Cultural safety for Aboriginal children

Artwork by Eileen Harrison – Coming Home (Acrylic on canvas, 2014)

"Keeping our children and youth connected to their communities and strong in their identity and culture is essential to their wellbeing and the cornerstone of resilience."[1]

Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

It is the right of every Aboriginal child to be immersed in their culture. The right to culture which includes the inherent right to kin, community, cultural practices and identity relates to and impacts upon the enjoyment of every other human right. It is about connections, relationships and experiences and it is the greatest source of resilience for Aboriginal children. Section 19 of the Charter of Human Rights states that Aboriginal people hold distinct rights and must not be denied the right to enjoy their identity and culture, to maintain their kinship ties and to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters with which they have connection under traditional laws and customs.[2]

For Aboriginal people "culture is about family networks, Elders and ancestors. It's about relationships, languages, dance, ceremony and heritage. Culture is about spiritual connection to our lands and waters. It is the way we pass on stories and knowledge to our babies and children; it is how we greet each other and look for connection. It is about all the parts that bind us together." [3] (Jackomos 2015)

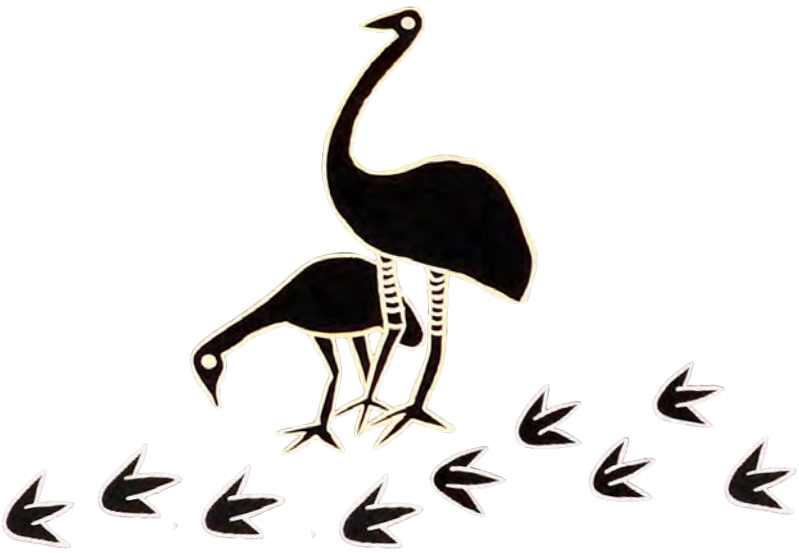
What is cultural safety?

Cultural safety is "an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening." [4] (Williams, R. 2008)

For Aboriginal people "cultural safety and security requires the creation of:

- Environments of cultural resilience within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Cultural competency by those who engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities." [5] (AHRC Social Justice Report 2011)

Every Aboriginal person, every Aboriginal child, needs to feel that their sense of self and their identity is "valued in some way by the people and environments that surround them." [6] (VACCA 2010)



1 Commission for Children and Young People, Annual Report 2013-14, September 2014

2 Section 19, *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* (Vic) 2006

3 Commission for Children and Young People *Annual Report 2014-15*, October 2015

4 Williams, R. (2008), *Cultural safety; what does it mean for our work practice?* Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23(2):213-214

5 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner *Social Justice Report 2011*

6 Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), (2010), *This is Forever Business – a framework for maintaining and restoring cultural safety in Aboriginal Victoria*

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How can our organisation create a culturally safe environment?

Talk with Aboriginal people

Creating a culturally safe environment is about relationships and actively creating opportunity for Aboriginal voice and presence in an organisation's planning, policies and activities. Consult with local Aboriginal people, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and local organisations with Reconciliation Action Plans or Aboriginal Inclusive policies for guidance on how your organisation can become culturally safe. Cultural safety is about how your organisation is experienced by Aboriginal people and in particular by Aboriginal children.

Find out who the Traditional Owner groups or Registered Aboriginal Party is in your area

There are approximately 47,000 Aboriginal people currently living in Victoria, representing 0.9 per cent of the total population with government projections expecting this number to rise to over 80,000 people by 2021. The Victorian Aboriginal population is young and growing, with more than half being under the age of 25 years, and 36 per cent being children aged 0-14 (ABS 2012). No matter where you live in Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be living in your community, with a Traditional Owner Group known within your region. There are a number of websites that contain information about local and regional Aboriginal populations and Traditional Owners. Please visit: <http://www.mav.asn.au/policy-services/social-community/indigenous/Pages/default.aspx> <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/registered-aboriginal-parties)>

Recognising the impact of the past

Child safe standards in your organisation must address the continuing negative impacts of past Government policies and practices on Aboriginal peoples. This can be achieved by acknowledging that Aboriginal people are the First Peoples who have an ongoing connection to this country beyond 40,000 years. Also encouraged is knowledge of key events, like observance of the National Government Apology to Australia's Indigenous People for the forced removal of Aboriginal children (Sorry Day), and NAIDOC Week which celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures each July. Also important is knowledge of pivotal reports like the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC, 1987–1991) and the Closing the Gap National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

Respect and embrace Aboriginal culture in every aspect of your organisation

Respect of Aboriginal cultures, values and practices is at the heart of creating a culturally safe organisation. Every organisation should create a physical environment that is respectful of Aboriginal culture as a first step.

To create a sense of identity and belonging select culturally appropriate symbols, images and objects in consultation with the families of Aboriginal children involved in your organisation. Aboriginal peoples are diverse and the cultural significance of items will vary throughout the State. There are over 30 language areas in Victoria.[7] (Clarke 1996)

One thing you may do is purchase or create a plaque or poster acknowledging the Traditional Owners where your organisation is physically located. Below is an example from AnTAR.<https://antar.org.au/>

7 Clarke, Ian (1996) *Aboriginal Language areas in Victoria - A reconstruction*

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A significant amount of work has been done through Reconciliation Victoria with local Councils that will provide guidance to you and also information about Reconciliation Week and other significant events and celebrations. <http://www.reconciliationvic.org.au/>

Finding out more

The process of finding out more by reading, talking with people and visiting places builds your organisation's capacity to be a culturally safe organisation. Knowing what questions to ask is a good way to start conversations with your board, volunteers, membership and staff. The Victorian Government developed the Aboriginal Inclusion Framework to assist with this, posing questions that relate to Leadership, Policy, Programs, and Communications. The Framework is available on the Aboriginal Affairs' website <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/aboriginal-affairs-policy/aboriginal-inclusion>