

**Aboriginal Cultural
Competence
Framework**

October 2008

Published by the Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria
November 2008

© Copyright State of Victoria 2008, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency 2008.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency owns copyright, and this statement does not take away the Department of Human Services' right to use, reproduce and publish the document in accordance with the (non-exclusive, irrevocable, world-wide, royalty free) licence granted to it by VACCA.

This publication is copyright. No part may be reproduced by any process except in accordance with the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*.

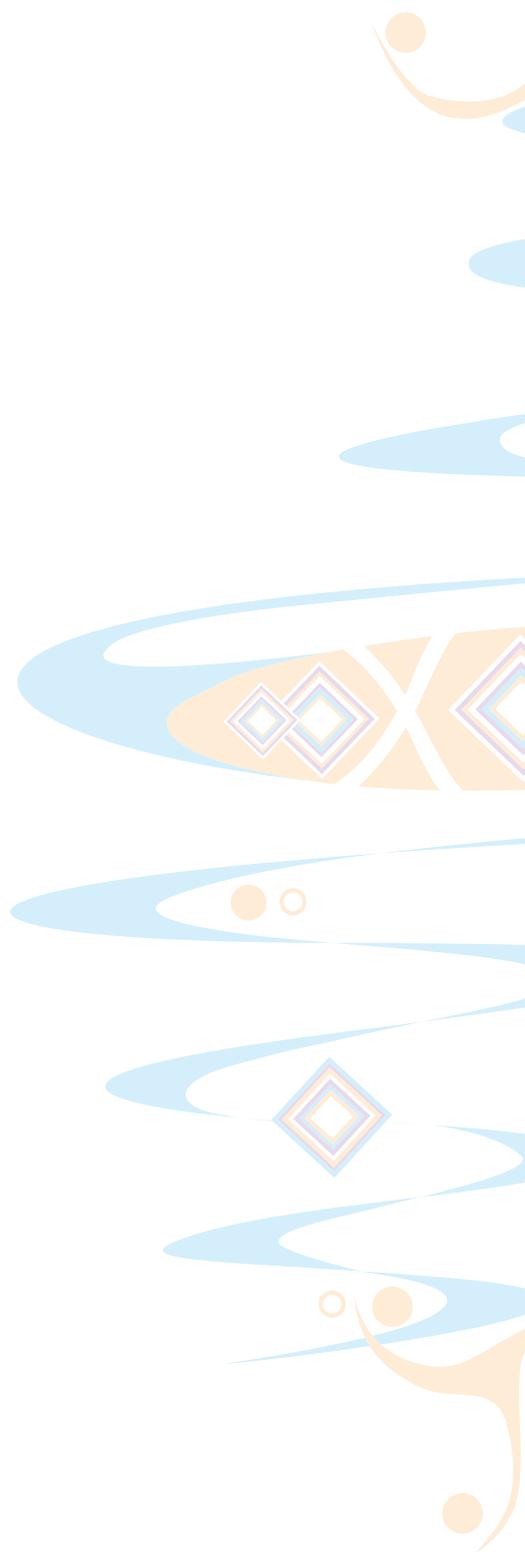
This document may also be downloaded from the Department of Human Services website:
www.dhs.vic.gov.au/

Authorised by the Victorian Government, 50 Lonsdale St, Melbourne

Printed by

Artwork by Reanna Bono.

Description of artwork: The orange figures in the artwork represent families within the communities, which then travel along the pathways to come to a meeting place - where the community and mainstream come together.



Ministerial Foreword

The Victorian Government believes every child has the right to live a safe, stable and healthy life. With the passage of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, Victoria now has a broad reform framework to deliver child and family services.

For Aboriginal children and families this means new principles related to child placement and decision making. It also means better quality child and family services, through registration and performance standards. Significantly, these standards place a high level of importance on mainstream services developing culturally competent practice.

To deliver on these reforms and the need for culturally competent services, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) was commissioned to develop an Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework. This Framework will guide mainstream Community Service Organisations in the development of management strategies, policies and direct practice which will provide better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

There can be no denying the impact of past removal policies of Aboriginal children – these have had a detrimental and lasting impact on the lives of individuals, families and the broader community. Aboriginal Victorians are over represented in a range of measures related to social disadvantage. The Victorian Government is dedicated to breaking this cycle.

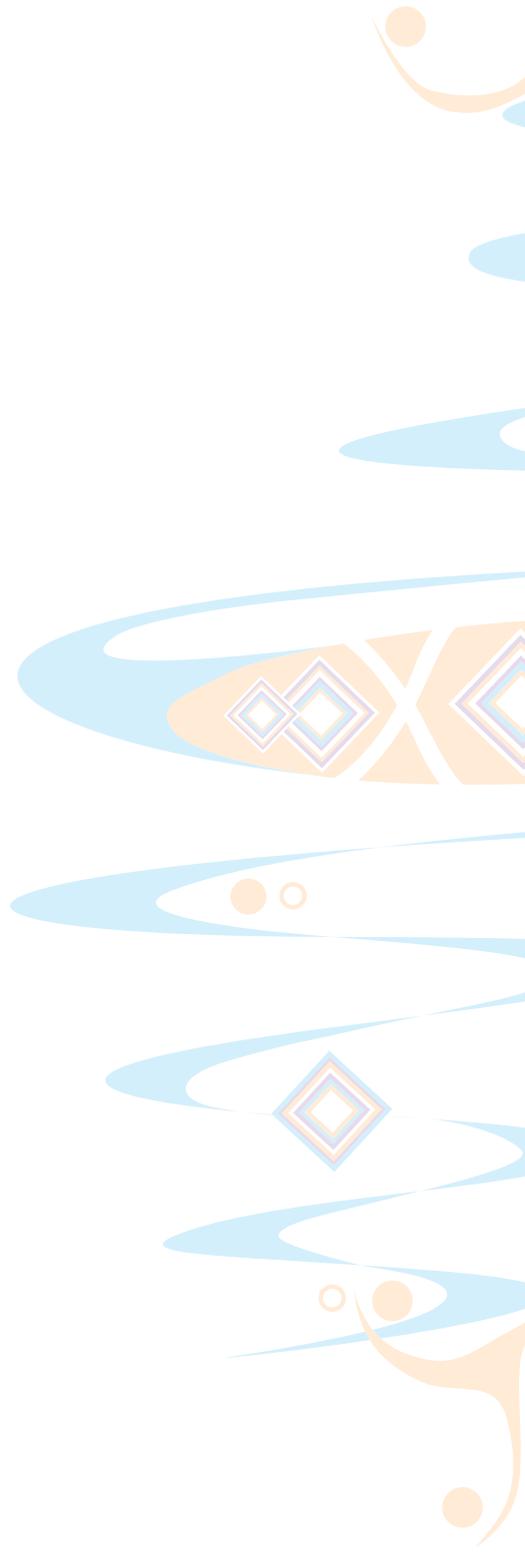
On Wednesday the 13th February 2008, the Prime Minister made a national apology to the Stolen Generations. It is in this context that the Victorian Government is committed to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with respect to life expectancy, access to early childhood education, educational attainment and employment outcomes. In summary, this means working actively toward equal opportunity and improved outcomes for all Victorians.

This Framework is designed to help Community Service Organisations define the vision and realities of cultural competence in the services they deliver. It will provide a solid foundation for improved outcomes for Aboriginal children and families as well better partnerships between these organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

I commend the Framework to you and congratulate all involved in its development.

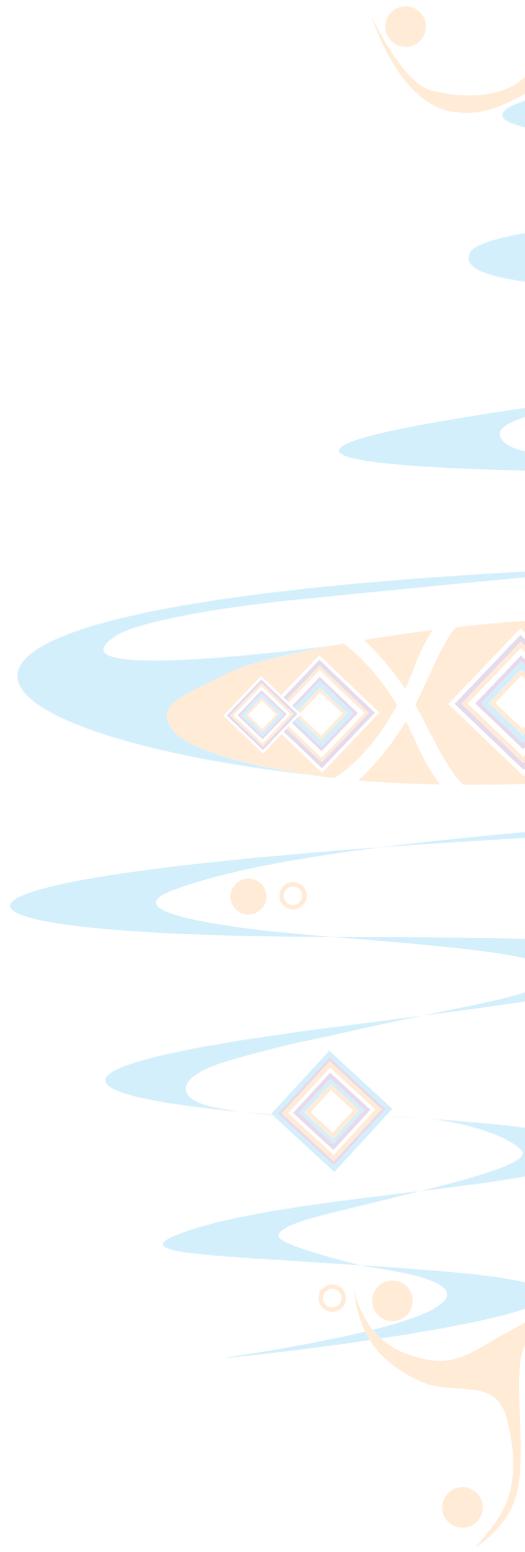


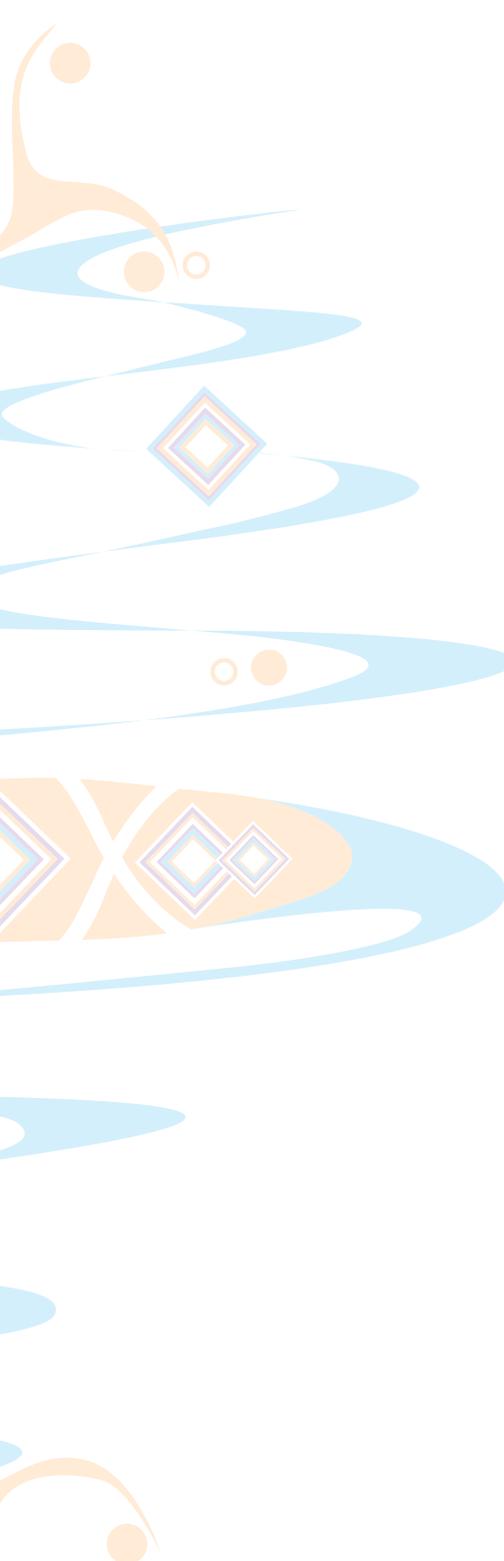
Hon Lisa Neville MP
Minister for Community Services



Contents

Purpose	7	The ground rules: a partnership approach that supports Aboriginal self-determination	30
Approach	8	Self-determination	31
Understanding the policy context	9	The Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations first principle	32
Legislation	9	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are different	33
Registration standards	9	Parallel processes involved in cultural competence	34
Best Interests Framework	10	The best interests principles and the lens of culture	36
Understanding culture	11	Fitting the standards to the framework: a staged approach to meeting the cultural standards for registration	41
First Peoples of Australia - Why the lens of culture is particularly important for Aboriginal children	12	Developing a promising future	52
Never again: the Stolen Generations	13	Conclusion	55
Aboriginal child removal policies in Victoria (1835–1970)	14	Key terms	56
The situation today	15	Some resources	57
Grief, loss and trauma	16		
Culture – you’re swimming in it	16		
Culture and the child and family services system	17		
Understanding cultural connection and its importance	18		
Culture as a resilience factor: an example from research	20		
Culture as a human right	21		
Towards a culturally competent service system for Aboriginal children and families	23		
A conceptual framework	24		
The other side of cultural competence: the role of self-reflection	28		





Purpose

The Victorian Government's vision is that every child thrives, learns and grows, is valued, respected and has the opportunity to become an effective adult, irrespective of family circumstances and background.

This paper describes the understandings, principles and service context that underpin **Aboriginal cultural competence** for the child and family services system in Victoria.

The Victorian Government is committed to providing quality services for Aboriginal children and families. Through legislation and policy, the Government acknowledges that recognition of Aboriginal self-determination and the provision of culturally competent services are fundamental to improved outcomes.

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* provides for the Minister to determine performance standards for Community Service Organisations (CSOs) including cultural standards (s.59). This paper informs the registrations standards for CSOs providing community based child and family services and Out of Home Care Services as they relate to Aboriginal children and families and their communities.

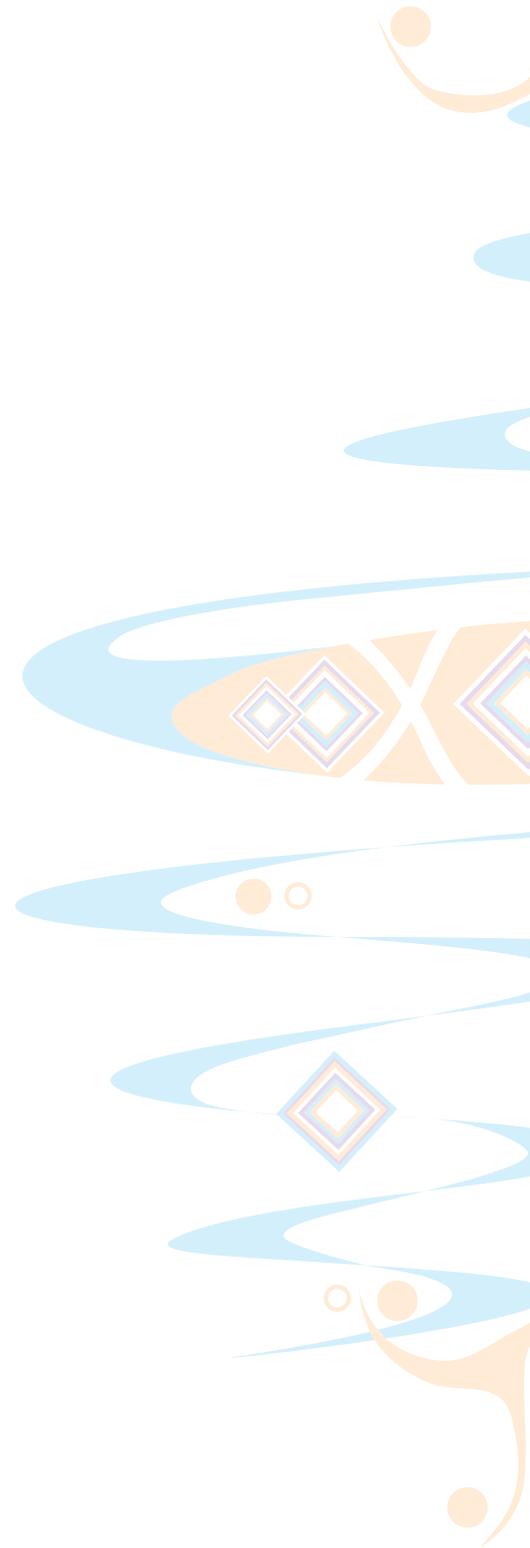
The *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework* is part of a suite of documents related to the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* and the *every child every chance* reforms. The framework sits alongside the following key documents:

- *The Best interests framework for vulnerable children and youth;*
- *Registration standards for community service organisations;*
- *Best interests principles: a conceptual overview*
- *The Best interests case practice model summary guide*
- *Cumulative harm: a conceptual overview*
- *Stability: a conceptual overview*
- *Child development and trauma guide*
- and *Promoting high quality community services for children, youth and families.*

Approach

The approach of this paper is to

- briefly introduce and explain the reason for developing an Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework
- outline why the lens of culture is important for Aboriginal children with reference to the Aboriginal child removal policies of the past, the current situation and how Aboriginal culture is critical to understanding the needs and best interests of children
- explain the key understandings and conceptual framework behind the notion of Aboriginal cultural competence
- outline how CSOs can engage with Aboriginal children, families, communities and services in a culturally competent way which respects the principles of Aboriginal self-determination
- explain how to apply the lens of culture in the context of the best interests principles
- outline a staged approach for CSOs meeting the cultural standards for registration with suggestions as to how to use the conceptual framework to address the practice evidence.



Understanding the policy context

There are three key government policy drivers for the development of the Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework.

Legislation

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA)* and the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* set the broad framework for reforms in the child and family services sector. A foundational component of CYFA is the Best Interests of the Child principles which promote:

the need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development by, wherever possible, maintaining and building their connections to their Aboriginal family and community (s.10).

The Children, Youth and Families Act includes other measures that specifically concern Aboriginal children and families. The Act:

- recognises the principle of self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal communities as part of the decision making process regarding Aboriginal children (s. 12)
- requires compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, in recognition of children's right to be raised in their own culture and the critical role of extended family, kinship networks, culture and community in raising Aboriginal children (s. 14)
- states that the Principal Officer of an Aboriginal agency can be authorised to perform functions and exercise powers regarding Protection Orders (s. 18)
- mandates preparation of cultural plans for Aboriginal children subject to guardianship or long term guardianship orders (s. 176).

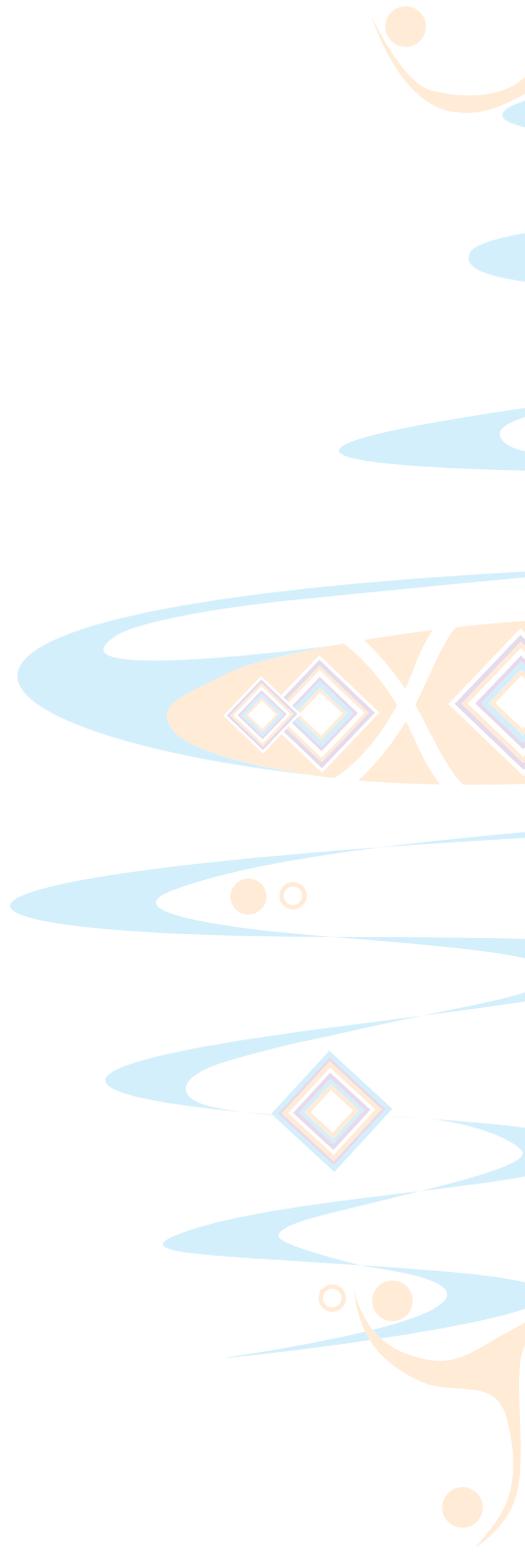
Registration standards

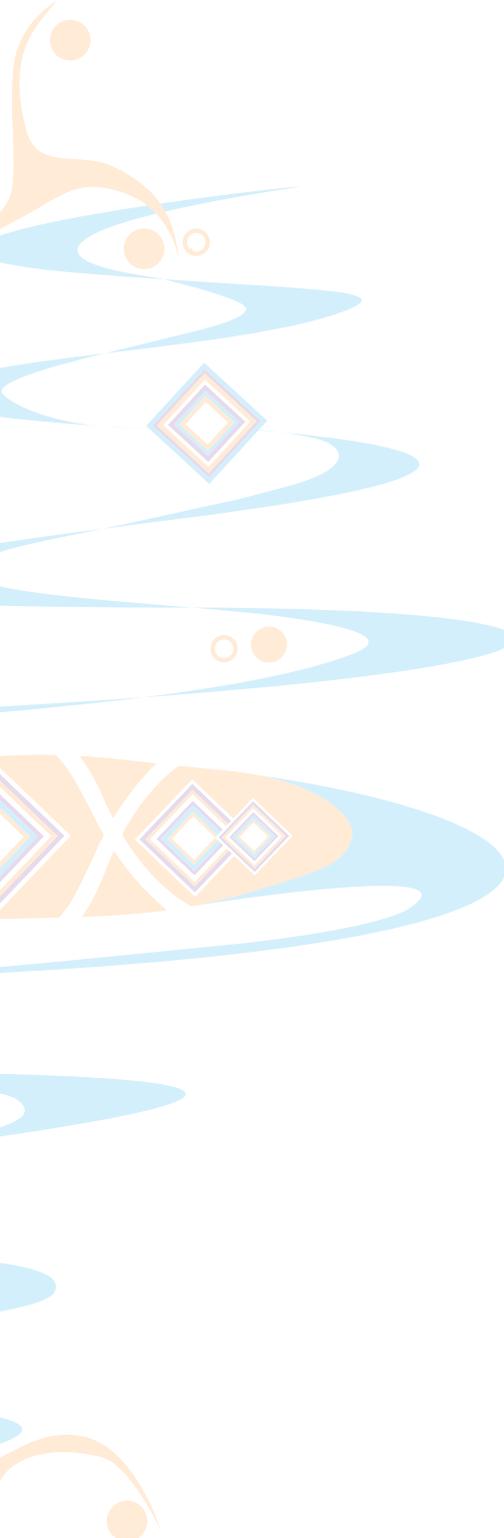
One of the significant reforms of the CYFA is the promotion of high quality services through the registration of CSOs and the development of performance standards for child and family services and Out of Home Care services.

