

Discussion Paper 4

Issues to consider in responding to Indigenous children who have experienced abuse related trauma



Introduction

This discussion paper outlines some key issues in considering responding to Indigenous children who have experienced abuse related trauma. It includes a framework for working with and supporting Aboriginal communities as well as a specific link between this information and the SMART program. The paper is a collaborative piece written by Associate Professor Marlene Drysdale from the Indigenous Health Unit at Monash University and the SMART team at the Australian Childhood Foundation.

Violence and abuse are major issues in most, if not all, of Indigenous communities. They form part of an inter-related wave of problems that have naturally stemmed from the injustices that Aboriginal people have suffered throughout modern history (Bedford & Maloney, 2002:1).

The intent of this paper is to generate discussion. The paper provides an opportunity for readers to share specific knowledge. It also poses a series of critical questions to further enhance responses to students who have experienced chronic traumatisation. The paper enables readers to ask questions of each other about specific issues and how to best respond.

Please note that throughout this paper, the words Aboriginal and Indigenous have been used interchangeably. The authors recognise that Aboriginal does not include those of Torres Strait Island descent and do not wish to exclude those people from the discussion.

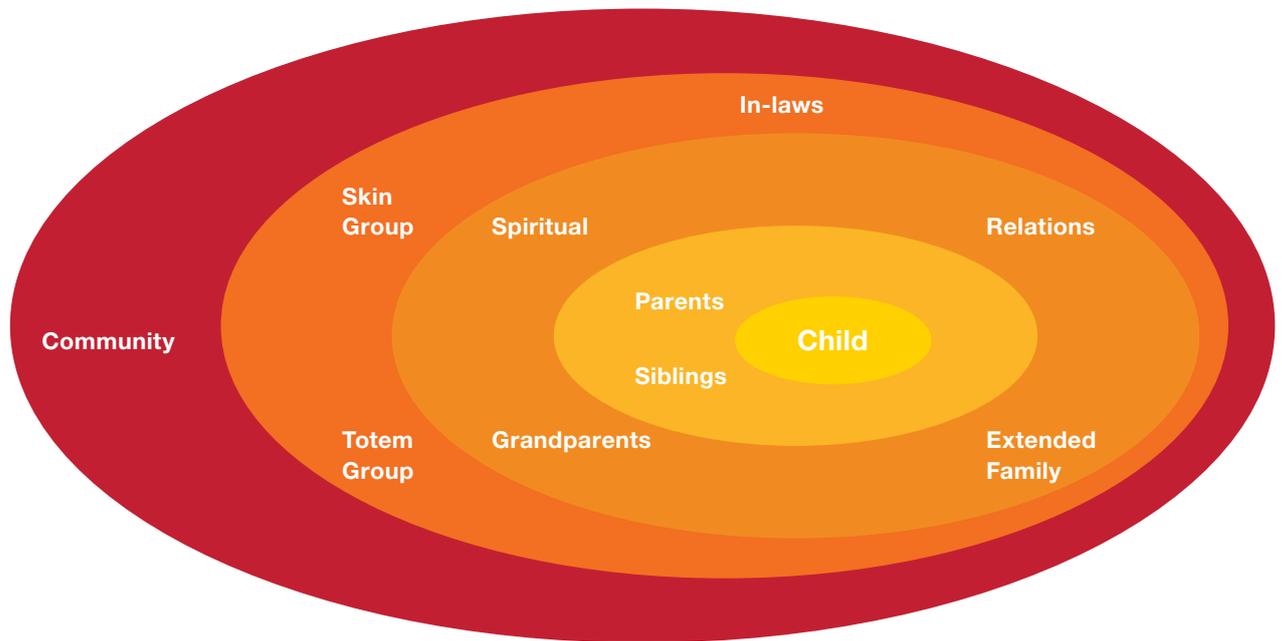


Section 1. Exploring child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities

Exploring the child's place in Indigenous communities

Aboriginal child care practices position children as the responsibility of the whole extended family and the community. A child's elders as well as all their broader extended family play a role in their development, including older siblings and cousins (Bedford & Maloney, 2002:35).

This is reflected in the following diagram.



Exploring trauma within Indigenous communities

The overwhelming majority of Indigenous families today have experienced the impact of colonisation and related historical policies of assimilation. Colonisation and the practices of the past are perceived by Indigenous people as the underlying reasons for the level of unresolved trauma within the community. For example, the large-scale removal of Indigenous children from their parents in the 1950's is seen as a major contribution to the experience of trauma (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000). Oppression, dispossession, enforced protection and assimilation policies up until the 1970's fragmented many families (Mow, 1992).

