Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures

Find resources that help you to deepen your understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to incorporate this appreciation in daily practices and learning with children.

Reconciliation action plan

Join 3,500+ schools and early learning services in developing reconciliation action plans (RAPs). The Narragunnawali website hosts learning activities, professional learning and webinars to help you get started. Create your own RAP using the three prongs of activity:

- In the classroom/early years service
- Around the school/service
- With the community.

There are 39 RAP actions to select from, including 14 that are a minimum requirement. If you need inspiration, you can use the Narragunnawali website to explore ways that other services are implementing this initiative.

International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 (IY2019)

Early years educators may reflect on the first languages of the children, families and colleagues. Are endangered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages used by members of your community? The IY2019 is an opportunity to consider the importance of Australian Indigenous languages. How do you value, celebrate and engage in the first languages of all those within your community?

Our Bedtime Stories presents stories for children in Indigenous languages, using traditional storytelling techniques together with animation, music and film. A new series is being made as part of IY2019. Find out what else is happening to celebrate IY2019 here.

An online search may result in some useful resources. – here’s two songs in Wiradjuri: ‘Balang ganha bungangbu burrami’ (Head, shoulders, knees and toes) and ‘Gulambali wibiyanha galingga’ (Pelican sitting on the water).
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day 2019

In 2019, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day (4 August) is celebrating the early years, and promoting the importance of early years education and care. The 2019 ambassador is Nanna from the animated children’s series Little J & Big Cuz.

Case study

Many educators are seeking ways of getting started in this area or progressing beyond a few special days or one-off activities. Here are a variety of approaches and ideas.

Victorian educator Adrienne Cowan perhaps echoes the experiences of many of us:

‘Had a really interesting day at work … Our director challenged us about Aboriginal reconciliation and what things we can do to build our children’s knowledge and understanding on our history and heritage and the “first peoples” of our land … I thought hard about it and came to the conclusion I barely knew anything. I grew up in Australia and should know. I’m so ashamed I didn’t. I started thinking about what I could do to educate myself more about it … In Melbourne we have an amazing museum which has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait area where you can learn a great deal more than just good old Google…

I approached my director, stating I’d love to do a PD and go to the museum. It turned into five educators going. I’m so grateful our director challenges our thoughts and understanding so we can grow and teach these little humans we are entrusted with. She’s provided us this great learning experience and I’m so excited to participate and learn from it.’

Educator Jennifer Renee has used a range of strategies to embed the focus at her service.

‘Our centre when it opened had a smoking ceremony with the local elders. Look into a strong partnership with your local elders, perhaps have monthly story times where they have time to share culture and music?

The 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning factsheet is a great way to begin embedding this focus in documentation … everything from team meetings to labeled learning areas in the rooms.

Photo provocations and instructions (are) set up with intentional teaching to support respectful uses. This could include provocational photos or items set up in the rooms for art or story areas, loose part play with natural indigenous resources, offering tastings of bush tucker.

I try to find links between cultures. For example, in the week of Saint Patricks Day, we dyed some thread and fabric using meal offcuts of vegetables from our kitchen. This linked with a previous activity of making paint from natural indigenous dyes.

Many services embed a sustained focus along with acknowledging particular events. Educator Marion Taylor describes the approach at Mission Australia Early Learning Service, Mount Hutton.

‘With Reconciliation Week in May, we have kept things simple. We want our families to become involved participators so we’ve set up a provocation in the foyer involving the theme for this year: “Grounded in truth”. The children created their own handprints to holistically show their support for this momentous week and throughout the year.'
We also are allowing families to contribute by providing hands for the families to illustrate or use words of encouragement and support for reconciliation, not just for the week but 365 days a year. We also still have a petition for families and visitors to support Kelly’s Place in regards to the Aboriginal flag flying proudly on the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

We also have a library available 365 days a year to help extend our own journey!

Tasmanian educator Mary Marsh is an advocate for yarning circles.

‘I am in the Toddler 2–3 room. We have two yarning circle areas: one in the bush around a campfire and the inside area is called “Circle time”.

The service uses Circle time for experiences such as this:

‘Lately in our Toddle bear room with our 2-3-year olds we have been enjoying a lot of storytelling experiences from around the World. Our focus in part has mostly been upon Aboriginal stories both from Tasmania, shared with us by Trish Hodge, from Nita Education as well as others from the nations on the mainland. Our circle allows for this special, intimate exchange using the process of sharing a story aloud using props to engage the children more fully in this experience. We encourage our children to take part in the whole process by allowing them to add props to our story mat as the story is retold aloud. The children become so involved that they are now beginning to share the stories aloud with their friends.’

