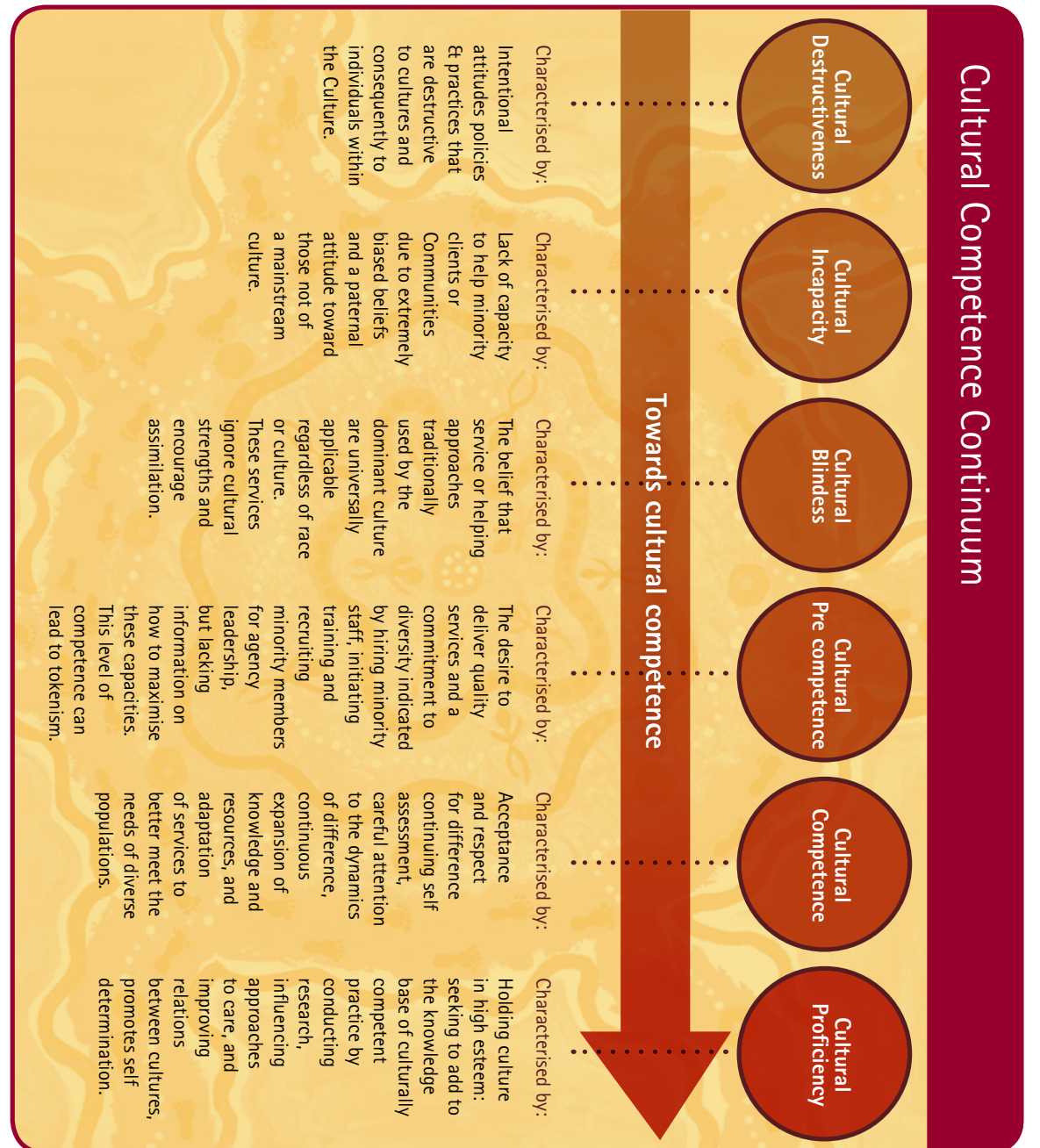


Figure 2 Cultural Competence Continuum

<sup>24</sup> Cross, J., Bazron, B., Dennis, K. and Isaacs, M., 1989, 'Towards a culturally competent system of care, volume 3, Washington, DC, Georgetown University.

### How Culturally Competent are You? The Continuum of Cultural Competence

The following continuum of cultural competence is currently used in some American states.<sup>24</sup> It allows you to make a self-assessment of the cultural competence of your organisation, your program and your own practice, and helps you to understand the journey of cultural competence. Remember: cultural competence is built over time, not overnight.

In thinking about the Aboriginal children and families you provide a service for, do you or others in your organisation:

- treat all children the same, as though the child's culture does not matter?
  - believe that your organisation can run a service for Aboriginal children without input from the Aboriginal community?
  - believe that the Stolen Generations happened in the past and Aboriginal people need to get over it?
  - disregard the expertise, cultural skills and knowledge of Aboriginal professionals because they do not have 'qualifications'?
  - acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land only when an Aboriginal person is present?
  - ask the local Aboriginal organisation to be a partner, and then tell them how you want them to be involved?
  - display artwork from the Northern Territory, believing that this reflects Victorian Aboriginal culture?
- These types of behaviours are examples of cultural blindness or cultural pre-competence. If any are present, you need an increased focus on building Aboriginal cultural competence in your organisation.

