

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander father inclusive practice

Direction to staff

This document provides supplementary information to support Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) staff perform their role.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the term ‘child’ or ‘children’ also refers to ‘young person’ or ‘young people’.

Purpose of this document

This practice guide provides information about supporting the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers involved with CYPS, in order to increase their opportunities to participate in planning and decision-making in relation to the care and protection of their child/ren.

Scope

This practice guide supports all staff within CYPS who interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers.

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Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, partners, grandfathers and uncles have critical and unique roles in the care, development and formation of the cultural identity of children. Whether the father is a primary caregiver, lives in the home or is separated from the family, fathers have an important function in family well-being and significant role to play in children’s lives.

In the last five years studies examining parental influences on child development have identified that a father’s potential to positively influence their children’s cognitive development, social skills, mental health and academic achievement operates in different pathways to that of mothers and can be an important factor in children’s successful transition through infancy to adulthood¹.

Despite the important role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers have within the family and community, they are often overlooked and excluded from opportunities to contribute to vital discussions and decision-making when their child is involved with statutory services. Exclusion of fathers from these processes disadvantages not just the child and their father, but also the mother who is then held responsible for all parenting choices – good and bad. It contributes to an uneven analysis of parenting responsibility and holds mothers to an unfairly high standard of parental accountability.

The *Our Booris Our Way Review* Final Report (December 2019) states that the “exclusion of fathers from case work practice in child protection dislocates the child from the father and the extended family on the paternal side, who may be essential in the cultural connections and identity for the child, as well as providing greater possibilities for kinship carer placements.” It is also noteworthy that the Director-General has a legal obligation at section 351 of the *Children and Young People Act 2008*, to ensure that all members of a family understand, and can contribute to, any decisions made with respect to their child/ren.

It is important that all CYPS staff take responsibility for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers throughout care and protection or youth justice involvement. It is also important to recognise, the role of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander father, may also be provided by the child’s uncle and/or grandfather. Engagement may take many forms, depending on the circumstances of the child and family arrangement. Where face to face engagement is not possible, CYPS staff must make best efforts to engage fathers through electronic communication, telephone conversation and/or use of a culturally competent advocate.

¹ Cabrera et al, 2011; Fletcher et al 2014; Pougnet et al 2011; Pears et al 2012; Herbert et al, 2013; Majdandžić et al 2014

What is father-inclusive practice?

Father-inclusive practice aims to:

- value and support men in the role as fathers,
- actively encourage their participation in decision-making, and
- ensure they are appropriately and equally considered in all aspects of service delivery, including assessment, meetings and case planning.

Assisting to strengthen the role of men as fathers can lead to overall better health and wellbeing as well as assist to improve child development and family harmony in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Father-inclusive practice recognises the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers and believes that a father's choices and actions matter to children and family functioning.

By working in father-inclusive ways we:

- Acknowledge traditional parenting practices valued by the entire family, focussed on the health and wellbeing of the child, family, extended family, kin network and overall community. This provides the opportunity to recognise and promote the importance of the role and responsibilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, fathers, uncles and grandfathers have in strengthening family ties.
- Demonstrate an understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have been greatly impacted through the history of colonisation resulting in intergeneration disconnection from their role as men and as father. Very often their trauma histories go unidentified and untreated and by being father inclusive, it is an opportunity to repair this loss by helping him to address this through participation and creating partnerships, and by connecting him to the appropriate services that will reduce his social isolation he may experience as a father.
- Focus on increasing the positive interaction between the father and child, nurturing their current strengths and enhancing their parenting skills and capacity to continue to build their confidence.
- Comply with section 351 of the *Children and Young People Act 2008* by ensuring that all family members are aware of, contribute to, and understand all decision-making processes which may affect them. This in turn supports the father's role in decisions regarding the care and protection of their child/ren, increasing the likelihood of continued engagement with child protection and the associated community supports that are offered.
- Support fathers to stay connected to their child and family so as opportunities exist for a child to learn culture, language, customs, beliefs and traditions. This is of particular importance for consideration if the paternal side of the child's family is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

- Recognise the importance of the father in a child’s life, even when there is no father currently involved with the family. This will create an opportunity to talk to mothers and children about how the absence of the father has affected the family².

Barriers experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men’s parenting requires an understanding of contextual factors including (but not limited to):

- colonisation,
- discrimination,
- destructive government policies that have challenged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male roles,
- authority, and
- status.

Since colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced systemic racism and discrimination in the forms of; damaging legislation, removal from traditional lands, racial assimilation and acts of violence.

Between 1910 and 1970 the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by the Australian Government created “The Stolen Generations” resulting in mass familial disruption damaging the intergenerational transmission of parenting skills and cultural knowledge for generations³. This dislocation and disruption of families also affected the role and responsibility of fathers and many men have been prevented from caring for their families. The result has been a great loss of connection with traditional gender and fathering roles and has unjustly and culturally inappropriately placed a greater level of responsibility upon mothers to attempt to fill those significant roles.

