



‘It is the
story of
all of us.’

**Learning from Aboriginal
communities about supporting
family connection**

Authors

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Disclaimer

The opinions, comments and/or analysis expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Child Safety Commissioner, and cannot be taken in any way as expressions of Government policy.

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Title: Quotation from Muriel Bamblett, CEO Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (see page 34).

Cover picture *Culture* painted and photographed by Codey, age 12, 'This is a painting of my Aboriginal Culture showing my totem which is a turtle.' From the 2011 *As Eye See It* exhibition of photographs by young people in out of home care (reproduced with permission).

Foreword



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are highly over-represented in out of home care statistics. Around half of these children are in kinship care, a family arrangement that for Aboriginal people sits uncomfortably with the concept of 'out of home care.' Despite the number of children in Aboriginal kinship care, there is little published research in this area.

The *Family Links: Kinship Care and Family Contact* research project was conducted by the University of Melbourne (Department of Social Work) with assistance from staff of my Office. This report describes a component of this study that was devoted to exploring issues for Victorian Aboriginal kinship families. It is the first such study in Victoria. Three Aboriginal services contributed their professional and personal wisdom about the issues that Aboriginal families face when caring for children unable to live with their parents. In doing so, they also taught us about good practice for working with all families. In refreshingly direct and humane language, they spoke about patience, creative responses, listening and not judging, understanding and allowing for fears borne of personal and social history.

Research with Aboriginal people has an ignominious history. Too much has been done to Aboriginal people rather than with them. Underlying assumptions and purposes have been faulty. As a result, Aboriginal people feel that research has benefited them little. In undertaking this project, the researchers have tried to work together with Aboriginal services, and to be sensitive to how they wished to proceed. We appreciate that, amidst the hectic round-the-clock world of Aboriginal community services, they were willing to give time to advise on how we can do better.

My friend Muriel Bamblett, CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, constantly tells me: 'If you get it right with us, you get it right with everyone.' I hope that the findings of this study will be useful to kinship care programs, non-Aboriginal carers of Aboriginal children, child protection and family service workers, policy makers, and people who work with families of all backgrounds.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernie Geary', with a horizontal line underneath.

Bernie Geary, OAM
Child Safety Commissioner

“Family needs family.
And if their mother
can't be there, well
then, I'm there. I will
not let strangers bring
up my grandchildren.”

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Glossary

Term	Meaning
Family/kin	<p>A large group of people related directly or indirectly by blood, marriage, cohabitation or co-option into the family network.</p> <p>Relationships may be formally or informally defined according to local culture. Familial terms such as sister, cousin, uncle and daughter may be used in a variety of ways both formal and informal according to culture and how relationships become identified over time.</p>
Kinship care	<p>Care within the family or friendship network of the child. Kinship care may be 'formal' ie approved by child protection, or arranged informally.</p>
Out of home care	<p>A mainstream usage of this term is to refer to children who are placed in home-based care (foster care or kinship care) or residential care, or their variants, under a statutory order of the Children's Court.</p> <p>While Aboriginal publications sometimes use the mainstream term 'out of home care' in relation to kinship care, Aboriginal people generally regard kinship care as family care rather than Out of Home Care. As found in this research project overall, many non-Aboriginal families agree.</p>
Foster care	<p>Differentiating between foster care and kinship care is often not useful in Aboriginal communities, as many caregivers provide care for children who are both related by kinship ties and unrelated, making little distinction between the children.</p>
Aboriginal Child Placement Principle	<p>The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle governs the way in which care for Aboriginal children should be determined, and is in legislation and policy in all Australian states (State of Victoria, 2005). It has the following order of preference for the placement of children: with the child's extended family; within the child's Aboriginal community; with other Aboriginal people; and as a last resort, with non-Aboriginal carers charged with ensuring the maintenance of the child's culture and identity through contact with their community.</p>
Contact	<p>In this study, 'contact' has been taken broadly to include both direct (face-to-face) and indirect (telephone, electronic) contact between a child and family members with whom they do not live.</p>
Koorie or Koori	<p>An Aboriginal person from southern NSW or Victoria (Macquarie Dictionary online, 2011).</p>
The Stolen Generations	<p>The name given to the large number of Aboriginal people who were forcibly removed from their families for several decades up to the 1960s.</p>
Cultural Support Plan	<p>An individually tailored plan for Aboriginal children in care that contains information about their traditional links and family connections in order to maintain a strong sense of identity and belonging. Plans include the names of all members of the child's family, elders and significant persons.</p>

Term	Meaning
Mob	Aboriginal English word meaning a tribe or language group (Macquarie Dictionary online, 2011).
Note re Torres Strait Islanders	<i>In this paper, the term 'Aboriginal' is preferred at times over the term indigenous or the acronym ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander). The indigenous population of Victoria is overwhelmingly Aboriginal, and this is the term mostly used by the three Aboriginal organisations with which the researcher consulted. However, it is recognised that in 2006, in addition to 27,746 Aborigines, there were also an estimated 2,234 Torres Strait Islanders and 859 people identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Victoria (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).</i>

Key pointers to good practice in Aboriginal kinship care

1. Keep children safe

- Protection includes physical care, cultural safety, social support and wellbeing. This is the highest priority for Aboriginal children and all children.

2. Improve Aboriginal kinship care assessment and support

- Ensure that the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is implemented in the way required in Victorian law, prioritising safety and the child's best interests as paramount in decision-making.
- Assessments of kinship families for Aboriginal children need to become more thorough and culturally appropriate.
- Ensure that kinship care assessments include an Aboriginal person who is in a position to be impartial.
- Police checks need to be applied more judiciously and sensitively.
- Promote awareness of the cultural context of threats of physical punishment used by Aboriginal people as part of a careful assessment of actual risk.
- Ensure that placements are not made regardless of personal circumstances and capacity to cope just because a caregiver agrees out of cultural obligation.
- Provide Aboriginal service staff with training in responding to traumatised children and working with difficult family dynamics.

3. Increase financial and non-financial support to caregivers of Aboriginal children

- Recognise that Aboriginal caregivers are more likely to be older, single, in poorer health, and caring for more children than non-Aboriginal caregivers of Aboriginal children, and provide commensurate support.
- Address housing and transport issues to ensure children are comfortable and have access to family and community.
- Provide training to caregivers in recognising and responding to children's experiences of trauma.

4. Through Aboriginal services, support children's relationships and contact with a wide range of family members

- Listen to children and take their wishes into consideration in making arrangements for contact with family members.
- Cultural Support Plans should be developed and implemented by Aboriginal services, and this work resourced commensurately.
- Enable appropriate support to ensure that contact with mothers and fathers is safe and as positive as possible.
- Provide environments for supervised parental contact that have an informal ambience, activities, mentoring and support, and outdoor play space.
- Support caregivers to help children find, connect and maintain contact with brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, and with their indigenous culture.

5. Develop cultural awareness in non-Aboriginal workers and caregivers

- Fund Aboriginal services to provide training in sensitive family support to other services working both with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families.
- Ensure that those working with Aboriginal children in kinship care have cultural awareness training.
- Improve responsiveness and support from child protection workers to Aboriginal caregivers such that greater trust of child protection can be developed in Aboriginal communities.
- Recognise racist barriers within families that limit children's family support and connections, and utilise Aboriginal services to address these.

6. Recognise that all the above measures may work together to build a greater pool of suitable Aboriginal kinship care arrangements.

7. Continue to support and work towards reconciliation in the Australian community

- Recognise that many of the problems in Aboriginal communities can only be resolved when mainstream society fully accepts its indigenous people and offers them the same respect and opportunities as other Australians.

