

FOUNDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILD AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

CAFWAA Conference 2009

Overview of the workshop

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context for child and family support
- Key themes underpinning the development, organisation and delivery of child and family support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- Application of the key themes within the development and operation of an Early Childhood Program provided by the Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs
- Implications of the foundations for effective child and family support services within practice and service delivery

Background

- The workshop draws on findings of a project commissioned by the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Limited in 2008
- The project examined the provision of child and family support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in South East Queensland and identified strategies to improve the delivery of these services
- The views and experience of Indigenous and non Indigenous service providers and a review of the literature informed the findings

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context

- Application of child and family support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families requires a consideration of the following factors:
 - Population
 - Family
 - Social
 - Economic
 - Cultural

Demographics

Population

- At 30 June 2006, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander estimated population of Australia was 517,200 or 2.5% of the total population.
- Queensland had 28.3% of the estimated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population – 146,400.
- This represents 3.6% of the total Queensland population.

Demographics

Age

- In Queensland in 2006, 44.8% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population were aged under 18 years compared to 24.4% of the non-Indigenous population
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children made up 6.3% of the Queensland population aged under 18
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is younger than the non-Indigenous population because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people tend to die at significantly younger ages and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a slightly higher fertility rate than non-Indigenous women

Demographics

Distribution

In Queensland, in 2006:

- 26% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in 'major cities', 20% live in 'inner regional' areas, 32% live in 'outer regional' areas and 22% live in 'remote' or 'very remote' areas
- Larger numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in urban and regional areas but make up smaller proportion of the population than those who live in remote or very remote areas
- 41,369 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in Brisbane
- The Gold Coast had the largest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with 5,675, followed by Townsville with 4,982

Demographics

Family "types"

In Queensland, in 2001:

- Nearly half (47.5%) of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were couple families with children, similar to all families (44.7%)
- About one in five (19.6%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were couple families without children, whereas almost two in five (38.0%) of non-Indigenous families were in this category
- A much higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were one-parent families (30.3%) compared with the non-Indigenous population (15.6%)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were more likely to be larger than other families (average 3.6% members per Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families compared with 2.9% members in other families)
- Couple families with children aged under 15 years comprised 40.5% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families whereas only 32.1% of non-Indigenous families were couple families with children aged less than 15

Demographics

Age of parents

In Queensland, in 2004:

- Parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies tend to be younger with 55% of babies born to mothers aged 20-29 and 45% having fathers aged 20-29, compared to 45% and 33% for all births
- 18% of Indigenous babies were born to mothers aged under 20 years and 8% having fathers aged under 20 years, compared to 6% and 2% for all births

Demographics

Households

In Queensland, in 2001:

- There were more people living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander one-family households (3.9 per household) than in non-Indigenous one-family households (3.1)
- There were more people living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander multi family households (7.2%) than in non-Indigenous households (5.2%)

Caring for children

- A review of the literature indicates significant cultural differences in the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Areas highlighted include understandings of childhood, parenting and family
- Family relationships and structures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are different to those in non-Indigenous families

Caring for children

- Approaches to parenting and childcare vary across and within cultures
- Kolar and Soriano (2000) state *'It is important not to view these differences as deficits in family functioning and family relationships or parenting styles, but rather as culturally specific issues that are influenced by history, geography and experiences'*

Family functioning

- Despite widespread recognition that strong family relationships and good family functioning are essential for individual, family and community wellbeing, there remains a limited evidence base to describe how well Aboriginal families function or the factors that support family harmony or contribute to dysfunction

(Walker and Shepherd , 2008)

Family functioning

- Ten factors were found to be independently associated with family functioning (WAACHS):
 - ▣ Family financial well being
 - ▣ Quality of children's diet
 - ▣ Level of educational attainment of the primary carer
 - ▣ Importance of religion/spirituality
 - ▣ Whether overuse of alcohol causes problems in the household
 - ▣ Parenting quality
 - ▣ Whether children were at high risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties
 - ▣ Age of the primary carer
 - ▣ Whether the carer has had a limiting medical condition

