

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy – Proposed governance model

Background

The Association for Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA), NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), AbSec and FAMS, have commissioned the University of Sydney, Research Centre for Children and Families, in partnership with Curijo, the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), Charles Stuart University, and DaV'ange, to develop a Child and Family Workforce Skills Strategy. The aim is to provide a platform for consistency in the quality and content of training, as well as address issues for workforce training delivery and portability across the sector.

Purpose

- **Identify** the knowledge, attributes and skills required by the NSW child and family social services workforce employed under Permanency Support Program, Intensive Therapeutic Care and Targeted Early Intervention contracts.
- **Develop** strategies for delivering appropriate training and professional development.
- **Advise** on how the sector can collaborate for the delivery of efficient and integrated workforce training.

What are the issues?

The child welfare workforce in Australia faces numerous occupational, organisational and socioemotional challenges in their day-to-day work that cumulatively deter practitioners from pursuing a career in child protection and make it difficult for child welfare agencies and departments to recruit qualified staff.¹ Recruitment of child welfare practitioners in regional and remote areas is a major challenge.² Given these challenges, research suggests that agencies need to: develop a clear, consistent recruitment message; provide realistic job profiles; increase employee benefits and use professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work.³

Occupational stress emerged as a key issue during the sector consultations. The psychological and physical safety in the workplace is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. Employee psychological and physical safety should be a key focus for an organisation's culture and practice. On the job support, including supervision, mentoring, and coaching were viewed as crucial to building staff resilience as well as capabilities.

Consultations were conducted with across the child and family services sector, including mainstream, Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse organisations; practitioners; families and young people. Several key themes for action emerged from these extensive consultations. The next step will be the development of a NSW governance model to enable the implementation of the target action areas. The governance model will identify the lead agencies and members responsible each action area, as well as the key accountabilities and timeframes for the outcomes to be achieved.

Key Themes

- Develop clear, consistent recruitment messages, including realistic job profiles and common position descriptions across government and non-government agencies.
- Adopt agreed upon protocols and approaches to workforce induction and on-boarding, including minimum required content.
- Ensure training is evidenced based and integrated into practice through active workplace strategies.
- Identify the personal attributes needed for roles such as: active listening, empathy, respectful communications, and cultural competence.
- Provide pathways for people from Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds to enter the workforce and be supported to gain professional qualifications.
- Proactively prevent worker burnout through staff support to maintain professional boundaries, limit workload and engage in self-care.
- Consider the occupation stressors for employees and mechanisms to promote their psychological and physical safety.
- Offer on-the-job support through supervision, mentoring and coaching.
- Promote leadership opportunities and training for promising practitioners.
- Become a culturally competent organisation through organisational culture and practice that reflects cultural safety and respect for staff and families.
- Value diversity across the organisation and learn from the lived experience of staff and families.

Governance model

It is proposed that a Steering Committee, with representatives from the sector, be formed to lead the implementation of the strategy and key action areas. Members of the Committee will be drawn from government, peak organisations, industry, and unions representing the workforce. Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee will set out the responsibilities, timeframes, and performance indicators for the implementation of each action area under the workforce skills strategy. Members will represent their organisations, and new members and agencies may be invited to join to contribute a sector perspective or expertise as the need is identified by the Steering Committee and endorsed by the Chair.

It is proposed that the Steering Committee will meet quarterly, to review progress against the workplan for the workforce skills strategy. A series of working groups will be formed to progress the initiatives under each of the action areas. Each working group will be led by one of the Steering Committee members and consist of members able to contribute to the workplan for the action area. The lead for each working group will report to the Steering Committee during the quarterly meetings. The quarterly reports will provide an opportunity to report on progress, raise and resolve issues that may impact on implementation, and discuss emerging issues as they arise.

The recommended action areas have been identified as the critical issues for the child and family workforce training strategy. They have been derived from the analysis of the literature and policy environment, as well as the issues raised during the sector and family consultations.

The timeframe for each working group will be determined by the scope and complexity of the action area. It is anticipated that the membership of the working groups could change as specific tasks are completed or new items are added to the workplan, which require different expertise or agency commitment. New working groups may be formed (as 'task and finish' groups) as needed, and some groups may merge if the Steering Committee deems there is a significant overlap in the objectives and outcomes for the initiatives.

