



Department for
Child Protection

Enhancing the planning and delivery of services to Aboriginal people in Western Australia

A guide for not-for-profit services funded by the
Department for Child Protection



PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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1. PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

The information contained in this document is intended to be a useful guide to working with Aboriginal people and communities.

Aboriginal communities are entitled to high standard child protection and care services for their children. Services to Aboriginal people in Western Australia provided by the government, non-government organisations and churches have experienced varying degrees of success. This usually depends on the level of knowledge, respect or understanding a person or organisation has of Aboriginal history and culture and delivering culturally sensitive services to Aboriginal individuals, families or communities.

The principles, concepts and strategies contained in this guide are intended to help you increase your knowledge base and confidence to engage appropriately and sensitively with Aboriginal people when planning for and providing services. It is not a fully comprehensive description of all the many and varied aspects of the diverse Aboriginal people, communities and cultures in Western Australia.

The information provided does not reveal sacred aspects of Aboriginal culture which cannot be disclosed to non Aboriginal people.

2. USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is useful when:

- encouraging Aboriginal people to access and use your services.
- planning, providing, reviewing or evaluating service activities.
- seeking to involve Aboriginal people to oversee and guide service delivery.
- developing culturally appropriate information for Aboriginal people.
- raising the cultural awareness of your staff.
- seeking to improve the quality and effectiveness of your services.

You can seek further information or clarification about anything in this guide from your local Senior Officer Aboriginal Services (SOAS) based in your local Department for Child Protection (DCP) District office (telephone 9222 2555) or the Department's Aboriginal Non Government Policy Officer (telephone 9222 2764).

3. BACKGROUND TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND CULTURE IN WA

The Aboriginal population in Western Australia is very diverse in its geographic, demographic, cultural, linguistic, political, social and economic characteristics. For example:

- there are approximately 118¹ distinct Aboriginal language groups in Western Australia.
- 34% of WA's Aboriginal population live in the Perth metropolitan area (1.5% of total population in Perth)
- 66% live in WA's regional areas. The largest regional population of Aboriginal people is in the Kimberley (33% of the people in this region) followed by the Pilbara (13.5%), the Central and South Eastern regions (9.2% each), the Upper Great Southern (4.8%) and the Midlands (4%).

Many of the towns and communities that Aboriginal people now live in were established by the government or churches, without the consent of the Aboriginal people who were forced to live in those areas. In many cases people from distinct cultural and language groups were removed from their traditional homelands and forced to live with other diverse groups as a single community.

In addition during the 1960s to the 1990s, many Aboriginal people moved from traditional lands to other locations around the State. They are not the traditional people of the area. This can sometimes lead to a lack of understanding regarding who are the traditional owners and who are 'newcomers'.

The history of colonisation as well as past government practices of assimilation, removal of Aboriginal children from their families and segregation of Aboriginal people on designated reserves have led to changes in some Aboriginal languages and cultural practices. This history is still affecting the health and well-being of many Aboriginal people.

Some Aboriginal people may experience feelings of disconnection/separation from their own culture, families, language and land of origin. Some Aboriginal people may not feel accepted in non-Aboriginal culture or find it difficult to trust government or non-government service providers.

Much has been taken from the Aboriginal people in Western Australia however Aboriginal people still retain their distinct cultures.

4. DESCRIPTIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

1. **Aboriginal:** A person of Australian Aboriginal descent and the traditional custodians of the land of Australia.
2. **Aboriginal Culture:** All things Aboriginal including languages, customs, lore², country (land), beliefs and lifestyles.
3. **Aboriginal Lore:** Aboriginal customary lores/rules recognised by the Aboriginal community as binding.

¹Tindale Map of Tribal Boundaries Western Australia

²Also referred to as Aboriginal law

4. **Aboriginal Community:** All local families including local traditional family groups, extended family, Aboriginal people in cross-cultural marriages, local church and sport groups, Aboriginal people from different geographic areas who are related to local families and local Aboriginal organisations. An Aboriginal Community can include many diverse urban, regional and remote communities and language groups.
5. **Aboriginal Language Group:** A common language group related to a specific geographical area (country) eg Noongar³, Yamatji, Banjima, Martuwangka, and Kimberley Kriol which may have a number of dialects or closely related languages used for different situations.
6. **Elders:** The Elders of a community or language group are the custodians of the traditional knowledge and lore and are recognised and respected as such within a given community/ group as distinct from a leader. Elders can speak only for their language group or geographic area (country). Note that high mortality rates mean that in some Aboriginal communities Elders may be younger people.
7. **Leaders:** Respected people in the community such as grandparents or others as nominated by the Aboriginal community and not necessarily an Elder.
8. **Traditional Owners means:** those people with links to specific lands dating back before European contact, not necessarily those presently residing in a town.

