Cultural safety for Aboriginal children

"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."
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.  

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." (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." (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.  
  (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." (VACCA 2010)
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.nyasna.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/>

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7 Clarke, Ian (1996) Aboriginal Language areas in Victoria - A reconstruction
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>
Safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Victoria is a culturally diverse community made up of many different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, language and religious groups.

In Victoria, mandatory child safe standards have been introduced to help protect children from abuse in organisations. In complying with the standards, organisations must promote the cultural safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Like other aspects of child safety, creating and maintaining an organisation in which the cultural safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is kept safe requires effort.

Steps to ensure cultural safety include sharing knowledge, raising awareness, developing understanding that leads to cultural sensitivity and finally, cultural competence. This ongoing and dynamic process leads to sustainable philosophies and values within an organisation that promotes cultural safety for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and benefits all children, families, staff and managers.

You can promote the cultural safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds by:

- ensuring your organisation clearly demonstrates a zero tolerance of discrimination
- ensuring your policy and procedures specifically address cultural inclusion, sensitivity and competency
- providing training and development on cultural sensitivity and competency
- being respectful, inclusive and welcoming of families from a range of backgrounds
- asking children and families about their culture and cultural support needs
- recognising occasions which are important to different cultures and dietary requirements
- ensuring the physical environment reflects a positive and welcoming approach to diverse cultures, through decoration and artwork
- employing staff that are representative of the diversity of your local community

Cultural competency is characterised by a set of behaviours, attitudes and skills, policies and procedures that help staff to work effectively and efficiently in a cross-cultural context at all levels within the organisation.

Multicultural Mental Health Australia

Organisations can demonstrate that they value diversity by accepting, respecting and welcoming the differences between and within cultures. Such an inclusive environment acknowledges differences between cultures, but does not value one over another.
Safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

- employing staff who display cultural sensitivity and cultural competency
- actively seeking out and talking to families about how they would like to be involved
- asking families about their preferred format for the provision of information, including translation or interpreting into community languages and audio-visual formats
- ensuring complaint and grievance processes are easily understood and provided in culturally relevant and sensitive ways.

**Discrimination**

Is treating, or proposing to treat, someone unfavourably because of a personal characteristic, such as gender, race, culture or religion, age or sexual orientation.

In Victoria, the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* protects people from discrimination and harassment in areas of public life such as workplaces, schools, clubs, shops or places that provide services.

**Racial, cultural and religious abuse**

Is conduct that demonstrates contempt, ridicule, hatred or negativity towards a child because of their race, culture or religion. It may be overt, such as direct racial vilification or discrimination, or covert, such as demonstrating a lack of cultural respect (attitude and values) and awareness (knowledge and understanding) or failing to provide positive images about another culture.

**Useful resources**


Centre for Multicultural Youth <http://www.cmynet.au/>

Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia <http://fecca.org.au/>


Safety of children with a disability

All children are vulnerable but some children need special care and protection to ensure they are safe — children with a disability have an increased risk of being abused.

It is unlawful to discriminate against children with a disability and like all children, children with a disability have the right to participate in decision-making that affects them.

In Victoria, mandatory child safe standards have been introduced to help protect children from abuse in organisations. In complying with the standards, organisations must promote the safety of children with a disability. It is your responsibility to uphold the legal and human rights of children with a disability to ensure they are safe when in your care.

Children with a disability are more vulnerable to harm and abuse such as harassment, bullying, humiliation, physical and sexual abuse. This can be due to:

- social isolation
- limited provision of developmentally appropriate sexual and relationship information
- low levels of expectation held about their capacity to identify and report concerns
- inaccessible pathway to raise issues, concerns and complaints
- communication difficulties
- personal care needs requiring the involvement of different people and various levels of supervision
- signs of abuse being viewed as being related to the child’s disability.

Each child is different and will experience their disability and the world differently — it is important not to stereotype or make assumptions. It can be hard for a child with a disability to make themselves heard or understood.

What you can do to help keep children with a disability safe in your organisation:

- Ensure your organisation has a child safe culture in which abuse and harm is not tolerated and diversity is welcomed.
- Pre-empt unsafe situations via your risk assessment processes.
- Ensure you have sound recruitment and screening processes in place for staff and volunteers.
- Ensure your code of conduct for staff and volunteers clearly outlines boundaries about staff and volunteer interaction with children with a disability, including personal care assistance.
- Have a robust complaint process, encourage feedback and be responsive if problems arise.
- Empower children with a disability by assisting them to build their self-esteem and confidence.

A child’s disability does not reduce their need for cultural respect and competency.
Safety of children with a disability

- Teach children about their bodies and their safety, including online activities (sex and relationships education).
- Enable and facilitate independence with dressing and toileting and personal care where possible.
- Communicate directly with children with a disability about how safe they feel.
- Be inclusive and collaborative with families.
- Raise awareness about abuse and ways to seek help. Make sure children with a disability know who they can go to if they feel unsafe or have a concern or complaint – make sure these processes take into account the child's developmental level and communication requirements.
- If children have communication difficulties, organisational procedure must ensure vigilance in identifying indicators or warning signs. Listen to children, no matter how they communicate their thoughts, views and concerns.

Useful resources

Davis Miller and Jon Brown, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), United Kingdom, 'We have the right to be safe' Protecting disabled children from abuse, October 2014

Government of South Australia, Department for Education and Child Development, Families SA, Protecting children and young people with disability: a booklet for parents and carers, August 2012

State of South Australia, Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities. A guide to protecting children and young people with disability and preventing sexual abuse: For parents and carers, 2012


'Three students experienced abuse, they said the most helpful thing was being believed and having action taken to resolve the situation.'