



Meeting the Needs of our Children

Effective Community Controlled Strategies
that Prevent and Respond to Family Violence

FACT SHEET 1

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CREDITS and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The image used on the cover of this document is one of a series created by students in year 10 at Moree Secondary College, Bathurst in 2011. The students participated in the 'LoveBites' Program - a program that teaches and informs students about Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Assault.

A component of the LoveBites Program requires students to develop artworks for distribution in the community about messages they would like to promote. The artwork used on the cover of this document is about 'Respect'. It conveys the students' desire to promote a positive element in a relationship... that you need to respect your culture, family, relationship and most importantly yourself to live a life free from violence.

The LoveBites Program was coordinated by Bathurst Women and Children's Refuge.



INTRODUCTION

This research project aims to increase awareness by service providers, researchers, policy makers and other decision makers of effective community controlled strategies targeted to children's needs that prevent and respond to family violence.

While there is evidence of the importance of local solutions to prevent and to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence, there is a gap in information on key principles from practice that are critical to effectively working with Aboriginal communities and reducing the incidence of family violence. There is also a gap in understanding what these principles mean and how they can be realised for outcomes for children.

This research project seeks to redress this gap through developing a Good Practice Principles and Process Framework. This will draw on available literature as well as experiences of service leaders on the ground around Australia. This fact sheet introduces this project and outlines key themes and findings from the literature review developed in its first stage on what we know about meeting the needs of our children through effective community controlled strategies to prevent and respond to violence. This is supplemented by a draft Good Practice Principles and Process Framework. This will be used in phase 2 consultations with services and refined. The project will also explore required supports to implement these principles. The outcomes of this research will be used to engage with Government stakeholders and diverse services on principles of good practice that most effectively support and ensure child safe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The major project's phases are:

- Literature review on family violence, including key principles for effective prevention of, and response to, family violence – with a specific focus on Aboriginal led programs and those which target children.
- Consultation phase 1 of individual interviews and focus group sessions with a sample group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services in each jurisdiction on current service delivery principles and practices, leading to a consultation report.
- Draft Good Practice Principles and Process Framework to identify the core criteria for a national framework for the design and delivery of services, programs, activities or initiatives that focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities who are at risk of or have experienced family violence.
- Consultation phase 2 to test and further develop draft Good Practice Principles and Process Framework through interviews and focus group sessions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and government stakeholders in each jurisdiction.
- Final Good Practice Principles and Process Framework, and accompanying accessible factsheets for services.

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Good practice principles guide the way our community controlled organisations deliver services and programs to ensure they are culturally responsive to our people at the local level. Without these we would be trying to meet the needs of everyone – government, community, families, mainstream services and others who are quick to criticise how we do things.

If we have a set of good practice principles isn't it a given that our service is better placed to produce long term sustainable outcomes for our people. This is what makes us unique and why we are here.

This project is necessary but we need something to contribute to rather than pick our brains first with no context to start from. It would be good if we were invited to have a look at the proposed principles and framework material once they are drafted. Then we could have one more say about what we think should/should not be in a national framework document.

*William Glenbar – Committee of Management member,
Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service*

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FINDINGS AND KEY THEMES

1. Children and family violence

Family violence against children is not unique to Australia or to the Indigenous people of a nation - it occurs in almost all cultural groups in every nation across the globe. It is very complex in nature and occurs for a combination of reasons.

The risk of home and family violence arises from the interaction between the quality of family relationships, and stress or pressure upon the family from external factors or from characteristics of family members. Dysfunctional family relationships and poor parent-child interactions have a critical bearing on whether children experience violence in the home. Other factors derive from the environment, as in the case of emergency situations, but may also be related to the availability of social networks, or loss of livelihood.

Violence is likely to result from a combination of personal, familial, social, economic and cultural factors, and the interrelationship amongst these factors can be difficult to disentangle. Moreover, some children are exposed to several types of violence from multiple sources over many years.

2. Research into family violence

A number of inquiries have occurred in each jurisdiction as well as at a national level into child abuse with some having a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Recommendations made by these inquiries have resulted in system changes to better identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are coming into contact with child protection and other services.

There is, however, a lack of published information about projects, programs and activities designed to prevent and respond to family violence, targeted to children. Whilst quantitative information (data) is included in many published reports, qualitative information is not.

Key performance indicators measuring success are based on the 'number of participants' rather than the 'quality of outcome/s' for each person. In many instances, qualitative measures and indicators are not built into or stated at the scoping or commencement phase. They are usually only identified when evaluation occurs.

3. Gaps and shortcomings in available data

The independent nature of databases and an unwillingness or inability to share information between different agencies has resulted in a patchwork picture being painted about the extent and impact of family violence on individuals, families and communities.

A lack of information sharing has made it easier for both victims and perpetrators to slip between the gaps and not receive the support, services or help they need when a family violence incident occurs. The extent of the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has not been fully documented to date although child protection data has improved in each jurisdiction.

Data and other information published in all jurisdictions is presented in whole of state/territory format rather than local government area format. This makes it difficult to clearly identify where there have been increases in the number of incidences of family violence related issues.

