

## Trauma in Aboriginal Communities

When a person experiences persistent fear, terror, and feelings of helplessness they can experience trauma (Perry, 2014). In some cases, trauma is passed down from the first generation of survivors who directly experienced or witnessed traumatic events to future generations. This is known as intergenerational trauma. It can be passed on through parenting practices, behavioural challenges, violence, harmful substance dependence and mental health and wellbeing struggles.

Aboriginal communities have their own understanding of trauma and healing practices. For many indigenous communities around the world, stories of survival are embedded in traditional narratives and trauma can be viewed as a living being which shrinks and grows. When Aboriginal children have limited connections to culture, they can miss out on learning their cultural history and cultural healing practices.

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‘We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be re-born.’

Writings of Miriam Rose Ungunmerr in *Educaring a trauma informed approach to healing generational trauma for Aboriginal Australians* by Judy Atkinson.

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Remember that recognising culture is not a one-way street. You also need to be aware of your own background, and how your culture and privilege have shaped your assumptions and expectations about parenting and the way families work together. When you talk to individuals and families from a different culture, be willing to share some information about yourself and be transparent (Walter, Taylor & Habibis, 2011).

Research and literature can provide a framework for your understanding of how trauma may impact a child or adult you are working with. But as the survivors of abuse and neglect, their own lived experience is another form of expertise you can draw on when trying to understand what they need. It is also a good idea to speak to an Aboriginal practitioner or community member to gain local cultural expertise.

See: [Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing, Growing up our Way – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Rearing Practices Matrix-SNAICC](#),

## Why and How Does Intergenerational Trauma affect Aboriginal People?

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Hearing the stories of Aboriginal families and communities is key to understanding the impact of intergenerational trauma. Watch and listen to the testimonies of Aboriginal people on the [Bringing Them Home](#) website.

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Poverty, lack of access to services or quality education, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination often go hand in hand with social rejection and stigma (Gibson, 2015). One of the most powerful examples for our work is the systematic racism that led to Aboriginal children being taken from their parents. This act, as well as the institutional abuse and prohibition of cultural practices that followed, led to suffering across generations. This oppression is not restricted to the past. Aboriginal people continue to experience racism today.

The ongoing impacts of living with racism and trauma include:

**Isolation of Aboriginal communities:** Members of a community may withdraw within the community for protection against racism. Traditional Aboriginal reservations are often in remote locations with less access to recreational, education and employment opportunities.

**Protection of community and culture:** This can act as a barrier to seeking help when violence occurs. The high incarceration rates and deaths of Aboriginal men in custody can make women want to protect the men from the danger of state abuse or their community from shame.

**Hesitation to use mainstream services:** Aboriginal Australians are often hesitant to use mainstream services- these can include health services, antenatal services, or school. This can be due to experiences of racism in the past and fears and concerns that their problems will be attributed to being Aboriginal or that they will be seen as incompetent parents. In Aboriginal communities it is not common to share personal information with strangers and trust needs to be built with a professional rather than expected. Help can often be sought too

late, and interventions offered are then more likely to be drastic which reinforces the legacy of trauma (Herring et al., 2012).

The numbers of Aboriginal children who come in contact with the child protection system is alarming. An independent review in 2019 titled Family is Culture found that in NSW, Aboriginal children are vastly over-represented in the out-of-home care (OOHC) and child protection system. It showed that Aboriginal children are known to the child protection system early, highlighting the need for early intervention and prevention.

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“Aboriginal culture has been subjected to the most profound shocks and changes. It is a history of brutality and bloodshed. The assault on Aboriginal people includes massacres, diseases, dispossession and dispersal from the land ... I cannot overstate the traumatic consequences of policy and the destruction of Aboriginal and community life that resulted”

Lowitja O’Donoghue (1993)

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## Aboriginal Identity and Culture, the ‘Building Blocks’ of Life

Identity, to an Aboriginal child, is more than what they look like. It is the building blocks of their life: their culture, their family, their connections, their beliefs, their kinship, the Dreamtime, and other spirituality. There is a reverence and respect for the land and oral traditions that are paramount in an Aboriginal child’s life. Removing any aspect of that identity can have irreversible ramifications that would be damaging to a child’s cultural safety, mental health, and wellbeing.

It is your role to support identity and culture for Aboriginal children. They need to know who they are, where they fit within their family and community, who they belong to and where they are going. Aboriginal identity provides safety for Aboriginal children.

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Our families are essential to our children's experience of, and connection with, their culture and thus their healing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people learn and experience our culture and spirituality through our families: whether through our knowledge, stories, and songs from parents, grandparents, Elders, and uncles and aunts, and through everyday lived experience of shared values, meaning, language, custom, behaviour and ceremonies.  
(SNAICC, 2012)

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There are some creative tools you can use to help children identify what is unique and special about themselves. These tools can be used as a way of getting input from children in the case planning process and will be a record that can be included as life story work. Take a look at the [Kids Say Cards: Talking and listening to kids](#) by Winangay. and Kids Central Tools and Resources for some examples.

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Kids should be asked about stuff that's got to do with them... they can tell you stuff you'd never think of – 'cos you're not a kid.'

– 6-year-old girl in OOHC.

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## What Can You Do?

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.
- how privileged do you think you are? Does this influence the way you relate to the families you work with?

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“Culture is fundamental to the lives of Aboriginal people. A vibrant culture and connection to community are significant factors in strengthening the resilience of Aboriginal children and young people. The identity of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is intrinsically connected to their family and their relationship with the land.”

SNAICC, 2010.

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