The standards place a high level of importance on developing culturally competent practice, in recognition that Aboriginal children, youth and families are overrepresented in child protection and Out of Home Care services and underrepresented in universal, preventive and family services.

Best Interests Framework

Aboriginal cultural competence is a key facet of the Victorian Best Interests framework which interprets issues of children's safety, stability and development through the lens of age and stage, culture and gender. In other words, when assessing, planning and addressing the needs and interests of the child, due consideration is given to whether or not the child is safe, has stable relationships and a stable environment, and their developmental needs are being addressed. These dimensions of safety, stability and development are understood in the context of who the child is; that is, their age and stage, their culture and their gender. These elements concerning the identity of the child provide a lens through which the other dimensions are understood. The best interests principles, and for our purposes the lens of culture as a fundamental element of those principles, are concerned with the needs and rights of the child to ensure their best interests are promoted throughout their experience of family services and Out of Home Care.





Understanding culture

There is much to grasp in understanding the concept of culture and its impact on all of us; but particularly on Aboriginal peoples¹ who live in a dominant culture that is very different to their culture. Aboriginal peoples must straddle both cultures in their day to day experiences.

Cultural considerations are relevant to **all** children, whether or not their cultural identity is the same as the dominant culture. For children of non-mainstream cultures, cultural differences and considerations are easier to discern. It is always difficult to define one's own culture as we exist within it. As Aboriginal leader Dr. Alf Bamblett has put it, culture is to people as water is to fish – we take our own culture for granted as it is part of our identity and part of our very being.

When it comes to understanding the lens of culture for Aboriginal children so that we provide appropriate and beneficial services, CSOs need to develop an understanding of cultural competence which goes beyond a checklist approach and is all-embracing. It is not a question of being 'politically correct' but rather respecting the unique identity of each and every child. The lens of culture, along with age and stage, and gender, assists workers and agencies to understand how to appropriately address the range of safety, stability and development issues for each child. It also helps us to see the child and their relationships from the perspective of their own community and not just from our own cultural bias.

¹ Throughout this paper we refer to 'Aboriginal peoples' rather than 'Aboriginal people' to reflect the plurality and diversity of Victorian Aboriginal communities.

First Peoples of Australia - Why the lens of culture is particularly important for Aboriginal children

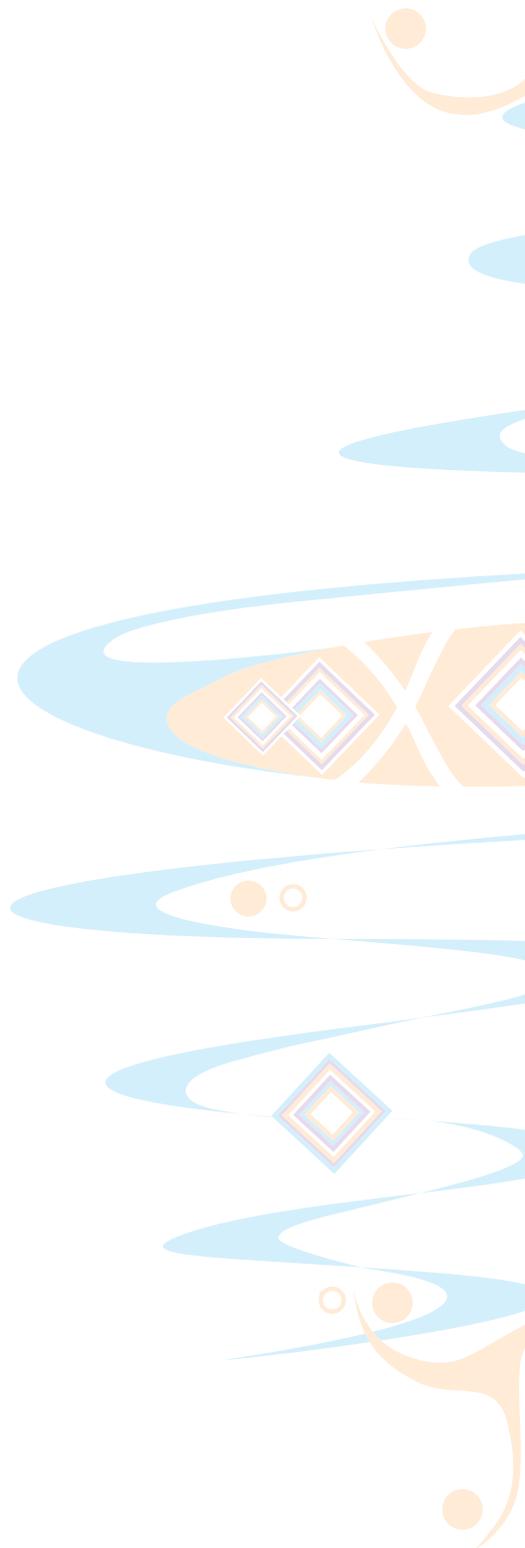
It is important to understand how the dynamics of culture are different for children of minority cultures and different again for children of Indigenous cultures. For Aboriginal children, families and communities in Australia, culture frames a sense of identity which relates to being the First Peoples of the land.

Culture, for Aboriginal peoples, enhances a deep sense of belonging and involves a spiritual and emotional relationship to the land that is unique.

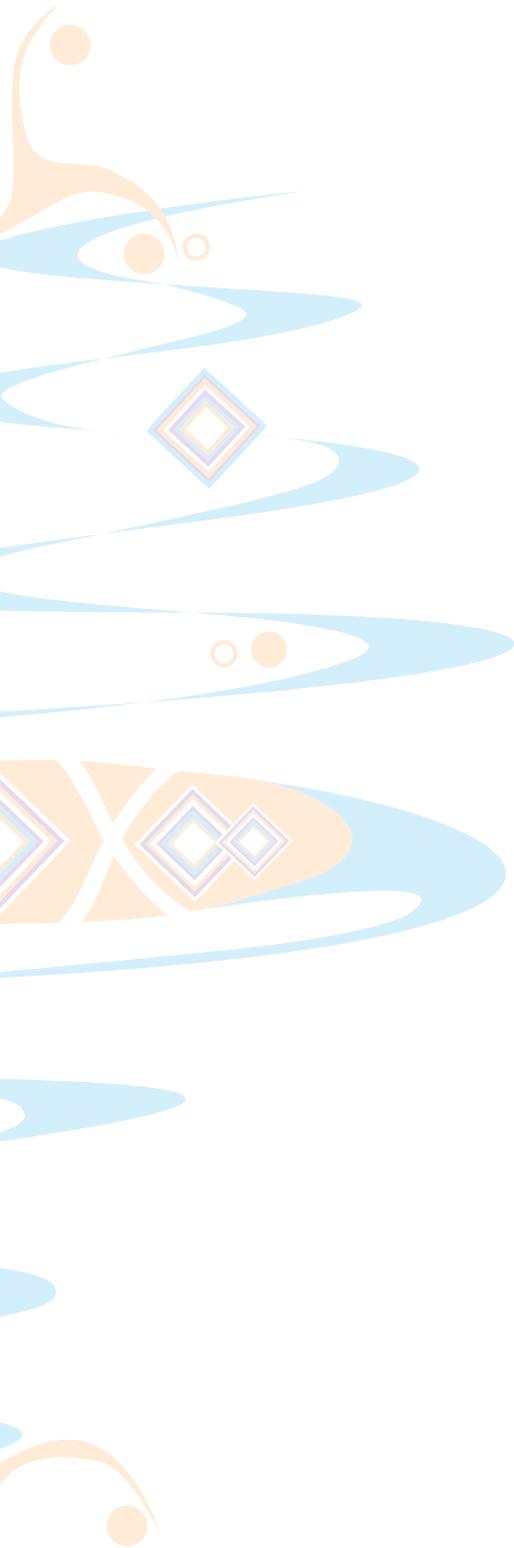
Culture has been a protective factor against over two centuries of colonisation and the imposition of a dominant culture on all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives. It is not just about seeing the 'tip' of the cultural identity 'iceberg' of food, dress, music, language, art, etc., but the more subtle ways in which culture impacts on how individuals see and engage with the world²

For Aboriginal children, their families and communities, cultural competence is a means through which First Peoples can be given due respect and honour in this their land and in the context of a history of racism and cultural abuse. Furthermore, it enables the broader community to understand the resilience and appreciate the pride Aboriginal peoples have about their culture. It also enables the broader community to celebrate and take pride in this the oldest continuing culture.

Meeting Aboriginal children's needs and rights in this way is central to a service system that is premised on the best interests of children.



² Patricia St. Onge, Breonna Cole and Sheryl Petty, *Through the Lens of Culture: Building Capacity for Social Change and Sustainable Communities*, Oakland, Canada: National Community Development Institute, 2003, p. 1



Never again: The Stolen Generations

It is estimated that tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families and raised in institutions or fostered-out to non-Aboriginal people. This was seen as a way of promoting the ‘best interests’ of the child.³

It made little difference what the family situation really was or how the children were cared for, because being Aboriginal was, in itself, reason to regard children as ‘neglected’. Even on the rare occasions when officials did not regard Aboriginal culture with contempt and fear, the emphasis on marriage and having fixed housing and employment in definitions of ‘neglect’ was inherently biased towards seeing all Aboriginal life as neglectful.⁴

The policies that led to the Stolen Generations were based on the desire to explicitly ‘absorb’ and assimilate Aboriginal children of mixed descent.

While there was no officially defined ‘best interests principles’ at the time, it is clear from official records that placing ‘part-white’ Aboriginal children with non-Indigenous people and institutions was seen as providing these children ‘with a better chance in life’ and therefore acting in their benefit. Aboriginality was one of the criteria for child removal decisions.⁵ In the context of a child and family service system which is premised on the ‘best interests’ of children, it is critical that we understand how the concept of ‘best interests’ can be misapplied in an ethnocentric way and ignore or seek to eliminate the culture of the child.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) and subsequent publications that tell the story of the Stolen Generations reveal the damage to self-esteem, identity confusion and lack of connectedness that the separation of children from their family, culture and community creates for Aboriginal children. This can be understood as nothing short of cultural abuse:

When the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated, or worse, intentionally attacked, it is cultural abuse. It is abuse because it strikes at the very identity and soul of the people it is aimed at; it attacks their sense of self-esteem, it attacks their connectedness to their family and community.⁶

Today Link-Up services are still assisting members of the Stolen Generations to come to terms with their sense of loss. The *Western Australia Aboriginal Child Health Survey* has demonstrated that Aboriginal parents/carers who were removed as children from their families and communities had an increased risk of alcoholism, problem gambling, criminal behaviour and contact with mental health services. In turn, their children are more likely to suffer from significant emotional and behavioural problems.⁷

³ Muriel Bamblett and Peter Lewis, “A Vision for Koorie Children and Families: Embedding Rights, Embedding Culture”, *Just Policy: A Journal of Australian Social Policy*, Edition 41, September 2006, VCOSS, p. 43.

⁴ Robert Van Krieken, *Children and the State: Social control and the formation of Australian child welfare*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992, p. 8.

⁵ Henry Reynolds, *Nowhere People: How international race thinking shaped Australia’s identity*, Camberwell, Victoria: Viking, 2005, pp. 216ff.

⁶ Muriel Bamblett and Peter Lewis, “A Vision for Koorie Children and Families: Embedding Rights, Embedding Culture”, *Just Policy: A Journal of Australian Social Policy*, Edition 41, September 2006, VCOSS, p. 42.

⁷ S.K. Zubrick, S.R. Silburn, D.M. Lawrence, F.G. Mitrou, R.B. Dalby, E.M. Blair, J. Griffin, H. Milroy, J.A. De Maio, A. Cox, J. Li, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, Vol. 2*, Perth: Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005, pp. 463-546.

Aboriginal child removal policies in Victoria (1835–1970)

In the context of understanding why cultural competence is important for Victorian Aboriginal children, it is critical to take a brief look at the history of child removal in Victoria. Many CSOs today may have been involved in these policies and associated practices in the past and will need to take account of this history if they are to establish trust with Aboriginal people and services.

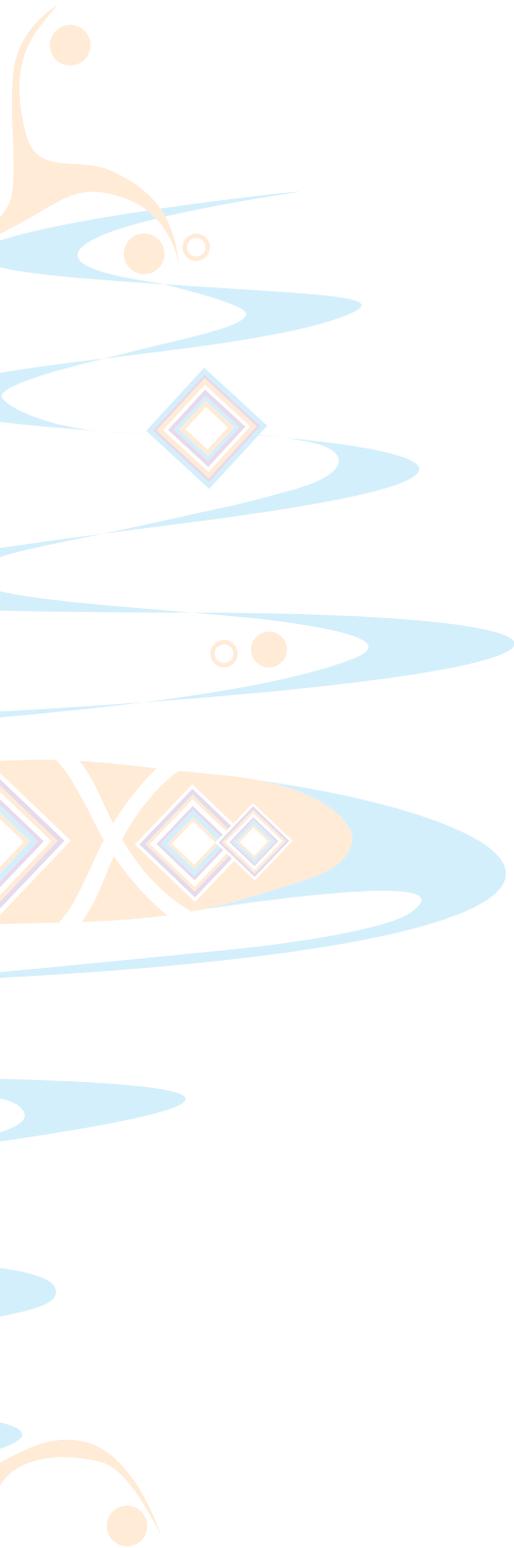
In Victoria, the impact of Aboriginal child removal policies was profound. It is important to appreciate that most Victorian Aboriginal people alive today have directly experienced or have had their parents or members of their extended family experience the consequences of these policies and practices.

Since European colonisation of Victoria, many laws and policies have been enacted that sought to segregate Aboriginal children from their families and communities and disconnect them from Aboriginal land and culture. For example;

- From 1837, missions established schools, attempting to wean the children away from 'tribal influences'.
- The *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* provided that at the age of 13 years 'half-caste' boys were to be apprenticed or sent to work on farms and girls were to work as servants. Having left, they were not allowed to return to their families on reserves without official permission for a visit.
- In 1955, Premier Henry Bolte commissioned a review of Victoria's Aboriginal affairs policy. The Aborigines Advancement League advocated self-government for Aboriginal communities and expressed fears for the physical and cultural extinction of Aboriginal people in Victoria. These claims were rejected. The ensuing *Aborigines Act 1957* established the Aborigines Welfare Board 'to promote the moral, intellectual and physical welfare of Aborigines...with a view to their assimilation in the general community'.

In 1968, in its first Annual Report, the Victorian Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs expressed concern about 'unauthorised fostering arrangements of Aboriginal children' and stated that about 300 Aboriginal children were known to have been informally separated from their parents, with possibly many more unknown. At that time the Aboriginal population in Victoria was estimated to be about 5,000.⁸

⁸ This section is a summary of the Stolen Generations policies in Victoria as presented in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Sydney: Sterling Press, 1997, pp. 57-70.



Apart from the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, families were often forcibly relocated onto missions with many families split between different missions. This meant that in Victoria, the impact of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children, coupled with the uprooting of Aboriginal families resulted in more cultural dislocation for Aboriginal children than in other parts of Australia. Aboriginal youth were over-represented in corrective institutions and a majority of them had been removed from their families and subject to foster-care breakdown.⁹

It was in response to these issues that the Aboriginal community established the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).

Today, many Aboriginal people are still distrustful of mainstream child and family welfare services due to the prominent role child welfare played in both removal of children and separation of families.

The situation today

Child protection intervention in the lives of the Aboriginal community remains disproportionate in Victoria and Australia. The *Protecting Children Report*, commissioned by the Department of Human Services in 2003, found that Aboriginal children in Victoria were almost eight times more likely to be deemed to have been victims of abuse or neglect than non-Indigenous children; more than 10 times more likely to be subject to court orders and 14 times more likely to have spent time in Out of Home Care. The reasons for this are complex and various. Annette Jackson, in her paper on child protection and the Indigenous community, delivered at the Eighth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, suggested five interrelated factors:

- The Child Protection and Placement system may be overly interventionist in relation to Indigenous children, due to limited understanding of cultural differences and the impact of history on Indigenous families.
- Fear, distrust and/or antipathy by Indigenous parents towards Child Protection authorities due to previous government policies therefore reducing access to less-interventionist options which require cooperation.
- Indigenous disadvantage such as poverty which creates greater risk of abuse and neglect.
- Absence of Indigenous specific universal and prevention services.
- The disproportionately large population of young people in Indigenous communities creating greater pressures for care.¹⁰

These statistics and understandings have led to the current approach which seeks to empower Aboriginal services and recognise the decisive influence of culture and connection to community in providing services that are in the best interests of Aboriginal children and their families.

⁹ B. Jackson, (ed.), *The First Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar: If Everyone Cared*, Report from an International Seminar on Aboriginal Family Life and the Welfare of Aboriginal Children, Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Office of Child Care, Melbourne, 1979, p. 2.

¹⁰ Annette Jackson in collaboration with Muriel Cadd, Melissa Brickell, Gwen Rogers and Gill Harrison, "Child Protection – Working more effectively with Aboriginal families: Ideas and Processes" paper at the Eighth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, November 2001, pp. 8f.

Grief, loss and trauma

Grief, loss and trauma are common human experiences that impact on families and their children. For Aboriginal peoples and communities, grief, loss and trauma have been pervasive because of what has been lost since European invasion. Many Aboriginal people have suffered differing degrees of disconnection from their land, language, culture, family and community.

Aboriginal communities that have been forbidden to use their language or practise traditional culture can experience intense grief arising from the denigration of their cultural identity. These losses have impacted on the social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples.

Colonisation and past policies and practices have created unresolved trauma within the community. Multigenerational trauma has meant that some adults' unresolved trauma has been 'passed on to' their children and for a minority of Aboriginal adults has led to a diminished ability to parent. Not surprisingly, people cannot parent well if they feel powerless or bereft of their dignity and culture. The collective trauma that has impacted on Aboriginal communities creates another layer of complexity that the child and family services system must take into consideration when dealing with Aboriginal peoples and their communities.

