

# Diversity and Inclusive Practice

## About Diversity and Inclusive Practice

The term **diversity**, when used to describe people or communities, indicates that a group of people is made up of individuals who are different from each other in some way. For example, diversity may relate to differences in:

- Culture and/or language
- Gender
- Appearance
- Lifestyle
- Social and economic circumstances
- Family structure
- Abilities, e.g. physical, social, creative, intellectual
- Values and beliefs.

In describing the provision of a service, the term **inclusive practice** refers to the principle that a service must be responsive to the needs of all users and that diversity will be acknowledged and respected. Inclusive practice means the service will not discriminate against people or treat them unfairly on the basis of these differences, and that negative stereotypes will be challenged.

Children's services operate in the broader context of their local and national community. This requires staff to plan meaningful ways to represent diversity in the service environment and to incorporate a respect for diversity into children's daily experiences. It is helpful for services to promote an awareness of the full range of diversity across Australia, not only of those groups or cultures that may be apparent within their own community or service environment.

You might also like to read other handouts in this series, which outline some of the issues affecting the mental health and wellbeing of particular groups in Australia. For example, there are fact sheets that relate to: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing*; *Children with Additional Needs*; and *Refugees and Mental Health*.

## Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Wellbeing is affected by **social inclusion**, the degree to which people are connected with other people, can participate in group activities and can access support when needed. Social inclusion can occur when all people feel valued, differences are respected and individual needs are recognised. Greater social inclusion is associated with better mental health outcomes.

To support social inclusion, we need to build communities and services that acknowledge and respect diversity and are free from discrimination. Ideally, children and families in Australia will have access to a range of services, activities and opportunities that enable them to build positive relationships and support networks. This is important for all children and their families, including those from ethnic or cultural minority groups and those with additional needs.

Babies and young children learn and develop through their early experiences and relationships. As they mature, they develop a self-concept, a sense of who they are and where they belong. They also learn key social and emotional skills. This early learning about self and others lays the foundation for their future mental health and wellbeing. By providing services that are inclusive of diversity and that help children and families to build positive relationships, we can support their mental health today and promote positive mental health outcomes for the future.

## What should I look for?

Look for ways you can acknowledge and reflect diversity as part of your ongoing practice. Build in regular opportunities to review and consider diversity and inclusion at several levels:

- Your local and national community
- Your service – practices and culture
- Yourself as a reflective practitioner
- Children and families you work with.

Think about diversity in your community and be aware of any changes. Consider how diversity is reflected in your service philosophy and environment. Do any policies or forms need review? Do staff need professional development? In an inclusive service, there should be a culture of respectfully challenging bias and the use of stereotypes, as these can occur unintentionally.

Review your own day-to-day practices and language and be open to constructive comments from your supervisor or colleagues. Encourage children to explore diversity in a range of ways, during everyday practices and through guided activities. Allow children and families to express themselves and give them opportunities to discuss their own needs and individual differences.

## What should I do?

You can contribute to social inclusion and the recognition of diversity by:

- Finding out more about cultural diversity or other differences in your community
- Reflecting the cultural background of children and families within the environment
- Modelling respect for diversity whenever opportunities arise
- Challenging stereotypes or bias when opportunities arise
- Sharing your own culture with children and encouraging others to share their culture
- Showing respectful ways to ask about differences in culture and modelling good listening
- Participating in training about diversity and inclusive practice
- Responding to children's questions about difference and building their understanding
- Extending children's awareness of diversity through visitors, books, songs, artefacts, *etc*
- Reflecting diversity in children's experiences, e.g. dramatic play, stories, food, the arts.

## Where can I find out more?

Dau, E. (Ed.). (2001). *Anti-bias approach in early childhood* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Pymble, NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

Goode, T.D. (2005). *Promoting cultural and linguistic competency – Self-assessment checklist for personnel providing services and supports in early intervention and early childhood settings*. Retrieved April 1, 2010, from: <http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/resources>.

Guigni, M. *Exploring multiculturalism, anti-bias and social justice in children's services*. Retrieved April 1, 2010, from: [www.cscentral.org.au/publications/childrens-services-central-publications.html](http://www.cscentral.org.au/publications/childrens-services-central-publications.html).

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VicHealth (2005). *Social inclusion as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing*. Retrieved April 1, 2010, from: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/en/Resource-Centre/Publications-and-Resources/Social-connection/Social-Inclusion-as-a-determinant-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing.aspx](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/en/Resource-Centre/Publications-and-Resources/Social-connection/Social-Inclusion-as-a-determinant-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing.aspx).