Commentary

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Support in Out-of-Home Care

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Due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out-of-home care system many children will not always be cared for in a culturally appropriate placement. Therefore, cultural support planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people must be a high priority for all staff, carers and volunteers of out-of-home care services. Six themes have been identified as assisting in the provision of cultural support planning within placements. Each theme has a detailed list of resources that can be accessed for children and young people, carers and professionals.

■ **Keywords:** child protection, intervention, out-of-home care

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people belong to strong and vibrant communities with rich cultures and histories. ATSI people experience many of the same issues that affect the broader Australian community, which are further exacerbated due to past injustices and ongoing marginalisation. As a result, Indigenous Australians have become the single most vulnerable and disadvantaged group in Australia (Moore, Bennett, McArthur, 2007). Indigenous Australian children and young people are, therefore, overrepresented in child protection and juvenile justice systems alike. As of June 2010, ATSI children comprised 4.6% of all children aged 0 to 17 years in Australia yet in 2009–2010 they constituted 32% of children placed in out-of-home care (Lamont, 2011). In Queensland, Indigenous Australian children are six times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than other children, despite only representing 6.1% of the population (Combined Voices, 2010).

Out-of-home care refers to the placement of children and young people who cannot live within their family unit due to a variety of reasons related to the willingness and ability of their parents (Richardson, Bromfield & Osborn 2007). Out-of-home care can include family-based care (foster care, kinship care, specialised foster care) and nonfamily-based care (residential care settings and semi-independent living options). The ATSI Child Placement Principal (commonly referred to as the Child Placement Principal [CPP]) essentially refers to the notion that when placing ATSI children

with carers, preference will be given primarily to their extended family. Where this is not possible, priority is given to individuals and families from the same ATSI community and failing that, with other ATSI people (Berlyn & Blomfield, 2009). If an appropriate placement cannot be found within and ATSI community then the child will be placed within a family outside of their culture. Due to the overrepresentation of Indigenous Australian children in the out-of-home care sector, and the complex challenges facing ATSI communities, full compliance with the CPP is problematic. However, connection to culture has consistently been identified as important to quality outcomes and wellbeing for ATSI children (Larkins, 2011). Therefore, non-Indigenous carers need to be supported to develop cultural proficiency to aide in their ability to provide quality care for ATSI children (Higgins, Bromfield, Richardson, 2005).

This article aims to outline a variety of cultural resources that can be used to promote cultural wellbeing for ATSI children and young people in out-of-home care. The term carer in this article applies to any adult providing direct care to children and young people in an out-of-home care placement.

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Six key themes have been identified in relation to supporting the cultural needs of ATSI children in out-of-home-care. We have included a list of key resources that relate to each theme as a good place to start when looking for appropriate and relevant resources. Some resources are local to South East Queensland only, and some resources are applicable to numerous themes, but are only listed once.

Theme 1

Carers need to develop an understanding of ATSI cultures to avoid unintentional racism or cultural insensitivity. For example, some ATSI children in care have spoken about carers playing down a child's Aboriginality as the child was fair skinned (Moore et al., 2007). Moore et al. (2007) explain that cultural abuse (including unintentional racism or cultural insensitivity) increases the vulnerability of a child. Therefore, agencies and carers need to commit to improving services and support provided to Indigenous Australian children in order to mitigate potential cultural abuse.

Support Resources

- Movies: *Australia, Rabbit Proof Fence, Samson & Delilah, Radiance, Bran Nue Dae, Ten canoes, Wrong Side of the Road and Kaiyai Girl.*

Theme 2

Carers should embrace an appreciation and respect for ATSI culture within their daily lives (Moore et al., 2007). Connection to culture is of central importance and cannot be construed as an 'extracurricular' activity pursued by an individual child in a placement (Moore et al., 2007). As carers play such a pivotal role in the lives of the children they care for, demonstration of their value of ATSI culture teaches Indigenous Australian children to value themselves and to grow up feeling proud and strong (Office for Children, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2005).

