



WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

A PRACTICE
RESOURCE



NSW Department of
Community Services

Produced by
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Aboriginal Reference Group

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A number of NSW Department of Community Service (Community Services) regions as well as several other government agencies have created their own practice guides for working with Aboriginal people and communities. In developing this practice resource, we have combined the best elements of existing practices to develop a resource that provides a consistent approach to working with Aboriginal people and communities.¹

The information and practice tips contained in this document are generalisations and do not reflect the opinions of all Aboriginal people and communities in NSW. There may be exceptions to the information provided.

As Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW; and as the NSW Government only has a specific charter of service to the people of NSW, this document refers only to Aboriginal people. References to Torres Strait Islander people will be specifically stated where relevant. It is important to remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. It is respectful to recognise their separate identities. Community Services recognise that Torres Strait Islander people are among the First Nations of Australia and represent a part of our client and staff base. The Department's Aboriginal programs and services are available, without question, to Torres Strait Islander people.



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SECTION ONE: GENERAL INFORMATION



What is the practice resource and why do we need it?

This practice resource — *Working with Aboriginal people and communities* is a guide for all Community Services and relevant non-government organisation (NGO) staff, particularly field staff. It has been developed to improve service delivery to Aboriginal people by providing staff with key facts, and information relevant to working with Aboriginal communities in NSW. This resource will help us become more culturally aware and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people and communities.

Working with Aboriginal people and communities provides important information to improve our knowledge and understanding of the diverse cultural dynamics that

exist within Aboriginal families and communities. It suggests some engagement and communication strategies that will improve the way we work with and relate to Aboriginal people.

Staff in Community Services and NGOs may find it difficult to build open and trusting relationships with Aboriginal people and vice versa. This can often be attributed to a lack of cultural understanding or a lack of awareness of effective practice techniques. This resource will help staff to break down these barriers by offering practical advice and solutions.

Many cultural and historical factors need to be acknowledged by anyone who works closely with Aboriginal people. Having

a greater understanding of this background, puts us in a better position to appreciate both the current impacts these factors have on communities and how we can work with Aboriginal people in the future.

Aboriginal culture and communities are diverse and there are many different nations, tribes and groups living in NSW. In view of this a 'one size fits all' approach will not work and we need to tailor our ways of working and communicating to meet the needs of the individuals and communities concerned.

Historical overview

History of mistrust of welfare based agencies

Historically the words protection and intervention have not been associated with positive outcomes for Aboriginal people, even where the actions of individuals offering these services may have been well intended. There is an understandable mistrust of people who offer services based on these concepts.

Some reasons for this mistrust stem from European colonisation and the subsequent forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, resulting in the Stolen Generation. Removing children from their families was official government policy in Australia until 1969. Taking children from their families was one of the most devastating practices of white settlement and for many Aboriginal people the impact of this practice is still felt today.

There are a number of other underlying social issues faced by Aboriginal families that impact on

the issue of mistrust such as power differences, lack of representative structures and a lack of Aboriginal people in influential positions in government.

Having said this, NSW Government organisations and NGOs are putting policies and programs in place that are committed to acknowledging and attempting to change these perceptions. However, this is something that is going to take time. Government and non-government agencies are moving towards working in more coordinated and collaborative ways with Aboriginal organisations and communities to develop a range of strategies, programs and initiatives that better meet their needs.

State and national apologies

In 1995, the Commonwealth Attorney General established a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, to be conducted by the Human Rights and Equal

Opportunity Commission (HREOC). The Inquiry report, *Bringing them home*, was tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament on 26 May 1997.

On 18 June 1997, former NSW Premier the Hon. Bob Carr, issued a formal apology in response to *Bringing them home*. Premier Carr moved that NSW 'apologises unreservedly to the Aboriginal people of Australia for the systematic separation of generations of Aboriginal children from their parents, families and communities' and 'acknowledges and regrets Parliament's role in enacting laws and endorsing policies of successive governments whereby profound grief and loss have been inflicted upon Aboriginal Australians'.²

On 13 February 2008, history was made when newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on behalf of current and successive Commonwealth Government/s:

KEVIN RUDD'S APOLOGY TO THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

“We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.”³



Historical overview (CONT'D)

Over-representation of Aboriginal people

Aboriginal children and young people make up around 4 per cent of all children and young people in NSW, yet they represent more than 29% of all children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC).⁴ To address this issue the NSW Government is investing significant resources into prevention and early intervention strategies for Aboriginal families. Strategies such as Brighter Futures and the Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy focus on providing early assistance for Aboriginal families and young mothers in an effort to prevent adverse contact with the child protection system.

Aboriginal people continue to be over-represented in the following areas:

- welfare systems
- child protection systems
- homelessness
- health systems
- juvenile and criminal justice systems
- unemployment.

Sensitive issues

It is acknowledged that past government legislation and practices enforced on Aboriginal people (e.g. assimilation policies) have contributed to Aboriginal people being one of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Australia. The effects of these policies have left lasting inter-generational impacts which need to be addressed.

Various government legislation and policies have contributed to:

- dispossession of land
- family fragmentation
- mental health issues
- social and emotional wellbeing issues
- grief and loss issues
- poverty
- racism
- unemployment
- poor health outcomes
- poor housing standards
- below standard literacy and numeracy rates
- alcohol and substance abuse/misuse
- over-representation in the juvenile and criminal justice system.

Historical overview (CONT'D)

Grief and loss

Grief and loss issues are prevalent in many Aboriginal families and communities and continue to adversely impact the lives of many people. These grief and loss issues are a combination of European colonisation resulting in the forced removal of children and other underlying socio-economic factors. The path of destruction is cyclical and inter-generational.

Grief and loss issues can result in:

- mental health issues
- self harm and intentional injury
- suicide — particularly with youth
- drug and alcohol misuse and addiction
- over-representation in the juvenile and criminal justice system
- over representation in welfare systems
- homelessness
- family and domestic violence
- general feeling of hopelessness
- relationship/connection breakdown
- loss of country
- loss of identity.

It is useful to increase our awareness of these issues and learn how to work more effectively with Aboriginal communities. Improving our ability to better identify culturally appropriate pathways will help us to address some of these issues in a sensitive and respectful manner.



Use of the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander'

Although the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are commonly used now, it is important to note that these names are the legacy of colonisation. Before, during and after invasion the First Nations people of Australia identified themselves by their country such as Darug, Gandangarra, Tharawal, Eora, Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri, Bundjalung and so on. The names Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are colonial labels imposed on a range of people with diverse cultures and languages.⁵

The term 'Indigenous' is generally used when referring to both First Nations' people of Australia — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. You will find that Indigenous is generally used by the Commonwealth Government as they have a charter of providing services and programs to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a national

level. The term 'Aboriginal' refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia's other Indigenous population — Torres Strait Islanders.⁶

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are opposed to the term 'Indigenous' being used as it generalises both cultures. Community Services advises against using this term where possible.*

In Community Services we refer only to Aboriginal, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW, and therefore we do not have a specific charter of service to Torres Strait Islander people. Having said that, we acknowledge and respect that Torres Strait Islander people are among the First Nations of Australia. We further acknowledge that Torres Strait Islander people represent a part of our client and staff base. It is important to

remember that while both are First Nations of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. It is respectful to give each their own identity.

It is considered offensive to include a footnote to the word Aboriginal stating that 'it includes both Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people', so it is advised not to do this. When specifically referring to both cultures, use the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'. Again, in all other circumstances, use Aboriginal.

All Community Services Aboriginal programs and services are open to Torres Strait Islander people, but are not always developed in consultation with Torres Strait Islander people. This is why we must be careful when using the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'.

* You may use 'Indigenous' if you are quoting or referring to another source where the term is used (eg. Commonwealth document, National data collection).

Use of the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' (CONT'D)

Definitions

Aboriginal as defined by the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW) is a person who:

- is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia
- identifies as an Aboriginal person and
- is accepted by the Aboriginal community in which the person lives.

Torres Strait Islander as defined in section 7 of the *Torres Strait Islander Land Act 1991* (QLD) is a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands.