Culture – you're swimming in it

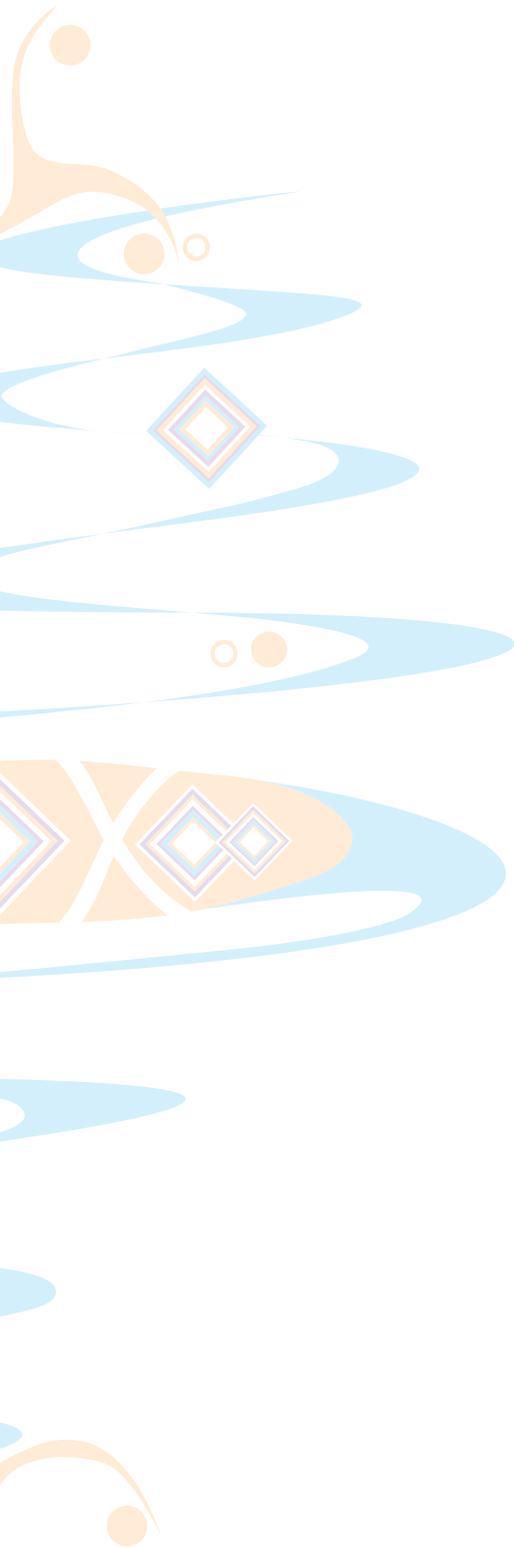
Having outlined the consequences of ignoring and denigrating Aboriginal culture, it is important that we look at what role culture does play for Aboriginal children and families.

Culture has been variously defined as:

- the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon our capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations
- the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group
- the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a system, company or corporation and
- one group or people's preferred way of meeting their basic human needs.¹¹

Modern child development theory now points to the role culture plays in the child's sense of identity and sense of belonging. The *Looking After Children (LAC) Framework* also acknowledges the importance of a child's identity.

¹¹ Terry Cross, "Through Indigenous Eyes: Rethinking Theory and Practice", Paper at 2007 SNAICC Conference, Adelaide.



Any work with Aboriginal children that does not pay due regard to their heritage and culture will fail to recognise valid and important impacts on their lives and the lives of their families. Culture plays a protective role, particularly for marginalised communities. In the case of Aboriginal children the possibility of loss of culture needs to be seen as a risk factor in any assessment process.

Cultural identity is not just an add-on to the best interests of the child. We would all agree that the safety of the child is paramount. No child should live in fear. No child should starve. No child should live in situations of neglect. No child should be abused. But if a child's identity is denied or denigrated, they are not being looked after. Denying cultural identity is detrimental to their attachment needs, their emotional development, their education and their health. Every area of human development which defines the child's best interests has a cultural component. Your culture helps define **how** you attach, **how** you express emotion, **how** you learn and **how** you stay healthy.¹²

Culture and the child and family services system

Emerging mainstream child and family service approaches emphasise the role of culture within a holistic and ecological framework. The holistic approach means looking at the whole child and not just the presenting problem, looking at the whole extended family and not just the parents, and looking at the whole community and not just the family. In social work theory this is consistent with the ecological perspective¹³ which suggests that all people are living beings who interact with their environments. Culture is a key mediator between people and their social environments.

Culture is passed down the generations in the complex of relationships, knowledge, languages, social organisation and life experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together. Culture is a living process. It changes over time to reflect the changed environments and social interactions of people living together.¹⁴

The holistic approach implies community-focused and strengths-based understandings of social welfare that necessitate cultural support and cultural and community connection as critical factors in assessments and interventions.

The holistic approach has been adapted by the Aboriginal health sector. The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation has the following definition:

Aboriginal health is not just the physical well being of an individual but is the social, emotional and cultural well being of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential thereby bringing about the total well being of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life. (NACCHO, 1996)

¹² Bamblett and Lewis, "A Vision for Koorie Children and Families: Embedding Rights, Embedding Culture", p. 44.

¹³ A key exponent of this approach to child welfare based on the human development theories of Urie Bronfenbrenner is James Garbarino see James Garbarino, "The human ecology of child maltreatment: a conceptual model for research," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 39, 1977, pp. 721-736.

¹⁴ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2002, p. ix.

Traditional Aboriginal understandings of the person view the person as living and being in relationship with the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the law/dreaming. It is inherently inter-relational and interdependent. Unlike Western culture, the person is perceived not as an isolated, independent self but a self-in-relationship. Aboriginal approaches to looking after children perceive culture and the maintenance of culture as central to healthy development. Therefore, Aboriginal communities believe:

- that the child's educational, physical, emotional or spiritual needs cannot be met in isolation from each other
- the child's relationship to the whole family, and not just mum or dad, are part of the child's key relationships
- the child's relationship to the land and the spirit beings that determine law, politics and meaning is a key element of their cultural identity
- the child is born into a broad community of care that consists of immediate family, extended family and the local community
- Elders also play a critical role, particularly in education and the maintenance of culture.

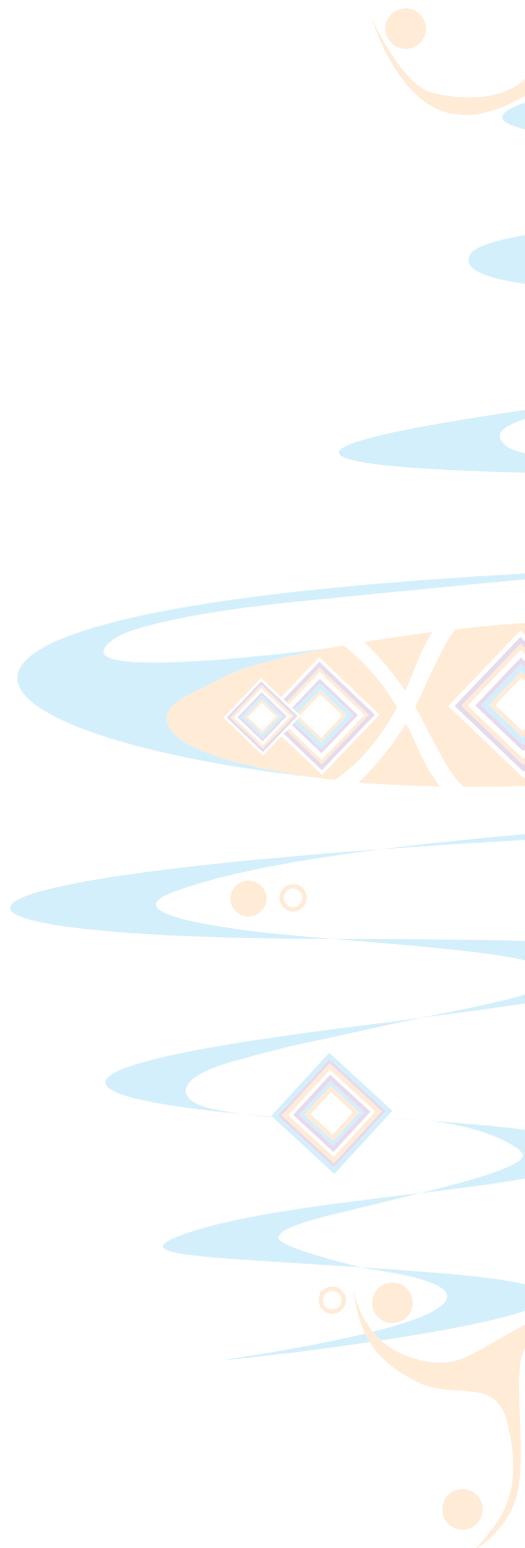
Therefore, it is important that interventions reflect this broad understanding and seek from the family their definition of who should be involved in particular assessments, interventions or planning activities, rather than assumptions being made about, for instance, who is 'family'. Workers may feel uncomfortable talking where there may be many members of the family present. However, effective interventions with children and families can only be realised if the key people as defined by the family are engaged in the process.

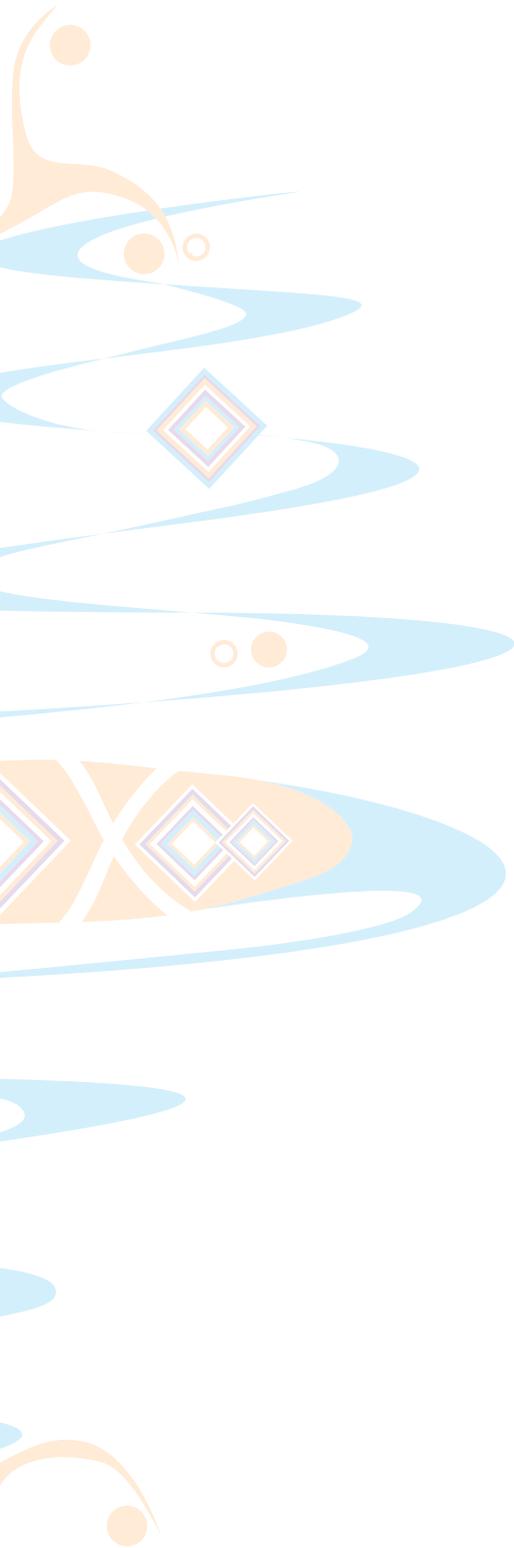
Understanding cultural connection and its importance

There are many ways of 'unpacking' what we mean by cultural connection. For example, a child might not have strong connections with their extended family members but practise an Aboriginal art form and, through that, have a strong connection with their culture.

Identity is a jigsaw puzzle, with many pieces. One's identity is also part of one's life journey, a journey that becomes more pressing to undertake and understand as one gets older. For example, knowing the family name might be one aspect of understanding their identity. A three year old may not care what their family name is; an 18 year old might care greatly.

An Aboriginal child who is in the Out of Home Care system may be confused or unsure of their personal identity. Links to their biological family may be tenuous. For the older child or adolescent 'reclaiming' their identity, identifying with their family name may be one of the first important steps in their journey towards wholeness, with resulting improvements in their self-esteem and wellbeing. Aboriginal communities place great significance on who the family is, family lines and connections, so it is critical that the child has this information.





Likewise, many Aboriginal children and adults may not know their clan or language group, due to the effects of colonisation. Aboriginal communities believe that it is beneficial for them, on a deep level, to have access to this information to allow them to connect now, or in the future, with their communities. Knowing the extended family is important. An Aboriginal family differs from a nuclear family, and extended family relatives can play a significant role in a child's upbringing. Knowing who they are and where the child fits into the family structure can be a significant piece of the puzzle of the child's identity. If the child is distant from their traditional country, as many children in the Out of Home Care system are, then a relative living in the same area may fulfil a significant connective role in their lives.

Aboriginal people have a strong connection with their traditional land. Returning to that traditional land, and understanding the stories of their past, is part of the healing process for Aboriginal people and their children. Part of this process might include hearing the stories of their ancestors and Elders.

For a child who is disconnected from their culture, cultural events can be a subtle and rewarding 'way in'. Attending events, be they creative, sporting or community, can be a very positive way for Aboriginal people to re-engage or even make a connection for the first time. By exposing children to positive images, resources, mentors and role models we can help seed a more positive attitude to their own Aboriginality. Events are an engaging, satisfying and positive way to help the child connect with their culture. For older children, knowing the history of Aboriginal people in Australia since colonisation can also provide them with a context for their circumstances. Enhancing their awareness of that history can be another step in the healing journey. Having the appropriate resources and access to Aboriginal Elders who can speak of this history with authority is useful.

So the dynamics of cultural connection can be represented in the following way:



Bamblett, M., Frederico, M., Harrison, J., Jackson, A., & Lewis, P. (2008). *“Not one size fits all” Measuring the social & emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children*; School of Social Work and Social Policy, La Trobe University, Melbourne; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Melbourne; Berry Street Take Two, Melbourne.

The implication for CSOs is that providing for cultural connection for their Aboriginal clients will be a comprehensive process and require significant input from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

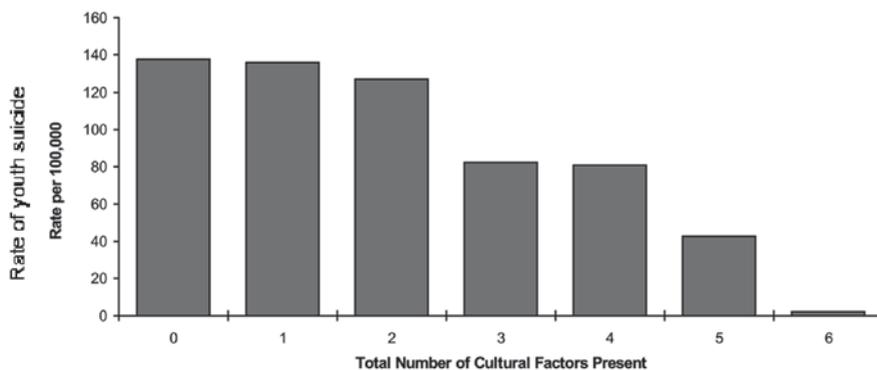
Culture as a resilience factor: an example from research

As has been stated, cultural connection is critical to identity and healthy development and wellbeing.

International research and practice also demonstrate the importance of culture as a means through which Indigenous communities can overcome disadvantage. A recent study from Canada by Michael Chandler and Travis Proulx for the International Academy for Suicide Research has pointed out that as measures for self-determination and culturally-based services increase, youth suicide dramatically decreases. As demonstrated by the following chart, the more Nation or tribal groups – here referred to as ‘bands’ – have control over and cultural input into governance, health, education, policing, resources and seeking title to land, the lower the incidence of youth suicide.

EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY -LEVEL INDICATORS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO A HEALTH OUTCOME – FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES, British Columbia, CANADA

An index of “cultural continuity” comprised of six marker variables: degree to which each of B.C.’s individual bands have already secured 1) some measure of self government; some control over the delivery of 2) health, 3) education, 4) policing services, and 5) cultural resources; and 6) are otherwise at work litigating for Aboriginal title to traditional lands.



Suicide rates by number of factors present in the community (1987 –1992). (Taken from Chandler M and Proulx T. Changing selves in changing worlds: youth suicide on the fault lines of colliding cultures. *Archives of Suicide Research* 2006: 10: 125 -140. 2006).

Being on your own land, having a form of self-government, having Aboriginal health services and policing all combine to create a sense that there is not only a proud past but a promising future for young Aboriginal people. It is clear from this that self-determination and cultural connection have a positive impact on the social determinants that relate to Aboriginal wellbeing and health and can create a platform for better outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Culture as a human right

Connection to culture is not only an increasingly recognised protective factor for children it is also recognised in Victorian and international human rights law and informs the *every child every chance* reforms.

The Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* recognises that Aboriginal people hold distinct Cultural rights, including:

- “(a) the right to enjoy their identity and culture; and
- (b) the right to maintain and use their language; and
- (c) the right to maintain their kinship ties; and
- (d) the right to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.” (*Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, s.19)

Under the Act, it is unlawful for a public authority (such as a community service) to act in a way that is incompatible with a human right or, in making a decision, to fail to give proper consideration to a relevant human right.

(*Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, s.38)

The Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 states that a child’s best interests are always paramount and:

When determining whether a decision or action is in the best interests of the child, the need to protect the child from harm, **to protect his or her rights** and to promote his or her development (taking into account his or her age and stage of development) must always be considered.

Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, s.10 [emphasis added]

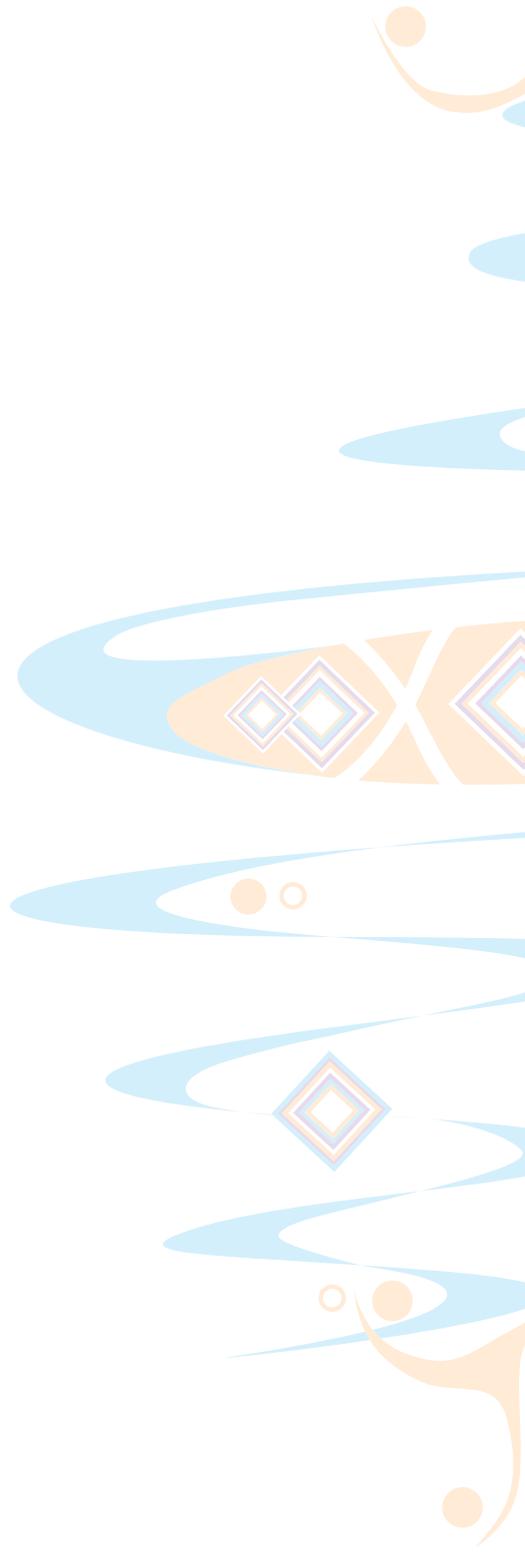
Article 2 of the *UN Charter* and Article 1 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights* enshrine the rights of all distinct ethnic and cultural peoples to self-determination and define the right of self-determination as involving the free choice of political status and the freedom to pursue economic, social and cultural development. All people have the right to self-determination.

Article 30 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* recognises the right of Indigenous children to enjoy their traditional culture. Children’s cultural identity is a key facet of their development and need to connect with their families and communities. Any definition of the rights of children, and any criteria that seek to determine what is in the best interests of the child, must recognise the right to culture as formative for identity and therefore that maintenance of cultural identity and connection is in the best interests of the child.

Key messages

In summary, the key messages that emerge from this section of the paper are:

- Consideration of cultural needs is important for all children.
- Aboriginal peoples, as First Peoples, have particular cultural needs and rights.
- Colonisation has impacted negatively on the culture of Aboriginal peoples and this has implications for Aboriginal children and families.
- Connection to culture and community enhances the resilience of Aboriginal children and families.
- All people have a right to self-determination and the protection of their particular culture.
- Strong cultural connection provides a promising future for Aboriginal children and young people.



Towards a culturally competent service system for Aboriginal children and families

Mutual understanding, collaboration and partnership building between mainstream CSOs and Aboriginal services and communities are essential. This is required to build Aboriginal cultural competence in CSOs and the child and family service system as a whole. Commitment to and respect for Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal cultures should form the ground rules for these partnerships. For the sector to be culturally competent there needs to be clarity around issues of:

- Aboriginal self-determination and the role of ACCOs
- acknowledging the impact of the past and contemporary forms of racism/marginalisation
- respect for culture and acknowledgement of the role of culture in programs/services to assist Aboriginal people.

Having looked at why culture is a critical consideration when providing services to Aboriginal children and families, it is important to develop an understanding of the concepts and principles behind the notion of Aboriginal cultural competence.

Cultural competence has been defined as:

a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.¹⁶

In practice, for workers this means the integration of attitudes, values, knowledge, understanding and skills that enable effective interventions with people from a culture different to their own. It is therefore critical that workers discover if their clients are of a particular culture. If workers discover that their client is Aboriginal then culturally competent practice indicates that a different approach is necessary in working with Aboriginal children and families. For example, as part of the assessment process, workers should gather information about the family's experience of racism and the CSO's history in Aboriginal child removal and be aware of the possible impact of trans-generational trauma on the family.

