

Assessing, training and recruiting Indigenous carers

**This project was conducted as a collaboration between the Australian Institute of
Family Studies and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care**



Australian Government

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SNAICC

National Child Protection Clearinghouse

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse has operated from the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995. The Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of its response to child abuse and neglect. The Clearinghouse collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care.

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The information in this booklet is based on retrospective, oral accounts. Participants were given the opportunity to check the accuracy of the information and provide feedback. The information was accurate to the best of the authors' knowledge at the time of publication.

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc. (SNAICC) is the national non-government peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The SNAICC Resource Service (SRS) works across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and children's services sector to produce and distribute practical resources and information.

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**Stronger Families and
Communities Strategy**

An Australian Government Initiative

Assessing, training and recruiting Indigenous carers

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are almost five times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care compared with non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007).¹ Yet there is a serious shortage of culturally appropriate placements to accommodate them. Even with intensive recruitment efforts, professionals have been unable to recruit sufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers to meet the demand.

Project background

Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers

In 2005, the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, was commissioned by the Australian Council for Children and Parenting's (ACCAP) Children at Risk Committee, to conduct:

- A literature review titled *The Recruitment, Retention and Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foster Carers: A Literature Review*. (Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005); and
- Interviews and focus groups with professionals from government, non-government and Indigenous organisations, as well as carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Indigenous young people in care, titled *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People*. (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).²

In the interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to talk about what they thought were barriers to recruiting, assessing, training carers and supporting carers and young people, and the strategies that worked well. The project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA).

Professionals, carers and young people told us of barriers and gaps in program and service delivery, and identified ineffective practices such as culturally inappropriate assessment tools and training programs. The participants highlighted the need to develop more effective and culturally relevant recruitment, assessment and training strategies. Carers also told us they needed more support in a range of areas such as dealing with state and territory child protection departments, and caring for children with increasingly complex needs. Young people told us they wanted more connection with their family and communities while in care. Importantly, the participants also identified examples of promising practice in the field, where effective and culturally relevant strategies had been developed to overcome barriers in these areas.³

Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs

In response to the needs identified by the participants, and guided by the examples of promising practice they shared with us, FaCSIA granted funding to AIFS to extend the program to profile promising practices in the sector (this phase of the project is referred to as *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs*). The term 'promising' describes programs that have been successful in meeting their goals and objectives, but which have not necessarily been externally evaluated. While a few of the profiled programs had been externally evaluated, the majority had not, and the term 'promising' applies to the collection of organisations profiled for this project.

In mid-2006, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in collaboration with SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care), profiled promising programs and services across Australia in order to disseminate the information to other professionals in the sector.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2007). *Child Protection Australia 2005–06*, AIHW, Canberra: Author.

² Summary papers prepared from the reports are available on the NCPC website www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/summarypapers/menu.html

³ The term 'children' is used in this booklet to refer to both children and young people. Where programs and services directly relate to older children, the term 'young people' is used.

The booklets

The findings from Phase 2 are presented in four individual booklets. Each booklet covers a theme in relation to out-of-home care with profiles of successful programs and services relevant to that theme. Where practicable, profiles are accompanied by practice models relating to that theme.

In booklet 1, *Characteristics of promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services*, common characteristics of the programs and services that we profiled are outlined. These cover two areas: organisational practice and service delivery.

In booklet 2, *Assessing, training and recruiting Indigenous carers*, specific programs that assess and train Indigenous general and kinship carers are profiled, and a model of how successful organisations have conducted effective carer recruitment, based on the findings from Phase 1, is also included.

In booklet 3, *Comprehensive support for Indigenous carers and young people*, programs that offer comprehensive support for carers and young people are profiled in detail.

In booklet 4, *Indigenous responses to child protection issues*, programs that collaborate with child protection services to enhance culturally relevant responses to child protection issues are profiled.

Characteristics of Promising Indigenous Out-of-Home Care Programs and Services

Section 1: *Organisational practice*

Section 2: *Service delivery*

A common characteristic of the organisations profiled was that they take a ‘ground up’ rather than a ‘top down’ approach to service development and delivery by consulting with community leaders. Their service provision is driven by the ongoing needs of their communities or client groups. This was true for carer support programs, training programs and programs that supported young people in care.

Professionals told us of the importance to them of strengthening and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and most programs we profiled incorporated strategies to achieve this. Professionals empowered communities and client groups by: advocating on their behalf, providing communities or client groups with knowledge and skills, and by building connections between communities or client groups so they could benefit from shared experiences and a common purpose.

The successful organisations profiled had similar management styles. They had strong leadership, were clear on what their core business was and operated within the boundaries of this, and took a collaborative, teamwork approach with staff within a flat organisational structure. In these organisations, staff felt valued, had autonomy over their program delivery and had input into the organisation’s decision-making processes.

Successful managers told us that developing strong relationships with external stakeholders was the key to getting the department or other organisations on board to fund or approve projects. Professionals told us that taking a confrontational or aggrieved approach rarely got them what they wanted. Instead, effective professionals arm themselves with facts or information when engaging in negotiations. This helps them gain the support of government departments and other organisations and secure funding for new or ongoing projects.

An outcome of establishing effective relationships with stakeholders was that staff became spokespeople for their organisation in the wider community. Through lobbying, advocacy and speaking at forums and meetings, the organisation and its staff become known to external stakeholder groups, which in turn may increase their profile and influence. This has the benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of introducing more culturally appropriate ways of addressing child protection and out-of-home care issues, as well as bringing more cultural awareness into the mainstream Australian community.

Assessing, Training and Recruiting Indigenous Carers

- *Step by Step* – Aboriginal assessment tool (Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies, in collaboration with the Department of Community Services, Aboriginal Services Branch, Sydney, NSW)
- *Yarning about Kids with Yorganop Carers* – Indigenous-specific training program for general and kinship carers (Yorganop, Perth, WA)

- *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* – Indigenous-specific training program for kinship carers (Department for Child Protection, formerly the Department for Community Development, Fostering Services, Perth, WA)

Comprehensive Support for Indigenous Carers and Young People

Comprehensive support for carers

- *Aboriginal Carers Network* – Carer support groups (Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat, Sydney, NSW)
- *IFACSS* – Comprehensive support service for kinship and general carers (Indigenous Family and Child Support Service, Brisbane, Qld)

Supporting children and young people in out-of-home care

- *Keeping Kids Connected* – Short-term emergency placements with non-Indigenous carers (Aboriginal Family Support Services, Adelaide, SA)
- *Panyappi* – Mentoring service for Indigenous young people (Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth and Family Services, Adelaide, SA)
- *Marungbai* – Leaving and after care service for Indigenous young people (Great Lakes Manning Aboriginal Children's Services, Taree, NSW)

Indigenous Responses to Child Protection Issues

- *Lakidjeka* – Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Melbourne, Vic)
- *RAATSICC* – Remote community response to child protection issues (Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Cairns, Qld)
- *Safe Families* – Family-inclusive approach to addressing child protection issues (Tangentyere Shire Council, Alice Springs, NT)

Workshop materials from the booklets

A workshop for professionals based on the material in the booklets has been developed to enable professionals to share their experiences, and to explore the suggestions outlined in the booklets. (See Butler, N. & Higgins, J.R. (2007). *Promising Practices in Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Carers and Children: A Workshop for Professionals*. Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care). For more information on the workshops contact the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care on (03) 9489 8099.

The overlapping nature of the themes

An important finding from the consultations was the overlapping nature of recruitment, assessment, training and support programs and services for enhancing outcomes for carers, children and young people. For example:

- Quality training programs consistently include broader carer support functions such as a telephone support service and advocacy with government departments on behalf of carers;
- Carers who receive good support or and training from their organisations often bring potential carers to the organisation, thereby facilitating the recruitment of new carers;
- Carers who are appropriately trained and resourced develop skills, knowledge and confidence in their caring role. This leads to improved outcomes for children and young people in their care;
- Children and young people whose needs are being met through culturally appropriate placements with well-resourced carers, or by programs designed to support their needs, demonstrate increased wellbeing such as improved school attendance, a reduction in problem behaviours, and an enhanced sense of identity and cultural connectedness.

Assessing and training Indigenous carers – Messages from professionals and carers

In *Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers*, participants told us that there was a need to develop assessment and training procedures that reflect an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture, community values and parenting practices, as well as the disadvantaged social and material circumstances that characterise many Indigenous people's lives. Participants believed this would be an important step in enhancing the recruitment of more Indigenous carers.⁴

Participants identified four promising approaches to culturally appropriate assessment:

- Using a flexible approach to assessment criteria;
- Adapting assessment tools to reflect an Indigenous communication style;
- Harnessing community knowledge in the assessment process;
- Collaboration between organisations and the department in the approval process.

In relation to training, participants told us they wanted:

- Training in understanding how state and territory departments work;
- Training that is timely and culturally relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers' lives;
- Cultural sensitivity training for non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children.

From *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs*, the following three profiles outline assessment and training approaches that have been developed specifically for Indigenous carers, and carers of Indigenous children.

- *Step by Step* – Aboriginal assessment tool (Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies, in collaboration with the Department of Community Services, Aboriginal Services Branch, Sydney, NSW)
- *Yarning about Kids with Yorganop Carers* – Indigenous-specific training program for general and kinship carers (Yorganop, Perth, WA)
- *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* – Indigenous-specific training program for kinship carers (Department of Community Development, Fostering Services, Perth, WA)

The programs reflect characteristics of successful assessment and training approaches that were identified by participants in *Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers*. The first program, *Step by Step*, outlines an Indigenous-specific assessment tool that can be used by government and non-government organisations and adapted for use in other jurisdictions throughout Australia. The second program, *Yarning about Kids with Yorganop Carers*, was developed to assess and train both general and kinship carers. The third program, *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong*, is an assessment and training program designed specifically for kinship carers who may have already been caring for their related children prior to statutory orders being issued.

