

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

About Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander refers to people who identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent and are accepted as such in their community.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, **health** is not just the physical health of individuals. It is also the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the community. Many people prefer the term **social and emotional wellbeing** rather than mental health.

The history of colonisation in Australia has had a negative effect on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Important factors include:

- Loss of traditional lands, language, cultural identity, law and social practices
- Loss of independence and self-governance, through introduced laws and systems
- Ongoing racism, stereotypes and lack of understanding of culture from some Australians
- Ongoing, intergenerational effects of forced removal of children (Stolen Generations)
- Impact of harmful levels of drug and alcohol use in some communities
- Difficulty accessing culturally appropriate services in some communities
- High rates of illness and early deaths
- Trauma, loss and grief due to the impact of all the above issues.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

The losses of the past and the discrimination and inequalities that still occur today have a significant impact on the wellbeing of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Social context, life experiences and sense of inclusion all have an impact on people's mental health. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have an increased risk of mental health problems because of the effects of loss and grief, discrimination, difficult living situations, health problems or other challenges.

Risks need to be acknowledged, but it is also important to recognise and respect the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Never assume that there will be a problem with a child's wellbeing because they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It is important to look at the needs of every child and family in context, while showing respect for their culture.

What should I look for?

In caring for babies and young children, be aware of any signs that may suggest an emotional, behavioural or developmental problem. This is relevant for all children, as well as for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Signs of possible problems include:

- Significant changes in feelings or behaviour
- Development that is out of step with peers at a similar age and stage
- Regression in development, losing skills they had previously mastered
- Poor-quality play that seems limited and repetitive
- Difficulties in attachment and relationships with family and carers
- Being withdrawn, fearful, anxious or upset much of the time
- Being angry, defiant or aggressive much of the time.

If a child's development or behaviour seems different from children at a similar stage, ask for further advice from your supervisor, manager or service director. It is important to consider differences in culture and approaches to child rearing. A single event does not mean there is a problem. It is more about what happens over time for that child.

What should I do?

Look for ways to learn about and understand local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This contributes to social inclusion, which supports social and emotional wellbeing. You can learn from children, families and community members, or through training and support services. When there are practices you are not familiar with, take time to ask and to listen respectfully.

Develop a caring partnership with families and communities and promote cultural diversity in your practice. It is sometimes difficult to understand a culture that is different from your own, so be aware that developing a relationship and gaining understanding may take time.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures continue to be important for many families. A child may have close relationships with several extended family members, which can foster a strong sense of identity and belonging. The way care is offered in a children's service setting needs to be inclusive of kinship traditions and extended family relationships.

To promote inclusion and reconciliation, and to support the needs of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and families:

- Be open to different ideas of family and community, including extended families
- Use a range of images, stories and music from diverse cultures, without stereotyping
- Respect that there may be different values about the role and behaviour of children
- Ask for any ideas or practices the family would like you to include or be aware of
- Network with local agencies that support Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families
- Invite family and community members to become involved in programs with the children
- Develop a program that celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and important dates.

If staff become concerned about a child's wellbeing or development, and he or she is from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, it is important to work in partnership with the family and community and in a way that respects their culture, values and beliefs. This may involve helping them to access Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services or other organisations offering culturally appropriate services. Larger agencies, such as government health or welfare services, may have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander liaison officer who can be helpful in working with the family.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

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