

# Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy – Working group for cultural competence

## Background

The child and family population in Australia is diverse and the child and family welfare workforce must reflect this diversity, however, there are particular challenges for strengthening pathways for growth in the Aboriginal child and family workforce across all roles.<sup>1</sup>

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 address disparities in educational and training programs.

In 2019 NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (AbSec)<sup>2</sup> identified a range of issues currently facing the Aboriginal child and family sector, including:

- Government reform agendas destabilising smaller organisations' workforces by increasing expectations on them to rapidly adapt to new ways of delivering services; contractual and funding repercussions can lead to job loss and instability.
- The current system does not provide enough opportunities for skilled applicants who do not hold formal qualifications; there needs to be a greater focus on building skills, expertise and other key attributes.
- The child and family sector are a competitive environment, which can be particularly challenging in regional locations with fewer local workforce resources.
- There is an urgent need to strengthen pathways to grow the Aboriginal child and family workforce across all roles.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners may lack cultural safety in the workplace, due to fellow staff and services not having sufficient understanding of local Aboriginal communities, and limited recognition and respect for their community, and cultural status.<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal practitioners are working within western structures, facing expectations from non-Aboriginal employees to be like them. They also have to balance their professional boundaries with their cultural obligations. The combination of these pressures can impinge on their professional and personal wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Cultural safety needs to be an ongoing process, involving continuous learning and quality assurance processes with accountability structures in place.<sup>5</sup>

## Key working group action areas:

- 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.
- Promote cultural supervision as an experiential, hands-on learning process that contributes to the development of employee practice competencies.
- Provide mentoring, coaching, or supervision for Aboriginal practitioners that is culturally safe, preferably with an Aboriginal person.

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## Working Group Lead – AbSec

### Working Group Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- Peaks
- NGOs
- SNAICC
- ACCOs

Interview with Aboriginal OOHC Service Executive:

*“Why they're working there and understanding what we're hoping to achieve and that's, you know, keeping our families together, keeping our kids on country ...*

*“So, for me, the skills are communication, they're acceptance in the community, they're understanding, being able to talk across many levels because for our workers, we have to be able to talk in our community and our Community level.”*

*“I think the services that work best are the average on services that understand the trauma and the history of our families, why we are, where we are, why we've lost parenting skills. How would you know these token Band-Aid things that they set up and run them for six months and think that they're gonna work.”*

## Strategies for Cultural sensitivity

Aboriginal learning emphasises people and relationships as the greatest priority. Following these ways of learning means that we pay explicit attention to Aboriginal ways of valuing, being, knowing and doing.

Anyone who is mentoring, coaching or supervising Aboriginal practitioners must be culturally safe, have ongoing training and preferably be an Aboriginal person. For Aboriginal people the relationship is key—transfer of learning will only take place if the mentor/coach/supervisor is trusting, open and flexible to the needs of the practitioner. All of these strategies should be viewed in the context of cultural safety when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.

## Cultural safety

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.<sup>6 7</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>. Aboriginal learning emphasises people and relationships as the greatest priority. Following these ways of learning means that we pay explicit attention to Aboriginal ways of valuing, being, knowing and doing.

## The eight interconnected ways of learning

**Story sharing:** learning through narrative-driven approaches

**Learning maps:** using mapping/visualisation processes

**Non-verbal:** applying relational and kinaesthetic skills to learning and thinking

**Symbols and images:** harnessing metaphors and imagery to understand concepts

**Land links:** linking content to local land and place

**Non-linear:** thinking laterally, interdisciplinary approach

**Deconstruct/reconstruct:** producing innovations

**Community links:** connection to community, placing local viewpoints at the centre

Cultural supervision is an experiential, hands-on learning process that contributes to the development of employee practice competencies. The aim is to support clinical strengths and identify needs in a cultural context.

*Mafile'o and Su'a-Hawkins' define cultural supervision as a process that facilitates “cultural development and capacity of the supervisee through reflection, critique and action”.*<sup>9</sup>

**Cultural Humility: a personal**

## Cultural supervision

Cultural supervision can take place on an informal or formal basis. In an Aboriginal organisation, discussions, and support around cultural experience and problem-solving happens as part of day-to-day work discussions and meetings. Nevertheless, there is still benefit even for Aboriginal organisations in having access to an outside community member and/or Elder to provide cultural supervision.