⁴ (see Higgins, D.J., Bromfield, L.M. and Richardson, N. (2005). *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies).

What works when assessing and training Indigenous carers

Culturally-appropriate assessment tools work best when staff:

- Allow time to build engagement and trust
- Use story telling rather than lists of direct questions
- Don't ask questions when the information has been gathered elsewhere (e.g., a training session; informal communication with potential carer)
- Draw on community knowledge about the potential of a carer/family to provide care
- Assess for the same general competencies as for non-Indigenous carers
- Also assess for:
 - Active participation in Aboriginal communities
 - Demonstration of an understanding of Aboriginal kinship systems
 - Knowledge of services for Aboriginal children and young people
 - An understanding of the impact of past welfare practices on Aboriginal people

Training programs for Indigenous carers work best when staff:

- Deliver the material in a shared learning environment (e.g., learning circles, yarning)
- Draw on the knowledge of experienced carers who participate in training sessions
- Are flexible in training content and schedules so as to be responsive to the needs of carers
- Build trusting, ongoing relationships with carers
- Acknowledge and value carers' knowledge and skills

Step by Step Aboriginal assessment tool

Assessment for carers of Indigenous children, Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies, Sydney, NSW

The *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool is an assessment package that has been developed by the Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies (ACWA) in collaboration with the Department of Community Services' (DoCS), Aboriginal Services Branch in Sydney, New South Wales.

Step by Step is a process where assessors and applicants work together to come to a decision as to whether an applicant is suitable to be a foster carer. *Step by Step* is designed to complement the *Aboriginal Foster Care Training Package*, which sets out nine modules to enable Indigenous foster carers to explore the challenges and rewards of caring. The assessment tool was developed by Louise Mulroney of ACWA in collaboration with the New South Wales Department of Community Services' Aboriginal Services Branch.

The *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool is mostly suited for Aboriginal cultures, reflecting the Indigenous population of New South Wales, although it provides guidance as to how it could be used when assessing Torres Strait Islander people who are applying to be foster carers.

The aim of the assessment tool is to have quality assessment tools that are effective in an Aboriginal context. The package is based on the mainstream *Step by Step* assessment tool that was published in 2003.

The *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool differs from other mainstream assessment tools in two important ways: it assesses a carer's capacity to raise an Indigenous child in an Aboriginal cultural environment, and it allows an assessor to use an Indigenous communication style of trust building and yarning, rather than direct, closed questions. While suggested questions are included in the package, the focus is on listening and gathering information that allows the assessor to make an informed decision as to whether an applicant has the necessary qualities to care for an Aboriginal child or young person.

The development of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous packages has been an extensive and comprehensive process. Both are able to be adapted in other states and territories, with limited modification, by government departments and non-government organisations throughout Australia.

Getting the *Step By Step* Aboriginal assessment tool up and running

2003	Mainstream <i>Step by Step</i> package published for use with non-Indigenous carers throughout NSW
2003–05	Extensive community consultation and revision of Aboriginal assessment tool
2005	Mainstream <i>Step by Step</i> package evaluated externally
2006	<i>Step by Step</i> Aboriginal assessment tool piloted throughout NSW
2006	Victorian version of mainstream <i>Step by Step</i> released
2007	<i>Step by Step</i> Aboriginal assessment tool commenced usage

Developing an assessment tool from scratch

When staff at ACWA began to develop the mainstream assessment tool they looked as existing material, but did not find any Australian resources that focus on competencies required by carers.

'When we got to [developing an] assessment tool we didn't see it in existence anywhere else. We asked ourselves, "What are the competencies we're looking for? How do we find and record these competencies and be comfortable at the end of the assessment process that this person can care appropriately?"'

The mainstream version of *Step by Step* became available in 2003 and rapidly became the preferred tool for use within NSW. An evaluation of the package confirmed its effectiveness in making decisions about the suitability of potential foster carers. The Victorian version was released in 2006.

Adapting the mainstream Step by Step assessment

Aboriginal professionals were interested in administering an assessment package like *Step by Step* and had started adapting it for their usage. ACWA was given funds to coordinate a project to produce one consistent Aboriginal version of *Step by Step*.

Consultations with Aboriginal communities

From 2003 to 2005, three rounds of consultations with Aboriginal communities throughout New South Wales were carried out to develop the Indigenous version of the assessment tool. Five Aboriginal services then conducted 20 individual assessments to trial the assessment tool. The Department of Community Services also established an Aboriginal reference group comprising departmental representatives from different regions who met every two months. The feedback from the consultations, trials and reference group meetings directed the development of the current assessment tool.

‘We have added things from the feedback, and if we review the mainstream package it will probably include many of these.’

Similarity in general competency needs

While developing a culturally appropriate assessment tool was paramount, it was still necessary to conduct the same rigorous assessment for a carer’s general competencies.

General competencies

Feedback from consultations indicated that the same four general competencies needed to be demonstrated for Aboriginal carers as for non-Indigenous carers:

- Personal readiness to be able to provide care;
- Capacity to be a team player;
- Ability to promote the positive development of a child;
- Capacity to keep the child safe.

‘If you look through the mainstream and Aboriginal assessments, apart from [the Indigenous-specific competencies] there isn’t a lot of difference, and that is after a huge amount of consultation. This was after asking if people wanted to scrap this and do one that was completely Aboriginal-specific. Did they want to make huge changes to this, or did they want to make some changes? The feedback, from three different sets of consultations over two to three years, was consistently, “A lot of it is brilliant but there are some specific changes that need to be made.”... We were surprised as people were saying, “As long as the trust and engagement stuff was there, we need to find out the same stuff as for mainstream carers.” We’ve got the same four core competencies.’

Additional Indigenous-specific competencies

It was identified in the feedback that potential carers also needed to be assessed for an additional Indigenous-specific competency to ensure an Aboriginal child would be cared for in a culturally safe manner.

Moving away from direct, closed assessment questions

Feedback indicated it was important to adopt an appropriate communication style. Moving away from a direct,

intrusive questioning style to a more sensitive approach was something that was valued by Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers.

'It's about moving away from mainstream lists and lists of questions that were very intrusive. That was our starting point... We've moved from a rigid and structured form of questioning... [This tool] was developed with knowledge about how people respond well and we learned that people don't respond well when they are hit with a whole lot of questions.'

The different communication style means that the assessor is focused on the information they need to find out, rather than asking a certain question. In this way assessors are able to determine whether the person meets each of the criteria.

'Your starting point is not, "What are the questions?" but "What information do we need to find out?" So even in the mainstream assessment you're free to have conversations with people but the tool gives you prompts.'

Using appropriate language to gather relevant information

Another suggested change from the mainstream assessment was using language in ways that would draw out relevant information.

'There were also changes around language and recognising people's biases about caring for Aboriginal kids and if they had issues around this you would be able to recognise that early in the piece.'

The need for culturally-specific case scenarios

One significant difference between the mainstream and Indigenous packages is that the case scenarios in the mainstream package were not relevant to Aboriginal family situations. So while there was a need for both packages to test the same competency principles, the Indigenous package uses case scenarios that are relevant to Aboriginal culture and the lifestyles of Aboriginal families.

The need for carer-centred assessment tools

Staff have found that the *Step by Step* assessment approach is appropriate for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers because it is more focused on the needs of the carers rather than the needs of the department or organisation.

'So many of the things Aboriginal people didn't like about the mainstream assessment tools, non-Aboriginal people didn't like either. It really highlighted how poor our general assessment tools were that nobody liked them and we weren't sure that we were getting the information we needed at the end of it. This is a mile away from other assessment tools. It's coming from community people, not just [departmental] people.'

Indigenous assessment tools may become mainstream

Staff felt that the Indigenous tool may actually end up as the mainstream assessment tool as suggestions for improvement that were made by Indigenous people were qualities that would be valued by non-Indigenous carers as well.

'I think it will be interesting to see what happens with these packages. I would be using the Indigenous one with non-Indigenous applicants. They might become mainstream because [we've] learned from the mistakes of the mainstream package, and [the Indigenous package] has a cultural component which you can use [or not use] if you need to.'

The assessors

Non-Indigenous assessors need to have cultural competency

The assessment tool is designed to be used by a team of two assessors. Due to the shortage of Indigenous staff, one person in the assessment team may not be Aboriginal. Non-Indigenous assessors need a level of cultural competency before administering an assessment to potential Indigenous carers.

‘Two of the things that a non-Aboriginal person would really have to have are community knowledge about what’s happening within that community, and an understanding of the impact of policies that have affected Aboriginal people such as the Stolen Generation.’

Non-Indigenous carers need knowledge of the current impact of past welfare practices

The importance of non-Indigenous assessors having knowledge of the impact of past welfare practices on Aboriginal people before assessing a potential carer of Indigenous children is highlighted when staff conduct training with non-Indigenous carers.

‘In the training we show the *Bringing them Home* video, and some [non-Indigenous participants] felt they were living a lie and this was hidden from them. It was an eye-opener for people who would open their doors up to Aboriginal kids because they wanted to do a service, but they certainly didn’t know the impact of those policies and practices that affected Aboriginal people and their views changed about Aboriginal people... It generated so much discussion. It really changed the non-Aboriginal people’s views about Aboriginal people.’

Indigenous assessors may have community knowledge

Aboriginal assessors may have a strong involvement and connection with the same community as potential assessors. Such a situation may be of benefit because assessors will have existing knowledge of the capacity of a potential carer family. This prior knowledge may mean the assessor does not need to ask the applicant directly about issues they already know.

How to assess Indigenous carers

The Step by Step Aboriginal assessment tool

The assessment and training package for registering new carers involves a 13-step process. The package is designed so that:

- Assessment and training can occur concurrently;
- Assessment can be completed prior to training; or
- Assessment can be undertaken following training.

The assessment process

The assessment process involves the following steps as the potential carer moves from the enquiry and application stages, through to becoming a registered carer.