Background to the project

The grandmother is non-indigenous ... She was very negative towards the community ... [but] it's a different perspective now on the grandmother's part because we sat down and explained it all ... And we're going to introduce the community ... and now she's a very happy Grandma. In the first place it was, you're not taking my bloody grandkids. **(Aboriginal community elder)**

This vignette of a non-Aboriginal grandmother interacting with an Aboriginal service speaks to the sensitivity and skill required to work together across the cultural divide in the interests of children's support and wellbeing.

The number of Australian children and young people in kinship care has increased dramatically over ten years (AIHW, 2007, 2011a). Kinship care is associated with greater stability of care, more contact with parents and other family members, less trauma in separation from parents, and less stigma (Connolly, 2003; Cuddleback, 2004).

For children in care, contact with a range of family members is of great importance to their wellbeing; but where there are protective issues, this may be difficult, and in extreme cases may threaten the care arrangement (Farmer, 2010). New Victorian government-funded kinship care support programs were being established in 2010 and 2011. However, the knowledge base to inform practice in supporting family contact is still limited (McDonald, Higgins, valentine, & Lamont, 2011).

Aboriginal family life

Family is the cornerstone of Aboriginal culture and spirituality. Family is more broadly defined in Aboriginal communities, including both the 'mainstream' concept of extended family, and others within the community who are considered to be family. Distinctions between close and distant relatives are often not seen as important. An Aboriginal family is thus a large group of people with potential to provide support for children for life (SNAICC, 2005). Aboriginal organisations stress that children need to develop relationships with extended family members while they are still children because it will be much more difficult for them as adults if they have been estranged during childhood (SNAICC, 2005).

... for cultural and spiritual reasons, maintaining contact or involvement with family or returning to family will always be in the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's best interests if safety issues can be addressed ... Family and community are the source of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's culture – remove them from family and you deny them their culture (SNAICC, 2005, p.2).

Contact with family should not be avoided because it is seen as disruptive and unsettling; instead it must be seen as a positive and necessary part of the child's experience of out of home care – unless safety issues prevent it. Contact with family should include contact with the child's extended family (SNAICC, 2005, p.21).

Family life includes learning about culture, history and country. This way of raising children “provides the best model for strengthening the next generation of Koorie children to negotiate their place in Australian society” (Atkinson & Swain, 1999 p.228).

Aboriginal family life has been impacted in multiple ways by the colonisation of Australia. Endemic racism in the form of dispossession, massacres, non-recognition as citizens and forced child removal (the Stolen Generations), together with poverty, disease and alcohol, have caused individual and family trauma that continues to the present time. Family relationships, contact and connections have been damaged or lost. This history has led directly to the high incidence of Aboriginal children in care today.

Aboriginal children in care

The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in ‘out of home care’¹ is nine times the rate of non-indigenous children nationally; in Victoria, the rate is 13% (AIHW, 2011a). Despite the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle being enshrined in legislation (State of Victoria, 2005, s.13), many Aboriginal children are still placed in foster care, usually non-Aboriginal. Fifty-two percent of Aboriginal children are in kinship care, with approximately half (26% of Aboriginal children in care) in non-Aboriginal kinship care (AIHW, 2011a). These figures are ambiguous, however: in a recent literature review, Boetto (2010) identified issues with knowing how many indigenous children are in kinship care due to the ambiguity between kinship care and foster care in a cultural context. Higgins, Bromfield & Richardson (2005) have also pointed out that differentiating between foster care and kinship care is not useful in Aboriginal communities, as many caregivers care for children who are both related by kinship ties and unrelated, making little distinction.

Until recently few support services were available to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kinship families, exacerbating the challenges for keeping children in touch with their families.

Principles of Aboriginal child welfare

Deriving from a history of dispossession, disempowerment and in particular the Stolen Generations Butler (August 1993) describes Aboriginal child welfare as being based upon five baseline principles of operation: spiritual identity; caring for the environment; extended family; cultural transmission; and self-determination. Culture is a particularly strong component (Frankland, Bamblett, Lewis, & Trotter, 2010). This includes the presupposition that the care of Aboriginal children has always been the responsibility of the whole community and not just individual parents. Many Aboriginal services have their origins in community action, and community control of services is strong.

Cultural Support Planning

Cultural Support Plans are enshrined in the Victorian Child, Youth and Families Act 2005. The aim is to give Aboriginal children the knowledge, cultural information and contacts to be involved with community activities and events, and to know their traditional land and community (State of Victoria DHS, 2005). All Aboriginal children in care should now be provided with an individually tailored Cultural Support Plan that contains information about their traditional links and family connections. Plans are completed with the assistance of Aboriginal services and community. The Plans should

¹ See Glossary.

include the names of all members of the child's family, elders and significant persons, enabling Aboriginal children to maintain family and cultural connections over their lifetime.

Associated with Cultural Support Planning, the Victorian Aboriginal Decision-Making Program (McHugh & valentine, 2010) provides for family members to participate in a facilitated meeting focusing on the needs of children at risk and ways that family may provide care.

Program standards

Mainstream policy standards are gradually being introduced to Aboriginal services. These can be a two-edged sword. Policymakers and practitioners grapple with the concern that kinship care standards should not be 'lower' than for foster care. Some of the difficulty in establishing appropriate program policy may stem from the tendency to see kinship care as a type of foster care, as well as from a lack of understanding of modern Aboriginal culture. However, there is general agreement that safety is the paramount consideration, even when it seems unclear as to how to translate this critical principle into practice.

Research on Aboriginal kinship care

Despite the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care and associated threats to family and cultural connections, there is little published research specifically on Aboriginal children in kinship care². This was noted by Bromfield and Osborn (2007), and a search using the Discovery search engine in April 2011 yielded no further results for 'Aboriginal kinship care'. Bromfield and Osborn (2007, p.4) comment:

Given the formal recognition of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which preferences kinship care for indigenous children, there is an urgent need for research that examines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's and carers' experiences of kinship care.

However, a number of small research studies on Aboriginal children in 'out of home care' have yielded some indicators about kinship care. In an overview of Aboriginal kinship care, McHugh (2003) draws on a previous mainstream research study in which the 43 indigenous carers (one-quarter of the total sample) appeared to be more likely to live with extended family, to foster sibling groups and to have more children placed with them than the non-indigenous carers. WINANGAY (Hayden, Bonser, & Aunty Susie Blacklock, 2011) has recently published an Assessment Tool for Aboriginal kinship care.

In a set of related Australian Institute of Family Studies *Promising Practices* papers, Higgins and Butler (2007) identify a number of themes that cross Aboriginal foster and kinship care. These include commitment to community and culture as an incentive to care; and the fact that staff in Aboriginal welfare services are also frequently carers as well. Young people in their study overwhelmingly wanted connection to their home country and biological family (J. Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield,

² However, the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat NSW (AbSec, 2009) has verbally reported the results of an unpublished research project on Aboriginal kinship care. We also note that kinship care and foster care are not clearly distinguished in Aboriginal child welfare; hence there may be Aboriginal care studies that include kinship care but have not been clearly defined as such.

& Richardson, 2007). Barriers to recruitment of indigenous caregivers were identified, including poverty and the damaging legacy of the Stolen Generation leading to aversion to 'welfare' and much individual dysfunction. Difficulties in caregiver assessment are noted including Anglo-European bias, and the way police checks are used to exclude suitable carers. The researchers also highlight the lack of support for Aboriginal caregivers.

In her recent literature review of kinship care, Boetto (2010) identified the low level of compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and of support to indigenous kinship carers; and a lack of cultural sensitivity in processes relating to kinship care.