<sup>22</sup> Lynch and Hanson, 1992, 'Developing Cross Cultural Competence' in Goode, T.D., Presentation to National Leadership Summit on Improving Results, National Center for Cultural Competence, 14 June 2005, at: [http://www.ncset.org/summit05/docs/ncset2005\\_2d\\_goode.pdf](http://www.ncset.org/summit05/docs/ncset2005_2d_goode.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Hepburn, K.S., May 2004, Building Culturally and Linguistically Competent Services to Support Young Children, Their Families, and School Readiness, Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, at: <https://folio.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/10244/93/HS3622H325.pdf?sequence=1>

## 1.3 Cornerstones of Aboriginal Cultural Competence

VACCA has identified the following cornerstones of Aboriginal cultural competence:

- commitment to social justice
- truth-telling about Australian history
- understanding Aboriginal cultures
- commitment to Aboriginal self-determination
- working together to build respectful partnerships with Aboriginal organisations.

These cornerstones do not stand alone, but rather, they connect and influence each other: History is part of culture; self-determination requires a strong commitment to social justice; self-determination is built on Aboriginal cultures and Aboriginal ways.

### Commitment to Social Justice

Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

Social justice is more than just treating people equally. Because inequality still exists in society, treating everyone the same does not lead to equality. Social justice recognises that there are situations where applying the same rules to unequal groups can generate unequal outcomes. Past disadvantage and the existence of structural barriers that are part of our current social, economic and political systems perpetuate discrimination and injustice. Social justice requires us to address the underlying causes of disadvantage and discrimination and take action to change the status quo.

On any measure, Aboriginal people are disadvantaged. Aboriginal children remain at a significant disadvantage when compared to non-Aboriginal children regarding health, preschool attendance and educational achievement. Aboriginal people have a lower life expectancy (19 years lower than the rest of the population) and poorer health; they develop chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory disease at an earlier age (approximately 20 years earlier); and are more likely to be admitted to hospital for alcohol and drug-related conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Commitment to social justice: a cornerstone of cultural competence.



*Your commitment to social justice can be shown when you:*

#### *Understand the Disadvantage Experienced by Aboriginal People*

We need to recognise disadvantage in the context of Australian history and identify continuing structural disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people. This disadvantage is not the 'bad luck' of individuals in our communities. It is the systemic disadvantage that Aboriginal people, including the children and families you work with, face each day. Without understanding the historical and current context of this disadvantage, any solutions will be both ill formed and ill equipped to address the challenges and deliver effective services.

For example, if we consider the low birth weight of Aboriginal children, we must also consider what this reflects about the accessibility and effectiveness of health and antenatal services for Aboriginal women.

Governments and our own communities cannot hide behind the façade of allocating the causes of these problems to the individual responsibility of the people and families who are the excessive imbibers of alcohol, tobacco, drugs and rely on poor nutrition. They are primarily outcomes of the exclusion of many Aboriginal people from access to services and resources related to health, education and substance abuse programs over many years and several generations.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Understand the Picture Painted by Data on Disadvantage and Its Impact on Individuals*

We need to know what early development of chronic disease or low life expectancy mean to the Aboriginal children and families we work with, and consider how our understanding of such data influences the solutions we arrive at. For example, Aboriginal people have some of the highest rates of severe and persistent ear infection called otitis media in the world. The impact of this for Aboriginal children is huge. This infection can cause short- and long-term hearing loss; it affects social development, language and educational performance, which can in turn affect ability to access housing and find employment. In child and family services, it is vital that we identify problems and define solutions holistically. When examining a child's school performance we must also consider that child's health—can they hear what the teacher is saying?

#### *Consider the cumulative impact of disadvantage*

Multiple disadvantages accumulate for the Aboriginal children and families we work with—low income, poor health, inadequate housing, inappropriate and inaccessible support services all affect each other. The impact on families of multiple disadvantage can be unremitting and exhausting. Aboriginal families need accessible, effective and culturally competent services that build on their strengths and resilience in the face of such disadvantage.

<sup>25</sup> Dodson, M., 1993, Annual Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services, at: [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/info\\_for\\_students/australia/resource\\_hraus.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/info_for_students/australia/resource_hraus.html)

<sup>26</sup> State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services, May 2008, Aboriginal Services Plan Key Indicators 2006/07, Melbourne.

<sup>27</sup> Dodson, P., 2008, 'In search of Change—Robed in Justice', City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture 2008.





Truth-telling about Australian history—a cornerstone of cultural competence.

### Truth-Telling About Australian History

Aboriginal people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children. To be culturally competent, we must acknowledge and tell the truth about our history and its ongoing impact for Aboriginal people; we should understand how the past shapes lives today.

