

Aboriginal History

What non-Aboriginal foster carers should know about the context of Aboriginal children and young people in care today



Real Kids, Real Carers

A continuing education resource for foster carers

Written by Louise Mulrone



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ACWA endorses the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy, and supports the vision of the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat NSW (AbSec) that all Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care be placed with Aboriginal carers.

However currently there are many Aboriginal children and young people who are in the care of non-Aboriginal carers. Therefore during the time of transition to realising SNAICC policy and the vision of AbSec, ACWA recognises the need to provide training to non-Aboriginal carers who have Aboriginal children placed with them.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following people who provided initial input into the contents and commented on draft material. Their willingness to share their views and experience has been invaluable, and essential to the preparation of this resource.

Robyn Bird-Hedges: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Amanda Bridge: Biripi Aboriginal Medical Corporation

Dana Clarke: Burrun Dalai Out of Home Care and Family Support Service

Betty Cragg: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Nicole Deguara: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Teresa Fenton: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Kaylene Kennedy: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Debbie and Geoff Keir: Foster Carers

Trish Kelly: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Wendy Knight: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Lyn Lawrie: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Iris McLeod: South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation

Hyllus Munro: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Cheryl Purchase: Department of Human Services – Community Services

Glendra Stubbs: Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation

We also wish to acknowledge the work done by Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in producing *Foster their Culture* (2008) which was produced to assist non-indigenous carers who care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care. This was an invaluable resource in preparing this training session.

Additional copies

Additional copies of this booklet can be downloaded from www.acwa.asn.au. It is located in the 'foster care resources' section under 'Resources'.

For more information contact:

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About Real Kids, Real Carers

This booklet is part of a continuing education resource for foster carers called *Real Kids, Real Carers*. *Real Kids, Real Carers* contains 8 separate booklets covering topics of importance to foster carers.

The titles in the series

- ★ Independence and connections: caring for adolescents
- ★ I'm an individual: children and young people with disabilities
- ★ Participation: creating opportunities for children and young people to contribute to decision-making
- ★ Reality fostering: the impact of fostering on carers and their families
- ★ Whose job is this? team work in foster care
- ★ Whose problem is this? managing and responding to challenging and difficult behaviour
- ★ Aboriginal history: the context of Aboriginal children and young people in care today
- ★ Preventing another stolen generation: keeping Aboriginal children and young people in care connected to their culture

Using these booklets

Each booklet sets out a short (approx two-hour) education session. Experience has shown that foster carers are more able to assess training that can be completed in a half day or evening.

The learning opportunities will be enhanced if sessions

- > involve an experienced foster carer as part of the training team
- > include agency workers as participants.

These sessions provide an introduction to the topic under discussion, though follow-up sessions may be required to explore the topic in depth.

These sessions are designed for all carers, whether very experienced or currently in their first placement. Children of foster carers, particularly those who are older teenagers and young adults, will also benefit from participating in these education sessions.

The sessions *Aboriginal history* and *Preventing another stolen generation* are specifically designed for non-Aboriginal carers who have, or may have in the future, the care of an Aboriginal child or young person.

Training resources

These booklets provide detailed guides to all activities, including handout material to be photocopied for participants. Handout material can be found at the back of each booklet.



The booklets include 'scripts' for trainers which are indicated by the use of the talking head icon.

Such scripts are not meant to be prescriptive, but provide input material that trainers can use and present in their own style.

Session Information

Target group

Non-Aboriginal carers who may have Aboriginal children placed in care with them.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the session, participants will be able to

- > describe the significance of the historical context of Aboriginal fostering, including the impact of the stolen generations
- > explain how Aboriginality is defined
- > describe the Aboriginal placement principle
- > describe key features of Aboriginal culture

Training team

At least one member of the training team must be Aboriginal, with strong links and good knowledge of the Aboriginal community and services in the area which the training is presented.

All members of the training team presenting this module must

- > have proven experience in working with cultural appropriateness with Aboriginal people
- > be familiar with the context of relating to Aboriginal out-of-home care.

Material required in session

- > Whiteboard or butchers paper
- > A workbook for each participant made up of Handouts 1 - 6
- > Map of Aboriginal Australia (full colour poster can be ordered via www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/map.html)
- > DVD: *Bringing them Home* (can be ordered without cost from Australian Human Rights Commission on 1300 369711)
- > DVD player
- > Set of marker pens and A3 paper (enough for one set for every 2-3 participants)
- > An evaluation form for each participant (see the example of Handout 7)

Length of session

2.5 hours

Background information for trainers

This session is designed to provide a safe and respectful opportunity for non-Aboriginal carers to learn about Aboriginal culture. Participants should be encouraged to ask questions, even if they inadvertently use clumsy or potentially racist language or ideas. If this occurs, trainers should respond to the question but include in their response a polite explanation of more appropriate terms to use, and the possible impact on Aboriginal people when racist language is used.