5. KEY PRINCIPLES FOR THE PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

1. Services respect, value, understand and are sensitive to Aboriginal culture and its diversity in Western Australia.
2. Aboriginal people have the right to access and receive a service that acknowledges and respects their culture.
3. Services devote time to build and maintain relationships with Aboriginal people and support them to actively participate in the development, implementation and ongoing guidance of service delivery.
4. Service delivery is responsive, flexible and accessible to Aboriginal individuals, families and communities. Services have a strong focus on quality and work towards achieving appropriate standards.

³ Noongar is also pronounced and written as Nyungar and Nyoongah

6. PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

6.1 Some Basic Aboriginal Cultural Facts

- a. Aboriginality is not defined by skin colour or where someone lives.
- b. Aboriginal culture exists and is alive, real and ever evolving.
- c. Aboriginal lore/law is real, being practised throughout Western Australia and is to be respected.
- d. Aboriginal people generally know their own community and language group well and can help you understand the different family groups, who is related to whom and who is from a different language group or community.
- e. Being Aboriginal and Aboriginal culture is an all encompassing way of being.
- f. Aboriginal people have great respect for the land and all places of cultural significance. This knowledge is held and passed down by the Elders.
- g. Cultural ceremonies and 'lore time', particularly in the remote traditional communities in the Kimberley, Pilbara and Desert regions, occur from November to March each year and are led by the Elders.
- h. Deaths and 'sorry times' i.e. mourning and funeral obligations are taken very seriously. Attendance at funerals of family/extended family and friends is essential. Aboriginal people are expected to stay a while with family after the funeral and to not do so is disrespectful.
- i. Sharing of money, housing and other resources with family is a responsibility and expectation.
- j. Be aware of the 'Shame Concept'. 'Shame' can be interpreted as but not limited to a display of public, personal, family and/or social:
 - lack of respect
 - embarrassment
 - shameful behaviour
 - self importance/self promotion
 - rudeness
 - breach of accepted Aboriginal "norms" and/or taboos.

6.2 Respecting Culture When Working With Aboriginal People

- a. In remote areas service providers should consider waiting until lore time is over before visiting a community, or seek advice on where you can go and who you can meet with to discuss business.
- b. An agency may provide service activities to the local town in remote areas but may be unable to do community outreach at lore times. It may be a good time to undertake planning for the following year.

- c. The land and all significant places should always be respected.
- d. Some people may find it disrespectful to speak a deceased person's name so avoid use of a deceased person's name unless it is commonly used in the community.
- e. After a death in some communities, a person with the same name as the deceased may change their name – if your name is the same as the deceased you may be expected to do the same or you may be given another name by the community.
- f. Photographs and videos must only be taken with people's consent. They can only be used in publications with consent. If a person who is in the photograph has died, it is possible that the photo cannot be used anymore or the person's face may need to be obscured.
- h. If you are staying overnight/camping in or around a remote community, it is best to ask where you may camp. This will enable you to camp without unintentionally wandering on to sites of significance.
- i. Be aware that in some more traditional remote communities certain family members or in-laws are unable to sit in the same room together. Seek advice from Aboriginal staff on these prohibited kinship relationships to avoid causing embarrassment or offence.
- j. Aboriginal beliefs and cultural practices are as valid as any other social and/or religious beliefs.
- k. Aboriginal people's values may be different to your own. Values that are really important to Aboriginal people include giving and keeping your word (i.e. not needing it written down), the importance of family relationships (kinship), reciprocation (if you give to someone or do someone a favour, you expect to receive a favour when you need it in the future) and the obligation to share shelter, food and other material resources with family.

6.3 Respecting Aboriginal Family Structures and Roles

There are differences in Aboriginal family structures and roles of members to non-Aboriginal families which need to be understood and respected when delivering services.

- a. The title uncle, aunty, sister, brother is used for all biological relatives and also used as a respectful title for friends, family, older people and sometimes, new acquaintances. It is not just restricted to biological relationships as in many non-Aboriginal cultures.
- b. Close and distant cousins have the same status as brothers and sisters.
- c. Aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, in-laws and grandparents will often include other people's children in their family for months and maybe years at a time
- d. Respect and seek to understand the role of Aboriginal women and men and their family responsibilities.
- e. Be aware there is a difference in Aboriginal male and female lore/law practices, significant sites, traditional responsibilities etc.
- f. In many Aboriginal communities the women, particularly the older mothers and grandmothers are strong and influential.