Aboriginal history is Australian history. A German lawyer involved in the persecution of Nazi war crimes commented:

A people cannot separate themselves from their history. You cannot say yes to Beethoven as a part of you and no to Hitler.<sup>28</sup>

Before colonisation Aboriginal people lived in small family groups linked into larger language groups with distinct territorial boundaries. These groups had complex kinship systems and rules for social interaction; they had roles relating to law, education, spiritual development and resource management; they had language, ceremonies, customs and traditions and extensive knowledge of their environment. In other words, Aboriginal cultures were strong and well developed, Aboriginal communities were self-determining and Aboriginal children were looked after and protected.

European colonisation had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities and cultures. Aboriginal people were rounded up and slaughtered or placed together on missions and reserves in the name of protection. Cultural practices were denied, and subsequently many were lost.<sup>29</sup> For Aboriginal people, colonisation meant massacre, violence, disease and loss.

Between 1869 and 1971, Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and community groups because 'being Aboriginal was, in itself, reason to regard children as "neglected"'.<sup>30</sup> Between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children were removed.<sup>31</sup> These Aboriginal people are the 'Stolen Generations'.

One principal effect of the forcible removal policies was the destruction of cultural links. This was actually their declared aim. Culture, language, land and identity were to be stripped from the children in the hope that the traditional law and culture would die by losing their claim on them and sustenance on them.

The complete separation of Aboriginal children from any connection, communication or knowledge about their Indigenous heritage has had profound effects on their experience of Aboriginality and their participation in the Aboriginal community as adults.<sup>32</sup>

### The Past Shapes Lives Today

The ongoing and intergenerational impact of forced removal policies and practices has been well documented. The *Bringing Them Home* report found that Aboriginal children removed from their families were more likely to come to the attention of the police, more likely to suffer low self-esteem, depression and mental illness and more vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

The *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* (2005) found that Aboriginal parents/carers who were removed as children had an increased risk of alcoholism, problem gambling, criminal behaviour and contact with mental health services. In turn, their children are more likely to suffer from significant emotional and behavioural problems.<sup>33</sup>

Today, Aboriginal people continue to experience the impact of the Stolen Generations. On any measure—socio-economic status, education or health—Aboriginal people continue to face significant disadvantage. Intervention in the lives of Aboriginal children and families remains disproportionately high.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Aboriginal people are unlikely to trust mainstream organisations, particularly those who were involved in the removal of Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children and families who need services may be reluctant to ask for help because of your organisation's history, and may wait until they are in crisis.

The policy of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families was developed under the guise that they would be 'better off'. Today, understandings regarding best interests are still influenced by the culture of those making the decisions. For example, attachment theory emphasises assessing a child's attachment 'in the context of the relationship with the carer'.<sup>35</sup> Aboriginal children form strong attachments to several adults in their community. In the past this has been viewed as a problem when seen through the lens of the dominant culture, with its preference for the nuclear family. Only recently has recognition of the strength of these connections been explored. In a presentation regarding human brain development, internationally renowned trauma specialist Dr Bruce Perry states:

We humans have not always lived the way we do now... We lived in a far richer relational environment in the natural world. For each child under the age of 6, there were four developmentally more mature persons who could protect, educate, enrich and nurture the developing child... The relationally enriched, developmentally heterogeneous environment of our past is what the human brain 'prefers'.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the enormous odds presented by colonisation, forced removal, discrimination and injustice, Aboriginal communities and cultures are thriving: strong kinship ties and social obligations continue; cultural centres, Aboriginal art, film, dance and theatre and activities celebrating Aboriginal cultures and significant events demonstrate the resilience of Aboriginal communities and cultures.

### The Importance of Apology

The overwhelming response to the Stolen Generations, conveyed repeatedly throughout the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry, highlights the need for acknowledgment, apology and reparation. This is eloquently stated in the following evidence given to the inquiry:

The Government has to explain why it happened. What was the intention? I have to know why I was taken. I have to know why I was given the life I was given and why I'm scarred today. Why was my Mum meant to suffer? Why was I made to suffer with no Aboriginality and no identity, no culture? Why did they think that the life they gave me was better than the one my Mum would give? <sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Gitta Sereny, quoted in *The Age* 21 April 2007, describes what a German lawyer who had dedicated himself to the prosecution of Nazi crimes after the war said when she interviewed him.

<sup>29</sup> For further reading, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, *Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers*, Melbourne, which includes a resource list regarding Aboriginal history on page 69.

<sup>30</sup> For further reading, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, *Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers*, Melbourne, which includes a resource list regarding Aboriginal history on page 69.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, *Bringing Them Home—National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, at: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AILR/1997/36.html>

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them home*, National inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, HREOC, Sydney, 1997, p202. Separation policies were in place until approximately 1970.

<sup>33</sup> Western Australian Aboriginal Child health Survey, Research Themes, 2005 at [www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/waachs](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/waachs)

<sup>34</sup> Aboriginal children in Victoria are almost eight times more likely to be deemed victims of abuse or neglect than non-Indigenous children; more than 10 times more likely to be subject to court orders and 14 times more likely to have spent time in out-of-home care. *The Protecting Children Report*, Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services, March 2007, *The Best Interest Principles: a conceptual overview*, page 24.

