

# **Indigenous responses to child protection issues**

**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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# Indigenous responses to child protection issues

## 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).<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

### *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, 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> Summary papers prepared from the reports are available on the NCPC website [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/summarypapers/menu.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/summarypapers/menu.html)

<sup>3</sup> 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.

# Indigenous responses to child protection issues – Messages from professionals

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An important issue that was raised by participants in *Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers* was a need to improve collaboration between organisations and child protection departments. Some organisations have developed Indigenous-specific responses to child protection statutory interventions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that require a complex level of collaboration between statutory departments and Indigenous organisations. Three of these responses are profiled in this section.

A strength of the organisations profiled in this section is that they run programs that support and empower Indigenous communities and families to become more knowledgeable and autonomous in developing protective strategies for children. The organisations profiled in *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs* are:

- *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)

## What works when taking an Indigenous approach to child protection issues

### Indigenous child protection services work best when staff:

- Take a community-centred, family inclusive approach to child protection concerns
- Advocate an Indigenous perspective for child protection processes (such as case planning)
- Provide an understanding of child protection issues to families and communities
- Build collaborative relationships with child protection departments and other agencies
- Ensure children are culturally safe as well as physically and emotionally safe



## **Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS) Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Melbourne, Victoria**

‘[The service] has been developed and is run by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people. Staff are from the local community. They have local knowledge. We get the door open because we are Aboriginal.’

*Lakidjeka* Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS) is a unique Indigenous-specific response to statutory child protection intervention in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Child protection services are required to consult with *Lakidjeka* before making any key decisions.

The *Lakidjeka* program is built on effective collaboration with the Department of Human Services, which is the Victorian department responsible for administering the child protection service. *Lakidjeka* responds to notifications made regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and works to ensure decisions are made that focus on the child’s best interests. The program supports and informs families through advocating for an Indigenous perspective on all significant child protection decisions. It also provides the Department of Human Services’ child protection practitioners with important cultural and case-management advice. The *Lakidjeka* program is operational across the state of Victoria, with Indigenous case workers and supervisors located in the eight departmental regions. The *Lakidjeka* ACSASS program is run by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). Another component of ACSASS is run by the Mildura Aboriginal Co-operative for the local government area of Mildura.

### **About VACCA**

VACCA was established in 1977 to provide a state-wide, culturally-sensitive child protection and family support service to Aboriginal communities. VACCA currently provides a range of culturally specific services, including the *Lakidjeka* program and other child and family services across the continuum of care such as Home Visiting, Koorie FACES program, Family Preservation and a Residential Family Reunification Program. The agency also provides early intervention programs including Supported Playgroups, Extended Care including Customary Care, Permanent Care, Koorie Cultural and Support program, Residential Care, Youth Homelessness Services including Kurnai and Leaving Care Programs. This program provides high-level advice to the government and other stakeholders involved in child and family welfare as well as research, program reviews, the development of resources including cultural resources, capacity-building programs, training and a staff wellbeing program. VACCA also has a strong policy voice.

VACCA was established to respond to child protection notifications from the department in a way that acknowledges the effect of past welfare practices on Indigenous families and communities, as well as to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out-of-home care system.

### **About *Lakidjeka***

*Lakidjeka*’s aims include:

- Providing an Indigenous perspective into child protection risk and safety assessments, planning processes and decision-making in relation to Indigenous children;
- Improving case planning and decision-making concerning Indigenous children and young people who have been notified to child protection;
- Improving engagement of indigenous children and young people and their families with relevant support services;
- Improving the involvement of Indigenous family and community members in the support of Aboriginal child protection clients;

- Improving Indigenous children's connection to their community and strengthening their cultural identity.

*Lakidjeka* provides the following services to children and young people from 0 to 17 years of age:

- Facilitating the placement of Indigenous children in line with the hierarchy of placement options outlined in the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle;
- Undertaking joint visits with child protection workers to assist in their understanding of Aboriginal child-rearing practices and assist families to understand child protection concerns and processes;
- Attending court and providing verbal and written evidence;
- Attending pre-hearings, case conferences, case planning meetings and family group conferences;
- Attending ongoing visits as required;
- Making referrals to other services;
- Providing a 24-hour on-call response to notifications;
- Advising child protection staff of culturally relevant referral pathways;
- Providing input into departmental cultural support plans;
- Facilitating families' involvement in decision-making;
- Providing decision-making input where there are allegations of abuse of Indigenous children placed in out-of-home care;
- Providing advice to mainstream out-of-home care service providers about facilitating community and cultural connection for Indigenous children.