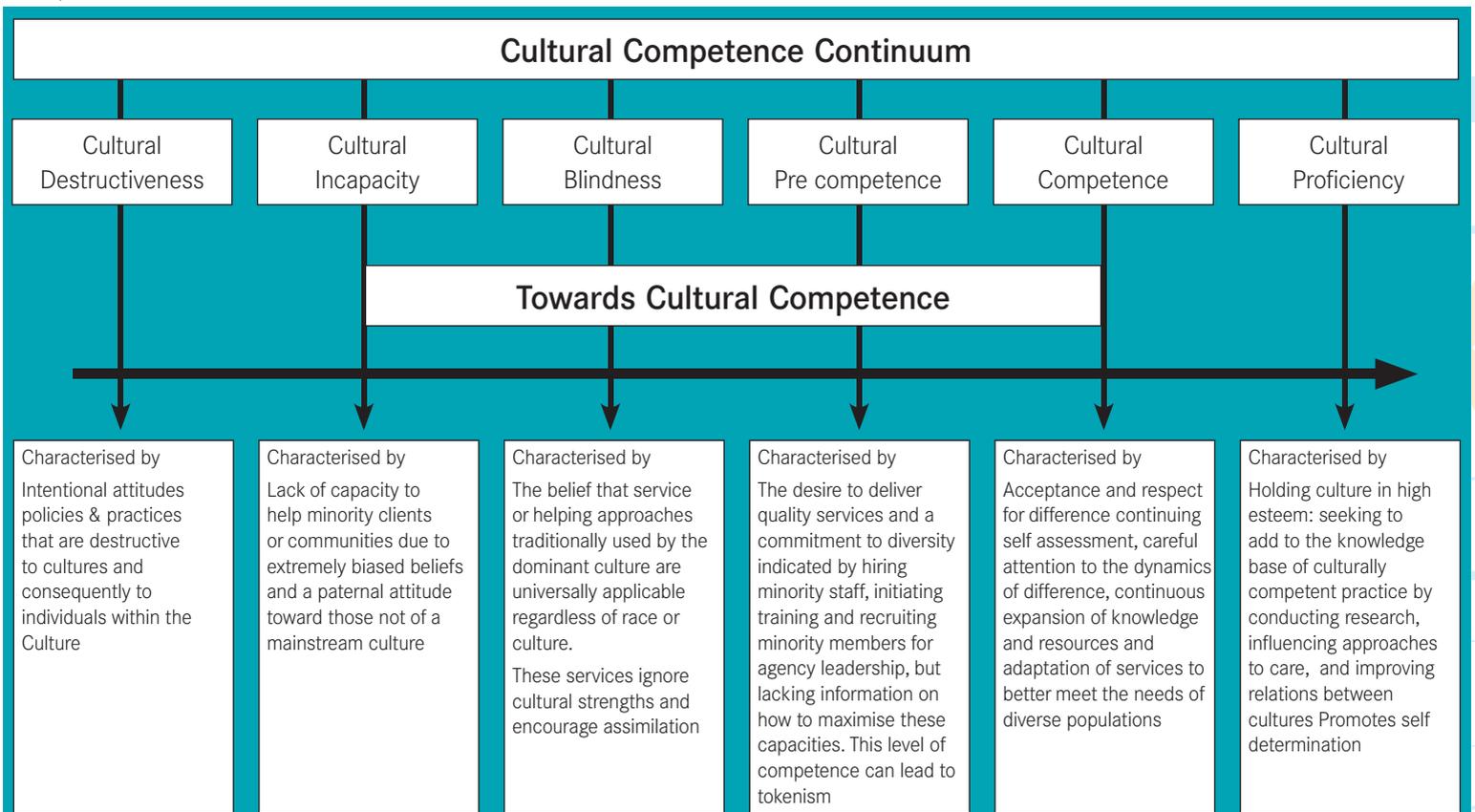
At a CSO or systems level, it means that practice, programs and policies are culturally congruent. For example, a CSO's code of conduct would include statements about respecting cultural differences. All agencies' policies would be scrutinised to ensure they are culturally appropriate. It is the role of the governing body and senior management to ensure that cultural competence is reflected throughout all aspects of a CSO's functioning.

There are several ways of approaching the issue of cultural competence. The following section outlines a conceptual framework, which is seen as complementing the requirements of the CSO Registration Standards.

¹⁶ Char Tong and Terry Cross, *Cross Cultural Partnerships for Child Abuse Prevention with Native American Communities*, Portland, Oregon: Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 1991, p. 12.

A conceptual framework

The chart below, adapted from material developed by Terry Cross, presents the continuum for cultural competence used in some states in America where they have introduced cultural competence standards.



The continuum crosses:

- Cultural destructiveness – as exemplified by the policies that led to the Stolen Generations
- Cultural incapacity – which relates to the prevalence of racism and paternalism
- Cultural blindness – where there is no understanding of cross-Cultural factors and misunderstandings or a belief that a mainstream service does not need to change to meet Aboriginal client's needs
- Cultural pre-competence – where there may be well intentioned actions such as the employment of Aboriginal staff within the organisation but not fully understanding cultural differences and approaches
- Cultural competence – where there is an acceptance and respect for cultural diversity within the organisation and service delivery is reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of different population groups
- Cultural proficiency – where Cultural diversity is highly valued where active research takes place and where self-determination is promoted and supported.

The continuum assists us in developing an understanding of the graduated journey that CSOs, their staff, volunteers and carers may take in their relationships with Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework that has been developed has six interrelated concepts that will assist CSOs and individual staff to be truly culturally competent. The benefits of cultural competence are that there will be greater engagement with Aboriginal communities, an appreciation of the richness and diversity of Aboriginal cultures and people, and better immediate and future outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

In developing cultural competence, CSOs need to understand that realising a framework for their CSO:

- requires leadership at all levels of the CSO's operations
- takes time and then more time to develop cultural competence
- requires the capacity to thoughtfully and respectfully question cultural differences
- takes time to develop trusting and reciprocal relationships with ACCOs
- requires a whole of agency approach that is embedded in the CSO governance, policies, programs, service delivery and practice approaches.



Cultural awareness (knowledge with understanding)

Cultural awareness has been described by Aboriginal psychologist and academic, Dennis McDermott, as being aware of cultural difference and cultural diversity. There is an understanding of some of the 'facts' or knowledge of another Culture and, more importantly for professionals, an awareness that cultural differences may necessitate a different approach to people of that other Culture. It is knowledge with understanding and it is a precursor to becoming cross-culturally competent. For individuals, Cultural awareness continues to develop and grow as they become more adept in cross-cultural situations.

Commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and respectful partnerships (the foundation for cultural competence)

Fundamental to the Aboriginal specific aspects of the *every child every chance* reforms is the recognition of Aboriginal self-determination in relation to decisions made regarding Aboriginal children. Therefore, as we move towards a culturally competent service system for Aboriginal children, families and communities, priority must be given to enhancing and capacity building ACCOs to deliver services. The role of mainstream CSOs is to support and complement ACCOs' service provision. CSOs need to demonstrate their commitment to Aboriginal self-determination by seeking a partnership approach. Without such a commitment, the service system cannot become culturally competent.

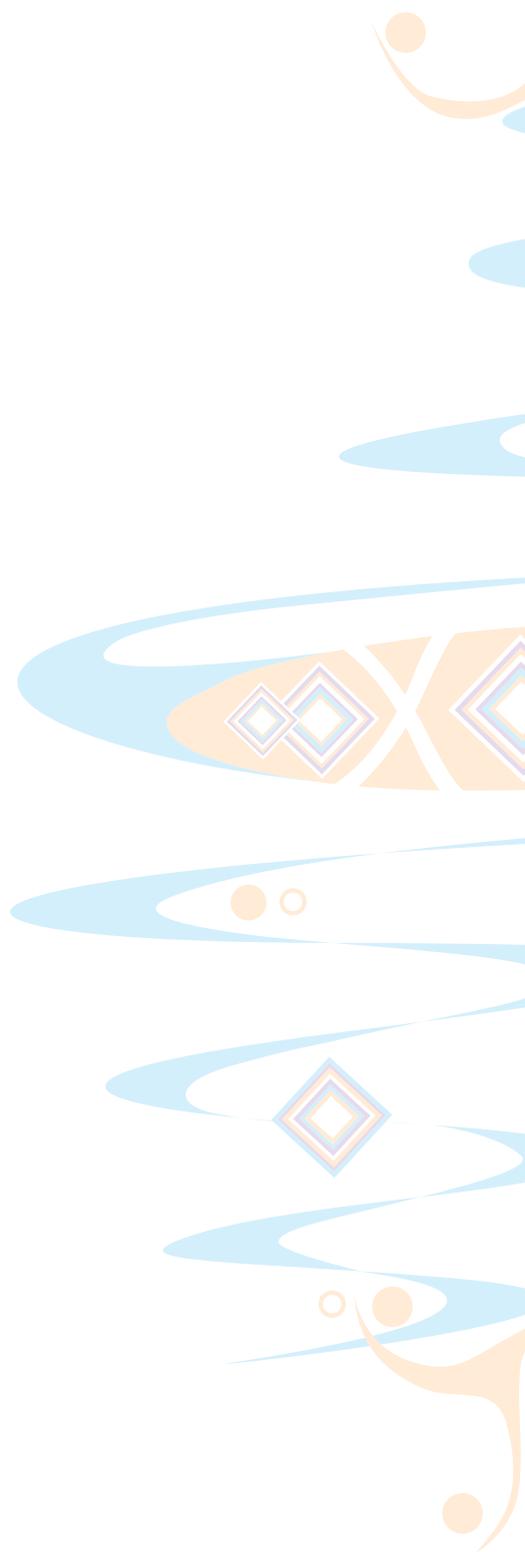
Part of understanding respectful partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organisations is for CSOs to demonstrate their commitment to delivering a culturally competent service for the benefit of Aboriginal children and families. These commitments enable an agency-wide approach that lays a foundation for cultural respect, cultural responsiveness and cultural safety.

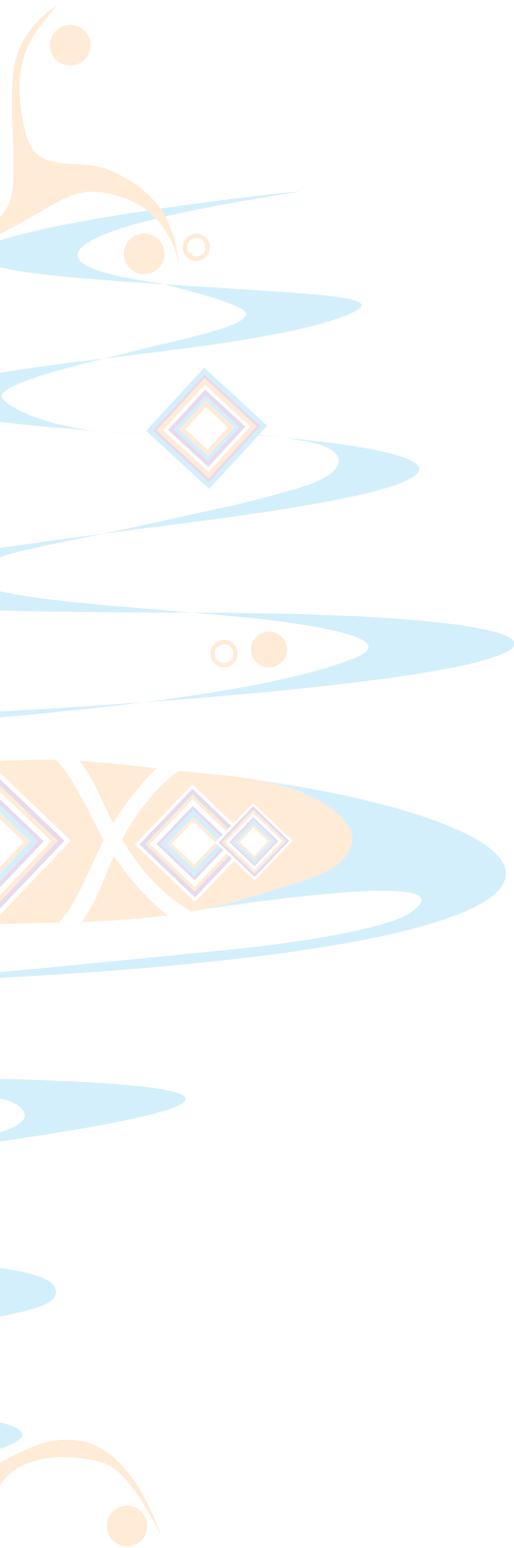
This commitment to Aboriginal self-determination must be seen as a key imperative of CSO's governance and senior management structures. Without this, the commitment will fail to be acted upon and will not be seen as a core function of the CSO.

Cultural respect (attitude and values)

Cultural respect is concerned with the attitude and values of individuals and therefore, at a collective level, the organisational culture of the CSO. Exploring the following questions may assist CSOs consider whether their organisation is culturally respectful:

- Is the organisational culture one that values and promotes the uniqueness and strengths of Aboriginal cultures?
- Does it recognise the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and respect the culture of the local Aboriginal community and the particular Aboriginal culture of its Aboriginal children and families?
- Are the CSOs board members, staff, volunteers and carers positive and respectful towards Aboriginal people?





Cultural responsiveness (ability and skills)

This requires the CSO to consider the necessary abilities and skills of staff, volunteers and carers to work effectively across-cultures and provide a service that meets the needs of Aboriginal people. Exploring the following questions may assist CSOs consider whether their organisation is culturally responsive:

- Within the CSO, are staff, volunteers and carers culturally responsive?
- Do they have the necessary ability and skills to work effectively across cultures and provide a service that meets the needs of Aboriginal people?
- Are they aware of the specific skills required to intervene effectively with Aboriginal people?
- Does the CSO provide thorough Aboriginal cultural competence training in a child and family services context for its board, staff, volunteers and carers?

Cultural safety (environment and client experience)

Dennis McDermott suggests that cultural safety is concerned with whether or not the client is 'safe' from covert or overt cultural abuse. In other words it is a reflection on the client's experience of the CSO and is achieved when the client feels safe to be themselves. It is therefore also concerned with whether or not the environment of the CSO is welcoming for Aboriginal people. One of the key aspects of cultural safety is the self-awareness of the provider of services of the power dynamics of cross-cultural interaction.

Cross-cultural practice and care (Is the lens of culture being used effectively?)

The final aspect of Aboriginal cultural competence as it relates to children and family services is concerned with the practice and care of CSO staff, volunteers and carers. In the context of the every child every chance reforms, the aim of promoting cultural awareness, commitment to Aboriginal self-determination, cultural respect, cultural responsiveness and cultural safety, is to provide services for Aboriginal children that promote their best interests. This means that the lens of culture must be used in assessments and planning concerning the safety, stability and development of children. This will be elaborated on later in the section on the Lens of Culture.

The other side of cultural competence: the role of self-reflection

Cultural competence is not just about being able to work across cultures. It also involves being aware of the effects of a dominant culture on minority cultures. In the case of Aboriginal cultural competence it is about understanding how the process of colonisation and the power dynamic it has created impacts on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people.

A major step in cultural competence is being aware of one's own cultural influences and how these are similar and different from another person's culture. As a worker, self-reflection is a critical cross-cultural skill to limit the influence of one's own cultural bias.

American feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh contends that in mainstream society white people are privileged by the dominant culture. She suggests that there are at least 50 ways in which 'whites' are unknowingly privileged by dominant culture. For example, she says:

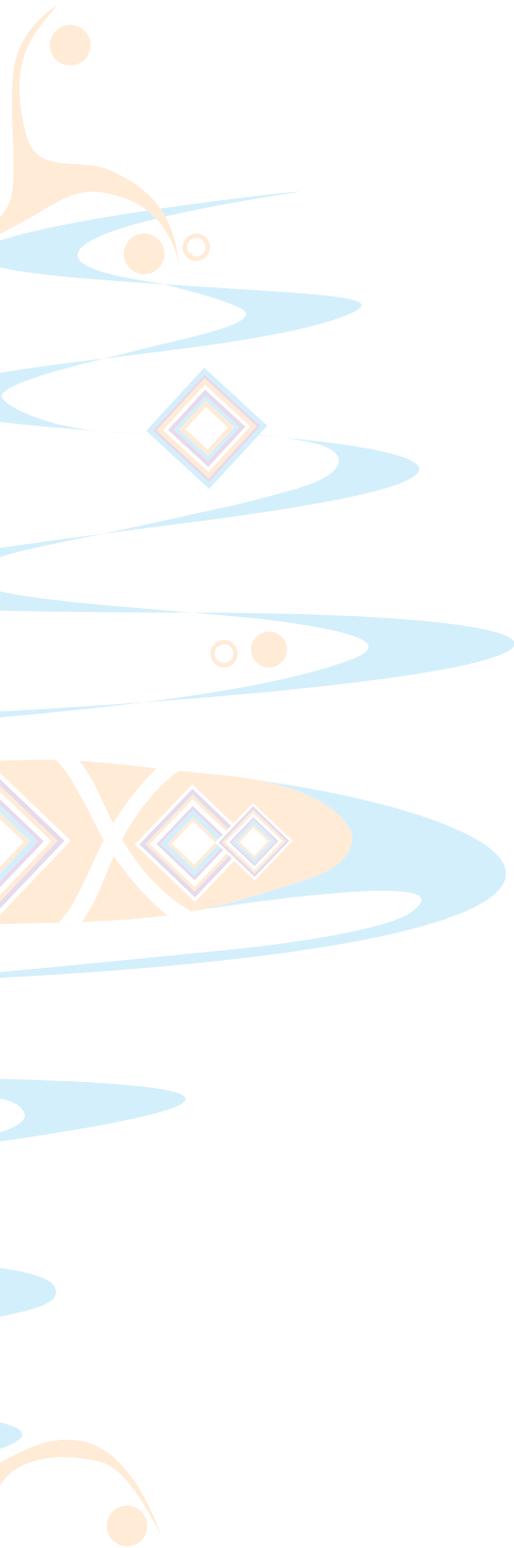
- I can arrange to be in the company of my race most of the time
- If I need to move to rent or buy or if I need credit my skin colour will not be an obstruction to getting the property
- I can turn on the telly and see my race widely and positively represented
- I can swear, get drunk, dress in second hand clothes, not answer letters without people saying how typical of my race
- I can do well without being called a credit to my race
- I am never asked to speak for all people of my race

Further to this Peggy McIntosh suggests:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.¹⁷

In the Australian context, many non-Indigenous people are fortunate not to have been subject to overt or covert racism and marginalisation in the same way as Aboriginal people. For agencies and child and family welfare professionals, understanding and recognising the power dynamics between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people is critical.

¹⁷ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unmaking the Invisible Knapsack", *Peace and Freedom*, July-August 1989, p.10.



Much of Aboriginal disadvantage occurs as a result of systemic racism and structures that exclude Aboriginal governance, culture and reality. There have always been divisive views in the community in regard to the rights and ‘place’ of Aboriginal people. For the general community, less fear of the unknown, more accurate information and greater understanding of issues that concern the lives and situation of Indigenous people are needed. For the organisations involved, a greater capacity is required to be inclusive or at least to maintain positive interactions with the Indigenous community.

In many ways, the journey to cultural competence begins with attitude. As in any mature relationship, mutual respect and a positive attitude towards each other provides the best foundation. If government departments and CSOs believe that Aboriginal peoples and cultures make a positive contribution to the nation, and are not just ‘problems’ to solve, relationships can deepen and be mutually beneficial.

Key messages

In summary, the key messages that emerge from this section of the paper are:

Fundamental to Aboriginal cultural competence is

- Cultural awareness – understanding the role cultural difference and diversity plays
- commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and building respectful partnerships
- Cultural respect – valuing Aboriginal peoples and their cultures
- Cultural responsiveness – having the ability and skills to assist people of a different culture
- Cultural safety – creating a service environment that is safe and welcoming for Aboriginal peoples
- cross-cultural practice and care – being able to relate and provide services to Aboriginal peoples
- self-reflection – being able to see how your culture and dominant culture generally impacts on Aboriginal peoples.

The ground rules: a partnership approach that supports Aboriginal self-determination

In this section we look at the ground rules to enable mainstream CSOs to develop their cultural competence in partnership with Aboriginal communities and services.

As our conceptual framework suggests, the concept of working collaboratively and developing inter-organisational links between mainstream CSOs and Aboriginal communities and ACCOs will require significant attention. Forging partnerships must be understood in context of:

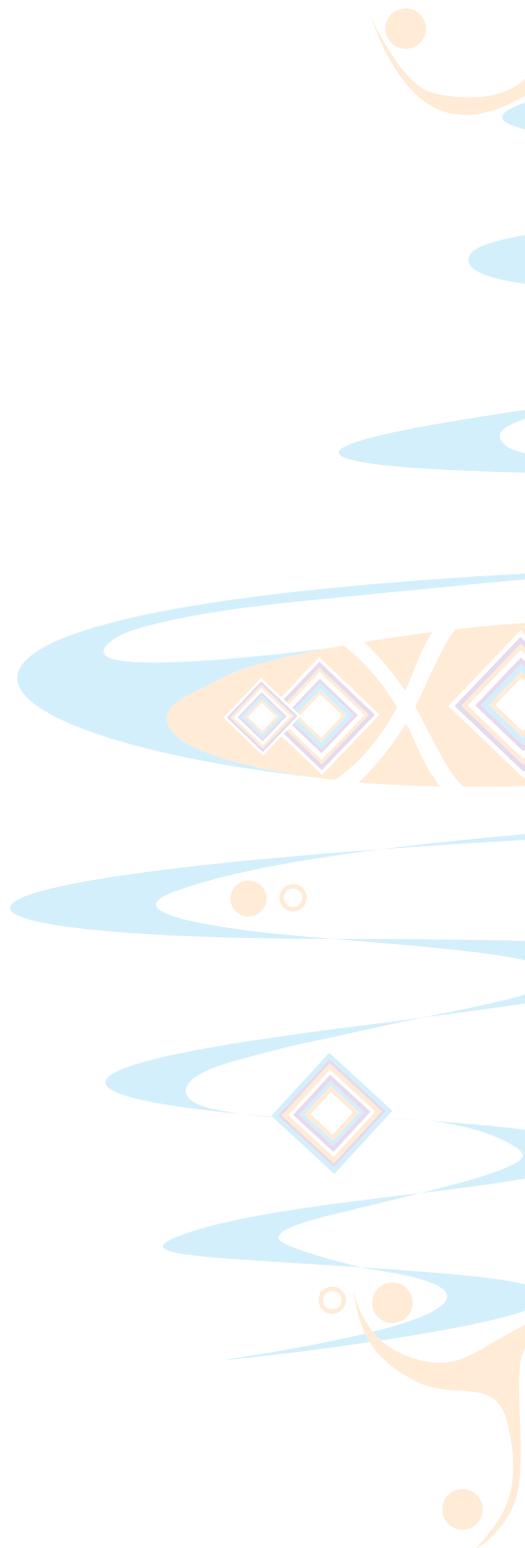
- Aboriginal people being reluctant to access mainstream services because of historical experience and learned mistrust
- mainstream services are often perceived by Aboriginal people as lacking culturally appropriate skills, understanding and an attitude of cultural respect.