Terminology

Outdated terms such as full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste and quadroon are extremely offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Acronyms such as ATSI, TI, TSI or abbreviations such as Abos should never be used as they are offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Do not use the words Aborigine or Aborigines as many Aboriginal people feel it is linked back to the terminology used in the periods of colonisation and assimilation. Instead, use Aboriginal or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

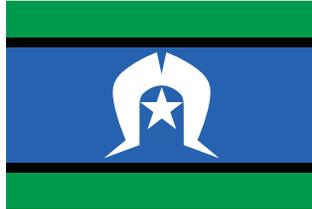
The first letters of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are always capitalised. Not doing so is regarded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as being 'racist, offensive and belittling, a way of negating our identity and

nationality and can be similar to misspelling a person's name (gail or dianne) or another country's inhabitants (chinese, european) by not capitalising'.⁷

Aboriginality is not defined by a person's skin tone or where they live. The colour of an Aboriginal person's skin may become lighter through different generations; it is also common for many Aboriginal people within the same family to have different complexions to each other. A person's Aboriginality should never be judged by their skin tone. It is inappropriate to comment on the colour of a person's skin in reference to their Aboriginality. For example, if an Aboriginal person has a fair complexion you would not comment that they 'do not look Aboriginal'.

'Aboriginal people both individually and collectively as a community, define themselves by their culture — not the colour of their skin.'⁸

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags⁹



The Aboriginal flag

The Aboriginal flag was designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas, an artist and Luritja man, originally from Central Australia. The black represents the Aboriginal people, the red the earth and their spiritual relationship to the land, and the yellow the sun, the giver of life.

The Aboriginal flag was first raised in Victoria Square in Adelaide on National Aboriginal Day in 1971, but was adopted nationally by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in 1972 after it was flown above the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra.

The Aboriginal flag is increasingly being flown by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In view of its increasing importance in Australian society, the Commonwealth Government initiated steps in 1994 to give the flag legal recognition. After

a period of public consultation, the Government made its own decision in July 1995 that the flag should be proclaimed a Flag of Australia in section 5 of the *Flags Act 1953*. The flag was so proclaimed by the Governor General of Australia, William Hayden, on 14 July 1995.

The Torres Strait Islander flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag is attributed to the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island, and was flown for the first time in 1992.

The flag is emblazoned with a white *Dari* (headdress) which is a symbol of Torres Strait Islanders. The white five pointed star beneath it symbolises the five major island groups and the navigational importance of stars to these seafaring people. The green stripes represent the land, the black stripes represent the people,

and the blue the sea. The flag as a whole symbolises the unity of all Torres Strait Islanders.

As with the Aboriginal Flag, the Torres Strait Islander Flag is beginning to be flown more widely and gaining more recognition as Torres Strait Islander issues gain more prominence in Australia.

In July 1995, both flags were proclaimed as official flags in section 5 of the *Flags Act 1953*. At events at which flags are shown, the order of display, from an audience perspective from left to right, the Australian flag, the NSW flag, the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag.¹⁰

Aboriginal language group names and nations

Aboriginal people refer to each other by their boundary (state) name (see table A):

It is important to remember that an Aboriginal person living in a particular state may not be from that state originally. For example, if an Aboriginal person originally from Western Australia is now living in NSW, they would still consider themselves to be a Nyungar/Nyoongar rather than a Koori.

Aboriginal people also refer to themselves and their mob by their nation name. (See table B):

There may be several different ways of spelling a nation's name, so if you come across a different spelling, do not automatically think it is an error.

TABLE A

STATE	NAME
New South Wales	Koori/Goorie/Koorie/Coorie/Murri
Victoria	Koorie
South Australia	Nunga/Nyungar/Nyoongah
Western Australia	Nyungar/Nyoongar
Northern Territory	Yolngu (top end), Anangu (central)
Queensland	Murri
Tasmania	Palawa/Koori

TABLE B*

NATION NAME	AREAS
Bundjalung	Grafton, Yamba, Gold Coast
Dunghutti/Thungutti	Kempsey
Eora	Sydney, La Perouse
Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay/ Gomeri	Goondiwindi, Lightning Ridge, Tamworth
Tharawal/Dharawal	Wollongong, Kiama
Wiradjuri	Gilgandra, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Bathurst

* Please note that that not all nations are listed here.

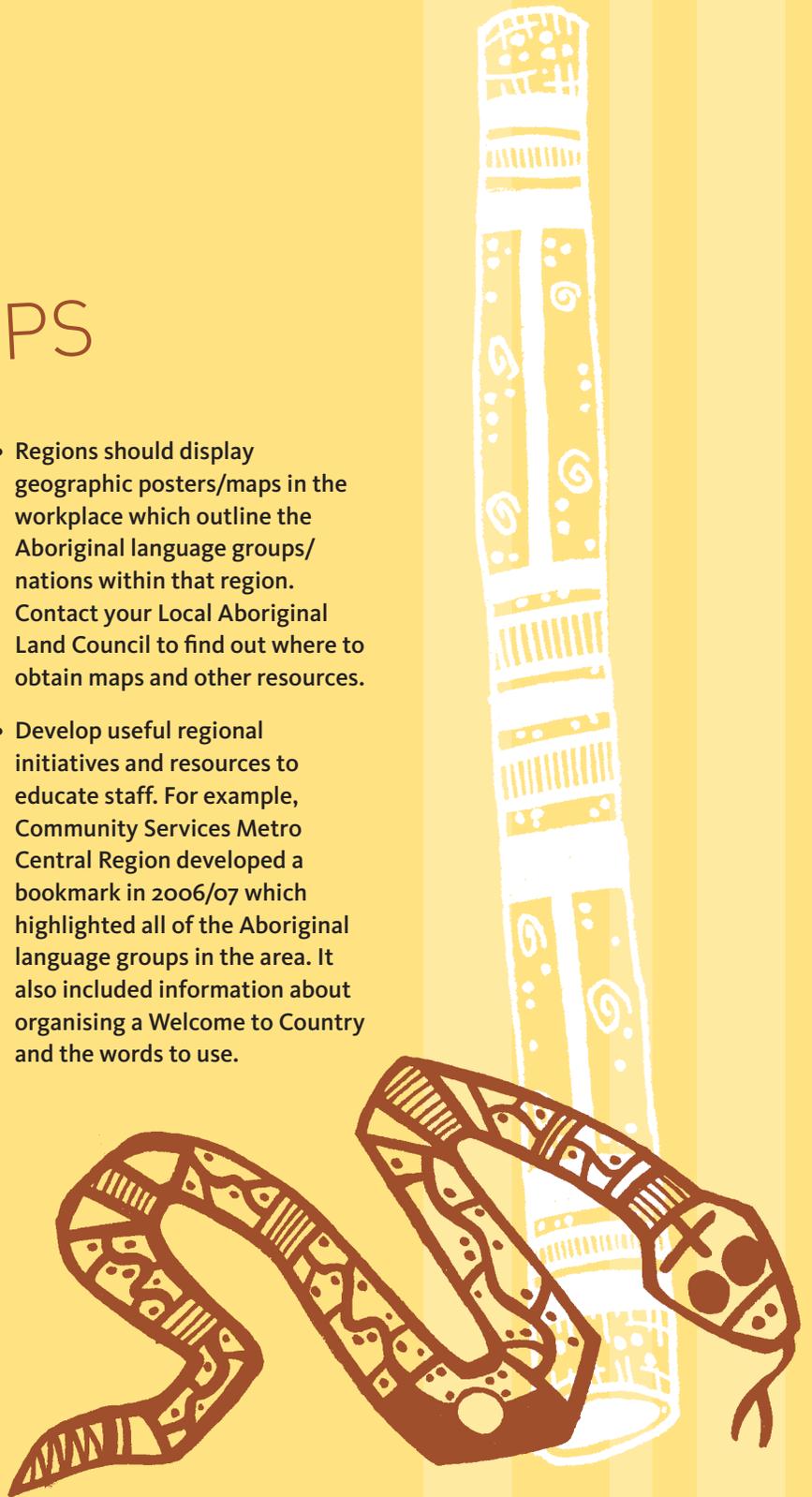
Aboriginal languages of NSW



Aboriginal language groups identified in this map were sourced from a mapping exercise for the revival and protection of Aboriginal languages in NSW conducted by the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs; and the NSW Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre. Please note there may be instances where Aboriginal language groups are not represented.

