Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing

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Contributors

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- In collaboration with:

  - Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)

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Context

- Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020

  "Australian society values, supports and works in partnership with parents, families and others in fulfilling their caring responsibilities for children" (p.12)

- Child Aware theme: Strengthening families across the life course…

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Approach

- Focus on:
    - Strengths (of "culture") v deficits (disadvantage)
    - The 'right' kind of support

- Aims: Understanding family life through a cultural lens, to;
    - identify characteristics of Aboriginal culture that contribute to effective family functioning
    - better understand traditional Aboriginal cultural practices
    - explore ways that service providers might draw from some of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal family practices.

"I never said it would be easy. I only said it would be worth it." (Mae West or God?)

Defining 'family'

- **Definitions of 'family'**
    - Fit for purpose?

    "…families are what people define them to be." (Families Australia, 2008)

- **Indigenous knowledge systems**
    - Kinship and The Dreaming …
    - Holistic understandings, 'innate' knowledge; connections to family/kin & the land; spirituality; respect; stories/narratives; imagery, etc.

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Method

- Qualitative approach

- Literature search to identify key themes

- Four focus groups, three locations (VIC, QLD, NT), 16 participants
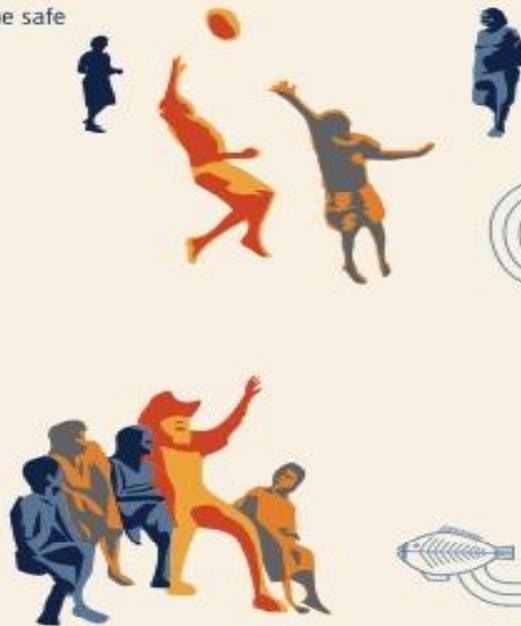
- Data collected by SNAICC

Themes - overview

A collective community focus

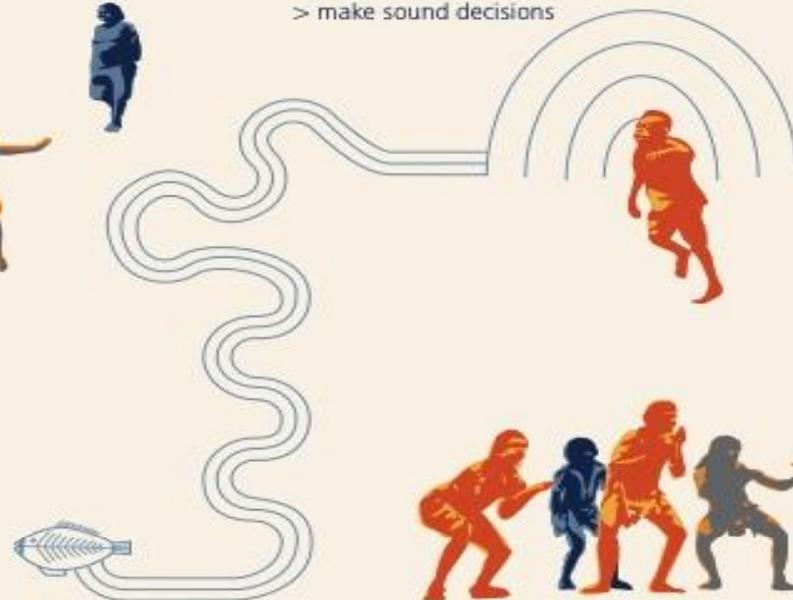The concept of "one community, many eyes" helps children to:

> build trust and confidence in themselves and in others
> access support when they face challenges
> be safe

Autonomous play

Having the freedom to explore the world can empower children to:

> build independence
> learn responsibility
> make sound decisions

Respect for the elderly

Elderly family and community members help children to:

> learn their responsibilities
> understand who they are and where they come from
> keep the spirit of Aboriginal culture alive

Spirituality

Helps children to cope with life by:

> connecting with others
> instilling positive values, such as caring and sharing
> improving physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing
> providing opportunities to heal from trauma

Theme 1 - A collective community focus: "One community, many eyes"

It's called "many eyes". There are people watching all the time. They know who you are, they know your name and they know what line you are and how you come down in your family and what your responsibilities are. (Parent, NT)

…It meant that if anything happened within the families, my Uncle would talk to this Auntie and say, this one needs some help. This person here would be best to talk to them, you know, there's certain people that would know who was best to talk to them and that word would go out. (Parent, Qld)

When you're young like that, you feel that your dad's eyes are everywhere or they're watching all the time and you're like, "Come on, give me a break." And it's actually love and you realise that later, but at the time, you are self-conscious like subconsciously with safety. You know, you feel safe because you know that people are watching. (Parent, Qld)

…Theme 1 - "One community, many eyes"

I was out about a week ago and there were a whole lot of Torres Islander families and I don't know where the men were. They must have been out doing something and there was a big pool and all these beautiful children were swimming in the pool. I was walking by, walking back to my car and there was a non-Indigenous older woman and she walked up to me and said, "Oh, look at that! They aren't even supervising their children in the pool." But if she had just opened her eyes just a little bit more, she would have seen what I saw, which was lionesses, like seven or eight women ready to pounce if something happened to their cubs. There was a safety thing, but they were all letting their children have fun. There was nothing wrong with that, but it's that stereotypical type of thing. (Mother, Qld)

Benefits for children: Physical safety; self confidence and trust in others; positive role modelling (discipline and trust in others); someone to turn to.

