

Including Aboriginal Australia in your service

by Gangari Bamford Maguire & Associates

We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we live, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and recognise they are the first people of Australia.

As non-Aboriginal Australians working in the child care field we are encouraged to support and embrace cultural diversity. However, how knowledgeable are we about Aboriginal Australia? Do we embrace and acknowledge Aboriginal Australia in a meaningful, respectful way? Can we confidently share and explore this knowledge with the children in our care?

Aboriginal Culture is the longest living culture in the world, dating back over 80,000 years. Aboriginal cultures are diverse and continue to evolve over time. Our experience has indicated that many people are not comfortable with their level of knowledge about Aboriginal Australia. They are fearful of doing the 'wrong thing' or of offending Indigenous Australians. Some are not sure where to start, while others feel it is only necessary to include Aboriginal perspectives in

their programs if they have Aboriginal children attending their service.

The aim of this article is to provide child care professionals with a starting point to begin exploring the importance of including and teaching about Aboriginal Australia in their service.

Who is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person?

Non-Aboriginal Australians can sometimes be confused about who is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. On many occasions we have heard children being challenged about their Aboriginal identity: "How can you be Aboriginal? You have blonde hair and blue eyes!" or comments like "I think he's half Aboriginal".

To begin, it is important to recognise that Aboriginality is not about the colour of a person's skin. Aboriginality means something different to each child and their family.

Since the early 1980s the Federal Government has used a definition that is broken into three parts as follows.

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person who:

1. Is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.
2. Identifies himself or herself as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
3. Is accepted by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island community as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.





Each of these requirements must be satisfied. Physical appearance and lifestyle are irrelevant. Terms such as 'half', 'quarter' and 'one fifth' are discriminatory and should not be used. The key is whether the individual identifies with being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

Creating inclusive child care environments

Learning about Aboriginal Reconciliation and promoting access and inclusion are important because Aboriginal people hold the unique status of being the first people of Australia. It is important that child care professionals develop a sound understanding of our shared history and the impact that colonisation had, and continues to have, on Aboriginal Australia.



Due to discriminatory policies and legislation, Aboriginal communities have been denied access and participation in many areas, specifically in education, health and employment. As a result, Aboriginal communities are the most marginalised in Australia. Racism is still an issue faced by many Aboriginal children and families and much of this can be attributed to ignorance. If we have knowledge of the true facts about Aboriginal Australia, then we can begin to deconstruct and challenge stereotypes and racism with children in child care.

As child care professionals, increasing our knowledge of Aboriginal Australia in the past and present will assist us to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to create accessible and inclusive child care environments. It is important that we educate ourselves to feel confident in passing on knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to all children in a meaningful informed way.



Aboriginal Education is not only appropriate education of Aboriginal students but also must involve the education of ALL children about Indigenous Australia. (Aboriginal Education Policy, NSW AECG Inc, 1995).

How can services acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal Australia?

When including an Indigenous perspective in your service program it is helpful to create a whole service plan for inclusion that involves all child care professionals. This plan needs to set clear, meaningful targets and objectives to create sustainable access and inclusion for Aboriginal children and families and support all children in the service to become more connected with Aboriginal Australia.

The following suggestions may assist your service to begin, or to further, acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal Australia:

- Acknowledge Country at all meetings and important events, including meetings with children. Acknowledgement to Country



is a way non-Indigenous Australians can recognise Aboriginal Australia. For information on this protocol the NSW Department of Education has some great resources. You can also contact your local Aboriginal Lands Council if unsure.

- At events with significant meaning or a major opening, consult with your local Elders group or Lands Council or cooperative about a Welcome to Country. There are specific protocols that may differ between communities, so it is important to always consult locally.
- Create a calendar of Indigenous events that can be celebrated at the service, for example, NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day. Also attend events that are happening in your local Indigenous community.
- Invite Indigenous performers and artists into your service and consider holding workshops for children and/or families with the visitors.
- Create resources such as postcards and posters with children that have messages of reconciliation and goodwill. Talk with children about who these might be sent to, for example, TV celebrities and politicians.
- Network with your local Aboriginal community and consider partnering with them on a specific program or project.
- Invite local people into your service to see your inclusive programs and resources.
- Invite Elders from your local community to take part in celebrations and significant events at your service. Invite children's and child care professionals' extended family and kin to events.
- Name a section or area in your service/ organisation in a local language. Consult with your local Aboriginal Lands Council or community group in regards to protocol and use of language in your local community.



- Set up 'sister' services, for example, in country or remote areas, and stay in contact with them via the internet or postal services to exchange photos, drawings and stories.
- Plant a tree in your service to acknowledge a significant date on the Indigenous calendar.
- Play traditional Indigenous games.
- Ensure your service has a range of Indigenous resources such as maps, flags, music, puzzles, books, dolls, videos and posters.

Conclusion

We believe that if services want to enrich the experiences they provide for children and implement genuinely inclusive practice, then a meaningful understanding and acknowledgement of Indigenous Australia is essential. Child care professionals play an important role in helping children to break down stereotypes and develop an understanding and appreciation of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. It's time to get on board!

Gangari Bamford Maguire & Associates provide workshops in *Understanding Reconciliation – Acknowledging & Celebrating Aboriginal Australia*. For more information e-mail Gangari: bamfordmaguire@gangari.com.au.



Learning about Aboriginal Australia

The following strategies may assist you to increase your knowledge of Aboriginal Australia and to promote access and inclusion in your service:



- Attend relevant training.
- Meet and talk with Aboriginal people outside of your service; the more connections you make the more you can begin to challenge and extend your ideas and understanding of Aboriginal Australia.
- Always consult – find out about your local Lands Council, Aboriginal cultural centres and cooperatives. Find local community links such as Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs), Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs), community workers and the Aboriginal Heritage Office.
- Access resources from organisations such as your Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU), the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Reconciliation Australia and Australians for National Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR).
- Read widely and outside of the mainstream media to stay abreast of current issues and to gain an Aboriginal perspective on different matters. Newspapers like the *Koori Mail* and the *National Indigenous Times* are Australia wide publications.
- Watch Indigenous television programs such as Message Stick, Living Black, Insight and NiTV.
- Listen to Indigenous radio programs. A list of the stations on the National Indigenous Radio

Service Network can be found on the Community Broadcasting website at:
www.cbonline.org.au

- Log onto relevant websites to get information and to order free resources such as NAIDOC posters, Sorry Day flowers, Reconciliation Week posters, Harmony Day resources and NAPCAN posters.
- Learn about your local community's Indigenous history and heritage.

Including Aboriginal perspectives in your service supports an inclusive environment and will also enrich the program and your service for all stakeholders.

References and further reading

- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2008). *Face the facts. Some questions and answers about refugees, migrants and Indigenous people of Australia*. Retrieved 12 May, 2009, from http://www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/face_facts/
- Bamford M., & Maguire, K. (2008). *Gangari understanding reconciliation workshop resource booklet*. Sydney: Authors.
- NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (1995). *NSW Department of School Education Aboriginal Education Policy*.

More information

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