Any racist or prejudiced comments should be challenged within the group, but in a way that opens rather than shuts down conversation eg



“John, your point about Aboriginal people not contributing to service clubs in your town is an interesting one. I can think of many reasons why Aboriginal people may not get involved. What do other people think may be some of those reasons?”

“Thanks, Belinda, for sharing the experience of your friend who thought it was best for her child not to know about her Aboriginal relatives. I wonder what she thought was so terrible that she chose to cut her child off from part of her family? I wonder if fear of difference or prejudice was part of it? What do others think?”

Session Outline

1. Introduction (15 minutes)

Welcome participants.

Acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in which you are holding the training. For example:



“Firstly, I would like to pay respect to and acknowledge the (*eg Darug or Dharawal people*) who are the traditional owners of the land we stand and meet on today. I would also like to recognise Aboriginal Elders, traditional and current custodians, past and present. I would like to thank the Aboriginal community for allowing training to occur on their land.”

Highlight that this training will explore some of the significance of acknowledging Aboriginal communities and Elders.

Introduce all members of the training team, and get them to briefly share something of their background, including the links they have to Aboriginal communities.

Use the map of Aboriginal Australia to show participants the groups with which Aboriginal members of the training team identify.

Provide housekeeping details, such as the location of toilets, length of tea/coffee breaks, and arrangements for smokers.

Ask each participant to introduce themselves and say their full name, the significance of how they got their name and how they feel about it. They can also share any links they have with Aboriginal communities, and whether they have had any Aboriginal children and young people placed in their care.

2. Session overview (10 mins)

Provide Participant Workbooks and get everyone to look at the top of Handout 1 which sets out the session aims.

Explain:



“There is a follow-up session to look at ways in which non-Aboriginal carers can provide good care for Aboriginal children, but this session looks at some background information. Without this information, it can be difficult to understand what is useful and helpful to Aboriginal children in care.”

Go through group guidelines at the end of **Handout 1**. Check that everyone is happy about the guidelines. Add in any extra suggestions.

Highlight the importance of this being a session that is both honest and respectful.

Explain:



“Sometimes people can feel shy or uncertain about asking questions about Aboriginal matters, because they don’t want to offend or upset people without being aware of it. We welcome all questions and will answer them honestly. We understand that most people are genuinely interested in finding out more about Aboriginal culture. This is not a forum for dealing with Aboriginal political issues. We want this to be a safe place for people to share their experiences and ideas, while respecting that at times others may see things differently.”

3. Historical context (55 mins)

Brainstorm: What comes to your mind when you hear the words ‘the stolen generations’?

Explain:



“The history of European white settlement and subsequent government policies and practices in relation to the Aboriginal community and directly contributed to many of the present issues experienced by Aboriginal people and communities. In order to understand the present, we have to understand the past. Aboriginal families right now are dealing with the impact of past practices.”

Briefly describe the history of policies regarding state intervention in the lives of Aboriginal families using the timeline of Handout 2.

Ask:

Were any of those dates or events surprising or unknown to you?

Explain



“Many people are unaware of how recently the forced removal of Aboriginal children continued (up to the 1960’s).

For many years, the underlying assumption was that the Aboriginal culture would just die out, and that former government policies and practices were designed to let that happen. However, despite the many challenges in the past 200 years, the Aboriginal culture has survived.

The Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world. One of the reasons the culture has lasted so long is its ability to adapt to change over time. Aboriginal people have been influenced by the arrival of other people in Australia. Years of misunderstanding and indifference have affected Aboriginal people, but they are continuing to keep their culture and identity alive.

This session will help us understand Aboriginal culture in the light of all that has occurred over the past 200 years.

We are now going to watch a DVD called *Bringing them Home*.

This DVD helps foster carers who may be caring for Aboriginal children understand some of the historical context they need to be aware of when caring for these children.

Most people find the video emotionally draining, and if anyone is very distressed by the material they are free to leave the room if they need to. But it would be great if everyone could get back with the group at the end to share in a discussion. One of the training team will be available to listen and provide support to individuals if necessary.”