1	Contact	A potential carer contacts the foster care agency and the enquiry is registered.
2	Information pack	The potential carer is sent an information pack.
3	Registration of interest	The potential carer completes a 'Registration of Interest' form.
4	Information session	The potential carer and their family attend an information exchange session. Agency workers and an experienced carer, if appropriate, will be in attendance.
5	Carer application	The potential carer completes an 'Application to Become a Foster Carer' form.
6	Training	The potential carer completes a training course.
7	Assessment	The potential carer is assessed by the foster care agency.
8	Checks	The potential carer undergoes checks, including health, accommodation, background and criminal record, and personal references.
9	Decision	Application is either approved or not approved.
10	Carer agreement	If application is approved: Carer signs a 'Code of Conduct' agreement. If application is not approved: The applicant may accept the decision or can appeal.
11	Matching	A child or young person is matched with the family. The family decides whether to accept the placement.
12	Ongoing training	The agency provides ongoing training.
13	Ongoing support	The agency provides ongoing support.

The assessment tool

The assessment tool is a written document outlining the competencies a potential carer is required to demonstrate. The assessment encourages a conversational style of gathering information about a competency. An 'Assessment Record' section of the tool includes both a 'checklist' of tick boxes against each competency and spaces to note down information provided by the applicant so that the assessor can determine whether the potential carer has the capacity to provide appropriate care of the child.

Assessing for four general competencies

The *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool is based around four general competencies:

- A. **Personal readiness** to be able to provide care – not bringing baggage that would cut across their ability to take care of children;
- B. Capacity and willingness to be a **team player** so they are not just taking the child and going home, but recognising they are part of an agency system and have to work with the department;
- C. Capacity and willingness to promote the **positive development of a child**;
- D. Ability to **keep children safe** – having knowledge around sexual assault and demonstrating safe practices in their own family situations.

Assessment process

Competency sessions B through D (above) begin with an opportunity to review how the assessment is going so far for the potential carer and the assessor. This gives both the assessor and the potential carer time to develop a relationship and gather information.

Assessing for Indigenous-specific competencies

The Aboriginal assessment package differs from the mainstream package in four key areas:

1. It assesses whether applicants can demonstrate Aboriginal cultural competency and whether they have the capacity and willingness to promote a positive Aboriginal identity.

This competency has been incorporated into general competency 'C', 'promoting the positive development of a child or young person', and includes:

- Identifying ways of encouraging children and young people to take pride in their own cultural identity by demonstrating active participation in Aboriginal communities; demonstrating an understanding of Aboriginal kinship systems; and demonstrating knowledge of organisations providing services to Aboriginal children and young people;
 - Describing opportunities for children and young people to participate in and learn about their family, community, culture, religious and language heritage;
 - Identifying the importance of sharing and safely storing memorabilia during the placement;
 - Describing opportunities for children and young people to develop strengths, interests and abilities.
2. Language throughout the assessment is accessible and informal.
 3. Material relating to the context of foster care for Aboriginal children and young people is explored, such as:
 - An understanding of the impact of the Stolen Generation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today;
 - The loss and grief experienced by Aboriginal communities as a result of past government practices;
 - Family functioning and kinship systems within Aboriginal communities;
 - Culturally respectful and sensitive approaches to gathering information;
 - Understanding of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in child protection legislation;
 - Being informed about relevant community dynamics in relation to the out-of-home placement of Indigenous children.

4. Sections on strategies for using the tool in a culturally appropriate way, including:
 - Engaging and building trust with Aboriginal applicants;
 - Exploring sensitive topics such as conflict and sexual abuse;
 - Using the questions in *Step by Step* as ‘prompts’ for conversation rather than a formal interview structure;
 - Working with applicants who are not literate;
 - Appropriate use of information already known to the assessor about the applicant because of existing community contact.

Progressive assessment of competency

As the assessor works through each competency to be assessed, they assign a grading of ‘Green-Go!’, ‘Orange-Slow!’ or ‘Red-Stop!’ against each one.

‘Green-Go!’ indicates that the person can meet the competency, and this is recorded on the Assessment Record. The assessor then moves on to the next item.

‘Orange-Slow!’ indicates that the potential carer may need further development for that competency such as training, reading, or thinking through an issue. Examples of issues that may warrant an ‘Orange-Slow!’ grading include:

- Inconsistencies or conflicting information in the potential carer’s story;
- Gaps in their history they are not willing to talk about;
- Inappropriate responses to a specific issue;
- Preoccupation of the applicant with a particular issue;
- Non-verbal information such as body language or lack of emotional affect.

Six steps for exploring ‘Orange-Slow!’ concerns include:

- *Naming* the specific concern and ensuring it is relevant to providing foster care;
- *Exploring* the information provided such as the context, or any cultural, gender or class understandings that may have obscured the meaning of the information given;
- Asking for *additional examples* to find out if the information is part of a pattern or isolated and unlikely to impact on the person’s capacity to foster;
- Asking the applicant for *their view* about the issue and its possible impact on a child in care;
- Seeking *information from other sources* (e.g., from those who know the applicant);
- Considering whether the concern is due to a *lack of knowledge* or experience that may be addressed through training.

After exploring ‘Orange-Slow!’ concerns the assessor may determine that: the issue has been satisfactorily resolved and the carer is graded a ‘Green-Go!’ for that competency; there are some continuing concerns that may be addressed in later sessions; or the potential carer does not demonstrate the competency and should be graded a ‘Red-Stop!’.

‘Red-Stop!’ indicates that the person does not have the necessary qualities to care for an Indigenous child. This may include expressing racist or judgmental views, having anger-management issues or punitive parenting styles such as the routine use of physical punishment. A ‘Red-Stop!’ grading may also be given if a potential carer demonstrates:

- Significant inconsistencies in factual information;
- Significant inconsistencies between information given by the potential carer and their emotional response; or

- Demonstration of grandiose or incredible information that is not supported by evidence.

Three steps for dealing with 'Red-Stop!' issues:

- Raise the issue with the applicant and indicate why their application would not be approved;
- Provide the applicant with *optional strategies* to address significant issues and (if appropriate) assure the applicant they can reapply when they have addressed the issue;
- Invite the applicant to complete a 'Withdrawal of Application' form. The assessor should *indicate* on the form *the competency that was not met* and the basis on which a reapplication would be considered (if applicable).

Assessment style

'Yarning'

Using a yarning style of gathering information enables the assessor to explore the potential carer's history in a way that feels less confronting than mainstream assessment tools. The assessment process engages the potential carer in a conversation about a scenario. The potential carer is encouraged to discuss their views on a subject or demonstrate how they would respond to a certain situation. The more sensitive, yarning style of gathering information promotes trust and engagement between assessor and potential carer.

'Engagement and trust issues come early and we work on those early in the piece in terms of them feeling comfortable about talking to us as assessors.'

While the yarning style of gathering information may take longer, potential carers are more comfortable in providing the necessary information.

'It recognises that you might have to spend longer with a person before you start, but once the process starts you're doing the same thing, collecting data through conversations.'

The assessor is responsible for collecting the information

Using a more informal style of information-gathering places more responsibility on the assessor to determine the carer's suitability by engaging them in stories to gain information.

'It's not so informal that you could forget to talk about some things altogether. If in the yarns you realise at the end of it we didn't actually talk about that, you'll see you haven't talked about it because when you fill in the boxes, you'll pick it up. [If you] didn't hear anything about talking about the kids' feelings, you go back and say "How do I have a conversation about that?" You're driven by what you're looking for, not what the questions are. There are questions to ask if you think there are issues about that, such as "Have you tried to have kids in the past?" "What's your feeling about that?" If they're freezing up and not talking about that, you think, "Well here's something we might have to talk about." You don't go digging for dirt; you hear the stories.'

Drawing on information already available

If the information has been provided elsewhere, such as at another point in the assessment or in training sessions, the assessor does not have to cover that area again.

'The assessor has to find evidence of whether the person has competencies to be a carer. In training they can also assess because in training they may tell stories about things or experiences they have had so the carers don't have to go through a formal process all the time if there is information out there that they know.'

Questions are accompanied by prompts

Prompts remind the assessor to consider whether they already have the necessary information from previous questions or prior discussions, so that they do not ask questions unnecessarily.

‘Every prompt question has got a connection to why you’re asking the questions so you’ll see when you look at it, in the column it says, “Remember, only ask this question if you don’t have evidence that the applicant can, for example, recognise and deal with stress constructively.” If you already know that because you know them personally or you’ve seen them in training and know they can do that because they’ve told a story where they had to do that, then you don’t ask the question. You don’t need to go there, you already know your information.” In the new assessment if someone, during the conversation has already supplied you with that information, you don’t have to ask those questions. You almost use it as a checklist at the end: “Have we covered these questions?”’

The assessment can use alternative tools

At points throughout the assessment, the assessor can use tools such as an ‘eco-map’ or ‘sociogram’ on which they draw information about a potential carer’s family and friends, hobbies, and activities they engage in. Other tools, such as when the assessor discusses the views of children in the household to fostering, include: using paper and marker pens to draw on; using photo-language sets of pictures that display a range of moods and responses; making collages to convey information; or using ‘Bear Cards’ that display 48 different personalities and feelings.

The process can be stopped by agreement at any time

By working through the material, both the assessor and the potential carer can stop at any point to discuss issues that may need to be explored, and identify areas that the carer may need to work on before they can become a carer. The assessment process can also be ceased at any point in time by mutual agreement, and the assessor can use the ‘Red-Stop!’, ‘Orange-Slow!’ and ‘Green-Go!’ strategy as indicators of whether to continue on with the assessment.

‘The assessment package is designed so that you start the process off and if at any point things come up and you think this person may not be suitable you stop it at that point by agreement. It’s designed around four basic sessions and at the end of each session is the opportunity for both the person who is applying and the person who is assessing to think about whether there are other things that need to be explored, or are there things straight away that indicates the person is not suitable. So rather than keeping on going you can say, “This is an area to be worked on, and once that’s been worked on you can come back and start up the process again.”’