- g. Young Aboriginal children are generally allowed much latitude to explore and be independent.
- h. Pre-teenage children can sometimes have substantial sibling responsibilities.
- i. Be aware that many people across the State are inter-related.

6.4 Practical Strategies for Engaging, Consulting and Building Trust with Aboriginal People and Communities

When engaging with Aboriginal people in Western Australia you must acknowledge and respect their cultural and geographical diversity. You will need to use different approaches for consulting and engaging with remote traditional communities than with urban communities and regional towns.

Consulting Aboriginal People and Communities from Urban Towns or Cities

Most of the concepts and strategies that follow in this guide are applicable but remember:

- a. You must identify, consult and work with the recognised Elders firstly and also the identified community leaders, local Aboriginal organisations and with all local family groups.
- b. Seek initial advice from a Noongar person/people when consulting in Noongar⁴ country including the Perth metropolitan area and Southern centres such as Albany, Bunbury or Katanning , a Yamatji person in Yamatji country etc.
- c. Seek out people who know the local families well to advise you in a particular urban suburb or district if you are planning or delivering a suburban based service.
- d. The CEO or Chairperson of a local Aboriginal managed organisation in a town or suburb may not be a recognised local community Elder or leader.

Consulting Aboriginal People and Communities in Rural and Remote Areas

Most of the concepts and strategies in this guide are applicable. In addition the following consultation protocols should be used each time you visit rural, remote and traditional Aboriginal communities.

Some Aboriginal communities have their own community consultation protocols which should be respected and used. In remote areas contact the Senior Officer Aboriginal Services (SOAS) at your local Department for Child Protection office, a local Department of Indigenous Affairs office or a local Indigenous Coordination Centre.

- a. When seeking to visit remote Aboriginal communities check with the community you wish to visit by ringing the Community Coordinator or Manager.

⁴ Noongar is also pronounced and written as Nyungar and Nyoongah

- b. Always seek permission to enter Aboriginal lands prior to a remote or regional trip. This can be done through consultation with the Department for Child Protection, the Department of Indigenous Affairs or an Indigenous Coordination Centre or your own Aboriginal staff who can contact the local Elders or the Community Council.
- c. In remote communities always consult through the Aboriginal Community Council.
- d. Ensure that an invitation is issued by the community for you to visit prior to going to a community. If your invitation is declined there are valid reasons.
- e. Always inform the community about why you wish to visit their community.
- f. Non-Aboriginal people should have local Aboriginal people accompany them in the initial stages of developing relationships with communities.
- g. Discuss with the Aboriginal staff/people any community expectations before visiting the community.
- h. Use diesel or gas powered vehicles when visiting communities where it is known that petrol sniffing is an issue.

6.5 General Practical Strategies

Getting started

- a. Firstly seek out and talk to someone who ideally is from or who knows the community you wish to meet with to get some background and ask advice about appropriate consultation/engagement strategies.
- b. Ensure a local Aboriginal person works alongside you in developing and building relationships with Aboriginal communities.
- c. An Aboriginal person taking you to any Aboriginal community or family group does so because they are respected and trusted by that community/group.
- d. Seek advice from your Aboriginal colleagues about all the different family groups in an area and who is related to whom. Aboriginal communities are often a combination of distinct families and extended families.
- e. Ensure you make yourself aware of whom the local Elders are and arrange to meet with them early on.
- f. Involve as many local Aboriginal Elders, leaders, representatives from all the local family groups and local Aboriginal organisations when planning for or evaluating services.
- g. It is critical you hear the view of the whole community and to do this you need to ensure representatives from all families meet with you and have a voice.
- h. Always check that the community wants the intended program or service, is engaged throughout the project and has meaningful input into its development, understands the program/service benefits and confirms that the program/service is appropriate and culturally sensitive.

- i. Aboriginal staff and/or the Aboriginal community must not be expected to “rubber stamp” your project/service.
- j. If family tensions are present in a community/town/city ensure you are not drawn into it during consultations, be objective, don’t take sides, but still try and meet with all family groups.

Greetings

- a. Always allow the Aboriginal person taking you to a community to introduce you to the people and follow their lead.
- b. If a handshake is not offered do not be offended (this is not generally an Aboriginal way of greeting people) and accept a verbal greeting as the formal introduction.
- c. If a handshake is offered shake hands with one hand only in a firm but not overly firm way and be aware that eye contact may or may not occur at this point.

