



# Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Children's Cultural Needs



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# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Cultural Needs

*“Cultural knowledge needs to be in the control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that our children's cultural needs are met”*

## Introduction

This project is based on the development of a cultural needs diagram which evolved from a research report into assessment tools that measured the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Not one size fits all VACCA, La Trobe, Take Two, 2008, unpublished). The report identified that one of the major gaps in current assessment tools is in the capacity to assess cultural connection and in building an evidence base on how disconnection impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's wellbeing. In the report the literature emphasised 'culture' as a strong factor in enhancing

wellbeing, without always clearly defining what 'culture' or more specifically, 'cultural work', means.

This resource attempts to 'unpack' what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people mean when they refer to culture, and cultural needs. Further, it has been observed that there may be some fear among those who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of 'doing the wrong thing' or uncertainty about 'where to start' when attempting cultural work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

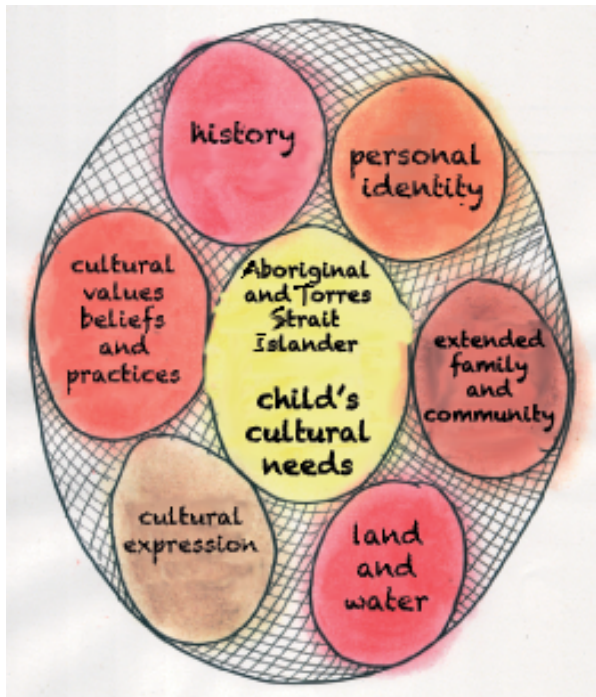
Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's connection to their culture requires a degree of cultural awareness. The desire to 'do no harm' may immobilise workers. However, a lack of awareness of the possibility of doing harm is an even greater risk.

Cultural work has many elements. The information outlined in many of the elements is represented in the cultural needs diagram(over page), relating to meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children around cultural connection.

## What do the domains of the cultural needs diagram mean?

The elements in the diagram are:

- Where you come from - family history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history
- Who you are - personal identity
- Who you belong to - family, extended family and community
- Where you belong - land and water
- What you do - participation, cultural expression
- What you believe - cultural values, beliefs and practices



Every child needs guidance through a map of their personal identity, in order to feel safe in their 'skin' and to feel good about who they are. In order to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's cultural needs, we need to understand that culture is a powerful force that helps to 'grow up' the child.



Elements of the Early Years Learning Framework

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, p. 10. © Commonwealth of Australia 2009.

## Using this Resource

The child's cultural needs diagram portrays different aspects of cultural connections that enhance a young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's sense of identity and wellbeing. The diagram should not be thought of as a formula or a recipe for approaching cultural connection, but rather a way of thinking and reflecting about what cultural work could be undertaken. It acknowledges the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

The child's cultural needs diagram was developed with consideration that some children may not be already culturally connected, i.e. those in the child protection system who may not be placed within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The diagram may also be useful for working with children who are well immersed in their culture as it may inform those who work with children and therefore support them to work in a more culturally appropriate way, for example; those involved in early childhood education and care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This resource aims to help those involved in mainstream childcare throughout Australia to understand some of the specific - but by no means all - cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Overall, the cultural needs diagram relates to Belonging, Being

and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) practice of cultural competence.

Each theme offers suggested links to the EYLF and we encourage services to explore links between the child's cultural needs diagram elements and the EYLF. There are some suggestions, questions and ideas to support you when reflecting on practice and how to support each individual child. Use the space provided under each theme to document your own notes and ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's cultural needs.