Historical factors and modern contemporary society have significantly challenged and undermined the traditional gendered roles along with the confidence of many parents, including the male fathering role. Kinship systems have clearly defined roles, responsibilities and obligations for men and for women. The distinct roles other males in the family are of significant importance as they can often be of a different nature to the biological father. The disruption of traditional practices can deny young males the pathway and rituals to signify their development into men.

In the ACT, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men comprise almost a third of the adult detainee population with a significant proportion aged under 40 years⁴. Many of these men are fathers who experience separation, disconnection and isolation from their children and family. There is a common social perception that males who are incarcerated are not willing to continue their fathering role in their child/ren’s lives. While they may not be able to physically care for their child during their detention period, there is an opportunity for the father to undertake parenting programs to prepare for reconnection with their children and families upon his release. Further,

² Safe & Together Institute, 2018

¹ Rossiter, C. Power, T. Fowler, C. Jackson, D. Roche, M. Dawson, A. (2017) “Learning to become a better man”: Insights from a fathering programme for incarcerated Indigenous men.

³ Reilly, R. Rees, S. (2016) Fatherhood in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: An Examination of Barriers and Opportunities to Strengthen the Male Parenting Role.

⁴ ABS (2018)

continued connection between the father and his children while detained will strengthen his need to undertake his role as a significant person in the child's life.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers may experience many challenges and barriers to accessing support and services. Some of these include:

- Highly differentiated parenting practices between maternal and paternal parenting roles.
- Significantly higher rates of social disadvantage including interaction with the criminal justice system, violence, poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness and stigma. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males also have higher rates of suicide and a lower life-expectancy than non-indigenous men.
- Feelings of rejection, grief and loss resulting in difficulty in building relationships and feelings of disempowerment.
- Shame associated with periods of incarceration or family violence resulting in fear of communication with their child.
- Shame associated with a lack of understanding of their Aboriginality and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture, and the self-conflict with navigating how to come to learn about culture.
- Mistrust of the child protection and other systems involved with the family due to past experiences.
- Services and programs not designed to promote cultural safety and the differing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices for men and fathers.
- Language and literacy barriers contributing to disempowerment.
- A societal perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers are disinterested in and/or disengaged from their parental roles and responsibilities.
- A general absence of male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in community and support services.

Lived experiences

Four Aboriginal sisters who were taken into care from their father and grandmother in a brief period of parental marriage difficulties.

The interesting thing was that he was such a great provider ... He was a great provider and had a great name and a great reputation. Now, when this intrusion occurred it had a devastating impact upon him and upon all those values that he believed in and that he put in place in his life which included us, and so therefore I think the effect upon Dad was so devastating. And when that destruction occurred, which was the destruction of his own personal private family which included us, it had a very strong devastating effect upon him, so much so that he never ever recovered from the trauma that had occurred ... Progressively the shattering effect continued in my father's life to the point that he couldn't see the sense in reuniting the family again. He had lost all confidence as a parent and as an adult in having the ability to be able to reunite our family.

Bringing Them Home Report (1997)

Active efforts for father-inclusive practices

Active efforts are **purposeful, thorough** and **timely** efforts that are supported by legislation and policy and enable the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children⁵.

To successfully implement active efforts, they must be underpinned by practice that **is culturally safe, child-centred, trauma-informed, relationship-based** and **dignity driven**.

The principles of the *Children and Young People Act 2008* require that active efforts must always be made to support an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child to remain in the care of their biological family and cultural community.

When applying active efforts to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers and families, consideration must be given to:

- Establishing an authentic connection with all family members through investing time and working in a respectful and culturally competent way
- Respect for traditional parenting practices and the value of communal parenting
- Promoting self-determination through family led decision-making as far as possible
- Meeting with fathers in culturally safe spaces – in their own space, giving them warning and not just turning up unexpectedly.

The following active efforts are recommended practices that recognise the important role, culture and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers. They enhance their opportunities to be directly involved in decision-making, discussions and planning about the best interests of their child in culturally sensitive and safe ways and to be connected to their child.

Active Effort – Recognise strengths and celebrate these

- Hold and demonstrate high expectations for success of fathers, maintaining a positive attitude towards men and their role as fathers.
- Identify what fathers are doing well and their strengths, including asking them what they think they are doing well and what abilities they have and assist build on the these.
- Celebrate progress and successes that fathers are making with families.
- Assist the father to understand his importance in parenting his children by outlining clearly what he does and how he does it. This will promote a generational change that will live on in their children's lives and culture⁶.
- Recognise and share your observations with the father about his skills and capabilities and how these can assist him to learn additional skills to prepare for his child's needs and different developmental stages.
- Encourage fathers to make choices between options provided by workers (or encourage them to come up with their own options), encouraging them to take responsibility for seeking their own solutions.
- Allow opportunities for fathers to practice skills and new ways of doing things by providing a safe space in which the skill can be modelled by you and he can practise with you until he feels confident to do it on his own. Give lots of positive feedback and encouragement and recognition for what he has achieved. Check in after a few days to see how he is going with the new skill and continue to build on these skills as they grow.
- Arrange meetings in accessible locations, providing transport and mobility support if needed.