Mary says that she is often unsure about whether she is doing things correctly.

‘Being of non Aboriginal descent, I’m trying hard to show authenticity but I worry about how others would perceive my delivery of content about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. But then I remember a saying by Mother Teresa of Calcutta about her work. She said, “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.”

South Australian service director Nyree Amorie recommends some resources to help educators learn more.

‘I recently read an amazing book called “Growing up Aboriginal in Australia” by Anita Heiss. I would highly recommend this to all educators to learn about the history of Aboriginal Australia.

I also suggest people take the time to watch a news and current affair program called “The Point” on SBS’s NITV (an Australian television channel that broadcasts programming produced largely by Indigenous Australians). “The Point” addresses lots of tough issues such as the stolen generation, the Australia Day debate, treaty, reconciliation and also celebrates the good news stories. Having this knowledge is valuable in programming, cultural considerations and events, relationships, working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and staff and in everyday practice in any early childhood setting.’

This is a great short animation explaining the impact of intergenerational trauma created by the Healing Foundation.
NAIDOC week

The theme of the 2019 NAIDOC week is ‘Voice. Treaty. Truth. Let’s work together’. NAIDOC Week will be held from 7–14 July 2019. Free copies of the 2019 National NAIDOC poster can be downloaded here.

Let’s yarn about NAIDOC week is a webinar produced by Wiradjeri woman Jessica Staines in 2018. In this 30-minute professional learning event, she urges educators to go beyond tokenism, providing some great examples of recent practice, links to very useful resources and a suggestion about using NAIDOC Week as a springboard to attend a local NAIDOC event. Her consultancy company, Koori Curriculum, facilitates practical workshops and a mentoring service and sells resources that are great for early years educators. The website includes a blog – read how one service has embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives using the children’s interests as the central focus of both learning activities and pedagogy.

Resources

SNAICC

SNAICC provides practical resources, professional learning opportunities and research-based advocacy to support both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in early years settings and educators developing skills in inclusion and cultural competencies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: Starting points

Taking the first steps can be daunting for some kindergarten teachers, but they need not be. The purpose of this resource is to provide examples of starting points for welcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children into kindergarten.

Finding a third space in which to teach: Reconciliation in action

Finding the ‘third space’ has long been used as a driver in second language learning in schools. This article explores the concept through interactions between Anangu educators and children and non-Aboriginal educators. Find examples of how one service has honoured Anangu literacy practices and worked to create a shared philosophy statement. This slide presentation provides a further glimpse into this work.

Source: Early Childhood Australia/Facebook
Eight ways of working with Aboriginal knowledge

Ceane Towers’s presentation at the 2018 Early Childhood Australia conference focuses on moving Aboriginal perspectives from tokenism through a focus on pedagogy. She draws on the eight Aboriginal ways of learning pedagogy, originally identified by Dr Tyson Yunkaporta.

For more about its use in education contexts, see Knowledge frameworks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Note that local communities may have their own ways of framing learning – this question is worth asking.

Our Gadigal home

Two NSW educators present the journey they began in 2017 to apply perspectives on Gadigal culture within their curriculum. This slide presentation records part of their journey.

Victorian Inclusion Agency

The Victorian Inclusion Agency asked leading educators how they bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their programs. Try using these reflective questions with the video Meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

- Why does every Australian child have the right to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures?
- Do you agree with the comment: ‘If there is context with tokenism, then it is still meaningful’?
- How confident do you feel when it comes to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives? Do you ever worry about ‘doing the wrong thing’ or offending Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? If yes, should this stop you from trying?

Other resources on this website include ‘Yulunga traditional Indigenous games’ and ‘Keeping Aboriginal children safe in mainstream organisations’.

Professional learning

The ECRH hosts three free online professional learning modules that support understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

- Personal cultural competency: This module helps you build your own cultural competency in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The course looks at power and positioning of cultures and the difference between being in a mainstream and a minority culture.
- Embedding culture in teaching practice: This module focuses on teaching practices and curriculum. It is designed to help you if you are working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. It also provides ideas and support for contexts where there are no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, families or staff members.
- Building a culturally competent and responsive service: This module gives you actions that you can use across your entire service. It covers policy, workforce development, resources, environment, community engagement, partnerships and advocacy.

A different type of professional learning experience may grow out of accessing one of the following resources.

- Ask us anything: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people Is it ever OK to ask someone how Aboriginal they are? Staff and students from Sydney University answer anonymously submitted questions to confront myths and stereotypes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- You can’t ask that: Indigenous This episode aims to explore what it’s really like to be an Indigenous Australian.
- Deadly questions. You ask. Aboriginal Victorians answer.