Painting





# History

*“History is the foundation to your connection to culture”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children develop a strong sense of wellbeing; and children become effective communicators
- Practices should respect and reflect cultural diversity
- Children learn about their history through cultural experiences

**‘History’ refers to where do you come from.**

**Examples of History as a cultural need:**

- When Elders and older people share history through story telling (oral history) with children
- History underpins who you are, and where you fit in
- Children are part of extended family and community, and need to know their family tree and where they come from, and the stories that go with their families
- Culture changes through generations, and cultural and spiritual beliefs evolve

- Culture is recycled through the passing of knowledge through the generations
- Culture is an ongoing cycle of events which children need to know about
- The impact of Australia’s history - pre and post colonisation - on culture and intergenerational trauma due to the effect on communities being unable to practice their cultural beliefs and values
- The importance of understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are survivors
- Our ancestors, extended family and community inform our culture too
- How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture fits with mainstream culture
- Children need to know the importance of living in a multi-cultural environment, respecting and reflecting on cultural diversity, whilst maintaining their own culture
- Children need to understand where they fit within their own community, state, country, and within the global picture so they understand the breaks in our connection and the importance of re-connecting.



Discovery and learning through cultural experience

## Reflective Practice

- Educators need to recognise the importance of cultural knowledge and its benefits for our children now and into the future
- Everybody has a responsibility and role to positively influence our children with cultural knowledge and experiences
- Positive cultural resources are needed to help our children understand and value their culture, such as resources written in both English and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

*I would like to*

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*It would be good to*

---

*I can*

---

*I will*

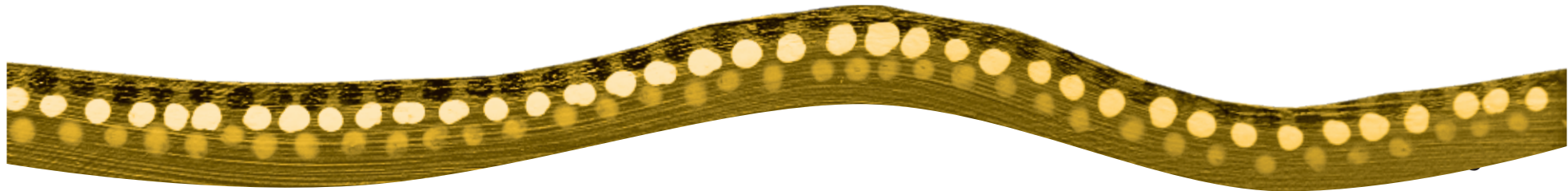
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*Who might help me with this?*

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## 'History' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and understanding of 'History' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child I'm working with?





# Personal Identity

*“Culture provides children with a strong sense of identity and belonging”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity
- Children develop a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children become confident and involved learners.

**‘Personal Identity’ refers to who you are.**  
**Examples of Personal Identity as a cultural need:**

- Belonging to a certain group/clan/family/community
- Being taught the knowledge, customs and languages of your group forms who you are within your group
- Identity plays a big part in understanding culture
- Culture is the foundation of our past, present and future. It helps inform our identity
- Children need their cultural identity acknowledged

- Culture makes a child feel special, unique and provides children with the inner strength to succeed
- Children can be a part of a number of cultures, and don’t have to live on their traditional land to identify with their culture.



Early learning



## Reflective Practice

- Children can identify with culture by having a 'yarn', going bush to connect with country, or going fishing
- Children need to feel culturally safe in groups.

## 'Personal Identity' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and understanding of 'Personal Identity' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child I'm working with?



*I would like to*

*It would be good to*

*I can*

*I will*

*Who might help me with this?*



## Extended Family and Community

*“Communities have a cultural responsibility and play a role in passing on stories and traditional child rearing practices. Parents do the pampering and nurturing, the uncles and aunties do the teaching, the nanna’s do the growling!”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with their family and community
- Children connect with and contribute to their world
- Partnerships
- Respect for diversity
- Continuity of learning and transitions.

**‘Extended Family and Community’ refers to whom you belong to. Examples of Extended Family and Community as a cultural need:**

- Children need to know who their family are and their family heritage
- Culture makes children strong, and parents stronger and resilient



Paper bark rafting

- All family members have a responsibility in encouraging and supporting children to practice their culture, including other children
- Children learn from many people within their family and community
- Everyone participates and has a role in building the child’s cultural knowledge and experience
- Extended family and community need to be supported and resourced to look after their children.