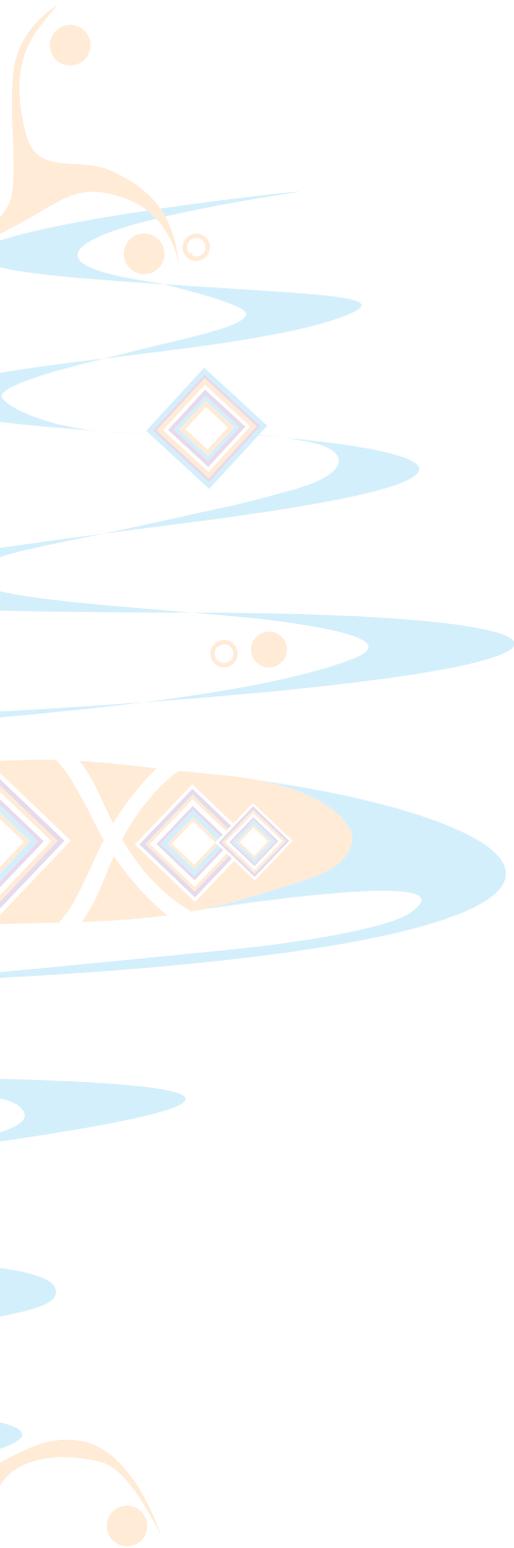
The process of developing collaborative relationships takes time. But it is essential that we pay heed to the warnings of Paulo Freire in reference to those of the dominant culture who seek to journey with marginalised people:

It happens ... that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin [of being oppressors]: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want and to know. Then a false solidarity emerges; one based on charity, paternalism or the desire for control.¹⁸

In other words, people from the dominant culture of a society who act to support marginalised people need to recognise that they are still part of the dominant culture and so must take care that they don't 'speak for' or 'do for' the marginalised. Collaboration, therefore, requires that the partner from the dominant culture is aware of obvious and subtle power dynamics and continually seeks to walk alongside and not ahead of the marginalised partner.

¹⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 36f.





Self-determination

In order to avoid partnerships that are either paternalistic or unintentionally dis-empower Aboriginal communities and services, a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination must inform the engagement between CSOs and ACCOs.

For example, fundamental to culturally competent practices in the human services sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand is an understanding of the role of the Treaty of Waitangi in defining relationships between Maori and non-Maori and protecting Maori self-determination.

*The Government affirms that Maori hold a unique place in our country, and that the Treaty of Waitangi is the nation's founding document. To secure the Treaty's place within the health sector is recognised as fundamental to the improvement of Maori health.*¹⁹

While we do not have a treaty in Australia or Victoria, the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* does acknowledge Aboriginal self-determination as a key principle when determining decisions that concern Aboriginal children and families. The issue of self-determination was also a key concern of the *Bringing them Home* Report.

Clearly, the implementation of self-determination is important for juvenile justice, child welfare, adoption and family law matters. It is the principle grounding a right for Indigenous people to exercise control over matters directly affecting their children, families and communities. The Indigenous perspective on self-determination provides for the development of control over these areas of social life through processes which may involve some form of autonomy or self-government.²⁰

The *Bringing Them Home* Report recommended various measures to enable self-determination for Indigenous communities in the area of child welfare and protection:

*Before informed decisions can be made there needs to be proper negotiation between government and Indigenous communities and organisations relating to self-determination in juvenile justice, welfare and adoption matters. Communities must be in a position to make choices about what they see as suitable long-term solutions to particular issues.*²¹

In the context of child and family services in Victoria, self-determination concerns the movement from Aboriginal communities and services having 'static influence' and therefore merely an advisory role and no control through to the stages of 'dynamic influence' – where government departments are more accountable to Aboriginal communities, to 'direct influence' – that is, joint control, for example including case management contracting, to full control – where for example the transfer of guardianship orders to the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal self-determination in child and family service matters therefore requires a process of capacity building in partnership with government and mainstream services for Aboriginal communities and services. Commitment to this process is fundamental in creating a culturally competent child and family service system for Aboriginal communities.

¹⁹ Rt. Hon. Jenny Shipley, *Policy guidelines for Maori health 1996-1997*, Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Health, 1996.

²⁰ *Bringing Them Home*, p. 565.

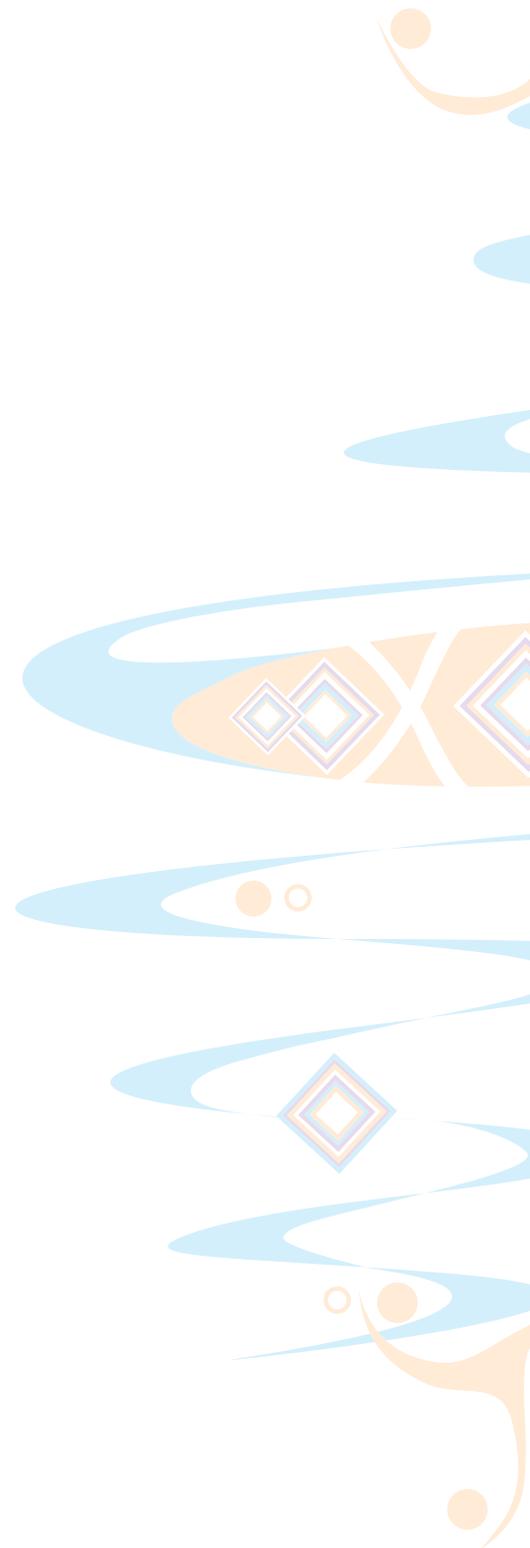
²¹ *Bringing Them Home*, p. 577.

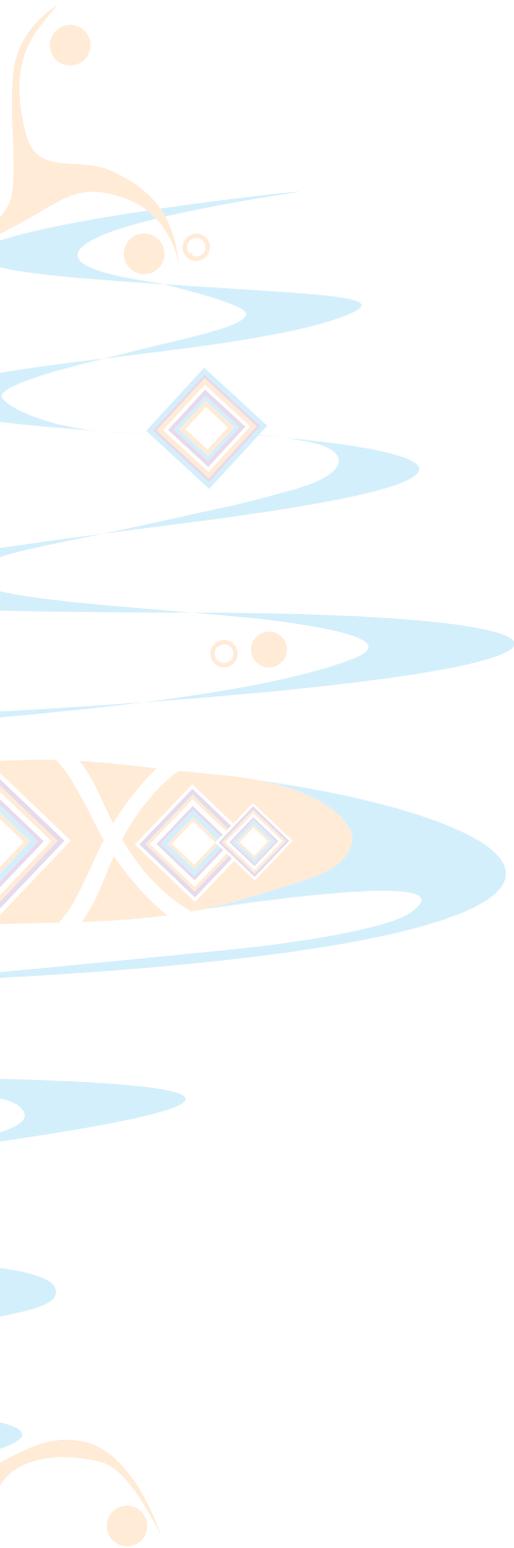
The Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations first principle

Critical to creating a culturally competent service system is an understanding by government and CSOs that preference should always be given to Aboriginal services when thinking about what services will meet the needs of Aboriginal clients.

While CSOs may become genuinely culturally competent, they will never replace Aboriginal services. No mainstream service can express the voice of an Aboriginal community. No mainstream service can be Aboriginal in its approach.

Indeed, the principle of self-determination that underlies the reforms means that developing the capacity of the Aboriginal child and family service system is fundamental to better outcomes for Aboriginal children. The reason that mainstream CSOs need to become culturally competent is that because of economic constraints, economies of scale, access to specialist services and geographical factors, ACCOs are currently unable to create a parallel Aboriginal specific system for all human services. CSOs are often an alternative if there is a lack of Aboriginal specific services or when at times an Aboriginal family prefers a mainstream service to an Aboriginal one. There are sometimes a variety of reasons why a particular Aboriginal family may not want an Aboriginal service. They may have difficulty relating to their community or their culture because of the policies of the past or they may have a particular disagreement with their local ACCO. In any case it could still be appropriate for an ACCO to have access to de-identified data and provide generalised advice about culturally appropriate ways of working.





Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are different

It is critical that CSOs understand the unique role of ACCOs. Aboriginal Services have broad objectives, other than to just provide services.

ACCOs operate differently to mainstream CSOs. ACCOs carry and express the political aspirations of Aboriginal people in seeking to alleviate disadvantage and provide the best possible level of services. Casework and community development are seen as intrinsically linked. For example, caseworkers see as a critical function of their work addressing racism whenever it is encountered by their clients rather than seeking to work around it.

ACCOs are also different and unique because of their culturally based value systems, kinship systems and the way they embed culture in their service delivery. ACCO board members and staff are often part of the community they serve and have experienced the same issues of racism and marginalisation. Board members are selected on the basis of Aboriginal community membership, which is seen as a key determinant of expertise/skills and knowledge required to govern.

The community expects the organisation to be actively involved in community life, for example, hosting children's days, sponsoring cultural or sporting events. These events are not held solely for clients as ACCOs do not distinguish between client and community populations.

ACCOs exist as a sector within a sector that is often in demand of further resources despite often going beyond the specifics of their funding agreements. Most ACCOs are funded on the basis of particular programs, projects and services and often do not have the overall infrastructure in place that is required when running multi program agencies. Also, ACCOs may be expected to partner with a large number of CSOs, which will also place demands on a limited resource base.

Parallel processes involved in cultural competence

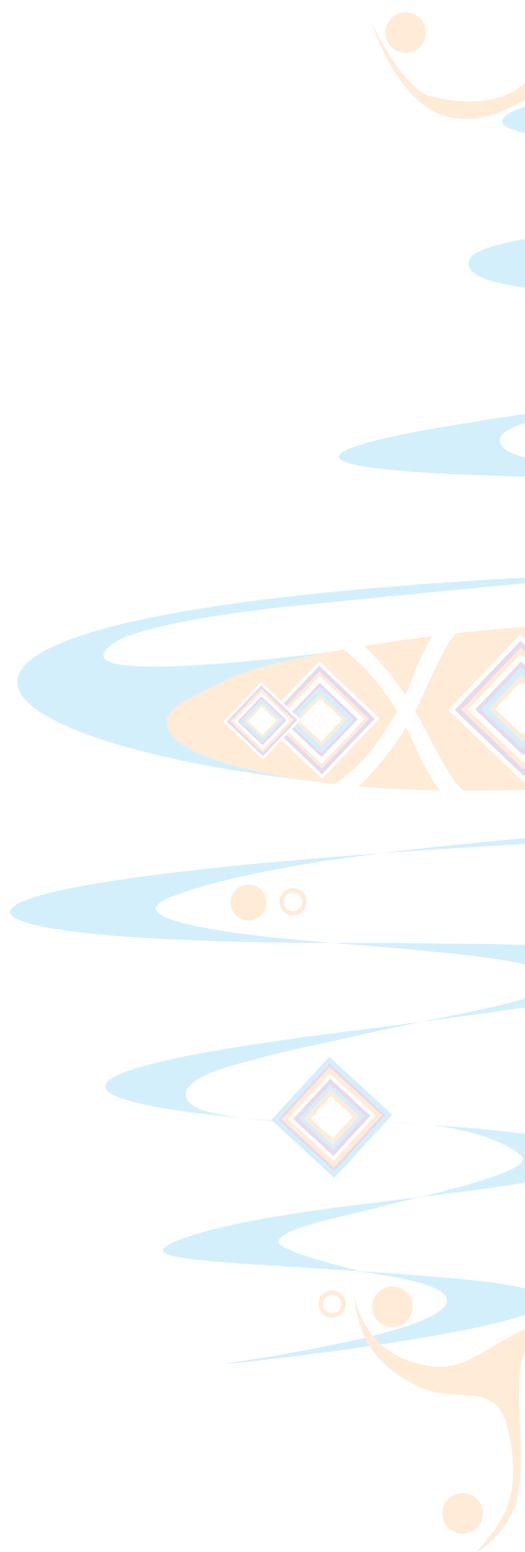
Developing partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and developing CSOs' cultural competence is a parallel process. Without a partnership approach to working with Aboriginal organisations and communities, a CSO's cultural competence will be inadequate and may inappropriately create competition with Aboriginal services. But without some measure of cultural awareness, CSOs may approach Aboriginal organisations without adequate cultural understanding and respect, leading to a mutually unsatisfying experience. It is therefore advised that CSOs have a staged approach to developing or strengthening their cultural competence.

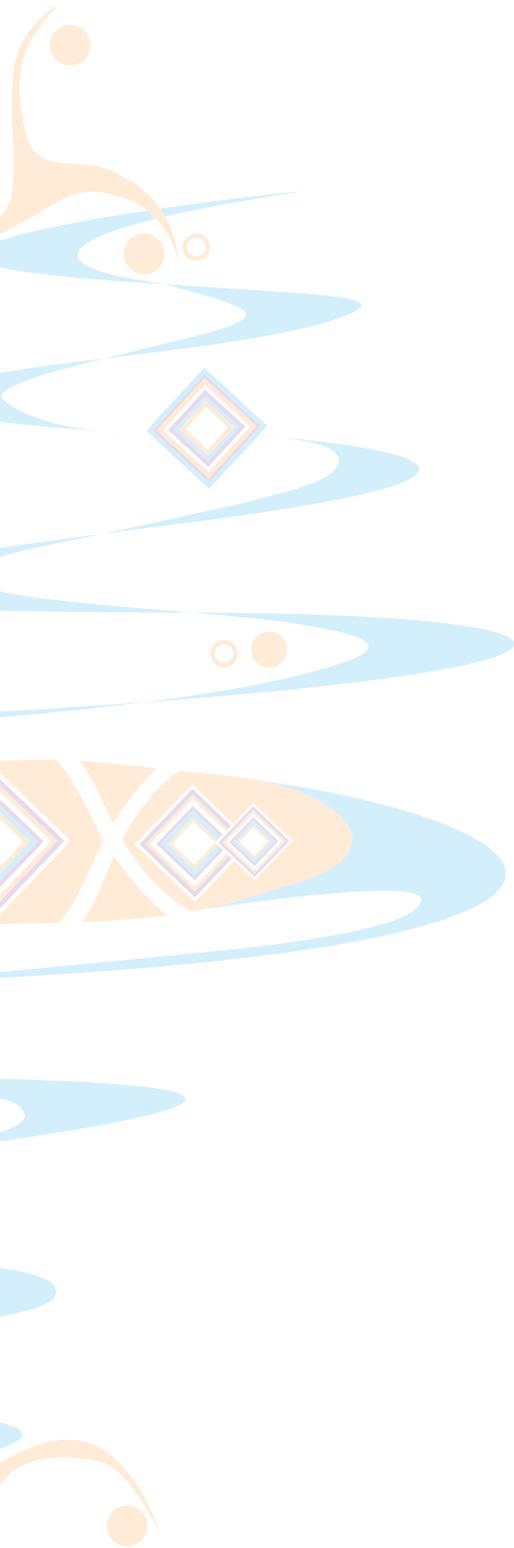
Partnership formation is a complex and difficult process particularly when it comes to working cross-culturally. It will take more than a few meetings to overcome centuries of mistrust and cultural miscommunication. CSOs also need to be aware of the resource constraints that ACCOs and local Aboriginal communities face when meeting around the partnership table. There are costs to partnership formation for ACCOs. However, ACCOs and Aboriginal communities are adept at recognising genuine attempts to form partnerships by mainstream bodies. Through partnership networks, cross-cultural commonalities and differences can be explored and better understood.

Some pointers to partnership formation are:

- Commitment to the principle of self-determination/Aboriginal community controlled processes.
- Processes for developing locally based and sector based protocols.
- Negotiating reconciliation/commitment statements, for example:
- CSOs affirm the primary role of ACCOs receiving resources for and providing services to Aboriginal communities
- CSO partners to work towards capacity development for relevant ACCOs through training and mentoring
- secondments.
- Commitment of ACCOs to assist CSOs to understand issues of respect and cultural safety – use of Aboriginal services for Cultural competency training.
- Understanding of the need for workers to self-reflect on the impacts of dominant culture on Aboriginal people.

These principles around partnerships and protocols create a relational foundation for CSOs to meet their requirements under the registration standards. A cautionary note is that if a CSO has worked to a point where they believe they can be self-sufficient in their cultural competence, they have missed the point.





Key messages

In summary, the key messages that emerge from this section are:

- Recognition of Aboriginal self-determination is foundational for better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.
- ACCOs should be seen as the preferred organisations when considering service provision to Aboriginal children and families.
- Mainstream CSOs cannot replicate the Aboriginality of ACCOs.
- ACCOs are different because:
 - they are expressions of self-determination
 - their staff and Board are part of the community for whom they provide services
 - they provide culturally-embedded services.
- Partnership formation is a journey that requires continual consultation and the time and patience of both parties.

The best interests principles and the lens of culture

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* has, as its focus, principles relating to the best interests of children. These principles are derived from understanding issues relating to the rights of children as well as an ecological understanding of children's needs.

The Best Interests Framework articulates these principles and draws attention to the critical dimensions of the child's life and experience – these areas are the child's safety, stability and development as understood through the first dimension or lens of the child's age and stage of life, their gender and their culture. In many ways the lens represents issues of identity for the child and it is within this context that the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework* for CSOs needs to be understood.