PRACTICE TIPS

- Familiarise yourself with the area you are working in.
- Have a look at maps and get to know the Aboriginal language groups in your area and the history of those language groups.
- Research relevant Aboriginal organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other service providers in the area and form partnerships with them.
- Some Aboriginal people or community groups may think it is inappropriate for a non-Aboriginal person to refer to them by their boundary (state) name (eg. Koori, Murri). However, if you have an established relationship with the person or community group it may be appropriate for you to use their boundary name when their consent has been given.
- Organise for Aboriginal staff to hold information sessions within their region to give staff an overview of community history and dynamics.
- Regions should display geographic posters/maps in the workplace which outline the Aboriginal language groups/nations within that region. Contact your Local Aboriginal Land Council to find out where to obtain maps and other resources.
- Develop useful regional initiatives and resources to educate staff. For example, Community Services Metro Central Region developed a bookmark in 2006/07 which highlighted all of the Aboriginal language groups in the area. It also included information about organising a Welcome to Country and the words to use.



Aboriginal concept of family and community

Extended family

Understanding structures and concepts that exist in Aboriginal families and communities is important in building relationships.

Aboriginal people have strong family values. The family system has an extended family structure, as opposed to the nuclear or immediate family structure which is common in Western society. This extended family concept is rarely endorsed or understood by government authorities so it is important that workers have an understanding of this when working with Aboriginal communities.

The concepts of extended family and 'community as family' in Aboriginal communities encompass the idea that children are not just the concern of the biological parents, but of the entire community. The raising, care, education and discipline of children are the responsibility of everyone — male, female, young and old. An extended family structure is based on:

- blood-related (mum, dad, brother, sister, grandmother/ father, cousin, aunty, uncle)
- marriage (aunty, uncle, cousin)
- community (Elder, neighbour, friend, organisation)
- kinship system (aunty, uncles, cousins or Elders)
- non-related family (Elder, friend, community member)
- mutual respect
- a sense of belonging
- acceptance and knowledge of Aboriginal kinship ties
- mutual obligation and support.

Kinship

Kinship systems define where a person fits into the community. Kinship systems may vary across communities and nations but the principle is the same across Australia. Kinship defines the roles and responsibilities for raising and educating children and structures systems of moral and financial support within the community.¹¹

The family structure is linked with the community and with this knowledge comes a complex system of roles and obligations within the community. Aboriginal children learn at an early age the kinship ties that exist within their community and subsequently their place in the community.

Acknowledgement of land and original custodians and Welcome to Country

Aboriginal people are the original owners of the land and it is important that this special position is recognised and incorporated into official activities. This enables the wider community to pay respect to Aboriginal people, share in Aboriginal culture and build better relationships.

It is now common to attend a meeting, conference or community gathering where proceedings begin with either:

- an acknowledgement of land or original custodians by the first speaker; and/or
- a Welcome to Country which is performed by an Aboriginal Elder or leader who is from the community in which you are meeting.

When organising a meeting, event or conference, it is respectful and good practice to acknowledge the land in which you are meeting and its original custodians.

It is advisable to prepare such an acknowledgement to deliver at the start of the planned meeting or gathering.

For example:

'I would like to acknowledge the original custodians, the *Bundjalung* people, on whose land we are meeting today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present, and welcome all Aboriginal people here with us today.'

A Welcome to Country can only be performed by an Elder or leader who is from the community in which you are meeting. A non-Aboriginal person can not perform a Welcome to Country and to do so is rude and disrespectful to the traditional owners and to all Aboriginal people.

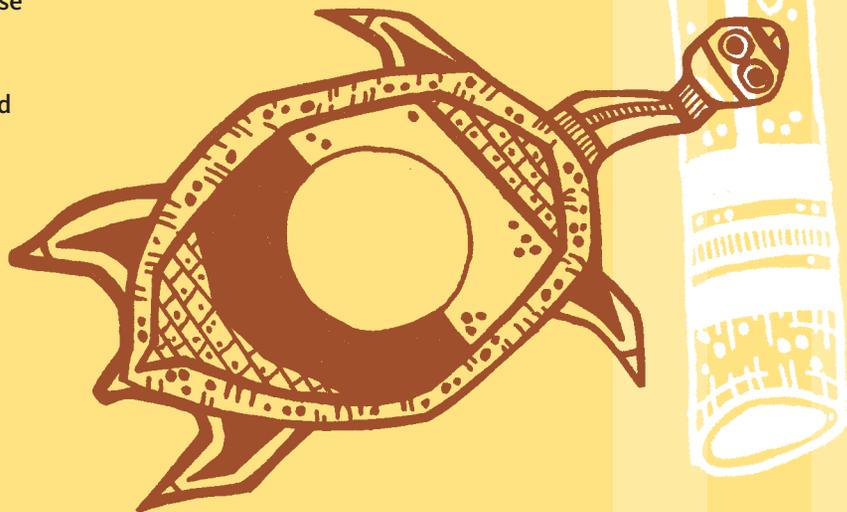
An Aboriginal person or group delivering a Welcome to Country or giving a cultural performance for an event must be remunerated accordingly.

Please consult the *Recognising Aboriginal Cultural Protocols and Practices Policy* available from The Department of Premier and Cabinet at www.dpc.nsw.gov.au.

Additional information is available in the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs' *Policy Guidelines for Aboriginal Cultural Performances* which includes a fee schedule at www.daa.nsw.gov.au.

PRACTICE TIPS

- Be aware and respectful of relevant extended family and kinship structures when working with Aboriginal people. Ensure that extended family is included in important meetings and in making important decisions.
- If there is a need to have someone present as a representative of the original custodians, ask fellow Aboriginal staff, they may be able to deliver the Welcome or recommend someone else. Alternatively you can organise this through your Local Aboriginal Land Council. If you are unsure of the correct Local Aboriginal Land Council use the NSW Land Council website (www.alc.org.au) as it has links to all NSW Local Aboriginal Land Councils as well as other useful information.
- The NSW Department of Premier and Cabinets' *Aboriginal Cultural Protocols and Practices Policy* specifies the correct procedures for Welcome to Country and other cultural performances.
- Refer to the fee schedule in the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs' *Policy Guidelines for Aboriginal Cultural Performances* to ensure Aboriginal people are paid appropriately for their services.



Men's and Women's Business

In Aboriginal culture certain customs and practices are performed by men and women separately, often referred to as Men's and Women's Business. These practices have very strict regulations attached and penalties for breaking these rules can be severe. Some Aboriginal communities that continue to practice their traditional customs will also continue these segregated practices and it is important that this is understood by all staff working with Aboriginal people.

An example of Men's and Women's Business in modern circumstances is when Aboriginal specific courses and conferences are held. It is common to see Men's and Women's Business on the agenda. In this context the group will split by gender and discuss issues separately.



PRACTICE TIPS

- If organising meetings with community members, discuss whether or not the topic of conversation is suitable for everyone or if the issue of Men's and Women's Business will apply. It may require another staff member to attend and run the alternative session.
- Where possible it is preferable for men to speak to men and for women to speak to women, especially in circumstances where you are not known by the person or community.
- There may be times when non-Aboriginal males and females may be asked to leave the room during Aboriginal Men's or Women's Business. It is important to not take offence to this as it indicates that sensitive or Aboriginal-specific issues will be discussed.



Communication

Respect and sensitivity

Respect is very important in every social structure in Aboriginal communities. Respect for Elders, the land, animals and ancestors are fundamental aspects of Aboriginal culture. Therefore, it is important that this practice resource provides an Aboriginal specific and culturally sensitive guideline for respectful, participatory communication with Aboriginal people.

Following a death in some communities, people may find it disrespectful to say the deceased person's name or to refer to the deceased person in general conversation. Where this occurs, different names may be used to refer to the deceased person. This practice may last for months or even years, until all relevant ceremonies have been concluded.