## Reflective Practice

- Communities would be happier and healthier if they were empowered to embrace their culture
- Educators have a responsibility in meeting children's cultural needs within services
- Services need to partner with families and share information about their culture
- Everyone has a responsibility to role model culture
- Culture needs to be integrated with education to balance the educational experience.

## 'Extended Family and Community' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and better understanding of 'Extended Family and Community' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child?



*I would like to*

*It would be good to*

*I can*

*I will*

*Who might help me with this?*





## Land and Water

*“Children need to understand the connection between the land, water, and the stars in the sky, and how their ancestors cared for the land and water from generation to generation”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children develop a strong sense of wellbeing.

### **‘Land and Water’ refers to where you belong. Examples of Land and Water as a cultural need:**

- Country is your land, your trees, your water – which is all within a child – their heart, soul and mind
- A child’s ‘place’ is sacred and helps them to feel strong, through the stories of their land, and/or water, and/or stars
- The connection to their land and/or water provides them with an opportunity to learn and form their own identity



Swimming on Paper Bark

- Culture is about beliefs, language, customs and how it is practiced
- The language group each person belongs to links them to their land and/or water
- If a child is not present on their land or sea, then it is difficult to talk about significant sites or places, for example secret or public sites, gender specific sites, or prohibitions around going to those sites
- Children, via their connection to their land and/or water, have an understanding of what they can do and what they should do, and what they can’t do
- Learning about the importance of sourcing food from land and water for survival
- A child’s sense of self can be enhanced through history, family and their environment.

## Reflective Practice

- For children who can't identify their traditional land or water, it is important for them to understand that they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and they will still need access to culture
- All communities within Australia have cultural stories pertaining to that particular community, be it desert, water, forest, swamp, sky...
- Story telling about land, water and the stars to help childrens interest in their culture, and their connection to it.

## 'Land and Water' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and understanding of 'Land and Water' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child I'm working with?



*I would like to*

*It would be good to*

*I can*

*I will*

*Who might help me with this?*



## Cultural Expression

*“Culture provides a child with safety to express themselves emotionally, physically and spiritually”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity
- Children develop a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children become confident and involved learners
- Children become effective communicators.

**‘Cultural Expression’ refers to what you do.**  
**Examples of Cultural Expression as a cultural need:**

- Culture gives children a sense of pride
- Culture provides children with a voice and empowers them
- It forms a child’s identity, regardless of their skin colour
- Traditional cultural practices, ceremonies and laws
- A child needs to ‘feel’ connected to their culture



Adapting the enviroment; the Aboriginal Children’s Centre

- Positive emotions are expressed through immersion in culture and increased well-being
- Culture protects children and helps them to thrive
- Having access to traditional cultural expression is comforting and culturally safe for children
- Modern events that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of cultural expression; cultural expression can take on many forms
- Culture has a visual representation so that the people that are from a particular family group identify the signature of your body paint or the ceremonies that you belong to
- Children are often told ‘scary’ stories as a means of practice to discipline them and prevent them from harm.



## Reflective Practice

- Culture can be demonstrated, is a primary way of teaching and is not always taught through verbal language. For example playgroups that tell stories by drawing footprints in the sand, like animal footprints
- It is important for children to write in their own language
- The importance of culture needs to be reflected in early childhood programs
- The importance of language programs within education settings and educators who are prepared to listen to children
- When cultural needs are being met, children are happier and more confident.

## 'Cultural Expression' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and understanding of 'Cultural Expression' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child I'm working with?



*I would like to*

*It would be good to*

*I can*

*I will*

*Who might help me with this?*



## Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices

*“Children are the absolute focus of, little treasure of, families”*

EYLF principles, practices and outcomes:

- Children develop a strong sense of identity; wellbeing
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children become confident and involved learners; effective communicators
- Respect for diversity
- Continuity of learning and transitions.