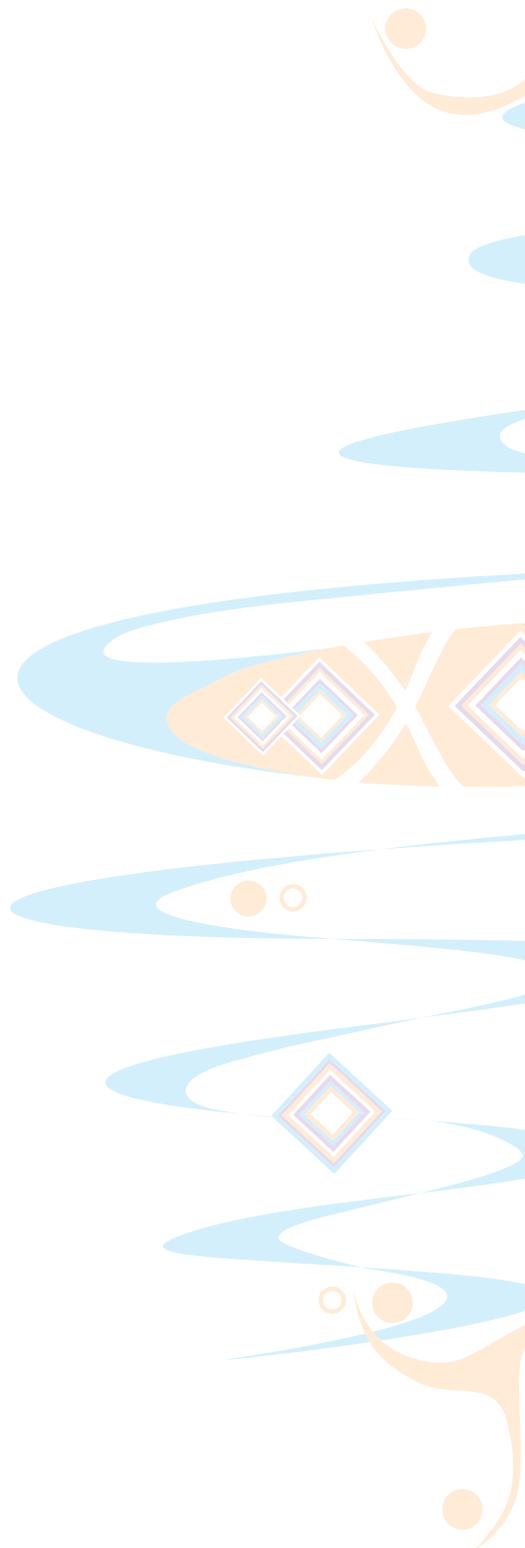
The lens of Culture therefore becomes a tool through which the child's safety, stability and development are best interpreted and assessed as it pertains to the identity of the child, which must always be respected if best outcomes are to be achieved.

This perspective indicates that in our practice with Aboriginal children and their families, the process of undertaking assessments and interventions and what we assess all have cultural dimensions. For example, the emphasis placed on verbal and non verbal cues differs between cultures; for many Aboriginal people, non verbal cues are as important as verbal communication. This means that a worker's non-verbal cues will play a critical role in their capacity to engage.

Having looked at a conceptual framework for understanding Aboriginal Cultural competence and explored the ground rules for partnership development at the CSO level, it is now time to focus on how cultural awareness, respect, responsiveness and promoting cultural safety enhance service delivery to Aboriginal children and families. In particular, it is critical for culturally competent practice and care that we understand the notion of the Best Interests Framework lens of culture as it relates to Aboriginal children.

As part of the *every child every chance* reforms, the Victorian Government has developed the Best Interests Framework. Critical to this framework is the notion of the lens of Culture. According to s. 10 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*:

- (1) *For the purpose of this Act the best interests of the child must always be paramount.*
- (2) *When determining whether a decision or action is in the best interests of the child, the need to protect the child from harm, to protect his or her rights and to promote his or her development (taking into account his or her age and stage of development) must always be considered.*
- (3) *In addition to sub-sections (1) and (2), in determining what decision to make or action to take in the best interests of the child, consideration must be given to the following, where they are relevant to the decision or action.*
 - (c) *the need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development by, wherever possible, maintaining and building their connections to their Aboriginal family and community;*



Under the Best Interests Framework, **the child is understood holistically**, with their life and experiences placed at the centre, while recognising the context in which they live and grow – their families, extended families, cultural community and broader community – and the services and supports society makes available to them.



The above lens diagram from the *Best Interests Framework* represents how the Best Interests Principles are to work. From the perspective of Aboriginal children and families, we need to understand the practical ways in which the lens of culture can inform the domains of safety, stability and development and the outcomes we wish to achieve.

Under the Best Interests Framework, **the child's experience is put first** and is understood through **the lens of age and stage, Culture and gender**.

The lens of culture informs all aspects of the child's experience.

Through this lens, priority is given to the **safety** of the child in terms of the provision of basic care and protection from **current and future** harm. For Aboriginal children, safety includes the protection of the child from cultural abuse. Aboriginal children should feel that their Aboriginal identity is valued and treasured so that they can freely express their cultural identity.

Focus is also given to promoting the child's **stability**, which requires positive relationships and connectedness with parents, families, carers, friends and significant adults. For Aboriginal children, another key area that promotes stability is connectedness and a sense of belonging to culture, land and Aboriginal community. It is critical for CSOs to consider how connection to country, family and community is given due consideration, given the importance of the holistic approach for Aboriginal children. For Aboriginal children, stability is understood as broader than a sole focus on one to one relationship with a parent. Continuity of relationships is also a key facet of stability. For Aboriginal children, continuity with their community, family and cousins is also significant for their sense of stability.

The child's **development** must be attended to in the domains of:

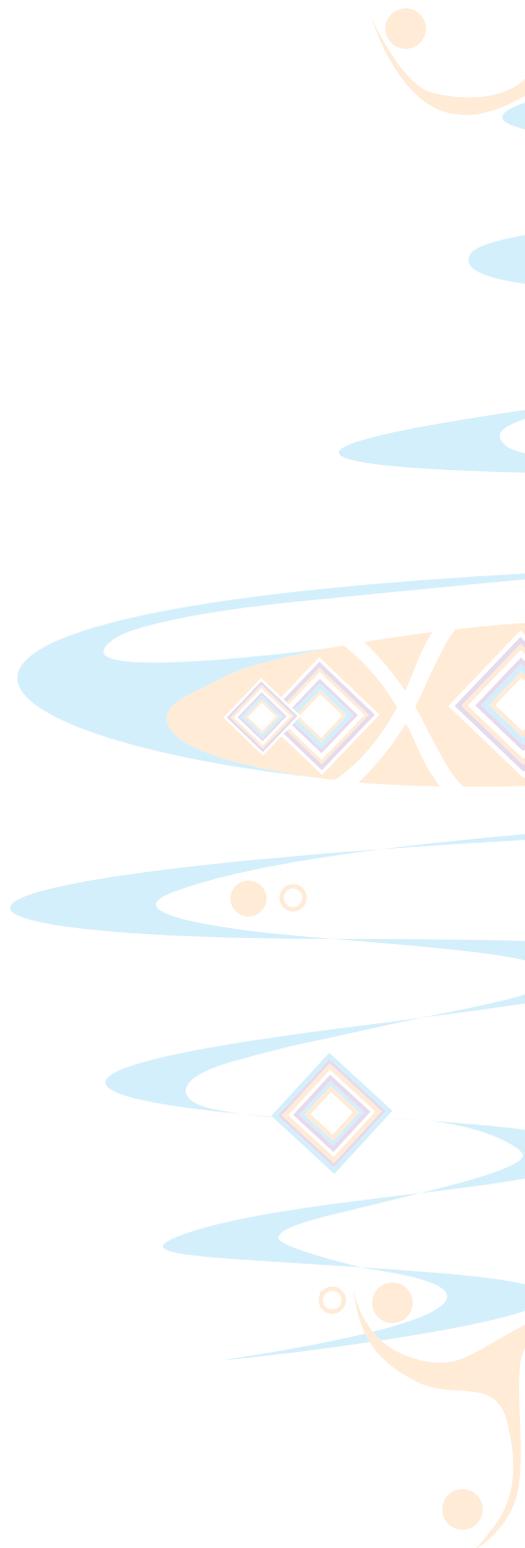
- health and growth
- emotional and behavioural development
- education and learning
- family and social relationships
- identity (including sexual identity)
- social presentation and self-care skills.

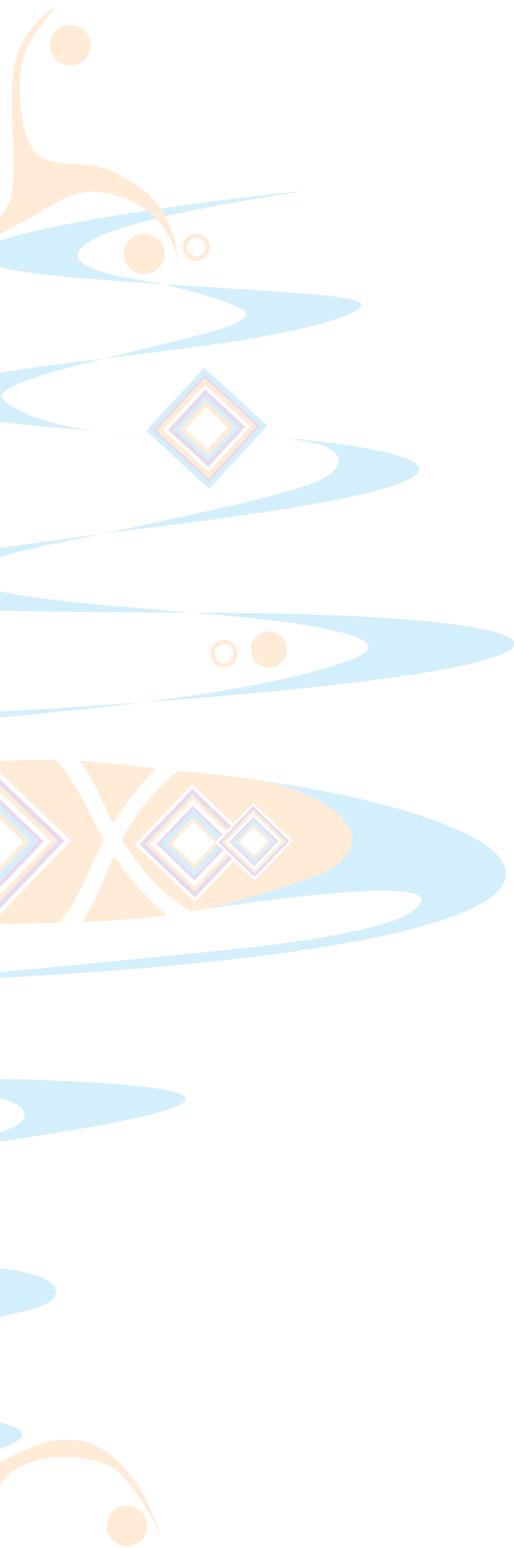
The Aboriginal child's development must be recognised in the context of the community connectedness that promotes healthy development for the Aboriginal child, Aboriginal understandings of emotional and behavioural development, and Aboriginal learning approaches. Key questions to consider in ensuring healthy development include:

- Is the child growing up strong in culture?
- Are there Elders providing support for their maturation needs in accordance with Aboriginal cultural norms?
- Is due regard being paid to cultural consideration of gender – that is, men's business and women's business?
- Are the learning styles of Aboriginal children being attended to in their learning? For example, traditionally, children's learning was seen to be more a result of the relationship between the child and the adult rather than the focus of the relationship. This still continues to be the situation for many Aboriginal children. Accordingly, formal interactions are less likely to be a successful learning approach.

The child's context has a critical impact on the experience of the child. This requires that due regard is paid to:

- **Parent and carer capability** to provide for culturally appropriate forms of safety, stability and development.
- **Family composition and dynamics** and their impacts on the child's safety, stability and development. There may be cultural strengths and extended family relationships which may provide a basis for helping the child, even if there are problems within the immediate family.
- **Community participation, social and economic environment**, and their impacts on both the child and the circumstances of the family and local Aboriginal community.
- **The supports and services** available to the child, including Aboriginal human and cultural services.





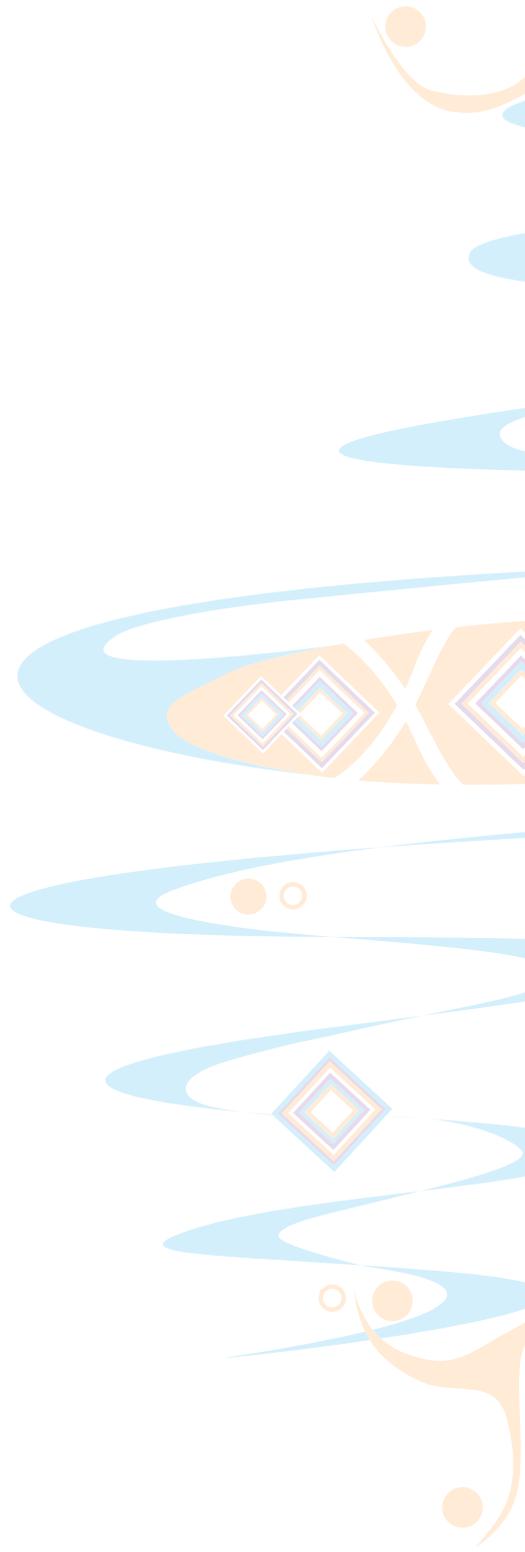
Therefore, when it comes to assessing, planning and acting to promote an Aboriginal child's safety, stability and development, child protection and family and placement services need to take account of:

- That culture in many ways defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important. Culture constantly evolves and adapts and is always a significant and changing influence on us.
- That it is Aboriginal peoples themselves who define their own culture. It is not appropriate for others to define Aboriginal culture for them.
- Understanding Aboriginal values and how they relate to Aboriginal child-rearing practices is critical. Examples of common Aboriginal child rearing practices that may differ from other Australians of Anglo-Saxon/Celtic descent include:
 - Co-sleeping with children over two years of age. While this doesn't mean that co-sleeping should always be a preferred option, particularly when there are other safety issues at play, such as a parent with a drug/alcohol problem, it does mean that workers shouldn't assume that co-sleeping is always inappropriate.
 - Children may spend extended periods in the care of significant adults such as grandparents and aunts.
 - There is much more emphasis on children being part of the adult world rather than being kept apart.
 - Older children are often seen as having a role in caring for younger children without this being a sign of 'parentification'.
- There is a diversity of Aboriginal cultures in Australia. What is appropriate for an Aboriginal child in the Northern Territory may not be appropriate for an Aboriginal child in South Eastern Australia. Aboriginal children require cultural knowledge and cultural information that relates to their own community and tribal group if they are to meet their developmental needs.
- The fact that culture in many ways defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important, means it also defines how we as workers think, communicate, and what we consider of value. Being culturally aware also means thinking about how our culture has influenced us and how we would respond if someone from a different culture imposed their thoughts and values on us.
- The protective and resilience building qualities of a strong cultural identity and involvement in cultural life. Adherence to cultural traditions and participation in cultural activities enhance child wellbeing and contribute to the child's resilience, social confidence, secure cultural identity and protection from prolonged isolation, emotional trauma or exclusion.
- The dynamics of power between cultures. In order to look at ways in which we can keep Aboriginal children resilient, we need to begin by understanding that for Aboriginal people, colonised Australia is a toxic environment that talks down to Aboriginal adults and children and is premised on 'doing for' rather than empowering Aboriginal people. Racism and dealing with the underlying issues that lead to disempowerment and dysfunction need to be taken into account by the service system.

Key messages

In summary, the key messages that emerge from this section are:

- The lens of culture is a tool through which the child's safety, stability and development can be understood and addressed.
- Promoting, maintaining and strengthening Aboriginal Culture is in the best interests of Aboriginal children and contributes to their resilience, particularly in the face of racism, Culture abuse and misunderstanding.
- The safety, stability and developmental needs of Aboriginal children require a Culturally-attuned approach.



Fitting the standards to the framework: a staged approach to meeting the cultural standards for registration

For CSOs to be part of a system that gives every Aboriginal child every chance, they need to be culturally competent and meet the cultural components of the CSO registration standards. The CSO registration standards are about meeting minimum standards as well as aspiring to provide the best possible services for Aboriginal children and families.

As explored earlier, behind the staged approach to meeting the cultural standards in the registration standards for CSOs are:

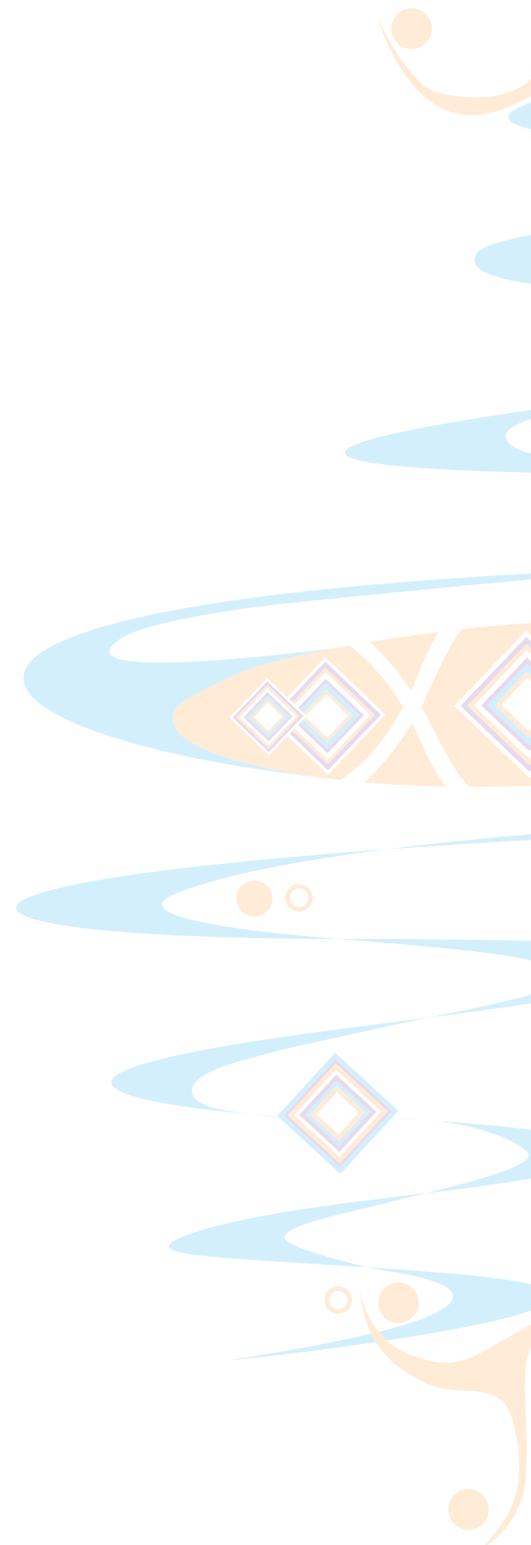
- a holistic understanding of culture and its impact upon individuals, families, professionals and ACCOs
- an understanding of dominant culture and its pervasive impact, including acknowledgement that Aboriginal people need to be bi-culturally competent
- an understanding of the need for culturally responsive service provision
- an understanding of the importance of the impact of the past, the impact of disadvantage and discrimination and an appreciation of cultural resilience
- an ability to differentiate between tokenism and deep cultural understanding
- an understanding that Aboriginal cultural competence is a journey, not a destination.

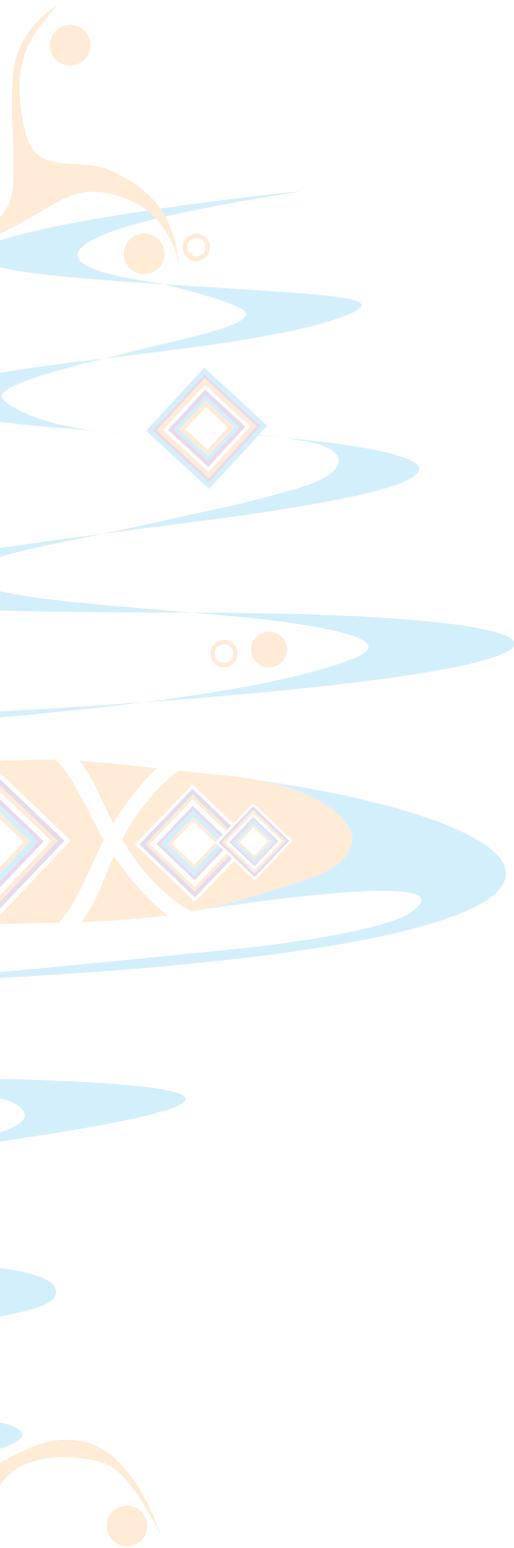
In terms of the Aboriginal cultural competence of a CSO, there needs to be an agency-wide approach. The following chart provides an example of cultural competence consistently applied throughout a CSO:

Governance responsibility	Culturally competent service delivery incorporated into strategic plan
Senior management responsibility	Development of cultural competency service delivery policies and guidelines. For example, CSO assessment frameworks when involved with Aboriginal children always articulate particular service principles that guide interventions, such as assessments will gather information on child's past experience of racism within the general community.
Team leader responsibility	Development of cultural competency practice. Developing positive relationships with ACCOs, children and families. For example, in supervision, worker is assisted in identifying best sources of information to clarify the particular child's experience. In Out of Home Care, did the placement foster positive messages about Aboriginal culture; are Aboriginal posters, toys, books available?
Direct service staff responsibility	Development of culturally competent interventions. For example, does the worker understand how best to communicate with Aboriginal children and families? Is the worker able to advocate to key stakeholders such as schools the importance of supporting the child's cultural identity?