<sup>36</sup> Perry, B., 2006, 'Applying Principles of Neurodevelopment to Clinical Work with Maltreated and Traumatized Children: The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics' in Boyd, N. (ed.) *Working with Traumatized Youth in Child Welfare*, Guilford Publications Inc., New York.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, *Bringing Them Home—National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, confidential evidence 139, Victoria: woman removed at 12 months in 1967.

On 13 February 2008, when the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Kevin Rudd apologised to Aboriginal people on behalf of the Parliament of Australia, he was truth-telling about Australian history. He said:

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 left behind, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

*Your respect for the impact of history can be shown when you:*

- take opportunities to acknowledge that Aboriginal people are the Traditional Owners of this land
- understand the experiences of Aboriginal people with mainstream child and family services organisations and adapt service delivery approaches to support Aboriginal people
- make a formal apology to members of the Stolen Generations
- consider how the sentiments behind a formal apology can be kept alive in strategic planning, service delivery, priority setting and decision making—in the way you want the organisation to run.

### Understanding Aboriginal Cultures

There are many Aboriginal cultures and peoples. Aboriginal cultures exist and thrive in a wide range of communities throughout Australia. It is important to avoid assumptions regarding Aboriginal cultures. The Aboriginal people you work with are not all the same—their culture, what they value and hold dear, how they live and make decisions, their relationships are not the same. As in Western and Eastern cultures, Aboriginal cultures have characteristics they share and others that differentiate them.

While diversity exists across and within Aboriginal communities, some Aboriginal cultural characteristics are part of all Aboriginal cultures and unite Aboriginal people through shared history and shared experiences. Understanding these cultural characteristics and appreciating their impact for Aboriginal people today is a cornerstone of cultural competence.

#### Aboriginal Kinship Ties

Aboriginal people see the individual holistically:

Aboriginal understandings of the person see the individual in relationship with the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the law and dreaming.<sup>38</sup>

The child's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural needs and wellbeing are seen as intrinsically linked—they cannot be isolated. The child is not seen as separate, but in relationship to and with others. An Aboriginal perspective sees:

- the child's relationship to their whole family—not just to their mum and dad
- the child's relationship to their community—not just their family
- the child's relationship to the land and the spirit beings which determine law and meaning.

Understanding Aboriginal cultures—a cornerstone of cultural competence.

Aboriginal people are protected and strengthened by the resilience of Aboriginal kinship ties, social responsibilities and community connections.



Aboriginal people value community and social relationships and the responsibilities each person has to each other:

Community is where I can share my innermost thoughts, bring out the depths of my own feelings, and know they will be understood.<sup>39</sup>

From a very young age, Aboriginal children are told about their relationships and links to others, and are taught to show respect to their Elders. Within Aboriginal communities, kinship networks are based on relationships of blood, marriage, association and spiritual significance. An Aboriginal person has brothers, sisters, mother, fathers, uncles and aunts, who are additional to relationships by blood or marriage. Aboriginal children understand that these people are important in their life—they are people who will support them and on whom they can rely—they are family. These relationships are maintained through involvement in community. Even if they see each other infrequently, Aboriginal people describe a closeness that exists—'like I saw her yesterday'.

Each individual is important, has a role to play in the community and is accepted for both their strengths and limitations. Sharing is a strongly promoted value. There is a strong obligation to share if others are in need. The family, and one's obligations to the family and community, are more important than material gain.

In Aboriginal communities, Elders take a vital leadership role:

Leadership is earned after a life journey and knowledge and power is demonstrated in capability. One Elder emerges and is acknowledged by all... Everyone knows who this leader is. The Elder carries his authority in his sacred wisdom and this is displayed in his or her conduct and words... Europeans are often surprised to find that the leader is an elderly man or woman who sits un-noticed and ordinary, not in front, but in the midst of a huddle of people.<sup>40</sup>

Taking a holistic view of the Aboriginal child and family in your assessment and planning means looking at the whole child—not just the presenting issue—and recognising the centrality of culture and community in service delivery. Working holistically will allow you to see beyond the family's needs to the strengths present for the child, family and community.

*Your respect for Aboriginal culture can be shown when you:*

- recognise the cultural and spiritual wealth that comes from many people living together
- understand the complex network of relationships for an Aboriginal child—you cannot reduce and simplify these relationships to fit a Western nuclear family model
- understand when community business means that Aboriginal children and families and Aboriginal workers cannot make a meeting; seeing this as a reflection of a strong community
- listen to Aboriginal community Elders—appreciating their strength, knowledge and understanding in helping Aboriginal children build strong cultural and community connections.
- assist Aboriginal children to build strong relationships with their community.

<sup>38</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne, page 24.

<sup>39</sup> May, R., in Atkinson, J., 2002, Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia, Melbourne: Spinifex Press.

<sup>40</sup> Botsman, P., 2008, 'Change Robed in Justice'—Australia's Indigenous National Leader Emerges, Peter Botsman's Working Papers, at: <http://www.workingpapers.com.au/publishedpapers/2684.html>





Aboriginal people have a strong spiritual relationship with the land that is different from that of other Australians.