Several relevant areas have been designated as research priorities by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC, 2004). These include factors that contribute to placement stability and promote child wellbeing in out of home care; policy and practice that is not culturally relevant, including the placement of children in non-indigenous care; compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle; cultural and other bias in the application of risk assessment frameworks; the experiences, difficulties and support needs of Aboriginal kinship carers.

However, research in this area has its own issues. Aboriginal people are much researched, but feel that this has not benefited their communities (Onemda, 2008, p.16). Problems have included insufficient information being provided about the purpose of the research, lack of confidentiality and respect for participants, and a lack of feedback to communities (Onemda, 2008). More attention is needed to gaining trust and to control over the research process by communities (Penman, 2006).

The research study

The research project *Family Links: Kinship Care and Family Contact* was designed to inform the longer-term support of kinship care arrangements, and to improve children's wellbeing by encouraging greater attention to family connections. The project had two components:

- A survey of caregivers about their experience of children's contact with their family members
- Focus groups and interviews with children and young people, parents, kinship carers and kinship support workers.

The numbers of Aboriginal children in kinship care, together with the signal importance of their connection to family and the evident difficulties with this, confirmed the need for a dedicated focus on Aboriginal children within the broader research study. The research team was mindful of the necessity for Aboriginal collaboration if the research was to be useful.

For this part of the project, we set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the kinship carers who look after indigenous children?
2. What works to keep Aboriginal children connected to family and culture, and in supporting family relationships?
3. What are the barriers to family and cultural connection?

Aboriginal collaboration in the research study

An ideal research team for this part of the research would have included an Aboriginal co-researcher. However, funding precluded this, and the work was undertaken by the primary research worker, a white woman who has completed Cultural Respect training at the Koori Heritage Trust. Aboriginal approval and control of the study was achieved in several ways. The Research Project Reference Group included representation from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), and confirmed the importance of including specific attention to Aboriginal kinship care. A research staff member from VACCA reviewed the draft survey questionnaire regarding appropriateness for Aboriginal respondents. Aboriginal participation in focus groups was solicited via the DHS Aboriginal Out of home care Reference Group, as well as via direct approaches to services. Relevant documentation was sent to each service, and further discussions were held with services interested. In these discussions, the possibility of an Aboriginal co-facilitator for the consultations was canvassed, and one service made such a person available. However, in the end all the services decided that this was unnecessary because young people and parents were not involved (see below).

This report has been reviewed by a representative of each service for factual accuracy and interpretation. The report will be sent to the participating organisations and other key Aboriginal organisations.

Details of the methodology appear in the Appendix. All quotes are de-identified.

Limitations to the research

Aboriginal services are always over-stretched, a consequence of the level of community need and funding models. A request for research participation comes on top of heavy day-to-day demands. This led to some limitations to the study. Within the wider research project, there was a strong focus on obtaining the views of children in kinship care, and parents with children in kinship care, as well

as the views of caregivers and support workers. In the Aboriginal services, however, despite some effort it was eventually not possible to gain access to children or parents. Participants were therefore a mix of staff and caregivers, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

Participating organisations

The three organisations were the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, and Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC). The services consulted share a common history of establishment in the 1970s by community action. Community control of the services remains strong; cultural activities and a philosophy of self-determination are central to each. One was metropolitan and two were rural. One of the rural services is in a larger, more traditional Aboriginal community with strong ties but considerable intra-community conflict; the other was described as a more contemporary community. All three services are involved in support to families in various ways. The services were each in the process of developing newly funded kinship care support programs.

The participants

Thirteen people participated in the consultations; eleven were Aboriginal and the other two (one carer and one worker) had Aboriginal family. One caregiver and two workers were men. Five participants identified as caregivers and eleven as service workers (with overlap between these roles). Of the five identified carers, four were single (one unidentified marital status). One (non-Aboriginal) carer was great-uncle to two older children, another (Aboriginal) carer was great-aunt to two infants.

Results: the survey

Four hundred and thirty questionnaires were completed. This represented a response rate of 27% of all caregivers being paid caregiver allowances at the time. While this is a good number of returns (Van Bennekom, 2007), it cannot be regarded as necessarily representative of the whole population (AAPOR, 29 Sept 2008).

Sixteen percent of the 694 children for whom survey data was available were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI), a total of 109 children. This percentage is a little lower than found in the latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare survey at 30 June 2010, where 19–22%³ of the total number of children in kinship care were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (AIHW, 2011a). It may reflect a lower return rate from indigenous than non-indigenous caregivers.

Questions were asked about the demographics of the respondents, and about Cultural Support Planning.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kinship care

Two-thirds (67%) of the indigenous children in this sample were in non-indigenous kinship care⁴.

Fifty-four caregivers reported that they were looking after Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children. Fifteen caregivers were indigenous and 39 were non-indigenous.

Torres Strait Islanders

Three of the indigenous children were Torres Strait Islanders, and three were both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, together comprising 6% of the total of 109 indigenous children in our sample⁵. Of the children's four caregivers, one was a Torres Strait Islander caring for a Torres Strait Islander child; two others were not indigenous with the other unspecified. The Torres Strait Islander caregiver indicated that her child also had Filipino heritage and she would like to promote awareness of this culture as well.

Demographics of kinship carers

An outline of the characteristics of the caregivers of indigenous children appears below in tabulated form.

We note that the caregiver with the largest group of Aboriginal children (6 children) was one of three who did not specify their Aboriginality.

3 Given that there is not a clear distinction between kinship care and foster care in Aboriginal families, this figure varies according to how many placements identified in the AIHW data as foster care might be kinship placements.

4 This is a greater figure than in the AIHW collation of state governments data, which found that 47% of indigenous children in Victoria were in non-indigenous kinship care (AIHW, 2011a, p.67). Approximately one-quarter (23%) of the non-indigenous carers of indigenous children in our sample were identified as 'kith' carers, possibly adding to the figures for non-indigenous care. This is a group where there is sometimes ambiguity about classification as foster care or kinship care.

5 This is higher than the 1% of the Victorian population that is estimated to be Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). However, variations can be expected when numbers are small.

Aboriginal caregivers

Table 1: ATSI caregivers: Age and gender

Gender			Age			Total caregivers
F	M	Unknown	<50	51–60	>60	
14	0	1	5	6	4	15

Of the children in the care of indigenous families, all were with female relatives. Six (40%) were 51–60 years of age; and four (27%) were over 60; thus two-thirds (67%) of the indigenous carers were over 50.

Table 2: ATSI caregivers: Marital status

Marital status			ATSI status of partner				Total caregivers
S	P	Unknown	Y	N	Unknown	N/A	
12	3	0	0	2	1	12	15

Twelve (80%) of the 15 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander carers were single women. There were no reported indigenous spouses of indigenous carers.

Table 3: ATSI caregivers: Relationship to children

Grandmother	Great grandmother	Other relative	Kith	Total caregivers
12	1	2	0	15

Most (87%) of the indigenous caregivers were grandmothers. There were no kith carers.

Table 4: ATSI caregivers: Numbers of children with caregivers

Number of children with caregiver	1–2	3–4	>5	Average number of children with caregivers	Total number of caregivers
Number of caregivers	8	7	0	2.4	15

The Aboriginal carers had an average of 2.4 kinship children in their care; nearly half (47%) of the Aboriginal carers had either 3 or 4 children in their care.

Table 5: ATSI Caregivers: Ages of children

Age of children	<10	>10	Unspecified	Total children
Number of children	24	10	2	36

Seventy percent of the children were under 10 years of age.

Non-Aboriginal caregivers

Table 6: Non-ATSI caregivers: Age and gender

Gender			Age			Total caregivers
F	M	Unknown	<50	51–60	>60	
35	2	2	17	15	7	39

Most of the non-indigenous caregivers were women. Thirty-eight percent (15) were aged 51–60; 18% (7) were over 60. Thus, 56% (22) were over 50.

