

Promoting the Safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

A person who is descended from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person; and is accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.

Source: Adapted from *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic)

Historical racial and social factors such as poverty, marginalisation, racism and intergenerational trauma continue to detrimentally influence the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to experience a level of disadvantage far greater than that of the general population.

Research and inquiries have consistently pointed to a clear link between the impacts of past legislation, policies and practices, ongoing experiences of dispossession and marginalisation, and the full range of social and economic problems that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today

Telethon Kids Institute 2017, p. 24

In family contexts, the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities exerts pressure on family relationships and contributes to child abuse and family violence, resulting in the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the statutory child protection system.

[Indigenous children are] 8 times as likely to be the subject of substantiated child abuse or neglect.
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, p. v

In an organisational or community context, these factors may result in children and young people experiencing discrimination, exclusion and isolation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people may be targeted for abuse and other forms of maltreatment as a result of their marginalisation. The mistrust and fear of authority common in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities also means that children and young people experience additional barriers to reporting abuse to the authorities such as police or child protection services.

In addressing the vulnerability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, Victoria has appointed a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People to work alongside the Commissioner for Children and Young People to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, and connect them, their families and carers to quality and inclusive services that support them.

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Phillip Reed, CEO of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, stated: ‘When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are separated from culture, they are more likely to be separated from the protective factors that support high self-esteem, secure attachments and a strong and positive social network’ (Blanco 2017).

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, art 30

Archdiocesan parishes, agencies and entities who foster and support cultural connection, play a role in promoting the safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Cultural safety

An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, who they are or what they need.

Cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Providing cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people is recognised as a protective factor in protecting children and young people from abuse.

Strong cultural identity, connections to family and community, and cultural care practices are non-negotiable factors in keeping our children safe.

Sharron Williams, SNAICC Chairperson (quoted in SNAICC 2017)

In an organisational context, cultural safety is defined by the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and local communities can be a useful starting point in supporting cultural identity and building cultural safety within a parish, agency or entity context.

Practical strategies to help archdiocesan parishes, agencies and entities to create cultural safety include the following (VACCA 2010, p. 17; CCYP n.d.):

SNAICC offer the following definition of cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: ... cultural safety encompasses the child being provided with a safe, nurturing and positive environment where they are comfortable with being themselves, expressing their culture ... their spiritual and belief systems, and they are supported by the carer and family.

Australian Human Rights Commission 2018, p.

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- Acknowledgement that Aboriginal people are the First Peoples who have an ongoing connection to this country beyond 60,000 years (possibly 80,000 years).
- Sharing cultural safety information with clergy, employees and volunteers (e.g. through training, induction).
- Reflecting on the key messages and practices within your organisation in relation to promoting cultural safety (e.g. what would it look like, feel like and sound like to be culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people?)
- Incorporate cultural safety into your organisation's policy, procedures and meeting agenda.
- Communicating in a culturally sensitive, relevant and accessible manner.
- Seeking input from families about how to communicate child safety information in a culturally appropriate way.
- Respecting Aboriginal culture by creating a physical environment that is respectful of culture (e.g. selecting representational symbols, objects and images in consultation with Aboriginal families, children and young people).
- Observation of key events that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture e.g. NAIDOC week.
- Learning or staying current with the negative impacts of past government policies and practices (e.g. Stolen Generations).
- Encouraging and creating opportunities for families, young people and children to express their Aboriginal cultural identity without fear of retribution or discrimination.
- Consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and listening to "their voice" when undertaking organisational planning and decision-making activities.
- Communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to find out how best to be inclusive and respectful of cultural needs.
- Supporting education that strengthens culture and identity.
- Promoting the connection to land and country and learning about cultural heritage from elders.
- Strengthening kinship ties and supporting observance of social obligations.

In summary, respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and promoting cultural safety are the foundations upon which child safety grows.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria (a website about upcoming events, projects, books and resources).

www.cam.org.au/acmv

Deadly questions (established by the Department of Premier and Cabinet to assist non-Aboriginal people to learn more about Aboriginal culture by asking questions which are answered by Aboriginal Victorians)

<https://deadlyquestions.vic.gov.au/>

Department of Planning and Community Development 2011, Victorian Government Aboriginal Inclusion Framework.

www.vic.gov.au/system/user_files/Documents/av/Aboriginal-Inclusion-Framework-2011.pdf

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Professional Standards Unit
psu@cam.org.au

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