Steering Committee Members

Steering Committee Chair:

- ACWA

Government members:

- DCJ
- Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG)

Peak bodies:

- ACWA
- AbSec
- FAMS
- SNAICC

NGOs:

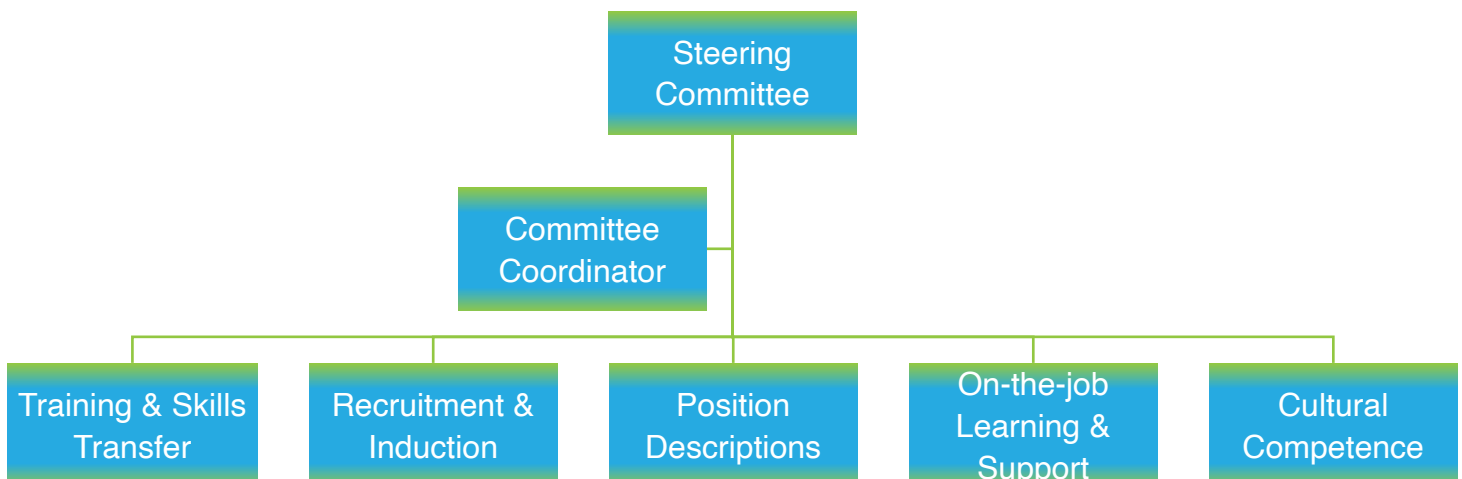
- Key industry representatives

Unions:

- Australian Services Union (ASU)

Note: Consider inviting national representatives from peak bodies such as SNAICC and Families Australia for alignment to the National Plan for Protecting Australia's Children.

Proposed Steering Committee and Working Groups



Organisation-level changes and a climate of support

There is a need for both interpersonal and organisation-level supports. At the interpersonal level, peer support and cohesive teams can supply practical support and help protect against the negative effects of work-related stressors. At the organisation level, leadership, supervisory support, role clarity, workforce training and caseload management can alleviate stress experienced on the job.

Organisation-level changes are also needed for improving staff retention, including decreased workload, increased compensation, ongoing professional development, competent and engaged leadership, and improved organisational culture.⁴

The NSW Practice Standards emphasise the importance of critical reflection for improving service outcomes, including the use of group and individual supervision as a component of good practice.⁵ Overall, it is important that child welfare agencies recognise the need to foster an organisational culture characterised by a climate of support and holding shared risk.⁶ This includes building the self-care capabilities of staff through training and education opportunities and supporting staff to practice self-care on an ongoing basis through mentorship and supervision.

“I think as we move towards what we’re calling a ‘trauma-informed’ or ‘trauma-sensitive’ practice, the knowledge mobilisation [must] support workforces in the midst of trauma. When we’re not including them in the trauma system, then we discount their experience and their own histories. Yet we kind of expect them to show up and be present to this pervasive experience without the kind of supports that come from the top, you know, right through the chain of command. We’re missing something.”