### Aboriginal Spiritual Relationship with the Land

The land is my backbone... I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me. I think of land as the history of my nation. It tells me how we came into being and what system we must live... My land is mine only because I came in spirit from that land, and so did my ancestors of the same land... My land is my foundation.<sup>41</sup>

Aboriginal people have a deep connection with their land, which is central to their spiritual identity. This connection remains despite the many Aboriginal people who no longer live on their land. Aboriginal people describe the land as sustaining and comforting, fundamental to their health, their relationships and their culture and identity.

When I return to my land my worries go and the energy from the land is healing.<sup>42</sup>

For Aboriginal children, their traditional land and what it represents in terms of their history, survival, resilience and cultural and spiritual identity gives them much to take pride in.

This spiritual connection to land may not make sense to you. In the dominant Australian culture, land is thought of as a commodity to be used, enjoyed and owned—as a place to build a home or grow food or develop a park. Aboriginal people consider the land differently:

I think these are things of the heart, if you like, these are spiritual things. You cannot interpret them in an empirical sense. You have to understand them.<sup>43</sup>

Aboriginal spiritual identity and connection to the land is expressed in the Dreamtime. In Aboriginal cultures, the Dreamtime tells of the beginning of life. Different Aboriginal groups have different dreamtime stories, but all teach about aspects that affect daily life. Dreamtime stories teach Aboriginal people of the importance of sharing with and caring for people of their community, of nurturing the land and of the significance of the land and its creatures.

Dreamtime stories pass on the history of Aboriginal people, their relationship with the environment and their spiritual connection. For Aboriginal people, the past of the Dreamtime is still alive and vital today, and will remain so into the future. The complex set of spiritual values developed by Aboriginal people and that are part of the Dreamtime include 'self control, self reliance, courage, kinship and friendship, empathy, a holistic sense of oneness and interdependence, reverence for the land and "country" and responsibility for others, especially children.'<sup>44</sup>

*Your respect for Aboriginal spiritual identity can be shown, for example, when you:*

- respect Aboriginal spirituality—the same respect that is given to other religions, beliefs and values
- understand Aboriginal spiritual values that are described in the Dreamtime and see these as a basis for strengthening and healing with the Aboriginal children and families you work with
- acknowledge the land and the Traditional Owners at organisational forums and gatherings
- encourage Aboriginal children to know their land and making sure they have access to or a connection with their land
- assist Aboriginal children to hear the stories of their past from community Elders—the Dreamtime stories

<sup>41</sup> Quote from Galarrwuy Yunipingu, in Calma, T., July 2008, Australian Human Rights Commission, Essentials for Social Justice, page 50, at: [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social\\_justice/essentials\\_sj\\_speeches.pdf](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/essentials_sj_speeches.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Personal communication with Lance James, Program Manager, Link Up Victoria, as part of Aboriginal Cultural Competence consultation (see [http://www.vacca.org/01\\_program/link\\_up\\_victoria.html](http://www.vacca.org/01_program/link_up_victoria.html)).

<sup>43</sup> First Nations discussion involving Julian Burger, leader of the team representing Ingenious People at the UN in Geneva, Rev Makhenkesi Stofile, Premier of Eastern Cape Province in South Africa and Elijah Harper of Red Sucker Lake First Nation, who initiated the 1995 'Sacred Assembly' for reconciliation and healing in Canada, at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s20113.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Charlesworth, M., in McEwan, A., Tsey, K. and the Empowerment Research Team, 2008, The Role of Spirituality in Social and Emotional Well-Being Initiatives: The Family Wellbeing Program at Yarrabah, Discussion Paper Series: No. 7, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, at: [http://www.crah.org.au/publications/downloads/DP7\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.crah.org.au/publications/downloads/DP7_FINAL.pdf)

Commitment to Aboriginal self-determination—a cornerstone of cultural competence.

### Commitment to Aboriginal Self-Determination

To be unable to speak leads to a silencing of voices and that leads to learned helplessness. If you give up and feel helpless you lose resilience, you cease to become the key player in your future. Self-determination is necessary for our children to have a future.<sup>45</sup>

Aboriginal self-determination is a fundamental requirement for better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. To avoid partnerships that are paternalistic or disempowering for Aboriginal children and families, services and communities, mainstream organisations must be committed to Aboriginal self-determination.

#### Self-Determination is a Human Right

Respecting and promoting human rights is important for all Australians, because it 'helps build strong communities, based on equality and tolerance, in which every person has an opportunity to contribute.'<sup>46</sup> The Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* recognises that Aboriginal people hold distinct cultural rights, including the right to:

- enjoy their identity and culture
- maintain and use their language
- maintain their kinship ties
- maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.<sup>47</sup>

#### Self-Determination is now the Law

The right to make decisions and to control their implementation has been repeatedly identified as being critical to the future wellbeing of Aboriginal people. Self-determination was prescribed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody as being necessary for Aboriginal people to overcome their previous and continuing institutionalised disadvantage and disempowerment. In April 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report recommended the implementation of self-determination in relation to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people through the passage of national framework and standards legislation.

Today, the Victorian *Children, Youth and Families Act* recognises the principle of Aboriginal self-management and self-determination as a key principle when determining decisions that concern Aboriginal children and families. However, the question of what this means in practice remains unanswered.

