

# Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is when the effects of trauma experienced by one generation, such as systemic racism, institutional abuse, war, genocide, slavery and forced removal of children, are passed on to the next. Intergenerational trauma may be ‘passed on through parenting, behavioural problems, violence, harmful substance use and mental health issues’ (Australian Together, 2019).

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“When you think about the fact that most Indigenous families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children, that speaks volumes about the Trauma we’re all carrying”

- Dodson, (2019)

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## What does Intergenerational Trauma look like?

De Gruy (2019) states that a child or adult who experiences intergenerational trauma takes on adaptive and survival behaviours from the previous generation. For example, in the following story, it appears Vicky learnt adaptive behaviours including ‘numbing’ - a biological process where emotions are detached from thoughts, behaviours and memories. In Vicky’s story, numbing is evidenced by her limited range of emotional responses to her children. Vicky’s survival techniques include closing off connections with anyone that appears to be a threat to having her children remain in her care, self-medicating and learning to hide her addiction.

### **Vicky’s story: example**

Vicky is a stay-at-home mum with two young children. Vicky is Aboriginal and was removed from her family as a 2-year-old due to one parent being violent and alcohol dependent. Both Vicky’s parents were removed at young ages from their parents, as was her maternal grandmother.

Vicky is dependent on prescription medication due to a chronic disease. Vicky feels isolated. She is unable to work and socialise. Vicky’s addiction to the prescription medication is getting worse but she has managed to hide it so far. A health nurse who visits the home fortnightly, notices how Vicky’s children console each other when one of the children falls over and Vicky just looks up and continues her conversation with the nurse.

The nurse has noted before how distant the relationship between Vicky and her children seems. When the nurse attempts to discuss her concerns with Vicky, Vicky is afraid to talk as she fears her children will be removed, as she was. Vicky loves her children but doesn’t know

how to bond with them. Therefore, Vicky cancels the next appointment with the nurse and does not return any phone calls from the agency.

Intergenerational trauma may be impacting on Vicky's emotional connection with her children. This may mean her children will find it harder to manage their connections and stress throughout life (Blue Knot Foundation). Working to help a child and their parent heal from trauma will help break the cycle of trauma and its cumulative damaging effects on the generations that follow.

## Healing through recognising strength and resilience

When working with intergenerational trauma, it's essential you help families realise their strength, resourcefulness and resilience. For example, help a child notice what they did to keep themselves and their siblings safe when their father was hitting their mother. Notice and build on the times parents and carers have been able to protect their children and keep them safe. In Vicky's example, this might be an interaction between Vicky and one of her children where she noticed what the child was feeling and responded appropriately. Build on these individual as well as collective strengths such as culture, kin and connections. These influences could help a child and their family start the process of healing.

Watch - Learn more from Pediatrician Nadine Burke Harris as she explains in this powerful ['How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime'](#) - 16-minute TEDtalk.

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The experts say:

I am not defined by my scars, but by the incredible ability to heal.

Lemn Sissay, (2016)

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## Intergenerational Trauma Impact on Aboriginal Families

For generations, Aboriginal children, families and communities have experienced life-altering trauma as a result of colonisation, institutional abuse, systemic and interpersonal racism, discrimination, loss of culture and land and the forced removal of children. Aboriginal people continue to suffer racism and discrimination and as a result experience widespread socioeconomic disadvantage in Australian society. Today, Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families and communities and remain in care at a much higher rate than non-Aboriginal children.

In the child protection sector and within the Permanency Support Program (PSP), it is the responsibility of everyone to play a role to support healing. You need to be aware of the experiences of Aboriginal people, the trauma that has resulted and how this may influence parenting practices and the ability to love, grow and learn. With support and connection to culture, Aboriginal children and families can begin to heal.

Cultural safety is a foundation for working with and walking alongside Aboriginal children and families. It is your responsibility to consistently work to support children's identity and connections. Valuing culture and what a child and family bring is the key to healing and positive outcomes.

Some ways you can improve your cultural practice and help Aboriginal communities to heal are:

- commit to finding family and connecting children to their family network
- understand that connection to family, community and culture is a safety net for Aboriginal children
- truly listen to and value the input of Aboriginal people
- acknowledge the trauma Aboriginal people have survived and the role child protection has played in this
- undertake cultural awareness training
- consult with Aboriginal colleagues and organisations
- practice empathy and respect and strive to uphold human rights
- explore the strengths of Aboriginal children, families and communities
- commit to ongoing learning about Aboriginal history and knowledge, and the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people.
- consider how privileged you are. Does this influence the way you relate to the families you work with?

For more information on intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal communities, see [Trauma in Aboriginal Communities](#).

Think about some of the words you come across in your practice such as 'intergenerational grief' or 'intergenerational trauma'. This language suggests that Aboriginal people are impacted by something that happened in the past and implies that it is an issue for them to overcome. This hides who is really responsible for the suffering of Aboriginal people and absolves society from doing anything about it. Some Aboriginal people refer to intergenerational trauma as “intergenerational oppression”.

## Intergenerational Trauma and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Some culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Australia have survived significant trauma and may also be experiencing intergenerational trauma. Most refugee and asylum-seeker communities have experienced some or many forms of trauma, resulting from torture, war, terrorism, persecution and human rights violations. Migrant communities may also have experienced trauma. Trauma through the migration journey is likely to be affected by the safety a person and their family experienced in their country of origin, their choice, consent and preparation in moving countries, the nature of their journey, how they have been recognised in their new country and their chances of returning home.

Children of survivors of the Holocaust have described the way a lack of trust in others is communicated continually to them by parents. Parents can also transfer feelings of meaningless and futility. On the other hand, values of integrity, commitment and ways to find the light amongst the darkness can also be transmitted (Foundation House).

Learn from children, their parents and specialist services about how intergenerational trauma might be affecting the children and families you're working with. Understand that concepts like intergenerational trauma and mental health might not be familiar or can even be stigmatizing for many communities. Sensitively explore past experiences and link them to specialised support where needed. You may learn a lot from watching this short video called "[What is Privilege?](#)"

For more information, see [Tips for Working with Culturally And Linguistically Diverse \(CALD\) Communities](#).

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**With your support and education, a child or adult may still be practicing the old but may be open to finding new ways of coping and healing - DCJ**

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## Support Healing from Intergenerational Trauma

- Support survivors to regain a sense of control over their daily lives.
- Understand intergenerational trauma and how it affects the family you work with.
- Listen to their story, find out what intergenerational trauma looks like for a child and their family.
- Help create environments where children feel physically and emotionally safe.



- Consider the generations before and what factors and ongoing societal patterns affect the whole family.
- Keep in mind that intergenerational trauma can have an impact on psychological, familial, social, cultural, neurobiological and potentially genetic factors.
- Be aware that Aboriginal and CALD clients often build trust by asking personal questions to establish a relationship and determine your credibility as a professional.
- Get regular supervision to respond well in all situations, especially when strong feelings arise. Regular supervision also helps you engage in supervision when strong feelings come up.
- Seek group supervision as a way of exploring multiple perspectives, expertise, practice opportunities, values, ethics and bias to provide the best service to families

For more information see [Impacts of Trauma](#), [Collective Trauma](#), [Group Reflective Practice](#), [Conversations with Children Families and Carers - Tips and Guidance](#).

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