Generally, it is unfavourable to display pictures or images of deceased people. This is particularly the case when the images may be seen by the family or community of the deceased. You should seek appropriate permission from the family and local community before broadcasting names or images of deceased people. Family and communities will be able to advise of the appropriate practice.¹²

A familiar term used by many Aboriginal people is 'Sorry Business' which indicates that there has been a death within a community. If a community is dealing with Sorry Business, it is respectful not to make any requests (e.g. for a community meeting or consultation) for a period of at least two weeks or as advised by the community. During Sorry Business you should ensure you are respectful at all times.

Offer and earn respect

Like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships, engagements with Aboriginal communities need to be based on respect. We need to offer and earn respect, particularly in dealings with community Elders and leaders.

Elders and community leaders not only hold key community knowledge but they also have a great deal of influence over when, how and if a community will work with those from outside. This is also true for other representatives of the local community. An Elder or leader may not necessarily be an older person. They may also be a younger person who is well respected within their community and holds significant community knowledge. Many Aboriginal people acknowledge Elders and

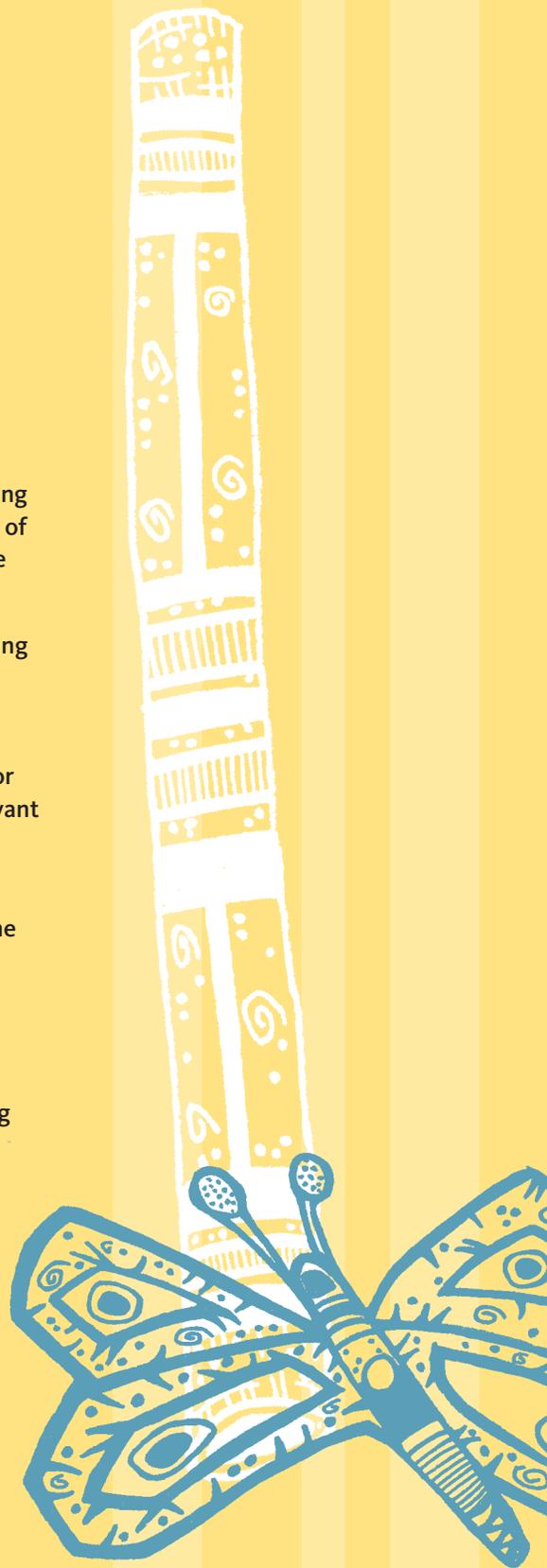
leaders as Aunty or Uncle, even if that person is not blood-related or kin as this is a sign of respect in Aboriginal culture.

Always be aware of the need to consult Elders and treat them with respect. The same courtesies accorded to dignitaries should be applied to Elders. Where extensive consultation is required, ensure that Elders are paid at the same rates as professional consultants. It is unreasonable to assume that consultation can be undertaken with Aboriginal people and communities at no cost. If the intended consultation is not expected to take a long time, then remuneration may not be required. However, it may be appropriate to supply morning or afternoon tea or refreshments. Transport to and from the venue may also need to be arranged.



PRACTICE TIPS

- Respect, acknowledge, actively listen and respond to the needs of Aboriginal people and communities in a culturally appropriate manner.
- Show respect for Elders and leaders in the community and involve them in important decision-making processes.
- Referring to an Elder or leader as Aunty or Uncle may not be appropriate for an outsider unless a strong relationship has been established.
- Establish community advisory groups with local Elders and Aboriginal organisations, or access existing groups to ensure culturally relevant and sensitive service development and delivery.
- Respect cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business.
- Display Aboriginal visual and written material where possible.
- Respect a community that has Sorry Business by not requesting meetings or work, for a period of two weeks or as advised by the community.
- Avoid displaying or broadcasting images of deceased people. If it is important to do so, make sure that you have permission from the person's family and/or community and include a relevant disclaimer.
- If appropriate, remunerate Aboriginal people for their time and expertise.
- If organising consultation or other types of meetings with Aboriginal people consider transport needs. If the meeting will go for over one or two hours, providing light refreshments is recommended.



Communication (CONT'D)

Use of appropriate language

Language

There is no universal Aboriginal language. Each nation has its own distinct language and/or dialect. It has been suggested that there are up to 300 Aboriginal nations throughout the country, speaking about 250 different languages with up to 600 dialects.¹³

Past assimilation policies prohibited Aboriginal people from using their language which contributed to the breakdown in the teaching of language between

generations. Aboriginal culture is an oral culture so this practice had a devastating effect on the preservation of language and knowledge, and many languages have been lost as a result. However, in some communities language is still strong and is being revived and taught at schools and published in books.¹⁴

Aboriginal English

There are slight differences in pronunciation and grammatical structure which may make Aboriginal English difficult to understand at first.

Some Aboriginal English dialects have greater similarity to standard Australian English than others.

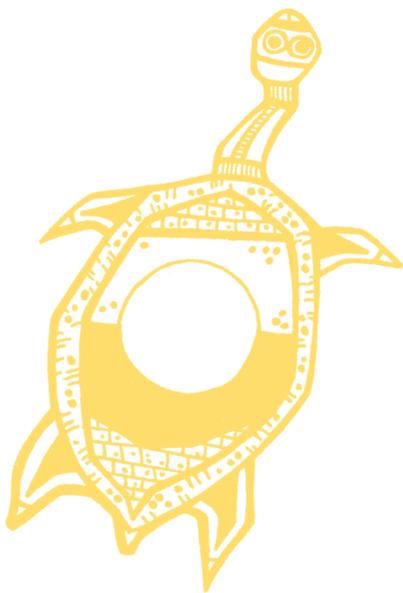
Aboriginal English, an adaptation of the English language, is spoken by many Aboriginal people throughout Australia. While there is a commonality with Australian English, accent, grammar, words, meanings and language use will differentiate Aboriginal English or 'lingo' from Australian English and slang. There are also similarities between Aboriginal English and traditional Aboriginal languages.

Just as similarities between traditional Aboriginal languages and dialects vary between areas, the use and meaning of Aboriginal English also varies according to geographic location.



These are some of the common words you may hear used by many Aboriginal people across NSW:

The Aboriginal English terms listed here are not representative of all Aboriginal communities in NSW. Some of the terms listed are from particular language groups and may only be used by some Aboriginal communities across NSW. Other Aboriginal communities may use other terms which have the same Australian English meaning.



ABORIGINAL ENGLISH	STANDARD AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH
country	land, home
mob	family, kin, group of people
lingo	Aboriginal language
Sorry Business	ceremony and rituals associated with death
grow [a child] up	raise [a child]
growl	scold, chastise
gammon	pretending, kidding, joking
cheeky	mischievous, aggressive, dangerous
deadly	fantastic, great, awesome
shame	embarrass, humiliate
tidda girl	female friend, best friend, peer
sista/sister girl	female friend, cousin, peer
brotha/brother boy	male friend, cousin, peer
gunja, yaandii	marijuana
dubbay, dub	girlfriend, female partner
gubba	non-Aboriginal person
duri (doori)	sex
charge-up, charge	drink alcohol
goomi	alcoholic
goom	alcohol
gungi, gungy	police
jillawah, jillabah	toilet
durri (durry)	cigarette, smoke

Communication (CONT'D)

Pronunciation or accent is a fundamental differentiation of Aboriginal English from Standard Australian English. Even though the words used have the same meaning, some Aboriginal people tend to pronounce words and letters differently; letters are overcompensated, left out or substituted (see example table below).