Table 7: Non-ATSI caregivers: Relationship to children

Grandparents	Other relative	Kith	Total caregivers
19	9	11	39

In the non-indigenous caregiver group, relationships to the children were more diverse. Half were in the care of grandparents, and the rest were split roughly evenly between other relatives and ‘kith’ care arrangements.

Table 8: Non-ATSI caregivers: Marital status

Marital status			ATSI status of partner				Total caregivers
S	P	U	Y	N	U	N/A	
17	22	0	1	21	0	17	39

Over half the carers (22) were partnered; however, only one had an Aboriginal partner.

Table 9: Non-ATSI caregivers: Numbers of children with caregiver

Number of children with caregiver	1–2	3–4	5+	Average number with caregiver	Total caregivers
Number of caregivers	35	4	0	1.6	39

The caregivers had an average of 1.6 children in their care; only 13% had 3 or 4 children in their care.

Table 10: Non-ATSI caregivers: Ages of children

Age of children	<10	>10	Unspecified	Total children
Number of children	42	31	0	73

Fifty-seven percent of the children were under 10 years.

Comparing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caregivers

The Aboriginal caregivers were on average older, more likely to be single, and caring for both larger numbers of children and a greater proportion of younger children. The older age of the indigenous carers is of particular concern given the current life expectancy of indigenous women (65 years for indigenous women, compared with 83 years for Australian women in general (AIHW, 2011b).

General comments

Consistent with comments made by other survey respondents, there were some comments from survey respondents who were caring for indigenous children about their love for the children and the satisfaction they bring.

It was a very happy experience. **(Aboriginal carer)**

You're more than welcome to visit me in [hospital], but I'd rather it be in my own home because then you'll get to see my beautiful, beautiful grandkids.
(Non-Aboriginal carer)

Family needs family. And if their mother can't be there, well then, I'm there. I will not let strangers bring up my grandchildren. So until they are all grown up, I will care for my 'grannies'. They keep me young and fit at heart. **(Aboriginal carer)**

Parental contact

As in the survey overall, many difficulties with parental contact were mentioned by respondents who were caring for indigenous children. There were safety concerns at times. Some carers felt that there was insufficient support for contact visits.

Believe children's knowledge and contact with parents is important, but current access schedule (3 times a week) is disrupting to routine and causes some behavioural changes. **(Non-Aboriginal carer)**

Visit would be much better if mother took the time to come to each contact as the small children would get to know who she is. It is very upsetting Mum come once every three months and they just don't know who she is. It would be nice for someone to catch the mother up on what the children are doing so she could have more to talk about – swimming lessons. **(Non-indigenous carer of Torres Strait Islander children)**

Contact was not [unsafe] whilst visits have been supervised by DHS. In the past, children had unsupervised access and were subject to violent behaviour by father. **(Non-Aboriginal carer)**

Cultural Support

Survey respondents were asked to complete the following set of questions if they were caring for indigenous children.

Figure 1: Survey questions re support for Aboriginal children’s culture

- Q42.** Do you feel that you are receiving adequate support to ensure the children keep in contact with family and culture?
- Q43.** Are you satisfied that the children are growing up with an active understanding of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island culture?
- Q44.** Are you aware of the children’s Cultural Support Plans?
- Q45.** Do you have a part in implementing the Cultural Support Plans?

Table 9: Survey responses: Support for children’s culture

Carer	Q42. Adequate support?			Q43. Children understand culture?			Q44. Aware of plans?			Q45. Part in implementing plans?		
	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure
ATSI	8	5	2	13	1	1	5	6	4	7	5	3
Unspec’d	2	0	1	3	0	0	2	1	0	1	2	0
Non-ATSI	20	13	6	22	10	7	11	23	5	11	18	10
Total	30	18	9	38	11	8	18	30	9	19	25	13

The findings presented above give some cause for concern. The most positive aspect was that almost all (13 out of 15) of the indigenous caregivers felt that the children in their care were growing up with an active understanding of their culture. Comments included:

They know where they come from and are encouraged in cultural perspectives. (Aboriginal carer)

The children’s family is a very close loving supportive family. (Aboriginal carer)

However, only around half (8) of indigenous caregivers reported that they received adequate support with this. Only one-third (5) were aware of the children's Cultural Support Plans, and less than half (7) felt they had a part in implementing the plans. Frustration and disappointment was noted in the comments made.

We get no support at all. We make sure the children keep in contact with family and culture. We go to a lot of effort to make sure they know who they are. What Plan? (Aboriginal carer)

It is difficult caring for a child when they are aware they have a sibling but unable to see them. Have asked the Department for years but to no avail. This affects the child's self-esteem and the child's sense of belonging. The foster child has to adopt the foster parent's customs and culture, as their birth right to know their country, culture and customs are not supported by the Department. (Aboriginal carer)

The situation is more concerning with regard to children in the care of non-indigenous caregivers. Only half (20) of non-indigenous caregivers felt that children in their care were growing up with an active understanding of their culture. Only half (20) reported receiving adequate support with this. Over half (23) were not aware of the children's Cultural Support Plans, and many felt that they did not have a part in implementing these (18, with another 10 'unsure'). Comments gave a mixed picture, with a number of caregivers keen for more help with family and cultural connections for the children. For a few, the connection appeared to have been lost. One carer commented:

Would love for the children to learn and know of their culture as they do mine! A little each day. (Non-Aboriginal carer)

Support

An overwhelming theme from survey respondents in general was their comments about lack of support. Among other issues, they felt that they lacked information about entitlements; financial assistance; assistance with housing; counselling and help for distressed children; and information about responding to children's trauma. They spoke of great stress put on families and relationships. Caregivers of Aboriginal children made similar comments.

We have our right to be grandparents taken from us and we become parents again. And it puts a bit on husband and wife relationships. I know several families where the marital relationship has broken down. (Aboriginal carer)

Caring for the children is the easy part, being involved with DHS for nine years has been the hard nine years of our lives with no support or considerations to our needs as a family. (Aboriginal carer)

There is nowhere near enough training and support in working with, living with and parenting traumatised children. My husband and I are both experienced counsellors and have raised three children, but have still often felt totally ill-equipped with our foster children. **(Non-Aboriginal carer)**

We are nine, living in a three-bedroom house – I sleep in the garage with two children. That's the thanks we get! **(Non-Aboriginal carer)**

Results: the focus groups

Family contact and connections exist in the context of community and mainstream society including non-Aboriginal family, support services and child protection. It was not possible, or desirable, to separate experiences of family connections from their social context. With some overlap they have been grouped into several themes. Training needs in relation to these were also identified.

Together, the findings of the survey and focus groups provide some answers to the research questions. However, as well as addressing support to Aboriginal children and families, they also speak to the nature of good case practice for all families. We return to this in the Conclusions.

A comment about language

Australian English varies across States and regions. Aboriginal English of a 'light' variety, ie close to Standard Australian English, is generally found in towns and cities (Eades, 1993) and was evident in the consultations undertaken in this study. As in all language, culture is embedded in words and phrases, and thus in the thinking of the speaker. On reviewing the transcripts, several observations were made. Terminology varied from time to time. For example, while being well aware that Aboriginal family is broad and encompassing, the researcher was now and again confused by a statement such as 'I have three sisters' followed by a story that included five sisters and some brothers, as the speaker moved between a mainstream nuclear concept of family and the wider Aboriginal view.