The information describing how to conduct an assessment of Aboriginal carers is an outline of the *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool. For more information, contact Louise Mulroney, Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies, Locked Bag 13, Haymarket, NSW 1240. Telephone: (02) 9281 8822. Fax: (02) 9281 8827, or go to their website at: www.acwa.asn.au.

Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers

Assessment and training for Indigenous carers, Yorganop, Perth, WA

'It's the way in which we work with [carers]. We value our carers and we let them know that they're valued and we think that the relationship with them is really important, and actually build a relationship with our carers.'

Yorganop Child Care Aboriginal Corporation is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Western Australian Department of Community Development. Yorganop provides a range of services, including the assessment and training of carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 to 15 years who are placed in emergency, short- and long-term foster placements.

Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers is a culturally appropriate training program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers and non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children developed by Yorganop. Yorganop also conducts culturally appropriate assessments of carers. While these two functions are distinct, they also overlap: The training starts in the assessment and assessment continues throughout and following training. Yorganop is now a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), which has enhanced their credibility in the sector.

'And I think that because we are an RTO, training is what we do, it's not an additional thing, whereas for other organisations it's something extra to do. Becoming an RTO gives you that knowledge around targeting what you're delivering to the needs of the client group... And by doing one thing really well and demonstrating that you can do it really well and getting really good outcomes has led to other opportunities. They know we offer a quality service.'

After carers have been assessed, they participate in Yorganop's training program. The program consists of 10 training modules, which the carers are required to complete within a two-year period. Yorganop staff take a shared learning approach to delivering training, and all carers have the opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences with the group as training progresses through the modules.

The ten training modules are:

- Getting started
- Dealing with sadness
- Growing up kids
- Helping children behave
- Family and health
- First aid
- Helping kids who have been harmed
- Helping kids settle arguments
- Caring for teenagers
- Helping kids face the world

Getting *Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers* up and running

1997	Dawn Wallam joined Yorganop to manage the training program.
1999	Review of services. Decision to develop a culturally specific training program.
2000	Consulting with communities, developing training content. Yorganop became a Registered Training Organisation.

In 1999, Yorganop restructured its services as a result of a review initiated by the Department of Community Development (DCD). The review provided an opportunity for Yorganop staff to determine how they would go about developing a culturally appropriate assessment and training program for Indigenous carers.

Developing the assessment tool

The first step in recruiting potential carers is administering an assessment. Initially, Yorganop used the department's assessment tool as a guide to develop their assessment strategy for kinship and non-kinship carers.

'We looked at... how the department did their assessment and we revamped that to fit what we were doing. And I think ours is a bit more rigid than the department's, and we don't make any distinction between a kinship and a general carer – they all get the same assessment. And they get some homework with the assessment as well, which is a good gauge of motivation.'

Seeking community input

Staff sought input from rural, regional and metropolitan communities across Western Australia about community needs to ensure that the program would be relevant to the diversity of communities in that state. This feedback provided valuable baseline information from which Yorganop could develop its own assessment and training program.

Using traditional ways to deliver training

In order to ensure the training program was culturally relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Yorganop decided to draw on traditional ways of sharing knowledge, using a learning circle approach.

'We decided that we would go back to doing things the way in which Aboriginal people traditionally learned, and it was just about having those learning circles and we called it "yarning", "*Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers*".'

Fine-tuning of the content

Yorganop continued to review and fine-tune training modules to ensure the content was appropriate as the course progressed. They now have a training package that is targeted to the content needs of their carers.

'It's about making sure the content is appropriate and that's taken us a long time to develop that, so it's about meeting your target needs.'

How to train Indigenous carers

Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers assessment and training program

Yorganop's *Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers* has 10 training modules. Throughout the training program carers are encouraged to share their knowledge and skills and everyone contributes to the learning experience.

Delivering the material in a shared learning environment

An important aspect of Yorganop's training program is the way in which the material is delivered. Yorganop staff create a shared learning environment and involve the participants in discussions.

'Our training is not a chalk and talk; we don't have someone up there doing [it]. It's a yarn, you have a discussion, have a conversation, so no one has necessarily got all the information there. It's shared learning.'

Carers must complete 10 training modules

Potential carers agree to complete 10 training modules over a two-year period. They receive a certificate for completing each module, and are encouraged to take additional courses as well.

'Training for carers is written into their [agreement]. When they are assessed they agree to complete 10 modules of training over a 2-year period. [The 10 modules are] mandatory. They usually get through the training in 12 months but we give them the 2 years if there are things that come up. Every carer gets a certificate after they've taken each module. We also strongly encourage our carers to do the Indigenous Positive Parenting Program... Our focus on the training is to ensure that our carers are really well versed in any sorts of issues that crop up in caring for kids.'

The 10 modules are:

- 1. *Getting started.*** This module covers things that new carers need to know such as confidentiality, critical incidents, care plan reviews, carer reports, relationships and responsibilities of carers, and roles and responsibilities of *Yorganop* and the department.
- 2. *Dealing with sadness.*** This module relates to children missing people and things, and puts carers in touch with how the child may be feeling about being away from home and their families. It covers grief issues, sadness, anger, denial, pining and contact with the child's family. It also covers loving and letting go for the carer when the child is reunified, and the transition to reunification.
- 3. *Growing up kids.*** This module covers the growing up and development of children, adolescence, yarning about children, learning by playing and doing small jobs, working in with the school to help children learn, and respite, personal care and support.
- 4. *Helping kids behave.*** This module covers helping carers to enforce boundaries such as no hitting, choice and consequences, setting the rules, understanding of consequences, motivation, inclusion and listening, consistency and time out, ways to discipline negative behaviour, star charts, rewarding, accepting responsibility, understanding, child focus, positive reinforcement, problem solving, working with schools, and using the Indigenous educational officers at the school.
- 5. *Family and health.*** This module talks about blended families, sharing and caring in families, the health of the child in your care, health department booklets and health topics.
- 6. *First aid.*** In this module, carers complete or update their First Aid Certificate and get first aid tips.
- 7. *Helping kids who have been harmed.*** This module covers harm that the child may have suffered, including what harm is, protection and self-protection.
- 8. *Helping kids settle arguments.*** This module helps carers assist children in dealing with anger. It also

includes yarning about helping children in care to feel good about themselves.

9. **Caring for teenagers.** This module covers boundaries, responsibilities and freedom for teenagers, as well as future planning.
10. **Helping kids face the world.** This module covers Aboriginal ways. It takes a family tree focus (making sure children are connected), and talks about acceptance and helping kids find a place in the world.

Supplementing the training modules with videos and discussion

When carers have completed a module, trainers may supplement the information with a video to generate conversation about the topic if they feel that would be useful. The videos were made by Yorganop using Yorganop staff and carers, who yarn about their experiences on that topic.

‘For each of these modules there’s a video that goes with them to spark discussion... The way those videos are set up, they’re just a group of people sitting around having a yarn and we didn’t script those at all. We just threw the topic out there and they gave their opinions. So they’re not necessarily “correct”, and some of the things they might say might be right out there, but they will spark a discussion. Because someone might say, “For goodness sakes, when my kids were little I used to give them a good smack.” And someone else might say, “Oh my God, well you can’t be smacking kids today, you’re not allowed to.” And so there’s big discussion about that. And out of that will actually come ways of dealing with kids’ behaviour without actually hitting them.’

Being flexible about delivering training content

Another important aspect of Yorganop’s training style is being flexible about content. If a carer has an issue, rather than waiting for that topic to come up in a few weeks time, the material is introduced when it is needed.

‘If we know that a carer might have a particular issue and they might not raise it themselves, we’ll make sure it gets raised as an issue. So you might just throw something in when you see the opportunity.’

Yorganop staff will also discuss topics that are not usually covered in the modules, but address a specific issue a carer may need information on concerning a child in their care.

‘If a specific issue arises for a carer... we have had some kids with foetal alcohol syndrome... we might resource specific information around a topic. We’ll gather up some resources. We might talk to key people who might be able to provide some additional information. Then we’ll go out and sit one-on-one with that carer and we’ll go through whatever the issue is, and provide them with resources, so they feel that the child is not just going off for treatment and they are the one who looks after them when they get home. They have an understanding of what the treatment is, what they can do to support the treatment, what strategies they can use, and those types of things.’

Options if carers miss a module

If carers cannot attend a module, they have the option of attending that module at a different venue, or having a one-on-one training session if necessary.

‘We repeat training modules at each location. They can go to other locations if they miss a unit. We also do one-on-one training if people are working.’

Following up with carers if they miss a module

Yorganop ensures that carers receive the training they need and are comfortable with attending training by following up when carers miss a module.

‘Where we’ve maybe had a couple of carers who didn’t come along to the training, [we follow up] to make sure that they came along and they felt good about coming. So it’s doing work with them between training. Making sure that, without being intrusive [and saying], “Why aren’t you at training?” But... “Okay, we have this carer and she hasn’t been to the last two training sessions,” [and] having that discussion here with the [worker] who’s actually supporting that carer, and then working out what we might do to get them to come along. Finding out the reason why they’re not coming. And... sometimes they’ve fallen out with another carer, so being mindful of those dynamics and making room for that. So then maybe we’ll suggest, “It would be good if you came to the training here because our numbers have fallen off and you’d make up the balance.” Or, “We really need you to come to this one because we’d like you to have a yarn about ...” And sort of empowering them.’

Sharing stories through yarnning

Creating a shared learning environment involves taking time for participants to share their stories and link experiences to learning messages.

‘We like to spend time to yarn with them about a particular issue. A lot of it is just about how the message is delivered... And once you get yarnning it’s amazing how many different experiences the content or the theory and the background can be grounded in. Almost everybody in the room has an experience that they can share that’s relevant to the topic. It’s generating that discussion.’

