

# Aboriginal culture

This information sheet provides a snapshot of information to help you enhance your knowledge about Aboriginal culture in Victoria, and the cultural needs of the child or young person you are caring for. Further information about caring for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care can be found in the Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care resource developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).

Culture plays a key role in the Aboriginal child or young person's development, identity and self-esteem, and in determining their overall wellbeing.

As a relative carer of an Aboriginal child or young person, you have a significant role in fostering their Aboriginal identity and connection to culture. If you prioritise and understand the importance of Aboriginal culture to a child or young person's wellbeing and positive development, and you bring this into your home, you are more likely to raise Aboriginal children and young people who experience better life outcomes. The impact of culture on overall wellbeing cannot be overestimated.

## Terminology

'Koori' or 'Koorie' is a term used by the Aboriginal community to refer to clan groups that are from Victoria and some parts of New South Wales. Aboriginal people may also identify themselves, according to the language group of their family's ancestral lands, for example, Yorta Yorta.

'Community' refers to Aboriginal people living in Victoria who may belong or identify with one or more

communities. For example, they may identify with their ancestral lands and country where their family is from, which may not be where they now live or work. Aboriginal people may also be part of the local Aboriginal community where they live or work. Community is about interrelatedness and belonging, and is central to Aboriginality.

## Aboriginal culture

For Aboriginal people, land, kinship system and spirituality are the foundations on which culture is built and grown. They share deep spiritual connection with the land, and relationships are not only with other family and people, but also with all aspects of the environment.

Elders are held in the highest regard by the Aboriginal community. In Victoria, Elders can be people who have lived in an area for a long time and are respected community members, or traditional Elders who are

descendants of the area and active in community issues. When addressing an Elder, it is important to acknowledge their status as aunty or uncle.

Elders have a significant role in the community to teach, guide and hand down cultural information and traditional knowledge. Every Aboriginal child or young person should be made aware of their Elders and have opportunities to meet and spend time with them.

*The information contained in this factsheet is based primarily on information from the Manual for Kinship Carers, published by the former Department of Human Services (now Department of Families, Fairness & Housing) in 2017.*

In learning about culture, it is important that you are aware diversity exists among Aboriginal and Torres Strait people across Australia. If you do not already know, it is important for you to learn about the Aboriginal child or young person in your care, including asking:

- Where are they from and who is their mob?
- How much do they know about their culture, traditions and practices?

- What are their connections to their family, Elders and community?
- What are their interests and involvement in community events and activities?

This will help you to understand the child or young person, and support them in connection to their community, the local Aboriginal community and their culture.

## Torres Strait Islander culture

Torres Strait Islander people and culture have many significant differences to Aboriginal culture and people, including child-rearing practices. However both share the same disadvantages regarding health, education, welfare and economic outcomes, due to the ongoing negative impact colonisation practices have had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

The islands of the Torres Strait are located between mainland Queensland's Cape York Peninsula and Papua

New Guinea, and are the traditional lands of Torres Strait Islander people. Torres Strait Islander language and culture differ from island to island, although there are shared cultural characteristics across the Torres Strait.

When caring for Torres Strait Islander children and young people, it is important you are aware of these differences and seek to either obtain or maintain their cultural connections to Torres Strait Islander communities, both in the Torres Strait and mainland Australia.

## Historical context

Colonisation and past government policies have impacted on Aboriginal people, with the forcible removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, the forcible removal of children from their families and penalties imposed on Aboriginal people practising culture. This has denied many Aboriginal people their culture and had significant impacts on life outcomes.

Many Aboriginal people have lost their traditional lands, aspects of culture, language, connections to community and family. These losses are not just historical events, but are experienced by Aboriginal children, young people, their families and the Aboriginal community, as current losses that still require mourning.

## Trauma

For Aboriginal families and children, the losses that Aboriginal people have experienced have had a profound impact on their social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. They continue to be passed down to the next generation through what is known as 'transgenerational' trauma.