Do not imitate Aboriginal speech patterns or assume Aboriginal people will be more open with you by attempting to speak Aboriginal English with them.

Aboriginal English makes considerable use of non-verbal signs, especially when discussing direction. These are an integral part of the communication process and should not be ignored.

Differences between Aboriginal non-verbal features and those of other cultures provide additional scope for misinterpretations. This is especially so for people of Anglo-Celtic descent who usually downplay non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication includes hand and facial gestures, eye contact and silence. The most common hand and facial gestures are used to indicate direction. If there are concerns about misinterpreting non-verbal communication, clarify by re-phrasing the question or repeating the non-verbal response back by using verbal language. For example, if asking a person how many children they have and that person holds up three fingers,

clarify by asking back 'So you have got three children, right?'

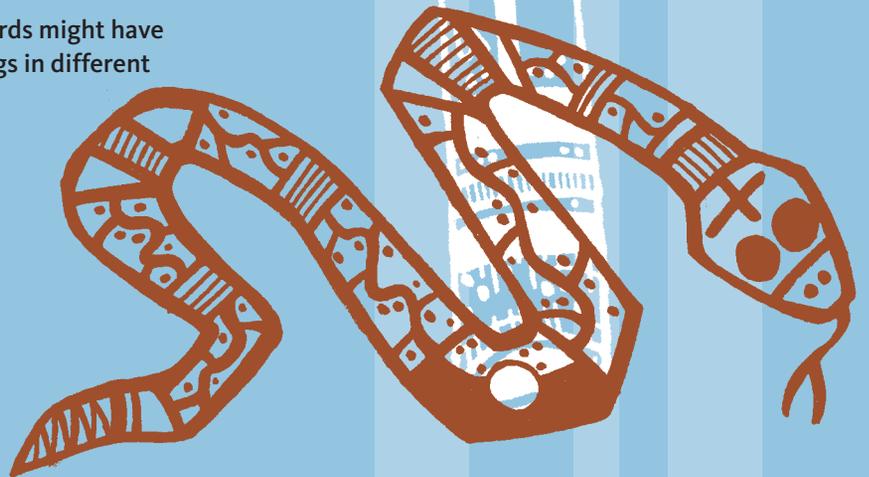
Be sensitive to the use of non-verbal communication cues which are a part of Aboriginal communication patterns. The use of silence does not mean Aboriginal people do not understand, they may be listening, remaining non-committal or waiting for community support. During discussions, Aboriginal people may delay expressing a firm opinion, preferring to listen to others' opinions first before offering their own.

Remember that language issues are extremely sensitive because so many Aboriginal languages have been lost and many of those that survive are endangered.

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH	STANDARD AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH
<i>"They wait longa river".</i>	<i>"They wait along the river".</i>
<i>"They frighten o doctor".</i>	<i>"They are frightened of the doctor".</i>

PRACTICE TIPS

- Don't mimic Aboriginal speech patterns or attempt to speak Aboriginal English as a way of encouraging an Aboriginal person to be more open.
- Think about the language used (written, verbal and non-verbal) when communicating with Aboriginal people.
- Respect the use of silence and don't mistake it for misunderstanding a topic or issue.
- Always wait your turn to speak.
- Always consult with Aboriginal staff/people if unsure.
- Be aware that words might have different meanings in different communities.



Communication (CONT'D)

Communication techniques

Both government and non-government agencies have a responsibility to build effective working partnerships with Aboriginal people and communities. This may be achieved by local agencies and community service centres (CSCs) working with local Aboriginal communities. Workers will benefit by gaining an understanding of community life and working more effectively with Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal communities have constantly met barriers within mainstream systems and Aboriginal cultural priorities have been largely discounted, ignored and undermined. If engagement seems difficult or time-consuming, remember that history has not

given Aboriginal communities and families much reason to walk forward confidently in partnership. When communicating with Aboriginal families, consider other factors which may affect communication.

Some members of the Aboriginal community may have difficulty with numeracy and literacy. If you are working with members of the Aboriginal community who lack these skills, it may be necessary to provide assistance with completing forms, reading information and writing statements. It is important to approach this sensitively and not cause embarrassment or shame to the person by asking them whether or not they can read or write. When the time comes for the person to read or write something, ask them if they would like help or the help of a family or community member. In most cases the person will ask for assistance if

they need it, provided the issue has been approached with sensitivity and respect.

It is common for some Aboriginal people to use swear words in their regular vocabulary and in general conversation. Swearing is not considered to be as offensive as it is in non-Aboriginal culture. If this happens, try not to take any offence. This does not include a person swearing directly at you in a derogatory, threatening or offensive manner; this behaviour should not be tolerated by anyone.

PRACTICE TIPS

- Use clear, uncomplicated language. Do not use jargon.
- Be mindful of potential language barriers.
- Consult with Aboriginal staff within the Department or other government departments if necessary.
- Do not continually ask a person to repeat themselves if it is difficult to understand them, especially in front of a large group.
- Speak clearly and as loud as necessary but do not shout.
- Sensitively offer assistance with reading and writing if it is required.
- Be aware that swear words may be a part of accepted conversation.

Communication (CONT'D)

Building rapport

Local corporations, organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and working parties are good points of contact for establishing the correct people and groups to consult with in a particular community. It may take time to establish these networks or to find out who the right people are. Again, spend the time to do this properly and it will help lay the groundwork for meaningful interaction with the community.

When building good rapport with the Aboriginal community remember that time spent with local Aboriginal community organisations, groups, Elders, children and families makes a difference to the engagement process. A couple of hours in the community each week, having a cup of tea and getting to know the people, is likely to save hours of work in the long run. Workers can learn how the community works, who they need to speak with and who can provide families with support.



PRACTICE TIPS

Cultural bias

Cultural bias influences our actions as our perceptions are shaped by our own cultural context and experiences. When working cross-culturally it is easy to misinterpret what is going on within families; such misinterpretation leads to poor outcomes. For this reason, we need to actively recognise and monitor our own cultural bias and behaviour.

For example, a psychological assessment may find that a child is more connected to their maternal grandmother than their own mother. In this instance it may be misinterpreted that the child would be better off living with their grandmother rather than with their mother. However, in Aboriginal culture it is very common for children to have a greater connection to their grandparents than to their parents. Removing cultural bias in this situation allows us to acknowledge the strong connection to the child's grandmother as a common relationship within an Aboriginal family. We can also acknowledge that a strong relationship between the child and mother also exists, rather than determining that the child is better off not living with their mother.

Cultural sensitivity and the minimisation of cultural bias can and must be learned from Aboriginal people. The diversity of Aboriginal culture must also be acknowledged to work effectively with Aboriginal communities.

- Contact the local organisations and land councils and arrange a visit to meet people in the community.
- Attend community open days, fair days and other events.
- Wherever possible, attend functions in the community that you are invited to.
- Contact parenting groups or the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to get to know the parents in the local community and schools.
- Gain some basic knowledge of the community including dominant family groups, preferred names, original custodians and language groups.

Participation

It is very important to play an active role in the community and participate in as many relevant community events and discussions as possible. In the Aboriginal community word of mouth is very important and once an outsider is known as someone who has built trust and listens, the community will be eager to work with that person.

Having a community development focus in engaging Aboriginal organisations and communities is essential. Community development is based on the idea that local people already know what the issues and problems are and how to solve them. The community development approach means working closely with communities and recognising the strengths, skills and knowledge of local people.

For more information on community participation visit www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au.