## Getting *Lakidjeka* up and running

1978	Commonwealth funding was made available for an Indigenous child welfare service.
1989	The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle was enshrined in state child welfare legislation.
1992	First formal protocol between VACCA and the Department of Human Services.
1997	The <i>Bringing Them Home</i> report into the removal of Indigenous children from their families was released.
	The Victorian Parliament apologised for past policies regarding the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and made a commitment towards improving future opportunities for Indigenous people.
1999	A joint VACCA–Department of Human Services review of the program was undertaken and led to a range of recommendations. Findings of the review were published in a report titled <i>The Continued Journey</i> . In particular, the review resulted in establishing a need for the state to provide program funding to deliver a comprehensive service approach.
2000	The joint VACCA–Department of Human Services review of the program was completed. VACCA tabled with the department a formal submission requesting comprehensive funding for the program.
2001	The state government minister responsible for the Department of Human Services stated in parliament that all notifications involving Indigenous children would require the department to consult with VACCA. The new protocol between <i>Lakidjeka</i> and the department was signed.
2002	The state government commits to \$2.4 million over four years for the protocol. The program begins operation in six of the eight regions, reflecting the recommendations from the review, which also included a new partnership framework between <i>Lakidjeka</i> and the department and between <i>Lakidjeka</i> and Indigenous organisations regionally.



2003	The <i>Lakidjeka</i> program became operational in all regions.
2005	Extension of the program to enable it to remain involved with cases beyond the initial statutory case plan. This meant that the program was able to provide advice on all significant decisions during an Indigenous child's involvement with child protection services until case closure.

### ***The need for an Indigenous child protection service***

The initial drive for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service emerged due to the inability of the Victorian child protection service to satisfactorily meet the needs of Indigenous children.

### ***The first formal protocol between Lakidjeka and the Department of Human Services***

In 1992, the first formal protocol to respond to child protection issues was established between VACCA and the Victorian Department of Human Services. With Commonwealth funding, four experienced Aboriginal child and family welfare personnel were appointed and began to provide consultation across the state in line with the protocol. However, with over 1,000 notifications per year, the program could not respond to all requests for consultation due to inadequate funding.

### ***Launch of the Bringing Them Home Report***

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released the findings of an inquiry into the forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This document, the *Bringing Them Home* Report provided an understanding for governments of the importance of introducing new ways of operating child welfare in relation to Indigenous children to minimise contemporary removals.

### ***Victorian Government apologises***

On 17 September 1997, the Victorian Parliament apologised for past policies regarding the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and reaffirmed its support for reconciliation.

### ***Lakidjeka ACSASS fully funded***

In 2001, Victorian Government minister Christine Campbell stated in the Victorian Parliament that 'for all notifications involving an Aboriginal child, VACCA should be consulted'. This directive was a catalyst for government to provide funding for a more comprehensive service. ACSASS became the first (and only) Indigenous service in Australia fully funded to provide advice on all child protection investigations involving an Indigenous child.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Getting local communities on board***

An important component of *Lakidjeka's* success was getting local Aboriginal communities engaged in protecting vulnerable and at-risk children. This was achieved through including them in the review of the 1992 protocol and committing to having formal agreements in place to ensure they were involved in decisions related to their children. Initially, some communities wanted to take responsibility for child protection issues themselves, but once they understood *Lakidjeka's* role they opted to be a support service to the families. The Mildura Aboriginal Co-Operative assumed responsibility for the ACSASS program in their local government area. Other communities were in agreement with VACCA undertaking this complex service.

**'It is my belief that the unique service [that Lakidjeka provides] has been possible because we have insisted that all direct service delivery staff are Indigenous people who live in**

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous children comprise approximately 40 per cent of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Only 6 per cent of the total Indigenous population of Australia live in Victoria. This is significantly lower than the proportion who live in other states such as New South Wales (29 per cent) or Queensland (27 per cent). ABS. (2001). *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*. 4713.0: Canberra.

the communities that they work in. I also believe that the unique quality of the service is a direct result of real community consultation and input into the development of the program; both within VACCA as well as with the funding body [the Department of Human Services]. The community helped develop the program.'