Improvements in data sharing and how the information is presented could result in more informed and strategic decisions being made at a policy and planning level between individual government agencies and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and agencies that have responsibility for providing on-ground service responses.

4. Non-disclosure

Family, community and cultural peer pressure towards victims of violence continues to hamper victims who feel powerless to take action to report family violence, assault and/or sexual assault.

Increasing the level of disclosure has been identified as one step in resolving the problems of violence that impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It was suggested that efforts to increase disclosure can only be effective within the context of broader efforts to break the cycles of intergenerational violence and cultures that establish violence as normative.

It was also suggested that solutions need to consider the role of men in changing attitudes to violence, ensuring that the right services and responses are in place to respond effectively to disclosures and that culturally appropriate supports are available for victims.

5. Place based responses

There is strong evidence that place based approaches that have been taken to examine, consider and understand the localised causes of family violence have resulted in more effective and culturally appropriate action being taken to respond to family violence.

It is evident that localised geographic factors and cultural practices must be factored into responses/actions taken to ensure that services, programs, activities and initiatives reflect and meet the needs of the local population – at an individual, family and community level.

6. Partnerships and referral arrangements

Partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream services have created and led to more options and choices being available to victims of family violence and strengthened local and regional responses.

Closer working relationships established where joined up service arrangements are in place have enabled two way learning processes to occur and resulted in more cohesive case management and referral responses for victims and perpetrators. Collaborative approaches to service delivery result in a reduction of service duplication, more efficient use of resources and the promotion of shared goals.

7. Community consultation and engagement

Strength based approaches involving participation by key local stakeholders and community members in discussion, planning and decision making processes has resulted in greater ownership of projects at all stages.

Projects which have actively involved community members to identify and define problems and issues in their own language and terms have facilitated greater initiative and support for actions. Involvement at this level has also encouraged and resulted in more sustainable outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Leadership opportunities have occurred where key people in different peer groups (youth, women, men and Elders) have instilled greater confidence to participate in activities as well as foster closer, more collaborative and respectful relationships within, amongst and between participants.

A number of projects, programs and activities undertaken have reported that engagement strategies work best when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are consulted about their needs, and services respond using holistic approaches that are delivered in a culturally sensitive manner.

8. Gaps in availability of services for children

There are only a few services in place at present in certain locations throughout Australia to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have experienced family violence.

The availability of these services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in communities located in rural and remote areas is limited mainly due to the higher costs that will be incurred to engage professionally qualified staff. Specifically, the higher the individual unit cost per person, the less likely a program, service or activity will be funded.

At the same time, the placement of services has also been determined by the availability of physical infrastructure on the ground. To some extent, the Australian government has taken specific action to address this issue by making funds available under the Closing the Gap initiative. These initiatives have not, however, included a focus on services for children and families experiencing family violence.

9. Cultural competency

The cultural competency of staff working in government and in mainstream services is frequently identified as a major factor in determining the successfulness or effectiveness a program or service response is.

Cultural awareness training programs are an essential cornerstone for building the cultural capacity of staff. However, these are not effective in the short, medium to longer term unless staff are supported and encouraged to participate in a structured program that has more than one or two sessions. Specifically, cultural competency and cultural proficiency can only occur over time, need to be reflected at all levels within an organisation and must be continuously monitored and updated to reflected changes which occur in relationships or situations.

10. Practice principles

A number of good practice case studies showcasing how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and activities respond to family violence have been published. Closer examination of these confirms that good practice principles are cited after they have been examined as opposed to confirming that they were set up and designed around existing and agreed good practices.

Information gathered during this research project found that some programs and services being delivered in each jurisdiction have

developed their own practice principles. Whilst there are some common themes occurring in each of these, the principles applied or stated appear to reflect the values and views of individual organisations.

Research undertaken by government, academics and practitioners into family violence have formulated and presented various ideas about what constitutes 'best practice' or 'good practice'. It is not clear from the published literature to what extent the proposed practice principles have been taken up by governments and their agencies in each jurisdiction or nationally.

Similarly, it was found that different approaches had been taken by governments in each jurisdiction when they were developing principles for their family violence policies, strategies and action plans. Some principles examined were written as a 'to do checklist' while others were more philosophical in nature. It was also evident that some governments had taken on board the findings from inquiries and task force reports to prepare their responses, new policies, strategies and action plans

A common theme appearing in a majority of existing principle statements related to:

- the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being a high priority;
- ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in identifying issues and possible solutions as well as being a part of the planning phase;
- ensuring that cultural perspectives and practices were embedded in all programs, services, activities and initiatives with a number directly or indirectly referring to the cultural competency of mainstream services;

There were, however, obvious inconsistencies in the wording and terminology appearing in each set of principles. Some documents made clear statements about the role of government while others did not make any reference to government or government agencies. It was also apparent where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders had had input into the development of some principles based on the words used and the descriptions accompany some principle and/or values statements.

Observations about the consistencies, inconsistencies, common themes and gaps in the principles that are currently in place are discussed in more detail in the literature review.

It is expected that this project will provide an opportunity for government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to come together to create and reach consensus about what should be included in a national Good Practice Principles and Process Framework to future projects, programs and activities.

MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information on this project please contact:

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