The following matrix may help CSOs understand how the Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework relates to the Cultural standards.

AREA	Approach	Understanding	Action	Feedback
	CSO's vision, purpose, values, policies, procedures, protocols and guidelines	Areas of understanding to consider - involves a growth in cultural awareness (knowledge with understanding)	Records demonstrate that approach has been acted upon	Processes are in place to enable feedback from Aboriginal children, families, services and communities on the following matters
Commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and respectful partnerships (the foundation for cultural competence)	CSO board and management demonstrate commitment to partnership and training from ACCOs	Self-determination, unique role of ACCOs mutual arrangements, impact of Stolen Generations	Statement of commitment to self-determination, partnerships, MOUs, protocols in place	How is the relationship going?
Cultural respect (attitude and values)	Support for local Aboriginal community, code of conduct promotes cultural respect	Local Aboriginal Culture	Plaques, acknowledgement of country, Aboriginal posters	Do Aboriginal people feel respected?
Cultural responsiveness (ability and skills)	Ensure the staff/ volunteers/ carers are culturally competent	Cultural competence	Records indicate cultural needs are being met, training addresses Cultural competence	Are cultural needs being met?
Cultural safety (environment and client experience)	Ensure Aboriginal people feel safe and welcomed, Aboriginal children see positive representation of their culture	Culturally welcoming, impact of racism and cultural abuse	Culture is positively represented, anti-racism policies,	Do Aboriginal people feel safe?
Cross-Cultural practice and care (is the lens of culture being used effectively?)	Commitments to Aboriginal child placement principle, lens of culture used in assessment, intervention and planning	Lens of culture as an assessment, intervention and planning tool	Use of the lens of culture is recorded in reports	Are the Aboriginal child's safety, stability and development needs met in a culturally effective way?





The CSO Registration Standards are grouped according to:

- Leadership and Management
- Organisational Culture
- Staff Capacity
- A Welcoming and Accessible Environment
- Safety, Stability and Development
- Strengthening Caring Capacity
- Responsive Services
- An Integrated Service Response

In each area there will be practices that can be evidenced in the CSOs approach, understanding, actions and ability to provide culturally appropriate means to receive feedback from Aboriginal children, families and communities. Below we outline the registration standards and relate them to our conceptual framework.

Standard 1 Leadership and Management

The CSO has the leadership and management capacity to provide clarity of direction, ensure accountability and support quality and responsive services for children, youth and their families.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural competence aspect of this standard is about ensuring:

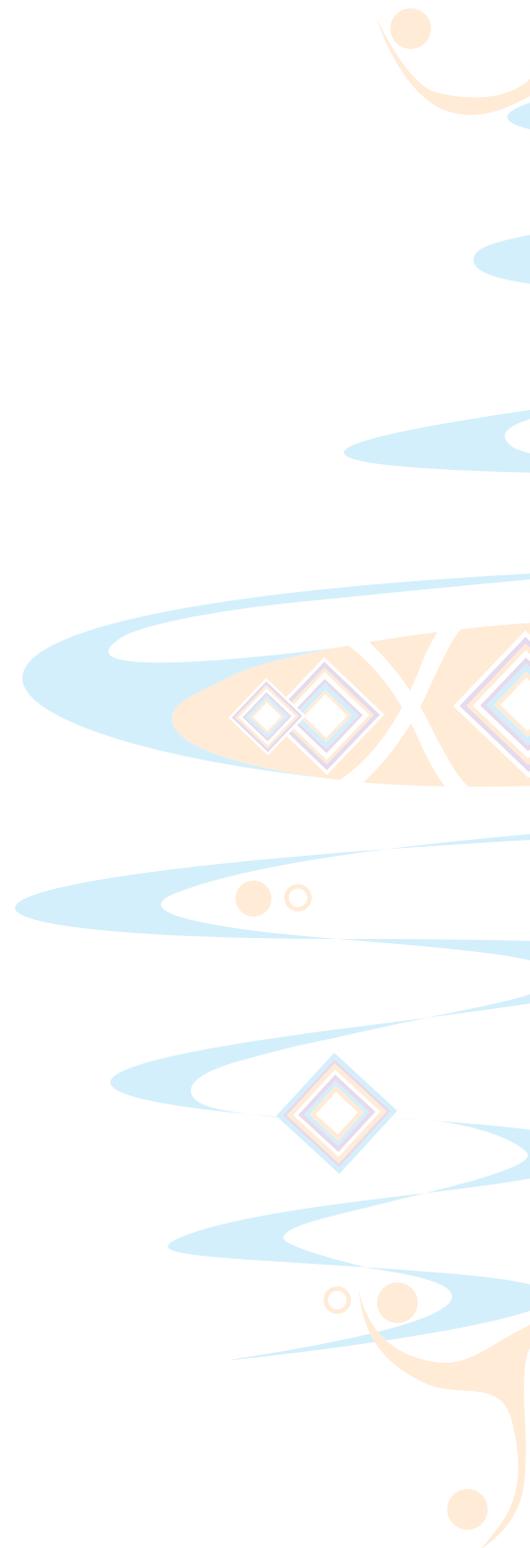
“Aboriginal and CALD communities are respectfully engaged in the organisational planning processes to ensure culturally competent practice”

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates a **commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and respectful partnerships**.

To become culturally competent, the CSO needs to have the leadership capacity, through its board and management, to understand the cultural needs of Aboriginal children and families, develop partnerships and protocols with local and service-based ACCOs and local Aboriginal communities and ensure that cultural competence is highlighted in its vision, values and strategic plan.

Signifiers of this would be:

- CSO statement of commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and cultural competent practice
- appropriate processes of consultation, actions and public statements the CSO makes to partner and support ACCOs and Aboriginal communities
- board awareness of cultural competence and the cultural diversity of Aboriginal communities
- the promotion of cultural competence throughout the CSO, evidenced by its vision, values, strategic plan, policies and practices
- planning processes demonstrate that they involve appropriate levels of Aboriginal service/ community input reflecting the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community.



Standard 2 Organisational Culture

The CSO promotes a culture which values and respects children, youth and their families, carers, staff and volunteers.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about:

“Supporting the provision of culturally competent services which are responsive to the needs of children, youth and their families”.

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **cultural respect**.

This will require CSOs to promote an organisational culture that supports the cultural needs of Aboriginal children and families. This can be achieved by developing policies, procedures and providing training for staff that promote a culture of respect for Aboriginal heritage and people, and establishing processes through which Aboriginal children, families and communities can provide feedback on the CSOs services.

Signifiers of this would be:

- statements of recognition and commitment relating to the Traditional Owners of the land, the Aboriginal communities that the CSO provides a service for and relevant Aboriginal agencies
- policies, protocols and partnership agreements on cultural competence and community engagement
- recruitment policies to increase the number of Aboriginal staff, volunteers and carers and mentoring processes to ensure they are supported
- feedback mechanisms that are accessible for Aboriginal children and families, including access to Aboriginal advocates
- human resource policies are reviewed to ensure that support for cultural competence, including the removal of artificial barriers to employment and promotion.

Standard 3 Staff Capacity

Staff, carers and volunteers support positive outcomes for children, youth and their families.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about ensuring:

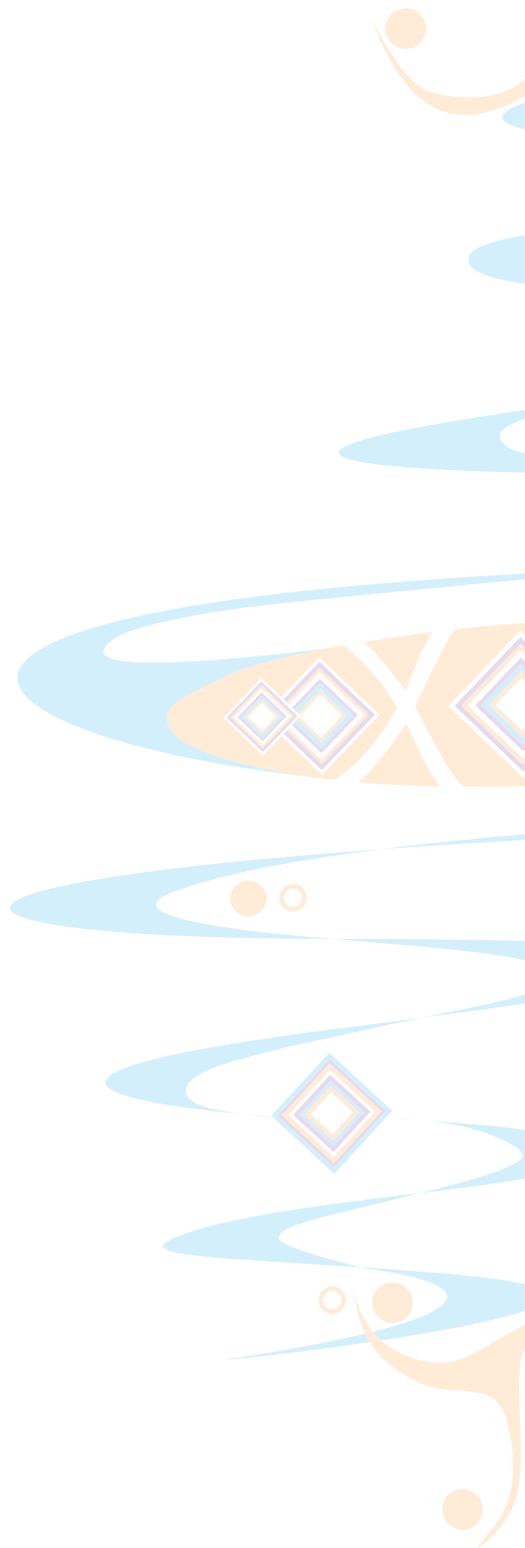
“staff, carers and volunteers are culturally competent and demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the needs of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children, youth and families.”

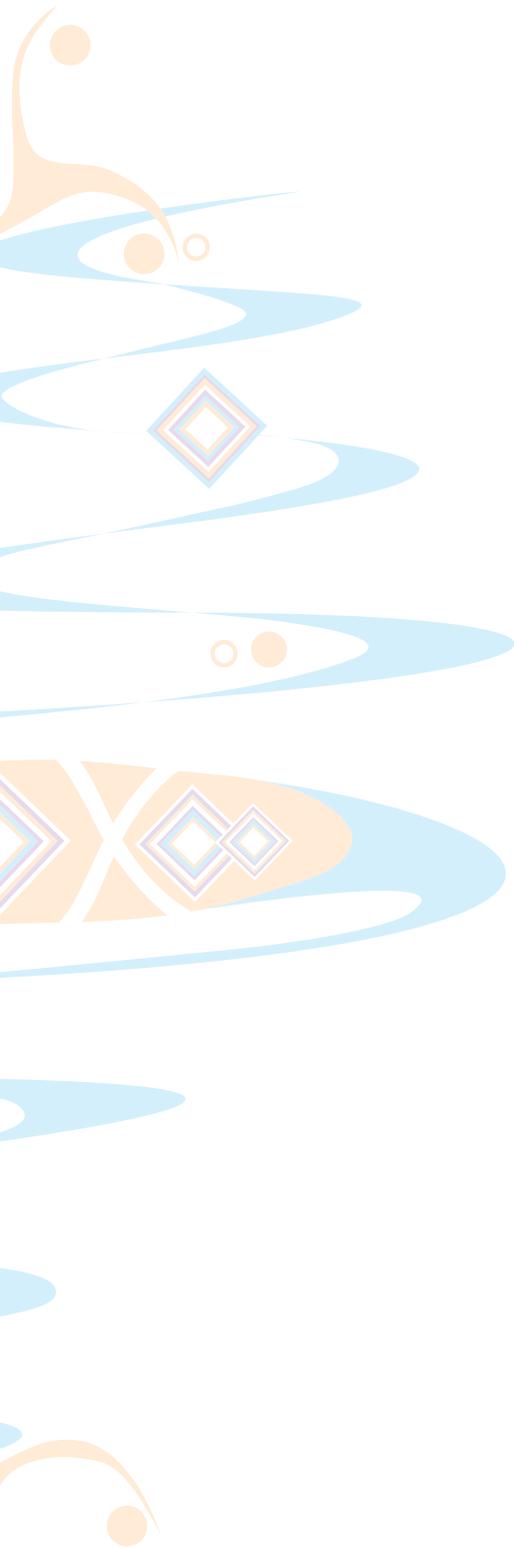
In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **cultural responsiveness**.

Staff, carers and volunteer cultural competence capacity can be achieved through recruitment processes and appropriate training. It is critical that the training is thorough, provides an understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and of local Aboriginal cultures and is relevant to the position/roles of staff. Training should provide space for staff to self-reflect on their practice and go beyond mere knowledge of culture to an aptitude for cross-cultural engagement.

Signifiers of this would be:

- Aboriginal community-sanctioned cultural competence training that pays due regard to the cultural diversity of the Aboriginal community; best practice would suggest that an Aboriginal service is engaged to deliver this training
- position descriptions emphasise the need for cultural competence
- services for Aboriginal children and families are delivered by culturally competent staff
- staff/carer/volunteer records document staff cultural competence training/experience
- feedback processes enable Aboriginal children and families to comment on staff/carer/volunteer cultural competence.





Standard 4 Welcoming and Accessible Environment

The CSO creates a welcoming, safe and accessible environment that promotes the inclusion of children, youth and families.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about ensuring:

“the service environment is safe, responsive to each child, youth or family’s cultural or Aboriginal background and encourages children, youth, families and carers to actively engage and seek support”

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **cultural safety**.

This will require that agencies exhibit a welcoming face and a beneficial service environment to their Aboriginal clients by promoting positive images of Aboriginal cultures, paying due regard to local Aboriginal cultures and using culturally appropriate resources.

Signifiers of this would be:

- posters and symbols (such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag) that promote cultural respect
- public support for Aboriginal cultural events
- a plaque that recognises the Traditional Owners of the land
- involving Elders in traditional welcomes to country
- acknowledging Traditional Owners and Elders at meetings and public forums
- a positive approach to Aboriginal clients by all staff
- a charter of client rights that acknowledges the role of culture and is accessible for Aboriginal children and families
- processes in place to actively seek out and analyse Aboriginal client feedback with ACCOs.

Standard 5 Safety, Stability and Development

The CSO promotes the safety, stability and development of children and youth.

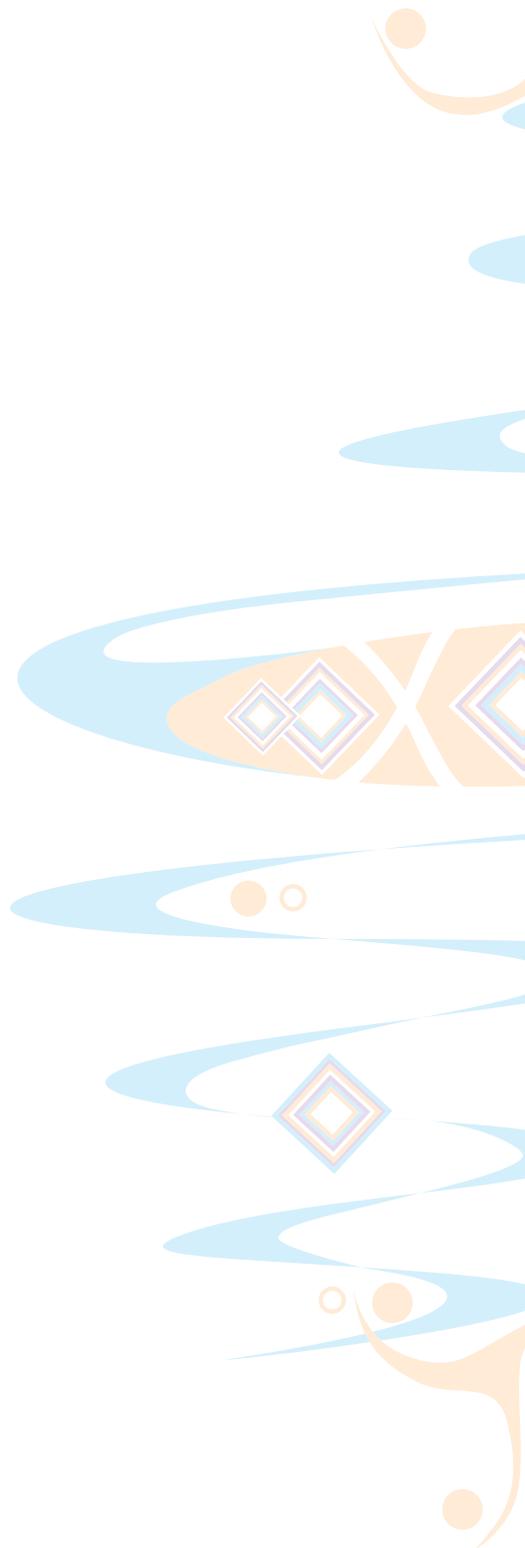
As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered Community Service Organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about enabling children and youth to:

- “develop and maintain positive family attachments and cultural connections”,
- “develop and maintain safe and positive attachments (including for Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children and youth connections to their Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse community and culture)”
- “develop culturally and age appropriate self-care skills”
- “be safe and effectively protected from harm to their learning, development, stability and culture”
- “participate in age and developmental and culturally appropriate ways” In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **cross-culturally competent practice and care**.

This standard requires that staff have a good understanding of how to serve their Aboriginal clients in ways consistent with using the lens of culture in applying the best interests principles. Practices that promote the safety, stability and development of Aboriginal children will incorporate cultural factors and enable children to feel safe in their identity and connected to their communities, and develop in accordance with cultural ways.

Signifiers of this will be:

- policies, procedures and practices support the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle
- appropriate use of Cultural Support Plans and records to demonstrate this support
- Aboriginal children and families feel culturally safe when dealing with the CSO and can access feedback mechanisms to demonstrate this
- information is available to Aboriginal children and families in a way that honours and respects their culture
- Aboriginal children in care will see their culture widely and positively represented
- CSO engages with ACCOs and Aboriginal community resources to assist in the development of the Aboriginal children in their care
- Aboriginal resources, including local Aboriginal resources, are used
- Aboriginal children’s development includes mentoring by community Elders and significant adults in the community.



Standard 6 Strengthening Caring Capacity

The CSO strengthens the capability of parents, families and carers to provide effective care.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard relates to:

- “strengthening the positive networks which surround children and youth”,
- “supporting the capability of parents, families and carers to consistently and appropriately engage with their children and/or those they care for through the provision of advice, support, encouragement and positive role modelling”,
- “building the confidence of parents, families and carers to bring up children in a way that promotes their best interests through ensuring safety, stability and healthy development”,
- “ensuring carers in the Out of Home Care system are supported to provide effective care.”

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **culturally competent practice and care**.

Fundamental to this standard will be a strengths-based approach to families that seeks to use positive, resilient aspects of Aboriginal culture in their care of children. For Out of Home Care, this will mean ensuring that placements pay due regard to the child’s culture and encourage effective connection with the Aboriginal community of the child.

Signifiers of this will be:

- Aboriginal children will feel connected to their community and participate in key cultural events and activities, for example, NAIDOC week events, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s day
- Aboriginal children will see their culture positively valued and represented in their placements
- Aboriginal children see CSOs as advocates for them, for example, will discuss issues with their school in the case of racism and bullying
- Respect for cultural processes such as men’s business and women’s business
- Non-Indigenous carers are:
 - assessed and receive specific training before being asked to care for Aboriginal children
 - encouraged and assisted to promote children’s Aboriginal identity and connection to community
 - encouraged and assisted to access ACCOs for assistance, access to cultural events, etc.
 - provided with continuing access to training and support to enhance their cultural competence.

Standard 7 Responsive Services

The CSO provides responsive services to support the best interests of children and youth.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about:

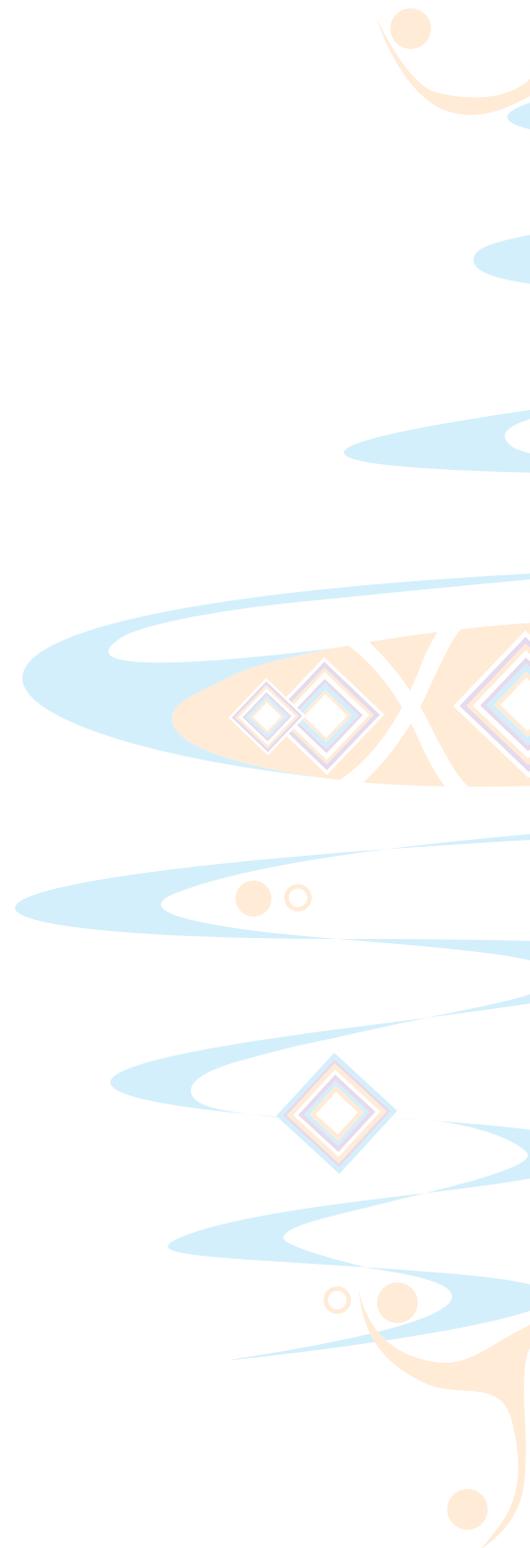
- “ensuring cultural safety and is sensitive to cultural and religious diversity”
- “protecting and respecting the cultural and spiritual identity of Aboriginal children and youth.”