Check if anyone has seen the DVD before. If so, ask them to think about the significance of the issues raised for them now.

Play the *Bringing them Home* DVD

Questions for group discussion

- How do you feel about the DVD?
- Why do you suppose we showed you it?
- What significance do you think those issues have for a non-Aboriginal person caring for an Aboriginal child?

De-brief by encouraging participants to look for the lessons we can learn from the tragic stories presented in the DVD.

4. Impact of the past (15 mins)

Explain:



“While the actual policies that created the stolen generation have now changed, their impact lives on in the present circumstances of many Aboriginal people.”

Brainstorm: What sorts of effects do past policies and circumstances have on Aboriginal people today?

Get participants to look at the material in Handout 3 and highlight any issues not covered in the previous brainstorm.

5. Defining Aboriginality (10 mins)

Explain:



In the past, there was a lot of focus on whether people were ‘full-blood’ or ‘part-blood’ Aborigines. Under the assimilation policy full blood Aborigines were required to live in reserves separate from the rest of Australian society, and ‘part-blood’ Aborigines were expected to become a part of mainstream Australian society and not identify in any way with Aboriginal culture.

We now recognise that a person can identify with a culture, even when they have one parent or other relatives from other cultures. Many people who were described in words such as ‘half caste’ or ‘quarter caste’ or ‘part Aboriginal’ never lost their strong sense of identity and belonging to Aboriginal culture and communities. This is why such terms are no longer accepted or used.

Go through **Handout 4** with participants.

Check if participants have any questions.

6. Aboriginal Placement principle (10 mins)

Refer participants back to **Handout 2** and the entry for 1987 where the Aboriginal placement principle came into effect in NSW for children in out-of-home care.

Read through **Handout 5** with participants.

Ask:

- Why do you think this principle was introduced? (*Answers should include: to try to enable Aboriginal children to stay in touch with their culture*)
- In what circumstances would an Aboriginal child be placed with non-Aboriginal carers? (*If there were no suitable placements with Aboriginal carers*)
- What is a key responsibility of a non-Aboriginal carer if an Aboriginal child is placed with them? (*Answers should include: to do all they could to keep that child connected to their Aboriginal family, community and culture*)

Check if participants have any questions.

7. Understanding Aboriginal culture (25 mins)

Brainstorm:

- What is culture? (*The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group*)
- What effect does our culture have on us? (*Possible answers include: what we think, how we communicate, what we value, what is important to us, what we wear and eat*)
- Does everyone from the same culture act and think in exactly the same way? (*No*)

Explain:



“Sharing a common culture doesn’t mean that people are exactly the same. This issue of diversity is even more complex when considering Aboriginal culture, as there are so many different Aboriginal groups. Even the words Aboriginal people use to refer to themselves differs from area to area eg ‘Koori’, ‘Murri’ ‘Nunga’ etc.

Show the map of Aboriginal Australia to reinforce the diversity of Aboriginal groups.

Explain:



“Because of policies that forces Aboriginal people to live on reserves, many Aboriginal people no longer live on their traditional lands. But even today, 70% of Aboriginal Australians know their traditional land and identify with it.

However, despite that diversity, there are common threads of values and beliefs which are shared by many Aboriginal people today.”

Brainstorm: From what you know of Aboriginal culture, what do you think are some of its basic values and beliefs?

Get participants to look at the material on Handout 6 and highlight any points not covered in the previous brainstorm. It is very appropriate when going through this material for Aboriginal members of the team to share their own experience of the different points raised.

Activity: Drawing a picture of cultural connection

Divide participants into groups of 2-3, and provide each group with a set of marker pens and a large sheet of paper.

Ask them to draw a picture of an Aboriginal child who is connected to their culture. Explain that it does not need to be great artwork – stick figures will be fine – and they can also use symbols and words to convey what cultural connection is all about.

Ask groups to share their pictures.

8. Conclusion (10 mins)

Get participants to relook at the acknowledgement made at the beginning of the session (**on Handout 1**).

Ask:

Why is that acknowledgment important in the light of what we have learnt about Aboriginal culture?

(Possible answers include: importance of connection to land, respect for Elders)

Highlight the features of the drawings that participants have just created, and that the follow up module ‘Preventing another stolen generation’, will look in more detail about the ways in which non-Aboriginal carers can help Aboriginal kids maintain their cultural connections.

(Ensure that the pictures are collected as they will be used in the subsequent session ‘Preventing another stolen generation’.)

Thank participants for their attendance.