⁵ SNAICC, 2018

⁶ Bornstein, M.H.(2012) Cultural Approaches to Parenting

- Prepare adequately before the first meeting, gathering as much information as possible from case notes and records. Try to minimise the need for fathers to retell their story.
- Express genuine (but non-intrusive) inquisitiveness about family and culture.

Active Effort – Respecting traditional parenting practices

- Recognise that Aboriginal cultures are collective and inclusive of family and community rather than individualistic. Their unique cultural values, practices, connection to country, rights and knowledge, must be considered.
- Where the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child is not able to communicate with his or her Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander father, every effort should be made to connect the child with their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander grandfather and uncles. Alternatively, the child could be connected to respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males in the community to assist with promoting the importance of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men’s role in an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child’s upbringing.
- Support the developmental needs of children by encouraging fathers, uncles and grandfathers to be healthy role models and participate fully in the child’s life as early as possible.
- Encourage fathers to engage with their children in cultural programs in the community to create a sense of belonging and connection through culture. This could be inclusive of encouraging family time (contact) in activities such as Reconciliation in the Park, attending the various NAIDOC events and Aboriginal cultural programs at the Child and Family Centres throughout the ACT.
- Encourage Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men to contribute positively to the health and wellbeing of the mother’s pregnancy to encourage a nurturing and supportive family environment for the infant. Include the father in conversations relating to CYPS Prenatal involvement.
- Should you require further assistance to speak with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, book a cultural consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Services Team.

“There are things you can’t put into a cultural plan – the only way to get them is to spend time with your family and get it that way.”

Father with a child in out of home care – Our Booris Our Way Review

Active Effort – Change the talk

- It is important that communication with Aboriginal men needs to be well-considered and carried out in a respectful, culturally proficient way. In some families and communities there are strict gender cultural protocols and lore that require men and women to have separate discussions from each other. This may also be known as Men’s Business and Women’s Business. Sometimes only key people will be able to speak about a child and what is happening.
- It is vitally important to explore how the family prefers to communicate, interact, have meetings, participate and discuss matters in relation to their children, particularly as many of them come from diverse and different communities across Australia where there may be different cultural protocols.
- It is important to address questions about the child/children with both the mother and the father. Use positive, strength-based language with fathers recognising the value of their contributions to the family and championing their role as a father.

- Use ‘yarning style’ communication when talking and allow parents to tell their stories without interruption, while also allowing for moments of silence.
- Use plain language and avoid the use of jargon and technical language.
- Avoid too much direct eye contact. Reduce discomfort by interacting side-by-side with fathers rather than face-to-face. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men prefer to speak in small groups, rather than one-on-one, this can be achieved by asking the father if he would like a support person to be involved in the discussion.
- Demonstrate genuineness, empathy, and respect by acknowledging the father’s thoughts, feelings and concerns. Don’t assume that you can or can’t talk to a father about feelings; however, rephrasing to ask ‘how does that sit with you? /what do you think about that?’ may be more useful than asking directly about feelings.
- Be honest, open and transparent in your communication about the role of child protection, concerns for a child, about processes and what they should expect in relation to visits, timelines, court issues, and other matters, including family time if the child is in Out of Home Care.
- Be patient while overcoming mistrust, and respect and understand silence while fathers listen to and reflect on what is being said.
- If children *will not be* restored to their family, engage father’s with compassion and provide opportunities for them to voice anger, disappointment, and despair. If appropriate, plan future contacts between the father and child.
- Where communication is difficult, workers may need extra support such as debriefings and supervision with managers or colleagues with cultural expertise, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Services Team.

“We have had three case managers so far. Each one you have to start again. The first one didn’t respond to telephone calls or emails. The second one lasted six weeks and told us ‘We will always make sure the parents are involved [in decision making around the children].”

Father on interaction with CYPS - Our Booris Our Way Review.