Language included references to children and families that seemed more empathic than often found in mainstream services. Phrases such as 'the young bloke' and 'that little one' were common. Aboriginal humour is famously robust and added a refreshing note to the consultations. However, the use by families of harsher language and threats was mentioned by a number of participants as a source of ambiguity and cross-cultural misunderstanding with potentially serious consequences for families (see page 30).

Looser language constructions than Standard English have mostly been quoted as they were spoken, with minimal editing.

Culture

The significance of Aboriginal culture was much stressed in all consultations. This included the nature of family; the imperative of connection to family and culture; family obligation to provide care; the diversity of Australian indigenous cultures; and the damaging impact on Aboriginal society of the generations of systematic child removal that led to the Stolen Generations. Cultural Support Planning as a formalised approach to the transmission of culture was addressed in the survey, and emerged in group discussions.

Kinship care is at the heart of culture, fitting naturally into an Aboriginal world view.

Well the strength [of kinship care] is that children remain within their extended families, which supports our philosophy around self-determination, self-management ... The family best knows the family circumstances so of course – we've got a lot of informal relationships with nannas and aunties ...
(Jenny)

The broad, inclusive and fluid definition of family was stressed by many. The terms brother, sister, aunt, uncle and cousin described a variety of biological and non-biological relationships. No distinction was made between caring for children or adult family members. The Aboriginal lack of distinction between kinship care and foster care was evident in discussions. At least three of the 13 participants had grown up in families where, with their parents, they had taken on the care of many children. When children stayed a long time, they became brothers or sisters.

The differences between our family and non-indigenous families is our family is everybody. It's not just the immediate family, Mum and Dad and siblings. You had the whole works and jerks of a Koori family ... Baby, newborn, toddler, youth, middle aged, right up until the elder. That's our kinship from that child. It's not Mum and Dad and brothers and sisters, it's everybody. That's the way we've been brought up. (Rose)

Family brings responsibilities that are imperative.

You're raised that way. When you're an oldest girl you're given specific obligations, and that's your obligation, that is your duty as the older person within that kinship group. (Nicole)

Caregivers may have their own problems. In one caregiving family who had taken in large numbers of children, the teenage grand-daughters had experienced physical and sexual abuse by a member of the community. In another case where a couple have provided extensive care to children as well as contributing to Aboriginal welfare in other ways, the couple's own young children were in care for a period of time when they were young.

My parents are foster carers. They've had about 50 kids on [Service] books but off the books they've had about a hundred or so ... Yeah, my niece kicked off the foster caring incident for my parents, and our family. I remember it as clear as day ... We sort of just sat down and Mum said you know, your [kin] brother can't take care of her and he's thinking of putting her in the home in town. Me and my brother looked at each other and we vowed that none of our [kin] brother's or sister's kids would end up in a home. Because me and my brother did a stint in there ... On and off, once my mother would fall off the wagon. And my father would. You know, just young parents and I don't blame them, they were young ... So for me and my younger brother it was like, no ... Having the foster kids in care has opened our eyes to that, it's a community responsibility, it's a family responsibility. (Nicole)

The overwhelming, much-repeated message in each consultation was the imperative for children to maintain links to their family members, community and culture.

The main thing is family. You've got to have contact. That's my big thing. It's not so much when they're younger; it's when they're older. 'Cause nothing would be worse than walking around a room and your brothers and sisters are sitting there and you don't know them. That's just not on, especially when it's not their fault either. **(Bob, non-Aboriginal carer)**

I know it's hard to do but that's my main thing, is that they reconnect. I don't care even if they've got Koori flag put up in their house. Something that kids can recognise. As long as that kid doesn't lose their identity and way, they're fine, no matter whose care they're in. Because at the end of the day they're going to come looking for their mob ... But at least you know they've got reconnection and know people loved them and they weren't given away. That's what I truly believe that our kids need to be connected to family and community. **(Rose)**

In one community, local culture and history includes a considerable level of conflict and at times violence; nevertheless, culture still drives obligation to give care.

So even if a Grandma didn't feel she was fit enough or strong enough to take on care, she would never say no. So [it's] cultural. Culture is a huge, huge issue. Or in terms of family ... there usually is another half a dozen people living in the house...they're not going to tell their family that they're not welcome there. **(Sue)**

Diversity among Aboriginal people was mentioned in two of the three groups. This included the differences in culture between clan groups; between traditional and contemporary culture in communities; and the big differences between northern remote Aboriginal communities and Victorian Aboriginal communities. The view was expressed that non-Aboriginal workers often treat Aboriginal people as all the same.

That's always been a concern of ours. When they do some research on Aboriginal people ... you go to the Northern Territory. We want to avoid that. **(Gary)**

Understanding diversity has implications for the implementation of Cultural Support Plans. A participant commented:

I think Cultural Support Plans are critical for all children in care ... But they also need to get them right ... I've got one in my head where the [Aboriginal] worker presumed that this child was the same father as the siblings...Where a worker goes, 'Oh them little fellas are Yorta Yortas' and they sign up the siblings and they get this beautiful glossy Plan. The kid starts writing stories about being a Yorta Yorta but in fact the child was somebody else. So then ... she goes back to that community and they say, 'No, no, no, no. Your brothers and sisters are but you're actually from Cumeru.' The identity can blow those kids away as teenagers, and this young girl unfortunately was a teenager. When she was told that she wasn't who she thought she was, that devastated her more than if she didn't even know. **(Jenny)**

An issue discussed in two of the consultations was that Aboriginal culture sometimes includes the use of loud, aggressive language when under pressure. This can be challenging for workers.

Look the first thing I tell a lot of non-indigenous people, and sometimes Aboriginal workers too, our mob is very loud. They're only loud when they're stressed and kids have been removed [or] they haven't got housing, they've got a crisis, they've got a death in the family. They need to have that time to let them express their feelings and don't take it personally. But even though that might happen make sure their safety is in place ... they just had a baby, they're at wits end ... Sit down and let them be, they calm down ... They're frustrated, who else do they go to? Don't judge them I suppose. **(Rose)**

Cultural awareness training was seen as important.

[What are things [workers] really need to know and understand?]

Well, culture. Culture, family connections, history. Not know about, but learn about. Because you can't assume that every Aboriginal person knows everything. So it's not just non-Aboriginal but also there's Aboriginal people who themselves may not even know that ... they're related. The connections and the history. So yes, that is just so important. **(Marjorie)**

Don't treat us all the same, because we're all from different mobs...make sure you get the cultures right and the identities of each region. Every region is different, we have certain beliefs and disbeliefs on what we do and how we do things. But most of all too is a lot of us still have that contact with elders, and respect our elders. **(Rose)**

I think one of the big things at the moment is you have to emphasise understanding how community and culture impacts on families. Because that's massive, and we're experiencing at the moment [that] new child protection workers just don't have any understanding of culture, and don't appear to want to. It's really become quite damaging. **(Sue)**

But I think too, they need to do some cultural awareness training, so they get a bit of a sense of our sense of humour as well. **(Jenny)**

Understand community politics. **(Gary)**

Just understanding what the community dynamics are....Culture training, hook up with someone that you can confide in perhaps, who is familiar with the community. **(Jenny)**

Impact of the history of the Stolen Generations

The history of the Stolen Generations casts a long shadow over current child protection; Aboriginal workers are constantly combating its repercussions. Participants in all consultations mentioned this. They spoke of the traumatic impact of care children's homes and non-Aboriginal foster care, often far removed from the child's community and without family contact. The impact is seen in the pull to substance abuse for relief of emotional pain, in subsequent effects on parenting, and in perpetuation of the cycle of child removal. This history creates the imperative for family contact. Rescuing stolen children and preventing further removal of children from their families is a major priority.