Hand out evaluation forms (Handout 7) to be completed.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the session, participants will be able to

- explain how Aboriginality is defined
- describe the significance of the historical context of Aboriginal fostering, including the impact of the stolen generations
- describe the Aboriginal placement principle
- describe key features of Aboriginal culture

Acknowledgment

We pay respect to and acknowledge the people who are the traditional owners of the land we stand and meet on today. We also recognise Aboriginal Elders, traditional and current custodians, past and present. We thank the Aboriginal community for allowing training to occur on their land.

Group guidelines:

To make this a positive learning experience:

- Mobiles off or on silent
- One person talking at a time
- Respect confidentiality: don't share private details about other people, including children, in a way that might identify them.
- Be prepared to listen to other's opinion
- Be respectful even if you disagree
- Feel free to ask questions

Aboriginal history

Some historical events of Aboriginal history

Before 1788

There were many nations and clans of Aboriginal people who lived in harmony with the land. The 'Dreaming' was important and laid down the laws for everyone and everyday life.

1788

Captain Cook takes possession of the land and does so wrongly under the international law of 'Terra Nullius', declaring Australia 'uninhabited waste land.'

1789

Smallpox decimates the Aboriginal population of Port Jackson, Botany Bay and Broken Bay. The disease spreads inland and along the coast.

1792

Colonists begin to settle the land, fanning out further and dispossessing Aboriginal people of their land.

1816

Governor Macquarie announces a set of regulations controlling the free movement of Aboriginal people.

1883

Aboriginal Protection Board is established. Most Aboriginal people in NSW are put into missions and reserves for better management and control. Many Aboriginal people lose contact with their traditional land and sacred sites.

1909

Passing of the Aboriginal Protection Act giving the Board legal sanction to remove Aboriginal children from their families.

1915

Amendment to the Act giving the Board the power to remove any child without parental consent and without a court order.

1937

Federal and State policies of Assimilation are introduced. Part Aboriginals are to be assimilated into white society whether they want to or not. Aboriginals not living in a tribe are to be educated and all others are to stay on reserves.

It was still widely assumed that Aboriginal people on reserves would gradually die out, and that all others would become part of white society and would not identify in any way as 'Aboriginal'.

1960's

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People began. This gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their first political voice at a national level.

1967

Referendum that changed 2 parts of the Australian constitution. The first part gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Aboriginal people; the second part was to include Aboriginal people in the future conduct of the Australian census.

1972

The Tent Embassy is established on the grounds of Parliament House in Canberra creating publicity for 'Lands Rights' claims.

1987

In NSW the Children (Care and Protection) Act passed, introducing a hierarchy of placement options for children, with the first three preferences to keep Aboriginal children within the Aboriginal community.

1992

The Mabo judgement is delivered, in which the High Court found that the people on the Murray Island in the Torres Strait held and continue to hold native title. For the first time since 1788, the legal fiction of 'Terra Nullius' was declared invalid.

1995-97

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families is carried out. Its report Bringing them Home concluded that 'one in ten Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities between 1910 - 1970.'

In response to the findings of the Inquiry, the Commonwealth Government announced a package aimed at reuniting families and enabling Indigenous people to access archives and historical information about themselves and their families.

2000

'Sorry Day' March for Reconciliation involves over 250,000 people marching across Sydney Harbour Bridge expressing sorrow for past practices and supporting the rights of Aboriginal people to maintain their own culture.

2008

The Australian Parliament apologises to the Stolen Generations. Both the government and the opposition support the apology and say 'sorry' to Aboriginal people who were taken away from their families from 1900 to the 1970s.

Now

Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world. One of the reasons the culture has lasted so long is its ability to adapt to change over time. Aboriginal people have been influenced by the arrival of other people to Australia. Years of misunderstanding and indifference have affected Aboriginal people, but they are continuing to keep their culture and identity alive.

Sources: Trainer Guide 'Our Carers for Our Kids' p. 28 NSW Department of Community Services 2007
'Foster their Culture' p. 28-30 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Victoria 2008

For further information

The Australian Museum has a comprehensive listing of historical and other interesting dates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in its Indigenous Australia section. Go to: <http://www.dreamtime.net.au/index.cfm>

Impact of the past

1. Breakdown of family and community relationships

A legacy of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families has had a destructive influence on family and community relationships. Patterns of child rearing and family life were broken, and many Aboriginal parents are currently raising children without having experienced a secure and safe childhood themselves.

One of the findings of the Bringing them Home report was that there was not a single Aboriginal family that has not been affected by the Stolen Generations in one form or another.