Drawing on the knowledge of experienced carers

The program draws on the knowledge of experienced carers who share their stories with new carers.

‘We’ve got some really experienced carers who can sit around the room and share their experiences with the newer carers as well and I think they find it quite rewarding that it’s coming from one of their peers, rather than someone up there telling them how it should be or how it’s going to be. And it’s through yarnning that a lot of this stuff comes out... The training is often about people sharing their problems and difficulties and someone else [says], “Oh, I looked after a kid once who was like that ...” They certainly prefer someone that they respect in the community and someone who’s got some experience as well. I think if it’s coming from someone who’s younger and it’s coming out of a textbook it’s not quite as powerful.’

Sharing experiences helps carers feel supported

Having experienced carers share experiences of raising children who often have challenging behaviours helps newer carers understand and manage issues relating to the children in their care.

‘It’s about those shared experiences. They know that they’re not the only person out there who’s grappling with these sorts of issues. I guess a lot of these little people that we are seeing are becoming increasingly more challenging in their behaviours that they display and often at a younger age. So if you are relatively new to foster care it can be a bit of a shock to the system when you see these young children and the challenging behaviours that they display. And if they haven’t experienced it with their own children it can be difficult as well. The big part for us is trying to give the carers a bit of an insight into what might be causing these behaviours or what’s driving these behaviours as well and the impact of the children’s experiences as well.’

Creating a ‘Yorganop carer’ community

Building strong relationships with carers

Central to Yorganop’s success is the importance they place on building strong, supportive relationships with their carers. Yorganop has created a carer community that supports each other, contributes to the service and becomes involved in wider community activities, which has flow-on benefits for children in care.

At Yorganop, building a relationship starts in the assessment, continues through training, and is ongoing while the carer is involved with the service. Yorganop now has a team of dedicated long-term carers, and continues to recruit new carers.

Ensuring carers are adequately equipped to meet the needs of children in care

Yorganop staff believe that the best way of meeting the needs of children in care is to ensure that carers have all the support and resources they need to do their job well.

‘Our primary focus is to make sure the carer is resourced and able to provide a quality placement. And we figure the outcomes [for children] flow from there ...’

Yorganop ensures their carers are:

- Provided with relevant and thorough knowledge and skills;
- Provided with comprehensive support to meet the needs of the children in their care;
- Acknowledged and appreciated for the work they do.

Yorganop sees carers as colleagues

Yorganop values the knowledge, skills and insights of experienced carers, who become partners in ensuring positive outcomes for children.

‘We don’t treat [carers] like clients. They’re our colleagues, because we’re all working together toward the one end, and that’s to provide really quality placements for the children that come into care. It’s a partnership.’

Current carers refer new carers

Most foster care services need to actively recruit new carers through promotion or publicity. Potential Yorganop carers are often referred by current carers, or refer themselves as they have heard about Yorganop from others and want to be a part of the service.

‘We have 100 per cent retention rate of carers... We’ve actually never had to advertise for carers. All our carers come to us by word-of-mouth from referrals from the other carers ...’

Using training venues that carers can access

Yorganop takes the training program out into communities where Indigenous people live, rather than expecting carers to come to them. They pay particular attention to finding training venues that would be easy for carers to get to, and that they would feel comfortable attending.

‘We deliver the training out into the community, we don’t expect carers to come to us. [We did some] minor tinkering with the venues to make sure it was the right venue, the right environment, the right location. And also that the venue was Aboriginal friendly, and that people would feel comfortable coming into that place ...’

Carers are shown they are valued

Yorganop staff put effort into showing carers that they are valued by providing support and appreciation for the work that they do, which extends to acknowledging the carer's own family.

'It's the little things that we do with our carers that builds on the relationship that we have with them so they know that they're supported and they are appreciated. Just little things, like we acknowledge their own children and the importance of their own children in that family, and they know that they're not forgotten and that we're only interested in our children in care. So we actually acknowledge anything that [their children] do. Their birthdays... we send birthday cards out to them, and if they've excelled at something we acknowledge it, we might send them a little certificate or just a mention that they've done something really great. At Christmas parties and activities, we have foster kids and their own kids and there's no distinction between the two. Once a year we have a carers appreciation lunch where we actually take them off to a hotel and have a big lunch for them and we have a 100 per cent turnout... 120 per cent. There are people we didn't even realise we had a relationship with!'

Sensitive issues can be discussed in an environment of trust

A benefit of building a relationship with carers is that if difficult issues arise, Yorganop staff are able to discuss concerns in an environment of trust.

'We've built up a relationship with the carers over a number of years... We've got an established relationship with the carer and that's actually really useful when you have to deal with quite sensitive, difficult issues, that we can take the time and frame it in a manner that's both respectful but addresses the issue... And because we've actually built that strong relationship with our carers, they're also willing to go the extra yard for us.'

Carers become confident and empowered

The relationship Yorganop staff build with carers, and the support and acknowledgment they receive, empowers carers to feel confident in dealing with issues, and building community networks.

'[The relationship] empowers these carers... we've had carers who've started off, they'd be contacting us every week about every little issue. These carers five years down the track are implementing programs within their local community, accessing government funding, you just see these people grow.'

Yorganop's assessment process

Current carers informally 'screen' potential carers

Yorganop carers often refer potential carers who they believe have the capacity to provide quality foster care. For Yorganop, this means many potential carers have already been partially 'screened' before coming to the service.

'So some of that early work is already done, that screening, because our carers won't actually refer a carer to us who they don't think is going to be suitable.'

Yorganop draws on community knowledge to assess new carers

An important aspect of Yorganop's assessment process is that it draws on knowledge from community members as to whether they are suitable, as community members often have information about a potential carer that cannot be gathered through the formal assessment process.

‘And part of the [assessment process], where it’s a bit different to the others, is the community screening process where we actually use our community and our community knowledge, which is our carers, as references to look at whether or not a carer is suitable. Because often you can do all your checks and everything on paper and it comes up clean but there might be a whole lot of other stuff that you find out afterwards ...’

Potential carers often know what to expect in the assessment process

As potential Yorganop carers come to the service after hearing about it from other carers, they often have prior knowledge of what to expect in the assessment process.

‘[Many potential carers] already know a lot of our carers... So to a certain extent they’ve been prepped by our carers as to what the assessment looks like. So before we even get to the front door they have some understanding of what’s going to occur.’

Yorganop staff take a sensitive approach to gathering assessment information

Most organisations and government departments use assessment tools that are culturally inappropriate to the lives of Indigenous people. They employ a direct style of inquiry that is experienced as confronting and intrusive.

Yorganop uses a communication style that is sensitive enough to engage potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, yet still gain the necessary information about potential carers’ capacity to provide quality care.

‘[The assessment is] probably the most intrusive part of our relationship [with the carer], because we do ask quite a few personal questions and we need to know some intimate details and that’s not always easy... But that is discussed with the people up front. We do tell them up front that that there may be things we have to ask that they may find a little bit confronting. We ask them to give us feedback on how it’s going as well. We don’t twist anybody’s arm for information.’

Assessment questions are communicated in a culturally appropriate way

Yorganop’s assessment process uses a more culturally sensitive, conversational communication style and open-ended questions to obtain information about a potential carer’s ability to care.

‘It’s a balance between yarning and... If you’ve done quite a few assessments you can yarn around and get all the information that you need. If [you haven’t] you probably need to go through the documentation a little more closely. But we don’t sit there with a clipboard and pen on one side of the table and them on the other ticking off the boxes.’

Carers are ‘reassessed’ every year

Carers are reviewed annually in accordance with Yorganop’s standards of providing care. The review also provides carers with the opportunity to give feedback regarding training and other services Yorganop provides to carers.

‘Every year our carers get reviewed. So, as well as having the big, full-blown assessment at the beginning when they come on board, we also have a review process every 12 months. And that review is... almost like a mini reassessment in that we look at how the training has been for them, we review their training that they’ve actually completed, and anything else that they’ve done as well. And this gives them the opportunity to give us feedback on how the training is going for them. What they’re getting from us.’

The benefits of becoming a Yorganop carer

Carers become involved in community activities

The confidence carers gain from their connection with Yorganop encourages them to become more involved in community life. In one region, carers have developed programs with the local school that the children in their care attend:

‘In one of our regions, our carers are pretty much heading up the community down there. They’re the drivers of so many initiatives. Our carers have set up breakfast clubs at schools. I’d say pretty much almost 100 per cent of our carers have got really strong relationships with schools. They do the homework classes a couple of days after school. There’s opportunity for the Indigenous kids at school to spend an hour or two after school doing the homework classes. [One] school... had no programs at all until our carers decided, “Let’s do something at the school.” And there was no relationship between the community and the school. And for a small primary school they had over 120 Indigenous kids so it was a huge proportion of the population. And they had an open day last year, and they had something like 80 carers and Indigenous parents at the school for this open day assisting. It was around NAIDOC week. Only a couple of years before that you would have been lucky to have eight parents there. So they’re quite inclusive in the way they operate.

And that comes down to the interaction that the carer has with the school and the fact that they are competent enough to actually have that relationship with that school. A lot of Indigenous people... generally don’t get involved with schools because they’re a minority so you generally don’t turn up to the [school event] or get involved in what’s going on. But our carers are really empowered and they do.’

The benefits flow on to children in care

The involvement of carers in the school community has flow-on benefits for the children in their care, in particular in their school attendance.

‘And what that means for our kids in care is really good educational outcomes for them. We rarely have our kids in care [having] issues at school. The only issues they have are some of the kids that have had substance abuse or foetal alcohol syndrome – they struggle around content, but not around attendance. We don’t have kids that are regularly missing school... Our kids grow up with the idea that school’s really important and they have got to go to school.’