I did see a lot of my family struggle with that Stolen Generation stuff. Especially my aunty who...she passed away in 2008, she struggled all her life with the Stolen Generation stuff. Even though she was an alcohol she had lost her children to us, and they came into our care with Dad. **(Rose)**

So Mum and Dad were able to get the two brothers out of the home, and then a couple of years later they were able to get the two sisters out. So my uncles were more or less brought up my like my brothers ... That's my connection with them ... when they did come home and a part of our family. **(Rose)**

Workers need to understand and deal with fear of child protection and the police, and even of the Aboriginal services.

One of the biggest problems I've found with Koori people is they just can't get away that welfare and child protection mode. They think it's all about taking the kids. I've sat down and talked to them and said, it's not about taking the kids. It's about protecting the kids from family violence ... **(John)**

My father has said to me, “Why are you in that position?” because of him being a Stolen Generation ... He’s very uncomfortable, and I say to him ‘Look Dad, at least I know these children are looked after. I know they’re safe, and a lot of things have changed since back when you were ...’ So he’s at this time comfortable with that. I said to him, ‘At least these days the kids have every opportunity to have contact with family, and it’s something we push for and try to make sure that it goes smoothly. **(Rose)**

It’s making sure that they’re not fearful of [our service]. My Mum and Dad have educated a lot of the young ones that they’re actually here to help you. If you do take on your sister’s or your cousin’s children. So to sit down ... and say, ‘It’s alright for you to take that child, and [our service] is not going to ... take that baby off you’. It takes away the stigma of it. **(Nicole)**

Family contact

Parental contact

Parental contact was seen as a very difficult area. A number of participants made it clear that where parents want contact with their children, this is likely to happen with all the difficulties it may entail. Families and community often focus on managing the situation and ensuring safety at times regardless of legal requirements, rather than trying to prevent contact.

The courts say ‘Don’t tell the family [members] where you live’ because they’re not allowed to know, but you know a lot of the carers go behind the backs of the courts and actually break the law by telling the family [members], like extended family, where they live. So that they can have that access. **(Nicole)**

But look, access is really ad hoc ... A lot of their carers ... will go and just see how the mother is, like, mental health wise and stuff. Or if they think she’s substance abused while she’s there, the family will just walk away. Cancel the access ... A lot of the family will just let it happen anyway ... So it’s around more protecting and putting strategies in place to protect the child and the carer if need be. Rather than stop the parent from coming to the door – because that just wouldn’t happen ... It can be [very difficult], absolutely. **(Sue)**

But yeah, we’ve had kids that have come into care, and come with the most dramatic lifestyle and we’ve known that. We don’t judge the parents, at the end of the day, they still have a right to see their child. My niece’s Mum, she’s been incarcerated most of her life. She’s been in and out of jail the whole time with that girl, sixteen years. But yet, my Mum and Dad still allow that girl to have a relationship with her daughter and because of that, that young girl doesn’t hate her mother now. **(Nicole)**

However, at times workers spoke of the need for more restrictions to keep children safe.

My strong point would be to treat the kids the same as you would a non-indigenous child and put the safety of the child first. Because a lot of times, because they're an Aboriginal family, I've seen them say, 'Well close enough is good enough' It's not ... You've got to really monitor and find out the parents – are they violent? Are they drug affected? Are they able to meet with them? ... How safe are the children when those parents have [contact]? **(Gary)**

We've got a couple [of sibling contacts] that aren't safe... incarcerated for murder or for whatever. So, I mean, there's one [contact arrangement] probably we'll be actively not supporting, when the older brother comes out because it's not going to be good for the younger one. **(Sue)**

We had one here too, the young bloke wouldn't do any programs to address his family violent ways. The Mum was doing a program. Yet the little young bloke that wouldn't do anything was going home living at home with the family and the baby all the time There should have been a strong condition Dad couldn't stay at the house but it didn't allow for that. So that person had access 24/7 to his child. **(Gary)**

Creative approaches and a determination to overcome obstacles were evident in enabling parental contact. However, as mentioned by participants in other parts of the research, workers were seen to need skill development to handle difficult family relationships.

With one of them ... child protection has said there has to be supervised access ... there is reunification hopefully being planned ... We've actually negotiated with child protection [for Mum's support worker] to bring Mum and bub to our playgroup ... She'll supervise them at playgroup. So we're not actually having child protection come in. Mum and bub are getting a lot more quality time and a lot more benefit from having it that way. Rather than just sitting in a stark office. It's working really well. Mum's loving it. Walking in and getting a bit of social contact and certainly getting some support. Without feeling that she's being watched constantly ... But hopefully, because we're just building up our engagement with Dad side of it. So once we've been able to build on that, we'll be able to do the same thing for him that we do for this other woman. **(Sue)**

If it's an Aboriginal kinship ... the people that we're expecting to get would have [to have] those skills in being able to mediate ... A kinship worker may have to go out there and actually be a bit of a buffer between them. I mean, it's a grandmother who's looking after her grandkid, then having Mum rock up. You know, that's going to be really tricky and I'm sure [these skills] wouldn't just happen with our community. **(Sally)**

Some of our kinship carers don't have cars ... So I envisage that the kinship worker may have to be doing transport and therefore they might be in a situation where they might be supervising. So we have to have discussions about that sort of stuff ... **(Tina)**

Beyond mother and father – the whole family

It shouldn't just be about Mum and Dad, it's about the whole family, bet you that child, they need that connection. **(Marjorie)**

Much discussion in all consultations focused on aunties and uncles as key figures for supporting children.

She [young woman] doesn't know the aunties. So I think that's going to be hard for her when she does come back in because she's lost the contact with everyone, even Nina's side of the family ... She remembers our names but she doesn't know us. **(Rose)**

It's just identifying that sometimes it's not about you, it's about the bigger picture and it's about the family. If ... the parents can't deal with that, you find other cousins, other aunties, uncles, that will ... come out and visit. **(Nicole)**

Modern technology played a role in the reconnection of a lost brother – the speaker's stepson.

With this technology Facebook and e.g. and that, well my eldest daughter was online talking to some woman up in Mount Isa, to find out it was their brother's aunty who's been looking for them for years they said ... Two different mobs, they don't know our ways. Now ... he [stepson] rings them every day and talks to them by Facebook or phone ... We've just been waiting for him to turn up. **(Rose)**

The cultural divide within families: racism and family contact

The divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sides of families was frequently mentioned. Racist attitudes were often seen as a barrier to keeping children connected to their Aboriginal family and culture.

The grandmother, who was non-indigenous, has got the children and has a negative attitude towards the indigenous side of the family. So therefore you get these malicious rumours, notifications which restricts that child connecting back to culture or back to the father of those kids. Yes, that bloke loves his children and if you look at Mum and him, Mum was probably worse than the father. Yet their father's been denied the access and the Mum's living at the house or goes and visits whenever she wants. **(Gary)**

On the other hand, a non-Aboriginal great-uncle described his involvement with the Aboriginal service to ensure the children's connection to their culture and Aboriginal family.

Their mother was Aboriginal. That's why they come here, to learn [their culture]. I can't do it ... you've got to know your relatives. That's my whole thing in life, you've got to know. Even if you don't want to know, you've still got to know. **(Bob)**

Placement of Aboriginal children away from Aboriginal family was generally seen as a problem. However, a senior Aboriginal worker also articulated the importance of a child's existing relationships with non-indigenous family.

I think they have an equal right – say if it's a non-Aboriginal grandmother has equal rights to an Aboriginal grandmother ... if you look at the Child Placement Principle it can be sort of skewed that way ... you've got to consider who the child's already attached to sometimes. **(Gary)**

Skilful casework is required to overcome prejudice; this may need to be done by indigenous staff.