**‘Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices’ refers to what you believe and how you behave. Examples of Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices as a cultural need:**

- Singing and dancing – it takes everyone to prepare for it; dancing brings the stories ‘alive’
- Ceremonies that are performed on land and sea for significant life milestones
- Painting our body designs for ceremonies and dancing



Fire making

- Respect is a very important value
- Some people say few things, but teach culture by example
- Love, and the goodness from your heart, goodwill and strong spirit
- Totems, Dreamtime and Creation stories, story telling; Songlines; Spirituality; Weaving, and Art
- Games such as ‘Marngrook’ football are part of cultural heritage, and the participation in these events provides children with a meeting place and a sense of pride
- Celebrating the conception of children via ceremonies, and their conception totems and how these connect to their land and water and the responsibilities for these
- Traditional child rearing practices are safe and healthy
- Discipline is often carried out by a group of people, rather than just one person.

## Reflective Practice

- It is important to balance mainstream lifestyle with culture, children need an education but also have the right to learn through cultural practices and inclusion in events
- Culture needs to be practiced every day as a way to build life skills
- Participating in practices helps children to form a sense of achievement
- Children need to learn the importance of support and looking after their own mob
- Children have the right to learn any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language
- If children don't speak in language or participate in ceremonies, they need to feel that they can acknowledge them and feel connected to the values, beliefs and practices

- Children must be valued for who they are and respected
- Children need to be guided, rather than being prescriptive about their goals in life
- Children need to learn independence so that they can be part of the communal group; and learn all positive things from the group
- Children have the right to relax and play, and join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities - to be active participants.

## Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices' Reflective action

What else can I do to gain more knowledge and understanding of 'Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices' as a cultural need of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child I'm working with?

*I would like to*

*It would be good to*

*I can*

*I will*

*Who might help me with this?*



Ceremonial dance



# Reflective Practice

## Make your own version of the diagram

This resource aims to provide you with a starting point in your growing understanding of how to respect and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and their cultural needs.

This space is provided to encourage you to collect, value and validate your own experiences and reflections on the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who you work with.



### Key Notes:

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- .....
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## Resources and Contacts in the Community to help me:

Land councils:

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State Community events:

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Community controlled organisations:

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National events:

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Elders:

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Library:

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State reconciliation council:

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Art galleries:

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Local Community events:

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Other resources and contacts:

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# Glossary

These are brief explanations only of some general terms.

## ***Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander person***

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is someone who: a) is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; who b) identifies as an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander; and c) is accepted as such by the Indigenous community in which they live.

## ***Ancestral lore/Legends***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions and knowledge, generationally passed on within the group, from person to person by word of mouth; by the Keepers/Elders of that knowledge/traditions.

## ***Both ways***

Learning, expressing and teaching knowledge and ways of 'doing' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, customs, language, etc - while at the same time adopting the non-Indigenous ways. Also known as 'two ways'.

## ***Clan***

A named, localised descent group whose members have an historical, religious and genealogical identity and a territory defined by ritual and economic responsibilities.

## ***Community***

It is generally acceptable to use the term 'community' to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living within a particular geographical location while remaining mindful of the diversity of the people within that 'community'.

## ***Dreaming/Dreamtime Stories***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have their own stories that explain the origin of the world, themselves and all that make up the world that provided them with a strong and close association with the land for thousands of years. These stories gave unity and purpose to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies in the past and are important today in maintaining their identity.

## ***Land or Water***

A culturally defined area of land, sea, island, desert, rainforest, river, swamp, lake, or sky known by a traditional language name (see Traditional Custodian); areas of land or water individuals are connected to.



# Expressing Culture

Some general examples of words used throughout Australia.

There are many words and phrases in 'general' use by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders across the breadth of Australia. For example the people of Far North Queensland have their own variations, as do people in the top end of the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

In the spirit of reflective practice, use these examples as a starting point to discover more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and expressions of some of the children, families and communities that you work with.

## **Business**

Generally has a cultural meaning such as 'Sorry Business' (mourning period) or 'Men's / Women's Business' (secret ceremony).

**Example:** *They went back home for sorry business last week.*

## **Camp**

Home, person's house.

**Example:** *The camp feels empty without the kids.*

## **Country**

The place in which a person was born / comes from.

**Example:** *They returned to Country to be with their mob.*

## **Deadly**

Excellent, really too good, impressive.

**Example:** *You too deadly!*

## **Lingo**

Language.

**Example:** *I don't understand their lingo!*

## **Mob**

'My people' family / extended family / language group.