The information describing how to train Indigenous carers is an outline of the *Yarning About Kids with Yorganop Carers* program. For more information, contact Dawn Wallam at Yorganop Child Care Aboriginal Corporation, PO Box 367, West Perth, WA 6872. Telephone: 9321 9090. Fax: 9321 9019. Or go to their website at: www.yorganop.org.au.

Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong

Supported learning and assessment for kinship carers, Fostering Services, Department for Child Protection (formerly the Department for Community Development), Perth, WA

‘It’s a people’s program. It’s very much designed for them and how they are. It’s a process that follows their direction. So it’s got that ability straight away to be received well. And in a lot of the [supportive learning] that we do, families or people are part of the solution, they have the answers... Carers have the ability to see they are doing a good job, because they know they are doing a good job. Everything is there and we are just joining up parts of the puzzle.’

Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong is a training initiative for kinship carers of Indigenous children developed by Susan von Leonhardi at the Department of Community Development’s Fostering Services in Perth, Western Australia. The program was developed in recognition that kinship carers were increasing in numbers and needed culturally appropriate and family-sensitive assessment tools and training materials, and that their training needs were different from those of non-kinship carers.

The program moves away from conventional understandings of ‘training’ by starting from the position that kinship carers already have valuable skills and knowledge that they bring to their caring role. Instead, the program takes a ‘supportive learning’ approach by building on what carers already know to assist them to meet standards, or competencies, in caring for the children placed in their care.

The program works from the assumption that kinship carers have the skills and the capacity to raise the children in their care, but sometimes need to be supported in this role. The program uses a ‘learning circle’ style of communication, where learners and facilitators are considered equal and all share and contribute from their own wisdom. The program also uses a ‘solution-focused’ approach to coping with difficulties and issues that carers may face, and assisting them to find ways of dealing with these challenges in order to make caring for the children in their care more manageable.

While the focus of the program is on supportive learning, it also incorporates an assessment element, in that carers are assisted to demonstrate four core competencies as the supported learning program progresses through the six learning modules or areas of focus.

The six learning modules or areas of focus are:

- Identity and belonging
- Caring for related children – strengths and challenges
- Understanding children’s needs and experiences
- Safety planning – safe care and safe environments
- Supports and working together
- Looking after yourself

The four competencies (or strengths and skills), which carers need to demonstrate are the ability to:

- Care for children in a safe and caring way;
- Provide a safe and caring environment;
- Work together for the child’s safety and wellbeing;
- Work on their own development – a demonstrated willingness to consider their own experiences, seek information, learn and develop their own ability to foster the children in their care.

Getting *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* up and running

2004	State government initiative to develop a program for Indigenous kinship carers
2004	Project manager Susan von Leonhardi consulted with community and experts
2005	Supportive learning delivered to over 600 carers across Western Australia
2006	Program revised to current format
2007	Plan to develop 4 additional core units in 2007: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– the effects of caring for related children on the children, carers and family;– the impact of abuse and trauma on children;– understanding and guiding children’s behaviour;– building closer working relationships between carers and workers.

Moving away from the idea of ‘training’ to ‘supportive learning’

Susan von Leonhardi was given the brief to develop *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong*. She developed the resource to acknowledge the wisdom, knowledge and skill of kinship carers regarding the needs of the children in their care.

‘I feel passionate about acknowledging all Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and people who become the children’s carers through their existing relationship with the children because of the incredible commitment they make to these children. I am aware that most of the time, they do this very well and for some, they need additional support to do what they are trying to do... One grandmother said to me, “We’re growing up our kids, we’re gonna keep them safe and we’ll make them strong,” and this struck a cord.’

Susan moved away from the more traditional training methods and instead, embraced a shared learning approach, offered in a supportive climate.

‘When we were told that all of our [kinship] carers need to be trained, I thought, “Oh, they’re going to love that – not only are they going to be fully assessed to look after their family’s children, they are also being told they will need to be trained.” So I thought, what must it be like for them, what can I do to make the training more acceptable and useful for them? I realised that the first thing that would help was to create a supportive and welcoming environment in which to do the sharing and learning, to find out what they already know and then build on that. I also began to think about the reality that for some carers, we might be delivering the learning in the carer’s home.’

An essential principle of *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* is the way in which it is delivered. It was important to find a sensitive approach to delivering the program content that enabled the sharing of knowledge in an equitable way, so Susan adopted the ‘learning circle’ approach.

‘[We] used the “learning circle” approach... The premise is that everyone in the circle is equal and no one comes into the room with a blank slate. Everyone has an enormous amount of wisdom and you need to create and provide an environment to allow people to share that wisdom.’

Seeking the input of community experts

The next step was to seek the input of community individuals and organisations, including other Indigenous training organisations, on the program’s content during the pilot session with a group of carers.

‘[We] sought the opinions of Indigenous people other carers that I know [and staff from an Indigenous training organisation] to see how that fitted for them. Their feedback was encouraging. The staff indicated it was culturally very appropriate... So it got good exposure before we set off to visit carers across Western Australia.’

After consulting with key people in the community, Susan and Anne Oakley, an Indigenous Learning and Development Officer with the then Department for Community Development, piloted the program with a group of carers to ensure the content was relevant.

‘Initially, [we] piloted it in the Kimberley. Then the whole thing took off. The resource was modified throughout the time we were delivering it. We’d hear that this worked or that isn’t working, so we knew to rework it. Whatever I heard and whatever the other workers told me I’d adjust the content to fit with the feedback received.’

The development of *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* continued to be an interactive learning process that was shaped by both workers and carers as it was rolled out across the state. The current version is based on the extensive input of both carers and workers.

‘Over the time we were developing the resource, we continually shaped and reshaped it by talking with workers and Indigenous [kinship] carers across the state. Some of the carers lived in remote areas and others in metropolitan areas. What we were continually finding out is that they had so much more to give us than we had to give to this process. We were in awe of these people.’

Skilling up workers in the spirit of delivery

In order for the program to be well received by carers, workers needed to be coached to deliver the program.

‘We walked staff through the resource. They each had their own leader’s guide which helped them to understand what the resource was about. So they had a good sense of the package and they had a very strong idea of the spirit in which it was intended to be delivered. It is about the spirit of it as much as it’s about the content.’

Involving Indigenous workers in delivering the supported learning program

When the program is delivered by a non-Indigenous person, workers found it essential to be accompanied by an Indigenous person in order to build trust and be accepted into the homes of Indigenous carers.

‘As a non-Indigenous person travelling through the Kimberley I always went with one of the Indigenous workers because they had the relationship with this person, and that allowed me, with respect, to enter their place and have that yarn or conversation.’

How to assess and train Indigenous kinship carers

Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong supported learning program

The supportive learning resource comprises six learning modules:

Module 1: Identity and belonging

The first module in the program relates to stories of identity and belonging by addressing questions such as: 'Where was I born?', 'Where did I grow up?'; 'Who are my people?'; 'Who do I identify myself as/with?' Workers talk about their own identity and sense of belonging in relation to these questions. They then encourage carers to share their stories.

'We start with the identity and belonging module. The way we introduce ourselves is we talk about our own place and belonging... Connecting with people at their place is often the way we build trust. Telling a grandmother a little of my own experiences as a grandmother helps them to identify with our mutual roles. This can say to the carers, "I'm not just an officer." And I think it has helped [carers] to see that we've all got stories, and that even though we present as a [departmental] worker, we each have our own stories. Not all workers want to do this but for me and for our other leaders, it has worked very well. Carers are then more comfortable sharing a little bit about their stories instead of being afraid to share anything in case we are judging them. I find that a particularly strong way of starting. This helps to prepare for the importance of every child having the right to their own story – their connections, their own identity.'

When workers and carers have talked about their own sense of identity and belonging, the workers then encourage carers to discuss these questions in relation to the children in their care.

'Even though we might not address this immediately, what we ask them is, can they answer the questions, and can the children that they're caring for answer these questions, or are they helping them to know the answers to these questions? And even though you don't hit them with it immediately, you've got it in your mind that you'll go there at some stage... So we start to talk about the sense of belonging and identity... We also say, what are the things that challenge that sense of belonging... and we use language that makes people feel quite safe and secure.'

Module 2: Strengths and challenges of being a kinship carer

The second module allows carers to discuss their feelings about caring for related children such as conflicts they might experience with birth family members, the financial hardship of raising extra children, the loss of their own lifestyle, and feelings of having the department in their lives. Carers are also validated for the strength and support they bring to their kinship network.

'Relatives have a unique place and what we need to do is... acknowledge that they are, indeed, the strong people in their families, and that's who the family members turn to in terms of their children, and the family issues that they are asked to help with.'

One of the main difficulties carers face is conflict between protecting children from further abuse and following traditional protocols, particularly when perpetrators of abuse or neglect may be the carer's own biological children.

'Saying "no" to the perpetrator coming to the house is really hard because of the traditions and the protocols and the emotional connections. Because this is a forever family. These aren't carers, they're relatives. We give them the title "carer" because that's how our system works. We call them carers. And they need to be helped to see how we see them as carers. But in their minds they're relatives and they're always going to be relatives and we need to respect that relationship.'

Another difficulty many kinship carers face is they are often the grandparents of the child and may be ageing and unwell, on top of which they have lost their freedom and lifestyle. Using a solution-focused approach to any concerns raised by carers helps them think through ways of making their caring role easier:

'The carers are also generally older, and they're often tired and often unwell. They're often grandma or older sister or the aunty of the mother, but often an older aunty. And it was good to have a conversation with them about [this] because it gave them a chance to really get it off their chest, having someone letting them say how hard it is. Because they may feel a degree of fear in saying that to an officer in case the officer, in their minds, might construe that as they're not coping. And we could then, in that solution-focused approach, say, "What would it look like if this was happening [if] there were additional resources available or [if] there were other strong family members?" So you can actually work with them to find out ways to strengthen up a potentially vulnerable situation. And letting them have that yarn about, "I'm worn out, I need to have time to myself, I used to be a granny and now I'm a carer." And they're no longer the granny, they're the parent who disciplines and stays up at night and worries about [the children]. That's a big deal.'