In discussing self-determination, Aboriginal Elder Lowitja O'Donoghue stated that: 'To Australia's indigenous peoples, self-determination is an aspirational concept.'<sup>48</sup> In Victoria's child and family services, self-determination is most appropriately realised through a planned process that also requires commitment to capacity building—building 'robust, viable and skilled Aboriginal agencies so that Aboriginal families and communities have access to services that are managed and delivered by Aboriginal people.'<sup>49</sup>

The realisation of self-determination in Victoria's child and family services sector means moving from a position where Aboriginal people have no control and limited influence, to where they have joint control and directive influence. Ultimately, Aboriginal people should have full control of decision making regarding Aboriginal children and families.

<sup>45</sup> Bamblett, M., 2006, Culture as Strength, Culture as Resilience—Strengthening Culture as the Service Response for Koorie Kids, VACCA.

<sup>46</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, Essentials for Social Justice, [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/health/health\\_summary.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/health/health_summary.html)

<sup>47</sup> Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Section 19, at: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/cohrara2006433/s19.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/cohrara2006433/s19.html)

<sup>48</sup> O'Donoghue, L., March 1999, Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, as quoted in An analysis of the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2nd edition, ATSIC, at: [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/14255/20010629-0000/www.atsic.gov.au/issues/international/draftdecfive\\_a.htm#fivea](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/14255/20010629-0000/www.atsic.gov.au/issues/international/draftdecfive_a.htm#fivea)

<sup>49</sup> Garbutt, C., 2005, Children, Youth and Families Bill, second reading speech, Victorian Parliament, 6 October 2005, at: <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/downloadhansard/pdf/Assembly/Spring%202005/Assembly%20Spring%20Weekly%20Book%205%202005.pdf>

**Self-Determination is Effective**

This has been repeatedly demonstrated internationally. In New Zealand:<sup>50</sup>

In just three short decades, the health status of Maoris has improved dramatically... In 1950 the life expectancy for Maori people was 15 years less than for non-Maoris. By 1992 the gap had been cut to just five years. In contrast, Aboriginal people die 16–20 years younger than the rest of the population. Self-determination has always been a significant factor in improving the situation in New Zealand, as indeed it has in Canada. 'Self-determination' very largely means being able to have charge of their own life the way the rest of us can take charge of ours.<sup>51</sup>

In Canada, the more nation/tribal groups have control over and cultural input into governance, health, education, policing, resources and seeking title to land, the lower the incidence of youth suicide.<sup>52</sup>

In Canada, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has identified five determinants of successful outcomes in Indigenous communities: sovereignty, institutions, culture, leadership and strategic thinking. In discussing sovereignty, the project points out that:

When Indigenous nations make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform external decision makers—on matters as diverse as governmental form, natural resource management, economic development, health care, and social service provision.<sup>53</sup>

In Victoria, there is also evidence of self-determination working. For example, in recognition of Aboriginal children not doing well at school, VACCA invested in an education worker. Now, Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are engaged at school, have minimal placement breakdowns and are strongly connected to their community.

**Self-Determination is Healing**

Recognition is growing about the healing derived from cultural strength and knowledge in children's services. The importance of holistic healing, used by Aboriginal professionals in Manitoba, Canada:

...transcends the notion of helping in a narrow therapeutic sense. Instead it emphasizes the resilience of First Nations people and their ability to utilize self help and cultural traditions as a framework for both addressing problems and supporting future social development at the community level.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi was established in 1840 and upholds Maori self-determination. Unsurprisingly, concurrent with the establishment of a tribunal to respond to breaches of the treaty in 1975 there were dramatic improvements in Maori health.

<sup>51</sup> Dr Keith Woollard, President of the AMA and Prof Ian Ring of James Cook University, in the *Weekend Australian*, 1997, identifies factors such as Maori control of health services; health service provision in a wider context of language, culture and social services; workforce development designed to close the training gap between Maoris and non-Maoris; Maoris receiving the same level of funding as non-Maoris with similar health problems. This is quoted by Malcolm Fraser, former prime minister of Australia, delivering the Fifth Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture at the Northern Territory University, on Thursday 24 August, 2000. at <http://www.abc.net.au/specials/lingiari/default.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Chandler, M. and Proulx, T., 2006, 'Changing Selves in Changing Worlds: Youth Suicide on the Fault Lines of Colliding Cultures', *Archives of Suicide Research* 10: 125–140.

<sup>53</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, April 2008, *Australia 2020 Summit—The Future Of Indigenous Australia*, at: [http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/final\\_report/2020\\_summit\\_report\\_full.pdf](http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/final_report/2020_summit_report_full.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> McKenzie, B., 'Connecting Policy and Practice in First Nations Child and Family Services: A Manitoba case study', 1997 in Pulkingham, J. and Ternowetsky G. (eds) *Child and Family Policies, Struggles, Strategies and Options*, Fernwood, Halifax.



The principle of self-determination means understanding the principle of Aboriginal services for Aboriginal people.

**Aboriginal Services for Aboriginal People**

The principle of self-determination means understanding the principle of Aboriginal services for Aboriginal people. While mainstream organisations may become genuinely culturally competent, they cannot replace Aboriginal services.