As a result, Indigenous children can deal with the effects of trauma as part of their daily life. This cumulative and pervasive experience of trauma is compounded for children who also experience abuse and violence directly.



Exploring the cultural understanding model

As professionals working with Aboriginal people, it is important that we reflect on the way that a lack of cultural consideration can influence the practices within systems designed to provide services to Aboriginal children and families. For example, comments like "we treat everyone the same" does not allow for diversity and difference. It more than likely reflects the institutionalised privileging of one view and one set of values as a standard.

The following diagram outlines a framework that promotes cultural competency in child welfare practice. Each of these elements builds on the previous to ultimately support practice that is sensitive to the needs of Indigenous children within their familial and community relationships.



Cultural awareness:

This is being aware of Aboriginal people such as making the statement, “*they have large extended families*”. It does not mean you understand what might underpin this situation nor does it lead to any action.



Cultural safety:

This level stems from individuals taking direct action to ensure someone within the community is safe. An example might be making sure members of the family know where the child is. Cultural safety often consists of small actions and gestures rather than standardised policy and procedure.



Cultural security:

This level provides a direct link between understandings and actions. It is when policies and procedures have created processes that are automatically applied.

For example, process dictates that if you write a note to the parent or guardian you ensure the Aboriginal School Liaison Officer or Aboriginal Education Worker delivers and explain it. Any other actions will involve these key people being informed of and included in meetings or sharing of information.



Cultural competence:

This highest level is defined as a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals that enables effective communication and actions in cross-cultural settings (Cross et.al.1989). Culturally competent professionals are able to work across various cultures and provide both quality care and a safe environment for their clients, particularly children and young people. Some of the key concepts included in cultural competence include social justice, access

and equity, accountability and continuous evaluation and improvement. Many schools would clearly demonstrate cultural competence in their support of Indigenous students. This is built on understanding many issues, including those outlined in this paper.



What does this mean for SMART PRACTICE?

In understanding this context, the question then becomes how best to implement SMART PRACTICE with Indigenous students? All of the strategies outlined in SMART seek to repair the impact of trauma at a neurobiological and social/familial level. Culturally competent SMART PRACTICE will ensure that these strategies are translated respectfully into practice. Some of these strategies are considered in this context below.



Support team

The use of a support team is critical in implementing SMART PRACTICE to ensure a consistency of response. When working with Indigenous students it is important to consider who the members of the support team might be and what their role is within the team. In the context of many schools, the AEW can act as a crucial reference point for the child. However, the reference point needs to be supported in their relationship. For example, has the AEW attended the SMART training?

The reference point and other key individuals at the school can work to engage the family in any process of intervention. For example, does the family need the support of a community member in connecting with the support team? Some Indigenous families may find schools alienating and struggle to engage with the education process (Schwab, 1999). This can be exacerbated if there are behavioural and emotional concerns regarding the student.

Finally how can the support team ensure that the student is able to contribute to the outcomes of the support team's discussion? What can the support team do specifically to engage and resource children from Indigenous communities?



Enhancing other culturally competent strategies

- The use of language and stories can be used most effectively to build narrative memory function, or the capacity to build stories of understanding about our past, present and future. This can incorporate or be replaced by pictorial representations of past experiences and patterns. Including kinship connection in this activity is integral to the way that indigenous children can learn to re-use helpful familial relationships to help them in their recovery from trauma.
- Understand principles of sharing and reciprocity within Indigenous communities (see Schwab, 2001). It can be more effective to work together to come to agreement around an issue rather than making a specific request of the student, their family or a community member. Deflecting a specific request rather than just saying “no” is a crucial skill in order not to offend the community member making the request. This sense of sharing can be replicated in work with both the student and the support team.
- Canvas appropriate calming strategies within the student's circles of care.

- Don't expect the student to be an expert on Indigenous culture and issues. Who else can help the team work most effectively to meet the needs of the student within their community and culture?
- Remember the critical value of utilising neutral body language and tone of voice when responding to the student's behaviour.
- Develop a plan for responding if the student comes to school having had a significant life event occur within their community. This may include the death or illness of a relative or community member. There may need to be opportunities provided to link this to the connection work outlined previously.



Section 2. Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How do you feel your school demonstrates and reflects the concept of cultural competence?
2. How would you assess your school or service in the cultural understanding model? What areas could be built on in terms of promoting and maintaining cultural competence?
3. What is the role of AEW's within your school? Can that be reviewed in terms of SMART PRACTICE?
4. How have you specifically adapted SMART PRACTICE to Indigenous students in your school? Please share as much detail as you would like.
5. Do you have a question of your colleagues around best supporting Indigenous students in your school?