

Childcare

and Children's Health

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Implementing an Aboriginal Perspective into any everyday early childhood environment

There is a great enthusiasm for learning about Aboriginal culture and heritage in early childhood services. Carers are looking for ways to include information and present experiences in a sensitive and interesting way for children – whether there are Indigenous children in their care, or not. As a result of this enthusiasm, and when Indigenous culture is included with respect and value, Indigenous children and families can feel a real sense of belonging and inclusion as their heritage is recognised and celebrated. Within any early childhood setting, it is important to make people feel safe, welcome and comfortable. In



embracing the Aboriginal culture and heritage, you are making a clear commitment to the inclusion of Aboriginal children and their families.

The opportunities for implementing a variety of cultural experiences in everyday early childhood programs are endless and are well supported by the range of resources available through both Aboriginal specific and non-Aboriginal organisations. Many non-Indigenous people may have little knowledge of significant sites in their area, and local Indigenous people and traditional owners of the land can be a valuable source of local knowledge. Consider inviting Elders from the local community to contribute their knowledge, skills and experience.

To avoid representing Indigenous culture and heritage in a tokenistic manner, it's important to include Indigenous culture and heritage in everyday experiences, all through the year. Consider presenting resources and materials in the same way as for all cultures, reflecting not only Aboriginal diversity, but the diversity of all cultures in Australia.

The following are some starting point suggestions:

Storytelling

Storytelling is a very important part of Aboriginal culture, where elders, parents and grandparents tell the young ones their Dreaming stories of how the world and features of the landscape were formed and the origins of people, animals and other living things. They also tell children about what their lives were like

when they were growing up. Traditional stories and songs help children understand the lifestyles and beliefs of Aboriginal people.

Children love to tell stories, whether they are true stories, dreams or make believe. The important thing is that children are encouraged to share their ideas, thoughts and feelings. We can encourage children to tell stories by modelling storytelling, with carers who read and learn some traditional Aboriginal Dreaming stories and then retell the story to the children without the aid of a book.

Traditionally stories were told around the campfire at night, so why not sit the children around the edge of a sandpit to retell a story, using a stick to draw images in the sand. Encourage the children to close their eyes and listen to the story and use their imagination to create images in their mind.

Books

Traditional and contemporary picture books and story books should be available to children all the time. Including Aboriginal stories along with all other books on the bookshelf gives children the opportunity to have an increased choice of books to read. In addition to the many traditional stories based on Aboriginal Dreaming, there are many contemporary stories about Aboriginal people.

Some books are written in standard Australian English, others in Aboriginal Languages and some incorporate Aboriginal English. Some children's stories use a combination of all three.

Music and music making

Finding appropriate cultural music for children can be difficult, but, if you think of it being more than an opportunity to sing and dance and use it as a chance to relax and to calm children, then there are more options available.

Aboriginal music, didgeridoo or other instruments playing softly in the background while children are eating, resting and even playing inside or out, will add yet another element to the educational program for children.

There are many opportunities throughout the day for upbeat singing and dancing music, too. It may not only be artists singing children's songs that are played, but

other well known Aboriginal artists offering a mixture of both contemporary and traditional songs can be appropriate for use in particular settings.

Children will also enjoy making and playing traditional instruments. Didgeridoos are a well-known aspect of the culture but they may have been avoided because of uncertainty about doing the right thing. It is important to understand that the didgeridoo was played in traditional ceremonies by men, and it is considered to be a male's playing instrument. How you relay this information needs to be thought through carefully. It may be an opportunity to help children see that there are many cultures throughout the world that have sex differentiated activities.

If one wants to be sure of avoiding causing offence, making an emu caller might be more appropriate. An emu caller is similar in appearance to a didgeridoo. It's much shorter, about 40cm long and can be made with pieces of cylindrical wood and decorated with paint or felt-tipped pens. Traditionally, the emu caller was held in one hand and one end of it was tapped with the other hand. The sound emitted is similar to that of an emu and Aboriginal hunters would use these to call in emus who are very curious, and would go looking for the sound. When the emu was close enough, the hunter would spear it. Telling this as a story will add to children's appreciation of the emu caller.

Another traditional way hunters tried to attract emus was to lie in long grass and wave their arms and legs. The curious emu would be speared when it came running to see what was going on. Try acting this out with children – it is a lot of fun.

Another fun music-making activity is clapping sticks – also known as tapping, or music sticks. Traditionally they are made of wood and decorated with paintings or burnt wire markings. The sticks come in many sizes and can be made to suit the person using them. Two sticks are tapped together to give a beat. They are used by both males and females. You can make your own clapping sticks with dowel which can be purchased and cut to size at most hardware stores. As with emu callers, when children paint and decorate the clapping sticks, they are ready to be used regularly.