This is where I think they should have looked at it differently – because there were children that I believe would have benefited better by having child kinship care assessments [within the Aboriginal service] ... The grandmother is non-indigenous ... who's very negative towards the community ... It's a different perspective now on the grandmother's part because we sat down and explained it all. And we're going to introduce the community – and now she's a very happy Grandma. In the first place it was, you're not taking my bloody grandkids ... [DHS] should have discussed that with indigenous staff. **(Gary)**

Financial barriers to family contact

There were many references to financial difficulties creating challenges in retaining family ties. The problem of distance arose frequently. Poverty interacts with distance to create barriers to maintaining contact with family, the more so with interstate family.

[Transport is] a real issue. Particularly if Grandma or auntie and uncle ... don't have a car. We have two trains that leave [town], and one of them at six o'clock in the morning. Now if you've got five babies to get organised and get on the train, there's no way that you're going to do that. So therefore, access just doesn't happen. **(Sue)**

A woman described how she and her brother are sharing the care of two infants, their great-niece and great-nephew.

Well, we're struggling ... my brother's got his business, he's got his two girls and my sister-in-law works two days a week. Now so they've got the four kids really, in a small home. Then there's just myself, and I work. So I'm just trying to help out as much as I can but we all have those loan commitments and things. I do it down there [in his house], because that's [the children's] home now. **(Penny)**

Program standards and family assessment

Program standards and policy for both mainstream and Aboriginal kinship care services were seen as a work in progress, raising complexities of cultural differences and the interface between Aboriginal society and wider Australian society. Perhaps for this reason, some participants felt that assessment errors were being made in both directions, that is, inappropriately excluding and including caregiving families. There was clear agreement that in formulating program standards, children's safety was paramount.

Several intertwined assessment issues were discussed. There was seen to be inadequate assessment of all members of the family regularly under one roof. Use of police checks was seen as a sometimes superficial 'bottom line' assessment of suitability, exposing children to unassessed risk obscured by the police clearance. The ambiguity of harsh verbal threats as a means of discipline was raised as another complicating factor. Further challenging the assessment process, participants stressed that the cultural imperative to care for children means that families are unlikely to self-assess their capacity to provide adequate care and say no when it will be too much.

A worker's going to have expectations because the system, the new program guidelines and the system has expectations. So I think particularly for our Aboriginal families, because really a lot of the kinship placement have been obviously from court straight to placement. So they've done a very quick police check but they've not done an environmental check. We're going to have to be going by the minimum standards. So I think that's really going to pose a huge headache and a huge issue for us to grapple with in terms of duty of care. **(Jenny)**

You might do [a police check] for one person but there might be five other people living in the house. **(Tamara)**

I think one of the other issues is through child protection that...screening them is not the right word. They don't tend to take into consideration the welfare of the kinship families. So frequently, unfortunately, because the family won't say no, they take on extra children and they put their own family at risk of falling apart as well. **(Sue)**

They kept removing these kids and placing them with a kinship; knowing that the kinship carer wouldn't say no ... The last time they did it, she was homeless. She was actually staying with another family member because she'd been kicked out of her house. Well, they still put the kids in there. No food, no bedding; nothing. Then I get the call on Sunday to say 'Well you need to go get a whole heap of shopping for her.' I'm like, 'I don't think so'. So then she went, once again, handed the kids back to DHS on the Monday morning. **(Sue)**

Sometimes, however, it was seen that assessment decisions may appropriately regard factors other than limited space as more important.

I mean we've got one carer at the moment who is living in accommodation that's just very small. But at the end of the day a decision was made to place these children with this carer and I think ultimately it was the right decision, despite the accommodation. Because we as Aboriginal people don't all have our own bedrooms and our own space. **(Jenny)**

Several people mentioned that police checks can exclude suitable caregivers where offences in the past are misinterpreted in relation to current risk to children. They commented that suitable caregivers may also be excluded because their fear of authority makes them unwilling to undergo police checks. Creativity was evident in trying to address this.

A lot of our community ... had either a drunk and disorderly or something else. Now ... they're frightened of going, because they think it'll come up in the police check. So a lot of our community are not applying for that because of a previous. **(Gary)**

We don't have a lot of Aboriginal carers. I think when that new rule came in a few years ago about the police checks and working with children checks. Look a lot of our mob are pretty alright [but they] don't like police nosing around. We tried this, and tried this, to try and get our mob on board, but they just don't like this police involvement ... I don't know how we're going to do it. I think it needs to be done away from [our service] maybe at a hall or something with a feed to give them just a police check. Mainly what police checks are looking are if people are molesters, that sort of stuff ... So what if they've had a little fight and that, you can overcome those sorts of things. That could have happened years ago. **(Rose)**

Yeah, and that's where I think my experience with the Department has failed. Like key champion people within families that are about preserving that family protocol, who they are as a family kinship, they've knocked them back because of they may have a past criminal history but changed their ways. **(Nicole)**

As previously mentioned, participants commented that Aboriginal people can be loud and speak aggressively when under pressure. The use of harsh language and threats of physical punishment for disciplinary purposes raises particularly challenging issues. Child protection workers have the task of identifying where threats of physical punishment are the discipline itself, and when they may indicate a genuine risk of abuse. Errors in either direction can lead to drastic consequences. An adequate assessment will involve getting to know families well. A variety of sources of information is needed, interpreted with indigenous assistance.

I think the other point to remember is that we are oral people. Our tradition is oral and our discipline's in the form of oral rather than physical and flog ... our discipline is with our words – 'Keep going mister ... I'll flog you, I'll flog you.' You can hear that 50,000 times a year ... Where someone else will just go up and slap, slap their children straight away ... Well it's the different levels of voice you use to give that discipline to get control. **(Sally)**

I think that the workers doing the assessments need cultural training ... 'I'll threaten them' – that's how they talk, the families. That came [up in a] kinship assessment and nearly knocked it on the head. [It's] the Aboriginal person that you're talking to. [But] that doesn't come up good – because you're not supposed to talk like that to a child. **(Gary)**

This little fella was playing up and he was jumping from the table to the dresser, from the dresser to the bed to the floor. She said, 'Keep going, I'm telling you, I've warned you, I'll kill you in a minute.' So next minute big report went over. 'Well she threatened to kill her child yesterday.' The little old lady next door, who's in her eighties, she was out hanging the clothes out on the line and she heard this Mum...threaten to kill so she was straight on the phone. **(Jenny)**

We had one [child protection worker] there. She came back, she said, 'Oh Gary, I don't know what to do here. This bloke said to his kids, 'You keep that up and I'll give you a bloody flogging.' Now that's a saying in our community. This kid's mucking – she said, 'I've written he's going to give them a flogging.' **(Gary)**

In the face of this complexity, Aboriginal input into assessments is critical.

One of the recommendations I'll be putting down is every kinship care assessment done on an Aboriginal child should have an Aboriginal person present. **(Gary)**

Casework skills

The kinship families heaps of time struggle. **(Sue)**

There was much discussion of the way in which Aboriginal services provide support to kinship families and discharge casework responsibilities. A feature of the discussions was the level of empathy and understanding demonstrated by participants as workers, carers and members of their own families and community, in providing support to keep families connected. The various life roles people played in supporting others were not differentiated from each other. The word 'engagement' was frequently used; workers understood this to be the key to successful intervention. Typically, they described a non-judgmental approach that takes personal and collective history into account in understanding of why things are as they are today, and displayed skill in intervening to assist.

Trust was mentioned as a particular issue for casework and support. Follow-up was seen to generate trust.