Meetings

- a. Ask where and when people or the community would like to meet with you. Meetings should occur where they feel most comfortable.
- b. At formal meetings acknowledge Aboriginal country.
- c. The community’s first impressions of you are everything. It is important to establish a friendly and co-operative ongoing relationship otherwise future contact may be more difficult.
- d. When attending Aboriginal meetings wait to be seated. If you are not shown a seat ask where you may sit or choose a seat that is a respectful distance back.
- e. When leaving a meeting do so quietly and without attracting attention.

Non-Verbal Cues/Presentation

- a. In some communities men should not sit in front, up close and directly facing women. This can be interpreted as confrontational and disrespectful.
- b. In some communities women should not sit in front, up close and directly facing men. This can also be interpreted as confrontational, and disrespectful.
- c. When meeting with Aboriginal people be aware they do not always look directly at you. Prolonged eye contact can be interpreted as staring, confrontational and disrespectful.
- d. If an Aboriginal person is comfortable with eye contact that is fine but if not then notice and respect this.
- e. When meeting with Aboriginal people wear respectful covering clothing - mini skirts, plunging necklines and tight fitting or transparent clothing is not appropriate.
- f. In traditional remote communities it is respectful for women to wear long full skirts.

- g. Be guided by Aboriginal staff about dressing appropriately before you visit an Aboriginal community or person's house.
- h. In all communication ensure sufficient personal space is available to Aboriginal people.

Networks, Contacts and Following Up

- a. Establish a network of male and female contacts within Aboriginal communities.
- b. Once good contact with a community is established, ensure it is maintained and follow up soon after a meeting. Distrust and cynicism towards non-Aboriginal people and service providers can occur so it is vital to be sensitive, to keep in touch and to keep your word.
- c. If you give your word on anything ensure that you follow through with it. Aboriginal communities will take you at your word and your credibility depends on keeping it.

Talking, Listening and Hearing

- a. Ensure that any question deals with one item per question.
- b. Questions with a 'this or that scenario' or questions constructed with two to three items may meet with a yes answer because it is sometimes considered rude to reply with an outright no.
- c. Further, yes may be the answer to one part of a question but no may be the answer to the next part of the question. In this scenario a yes response does not mean consent to the whole question.
- d. Silence may indicate people are finding what you say hard to follow so encourage discussion amongst themselves then go back and talk and listen some more.
- e. In meetings do not raise your voice but listen carefully. Check by paraphrasing that you have understood and been understood.
- f. Do not use direct questions, instead use indirect questions.
Direct question: What skills do you use in working with your service's clients?
Indirect question: Can you take me through what you do for someone who is at your front desk looking for help from your organisation?
 Identify the skills as these become evident during the response to your question. Use prompts if necessary.
- g. Present your verbal messages simply and clearly. Try to get to the point quickly.
- h. Use plain, clear English at all times rather than bureaucratic or 'high English' language.
- i. Use a normal tone of voice and listen very carefully because:
 - the spoken accent of Aboriginal people can vary from district to district.
 - the language spoken can in some cases be delivered quickly and/or quietly.
 - English words with Aboriginal meanings, Aboriginal English⁵ and/or Kriol are also used.
 - Use an interpreter where required as English may not be their first language.

⁵ Aboriginal English is a complete language incorporating elements of standard Australian English and many Aboriginal languages spoken all over Western Australia; Consulting Citizens, Engaging with Aboriginal Western Australian, September 2005

- j. Using local examples to illustrate your point can be very helpful.
- k. Use visual or pictorial ways of communicating as well as providing verbal or written information. Try to use Aboriginal recognised symbols or pictures in pictorial communication.
- l. Family relationships are very strong and criticism of close and/or extended family may get a very vocal response or you may simply be ignored from that point onwards.
- m. Seek ways to find solutions together and be creative in seeking Aboriginal focussed service responses.

Taking time

- a. It is critical to allow plenty of lead in time for consultations and meetings.
- b. Plan for several visits and meetings.
- c. Do not expect immediate answers or decisions.
- d. Allow people to make their own decisions in their own time.
- e. Do not force issues. Go back later for an answer if required.

Ensuring Aboriginal People Feel Comfortable Using Your Service

Whether you are planning or delivering a mainstream service or one that specifically targets Aboriginal individuals or families, always seek advice, guidance and/or feedback from the local Aboriginal community.