Benefits for parents/carers: Identifying risky situations; practical child care support; helps parents cope with parental stres; confidence, security and trust in the local community.

Theme 2 - Children need the freedom to explore and experience the world

They are encouraged to explore, within a safe distance, using common-sense and safe practices put into place ... they are encouraged to ... have a sticky-beak at everything. (Grandmother, Qld)

The reason it works so well in our culture, is because that sense of responsibility empowers our children. Children think, "well, mum trusts me enough to do this, this and this, I better not let her down". (Mother, Qld)

We don't wrap them in cotton wool. If you've got a bigger family, the older kids grow up quicker because they help bring up their younger siblings. The children learn from doing, so you have to give them that freedom and that responsibility gives them confidence. (Aboriginal Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

…Theme 2 - Children need the freedom to explore and experience the world

- To deny a child his/her independence is a breach of parental responsibility under traditional Aboriginal culture and Law (SNAICC, 2011; Yeo, 2003).

- Modern societies and overprotective parents: Exaggerating risks can have negative longer-term impacts for children:
  - Reduced child's resilience, independence/mobility and autonomy in decision-making
  - Increased child's anxiety, obesity and sense of entitlement (Locke et al., 2012; Rudner, 2012)

Theme 3 - Elderly family members are important to family functioning

The role of Elders is difficult for outsiders to understand. We rely strongly on them as key decision makers within families. They are the people we hold the greatest respect for because many of them went through so much, so that now we do not have to suffer the injustices they experienced. Their guidance is often illustrated through everyday life and their teachings are often done subconsciously; we follow, we observe and we go on to teach our own families. It is through our Elders that the spirit of Aboriginal people is kept alive. (Walker, 1993, p. 53)

I think you have to put in some effort though ... into instilling the values a bit more now because of all the other influences around. Simple things like, saying "give nanny a hug", or making sure Nanny Jen gets to hug the little grandchild ... she makes sure when you walk in there, you have to put that effort in. (Mother, Qld)

…Theme 3 - Elderly family members are important to family functioning

Now when we meet for family gatherings and stuff like that, when we arrive, we don't even have to tell them that, they will just go and greet all the Elders and all their grandparents and Aunties and Uncles, they just go and do it. You don't have to tell them, only the little ones. You know, we have to teach them, but when they get older, they will just do it automatically. (Mother, Qld)

I drop my kids at my parents every day. It's so much more than child care. They grow strong and learn about our culture and get really close with all their cousins. (Father, Qld)

I look after the whole family line … if they're in any trouble or they need anything in their life … if they need money or they need advocacy for gas or electricity, I help. And I talk to them every day. So that's part of it. Also, I have an open door at home so that if anybody in the community or my family are in trouble, they can come and stay. And I look after them until they're able to be on their own feet. (Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

Theme 4 - Spirituality helps families cope with challenges

I think Elders bring connection to our past and our history, and they bring us stories ... I wish I still had my grandmother around ... When you've got an older person, they can confirm your connection ... they can confirm your connection to country and family and their stories— which is what we should have and a lot of us don't have. And your language, you don't have a lot of language. And their stories that they tell you are our history and it tells you where you belong, and it gives you that strength. (Auntie and mother, Vic.)

Caring and sharing: The "heart" of Aboriginal spirituality

You kind of want to instil in your kids that caring mentality where they are like, that's caring, you can label it, I guess a kind of responsibility, but really it's instilling in them that caring for their family and themselves is so important to who we are.
(Parent, Vic.)

…Theme 4 - Spirituality helps families cope with challenges

I've decided in my life that I have a responsibility as an Elder and I will fulfil that responsibility. Our culture is caring and sharing … full-on caring … I decided a long time ago that that's where my niche is, and … also I do wellbeing about healing. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a preacher or anything like that, but I try and do appropriate cultural activities that help people to heal with all of the past wrongs … (Auntie and mother, Vic.)

For Aboriginal families, spirituality:

- is a key cultural characteristic that embodies the interconnectedness of life's dimensions

- is embodied through the Dreaming, which instills the shared values of interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty

- helps both adults and children to understand the importance of caring for and protecting one another, which in turn, helps to provide a safe environment for raising children.

The evidence…

- Theme 1: Evidence shows that socially inclusive approaches to raising children, where ensuring the wellbeing and safety of children is a shared responsibility, helps to improve family functioning and build strength in communities.

- Theme 2: Research supports the notion that child autonomy and independence helps children to develop the necessary skills to cope with life's challenges as they negotiate their pathways to adulthood.

- Theme 3: Elderly family members are known to provide crucial support to families in raising children and contribute to family functioning.

- Theme 4: Engaging in spiritual and/or religious practices have been shown to have positive effects on individuals and families.

Lessons for practice…

Some explorations may include:

- The extent of a family's social connections, and the degree of support that may already be available to help families cope with challenges, or to provide hands-on care for their children.

- Understanding some of the prevailing attitudes of parents and carers about child autonomy and independence.

- Identifying some of the values that parents would like to see in their children as they grow into adults.

- Exploring some of the tensions families might experience when trying to balance societal expectations with the competing demands of private family life.

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Child Family Community Australia (CFCA)

CFCA information exchange

Online resources for evidence-informed decisions in policy and practice

www.aifs.gov.au/cfca

Aboriginal Strengths Paper: www3.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications

Knowledge Circle: www2.aifs.gov.au

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