### ***Lakidjeka ACSASS program fully operational***

By 2005 the ACSASS program was fully operational across the state. From October 2002 to June 2005 there were 5,606 Aboriginal children notified to child protection and then referred to *Lakidjeka*.

Currently there are 33 staff employed in the *Lakidjeka* ACSASS program. The program relies on the dedication of workers who believe in children's rights. Staff work hard to be responsive, respectful, and professional and are committed to seeing that decisions are made in the best interests of Indigenous children and young people.

### **Responding to child abuse issues from an Indigenous perspective**

'*Lakidjeka* staff are able to give cultural consideration to the child protection risk framework in a way that only an Indigenous person can; thereby ensuring that the reason Indigenous children and families are engaged in the child protection system is as a result of risk and safety and not, as has been evidenced in the past, based on culture, race or colour.'

### ***Child protection issues through the lens of being Indigenous***

A great strength of *Lakidjeka* is the insight that Indigenous staff can bring to an understanding of a child protection matter involving Indigenous children and families. *Lakidjeka* staff bring a cultural and community perspective in relation to risk and safety assessments, which inform departmental decisions in key areas such as:

- Whether to investigate a notification;
- What risk factors are present;
- How they can be addressed;
- How best to engage with the child and their family;
- How the child's safety can be ensured;
- How the community can be involved;
- What community placements are available if required;
- What the appropriate referral pathways are;
- How the department can best develop a cultural support plan;
- What action should be taken when an allegation of abuse in care arises for an Indigenous child.

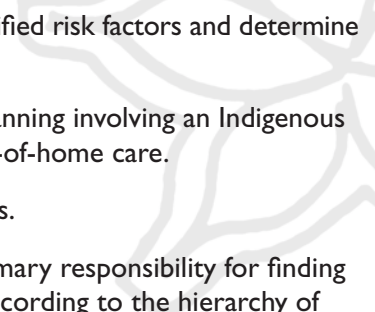
The program plays a role with mainstream out-of-home care providers by assisting them to understand the importance of cultural and community connection and how this is most appropriately undertaken.

### ***Formal protocols between Lakidjeka and the Department of Human Services***

*Lakidjeka* is authorised by the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to be able to receive information on notifications on Aboriginal children. In these instances, the department is required to consult *Lakidjeka*, and provide all the notification details (except the identity of the notifier).

The notification and case planning process is as follows:

- I. When a notification is received by the child protection intake team they must first ascertain if the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. If the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, *Lakidjeka* must be notified as soon as possible, and provided with client information and details of notification concerns.

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2. Child protection staff seek cultural advice to inform assessment of the identified risk factors and determine whether the matter will require further investigation.
  3. The department must consult regarding risk assessment and protective planning involving an Indigenous child, and in particular where there are intentions to place the child in out-of-home care.
  4. *Lakidjeka* staff work alongside departmental staff to attend joint home visits.
  5. If an out-of-home placement is needed for the child, *Lakidjeka* will take primary responsibility for finding an appropriate placement for the child within the Aboriginal community according to the hierarchy of placement options prescribed in the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. If a placement is not identified by *Lakidjeka*, this task will become the responsibility of the Department of Human Services.
  6. *Lakidjeka* staff will be consulted on any significant decisions made by the Department of Human Services in relation to Indigenous children, such as issuing protective orders and determining outcomes for Indigenous children involved in allegations of abuse in care processes.
  7. The Department of Human Services will continue to involve *Lakidjeka* case workers as cultural consultants and partners in the case management of an Aboriginal child, including undertaking joint home visits, seeking input into the cultural support plan, attending case planning meetings and involvement in the court processes.

*Lakidjeka* is involved at the very beginning of a child protection notification and plays a key role in assisting decision-making as to whether significant risk is present and child protection involvement is required. Many notifications now result in support services being provided to the child and the family by community organisations.

It was hoped that *Lakidjeka* would reduce the rate of renotifications for Indigenous children. Current practice indicates that without culturally appropriate support services, this is unlikely to eventuate as the capacity of mainstream services to effectively engage with Indigenous families and address family problems is limited and there are insufficient Indigenous services to meet demand.