No mainstream service can express the voice of an Aboriginal community. No mainstream service can be Aboriginal in its approach.<sup>55</sup>

**Aboriginal organisations are different**

They were established through political action and activism to allow Aboriginal voices to be heard. Aboriginal services have broad objectives. In addition to providing services for Aboriginal children and families, objectives include cultural advancement, community development, self-determination, human rights, redressing the disadvantage that Aboriginal people face and continuing to provide space for Aboriginal voices.

**Aboriginal organisations are community controlled**

This means they are part of Aboriginal communities. They are made up of and represent the Aboriginal children and families who seek your services. Aboriginal organisations have boards elected by their community, and their first accountability is to their community. They can speak on behalf of their community, establish priorities for services within their community and determine appropriate messages about their community.

**Aboriginal professionalism can be different**

Aboriginal professionals understand the impact of Australian history on Aboriginal people and understand Aboriginal cultures. They integrate these understandings into their practice. Aboriginal professionals can be part of the local Aboriginal community. They understand the complexity of Aboriginal families and communities, and the importance of connection to community and culture for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children. They understand the deep and longstanding impact on Aboriginal children when they are disconnected from their family and community.

**Aboriginal organisations understand Aboriginal people**

For Aboriginal children and families, the depth of empathy and understanding that comes from shared experiences goes beyond knowledge. Coming to an Aboriginal organisation

- where you do not have to explain yourself
- where the complexity of Aboriginal communities and cultures is understood
- where practice is built on understanding the role of Elders, relationships and kinship ties
- where silence and humour are understood – all allow Aboriginal children and families to access the services they need in a way not possible in mainstream organisations.

**Aboriginal organisations take pride in Aboriginal culture**

For Aboriginal children, being in placement with Aboriginal carers who

- openly display their pride in their Aboriginal culture, can be strong role models,
- understand the strength of the connections that exist between Aboriginal people,
- are able to introduce the child to their community, and
- have relationships with Aboriginal community Elders all allow Aboriginal children to explore their identity and take pride in being Aboriginal. Aboriginal carers see culture and community connections as integral to their life and giving strength and resilience to the child.

<sup>55</sup> State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency), October 2008, *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, Melbourne.





#### *Aboriginal ways can also be different*

We are not threatened by silence. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait.  
We do not try to hurry things up.<sup>56</sup>

Aboriginal ways of knowing are holistic and community based. Each person is seen in relation to their family, community and land. Social obligations and responsibilities are an integral part of life. Respect comes from relationships, rather than the position the person holds or the information they provide. Taking time to build relationships and getting to know who you are and where you are from are Aboriginal ways.

At VACCA, professional practice and service approaches aligns with the following principles, which are culturally embedded:

- **holistic healing**, which seeks to provide for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing
- **narrative**, rather than diagnostic assessment and planning
- **culture as treatment**, which views the affirmation and enhancement of Aboriginal culture as essential
- **family strengthening**, which seeks to address the underlying issues by promoting a positive and culturally appropriate approach to the family environment
- **culture as resilience**, which, along with a family strengthening approach, builds on the resilience of families and increasing resilience by creating a culturally responsive framework for families
- **empowerment model**, which engages participant families in the process of addressing issues, so that they become active participants in treatment, rather than passive recipients of a service.

#### *Your support for self-determination for Aboriginal children and families can be shown when you:*

- involve Aboriginal children and families in decision making
- provide a culturally safe environment where Aboriginal children and families feel empowered to speak up
- always prioritise Aboriginal services when you think about what service will best meet the needs of an Aboriginal child and family, and build partnerships with local Aboriginal services to facilitate this
- aren't 'doing for' but are 'working with' Aboriginal services
- support Aboriginal organisations to grow and develop through funding support and assistance with capacity building
- recognise the value of learning from Aboriginal organisations—capacity building goes both ways
- turn to Aboriginal organisations for advice and guidance at a program development and case specific level
- consult with Aboriginal organisations even when you have employed Aboriginal staff members to provide cultural advice—Aboriginal organisations know their families and communities
- trust that advice, rather than judging it through the lens of the dominant culture
- never compete with Aboriginal organisations for resources.

Building respectful partnerships—a cornerstone of cultural competence.

### Working Together to Build Respectful Partnerships with Aboriginal Organisations

If you have come to help me  
You are wasting your time  
But if you have come because your  
liberation is bound up with mine  
Then let us work together.<sup>57</sup>

Mainstream organisations that provide services to Aboriginal children and families need to build cultural competence for their services to be effective and culturally appropriate. Building Aboriginal cultural competence relies on engaging respectfully with Aboriginal organisations. Strong and respectful partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations are more likely when mainstream organisations genuinely attempt to build cultural competence.

Those non Aboriginal people who respect our culture and acknowledge our rights as self determining communities can be our partners in raising strong and resilient Aboriginal children.<sup>58</sup>

Working together is vital:

- to ensure effective, culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal children and families
- as the basis for achieving successful outcomes in any joint activities between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations
- as the foundation for capacity building in Aboriginal organisations that deliver services to children and families
- to create opportunities for capacity building in mainstream organisations through developing knowledge, skills and understanding in working with Aboriginal children and families.