**Child & Family Services Manager,
Sector focus group**

Remit for Working Groups

- **Evidenced-based training and skills transfer**—Advise on courses designed to meet workforce needs and active strategies for the transfer of learnings to practice.
- **Workforce recruitment campaigns and induction programs**—Design recruitment campaigns to make child and family services an attractive career, including pathways to employment and qualifications for people from Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds. Adopt agreed protocols and approaches to workforce induction and on-boarding.
- **Common position descriptions across government and non-government agencies**—Develop position description templates, based on standardised core competencies for key roles. Incorporating the personal attributes needed, such as active listening, empathy, communication skills.
- **On-the-job support**—Promote the value of supervision, mentoring and coaching to support staff and facilitate self-care and resilience.
- **Culturally competent and safe workforce and workplaces**—Endorse clear guidelines for cultural sensitivity and safety across all levels of organisations. Provide cultural mentoring and supervision for Aboriginal practitioners to foster culturally safe workplaces for staff.

Evidenced-based training and skills transfer

Currently, there is no accepted sector-wide framework for professional skills and competencies. The working group for evidenced-based training and skills transfer will make recommendations concerning courses for minimum entry and specialisation qualifications that meet the needs of the sector. The key task for the group will be to identify the courses most aligned with desired workforce competencies and supplementary trainings for role-specific skill development. The group will consider issues such as the priority practice areas (for example, the 12 PSP priority practice areas), that should form the basis of accreditation and how these align to professional standards and attributes relevant for the workforce.

For the NSW Workforce Strategy, mapping was conducted of the range of educational offering available to the workforce across tertiary, vocational, and private training providers. A total of 12 Universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) were identified relevant to the sector, including 58 courses. Some courses were found to be more aligned to the child and family sector than others, with core units and elective units specific to child, youth, and family practice settings.

Working Group Lead— ACWA / AbSec

Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs

Some of the issues for the working group to consider include:

Microcredentials

Microcredentials offer one of the pathways to obtain the skills for specialisation in specific area of practice for staff with generic diplomas and degrees. Microcredentials are short courses delivered by universities that require assessment. An advantage of microcredentials is that participants gain university credits that can contribute to further qualifications. They can also offer a bridge for upskilling practitioners with certificate-level qualifications. Microcredentials offer flexibility: they can be delivered online and can be run multiple times throughout the year.

The inclusion of assessments ensure participants can demonstrated achievement of the learning outcomes. There is the potential for industry and education to codesign courses with academics to suit the skills and capabilities required by sector reforms and new policy and program directions.

TAFE

Recently announced federally funded fee-free TAFE vocational education places over the next 4 years could provide opportunities for the care economy, including child protection and aligned services. A core target of the program is to attract students from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds. Therefore, the provision of additional state-based support for paid workplace placements and secure employment for successful candidates post-graduation could be part of a recruitment strategy.

Learning Hubs

The Permanency Support Program (PSP) Learning Hub focuses on self-paced learning. However, in its current form, it lacks competency assessments for learners completing training. There may be the potential to integrate the learning modules with supervision and performance review. Localised communities of practice are also recommended to provide a mechanism for discussion of practice issues.

Learning Hubs, and other communities of practice work best when they apply the principles of adult learning. That is, capacity development that enables the active participation professionals in the learning process. Information, connected to their experience and role, should be combined with demonstrations, practice and feedback.¹ Learning occurs when reflective practice and learning cultures work together, recognising that research and theory also needs 'practice wisdom' to keep pace with the constantly evolving nature of child and family work.²

Engaging agency leaders in training and ongoing professional development is critical to successful training and skills development. Research has shown that agency leaders play an important role in developing capabilities for using evidence-informed training via proactive planning, investment in support structures and maintaining relationships critical for effective implementation.⁷ Moreover, group supervision activities can help foster a positive learning culture.⁸

In the child welfare workforce context, behavioural training programs which provide practitioners with education in core practice skills needed for effective practice have been found to produce significant knowledge gains, skills, and confidence.⁹ Both group and individual training of skills have been found to work for child welfare workers. However, group training has been shown to be more effective in facilitating transfer of skills to the workplace.¹⁰

Recommendations

The workplan for the Evidence-based Training and Skills Transfer working group should encompass:

- Consider adopting the PSP 12 priority practice areas as a basis for child and family education and training.
- Liaise with the education sector (universities, TAFE, and registered training organisations [RTOs]) to design curricula that is better aligned with workforce practice needs and competencies.
- Invest in programs and courses that build competencies in specialised areas (e.g., practice with abused and traumatised children/young people; difficult conversations and conflict resolution; relationship-based practice).
- Incorporate specific plans to implement training content on-the-job through the development of training curriculum, coaching, and mentoring.
- Develop pathways for staff with experience and life skills to obtain formal qualifications.
- Support job candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse migrant backgrounds to gain formal recognition of relevant qualifications.
- Explore funding student placements and Aboriginal apprenticeships as a mechanism for attracting new graduates to the workforce.

¹ Sheridan, S.M., Edwards, C. P., Marvin, C. A., & Knoche, L. L. (2009). Professional Development in Early Childhood Programs: Process Issues and Research Needs. *Early Education Development, 20*(3), 377-401.

² Wesley, P. W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of Practice: Expanding Professional Roles to Promote Reflection and Shared Inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 21*(2), 114-123.

Workforce recruitment and retention campaign

The workforce consultations emphasised the importance of sharing accurate and precise information about the day-to-day duties of child and family sector roles during recruitment processes. This includes ensuring that job descriptions are reflective of the tasks required to perform a role. It is also important to have transparent conversations with job candidates about the proportion of time that would be spent on each task. Attention was drawn to the gap between perceptions of the nature of child and family sector roles and the realities of the work (e.g., proportion of work focused on administration compared to direct client work), leading to job dissatisfaction and turnover among newly recruited staff.

The lack of alignment between government and non-government approaches to workforce recruitment pose a structural barrier to an integrated workforce strategy. Job descriptions, competencies and entry level qualifications also vary, even when the same model of service exists. An integrated and tiered training model is recommended that incorporates different levels of training as matched to the essential criteria/competencies for different job functions.

Given the diverse child and family population in Australia, it is important that this diversity is reflected in the child and family welfare workforce. Despite the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the child and family welfare sector, only 2.3% of the welfare workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2020. It is important that the child welfare workforce has the competencies required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Therefore, recruitment strategies that prioritise people from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds are needed. Strategies for recruitment must also address the disparities in educational and training programs. This should include strategies to provide entry pathways to training and employment for people from disadvantaged communities; with international qualifications and those with lived experience.

Research suggests the most effective strategies to improve workforce recruitment are the following:

1. clear, consistent recruitment messages
2. realistic job profiles
3. adopt a common capability framework
4. use of professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work
5. increased employee wages and benefits.¹¹

Working Group Lead—DCJ

Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs
- Talent Acquisition professionals
- HR Experts

“[We need] a much better recruitment process and you know being very transparent about what people are entering into. However, we are so desperate for staff too, right? So, then we sometimes do shortcuts.”

**Child & Family Services Manager,
Sector focus group**

“One of my staff worked at Social Security in Iran for many, many years but couldn't get work here. Another one worked as a psychologist, same country but couldn't get any work here. They were so grateful that we were giving them a job, giving them a chance because they've faced so much rejection in their previous attempts to find work, so something needs to happen there in terms of assisting people to transfer those qualifications.”

**Child & Family Services Manager,
Sector focus group**

Recommendations

The actions for the working group should include:

- Develop clear, consistent recruitment messages.
- Use professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work.
- Consider strategies to address barriers to employment for those with overseas qualifications.
- Pursue specific recruitment strategies to target people from Aboriginal and culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Adopt a common capability framework and consistent recruitment practices across the sector.
- Explore recruitment pathways for those with lived experience of the child and family welfare system.

Common position descriptions across government and non-government agencies

The health care and social assistance sector has more than doubled in size over the past 20 years, and now employs more than 2 million people. Employment in the sector is projected to grow by 15.8 per cent over the next five years. However, there is a lack of guidance in the literature about the skillset that workers require.

To develop the NSW workforce strategy, child and family agencies across were asked to provide their position descriptions and other documents relating to the recruitment and onboarding for direct service roles. The range of documents received spanned urban and regional settings and included Aboriginal organisations. There was wide variation among position descriptions and requirements across organisations providing similar services. There is also significant variation amongst organisations in their processes for orienting new workers. Yet there was a common set of skills required for most roles.