Family functioning

Walker and Shepherd (2008) state:

- *‘While these associations do not imply causality, they highlight the complex interplay of factors that impact on family functioning. Likewise, they underscore the fact that there are both resiliency factors that contribute to very good family functioning and others that pose considerable risks and contribute to poor outcomes’.*

Disadvantage

- The safety, well being and life chances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also need to be considered in the broader social and economic context
- Daly and Smith (2005) examined key indicators of children well being and found that children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are at a substantial disadvantage compared with those in other Australian households on all the indicators. Indicators of exclusion from mainstream social and economic opportunities were chosen that correlate strongly with outcomes for children. The indicators were:
 - Absence of a parent
 - Household income
 - Parental and other adult employment status
 - Welfare reliance
 - Parental and other adult educational status
 - Health status

Impact of forced separation

- The WACCH study found that those carers who were forcibly separated from their natural families were:
 - ▣ About twice as likely to have been arrested or charged with an offence
 - ▣ About one and a half times more likely to report that the overuse of alcohol caused problems in their household
 - ▣ A little over twice as likely to report that betting or gambling caused problems in the household
 - ▣ About half as likely to have someone they could talk to about their problems
 - ▣ One and half times more likely to have had contact with Mental Health Services

Impact of forced separation

- In terms of the intergenerational effects caused by forced separation the study found that children who are cared for by a primary carer who was forcibly separated from their natural family were *'over twice as likely to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties when compared with children whose Aboriginal primary carers were not forcibly separated.'*
- Specifically:
 - ▣ *'A higher proportion of those children whose primary carer had been forcibly separated from their natural family were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties (almost one third) compared with those children whose primary carer was not forcibly separated (about one fifth)'*
 - ▣ *'Moreover, these children had levels of both alcohol and other drug use that were approximately twice as high as those children whose primary carer had not been forcibly separated from their natural family'*

Carer burden

- The WAACHS survey found that 24% of Aboriginal children aged 4-17 were assessed from questionnaires completed by their carers as being at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. This compares with 15% of the non-Indigenous population.
- Further analysis of the proportion of children with emotional and behavioural problems and the number of carers available to provide care indicate that the burden of child emotional and behavioural problems for Aboriginal families is 3.9 times higher than in the majority population.
- Therefore, there are a smaller number of carers available for a larger proportion of children with significant problems. (Silburn et al, 2005)

Over-representation in the child protection system

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly over represented in the Queensland child protection system
- The most recent child protection data (AIHW, 2008) showed that in Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were:
 - ▣ Three times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be the subject of a substantiated case of abuse or neglect
 - ▣ Nearly six times more likely to be on care and protection orders
 - ▣ Six times as likely to be placed in out of home care

Over-representation in the child protection system

- Reasons for the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system include:
 - ▣ Understanding of cultural differences in caring for children
 - ▣ Social and economic disadvantage
 - ▣ Forcible separation of children from their families and communities
 - ▣ Negative social and economic outcomes for children whose parents have been forcibly separated

Consideration of these factors

- Consideration of these factors should inform:
 - ▣ the targeting of services
 - ▣ the engagement of families and communities
 - ▣ who services need to work with
 - ▣ the range of services required
 - ▣ the way in which services are provided
 - ▣ the length of service required
 - ▣ the follow up supports
- These factors are relevant at both the local and whole of service system levels.
- They should therefore be considered by local organisations involved in delivering child and family support services, as well as larger non-government organisations and government departments.

Key themes

- Culture as protection
- Cultural safety and respect
- Community development
- Community control
- Holistic approach
- Partnership
- Sustainability

Culture as protection

- In discussing the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, Bamblett (2007) refers to 'culture as protection':
 - **'Culture defines** who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important. Aboriginal children require cultural knowledge and cultural information that relates to their own community.
 - The **protective and resilient qualities of a strong cultural identity** and involvement in cultural life.
 - Adherence to **cultural traditions and participation** in cultural activities enhance child wellbeing and contributes to the child's resilience.
 - The **dynamics of power** between cultures. Racism and dealing with underlying issues which lead to disempowerment and dysfunction.