Aboriginal children and young people in care will also have experienced trauma that has resulted in them coming to live with you.

## Aboriginal child placement principle

The Aboriginal child placement principle is in place to make sure that Aboriginal people are consulted on all decisions regarding Aboriginal children and young people involved with child protection, so that there is cultural consideration on all decisions, and there is not a repeat of past government policies that resulted in the Stolen Generation.

This principle aims to ensure that Aboriginal children are connected and placed within the Aboriginal community where possible. Where children are removed, the principle requires child protection to try to reunite the Aboriginal children with their family, where it is in their best interests and safe to do so.

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle governs the practice of child protection workers when placing an Aboriginal child or young person in out-of-home care, and specifies the order of priority in which types of placement are to be considered.

This hierarchy includes that:

1. the child or young person must be placed within the extended family or with relatives
2. if the above is not possible and after consultation with the relevant Aboriginal agency, the child or young person may be placed with:
  - a. an Aboriginal family from the local community and within close geographic proximity to the natural family
  - b. an Aboriginal family from another Aboriginal community
  - c. as a last resort, a non-Aboriginal placement family living in close proximity to the natural family.

## Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency delivers the Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service in all locations, except Mildura, where it is provided by the Mallee District Aboriginal Service. The service

provides culturally appropriate advice and consultation for all significant decisions about a child or young person involved with child protection.

## Aboriginal cultural identity

A child or young person's cultural identity is a critical feature of who they are. Children and young people who are strong in their culture, and see that their culture is valued by others, are more likely to develop a positive self-image. Denying them access to their culture is harmful, because it strikes at their sense of identity.

For Aboriginal children and young people, displaying respect for their Aboriginal culture and identity is critical to their comfort and pride in themselves, and their environment. You can promote the rich diversity and strength of Aboriginal culture to all those who seek to do their best for Aboriginal children and young people.

## Cultural plans

Non-Aboriginal carers, child protection workers and agency case workers caring for an Aboriginal child or young person have an active role in making sure they do not lose connection with their family, community and culture.

When an Aboriginal child or young person is placed in out-of-home care, a cultural plan must be developed and linked to their case plan. It is the responsibility of child

protection or the authorised Aboriginal agency to ensure the plan is developed. You and the agency case manager (if involved) will be included in the development of a cultural plan.

You have an important role in implementing the cultural plan to support the child or young person to maintain their connections to community and culture every day.

## Cultural safety

An Aboriginal child or young person should feel culturally safe. This means that they should view their Aboriginality positively and see that others are positive about their culture at school, in the community and in their interactions with other services.

If you are a non-Aboriginal family member, you can make your home a place of cultural safety by acknowledging

and respecting the child's culture, as well as including objects in the home that Aboriginal people place spiritual and cultural value on. Participating in cultural awareness training will assist you in providing a culturally safe environment for the Aboriginal child or young person in your care.

## Aboriginal kinship system

The Aboriginal kinship system continues to be a cultural strength for families and communities. This system creates a network of people who have a responsibility for the care and day-to-day needs of children and young people.

From a young age, Aboriginal children learn about their kinship relationships, and are introduced to a broad network of family and community members. They are taught who they are, their significance within the kinship group, and their responsibility and relationship with each person. As they grow they are identified through this system within their own mob or community, and in other communities.

These learnings and experiences are essential in raising children and young people to have a strong Aboriginal identity, wellbeing and sense of purpose.

Where possible, you will need to support the child or young person to maintain contact and develop links with their kinship network, and ensure they have contact with their family and community, so that they remain and are recognised by others as part of this network. As a family member, you are in an ideal position to ensure this happens.

## Aboriginal child-rearing practices

Aboriginal child-rearing practices can differ significantly to your practices if you are not Aboriginal. In Aboriginal child rearing, the whole Aboriginal community contributes to raising a child or young person, giving mutual assistance and support to the parents.