The sector consultations found that challenging conversations was rated as the most necessary skill (n=22) as well as a skill in which more training was needed (n=11). Overall, the most significant gaps in knowledge and skills were identified as working with culturally diverse groups, in terms of awareness of family relationships within diverse cultural contexts (n=29) and cultural awareness around identity, language and religion (n=18).

The adoption of common position descriptions for core roles across Permanency Support Planning, Targeted Early Intervention, and Intensive Therapeutic Care programs roles could streamline workforce planning and provide consistency and greater awareness of vacancies. It would also reduce the burden on job applicants. There is already significant workforce mobility across agencies and roles. A shared approach to recruitment may facilitate job mobility opportunities, either at level in another job family, or a higher rank that aligns with career goals and business needs.

The initial onboarding period can provide a valuable opportunity to impart the values of the organisation and prepare new recruits for their role, including support programs and staff to equip them for practice. A well-defined induction program can position agencies to stand out in the market and provide an opportunity for assessing the capabilities of new staff, identifying their professional development needs, and establishing a personalised plan for their career progression. This may be one of the strategies agencies can offer to attract and retain their workforce.

Working Group Lead—FAMS

Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs
- ASU

Common skills required*:

- Active listening and respectful communication skills with colleagues and families
- Relationship building and negotiation in the best interest of children
- Assessment and management of child safety and risk
- Ability to apply therapeutic approaches when working with children and families
- Understanding of the legal, policy and regulatory environment for pertaining to practice
- Writing case notes and reports for court.

**as documented in position descriptions and other recruitment documents.*

Recommendations

- Develop a sector-wide framework for professional skills and competencies, including baseline credentials for key roles.
- Draft common role definitions and core competencies for key roles and positions across the sector.
- Provide recommendations to promote alignment of recruitment and induction protocols across government and non-government agencies.
- Implement clear guidelines for cultural sensitivity and safety across all levels of organisations for ways of working with Aboriginal, gender and culturally diverse practitioners, children, and families.

On-the-job learning and support

Labour shortages and high-turnover rates are a feature of the care economy and its sub-sectors. There is good evidence that on-the-job support, such as coaching and mentoring, can contribute to job satisfaction and worker retention. Having the right skills and knowledge is critical for a workforce that operates across a diverse range of roles, in an environment of increasing scrutiny. The provision of safe, healthy workplaces and the delivery of appropriate support and development opportunities will strengthen the capacity of the workforce to respond effectively to current and emerging issues. Access to appropriate support and career development opportunities should be equitable across the workforce, which will assist in maintaining worker wellbeing and productivity.

Frequent supervision, organisational supports and self-efficacy have been identified as predictors of intent to stay among child welfare practitioners. Ongoing professional support, such as coaching and mentoring, provides workers with opportunities to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience. Coaching and mentoring also help workers to apply the skills learnt from training to their daily practice. Coaching and supervision can be offered as an individual or team-based program. For coaching and other forms of on-the-job support to be effective, it needs to have a clarity of purpose, with monitoring of progress achieved. This requires team managers, or external coaches, to be skilled and well-versed in the coaching model being utilised.

The common skills and capabilities identified during the sector consultations were consistent with recent evidence reviews and systematic reviews.^{12 13} Practitioners need to have the ability to apply therapeutic approaches when working with children and families. Using systemic family therapy approaches, including supporting families to disrupt negative behavioural patterns and develop appropriate coping skills, is deemed a necessary skill. Workforce participants suggested that therapeutic skills are generally lacking amongst workers in the sector.

Human skills or 'soft skills' such as emotional intelligence, resilience, communication, empathy, and self-awareness were also frequently identified as necessary skills for working in the child and family sector. Proficiency in report writing, time management and organisation were crucial given increased reporting requirements in the sector and identified administrative tasks as a common challenge for workers.