A partnership is much more than simply writing a memorandum of understanding or a protocol, calling something a partnership or including self-determination as an organisational value.

Given that our words hold little currency—having broken them so often before—we will be judged by our actions and over time.<sup>59</sup>

Judy Atkinson<sup>60</sup> identifies six essential elements for good partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations: respect, rights, responsibility, reciprocity and reflective practices. Consider how these elements could underpin your partnerships with Aboriginal organisations:

- **respect** for the richness and integrity of Aboriginal cultures of the past, current and future generations; for the individual and collective contribution, interests and aspirations of Aboriginal people; for the voices of Aboriginal people
- **join voices and advocate** for the **rights** of Aboriginal people to self-determination and to social justice; to an Australian community based on human rights
- **responsibility** and accountability for the services delivered to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities; for the credibility of our intent and process in all aspects of our partnerships with Aboriginal people and communities
- **reciprocity** in building services with Aboriginal people; involving Aboriginal people in all aspects of what we do and taking opportunities to build capacity in Aboriginal communities

<sup>57</sup> Watson, L, January 1992, Aboriginal poet and activist in 'Untitled' in Health for Women 3, Brisbane: Department of Health, at: <http://iilla.org.au/about/>

<sup>58</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne.

<sup>59</sup> Hytten, F. So what DO Indigenous people want?! AND, what can I do about it? September 2005, ANiAR, Victoria

<sup>60</sup> Professor Judy Atkinson is Director of the Gribi College of Indigenous People at Southern Cross University in Lismore, NSW. She has focused most of her community and academic life working in the field of violence, trauma and healing. She identified these elements of partnership at a workshop held at Onemda, VicHealth Koori Health Unit, in November 2007. We have expanded on each element.

<sup>56</sup> Atkinson, J., November 2006, 'Building the Future—Healing Tracks across the Nation', Child Safety Research Conference, Queensland, at: <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/research/conference/2006/documents/sub-keynote-5-judy-atkinson-1.pdf>

- **equality** in how we value Aboriginal people's knowledge and wisdom, their collective memory and shared experiences as a resource and inheritance—despite our differences, we are equal partners
- **reflective practices** include taking time to reflect on our own words and actions; understanding the importance of culture in all that we do and acknowledging the power derived from being part of the dominant culture.

## 1.4 Conclusion

At the heart of the journey to cultural competence in mainstream community services organisations is a strong commitment to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families in Victoria. This means understanding different cultures and skilfully incorporating this into the way services are delivered.

While the overarching goal is to provide culturally competent child and family service organisations, we cannot lose sight of the individuals who make up organisations. When you search for a placement, assess a child, develop a training program, interview a new staff member, or deliberate over your organisation's budget, the challenge is to apply the cornerstones of cultural competence to what you do and the decisions you make. Consider how you will:

- understand how your culture effects what you do and the decisions you make
- acquire knowledge about history and culture and understand its impact on the Aboriginal children and families who need your services
- understand that the serious and long-term disadvantage many Aboriginal children, families and communities face stems not from individuals but from historical and structural barriers
- actively promote self-determination for Aboriginal people, through the way your organisation delivers services, and through advocating alongside Aboriginal organisations so that they have greater influence and control over services for Aboriginal children and families.

We have already highlighted the importance of respectful relationships with Aboriginal community controlled organisations, but here repeat the powerful words of Aboriginal poet Lilla Watson:

If you have come to help me  
You are wasting your time  
But if you have come because your  
liberation is bound up with mine  
Then let us work together.<sup>61</sup>

This is a vital message. Aboriginal children and families and Aboriginal organisations do not want mainstream organisations to 'do for' them. They want genuine and respectful relationships, built on confidence in the rightness of self-determination and respect for Aboriginal cultures, Aboriginal professionalism and Aboriginal ways. They want partnerships that build capacity in Aboriginal organisations so that the future will see Aboriginal organisations delivering services for Aboriginal people.



The issues raised in this section are complex and require strong and sustained commitment. Other parts of this *Practice Guide* are directed at particular people in your organisation, and they are no less challenging. The way forward is to reflect on where you and your organisation currently sit along the cultural competence continuum, and then plan what you will focus on in the future: setting goals, taking action and then reflecting on your progress is something you do each day—this is no different. You can do this now; you do not need to wait.

There *will* be challenges ahead. We have highlighted the importance of working with local ACCOs and also alerted you to the challenges associated with forming such relationships—the dearth of resources within ACCOs, the past relationships with mainstream organisations which have left ACCOs distrustful. You may also encounter colleagues who do not believe Aboriginal children are a priority, or who do not believe Aboriginal children and families need particular consideration from your organisation. Any examination of current outcomes for Aboriginal children in the child and family service system will give you inspiration to remain focused on the vital importance of improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families by taking steps towards Aboriginal cultural competence.

<sup>61</sup> Watson, L., January 1992, Aboriginal poet and activist in 'Untitled' in Health for Women 3, Brisbane: Department of Health, at: <http://lilla.org.au/about/>