Child-rearing practices can also differ in other ways. For instance, Aboriginal people allow children and young people to play with less adult involvement, and discipline is commonly taught through humour, teasing and surprised responses.

If you are not already familiar, it is important to understand Aboriginal child-rearing practices, to better understand the child or young person's behaviour and responses to practices in your home. You can access resources through the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), and talk to your agency or local ACCO about getting support from the Aboriginal community.

## Aboriginal language

There has been a significant loss of Aboriginal language through past government assimilation policies. Koorie English has been evolving, particularly in Victoria. Aboriginal English is the first language or home language of many Aboriginal children throughout Australia. This is

often mistaken by non-Aboriginal people as bad English. For Aboriginal people, using Koorie English or Aboriginal English is a statement of identity. It is important that you do not correct or prevent children from using this language.

## Cultural lens

The term 'cultural lens' is used to describe how we understand behaviour and values, by moving beyond our own cultural approaches. It is about seeking explanations for behaviours that may not make sense to you, but are cultural practices. For example, some Aboriginal children and young people will find it unsettling to have a room of their own.

If you are not Aboriginal, you need to remember that your culture is different. Make sure you understand and don't misinterpret behaviour due to your lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture. Help is available through the case manager and, where possible, the Aboriginal family can be engaged to provide cultural advice.

## Current issues facing Aboriginal people

The effects of colonisation, dispossession from land, forced removal of Aboriginal children and young people, past government policies and racism have led to significant disadvantage in the Aboriginal community. The issues facing the Aboriginal community include high rates of unemployment, poorer health and higher levels of disability, earlier deaths, family violence and substance misuse.

Aboriginal children and young people are at significant disadvantage when compared to non-Aboriginal children in regards to:

- low birth rate
- higher rates of hospitalisation
- lower immunisation rates
- lower rates of attendance at preschool

- lower educational achievement
- higher rates of middle ear infection
- higher rates of involvement with juvenile justice
- higher rates of involvement with child protection and out-of-home care.

However, most Aboriginal children and young people remain at home with their families, and are thriving and achieving positive life outcomes within loving, supportive, and well-resourced families and communities.

## Importance of using Aboriginal services

Aboriginal people feel culturally safe using Aboriginal services. These services are provided by Aboriginal organisations that understand the Aboriginal culture, and the issues facing Aboriginal people, so they are able to provide holistic services. Where possible, it is beneficial to the child or young person to utilise these services. Most of these services are free.

It is also important to acknowledge that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may also choose not to access Aboriginal-specific services. In this case mainstream services are available.

## Confirmation of Aboriginality

Some Aboriginal services may ask for a letter confirming a person's Aboriginality to access their services. If a child or young person in your care cannot access a service without a confirmation of Aboriginality letter, contact your agency case worker, as there are processes in place with ACCOs to apply for one.

A letter of confirmation of Aboriginality acknowledges that an ACCO has confirmed there is evidence that a person:

- is of Aboriginal descent
- identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- is accepted as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.

If a child or young person does not have this letter, it does not mean they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

## Recognising cultural abuse

Cultural abuse refers to any actions or attitudes that ignore, denigrate or intentionally attack the culture of a person or community. It is important that you are able to recognise cultural abuse of a child or young person in your

care, and take action to address the behaviour. It is also important that you seek advice and support from child protection or the agency on the best way to deal with the issues that are occurring.

## Dealing with bullying and racism

As a carer of an Aboriginal child or young person, you may need to deal with the consequences of them being a victim of racism at school, among friends, in the community, or even in your home or neighbourhood.

It is important to develop strategies to deal with racism and bullying before it arises, or before it escalates.