Many of the previous concepts and strategies apply when providing direct services to individuals and families but in addition:

Employ Aboriginal Staff and Volunteers

- a. Employing local Aboriginal staff and having local Aboriginal membership on your management committee will encourage local Aboriginal people to access the service. So will the use Aboriginal volunteers where appropriate.
- b. Use innovative, Aboriginal friendly recruitment processes to recruit Aboriginal staff or volunteers by:
 - advertising on the “Aboriginal grapevine”.
 - advertising on Aboriginal radio if available and in Aboriginal newspapers.
 - seeking advice from Aboriginal people in the community to identify potential Aboriginal staff and target these people for attention.
 - ensure duty statements and selection criteria are written in plain English and it is clear what is expected of people (see Talking, Listening and Hearing).
 - use Aboriginal people on selection panels for positions where Aboriginality is a genuine selection criteria.

- conducting interviews in a non-intimidating location – out in the community.
- use less formal interview processes – use structured conversations.
- be aware of the ‘shame concept’ and that Aboriginal people may feel ‘shame’ and may be less likely to highlight their strengths strongly in interviews (see ‘shame concept’).
- be aware that lack of detail in an application does not necessarily mean the applicant does not possess the skills to do the job. Follow-up with referees for additional information.
- acknowledge that practical life skills and experience of the Aboriginal community is a genuine criterion and should be highly valued.

Policies, Practices and Values

- a. Demonstrate your organisation’s respect and sensitivity to Aboriginal culture through specific policy/value statements.
- b. Access cultural awareness training for staff and volunteers and monitor how this training is integrated into work practices.
- c. Display Aboriginal visual and written material where possible.
- d. Establish working relationships with Aboriginal community Elders, local Aboriginal groups or services, local individuals or agencies that could offer advice to ensure culturally secure and sensitive service delivery.
- e. All Department for Child Protection’s funded services are intended to support all Aboriginal families in a local area. Ensure all local families/groups know what information and assistance they can receive from your service, including having meetings with different groups in the same town to discuss the same issues.
- f. If you are an Aboriginal managed organisation you must ensure the service is open to all Aboriginal family groups in your area. A suggestion is that you pass a resolution that a representative from each local family group is invited, encouraged and supported to be on the management committee. This will help all Aboriginal families to feel comfortable using your service.
- g. If you seek Aboriginal advice and support to guide your service it will be more accessible and responsive to Aboriginal people. E.g. you could set up a service reference group with representation from all local families/clans to guide the service delivery and direction.

Working with Aboriginal Individuals and Families

- a. Before working with a specific Aboriginal family who has been referred to your service you can seek background advice from Aboriginal staff. The Senior Officer Aboriginal Services (SOAS) at the Department for Child Protection is available to talk to you.
- b. Initial assessments and further meetings with an Aboriginal person or family should be conducted at a time and in a place where they feel comfortable e.g. at the person’s home, in an open area outside, in a park or in an office.
- c. A mix of outreach, home visiting and centre based services is recommended.

- d. Aboriginal people may not wish to invite you inside their home. This is not being unfriendly, it is simply where they are most comfortable seeing you and should be accepted as such.
- e. Visiting Aboriginal families' houses works better with a male and female visiting the house together.
- f. If visiting a home where no male family member is present, male visitors should stay outside and in plain view.
- g. If there is no female present at a house female visitors should stay outside and in plain view.
- h. Initial assessments and further meetings could be conducted without a formal question and answer scenario, which can be uncomfortable for the person being interviewed. Information can be gathered through a structured conversation.
- i. When Aboriginal people are feeling pressured or aggressively questioned in a conversation/meeting, your questions may be met with agreement at the time and later met with disagreement. This is because the conversation/meetings have not been conducted in an Aboriginal friendly manner and can be interpreted as rude (see Talking, Listening and Hearing).
- j. Do not impose non-Aboriginal values during service delivery as the 'right way'. Instead explore opportunities to work towards 'bringing both ways together' e.g. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values and practices in relation to child rearing.
- k. Speak openly and honestly to service users and be aware your word will generally be taken at face value.
- l. Services to Aboriginal children, young people and adults should include the whole family where possible unless there is an issue of safety.
- m. You may work towards carefully bringing together representatives from different families where tension exists over time, but only when trust has been developed with the families.

REMEMBER: This guide is a basic introduction to working with Aboriginal people and does not in any way replace the more detailed cultural knowledge and experience of your Aboriginal colleagues and community people. These people will generally be willing to share their knowledge, advice and expertise.

See also: 'Consulting Citizens: Engaging with Aboriginal Western Australians', available from the Citizens and Civics Unit of The Department of the Premier and Cabinet.

Developed by Tony Calgaret, Aboriginal Policy Officer, Non-Government Funding and Agreements, in consultation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff of the Department for Child Protection, Western Australia.

Department for Child Protection
189 Royal Street
East Perth WA 6004
Phone (08) 9222 2555
Fax (08) 9222 2776
www.childprotection.wa.gov.au