PRACTICE TIPS

- Organise activities in the community such as breakfast clubs, family fun days, children's camps and barbeques. In order to develop better relationships with families you will need to involve the whole community.
- Become involved in supporting local events and functions; this is a great, informal way of meeting the community and establishing relationships.
- Having a BBQ or lunches during NAIDOC week, Survival Day or other significant cultural events is an excellent way to introduce yourself, your service and staff to the community. It is good practice to be involved in these activities.



SECTION TWO: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONSULTATION



Effective consultation with Aboriginal organisations and communities¹⁵

Engaging in proper consultation with Aboriginal people and communities on issues that affect them is an important process that must occur, particularly within government.

Effective consultations should occur early and throughout the decision making process, which requires openness about how, why and when they are being consulted and how much influence they will have over the decisions being made.

To ensure the effective conduct of consultative processes, there is a need to:

Identify the sort of representation required in the first instance; work through local Aboriginal agencies to find the right person or group to link to and to get information on the best way to approach them. It is important to get this right to ensure that there are no divisions in the community.¹⁶

It must be understood that any consultations held with an Aboriginal community are generally held with a representative group of members of an Aboriginal community including key family groups, and not necessarily the whole population within a given area.

Using the expression 'we have consulted with the Aboriginal community' implies that there has been a 100 per cent participation of Aboriginal people in the consultation process, when in fact it may only have been a small proportion of Aboriginal people who participated. Participation may be based on a range of factors including levels of interest in the topic being put forward or availability. Therefore, it would be more transparent to state that 'a group of Aboriginal people from the community have participated in the consultation process'.

Aboriginal people have often felt consultations left them powerless to affect government decision-making and for this reason prefer the term 'negotiation', which implies a more equal relationship where parties work through any conflict, finding areas of agreement and agreeing to disagree if areas of conflict cannot be resolved.¹⁷

This experience is well documented. 'Aboriginal communities have complained that in the past, consultation has been tokenistic. Negotiation needs to occur for equal relationships to develop'.¹⁸

Therefore, when planning to seek the participation or views of Aboriginal people on various issues or projects, a decision must be made in regard to the type of process you are engaging in. Explanations of consultation and negotiation processes are outlined below.

A consultation process is used to seek information, advice or an opinion, permission or approval for a proposed action.

The consultation process would be used when approval of a program, policy or service (something that has already been developed) is required. The consultation process can be held at the beginning, middle and end of a project (preferably all three).

A negotiation process is used to confer with others in order to reach a compromise or agreement.

The negotiation process should occur at the very beginning of a process, before anything has been developed. Negotiations take place to determine the overall purpose and direction of the project.

It should be noted that: 'It is crucial to the success of programs if consultation and negotiation occurs so that a more equal relationship is developed'.¹⁹

When developing an equal relationship it is important to 'recognise the specialist knowledge of particular community members and their potential contribution (to the consultation process), and involve such persons where possible and appropriate'.²⁰

Don't over-consult. Many Aboriginal communities are bogged down with numerous requests for consultation that, in many cases, don't go anywhere and become repetitive. Before requesting consultation with Aboriginal people ensure that the same type of consultation has not been undertaken recently. If it has, seek permission to use the outcomes from that consultation to inform the current project.

Before engaging in consultation with Aboriginal people determine what needs to be achieved from the consultation, develop a plan and stick to it. This will ensure that the consultation has a clear direction and the people being consulted know what is required of them.

It is also vital to consult with Aboriginal people who are knowledgeable about the issues of their culture and community dynamics. Although it is a sensitive issue, there are many people that identify as Aboriginal later in life; this can be for several reasons, including ramifications from the Stolen Generation. Although newly identified people may be Aboriginal, they may have limited knowledge and connections to the Aboriginal culture and way of life therefore would not be the best people to consult with on Aboriginal-specific issues. Use best judgement and sensitivity in these circumstances.

Working with Aboriginal organisations

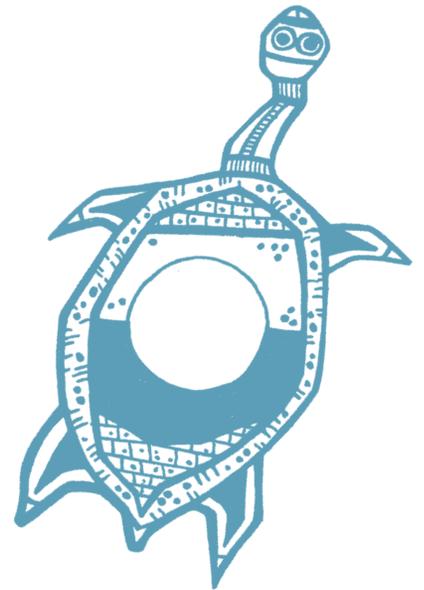
Forging strong working partnerships with local Aboriginal community groups and organisations in your area is very important. Our involvement with these groups and organisations will provide better knowledge of:

- the issues that are faced in the community
- knowledge of family links in the community
- what services are available in the community
- what areas of expertise community members hold
- how these services can compliment work with a particular family or group.

We often find that Aboriginal groups and organisations are very eager to have our involvement and would like to establish a contact who they feel comfortable working with, for both current and future issues.

It is very important that our presence is well known in the community as Aboriginal people prefer to do business with a departmental representative that they are comfortable and familiar with. Having an association with Aboriginal community representatives and organisations will increase our ability to relate to the community we are working in and gain the acceptance and trust of that community.

In many cases, Aboriginal families are prominent in the operation and management of Aboriginal community groups and organisations. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the dominant role of family groups in some organisations. It is important to ensure that any agreements or decisions made following departmental consultation are unbiased, fair and transparent.



Understanding community structures

While community structures vary, most Aboriginal communities will operate based on traditions of extended family and community care, particularly in rural and remote areas.

It is essential that we start to develop an understanding of the diversity within different language and kinship groups living in one area. This will help us to become more aware of local dynamics as we continue to build strong relationships with different communities.

Traditional custodians may not always occupy the land where we are working. The assimilation era displaced many Aboriginal people

from their traditional land and moved people all over the country. Aboriginal people who were placed on missions and homes in areas other than their traditional or original country have in many cases stayed in those areas and created family units. These people are sometimes referred to as 'historical people'.

In some communities there is a mix of traditional people and historical people, or historical people and no traditional people or vice versa. This could be important when addressing the community in acknowledgement of land and Welcome to Country ceremonies. It may also indicate why there may be rivalries or conflict between families and/or community organisations.