2. Poor health and high mortality rates

From the time of the colonisation of Australia, Aboriginal people have been forcibly removed from their home lands, so they could not access their traditional food sources, medicine or practice their cultural ceremonies. Combined with very limited exposure to healthy European food and medical services, health outcomes for Aboriginal people have fallen far below that of other Australians. Significant health issues for Aboriginal people include

- Otitis media 'glue ear' (affecting Aboriginal children at 10 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children)
- Diabetes 2- (affecting Aboriginal Australians at 3-4 times the rate on non-Aboriginal Australians)

In 1999-2003, 75% of Aboriginal males and 65% of Aboriginal females in Australia died under the age of 65, compared with only 26% of non-Aboriginal males and 16% of non-Aboriginal females. (Statistic from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)

3. Ambivalent relationships with government bodies

Widespread mistrust and fear of government and official bodies is another legacy of past policies and interference in Aboriginal communities. This leads to many Aboriginal people being uncomfortable with dealing with government and other organisations and providing information to them.

4. On-going experience of grief and loss

Aboriginal communities have experienced multiple, continuous and intergenerational loss, due to such factors as the stolen generations, impact of the welfare and justice systems and poor health and mortality statistics. In some instances, destructive patterns of alcohol abuse and other damaging behaviour have been used as means to deal with the psychological damage caused by exposure to very high levels of unresolved trauma and grief.

5. Marginalisation

The impact of dispossession from land and economic means of survival, and the imposition of different cultural values have meant that Aboriginal people are statistically more likely to have convictions on criminal charges. Patterns of incarceration have contributed to the cycle of marginalisation experienced by many Aboriginal people.

Defining Aboriginality

Aboriginal people can no more be ‘part Aborigines’ than they are part human beings.

“Being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual thing, an identity you know in your heart...It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand”

(Linda Burney, quoted in Yarra Bay Press Release at AECG State Rally, 1990)

Australian government definition

Since the early 1980’s the Australian government has used a three-point working definition to enable people to establish their eligibility for specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs.

According to that definition, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is someone who

- Is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- Identifies himself or herself as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Is accepted as such by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community in which he or she lives.

Each requirement must be satisfied. Physical appearance or lifestyle are irrelevant. This definition ensures that people cannot easily make false claims, as proof is required of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and acceptance as a member of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

Material on this Handout is drawn from ‘Foster their Culture’ p. 5 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Victoria 2008

Aboriginal placement principle

Under current NSW law, *Children and Young people (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, general orders for placement of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are set out.

This law states that the first option for Aboriginal children and young people is to be placed with a member of their extended family or kinship group.

However, if this is not practicable or in the best interests of the child or young person, the placement should be with **a member of the Aboriginal community to which the child belongs.**

If it is not practicable or in the child or young person's best interests, the placement should be with a **member of some other Aboriginal family residing in the vicinity of the child or young person's usual place of residence.**

If the first three placement options are found to be not practicable or not in the best interests of the child or young person, **placement with other people, including non-Aboriginal carers**, can occur. Such placements must be made

- in consultation with members of the child or young person's extended family or kinship group and such Aboriginal welfare organisations as are appropriate to the child or young person
- approved by the Director General of Community Services.

The law also states that **when an Aboriginal child or young person is placed with a carer who is not an Aboriginal person:**

- a fundamental objective is to be the reunion of the child or young person with her or her family or community, subject to the best interests of the child or young person
- continuing contact must be ensured between the child or young person and his or her Aboriginal family, community and culture.

If a child or young person has one Aboriginal parent and one non-Aboriginal parent, he or she may be placed with the person with whom the best interests of the child are served. If this placement is not with a person who is Aboriginal, arrangements must be made for the child or young person to have the opportunity for continued contact with their Aboriginal family, community and culture.

Aboriginal culture

Values and beliefs

The importance of family in promoting culture

The aim of parenting for Aboriginal people is to let the child know who they are in relation to their family, their kin, their people, their environment and the living spirits of their ancestors and land. These relationships define a child's identity by defining how they are connected to everything in life.

Aboriginal people have communities that are built on strong generational relationships and on having access to well-developed kinship networks. Many Aboriginal families today still have strong functional kinship networks in place, built on key people who play different roles but hold overall responsibility for the up-bringing and well-being of children and young families. Even in urban communities many Aboriginal families maintain very close contact with their families and members of their local Aboriginal community.