One of the difficulties many kinship carers face is, for them, they do not make a distinction between children in their care who are placed by the department and those who are not. However, child protection departments do, and this can create tension for the carers.

'We may place some children, but when you get out to these families you find they've got another three or four who are family placed. And we don't have a place in the system to acknowledge that formally. For me it's a potential weakness in the system because they are bringing up a group of children... and they don't recognise "placed" and "not placed". We have an investment in the placed children because we have a responsibility but they have an investment in the other children [as well], and they're all growing up in the same household. If poverty is an issue or those sorts of things are an issue, it affects those children and our children. And somehow I'm not sure how we address that, but we need to acknowledge it.'

Module 3: Understanding children's needs and experiences

An important part of the supported learning program is helping carers understand the child's needs from a developmental perspective, how the child may have had their needs compromised before coming into care, and how this plays out in their current behaviour. The starting point for this discussion is attachment and bonding issues with the child's biological mother, and how the attachment and bonding may have been disrupted.

'We talk about the mum of the child a lot. So we start with the beginning stories, the foundations of attachment. We actually go through this in a way that helps them understand that this is what every child needs from all cultures: What was happening for these little ones that she was looking after that might have got in the way of that? Or did it get in the way of that? Was it going well for ages and then something happened, or was it not alright from day one? So we help them to understand what might have been the journey for the child. And we'll kind of touch on that in terms of, "This is what attachment looks like." But we might not use the word "attachment". We might just say, "Baby needs a connection; he needs touch; he needs to be held; he needs to be fed; he needs to be soothed when he cries. You're strong, you can look after this baby. What was happening for mum that meant she couldn't do that." So we'll talk about where mum was coming from... They really take this on board because it helps them to get a context of where the child's been and what's been going on for the child. And this is the foundation.'

Another aspect of this module is helping the carers to understand what the child's basic developmental needs are, how these needs must be met before they can feel safe and secure.

‘I played around with Maslow [the psychologist who developed the theory that people have a hierarchy of needs] and we come back to, “Before these little kids can be safe they need good food, make them warm, give them shelter. And you’re doing that. And now they can start to feel safe and secure. And now you can start looking at who they belong with and whether you can get them to see them.”’

When the child’s developmental needs have been explored, workers can then talk about what it might be like for a child when these needs have not been met in the past, and how past abuse and neglect may be affecting the child’s current emotions and behaviour.

‘We’re now at a place where we can talk about the [abuse] issues. The things that brought this child into care, the things that we’re still worried about. So, we start to talk about how [violence] affects the family, and not just the child, but each member of the family including themselves. And they talk a lot about this in a very wounded way because they don’t have the answers, they just know they have to keep the kids safe.’

What I do is I ask them to describe what happens when the little one is frightened. And they tell me and I land on that and I say, “That’s what we call a state of being really aroused and very frightened and there’s lots of chemicals going through their body and if it keeps going they get unwell.” And they say, “Yeah, he’s always getting a cold.” So it helps them in that easy way to understand what we already know is happening for these children who are being exposed to family violence.

We also talk about it in terms of the child: “What kind of impact it is having on the child?” And they will tell me that it’s been really hard for them because they don’t go to school a lot because they’re scared and they don’t want to push them to school. So it’s an opportunity for us to talk about how school might actually be a good place and a safe place and how can they get them to school even though they’re frightened. What things can they do that will get them past being frightened: “Are there play mates in the community that they can take with them? Is there the neighbour’s child or an older brother or sister that can help?”’

An important aspect of this module is talking about the child’s rights and the child’s need to have a voice in the process and to be heard.

‘And we talk about rights and responsibilities in a way that allows them to understand it. We try and break it down so that it means something to them in their own environment. We talk a lot about the children’s rights and what we do here is actually engage with individual children so whilst we may or may not meet them, we talk about Albert or Johnny, not just about children in general. And that then becomes: “How could Johnny get to see mum and dad? How are you going to do that when you’re living in [town]? What kind of person could help you to do that?”’

So walking through that so that Johnny and Albert’s rights come first, and letting them know that Johnny and Albert need to have a voice too. And who can they say things to if they’re not feeling good? Letting them know that workers will come out and talk to Albert and to not be frightened of that because what the worker wants to do is make sure that Albert’s voice is being heard and his needs are being met and his rights are being met. So helping them to break that down a bit so they’re not so threatened by it, because that’s potentially very threatening.’

Module 4: Safety planning – safe care and safe environments

Once the issues around meeting the child’s emotional and developmental needs have been met, workers can discuss risk and safety issues, and how to keep the child safe in the future. But first, workers need to explore

the pain and grief many carers feel regarding the abuse issues in their family.

‘We talk about mum here, or dad, because that’s often a deep grieving for the grandmother. Or sometimes they are in serious conflict with their son or daughter. So I tease it out so I can see whether they’re in a deep sadness or they’re very angry and hostile. You need to know because it affects what you’re going to do in the safety planning. Same with the children’s experiences, we start to [discuss] what’s happening for the child and what they can see is happening for the child from their experience. What we’re trying to do is move towards [safety planning] because it’s crucial [to discuss] what safe care looks like.’

The workers then move towards how carers can ensure the child stays safe, and how carers can help the child to feel safe and stay safe.

‘We ask them, “What would be happening when your little fella is safe?” “Well I’ll be making sure he’s alright.” And the “no” bit is something we need to practise. How kids learn to say “no”. What gives them the strength to say “no”? Who do they say “no” to? How do they get past their cultural obligations? What about the family? How is it going to be for them when they are they going to say “no” to someone we are saying they need to say “no” to?’

We’re now in the space where there’s trust in the relationship between us so we’re able to discuss those things. We’re starting to build the beginnings of a safety plan. We’re also starting to say, “Lets see if you can help them practise a ‘what if’.” So we practise with them and help them to get ready to practise with their kids. “What if I wasn’t home?” “I’d go to nanna’s.” “Well what if nanna isn’t home?” “I’d go to Jim’s.” “What if Jim wasn’t home?” So it’s just walking through [that] to see that they have a real awareness of what safety looks like, and it’s not just accidental.’

One of the tools that workers use in order to help carers identify ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ people in the child’s life, is to use a kinship map, similar to a genogram, on which the worker and the carer can plot out a safety network and develop a safety plan for the child.

‘[What we say] here is: “Tell me about your family.” So we might put names on [the kinship map]. It’s not a genogram, it’s just getting a sense of who’s surrounding this child. And if there are any worrying or concerning people, who are they? And might I draw a railway line to show that this is a relationship they need to look out for. And then I say, “Maybe one day you can do this with your little fella.” And we give them a couple of pages for each child.’

Workers then develop the children’s family map to enable the child to tell their story, which may differ from that of the carer. This enables the carer to acknowledge that the child may have a different experience to the carer and may feel safe and unsafe with different people than the carer has identified.

‘We talk about the child’s story and the right to their story. And we also talk about [the carer’s] own story. [But] I’ll move beyond their story immediately if I feel it’s not [comfortable] for them. And even if they don’t tell me their story, they’ll tell me about the child’s, and that’s the bit that matters. We’re now moving towards issues for the child and safety planning and to recognise, especially when they’re not feeling safe, what that might be like. So what we do now is use the safety map.

We walk them right through different scenarios using [the safety map] and tell them the next step to take, and it really opens them up and they say, “I didn’t think of that.”... By the time we get here they are so involved and engaged in this process. And it was about they needed a place to feel safe enough to explore that and not feel judged. And then they became, by the way they spoke and the way they acted, highly protective.’

Workers find that in working through the safety planning module, carers have already worked out an informal 'safety plan' and have an awareness of how to keep the children in their care safe.

'When you talk to Aboriginal people about a "safety plan" for the child, they don't know what that is. But once you sit down and you yarn with them and you talk them through it, they've got one worked out without them even realising it. You've just got to bring it out.'

Workers also work through the safety plan with the children so they can clarify who they feel safe and unsafe with.

'And the younger kids that we've spoken to in the family, we suggest that they do their own, to get them to take some responsibility. Sometimes the carer might identify someone who the child is safe with but when you speak to the child they don't feel safe with that person. So it's about identifying who they feel safe with.'

Module 5: Supports and working together

After safety issues have been addressed and the worker and carer have worked out a safety plan to keep the child safe, the worker discusses with the carer how they can work with other significant people in the child's life to ensure the best outcomes for the child. In particular, the worker discusses the different roles and responsibilities of the birth parent, the carer who is the nurturing parent to the child, and the department, which acts as a legal parent to the child.

'So when we get to the Working Together [module], we use an adaption of Vera Falberg's work about the birth parents, the legal parent, and the nurturing parent, and you surround that child with all those features of parenting. But when a child enters care, the birth parent is often over here and the nurturing parent or carer is here and the legal parent is somewhere down here. And the child falls through the hole. And what I say to each of them is, "If we come together, and we work as closely as we possibly can, even if we don't like that person or agree with that person, the child becomes the focus. And we've all got to find a place where we can all come together and... know not only that she's safe, but she's got a strong sense of wellbeing and her needs are represented all of the time." So carers can take that on board and they don't feel threatened by the department when they see it's a partnership for the child, and we're all on the same side here and it's about the child.'

The next step is to assist the carer to identify who else can be of support in ensuring the child's needs are met and the carer is assisted to provide safe and nurturing care for the child.

'Then we say, "Who else [can help], because you can't do this on your own. What about us? We should be in there helping you. We've got resources and we've got people who've got a lot of skills. Don't do this alone because it's a big job you're taking on. These little kids have been harmed and they're behaving in very difficult ways and you're pretty exhausted. And what about the health workers out in the community, they can help you." So we begin to expand the community support system. And you can actually identify respite carers in their family. And then you talk about the process of getting these people registered to be respite carers. And kids will stay in the family as well.'

