

Successful strategies to support **Aboriginal** and **Torres Strait Islander** participation in early childhood education and care

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled Multifunctional Children's Services and Aboriginal Children and Family Centres have been successful in implementing strategies to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation, and in engaging the whole family in bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children up strong in their culture.



SNAICC SPOKE TO FOUR SERVICES TO UNDERSTAND SOME OF THE STRATEGIES THEY USE TO ENGAGE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN IN THEIR EARLY YEARS SERVICES.



TJITJI TJAPU TJUTA

Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta is a child care centre in Cooper Pedy in South Australia, that offers long day care, allied health and family support services to the community. SNAICC spoke with centre director Lyn Gordon.

COOLABAROO NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE

Coolabaroo Neighbourhood Centre is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service located in the South East metropolitan region of Perth that has been providing a variety of services including early childhood education and care, before and after school care and vacation care to the Aboriginal community for over 30 years. SNAICC spoke with CEO Joanne Della Bona.

YAPPERA CHILDREN'S SERVICE CO-OPERATIVE

Yappera is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service located in Melbourne that runs a range of programs including long day care, kindergarten, school holiday programs and additional child and family services, and has been operating for over 30 years. SNAICC spoke with CEO Stacey Brown.

LITTLE NUGGETS EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

Little Nuggets Early Learning Centre operates in Halls Creek in the remote Kimberley region, providing a safe space for children to build relationships, learn and to be strong in their culture and identity. SNAICC spoke with centre manager Naomi Ivala.

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

At Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta Child Care Centre having strong relationships with families is paramount in having strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation. Staff at the centre greet every child and parent by name and know the names of all the other siblings, aunties, uncles and grandparents.

When our staff are out on the street, families stop and talk to them. We had a new mum the other day asking if I can help fill out her child's birth certificate. I think that's beautiful. That's huge. We have the trust from community and we are helping our community. – Lyn Gordon

Building great relationships with families is important at Little Nuggets Early Learning Centre. The centre just received funding to begin home visits, which will work towards breaking down barriers and enable staff to build connections with families before they even step into the centre. Naomi hopes that these visits will enable staff to reach those children and families who have slipped through the gaps.

The reception area at Coolabaroo is an open area with two staff members, and sometimes parents stay around that area just for social conversation. According to Joanne it's those conversations that build relationships and tighten the centre's connection to community. Morning and afternoon drop off and pick up time is conversation time, where parents or guardians are made to feel comfortable raising any issues that may be troubling them.

At Yappera, having the trust from parents and families is crucial to Aboriginal children's attendance. Stacey explains that if you don't have that element of trust with families, especially with those families who may be on the cusp of vulnerability, then they won't attend the service.

Families feel connected to Yappera because they know we are a culturally safe space, our service is like a family where children refer to staff as Aunties. – Stacey Brown

INCORPORATING CULTURAL ACTIVITIES INTO THE CENTRE

At Coolabaroo teaching language, culture and dance to the children is imperative, because it makes the service a culturally safe place to be. According to Joanne, parents and families are happy because the service is helping to bring back the loss of culture to the children in the metropolitan area, starting from when they are babies. Joanne explains that when the children go home and start singing in language parents get excited and feel part of their children's cultural development.

When Coolabaroo does not have a language and culture teacher employed, you can feel the difference with the centre and children, something is missing. – Joanne Della Bona

At Yappera, staff take the children to Darebin Parklands every Tuesday for bush kinder, where they learn about nature, talk to the ranger, explore the environment and learn Aboriginal stories. The children love being out in nature and being connected to Country. **Back in the foyer of the centre at Yappera there is a tree with children's names and mob on the leaves. This is the first thing children identify with when they come into the centre, so they know from a young age who they are and where they come from.**

There are lots of things we do to maintain and promote the culture at Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta. However, the most important thing we do is to make our Aboriginal families feel comfortable. – Lyn Gordon

PROVIDING A BUS SERVICE TO INCREASE ACCESS

At Yappera, the provision of a bus service is the most important means of engaging Aboriginal children and families in the service. Staff at Yappera identify when a child's attendance has varied, and contacts the family to see what their barriers to attendance are. If one of the barriers is transport, the centre will include the child in their pick up service.

According to Coolabaroo Director Joanne Della Bona, the bus service is the key means of bringing many of their children into the service. Joanne explained that without the bus service they would have very limited attendance numbers.

Lyn Gordon says that the bus service at Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta is a very important way for staff to develop relationships with the families that don't come into the centre, because it enables staff to have important conversations with parents about their child. **Each day a different staff member at Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta will go on the bus run so all staff can build up those vital relationships.**

MAKING CULTURE PROMINENT IN THE PHYSICAL SPACE

At Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta Child Care Centre we recently put the Aboriginal flag out the front, and the comments from community have been phenomenal. We identify right from the front door that we are Aboriginal and a safe and welcome space for Aboriginal children and families. – Lyn Gordon

There are a lot of Aboriginal murals around Coolabaroo, created by a local Aboriginal artist. Joanne explains that this makes Aboriginal families feel comfortable in the space, because the centre is clear about its Aboriginal identity.

Little Nuggets Early Learning Centre incorporates a lot of natural resources into the physical space, which builds on the children's creativity and makes the children really excited.

Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta Child Care Centre has also created a sensory garden with as many natural products as possible. The path is made of wood, there is a big water feature so the children can play with water and explore. There are lots of different types of fruit trees and the children pick and eat the fruit. The leftover fruit from the garden is sent home to families.

IMPORTANCE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STAFF

Stacey Brown explains that it's the fact that Yappera is Aboriginal community-controlled that makes Aboriginal children and families come to the service. **Because the majority of staff at Yappera are Aboriginal, as well as the family support workers, families feel connected to the service and know that it is a culturally safe setting for their children,** and that their children are learning in the context of culture, family and community. This is first and foremost what draws Aboriginal families into Yappera.

The key thing I've found over the decades in terms of engaging Aboriginal families is having an Aboriginal director and training up Aboriginal staff, because that's our connection to community. We get better attendance because all Aboriginal staff have families and by engaging them we reach out to additional people in the community.
– Joanne Della Bona

It is very important that the non-Indigenous staff don't just have a 'cultural understanding' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and traditions. They need to have more than that. They need to really understand Australia's history and the real impact of colonisation and how it has impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It's important to empower the parents that come into the centre, acknowledging them as First Nations people and as experts in their children.
– Naomi Ivala

OFFERING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Coolabaroo operates as a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service, and as a real hub for families, referring them to additional supports if needed. They have also just started up an emergency food relief service, ensuring that all families have enough food to feed their children. Some of the families at Coolabaroo have a lot going on in their lives that can be barriers to engaging with early learning, and by providing additional supports it helps them to deal with those things and engage with early learning.

Yappera runs lots of additional programs to support the Aboriginal community, including parent information

sessions. The centre recently hosted a men's day and had an overwhelming number of dads participate. They will also be hosting a women's day.

Tjitji Tjapu Tjuta Child Care Centre is more than just a child care centre, it's really a community centre. The director has found it valuable to send home health notices to families that she rewrites into friendlier language, because they can often be quite judgmental. **If a child really likes the food that was served that day, staff also send the recipe home to the family, explaining that their child loved the recipe and ate the whole lot, so they may like to try it out at home.**