**Example:** *My mob are from...*

## **Shame**

Embarrassed / humiliated.

**Example:** *Shame, big time!*

## **Sis/Bruz/Cuz**

The use of the terms 'uncle', 'aunty', 'sis' (sister), 'bruz' (brother), 'cuz' (cousin) have wide and varied meanings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. These terms are generally used as a mark of respect, and endearment. They do not necessarily mean the person referred to is literally a brother, etc.

## **True**

Is that right? Really?

**Example:** *True, you moving back Country?*

## **Yarn**

Talk, friendly chat.

**Example:** *Let's catch up for a yarn later?*



# Resources

This is a brief list, there is much more to explore!

## Internet

- Home interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters: [www.hippyaustralia.org.au](http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au)
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care: [www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au)
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: [www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au)
- IndigiTUBE: [www.indigitube.com.au](http://www.indigitube.com.au)
- Australian Government Indigenous Portal: [www.indigenous.gov.au](http://www.indigenous.gov.au)
- National Congress of Australia's First People: [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)
- HREOC: <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/>
- Indigenous Australian servicemen - Australian War Memorial: [www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous.asp)
- <http://www.healingfoundation.org.au>

- Kevin Rudd's 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples' transcript: [www.aph.gov.au/house/rudd\\_speech.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/rudd_speech.pdf)

## DVD

- The First Australians (SBS): [www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians](http://www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians)
- Samson and Delilah: [www.samsonandelilah.com.au](http://www.samsonandelilah.com.au)
- Bran Nue Dae: [www.brannuedaemovie.com](http://www.brannuedaemovie.com)
- Ten Canoes, Dir. Rolf DeHeer: [www.vertigoproductions.com.au/10canoes.htm](http://www.vertigoproductions.com.au/10canoes.htm)
- Rabbit Proof Fence, Dir. Philip Noyce
- Women of the Sun (4 part ABC series)
- Lousy Little Sixpence, 1983
- Long Time Coming, Targeted Family Support Service: CAAC
- So Now You're a Dad: Indigenous Men Connecting with their Babies
- Ngartunna Waiendi: Babies on the Move: SA Health
- Stay Strong, Strong and Deadly

- Sorry, Fraynework Multimedia, 94999172 [www.fraynework.com.au](http://www.fraynework.com.au)
- Sorry Proof Country, Indigenous Australian Productions 2004
- Connecting our mob our voices, our future, City of Melbourne
- Ngaweeyan Thookayngat voice of children, VACCA [www.vacca.org](http://www.vacca.org)
- The Apology to the Stolen Generations, Reconciliation Australia, Ph: 02 6273 9200
- The Dreaming; 6 DVD set of Children's stories: SNAICC/Aboriginal Nations, 2004

## Radio

- National Indigenous Radio Service: [www.nirs.org.au](http://www.nirs.org.au)
- Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association: [www.teabba.com.au](http://www.teabba.com.au)
- Gadigal Radio Service (Sydney): [www.gadigal.org.au](http://www.gadigal.org.au)
- 3KND 1503AM: [www.3knd.org.au](http://www.3knd.org.au)
- SBS radio Aboriginal Podcasts: [www.sbs.com.au/podcasts/yourlanguage/aboriginal](http://www.sbs.com.au/podcasts/yourlanguage/aboriginal)

## Television

- Message Stick:  
[www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick)
- Living Black:  
[www.sbs.com.au/shows/livingblack](http://www.sbs.com.au/shows/livingblack)
- National Indigenous Television:  
[www.nitv.org.au](http://www.nitv.org.au)
- ABC Online Indigenous:  
[www.abc.net.au/indigenous](http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous)
- Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association: [www.caama.com.au](http://www.caama.com.au)
- Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association: [www.teabba.com.au](http://www.teabba.com.au)

## Publications

- Early Years Learning Framework Fact Sheet SNAICC 2012
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, *in Child Friendly Language*, Poster; Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation Inc., to purchase or download a free poster go to <http://www.childrensweekwa.org.au/about-childrens-week/rights-of-the-child-posters/>
- National Aboriginal Early Childhood Project [www.det.wa.edu/k12resources/earlychildhood](http://www.det.wa.edu/k12resources/earlychildhood)

## My Resources:



## PUBLISHER

SNAICC Resource Service



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