Some things you can do to support the child or young person is to:

- not ignore racism and bullying against them
- ensure that they understand there are laws that make it illegal to discriminate against an individual or group based on their cultural background
- tell them that unjust attitudes or actions are not deserved or acceptable
- be a role model for them on how to advocate on behalf of themselves
- teach them to be respectful while being verbally assertive and confident in their body language and response to racism and bullying

## Supporting and maintaining cultural connection

Sometimes, Aboriginal children and young people are disconnected from their community and culture. They are often at particular disadvantage, because they do not have the opportunity to experience the strength and richness of Aboriginal culture. They may have been exposed to only negative images and ideas of Aboriginal people, or simply do not know about their community and culture. Families exposed to the processes of past

government policies can impact on knowledge of cultural and spiritual identity. Consequently, Aboriginal children or young people may have low self-esteem and a poor sense of their identity. It is critical for these children and young people to develop a positive attitude to their Aboriginal culture and community. Seeking support from child protection or the agency, and local Aboriginal services will be helpful.

## Participating in cultural events and activities

Attending cultural events and activities supports children and young people to feel a sense of belonging to their community, enables them to see strong members of their Aboriginal community and spend time with Elders and other Aboriginal people, and helps in the development of a strong cultural identity.

There may be times when kinship carers, children and young people may need to attend funerals, as a result of a significant or extended family member passing away. For some communities, there may be specific cultural protocols to assist with grieving and the healing process. Deaths in the Koorie community can occur frequently, so it is important for kinship carers, children and young people to be aware of this and be adequately supported.

When you attend these events with the child or young person, you show them you respect and value Aboriginal cultural identity. If you are not Aboriginal, it provides an opportunity for you to learn more about Aboriginal culture, and what it means for the child or young person and their community.

There are a number of cultural activities that you can attend with the child or young person, or to support them to attend, which may include:

Aboriginal playgroups, childcare centres or kindergartens

- homework clubs, youth groups and afterschool groups at your local Aboriginal service
- cultural centres and museums like Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum or Koorie Heritage Trust
- family reunions or camps
- Aboriginal sports carnivals or sporting groups
- community cultural ceremonies.

There are many significant dates and cultural events throughout the year that are important for Aboriginal people to come together to grieve what has been lost, and impacts of past government policies, but also to celebrate history, culture, achievements, and the resilience and strength of Aboriginal people.

It is important for you to know the dates of these events and see that the child or young person in your care attends local events with you, their family and community. Local Aboriginal services will be able to provide information about local events occurring.

## Significant cultural events and dates

Sorry Day is 26 May each year.

Reconciliation Week is 27 May to 3 June each year.

National Aborigines and Islanders Day of Commemoration (NAIDOC) week is in July each year.

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day is on 4 August each year.

## Useful resources

Aboriginal associations and organisation contact details in the yellow pages <https://www.yellowpages.com.au/vic/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-associations-organisations-40592-category-a1.html>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies <https://aiatsis.gov.au/>

Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care (VACCA) <https://www.vacca.org/>

Commission for Children and Young People – provide a range of articles and links on their website <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/>

Growing up our way: child rearing practice matrix at SNAICC <https://www.snaicc.org.au/>

What is Sorry Business? <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/death-and-sorry-business>

Information about child protection laws in Victoria for Koorie families – call 1800 105 303 or visit Djirra <https://djirra.org.au/>

Koorie Heritage Trust <https://korieheritagetrust.com.au/>

Koorie Youth Council – for young Aboriginal people aged 12–25 years of age <https://www.korieyouthcouncil.org.au/>

Magabala Books – have a great range of books, including many for children and young people <https://www.magabala.com/>

News – subscriptions are available for

- *National Indigenous Times* <https://nit.com.au/>
- *Koori Mail* <https://koorimail.com/>
- *Deadly Vibe Magazine* <https://www.deadlyvibe.com.au/>

Reconciliation Australia <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) – the national body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services, and provides training and resources for carers of Aboriginal children, including resources about Aboriginal child rearing practices.

Call (03) 9489 8099 or visit <https://www.snaicc.org.au/>

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) – this agency provides training, cultural and parenting information, support for carers, groups and resources. Call (03) 9287 8800 or visit <https://www.vacca.org/>

Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance <https://www.vaccho.org.au/>