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates **cross-culturally competent practice and care**.

Assessment, planning, decision-making and implementation of decisions will need to give due regard to the cultural needs of children.

Signifiers of this will be:

- the CSO asks about the cultural background of its clients
- policies, procedures and practices are consistent with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle
- use of cultural support plans and records to demonstrate this support
- the lens of culture is a critical feature of assessment, planning and action processes and cultural issues are clearly documented
- involvement of Aboriginal families and their community in decision-making and planning processes
- use of Section 12 family meetings led by Aboriginal conveners
- feedback processes are culturally safe
- reflect on the differences in practice between Aboriginal and mainstream clients
- preparation for Aboriginal children leaving care will ensure connection to community and
- Aboriginal children will have a strong sense of identity and connection to their community.



Standard 8 Integrated Service Response

The CSO creates an integrated service response that supports the safety, stability and development of children and youth.

As stated in the *Evidence guide for registered community service organisations*, the cultural aspect of this standard is about:

“greater integration between family services and Out of Home Care services, cultural and Aboriginal specific services, Child Protection, universal and other secondary and specialist services to ensure:

an improved understanding of the needs of children, youth and families (including cultural and Aboriginal specific needs)”

In relation to the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*, this standard involves an approach that demonstrates a **commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and Cultural competent practice** as it relates to interagency cooperation.

An integrated approach that is culturally competent will require close links between CSOs and ACCOs and effective sharing of information without violating privacy and confidentiality considerations.

Signifiers of this would be:

- mutually agreed protocols and partnership arrangements with ACCOs
- support for ACCO involvement in Child FIRST alliances
- collection, analysis and sharing of data with ACCOs
- clear processes in place to refer to ACCO services when appropriate
- feedback processes for ACCOs.

Developing a promising future

The greatest signifier of a CSO's cultural competence in all these areas will be the experience of Aboriginal clients. The Best Interests Framework sets the foundation for maximising good outcomes for children involved in the child and family services sector by using the lens of culture, age and stage, and gender to understand their safety, stability and developmental needs. The child and family services sector intervenes into children's and families lives to promote a promising future for our children. On an individual level it is often difficult to know whether interventions have been successful. Included below is a hypothetical letter from a former Aboriginal client who is reflecting on her experience of the system. It highlights how cultural competence by a mainstream CSO may be experienced in the future if our efforts in the area of Aboriginal cultural competence are successful.

NAKAYA'S LETTER OF THANKS

To Sal and the other workers at Todd Hunter Family Services,

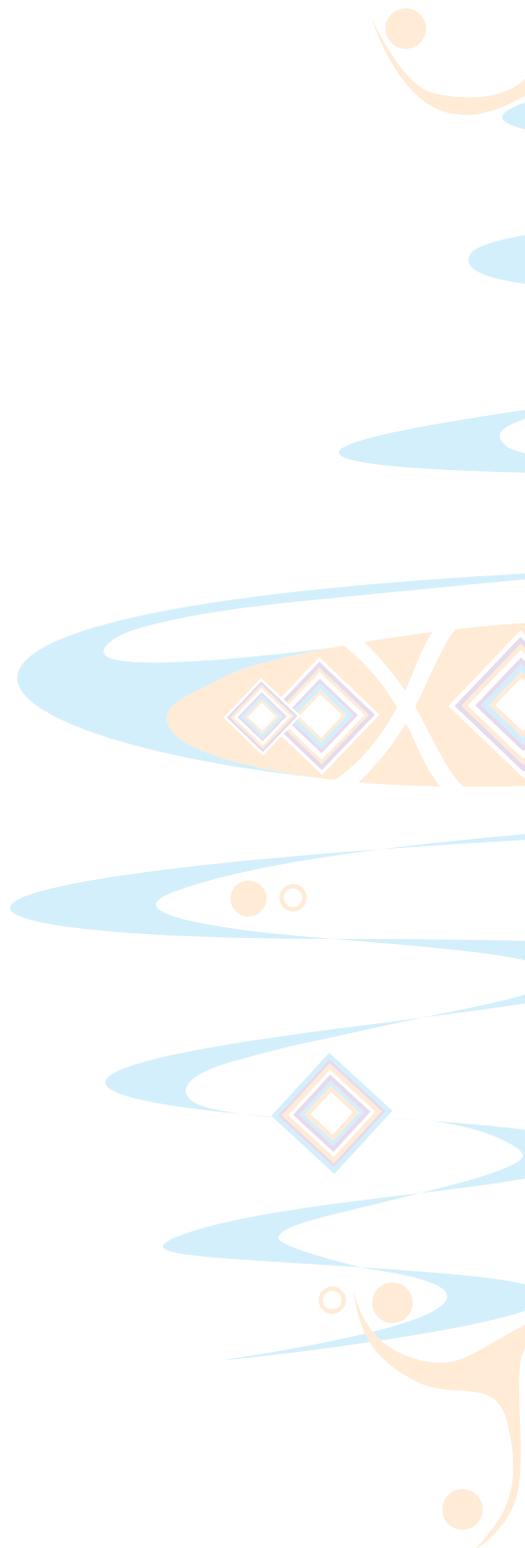
Hi, I thought I would drop you a line to let you know how things are going for me since I left George Street. I hope you are fine and all the kids are doing well.

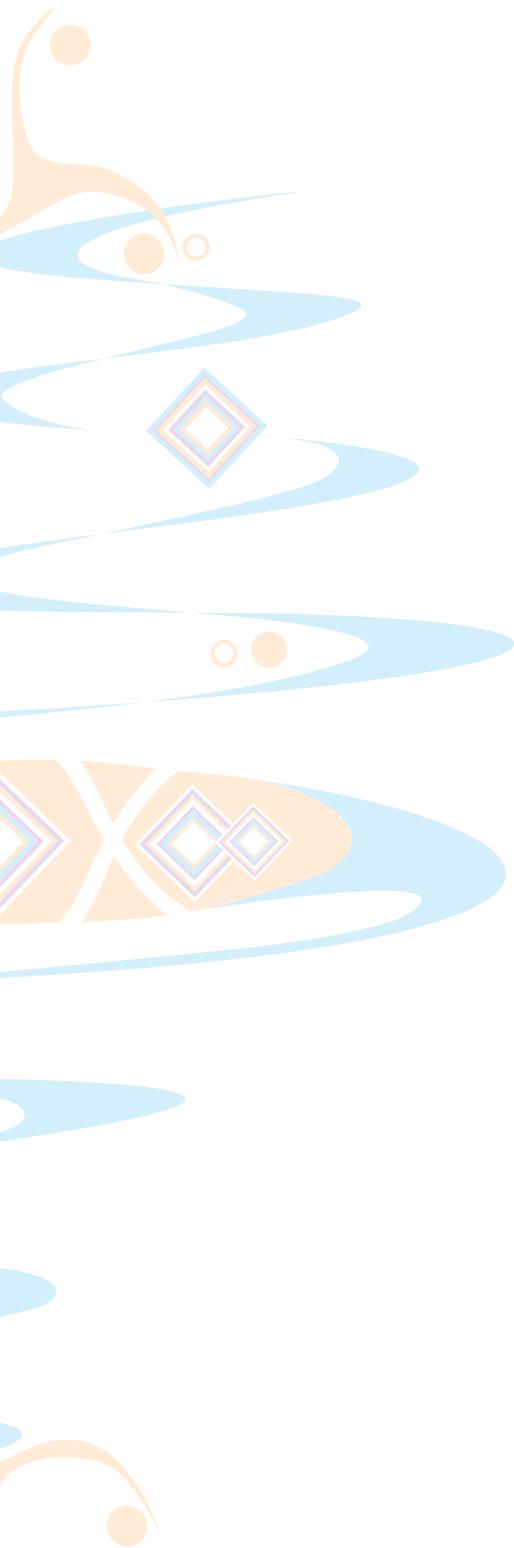
I've been busy lately and have just started my Certificate III in Business Studies at the local TAFE with the Koorie Unit. It is great to study with a bunch of other Koorie young people and the teachers are pretty switched on.

Mum is going okay and it's great to be back with her and my brother Henry. We sometimes get to go to Swan Hill and spend time with my cousins and go camping. We have a deadly time and I just wish we all lived a bit closer.

I'm still seeing my counsellor Aunty Nicole at the Aboriginal Health Service and this is going well. Thanks heaps for taking me to see her each fortnight even though it meant a trip across town. Sometimes when I talk with my friends about the 4 years I was in foster care and part of the Todd Hunter mob they are really amazed at how much you seemed to really, really care about me and my culture.

When I was 9 I was in a really bad place. Experiencing all that I had, I felt like I had lost my soul. I still remember the day I arrived at the agency, it was a lot for me cause I had only had some bad experiences with white fellas before. But there was a Koorie Flag on the wall and a plaque saying your office was on Wurrundjeri land and even though I'm Yorta Yorta I thought maybe, just maybe, it would be different.





Your lady at the desk looked at me in a friendly way and said howdy. Then when you talked with me in your office and calmed me down and introduced me to Nicole, who was Yorta Yorta like me, I felt OK.

And even when you took me to my carers it was scary but they were warm and showed me the way to my room which had a Koorie flag on the wall and this teddy bear sitting on my bed which also had a flag on it. I still have Charlie today and he is a reminder of how well things have turned out. I remember sitting in my room for days and feeling so alone, I remember I couldn't even cry because I was so scared and I would tell Charlie how I was feeling.

I remember all the phone calls you would make to find out stuff for me. I still laugh at the phone call that you had with my teacher who was racist and you really gave him a serving. But you always did the best you could for me.

Changing schools was especially hard for me. But again I remember Aunty Wanda, the Koorie worker who came to check on me regularly thanks to you. But my fondest memories are when my carers Aunty Mavis and Uncle Fred drove across town every Saturday so I could go to my Koorie netball team. Seeing my friends there was enough to keep me going.

I also know now that you encouraged my carers to take me to the Aboriginal Health Service when I was sick and to NAIDOC stuff where I could see all my uncles, aunties and cousins. And because of my work with Aunty Nicole my counselor at the health service I started feeling a bit better about stuff. Today I can see that she really helped me understand everything that had gone on and cause she was Koorie she really understood me.

I also want to say thanks for always being supportive when I talked about my mum and dad. You never put them down and I really appreciated the time you spent with mum and helped us get back together.

Anyway, I know it's the annual Koorie kids day at the League and I thought I'd help out, but also I know you'll be there so I will see you soon. I just want to let you know that you and your mates at Todd Hunter are really cool.

Many thanks - you guys are deadly

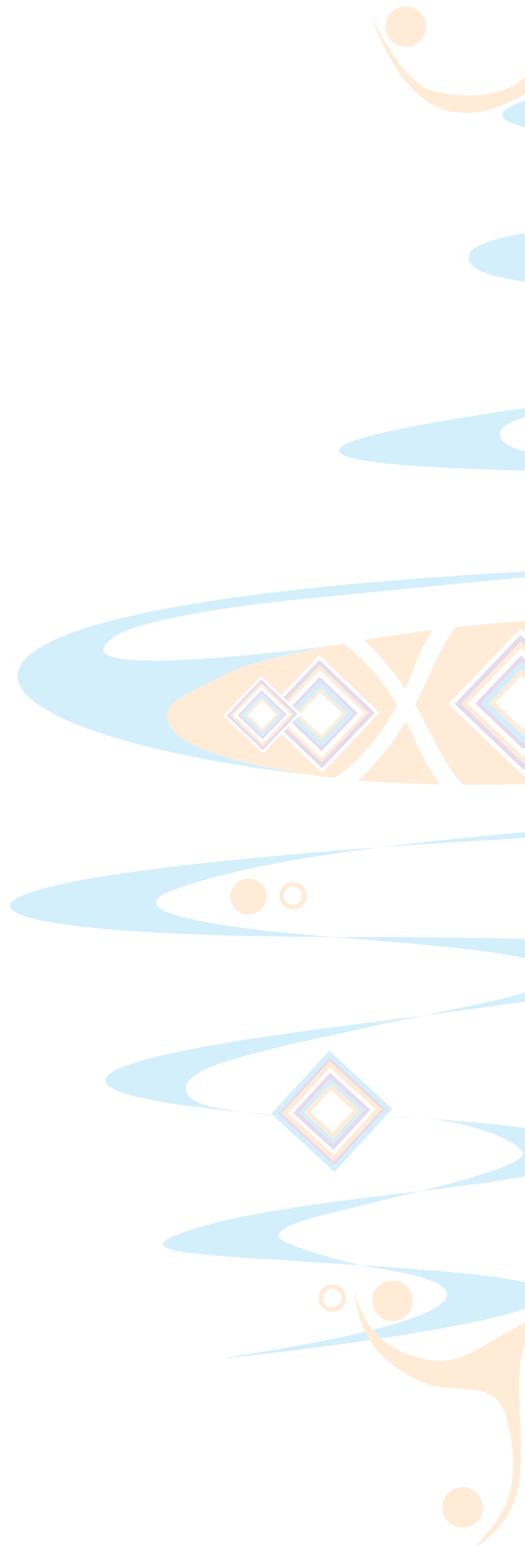
Cheers

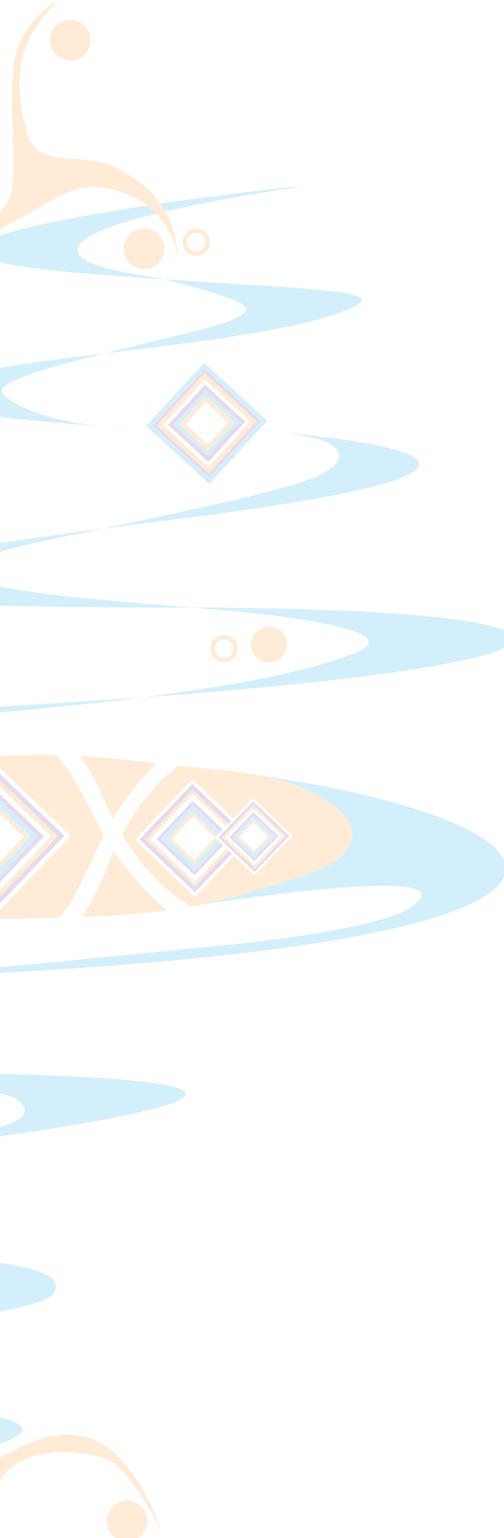
Nakaya

Key messages

In summary, the key messages that emerge from this section are:

- Cultural Competence needs to be built over time, not over night.
- Cultural Competence requires a whole-of-agency approach and strong and committed leadership at all levels.
- Cultural Competence relies on respectful partnerships with Aboriginal organisations.
- Cultural competence requires personal and organisational reflection.
- You are not expected to know it all.
- Cultural competence is a journey, not a destination.





Conclusion

The journey to Aboriginal cultural competence will be challenging for many CSOs. However, the understandings on the way will benefit both the Aboriginal community and the CSO level of professional competence. We hope the *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework* will assist your organisation in forming partnerships with Aboriginal communities and services and providing cross-culturally competent practice and care. If we are to successfully look after children and provide support for families, using the lens of Culture and becoming culturally competent are key factors in enabling CSOs to provide the best services they can for Aboriginal children and families. Success in this regard will also be a significant step in the complex but necessary process of reconciliation.

Key Terms

Culture is

- the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon our capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations
- the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group
- the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterizes a system, company or corporation and
- one group or people's preferred way of meeting their basic human needs.²²

Cultural abuse is

actions and attitudes that ignore, denigrate or intentionally attack the culture of a person or community

The lens of culture is

using cross-cultural understanding and perspectives to interpret and assess a child's safety, stability and developmental needs.

Self-determination is

the right to freely choose a group's political status and economic, social and cultural development.

Cultural competence is

a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.²³

Cultural awareness is

understanding cultural difference, cultural diversity and an awareness that cultural differences may necessitate a different approach to people of that other culture.

Cultural respect is

attitudes and values that accept and promote the uniqueness, diversity and strengths of other cultures.

Cultural responsiveness is

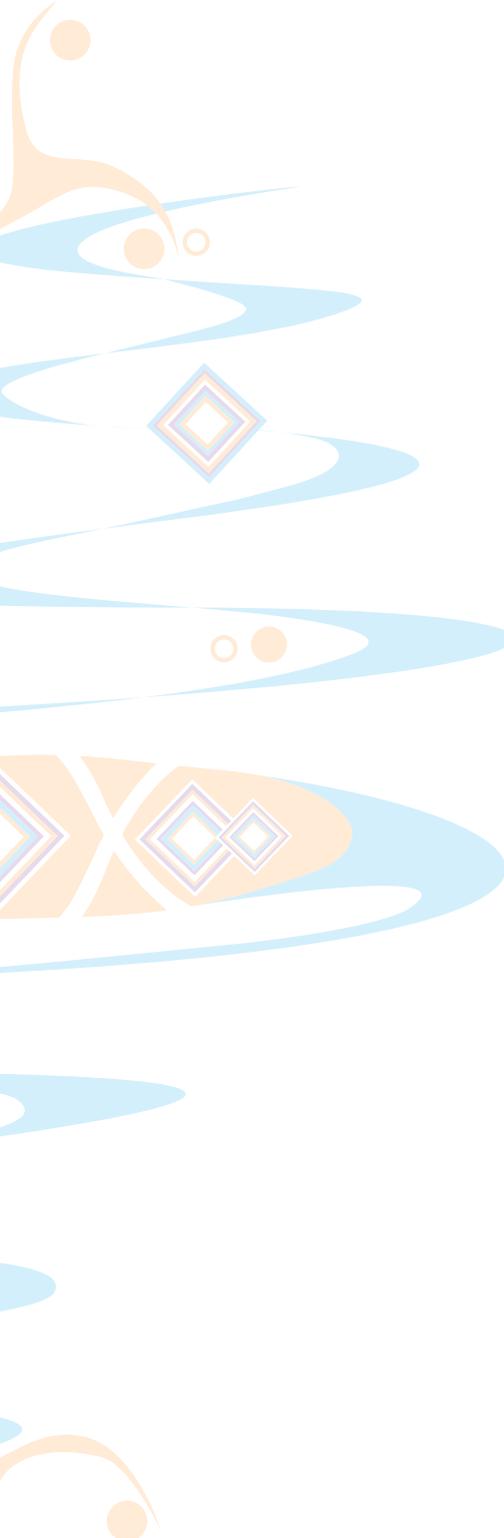
the ability and skill to relate effectively with people of another culture.

Cultural safety is

providing an environment which is welcoming and respectful of another person's culture.

²² Terry Cross, "Through Indigenous Eyes: Rethinking Theory and Practice", Paper at 2007 SNAICC Conference, Adelaide.

²³ Char Tong and Terry Cross, *Cross Cultural Partnerships for Child Abuse Prevention with Native American Communities*, Portland, Oregon: Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 1991, p. 12.



Some resources

Aboriginal People of Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Revised Edition August 2002.

Carmel Bird, **The Stolen Children – Their Stories**, Random House, 1998.

James Miller, **Koori: A Will To Win**, Angus & Robertson, 1985.

Phillip Gwynne, **Deadly Unna**, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1998.

Phillip Gwynne, **Nukkin Ya**, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 2000.

Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out of Home Care, VACCA, 2005.

Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child Welfare Workers, VACCA, 2006.

Aboriginal Life book, VACCA, 2006.

Annual Diary for Aboriginal Children in Out of Home Care, VACCA.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002

Aboriginal Resource and Cultural Guide, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, 2002

Protocol between the Department of Human Services Child Protection Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, 2002

Children, Young People and Families Act, 2005

Child Wellbeing and Safety Act, 2005

National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, April 1997, *Bringing Them Home Report*

Their Future Our Responsibility, Secretariat of National of Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