Although most practitioners entering the child welfare sector receive some form of pre-service training, the importance of ongoing professional support should be recognised. Research has found that training alone is not sufficient to help individuals learn and implement new skills.^{14 15 16} While workshops and seminars introduce individuals to the theory and reasoning for adopting a set of skills, there is growing evidence that practitioners are unlikely to practice these skills in the workplace unless they have opportunities for on-the-job support.^{17 18 19} Professional development should include a focus assisting practitioners to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience (e.g., learn effective strategies to manage the psychological demands associated with their occupational roles).^{20 21}

Working Group Lead—ACWA

Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs
- ACCOs
- ASU

Challenges for upskilling staff through training opportunities in the child and family sector include high caseloads, competing priorities and limited time to perform all demands of the job.

“I definitely noticed as soon as we started to refine our induction procedure and we really tied in the training and the timing of the training and we got management to help enforce that that we stick to things, we could already see a drop in numbers of staff turnover. Because people were much more confident about what they were doing while they were doing it. They had a buddy, they knew who to talk to, and so there was a much more of a process that gave them a better foundation.”

**Child & Family Services Manager,
Sector focus group**

Recommendations

- Revise NGO contracts and implement strategies to ensure staff have the capacity to attend and meaningfully engage in training, such as employing relief staff and reducing workloads.
- Consider how career progression is factored into workforce planning, such as opportunities for career development, progression planning and regular review of practice and areas for service improvement.
- Promote the value of supervision, coaching, and mentoring for staff development and competency. This may include recommendations for monitoring the quality and effectiveness of coaching and supervision models.
- Incorporate lived experience through voluntary or paid peer support and advocacy workers.

Culturally competent workplaces and staff

Given the diverse child and family population in Australia, it is important that linguistically and culturally diverse and competent staff make up the child and family welfare workforce. Despite the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the child and family welfare sector, nationally only 2.3% of the welfare workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2020. Given the importance that the child welfare workforce has the competencies required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, recruitment strategies that prioritise linguistic and cultural diversity are needed. Strategies for diverse recruitment must also recognise and compensate for disparities in access to formal qualifications.

When agencies are unable to retain Aboriginal staff, it may have future impacts on the recruitment of new Aboriginal staff if organisations come to be seen in the community as a non-preferred employer of Aboriginal people.²² Cultural supervision, peer supervision and mentoring are recommended as workforce development strategies for the recruitment, retention and upskilling of staff. Strategies include a designated mentor for new Aboriginal workers to encourage skill-building and confidence while also offering support during the induction process. Cultural supervision can support Aboriginal workers in understanding their cultural obligations and the blurred lines between family and work roles.²³

Cultural safety involves the positive recognition and celebration of cultures, empowering people to contribute and feel safe to be themselves. Cultural safety must be applied consistently at all levels of an organisation. This is a strategy to address discrimination and racism that impacts employees, children, and their families and that can lead to a loss of confidence in organisations.²⁴ Culture awareness is sensitivity to the differences between different cultures and the use of this sensitivity in effective communication.

Cultural peer supervision often occurs amongst colleagues in like roles. By sharing experiences and establishing professional connections, peer supervision can increase both personal and organisational learning.²⁵ An advantage of this approach is that it supports optimal safety and trust between participants, and it can be empowering to take on the responsibility of this role. The use of external supervisors can be used to equalise the power relationship that happens in line management supervision models, as they can work in collaboration with the clinical supervisor to ensure that cultural supervision needs are being met.

Working Group Lead—AbSec

Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- AbSec
- Peaks
- NGOs
- ACCOs

When working with Aboriginal practitioners, learning and support strategies can be viewed through the lens of the ‘8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning’, developed by Aboriginal elders in north-western NSW communities with Tyson Yunkaporta’.²⁶

“Programs that are written by Aboriginal peoples for their own communities, you know, there’s some really highly successful ones, but they’re not given any validation and they’re not provided with any support.”

Interview with Aboriginal OOH Service Executive.

Recommendations

- Engage with a diverse range of cultural groups about preferred models and how these might be operationalised.
- Develop clear guidelines for cultural sensitivity and safety across all levels of organisations.
- Encourage agencies to value diversity and the lived experience of staff and families.
- Value cultural supervision as an experiential, hands-on learning process that contributes to the development of employee practice competencies.
- Ensure mentoring, coaching, or supervising Aboriginal practitioners must be culturally safe, have ongoing training and preferably be an Aboriginal person.

For more information

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