There's some very sensitive people there ... and I suppose it's getting to know them before you start on the work. Even with the Koori workers, we were still very sensitive ... But as far as non-indigenous working – they need to stress that point ... Trust is a very big thing. They don't trust anybody so get that trust first then they'll work with you. **(John)**

Because our mob are so sick of waiting. 'Yes I'll get back to you, I'll get back to you, I'll get back to you.' So the follow up is really critical to how people will perceive you down the track too. 'No, I don't trust him.' 'No, he won't get – he's slack.' You know, how many times have you heard that? **(Jenny)**

The importance of working directly with children was stressed.

I deal with clients that were removed and have no relationship with family, Stolen Gens. That ... is important, keeping the children connected, even though the family may not be perfect, and all families aren't. Preparing the child how to deal with that is the key. I found dealing with Department ... workers go 'Well, I don't think it's in the best interest of the child to deal with the alcohol and the disappointment of not seeing the parent.' In my eyes, at the end of the day, that child, that's their family. **(Nicole)**

It's a family responsibility ... Mum and Dad will explain who [the children] are and what's gone on with that kid. We had one little girl that was sexually assaulted and she was very scared of girls, women because it was her mother that done it. So me and my niece had to keep our distance from her, until she had gotten used to us and felt that she was protected ... we sit down and discuss what the best action is for that child to make sure they feel comfortable. So my Dad will ring us and one by one we'll come home ... and have tea, and sit down and just yarn with the little person. **(Nicole)**

Well, it was hard at the start. That little one ... was doing really nasty stuff around the house, cutting stuff and drawing on stuff and that ... For us, it was how you can't replace the mother or father. For us as a family, it was understanding where she sat ... and knowing that when she fell, we were there to pick her up. **(Nicole)**

Crucially, a manager stressed that workers need to listen directly to children's views.

But talk to the actual kids, that's another thing too. They'll be very honest about their placement ... they don't hide nothing ... So that might be a tip for your new workers is to get them to build trust with them kids and those kids will just spill their guts really. **(Sally)**

The need for training for carers of Aboriginal children about understanding trauma in children was mentioned

The ones that have had the traumatics of parents that do damage to their children psychologically and physically. They get sent to my Mum, she's a qualified counsellor ... Our kinship carers [need help to] understand that psychological way, or counselling way, in how to deal with the psychological trauma that our kids are facing. Giving them the tools because carers are at their wits. If my mother, [hadn't] had the skills, half the kids [would] be messed up to the day. I've seen a lot of kids, the younger ones that we've had, as teenagers now and really changed because of staying with my Mum and being able to help them. **(Nicole)**

Carers would like to know what behaviour patterns are and the needs of a child ... You know, it's a wing and a prayer. And by having other people around you say 'Well sis or bro, you know that you shouldn't be doing that'. That's where courses or programs or something needs to be set up, that allows carers to come together and share their knowledge base ... and just be able to sit down and say 'Well, I had a kid last week and he had issues and I don't know how to do that.' It allows the psychologist to sit down and go 'With that issue that you had, here's some tools and some information that may help you next time it comes up.' **(Nicole)**

Child protection (DHS) was commented on by a number of participants. They often saw child protection as a collegiate partner to work out problems and issues with: sometimes with ease, sometimes not. The emphasis, however, was on sitting down together and talking through the issues, even when they expressed criticism of a worker's approach.

I also think the Department staff – particularly here in [country town] are really culturally sensitive. That's mainly through working through [Aboriginal workers]. Particularly ones that are just doing access visits – they come and talk to you all the time. What do we do here? I've even seen them having access with the Aboriginal families when they come in...The families are quite comfortable working with those staff ... **(Gary)**

So there's one contact arrangement probably we'll be actively not supporting ... because it's not going to be good for the younger one. But we'll do that in consultation with the family and with [DHS] Case Contracting as well. **(Sue)**

They should have discussed that [racism issue] with indigenous staff ... we ought to take some of this back to the Department. I will because it's an issue. **(Gary)**

In one area, the Aboriginal Family Decision Making program within DHS, with an Aboriginal convenor, has made a difference to the rate of kinship placements in the region.

[Another] strength of ours is, we've probably got a 90 to 95 per cent placement of kinship care out of our Aboriginal Family Decision Making meetings ... so nearly every meeting that we've had, the child's remained with the family or with our community. We engage the families. We know the families. Some of them if they don't get on with me, they might get on with [other Aboriginal worker] ... I think the key is that you've got Department [involvement]. **(Gary)**

Conclusions

We love caring for all the children and see them develop and gain confidence. It is not an easy path at times but it is not dull! Kinship care seems to be the 'Cinderella' of the care system, so I hope your research project might help these people. (Non-Aboriginal carer)

In the messages of these caregivers and community service workers, there is much that is universally applicable to children and their families. This includes attention to engagement; building trust; sensitivity; the use of empathic language; non-judgmental attitudes; and creativity. Children's physical, emotional and cultural safety remains the top priority. Children's culture needs to be respected and actively supported, and work oriented towards ensuring wide connections to family members for social support and a positive identity. This is, indeed, 'the story of all of us' (Bamblett, 2007).

For non-Aboriginal workers and caregivers, training in cultural awareness is imperative to develop understanding of the Stolen Generations legacy in contemporary child welfare practice; to reduce language-based misunderstandings; to effect better contact and connection of children to their culture and families; and over time, to thus reduce the cycle of family breakdown.

Kinship care in Aboriginal families has a greater chance of providing the best possible care for Aboriginal children as cultural awareness improves, understanding builds between child protection and Aboriginal communities, greater support is provided for vulnerable caregivers, and a more thorough and nuanced approach to the recruitment and selection of caregivers is developed.

It is clear that there is some way to go in ensuring that every Aboriginal child has an appropriate Cultural Support Plan that is effectively implemented. Implementation requires sensitivity, skill, knowledge, and time. Resourcing needs to be directed to local Aboriginal services which have the requisite family knowledge, community links and engagement. Our survey confirms that children in non-Aboriginal care are particularly vulnerable to loss of contact with family and culture, and their caregivers need more support from Aboriginal services to counter this.

As in mainstream practice, the use of police checks continues to generate errors both of inclusion of unsuitable caregivers and exclusion of suitable caregivers. A better informed and more culturally appropriate approach is needed.

This research has again underlined the imperative of community control and self-determination if Aboriginal communities are to be supported to care for their vulnerable members and keep them connected to family and culture. Thus children can be assured of a strong identity and family support for a good childhood and adult life.

The acute unmet support needs of kinship carers are nowhere seen as vividly as in the Aboriginal community, where larger numbers of children are being cared for by carers living in straitened circumstances. As carers age and young children turn into teenagers, providing adequate support will become critical if the wellbeing of both children and their families is to be assured, and further family breakdown avoided. Again in Muriel Bamblett's words: 'If we can get it right for Aboriginal people, we can get it right for everybody (Bamblett, 2006).'

Appendix: Methodology

Ethics

Approval for the research was obtained from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee, and ratified by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Aboriginal organisations that participated. All information gathered was kept confidential according to research ethics standards.

The survey

The survey was conducted in May 2010 with all registered kinship carers who were receiving caregiver payments from DHS. Additional questions were provided for carers of Aboriginal children. Demographic data and information about arrangements for family contact was sought, together with comments about caregivers' experiences. Questions addressed caregivers' capacity to keep children in contact with their family and culture; Cultural Support Plans; and support received or needed for family contact and implementation of Cultural Support Plans. There was also room for 'other comments.'

Microsoft Excel was used to facilitate data analysis.

The focus groups

The focus groups took place in May and June 2010. Written informed consent was obtained from participants. Transcripts were made from voice recordings; these were de-identified and coded using the NVivo (QSR, 2010) software package, enabling themes to be identified.

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