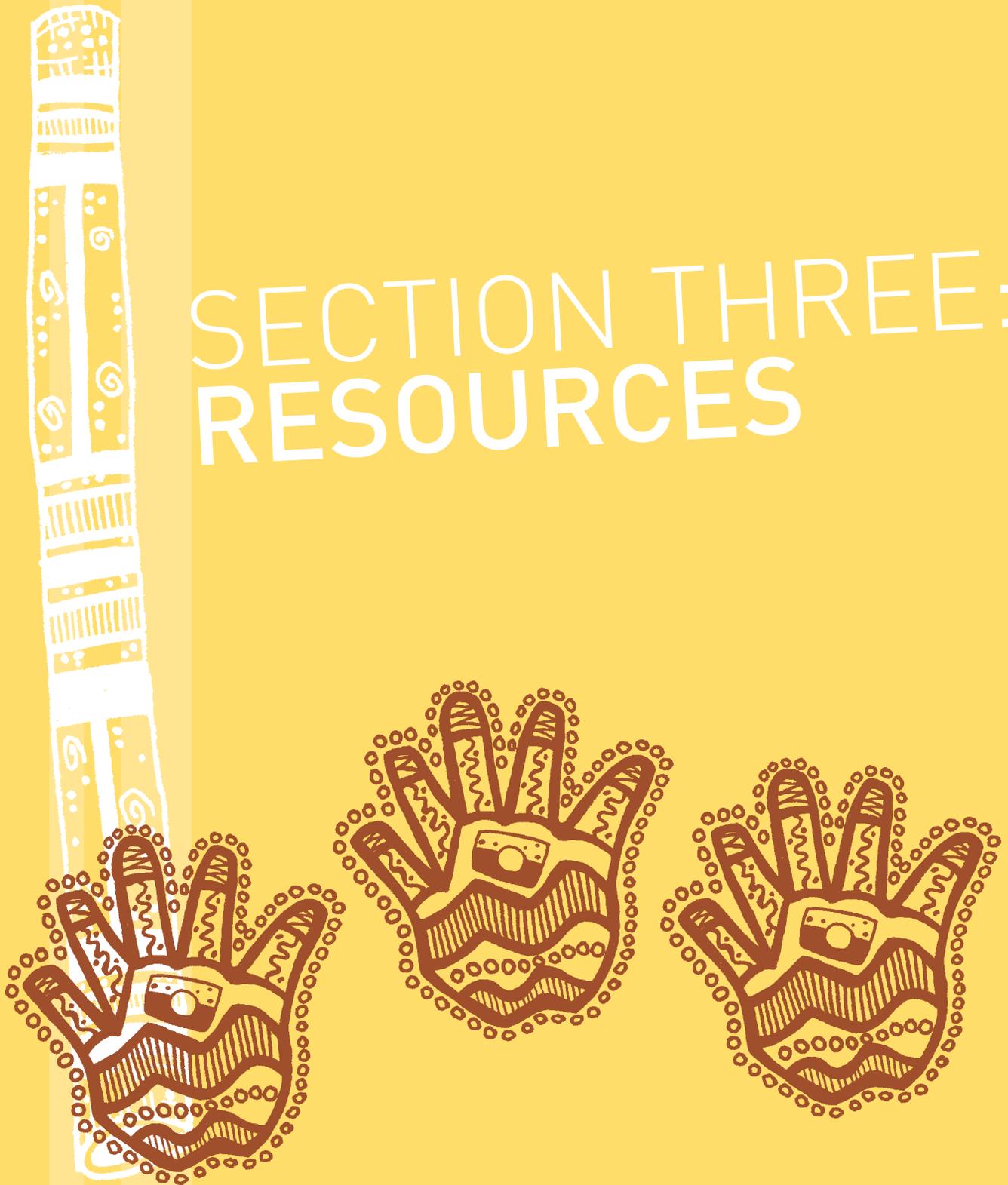
Understanding community structures will also be helpful in locating the Elders of the community or the key people that are seen as representatives of the community. Many of these people will be involved in local government steering committees and organisations.

PRACTICE POINTS



- Finding out what community structures are in place will make it easier to decide how to go about networking with and presenting ourselves to the community. Do this by contacting local Aboriginal organisations and/or the Local Aboriginal Land Council.
- Learn as much about the community as possible.
- Seek out the key people to engage with.
- Consult only with people who are across Aboriginal issues and community dynamics.
- Build strong networks with key people and groups and use the same group when future consultation is required; this will help build trust and maintain consistency.
- Determine the family structures that are in place.
- Ensure that consultation is undertaken with all key family groups within the community. This will avoid some families missing out which can cause conflict.
- Be aware and cautious of dynamics between families and the community.
- Always be open, honest and respectful.
- Seek appropriate permission from the Local Aboriginal Land Council and/or Elders to hold meetings on their land.
- Offer assistance with transport to and from meetings, particularly for meetings being held in rural and remote areas.
- Involve as many Aboriginal Elders, leaders, representatives from all local family groups and local Aboriginal organisations when planning or evaluating a service (establish a community advisory group).
- Where advisory groups are established, develop a terms of reference that clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the group and its members to avoid any confusion.
- Ensure consultations and negotiations are real, genuine and not tokenistic (i.e. consult with a person or group at the beginning, middle and end of a project).
- Keep your word — distrust and cynicism towards non-Aboriginal people and service providers means you need to maintain good communication and always follow through on agreements or decisions.
- Use a common-sense approach.
- Good consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal people takes time so be patient and do not rush matters. Aboriginal people may not work to deadlines about community business in the same way you do. They may also have other important demands on their time that you may not be aware of.
- Don't over-consult. It can be repetitive and time-wasting. Find out if similar consultations have recently occurred before another request to consult is made with Aboriginal communities.
- Where possible use the consultation and negotiation processes so community members are fully involved.

SECTION THREE: RESOURCES



Calendar of significant cultural events

Survival Day

January 26 is not a day of celebration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — the date marks the landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove, the beginning of invasion and dispossession. But it is not a day of sadness. Survival Day has been named for very good reason — despite the injustices of the past, Aboriginal people have survived.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are thriving. We have not let the wrongs of the past 200 years defeat us; now we are seeing Indigenous high achievers in every facet of society — from sport and music to politics and industry.²¹

The Yabun Survival Day concert is one of the biggest Survival Day celebrations in the country and draws people from all over NSW to Sydney. Go to www.gadigal.org.au for more information.

National Sorry Day

The *Bringing them home* report recommended (Recommendation No 7.a) that a National Sorry Day be held each year on 26 May 'to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects'.²² As a result of this recommendation the community-based organisation National Sorry Day Committee was formed. In 2005 the National Sorry Day Committee renamed Sorry Day as a National Day of Healing for all Australians. For more information visit www.nsd.org.au.

Mabo Day

On the third of June 1992 the High Court of Australia rejected the notion of "Terra Nullius", that this land was not occupied before European colonisation. Eddie Mabo, a Torres Strait man born on Mer in the Torres Strait and living in Townsville in Queensland and four other plaintiffs, Father Dave Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Salee, conducted a ten year battle through the courts that led to this historic judgement. Although there were 5 plaintiffs, the decision was named *Mabo Judgement* because it was Eddie Mabo's name that appeared first on the legal documents. The *Mabo Judgement* states in law that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have by prior occupation, ownership of land where native title has not been extinguished. The anniversary of Mabo Day is 3 June. This is celebrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL
Survival Day celebrated on Australia Day 26 Jan			
MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST
National Sorry Day 26 May Reconciliation Week 27 May-3 June	Mabo Day 3 Jun	NAIDOC Week first full week The Coming of the Light 1 Jul	National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day 4 Aug
SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
Deadly Awards no set day in September	NSW Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout Carnival October long weekend		

Reconciliation Week

At the end of May each year National Reconciliation Week celebrates the rich culture and history of the first Australians. It's the ideal time for all of us to join the reconciliation conversation and to think about how we can help turn around the disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For more information visit www.reconciliation.org.au.

NAIDOC Week

NAIDOC originally stood for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC). This committee was once responsible for organising national activities during NAIDOC Week and its acronym has become the name of the week itself.

NAIDOC Week is celebrated annually in the first full week of July, not just in Aboriginal communities, but also in increasing numbers of government agencies, schools, local councils and workplaces.

For many years, the Australian Government has been the major funding contributor to national activities. Wherever you live, taking part in NAIDOC Week is a great way to celebrate Aboriginal culture and build bridges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. For more information visit www.naidoc.org.au.

Calendar of significant cultural events (CONT'D)

The Coming of the Light

The Coming of the Light festival marks the day the London Missionary Society first arrived in Torres Strait. The missionaries landed at Erub Island on 1 July 1871, introducing Christianity to the region.

This is a significant day for Torres Strait Islanders, who are predominantly of Christian faith, and religious and cultural ceremonies across the Torres Strait and mainland Australia are held on 1 July each year.

Torres Strait Islanders celebrate this day as 'The Coming of the Light', an annual holiday in Torres Strait.

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD) is an annual event celebrated on 4 August each year, having been established by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in 1988.

Each year, SNAICC has a theme for Children's Day to highlight a significant issue, concern or hope for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

SNAICC encourages all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, mainstream child and family welfare services, government agencies, schools, preschools, child care services and any organisations with an interest in children to celebrate National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day.

For more information visit www.snaicc.asn.au.

Deadly Awards

Since September 1995, Vibe Australia has hosted the Deadly Sounds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment and Community Awards — the Deadlys. These awards promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievement as a marketable and growing force within Australia. The Deadlys provide a tangible forum where the wider community can learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music and culture.

Beginning at Boomalli Artist Co-op in Redfern in 1995, the Deadlys has since been staged at various locations in Sydney, and most recently at the Sydney Opera House. For more information visit www.deadlys.vibe.com.au.