Support Resources

- Newspapers: *Koori Mail* (http://www.koorimail.com/); *The National Indigenous Times* (http://www.nit.com.au/).
- Music: List of past and present artists (http://www.blacklist.org.au/); *Growin Up Strong & Happy To Be Me* CDs (http://www.auntywendysmob.com/).
- Arts: Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (http://www.acpa.net.au) offer courses in singing, acting, dancing, and music. They provide accredited training (Abstudy approved) and interactive media on all forms of arts (CD ROMs — including literature/media/with teaching prompts).
- Crafts: Art and crafts resource books — Indigenous studies teaching resources (http://www.rickroser.com/aresourceskit%20.htm); Network SA (http://www.networksa.org.au/shop/index.php?act=viewProd&

productId=23); Regional and Remote Aboriginal Children and Services Support Unit (http://rracssunorth.batchelor.edu.au/node/18); Kurrajong Aboriginal Products (www.kurrajong.net).

Theme 3

Carers need to acculturate themselves in ATSI communities. ATSI children in care who participated in a study about how to best meet their cultural needs reported that often they felt they missed out on community connectedness, support, advice and guidance as their carers and support workers were not fully aware of the resources available in the community (Moore et al., 2007). Additionally, establishing relationships within ATSI communities assists Indigenous Australian children to develop an understanding of ATSI codes of conduct, such as showing respect by calling someone Aunty or Uncle. Integrating with ATSI communities facilitates the deepest level of learning about culture — the ways of being, doing and knowing (Office for Children, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2005).

Support Resources

- Radio: 4 Triple A 98.9 FM Murri Country.
- Cultural trails — Brisbane area: Queensland Government (http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/facilities-recreation/walking/walking-trails/Aboriginal-culture-trails/index.htm).

Theme 4

Methods of supporting the cultural needs of ATSI children need to evolve along with the children. Often ATSI children and young people in care are apprehensive about connecting with their culture and community (Moore et al., 2007). This can be attributed to not wanting to be different from other children/people in the placement, associating their culture with traumatic events that occurred within their family, not feeling like they belong to the ATSI community, and not being exposed to the richness of culture and community (Moore et al., 2007). Indigenous Australian children in care reported that they need constant assurance and support that they belong to ATSI communities. It is crucial therefore that, Indigenous Australian children are provided with relentless opportunities to engage with, and develop a sense of pride in their culture (Moore et al., 2007). The importance of providing children and young people with opportunities to experience the vibrancy of their culture cannot be overstated.

Support Resources

- Games: Australian Sports Commission (http://www.ausport.gov.au/participating/Indigenous/resources/).
- Interactive web sites: Children's learning activities — Australian Broadcasting Corporation (http://www.abc.net.au/dustechoes/about.htm); Indigenous Australian

stories, Twelve Canoes (http://www.12canoes.com.au/).

- Art work: Aboriginal Art Online (www.Aborignialart online.com/index.php).

- About Indigenous Australia and Australians: Aboriginal Art Online (http://www.Aboriginalartonline.com/index.php); Indigenous Australia (http://www.dreamtime.net.au/).

- Storytelling, culture and history: Australian Government (http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/Indigenous/naidoc/); National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) — access to free culture portal stories, songs, links to Indigenous organisations and resources.

- Stolen generation information: Reconciliation Action Network (http://reconciliaction.org.au/nsw/education-kit/stolen-generations/).

- Educational resources: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learning and Engagement Centres Online Library Catalogue (http://nslib.qed.qld.gov.au/atsilib/webinqu7.dll).

- Various Indigenous search topics: Opening Directory Project, suitable for teenagers (http://www.dmoz.org/Kids_and_Teens/School_Time/Social_Studies/Geography/Oceania/Australia/Aboriginals/).

Resources for 3 Years and Over
- Language, arts, and crafts: Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (http://www.snaicc.asn.au/policy-advocacy/dsp-default-e.cfm?loadref=113).