Active Effort –Linking Aboriginal fathers into safe spaces and appropriate services

- Engage the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Services Team officer to provide guidance and advice.
- Be comfortable to step aside and allow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Services Team officer to take the lead in discussions with fathers and listen to and follow the advice they provide.
- Explore with the father, where and which environment he feels most comfortable to have a discussion and respect this when arranging appointments and meetings with him.
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) can provide culturally safe support options for Aboriginal children and families and should be a consideration when referring a child or family for support. Some have male specific programs such as men’s groups.
- Collaborate with other agencies to arrange support for a father if necessary. This should ideally occur during appraisal or assessment stages to support early intervention, but note that agencies may be referred to at any stage. Avoid referring fathers to multiple agencies and professionals as this may be overwhelming for the father.
- Consider making ‘warm referrals’ by taking fathers to introduce them to the service they are being referred to and answer any questions or concerns they may have to help them feel comfortable.

- Provide options for fathers to attend men’s programs and services in the community that offer a supportive cultural space and facilitators who champion the male parenting role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as:
 - Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services men’s group
 - Gudan Gulwan Parenting Our Way program
 - Gudan Gulwan / Oz Child Family Functional Therapy (FFT) for intensive family support
 - Relationships Australia, Dhunlung Yarra Service for strengthening relationships and building upon the role of being a father where culture remains central.
 - Domestic Violence Crisis Centre - where family violence has occurred and the father has been the perpetrator of violence, encourage him to engage in the Men’s Behaviour Change groups and Caring Dads groups to help fathers to recognise and prioritise their children’s needs and use healthy parenting strategies.
- For fathers who are incarcerated, encourage them to engage with the Alexander Maconochie Centre Indigenous Services Unit to arrange for Shine for Kids which supports parents to connect with and meet their children in a safe space. If this is considered unsuitable at the time, advice can be sought as to what other alternative ways a father can communicate with their child, including telephone, email, letter writing and exchanging photos with their child.

Active Efforts – Keeping kids connected to fathers through regular family time (contact)

- Focus on and reinforce the connection between father and child, and work with mothers to support fathers’ involvement, where it is safe to do so.
- Be inclusive and flexible when children are in out of home care. Children have a right to contact with their fathers, as long as it is managed in a safe and positive way.
- Family time is an important factor to facilitate restoration of a child back to their family. If a child is placed in out of home care, approaching fathers early increases the chances of restoration and a positive relationship with the agency co-ordinating the care of the child.
- Fathers should be supported to prepare for family time in a homelike or natural place where interaction can be natural, tailoring visits to meet the child and father’s needs.
- It is very important to focus on the quality of a man’s parenting and co-parenting, not just whether he is having contact with his children or not. i.e. reconnecting a child with a father who has been absent for years without an assessment of the reasons for this and the separation can cause harm.

“When I had contact with [child] they used to have someone watch and it made it hard. I think it should be in a playground or park, in a more natural place where it is easy to be ourselves and do our own thing. Having someone following me around and listening in is very hard for everyone.”

Father on supervised contact visit – Our Booris Our Way Review, Final Report

When Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander fathers use violence

In Australia, Aboriginal women are five times more likely to experience family violence compared to non-Aboriginal women. Further, hospitalisations of Aboriginal women due to family violence are 35 times more likely than for non-Aboriginal women.

The definitions used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to describe the nature and forms of family violence are broader than those used in non-Indigenous communities. The Victorian Aboriginal Family Violence Task Force defined family violence as:

'An issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one-on-one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide'⁷.

It is important to recognise family violence is one of many negative by-products of colonisation and is not a culturally appropriate or culturally sanctioned dynamic between Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men and women. It is also important to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are traditionally loving fathers who play an important role in child rearing and parenting practices.

Refer to the 'Working with families affected by domestic and family violence' guide and the 'Safety Planning' procedure for guidance in working with fathers who use violence.

Resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men

Supports and Services available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in the ACT can be found at: <https://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/capacity-building-resource/aboriginal-and/or-torres-strait-islander-mens-resource>

Related materials

The following materials directly relate to this practice guide.

Legislation

- *Children and Young People Act (2008)*
- *ACT Human Rights Act (2004)*

Policies, procedures and practice guides

- [Policy: Cultural plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people](#)
- [Procedure: Cultural plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people](#)
- Procedure: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural panel
- [Procedure: Placing a child in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle](#)
- [Procedure: Safety Planning](#)
- [Practice guide: Developing contact arrangements](#)
- [Practice guide: Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people](#)
- [Practice guide: Family Group Conference \(FGC\)](#)
- [Practice guide: Identifying and finding kinship carers](#)
- [Practice guide: Placing a child in a care placement](#)
- [Practice guide: Working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Services Team](#)

Other documentation

- [Form: Cultural Services Team consultation](#)
- [Our Practice Standards - Child Youth Protection Services, ACT Government](#)

⁷ DHS VIC Framework, 2012, p.23

- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families: Providing culturally responsive practice](#)
- [Working with families affected by domestic and family violence guide](#)

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Version history

The following table details the published date and amendment details for this document.

Date	Amendment details
29/06/2020	First publication of this practice guide.

Definitions

For definitions of terms used in this document, access the CYPS glossary.