

# Working with Aboriginal Families: A Practice Resource

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

This fact sheet provides an overview of 'Working with Aboriginal Families: A Practice Resource'. It is an expectation that all staff recognise their own responsibility in developing their cultural competency journey by familiarising themselves with the full version of the resource, which contains the detail to the contents below.

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

## Overview

- > Best practice for positive and effective engagement with Aboriginal families is for first connections with the service to be made by Aboriginal staff.
- > The intention of the resource is to provide learnings for non-Aboriginal staff in partnership with Aboriginal staff.
- > **Developing cultural competence is a life-long journey.**

## Historical Background

- > Past government legislation and practices enforced on Aboriginal people must be acknowledged as having contributed to Aboriginal people being one of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Australia.
- > **The damage and trauma of past laws and policies are still felt by Aboriginal people today.**
- > Historically the words 'protection' and 'intervention' have negative meanings for Aboriginal people, and understandable mistrust of people who offer services based on these concepts.
- > **'Stolen Generation' refers to those children who were forcibly removed from their families on the basis of their race alone.**
- > History was made when a formal apology for the Stolen Generation was made on the 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008 by the Prime Minister to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on behalf of current and successive Commonwealth Government/s.
- > **It is important to understand the background of the Apology to understand why it's a historic step towards reconciliation.**



## Terminology

- > **An 'Acknowledgement of Country' can be conducted by any person, as a way of showing respect and awareness to the traditional custodians of the land on which you meet.**
- > A 'Welcome to Country' can only be conducted by an Aboriginal traditional custodian of the land on which the meeting is taking place.
- > **Be respectful through understanding and using acceptable terminology when using words to identify Aboriginal people.**
- > Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are opposed to the term 'Indigenous' being used as it generalises both cultures. Where possible it is preferred the term is not used.
- > **WCHN mainly use the term Aboriginal, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of South Australia.**

## Diversity

- > **Aboriginal people and communities are extremely diverse and complex culturally and linguistically.**
- > Not 'one size fits all'. There is no universal Aboriginal language.
- > Before colonisation there were up to 300 Aboriginal nations throughout the country, speaking around 250 languages with up to 600 dialects.
- > Past oppressive policies prohibited Aboriginal people from using their language.
- > Aboriginal people may refer to each other by their language group name or nation name.
- > **The best action and sign of respect when learning names is to confirm at an individual level how they would like to be referred to.**
- > Spending time getting to know the community you are working in is important.
- > **Develop your awareness and engage with Aboriginal people in a more knowledgeable and sensitive way by exploring Aboriginal history and culture of the local community.**
- > Ask the local Aboriginal Worker or contact the Senior Aboriginal Cultural Lead for cultural advice.

## Social Determinants of Health

- > Aboriginal people are generally at a disadvantage when it comes to the social determinants of health compared with non-Aboriginal people.
- > **Aboriginal people continue to experience poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy than non-Aboriginal people.**
- > Aboriginal people may face barriers in accessing health services related to availability, affordability, acceptability and appropriateness.
- > **Aboriginal infants face large disparities in terms of health and wellbeing in comparison to non-Aboriginal infants**
- > SA Health Pregnancy Outcome reports in 2014:
  - Perinatal mortality rate for birth to Aboriginal women was 12.5 per 1,000 births (8.7 per 1,000 to non-Aboriginal women).



- Preterm births of babies for Aboriginal women were 17.9% and low birthweight babies were 14.8% (8.9% and 6.3% respectively for non-Aboriginal women).
- > During pregnancy, Aboriginal women can be faced with high rates of social health issues as well as other contributing factors which impact on the outcome of their children.
- > Over-representation of Aboriginal people in all areas of disadvantage is prevalent in society, including in child protection and out-of-home care services compared to non-Aboriginal children.
- > In 2015, figures revealed 35% of Aboriginal children are removed by child protection authorities and are 9.5 times more likely to be removed by child protection authorities than non-Aboriginal children.
- > Cultural separation from land, language, or knowledge, whether historical or ongoing compounds into grief and loss for Aboriginal people.
- > The legacy of unresolved grief from the 'unfinished business' of the Stolen Generation may have been passed on through the generations of a family, known as intergenerational grief.
- > **The experience of racism, prejudice and discrimination is still an issue today and continues the cycle of trauma.**

#### Parenting and Family

- > Aboriginal people place great value on belonging and family.
- > The strengths of Aboriginal cultural traditions in family life and raising children revolve around four interrelated themes: collective community focus, freedom to explore, elderly family members and spirituality.
- > **Recognise and focus on the importance of culture in parenting and the source of strength this provides to families.**
- > Dads requiring parenting support should be referred to a male Aboriginal Worker to provide a culturally appropriate service (this may need to be to an outside agency).
- > Raising children may involve all family members including fathers, grandparents, great-grandparents, uncles, aunties and anyone in the extended family group who has an interest in child rearing.
- > **Grandparents are an important link to culture and belonging.**

#### Family and Community

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

#### Aboriginal business

- > **Respect cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business.**
- > Remember it is sometimes more preferable for men to speak to men and women to



women, especially in circumstances where you are not known by the person or community.

- > There is knowledge which is not open to the public – this is referred to as secret/sacred business and often relates to ceremonial rites and passages.
- > Respect the community needs during Sorry Business (customs relating to death or funeral) by not requesting meetings for a period of time, as determined by the community or advised by Aboriginal workers.

### Communication and engagement

- > Aboriginal workers are the preferred lead communicator for Aboriginal families. Showing support and trust in their lead will be observed and demonstrates our respect to the families we engage with.
- > **Don't underestimate the value of visuals. Having appropriate images depicting real life Aboriginal families and connections are important for families and children to feel there is something they can connect with at the service.**
- > Think about the language used (written, verbal and non-verbal) when communicating with Aboriginal people remembering English may not be their first language.
- > **Listening to their stories and sharing your own, creates opportunity for building respectful and meaningful connections.**
- > Use indirect questioning techniques and repeat back what the person has said to ensure clarity.
- > Respect the use of silence and don't mistake it for misunderstanding a topic or issue.
- > **Actions speak louder than words. Be mindful of body language.**
- > Sensitively offer assistance with reading and writing if it is required or you think it may be required.
- > **Consider access to service by showing flexibility to families in regards to visiting and making appointments.**
- > For more information on communication refer to the following Queensland Health fact sheet:  
[https://www.health.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/151923/communicating.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/151923/communicating.pdf)

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### For more information

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