

Engaging with Aboriginal children and families

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Effective engagement between workers and families is a keystone of the Brighter Futures program. The engagement process, however, is rarely straightforward and for non-Aboriginal workers working together with Aboriginal children and families, it may be more complex.

Working with Aboriginal children and families is **always** about working with community; understanding community and keeping family work in context will help ground effective engagement.

This resource offers non-Aboriginal Brighter Futures workers some ideas and suggestions for reflective and respectful engagement. *Things to know* provides essential context around engaging with Aboriginal families and *Things to do* offers some practical suggestions for engagement.

Things to Know

"It is important not to dismiss these losses as simply belonging to the past but acknowledge how important these losses are for Aboriginal people today"

Australia's historical treatment of Aboriginal people has significantly undermined:

- development of cultural identity
- economic growth and stability
- flow of knowledge and understanding of child development, and
- culturally appropriate models of parenting.

As a consequence, many Aboriginal children and families are vulnerable and require support in raising their children.

Many Aboriginal children and families are reluctant to trust and deal with mainstream services, particularly child welfare agencies, because of the connection to the history of the Stolen Generations. Some of this reluctance can be around a fear that their parenting will be perceived as 'not good enough' and could incur a range of consequences, including the removal of their children.

Aboriginal parents want what all parents want for their children – success, happiness, safety and improvements in life. Aboriginal people have strengths and competencies that they and others lose sight of when problems and grief dominate their lives and their communities.

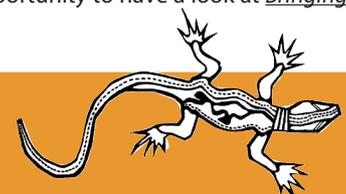
While there are many differences between Aboriginal people across Australia, there are also many similarities and continuities that bind people together and make them uniquely Aboriginal. Ngarritjan-Kessariss (1994).

Recognise the strengths and resilience within Aboriginal families. Despite high levels of adversity and illness, families and communities continue to support each other, take their obligations seriously, share their resources and show considerable tolerance, humour, patience and compassion. Aboriginal kinship structures continue as a significant attachment system which can have benefits for children's health and wellbeing throughout their development. Child rearing practices, family structure, roles and responsibilities all need to be viewed from this important cultural perspective.

2007 marks the 10th anniversary of the release of *Bringing them Home*, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report on the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families. Please use this opportunity to have a look at *Bringing them Home*.



NSW Department of
Community Services



Things to Do

An emphasis on self-determination for Aboriginal people requires the development of strategies ... to encourage and promote self-determination.
(INTERAGENCY GUIDELINES FOR CHILD PROTECTION INTERVENTION - UPDATED 2006, CHAPTER 6, PAGE 3)

➤ Understand that you do not fully understand.

You do have expertise of your own to offer but it's important to acknowledge that Indigenous families are the experts in what it means to be an Aboriginal family. No matter how sensitive and well informed you are, unless you are Aboriginal you cannot know the experience of being an Aboriginal-Australian. Be empathic without being over-familiar and take opportunities to learn from Indigenous children, families and communities.

➤ Network with Aboriginal workers and agencies.

Get advice and assistance from Indigenous colleagues and workers to inform your ongoing work with Aboriginal families – e.g. protocols in Aboriginal Communities. Ask family members if they want a support person, as some Aboriginal people feel more comfortable speaking about personal issues with a support person present.

➤ **Broaden your concept of family.** Aboriginal-Australians understand 'who is family' and 'what is family' differently to non-Aboriginal Australians and this influences decision-making around parenting. Decisions are often based on a consensus of extended family and kin (community) views rather than on the opinion of key individuals in the 'immediate' family group. This extended view of family and consultation needs to occur in your practice with Indigenous families.

➤ **Address issues the family has about your connection with DoCS.** Get any discomfort out of the way as soon as possible and be ready to revisit it along the way. For the reasons outlined, there are deep issues for Aboriginal people dealing with welfare agencies. Anger can, at times, be a normal response and there may be times when you need to deal with a clients' anger. This doesn't mean accepting abuse, but it does mean accepting and acknowledging anger.

➤ **Express genuine inquisitiveness.** Some non-Aboriginal workers say that asking *genuine* and *appropriate* but *non-intrusive* questions about family and culture can be useful as both a learning and relationship building strategy.

➤ Source and use culturally appropriate resources.

Wherever possible these should be locally based – e.g. Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy Books; NAPCAN booklets.

➤ **Be patient.** Many Aboriginal people understandably mistrust mainstream agencies and it takes respectfully persistent work over time to earn trust. In addition Indigenous people often spend considerable time on 'general talk' and interaction *as part of business*. Don't assume Aboriginal people have missed the point or don't understand; recognise this is a different – and legitimate – way of doing business. Brighter Futures workers who demonstrate a willingness to take time and genuinely listen may find their views are more respected if a conflict arises.

➤ **Respect and understand silence.** Silence may mean people are not ready to express an opinion yet, or they are listening and reflecting on what has been said. Respecting silence and not interrupting unnecessarily can be an important step in creating trustful relationships.

➤ **Always give something back.** For example, give time, or books or other useful or fun things, particularly for children: eg print off resources from the [Raising Children Network](#); order [NAPCAN tools and resources](#); print resources from the [DoCS parenting page](#); order resources from the [DoCS Resource Form](#).

➤ **Never make promises or even suggest outcomes that you cannot produce.** Instead, be very clear about the purpose of your involvement and your commitment to work *together* with the family to promote and achieve their goals using a strengths based approach.

➤ **People skills are important.** Remembering names and the relationships between people will help you engage and earn trust and be viewed as credible.

➤ **As a general rule avoid too much direct eye contact.** Aboriginal people easily and commonly read body language and direct eye contact may be inappropriate. Remember though, this will vary and you need to rely on local knowledge. In some communities respected community members might tell you, 'don't believe him, he couldn't even look you in the eye when he was talking!'

➤ **Be thoughtful about initial contact.** Where possible, it might be less confronting for a family to receive a phone call by way of initial contact before a face to face visit. It may also be more appropriate to meet outside of the family home in this first instance, just to reassure that you are not there to see what they have in the house, or who lives in the house etc. Maybe the second visit once the family feels more comfortable could be done in the home.