Puzzles

Not long ago, centres were being advised to make their own puzzles from Aboriginal posters because the available puzzles were difficult to find or were so detailed in their design that children were unable to complete them on their own.

Now, there are many puzzles which show the diversity of Aboriginal people and their lifestyles. Children should be provided with a selection of both contemporary and traditional style puzzles. Carers can provide children with an opportunity to increase their awareness of the diversity of Aboriginal people by discussing the varied pictures and colours used.

Construction

Block play is a wonderful opportunity for children to use their imaginations to create, build and construct. Offer children the chance to create scenes from stories they have been read. New materials can be introduced to add to their constructions. Materials may include pieces of cloth to resemble a waterhole or river, sticks and blocks might be used for a campfire. Wooden animals such as snakes and goannas could surround the campfire or have been hunted for food. While it is important to display Aboriginal artefacts in early childhood settings, it is also valuable to promote their use in the daily program. If displayed alongside regularly used areas such as block and construction, children will use great imagination as they include these materials into their everyday play.

Games

Traditionally Aboriginal children made up many of their own games, just like children today. Using their imagination and the materials around them, they were never bored and always entertained.

You might suggest that children collect small rocks or pebbles that can be painted in various designs and used for different games such as counting, matching, sorting and alphabet or word games. The same games ideas can be made with cardboard or cards. Children will relish the opportunity to decorate with Aboriginal type designs and make them their own.

Imaginative play

Play, using available materials and resources, allows

children to use their imaginations to create their own meaningful experiences.

Pieces of Aboriginal designed materials can be used for tablecloths, bed covers, floor mats and wall hangings. Aboriginal boy and girl dolls can be purchased through various education suppliers and come in a variety of skin colours, representing the diversity of Aboriginal people in Australia.

A coolamon is a wooden dish like implement used to hold water and for a variety of other purposes such as carrying food or for a baby to sleep in. Larger sized coolamons can be used for dolls' beds and smaller coolamons used as eating bowls or to collect and carry things.

Cooking

Traditionally Aboriginal people hunted and gathered their food from the land and it was cooked in a variety of ways including on hot coals, in the ashes and steamed. Damper was made from seeds of native grasses and shrubs and cooked in the ashes, covered in hot coals. Damper can be made easily with children, using flour and water, and cooked in the oven. Using this activity as a time to sit and tell Dreaming stories can add to the overall experience.

Nature

Traditionally Aboriginal women and children gathered a range of natural materials, including shells, seeds and seed pods, leaves and flowers and some grasses, to make things such as grass woven bags, baskets and mats. While these may be too difficult for young children, they can still be encouraged to gather items from the natural environment to use for collage, making games or threading for jewellery.

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The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this article is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

Case Study – Implementing an Indigenous Program in a Childcare setting

Jenny King is a Koorie Preschool Assistant who provides an Indigenous Language and Cultural Program in centres in the Wellington and East Gippsland Shires in Victoria. The program is for all children, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous and the experiences provided in the program can be used in any care setting, even if there are no Indigenous children. The program draws on the knowledge of local Indigenous people and helps children (and their families) appreciate Indigenous culture and significant sites in the local environment. Respect for and involvement of local Indigenous people are strong elements of the program.



The language belongs to the Gunai/Kurnai* people who live in the area. Jenny has had to gain permission from the Elders to teach the language in the different centres that she visits. At Lakes Entrance they have a local Indigenous language/art teacher who delivers the language to the children each and every week. Over the year, the children learn greetings, animal names, sea creatures, kinship terms, body parts, colours and counting, as well as a few songs. The Gunai Language Program has an interactive CD Rom produced specifically for and relevant to the Gunai/Kurnai people of Gippsland. It is delivered on the centre's computer and includes spoken word and listening activities, stories in language and memory games.

The Lakes Entrance centre is very fortunate in having ongoing support from a local elder, Uncle Max Soloman. Uncle Max visits the centre on a

regular basis. He comes to share his knowledge and culture by telling Aboriginal stories, showing the children his wood burning skills and he also carves animals out of wood. In the winter he comes and cooks Johnny cakes (like damper) on the camp fire in the playground. Uncle Max is a living treasure to everyone who meets him and the children adopt him like a grandfather. His involvement in the centre plays a big part in keeping Aboriginal children and their families attending regularly and bridges relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the community.

The year's cultural program culminated in an excursion to The Knob Reserve. This is an extremely significant place for Gunai/Kurnai people. It was the meeting place for the 5 tribal groups for corroborees, marriages, initiation and trading of goods. The children, parents and staff were met by the Young Spirit Dance group who welcomed everyone with traditional Gunai dancers. Uncle Max took them on a cultural walk through the bush to look at scar trees, grinding grooves, traditional bush foods and ochre rocks by the river. After lunch they participated in painting and throwing boomerangs and traditional Koorie games. This excursion was a "hands, ears and eyes on" approach to providing an insight into another culture which mirrors the teaching methods employed by Aboriginal people.