Mainstream organisations can establish formal arrangements with a cultural supervisor. It is also important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners to be supported to make connections with other Aboriginal workers and for this support to be valued as an important part of their role.<sup>10</sup>

**lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities. Being culturally fit means applying oneself to the daily exercise of self-reflection, personal engagement and active learning as they relate to reconciliation, cultural safety, white privilege and valuing diversity.**<sup>11</sup>

Cultural supervision offers practitioners an opportunity to:

- explore and recognise culturally based social and emotional issues and culturally relevant ways of addressing those issues
- receive mentoring and guidance—somewhere to listen and to be heard
- name and draw on cultural and spiritual meaning by talking with someone who understands the importance of Aboriginal spirituality and its place in the everyday work context
- exploring traditional approaches to healing, communication, and conflict resolution to support families
- debrief in a safe place on experiences of discrimination
- receive specialist support around issues such as cultural grief and loss
- name and manage cultural and community challenges and complexities.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

## Benefits of cultural supervision

Ensuring that practitioners have access to cultural supervision benefits agencies and clients by:

- developing a stronger sense of self and increased confidence in practitioners
- increasing knowledge and confidence on protocols, local traditions and cultural expectations, which in turn assists when working with local families and community
- increasing practitioners' capacity to advocate for families as a result of a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.<sup>14</sup>

Mentoring can be defined as:

**“a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant...mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé).”<sup>15</sup>**

**Other approaches that may be considered include a yarning session or two-way mentoring (in which the role of the mentor and the mentee can be reversed within a session).**

## Cultural mentoring

In addition to supporting staff to manage their personal and professional needs, Aboriginal staff described the importance of having a skilled mentor with the necessary expertise to support skill acquisition and development, ideally through formal mentoring training.

Aboriginal practitioners often lack cultural safety in the workplace, largely due to fellow staff and services not having sufficient understanding of local Aboriginal communities, and limited recognition and respect for their community and cultural status.<sup>16</sup> Aboriginal practitioners are working within western structures, facing expectations from non-Aboriginal employees to be like them. Cultural safety needs to be an ongoing process, involving continuous learning and quality assurance processes with accountability structures in place.

Even within Aboriginal-led organisations, excessive workloads and pressure, together with a lack of appropriate professional and personal support, can result in stress and high staff turnover.<sup>17</sup> While there remains a paucity of literature regarding what strategies successfully help support and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, some research highlights that

mentoring can be an effective strategy for promoting Indigenous ways of learning and professional development. Unlike formal supervision or 'academic' learning approaches to skills development, mentoring is practitioner-led and provides unique opportunities for Aboriginal staff to explore their own priorities, thoughts, and feelings, based on their personal values and beliefs.

Through cultural mentoring, Aboriginal staff have the capacity to access learning opportunities that are congruent with their values, beliefs and learning styles, and personally relevant. In addition, when delivered through an external coach, mentoring can help to replace systematic 'power differentials' using an objective 'other' and lessen practitioners' fears or concerns that sharing their thoughts or feelings about their workplace, may lead to retribution.<sup>18</sup> Debriefing is an important aspect of mentoring, allowing practitioners to identify challenges in a culturally safe place.

## Four strategies common to mentoring models<sup>19</sup>

- Developing trusting, respectful, one-to-one mentoring relationships
- Promoting social and personal development through goal setting and support
- Integrating organisations, social services, and other support systems, including families and communities
- Increasing specialised skills.

## Cultural mentoring in practice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff acknowledge that access to highly skilled Aboriginal mentors is limited, requiring organisations to explore alternative mentoring models. Practitioners favoured receiving mentoring from an Indigenous practitioner who understood their cultural challenges, and how their status or role within the community further impacted upon them. This model of mentoring requires supervisors, who may be non-Aboriginal, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mentors, to work collaboratively for the benefit of the practitioner, and resolve any differences in opinions or ways of working, especially for complex cases or situations requiring complex, clinical decision-making.

Exploratory qualitative research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health practitioners have led to a number of proposed models:

Remote mentoring	Dual supervision	Cultural & community education	Training model
Non-Indigenous organisations may benefit from using web-based video-conferencing platforms to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to access external Indigenous mentors within their extended community.	A dual model of supervision provides opportunities for staff to reflect and model their clinical skills from experienced staff, together with opportunities to reflect on their cultural obligations and the impact these had on their professional duties, as well as their personal wellbeing, with an Indigenous mentor.	This model invites a respected elder or trusted member of the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community to provide cultural mentoring. Using a community-based approach, Aboriginal staff are provided with critical opportunities to learn and reflect on their experiences from others who have extensive and relevant experience with their local Indigenous culture. Some organisations have an <i>Elder in-Residence</i> position for this purpose.	Internet-based platforms can be used to develop skills for Aboriginal workers working in relative isolation. <sup>20</sup> Training studies indicate that gains from training workshops on their own are often minimal and are more effective if supported by extend group training, or community of practice. <sup>21</sup> Training topics may be generated by the group with an expert providing consultations and supervision. To ensure cultural safety, a training model should be co-designed with Aboriginal practitioners.

## For more information

Research Centre for Children and Families

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**w** <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>



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