Cultural safety and respect

- The concepts of 'cultural safety' and 'cultural respect' are used to denote the importance of acknowledging cultural diversity and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and traditions

Cultural safety and respect

- The Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (2008) suggests that 'cultural respect' can be seen as comprising the following elements:
 - *Cultural respect is about shared respect*
 - *Cultural respect is achieved when the child protection services provided by all parties from both Government and non-Government sectors aspire to achieve a safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, where cultural differences are respected*
 - *Cultural respect is a demonstrated commitment to the provision of child protection services that do not compromise the legitimate cultural rights, practices, values and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*
 - *Cultural respect upholds the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to maintain, protect and develop their culture, whilst achieving equitable outcomes in regard to the safety, well-being and life opportunities of their children and young people*

Community development

- Community development from an Indigenous perspective *'... implies an awareness of exploitation and oppression. It is based primarily on the notion that people are capable of finding their own solutions to their problems. Experts can best contribute by supporting initiatives decided collectively by people who have joined together to address their community needs.'* (Burchill et al, 2006)
- The MCEETYA discussion paper (2001) on early learning for Indigenous children highlights that *'Self-determination and empowerment are the cornerstones of Indigenous community development and capacity building approaches'*

Community control

- Community controlled services are initiated, planned, delivered and managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- Councillor (2003) identified benefits that properly resourced Aboriginal community controlled health services can deliver including:
 - *'Better access – because the local community has ownership and control of the service, and because service delivery is flexible and responsive, Aboriginal people are more likely to access the care they need'*
 - *The full range of primary health care services is available in one place – service delivery is integrated and holistic, rather than being built around different specialities or 'body parts'*
 - *The care provided is culturally appropriate – the organisation is run by Aboriginal people, employs Aboriginal or culturally aware non-Aboriginal people, and delivers care in a sensitive and inclusive way'*
 - *The sector delivers value for money – based on local knowledge, services are targeted at areas of local need'*
 - *The sector represents a major source of education and training, and ultimately of empowerment and cultural pride, for Aboriginal people'*
 - *The knowledge required to improve Aboriginal health is not innate; it must be acquired. The ACCHS (Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services) sector has developed a large pool of knowledge and expertise about Aboriginal Health issues, which enables it not only to deliver appropriate care, but also to advocate effectively for Aboriginal people in health.'*

Holistic approach

- The term 'holistic' is used in different ways including:
 - understanding the range of dimensions of wellbeing – physical, spiritual, cultural, emotional and social
 - acknowledging the range of social and economic factors impacting on child development, family functioning and community functioning
 - addressing a range of child, family and community needs simultaneously
 - using a 'one stop shop' or child and family centre from which a range of services can be provided and through which children and families can be linked to other services
 - working at individual, organisational, community and societal levels simultaneously
- Libesman (2004) suggests that 'Community satisfaction with service delivery will be increased by a holistic approach to healing, autonomy and flexibility in service provision, and the capacity to respond or tailor services to meet local needs.'

Partnership

- Partnerships between government and non government organisations and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non Indigenous organisations are necessary for effective service delivery of child and family support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- Libesman (2004) suggests that '*Good partnerships and meaningful collaboration must be founded upon inclusiveness and empowerment strategies. They will usually require government agencies to relinquish some power and to recognise the authority of the Indigenous community or organisation*'.

Partnership

- Concept of 'two ways learning' or 'both ways learning'

Sustainability

- Sustainability refers to building and maintaining service delivery and organisational capacity over time. It requires access to ongoing funding and effective governance.
- Sustainability involves *'... the establishment and continuity of activities, structures, processes, ways of working and services that can persist and endure. It is about the ongoing application of knowledge, skills and understandings to family and community issues and the maintenance of positive patterns of behaviour.'*

(Scougall, 2008)

Effective child and family support

- These seven themes should underpin the development, management, coordination and delivery of child and family support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families at both the local and whole of service system levels
- Collectively, they provide a foundation for effective child and family support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Further work is required in identifying and documenting effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategies, programs and models of service delivery that can be shared and considered in the local context