Following the excursion parents and carers were surveyed about their responses to the day and their attitudes to the Language and Cultural Program. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. All parents agreed that the experiences had been beneficial to their child. Parents and carers spoke of their appreciation for the Program and what it has taught them and the children.

*Gunai and Kurnai are different ways of spelling the name of the clan groups of the Gippsland area in Victoria.

Insect Stings and Bites

Children have a natural affinity with nature and they relish the experiences offered by the outdoors. Being naturally curious, most children will encounter the small world of insects and spiders – so bites and stings may occur.

Simple precautions may reduce the threat of insect bites and stings:

- Regularly check outdoor environment as a precaution
- Remove leaf litter, keep grass cut short and remove clover as it attracts bees
- Outdoor food should be covered
- No soft drink cans outside. Wasps are attracted to sweet drinks, and can crawl into soft drink cans and sting whoever drinks from the can
- Insect repellents should not be used on babies or toddlers, but may be used sparingly on children. It's advisable to test for a reaction on a small area of skin before use. Roll-ons are safer than aerosols, especially for young children. Avoid eyes and mouth and the parts of hands and fingers that may touch faces or go into mouth
- Educate children about the dangers of touching insects and spiders
- Keep poisons information sheet near the phone.

Many insect bites and stings cause short-term pain or discomfort and localised swelling, but most do not present a serious health threat and are treated by:

- Washing the affected area with soap and water – this reduces the likelihood of infection
- Applying a cold pack to help reduce swelling and itchiness
- If pain persists, the use of paracetamol can be discussed with a parent or a medical practitioner.

Some bites/stings can be more serious and immediate medical attention will be needed. If possible, it can be useful to take the dead insect



along for quick identification and appropriate medical response.

It is important to monitor a child who has been bitten or stung.

Carers should have a record of children who have known insect allergies, but even children who do not have a previous history of known allergy may experience an allergic response to a bite or sting.

Watch for symptoms that might indicate a severe allergic reaction, or anaphylaxis. These symptoms include one or more of the following:

- difficulty breathing
- swelling around the lips or eyes
- vomiting
- widespread rash
- dizziness or collapse.

Call 000 immediately for an ambulance if:

- any of the symptoms listed above appear
- if a child has previously had a severe allergic response to an insect bite or sting
- if the child has been stung in the mouth or throat.

For children with anaphylaxis, follow the child's emergency health management plan that may include administering Epipen.

The following information relates to some common stinging insects:

Wasps

Wasps are aggressive and can sting repeatedly, and the risk of an allergic response is increased if multiple stings occur. Apart from the danger of wasps crawling into soft-drink cans, wasps are attracted to sweet foods and meats, so extra care should be taken in supervising children eating these foods outside. Keep children away from wasp nests, as disturbed wasps are more aggressive.

Bee stings

Unlike wasps, bees can only sting once because they have a sting with barbs that remains in the skin. Stinging kills the bee, but the sting that remains contains poison (or venom). While it remains, more poison can be released, so it's important to remove the sting. Use your thumbnail to gently scrape the sting out – don't squeeze or pull as this will release more venom. Some children are allergic to bee stings so any child who is stung should be closely monitored.

Ants

Most ants bite, and some, including bull ants, are aggressive with very painful bites that cause localised swelling and intense itchiness. Cold packs may help relieve symptoms, but children should be closely monitored in case a more severe allergic reaction occurs.

Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes are particularly active in the evening and night and unprotected, sleeping children are especially vulnerable to mosquito bites. The bites cause itchiness and red lumps – sometimes with localised swelling,

especially if the bite is on the face. Applying a cold pack can relieve discomfort. Calamine lotion may also help.

Note: Mosquito bites can transmit serious diseases, – for example Ross River fever. In areas with a known threat of mosquito borne disease, extra care needs to be taken to protect children.

Caterpillars

The hairs from caterpillars can get into the skin and cause severe itching, but it is unlikely that treatment other than removing the hairs and applying a cold-pack will be needed. To remove hairs, press adhesive tape over the affected area, and carefully lift it off. Tweezers can also be used for individual hairs.

Note: If caterpillar hairs get into the eye, the child will need medical attention. Don't try to remove the hairs yourself.

Spiders

Most Australian spider bites are not life threatening. Funnel web and red-back bites are the exceptions and urgent medical help is needed for these bites. Bites from spiders can be very painful and may cause swelling. Some bites can become infected. If pain persists or infection occurs, seek medical attention.

References:

http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/insect_bites

QIAS – Principles 5.2, 5.4, 6.6

FDCQA – Principles 4.3

OSHCQA – Principles 7.2

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