The land and spirituality

Aboriginal people's relationship with the land is different to that of other Australians. Aboriginal people have a deep spiritual connection with the land. Relationships are not just with people, but with the land. Each clan or language group lives in well defined areas that it owns according to its own ancestral law.

The Dreamtime

Aboriginal Dreamtime is the foundation of Aboriginal culture that explains the origins and culture of the land and its people. (The term 'the Dreaming' is sometimes used instead of the 'Dreamtime' to emphasis that it does not only exist in the past, but is a continuing underpinning of Aboriginal culture which therefore still exists today.)

In the Aboriginal worldview, every meaningful activity, event or life process that occurs at a particular place leaves behind a vibrational residue in the earth, as plants leave an image of themselves as seeds. The shape of the land, the mountains, the rocks, the riverbeds, the waterholes and their unseen vibrations echo the events that brought that place into creation. Everything in the natural world is a symbolic footprint of the metaphysical beings whose actions created our world.

Different Aboriginal groups have different Dreamtime stories, but all stories teach aspects of daily life and the traditional lore. These stories are passed on through storytelling, art, music and ceremonies. Through dreamtime stories, children's learning is staged. When children are fully able to understand the meaning behind the Dreamtime stories then the stories' relationship with life experience are explained.

The Dreamtime should be treated with the same respect that is given to other religions, including their beliefs, values and written texts.

Social relationships

Aboriginal culture places great emphasis on the importance of social relationships and mutual obligation. People are seen as belonging to their family and clan as well as their traditional land. Aboriginal people will often ask each other when they meet: 'Who is your mob?' or 'Where are you from?'

Sharing is a strongly promoted value and it is seen that there is a social obligation to share, which can include one's home and possessions, if others are in need. The sense of family / group ownership, rather than individual ownership is prevalent. Material gain is not seen as being as important as family and one's obligation to family and the broader community.

Aboriginal family and kinship structures

Aboriginal people have a complex system of family relationships. Extended family relationships are at the core of Aboriginal kinship systems that are central to the way that culture is passed on and society is organised. It is a complex system that determines how people relate to each other and their roles, responsibilities and obligations in relation to each other, to ceremonial business and to land.

One of the impacts of government policies which separated families and communities was that the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to another was stemmed. However, Aboriginal kinship systems have not disappeared.

Some of the features of traditional family structure include:

Clan

A clan usually consists of two or more family groups that share an area of land over which they have ownership.

Totem

For Aboriginal people the totem is a non-human species or phenomenon that stands for, or represents, the group. Aboriginal people's totems link people or groups through their physical or kin relatedness.

Parents

An Aboriginal child's identity is determined by his or her parents and they are born into their clan's practices, customs and law. Aboriginal parents play an active role in the cultural, social and spiritual development of their children. It is understood that to parent a child means to help the spirit of the child emerge as the child grows and experiences life. Although some traditional aspects of child rearing practices have changed with the impact of colonisation, most Aboriginal parents impart their understanding of culture to their children and maintain their kinship networks.

Mothers and aunts

Aunties have an obligation to support the mother in the raising of her child. The traditionally interchangeable roles of mothers and aunties remain strong in many Aboriginal families today regardless of whether they live in an urban or rural community.

Fathers and uncles

Traditionally, a father's role was to protect and provide for the family, and his brothers (the children's uncles) share in this responsibility.

Many fathers and uncles take time to impart aspects of Aboriginal culture to their boys. However, it is clear that for many Aboriginal communities, the traditional role of the men has been impacted most by the effects of colonisation. Men's roles have changed from that of hunter to a more general role.

Grandparents

Grandparents are very important people in an Aboriginal family's life. They have a critical role in imparting culture, particularly through story telling, and in assisting parents to raise their children. However, one of the key issues faced by Aboriginal communities since colonisation is the shorter life span of Aboriginal Elders, which impacts on child rearing practices.

Cousins

In some Aboriginal languages there is no word for cousins. Cousins may be referred to as brothers and sisters and are likely to be important members of an Aboriginal child's peer group.

Elders

Families are guided by Elders who are respected by the whole community. They may be community Elders (people who have lived in the area for a long time and are respected community participants) or traditional Elders (people who are descendents of the area and active in community issues).

Material on this Handout is drawn from 'Foster their Culture' p. 6-11 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Victoria 2008

For more details about Aboriginal culture, you can download a full copy of the 'Foster their Culture' document from the 'Resourcing' section of the SNAICC website. Hard copies are available free of charge to foster carers and details of how to obtain one are on the SNAICC website. Go to: www.snaicc.asn.au