- Books: *A is for Aunty* — Childhood memories of life on the mission at Murrin Bridge (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/books); Bronwyn Bancroft books, available from Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/books); *Sam's Bush Journey* (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/books); Various arts and crafts resource books — (http://www.rickroser.com/aresourceskit%20.htm)

- Music/songs: *From Little Things Big Things Grow* — iconic Australian song — 'our anthem of hope' including the sweet wild artwork of Gurindji schoolchildren from Kalkaringi, NT. Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/books).

- Educational resources: *Growin Up Strong & Happy To Be Me* (CDs; http://www.auntywendysmob.com/).

Resources for 10 Years and Above
- Books: *Little Red, Yellow, Black Book.* Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/books).

- Educational resources: The Bridge board game — designed to assist participants understand discrimination

and oppression, experienced by Australian Indigenous peoples (http://www.therbridge.com/game.html); The Moorditj CD-ROM — short biographies of artists and their artwork (http://moorditj.sponsored.uwa.edu.au/artists).

Theme 5
At the time of colonisation there were approximately 600 different clan groups across the Australian continent. These communities have distinct cultures and beliefs. Wherever possible, ATSI children in care should be supported to connect with their own community. A community member explained: 'You see one of the key components of healing here, in a blackfella way, is the capacity or the ability to be able to talk to people of your own country, to know your country and customs' (MacMahon, Reck & Walker, 2007).

Support Resources
- Language: A collection of words from different clan groups (http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/languages/curr.html).

- Family history and genealogy support: Queensland Government (http://www.atsip.qld.gov.au/people/family-history/); 'Footprints before me' — State Library of Queensland (http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/info/ind/footprints); Link-up Queensland (http://www.link-upqld.org.au).

- Map of Aboriginal Australia: Represents all of the tribal or nation groups of the Indigenous people of Australia available from Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (http://www.antar.org.au/shop/awareness).

Theme 6
When teaching children about Indigenous Australian culture it is generally best to start from the present day. For example, use photos and information about Indigenous Australians in the 21st century. Avoid stereotypes such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people wearing loincloths and carrying boomerangs. The Indigenous Australian people in Brisbane and surrounding areas that children meet will not look like this. It can be explained to children that some Indigenous people in Australia are hunters and live a traditional lifestyle, while other Indigenous Australians live in towns and cities. All are Indigenous Australians and have a strong cultural identity. This supports children's understandings of diversity (Office for Children, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2005).

Support Resources
- Online books: State Library of Queensland (http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/find/virtualbooks/atsi).

- Events: Calendar of events — Queensland Government (http://deta.qld.gov.au/Indigenous/Indigenous_cultural_calendar.html).

Carer Prompts

In addition to considering the six themes and accessing the associated resources, there are a number of questions that carers might find useful when thinking about how best to support the cultural needs and wellbeing of ATSI children in their care.

- How do you think you could encourage [*insert child's name*] to develop a sense of pride and interest in their ATSI identity?

- What aspects of ATSI culture are you interested in?

If none are specified:

- What are your hobbies/interests generally?

For example, if the carer enjoys reading the newspaper on a Sunday perhaps the carer could start reading the *Koori Mail*. If the child enjoys music, the carer could identify some ATSI artists that the carer may be interested in listening to.

- Can you name some ATSI people who are good role models?

- Do you know of any ATSI services in your area?

These questions assist carers to think more practically about their support of ATSI culture within the context of the placement. They can assist carers consolidate their own knowledge base as well as encourage carers to see themselves as a resource to children and young people promoting cultural wellbeing.

Often a lack of purposeful cultural support within out-of-home care placements relates to a lack of knowledge about how to provide the support, and where to get the necessary resources. The resources outlined above enhance the accessibility of key cultural items for children and young people and their carers. Given the overrepresentation of ATSI children and young people in out-of-home-care, any improvements in the cultural support provided to this population will have positive impacts. Cultural support is the business of every carer, worker and volunteer in the sector and it is our hope that the themes, resources and prompts listed in this article will provide practical strategies that are accessible to everyone.

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