A part of the 'Working Together' module is encouraging the carer to talk about issues in the family as they arise, so that everyone can work together to keep the child safe.

'So we're also saying in the Working Together [module] that we need to talk, we need to have these yarns so we're all hearing the new information that's happening or the latest thing that's happening for the family. That helps us to all see that we're on the same page. And they agree with that. So I actually break down those skills of effective communication and good listening.'

Module 6: Looking after yourself

Finally, an essential component of the program is ensuring that carers look after themselves and their own needs. Part of this is acknowledging how hard they are working to take care of the children in their care, and ensuring that their work is made as easy as possible.

'It's really important that they see that we're acknowledging the job they're doing, the work they're having to put in and how they look after themselves. So we look at all of those aspects and what can be done about it.'

And then I say, "Of all of the things that we've been talking about, is there something important that you need to remember?" And whatever it is we write it down. And if reading and writing is an issue we'll talk about that. For a crisis, doctors, nurses – get those names and numbers down. Looking at crisis mode, "If the kid's really hurt or injured, who would you go to quick? Let's practise that." So going through that stuff about "Don't wait for the fire" and getting them to practise that and doing it the same with the kids.'

Conclusion

The *Growing up Our Kids Safe and Strong* supported learning program works in a respectful way to share knowledge and skills about raising children in care with kinship carers. Where appropriate, workers assist carers to enhance their abilities in order to meet departmental competency standards. The intended outcome of the program is to validate carers' knowledge, fill in any gaps, and assist carers to feel empowered, confident and supported in their caring role.

The supportive learning approach

Overcoming carers' fear and anxiety

'What hit us like a flood was their pain. So there had to be a place that was safe enough for them to explore their really strong feelings.'

An important part of the process was engaging with carers so they would be comfortable inviting departmental workers into their home. Workers found that shifting away from a 'training' approach and focusing on the supportive aspects of the program enabled them to be better received by carers.

'We focused on support for the carer we were talking with... it made it easier to get your foot in the door. We delivered it to over 600 carers last year. And it was a big task to just get our foot in the door first. There was a lot of initial resistance, and we expected that. And to me, it was healthy because people were saying: "We know our rights and we've been hurt before and we don't want you telling us what to do. And we, even more importantly, don't want you to take our kids off us." And there was fear.'

Workers found that taking a supported learning approach enabled carers to feel safer and more comfortable about participating in the process.

'There's a lot of fear around things like police checks and things. [The program] helps to take the fear out of it and makes it more natural... When we'd first start this they'd be saying, "What are you going to tell [the department]?" And by the time we left they'd be saying, "When are you coming back again?"'

Building a trusting relationship with carers

Workers build trust with carers by sharing some of their world, by respecting the knowledge and wisdom of the carer and their place in the family of the child, and by listening to their stories. Only then are they able

to work through the modules or areas of focus in a way that allows carers to feel more comfortable about discussing sensitive issues. It is important that workers build a trusting relationship with carers so that issues such as how to keep children safe can be discussed in an open and honest way.

‘The key areas are really crucial, they can’t be left out. But the journey [of moving through the modules] is about waiting for the people to be ready to talk about the next area, and the next area, and so on. It’s... about making sure that people are ready to go to the next place. But you do need to keep a sense of the resource as a whole. You can’t just take the safety planning out of there without doing the relationship first... We go home when their door is shut; they are left to rear the children. The only way we can know that the child is safe is by building a relationship to create openness and trust.’

Assessing carer competency through yarning

As well as building a trusting relationship with carers, workers need to ensure that carers meet competency standards. The assessment of competencies is embedded in yarning with carers throughout the delivery of the modules, rather than the direct assessment style that characterises mainstream processes.

‘We had in the back of our mind the strengths, or skills, standards and competencies, that had to be applied, whether we were assessing or whether we were using our supportive learning. So these competencies were being considered as we were talking. So no matter what we were talking about, we were also trying to establish whether people were actually sufficiently competent to be caring for the children.’

Addressing issues when the children’s safety may be compromised

Occasionally trainers did encounter situations that might have placed the child at risk, so they would discuss this with the carers, and broach the issue with departmental case workers in a way that encouraged case workers to provide more support for carers.

‘If we became aware of potential risk, we would say, “We are going to suggest you receive additional assistance or support and we will let your case worker know that you need the assistance.” Obviously if we had been sufficiently concerned for the wellbeing of any child, we would have acted on that immediately. Later we would inform the case worker. The issues would be written in an “additional support pro forma” and sent to the case worker. We never did this without telling the carer. We also informed the case workers if for example the carer had been ill or had additional children that they were caring for which stretched them to the limit. The case workers then knew perhaps something they hadn’t been aware of.’

The information describing how to assess and train kinship carers is an outline of the *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* supported learning program. For more information, contact Susan Von Leonhardi or Anne Oakley at Fostering Services, Department for Child Protection, 91 Hensman Road, Subiaco, WA 6008. Telephone: (08) 6380 5900 or 1800 024. Or go to their website at: www.community.wa.gov.au/Resources/CarersAndFosterCare/FosterCare.

Recruiting Indigenous carers – Messages from professionals and carers

In *Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers*, professionals told us that successful recruitment strategies were culturally appropriate and took advantage of the commitment to community that is characteristic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They discussed ways they have found to improve Indigenous carer recruitment such as:

- Recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers by Indigenous people;
- Community-generated recruitment strategies such as community days to attract potential carers;
- Strengthening collaboration between organisations.

In Phase 1 of the project, organisations that had success in recruiting new carers by using the recruitment strategies referred to above outlined how these strategies had been effective. They have been summarised below.

While no one organisation was profiled in *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs* specifically because they had developed an effective and culturally appropriate recruitment strategy, many organisations that offered comprehensive, culturally relevant services in one area usually attracted new carers to their organisation.

For example the *Yarning About Kids With Yorganop Carers* assessment and training program prioritises building an ongoing relationship with carers and offering a comprehensive, responsive service. Because the service not only meets the needs of carers in their caring role, but also brings carers together and empowers them to feel more confident and skilled, the service attracts Indigenous people who want to become carers who are affiliated with that organisation.

Another example of how effective carer support can act as an incentive for encouraging people to become new carers is the *Aboriginal Carers Network*. The support groups that have developed as part of the Aboriginal Carers Network are often able to locate placements with kin or community members, thereby facilitating recruitment through the networking process.

Findings from *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs* show that offering an effective and culturally appropriate service to carers is part of an effective recruitment strategy.

Recruitment of Indigenous carers works best when:

- Training and support programs provide comprehensive, supportive services to carers because they attract others who want to become carers
- It is conducted by Indigenous people through Indigenous organisations
- Recruiters use community generated strategies, such as community days
- Indigenous carers speak at recruitment information sessions about their experiences

How to recruit Indigenous carers

Recruitment tips from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals

In *Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers*, professionals told us of recruitment strategies that had been successful for them. These strategies include:

Using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to recruit Indigenous carers

The most effective strategies were those where Aboriginal organisations have responsibility for the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster and kinship carers using community-based recruitment strategies (word of mouth, community networks, family days, information nights).

Using experienced Indigenous carers to speak at recruitment information sessions

The use of current Indigenous carers to speak at information sessions for prospective foster carers was an effective recruitment strategy. It was important for the message to come from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recruiting at community days

The most effective strategy was using community days to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become carers. The following representative of an Indigenous organisation discusses a community day they held to recruit new carers:

‘We’ve only just last weekend participated in a family day at [a small community about 300 kilometres away] – and we had about 400 people plus at our community day. We set up a community day at the local football club and our workers [in that community] worked with volunteers to set up a barbecue that included cooking kangaroo tails in the fire and kangaroo rissoles and sausages and emu steaks, lots of salads, karaoke, face painting.

We had other organisations from the community come in and participate and so they were talking. [The other organisations] were supportive of everything that was happening – being part of the one community, being seen as being not just an Aboriginal community but a broader community and so we had other service providers – non-Aboriginal providers there. We also had the Aboriginal health service there. We use it as a great promotional tool: “Are you interested in becoming a foster carer?” I would say that maybe 200, maybe 250 of the people there were children. And so when you see all of these wonderful children having a fabulous time doing all of these wonderful events it makes us realise how important they are in our community – today, but also tomorrow so that we stay strong and survive and it’s a really good recruitment tool. We do the same thing when we go to the football carnivals. We actually say how good it is to be here with all of our children and young people thriving and surviving and how do we ensure that happens today and tomorrow, and so that as a promotional tool, as a recruitment tool has been really, really successful.’ (Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency representative)

Effective carer support and training programs attract new carers

Comprehensive training and support services for carers, such as Yorganop’s training program (described earlier in this booklet) and the *Aboriginal Carers Network* (see booklet 3, *Comprehensive support for Indigenous carers and young people*), attract new carers as people want to become involved in caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through the service, and feel confident they will receive the support they need in the caring role.

Conclusion

Successful assessment and training programs are those that take a carer-centred approach by being responsive to the needs of carers and incorporating feedback from carers into assessment and training programs. This is particularly the case with Indigenous assessment tools, which use a relaxed, conversational style of gathering information, and incorporate community knowledge about a family when making assessments about whether a potential carer has the qualities necessary to provide appropriate care.

Effective assessment and training programs also focus on building a relationship with carers over the long term and offer comprehensive support. The training programs profiled here value the input of carers and acknowledge the skills and knowledge they bring to the caring role. The benefit to carers is that they become confident, skilled and empowered, and this has flow-on effects for the children in their care.

Recruitment strategies that have worked best are those that are community-based and are conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Activities such as community days are opportunities for organisations to encourage Indigenous people to become carers. Organisations that become known in their communities for offering effective and comprehensive support attract new carers who want to be part of the organisation. Having an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person speak at information or training sessions is also an effective way of recruiting new carers.