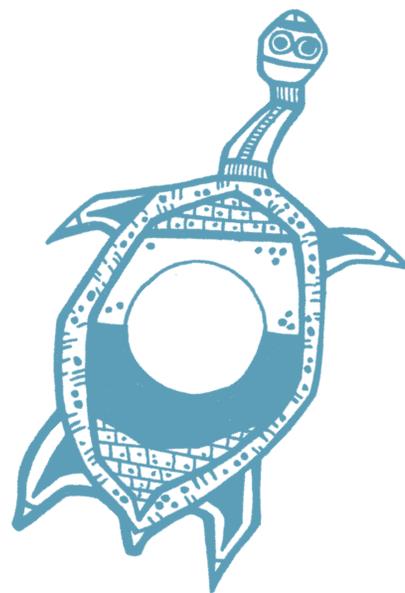
NSW Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout Carnival

For the NSW Aboriginal community, the Knockout is the biggest event of the year attracting up to 60 teams and many thousands of Aboriginal spectators. It is run by and for the Aboriginal community and is largely funded from private sponsorship and community support. For the most part, this major sporting and cultural event goes unnoticed by the wider community.

The Knockout is a four-day dance and celebration reminiscent of traditional ceremonies but also enabling new social and cultural practices to emerge. It is an opportunity for families to gather, re-unite as a community and barrack for their home-towns and mobs, and to commemorate past glories and those who have passed on. The Knockout is fiercely contested, with world class, tough football on display.

The Knockout, beginning in Sydney in 1971, is widely described as a modern day corroboree. It attracts teams from all over NSW from as far as Bourke, Moree, Dubbo, Ballina and Bega to the South. The event involves incredible organisation and planning, largely on a voluntary basis, and victory is cited as a lifetime highlight for players and communities.

Traditionally, the Knockout is held in the town of the previous year's winning team, during the October long weekend.²³ For more information visit www.knockout.net.au.



IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

DO

- Where possible only use the term 'Aboriginal', on the basis that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW.
- Use the term 'Torres Strait Islander' when you are directly referring to Torres Strait Islander people.
- When developing Aboriginal programs or policies, include a disclaimer such as:

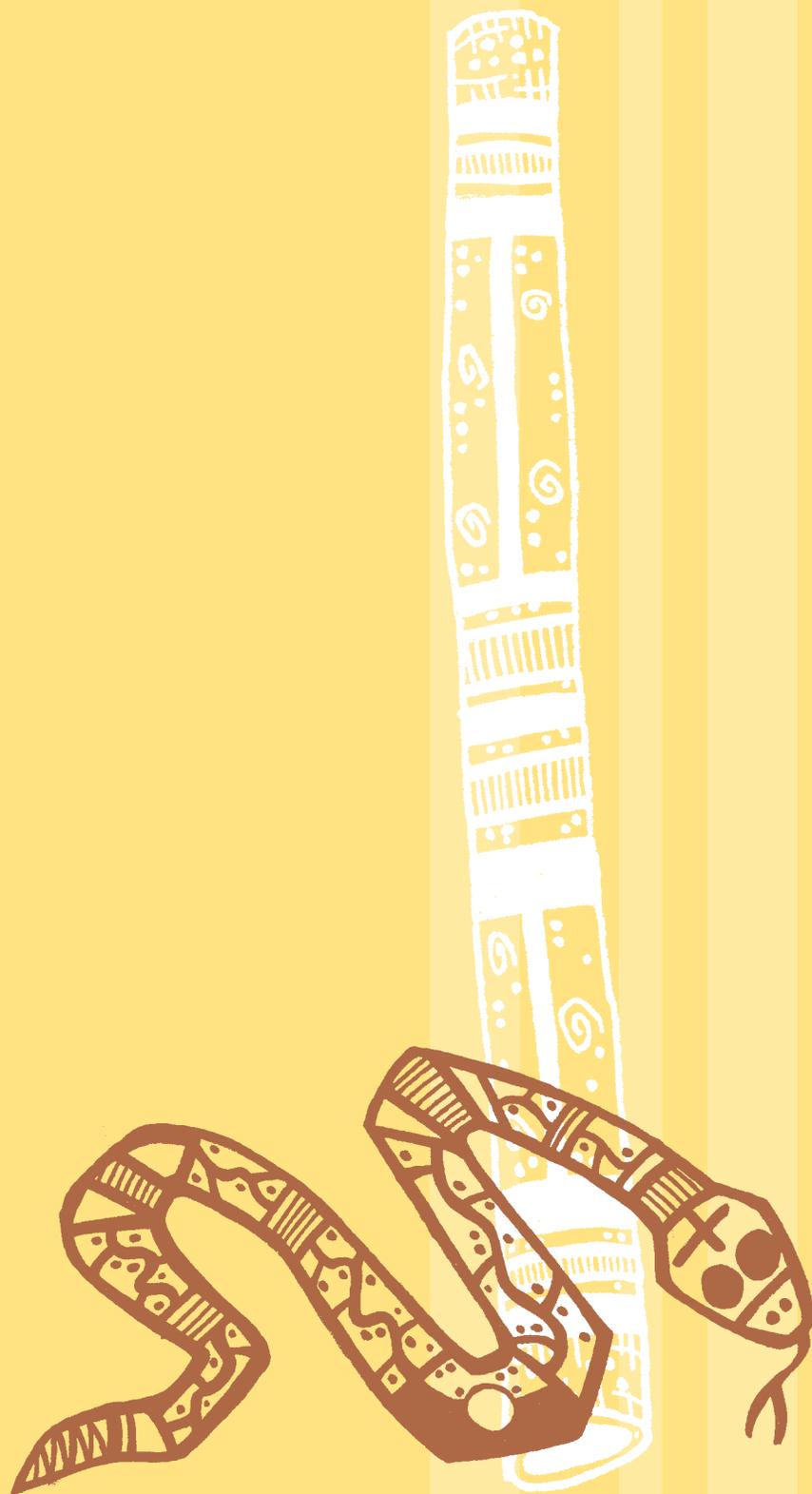
This practice resource only makes reference to 'Aboriginal' people and will not make reference to Torres Strait Islander people unless relevant, as this is a resource for NSW and Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW. There was no consultation with Torres Strait Islander groups in the development of this document.

However, we acknowledge that Torres Strait Islander people are among the First Nations of Australia. All Community Services Aboriginal programs and services are available to Torres Strait Islander people.

- Use capital first letters for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous.
- Acknowledge land and original custodians when addressing a group of people.
- Organise official Welcome to Country speeches for large forums, conferences and gatherings.

DO NOT

- DO NOT include a footnote to Aboriginal stating that 'Aboriginal covers both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.' This is considered offensive and generalises both cultures. It is also considered a generalisation to use the word Indigenous in reference to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people — try to refrain from using this term.
- DO NOT use acronyms such as TSI, TI, ATSI, and terms such as Abo or Aborigine.
- DO NOT use outdated terms such as full blood, half caste, quarter caste and quadroon when referring to a person's Aboriginality. A person is either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.



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² Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them home*, viewed 7 May 2007, www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/apologies_state.html

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- ⁶ Ibid, p.2.
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- ⁹ More information at www.ausflag.com.au
- ¹⁰ NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, *Aboriginal Cultural Protocols and Practices Policy*, www.daa.nsw.gov.au/data/files//Aboriginal%20CulturalProtocolsandPracticesPolicyFINAL.pdf
- ¹¹ www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/family.cfm
- ¹² NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, 1999, *Getting It Right, A Journalist's Guide to Working with Indigenous Communities During the Sydney 2000 Olympics*. p.13.
- ¹³ Ibid, p.7.
- ¹⁴ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, op.cit.
- ¹⁵ Majority of this section was to be part of the Research to Practice (R2P) Note “Use of appropriate language when engaging with Aboriginal communities in NSW”, published by DoCS Centre for Parenting and Research. After discussions with the Centre for Parenting and Research, it was agreed to remove this section from the R2P note for inclusion in this resource. Therefore, we acknowledge and appreciate the work of Hyllus Munro, DoCS Centre for Parenting and Research, in allowing us to use this piece of work.

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- ¹⁷ Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Australia, 2002, *Guidelines for reaching our clients – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*, viewed January 1, 2007; www.learnline.cdu.edu.au/wip/cce/topic4.html
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