### ***Supporting families who become involved with the child protection system***

*Lakidjeka* offers support to children and families who become involved with the child protection system. *Lakidjeka* workers represent and advocate for the best interests of Indigenous children. If the family is required to attend court, and if a protection order is issued in relation to an Indigenous child, case workers ensure families have access to a lawyer and are able to attend legal appointments.

*Lakidjeka* workers assist families to understand legal jargon and feel supported by someone from their own culture. *Lakidjeka* case workers engage on a long-term basis with a family and advocate on their behalf, particularly in relation to promoting the child's best interests and ensuring families understand child protection processes including court proceedings.

*Lakidjeka* workers have status to act as a 'friend of the court' during court hearings and are able to give unsworn statements in the court room. (This status is only acknowledged in the Melbourne Children's Court, and not in the Magistrates Court or County Court.) This means that *Lakidjeka* workers are recognised by the court as having a legitimate role in the proceedings, and having expertise in Indigenous child and family welfare matters.

### ***Facilitating children's placement in line with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle***

The establishment of *Lakidjeka* has had a significant impact on reducing the number of placements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children outside their communities. There is an increasing number of Indigenous children who now remain more connected to their families and communities, which strengthens positive cultural identity.

As Indigenous people with connections in their local communities, *Lakidjeka* staff are often able to identify family members with whom the child can be placed and engage key people in the family who can participate in the planning and decision-making process regarding a child's wellbeing.

‘At present I am confident in saying that as a result of the program’s involvement in notifications and investigations we are able to ensure that adequate consideration is given to things like the [Aboriginal Child Placement Principle], cultural assessments and frameworks, extended family and community information, and input into the planning for service delivery. What this has meant in real terms is that children are now less likely to be placed in out-of-home care. Should a placement be required, children are now more likely to be placed with extended Aboriginal family members as opposed to a non-Indigenous placement. In many cases, children can remain at home with biological parents where the risk is not significant and can be managed. And most importantly, families and children feel that the power has shifted and they now have a real say in what is happening to and with their children.’

### ***Providing cultural guidance to the statutory child protection service***

*Lakidjeka* has built a reputation for providing sound advice to child protection departments on the child’s Indigenous community and valuable information to promote the child’s cultural identity. Staff are able to inform decisions on placement options and use a sophisticated Indigenous risk assessment process as well as having skills in collaborative case management.

One of the reasons *Lakidjeka* has been successful in building a partnership with the department is their willingness to take a collaborative approach on child protection issues, rather than taking an adversarial stance.

‘We may or may not agree with the department, but we have to be professional and be able to work with them the next day... You need to be comfortable working with and walking alongside the department.’

*Lakidjeka* staff now provide input into the department’s ‘Beginning Practice’ training program for new child protection workers. *Lakidjeka* regularly provides advanced training courses on working with Aboriginal families and organisations for child protection workers and other child and family welfare staff.

‘The staff participation in the Department of Human Services professional development training has given *Lakidjeka* staff the opportunity to understand the child protection system and its decision-making processes a whole lot better, giving the *Lakidjeka* staff the opportunity to consult and be consulted in significant child protection or case plan decisions.’

*Lakidjeka*’s success in this training is significant as it is seen by key sector stakeholders as having led to more informed decision-making by child protection services and other child and family welfare services.

‘Child protection and other services are coming to understand the important role culture can play in developing resilience for Aboriginal children.’

### ***Program challenge***

There are a number of program challenges. These include: recruiting Indigenous staff for this complex work, and the ongoing education of child protection staff about understanding the role of the program and the input of cultural and community connections as part of promoting children’s best interests.

The extension of the service beyond the first statutory case plan has meant that program staff are requested to attend a large number of statutory and other meetings as well as be involved in allegations of abuse-in-care processes for Indigenous children. This has meant that work demands outstrip the capacity of the program to meet all service demands and the program must at times make decisions about workload priorities.

### ***Outcomes of the Lakidjeka program***

Since *Lakidjeka* has been in operation, there has been an 85 to 95 per cent compliance with the consultation process by the Department of Human Services when they receive a notification, a reduction in Indigenous children being removed from their families, and an increase in compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Prin-

ciple in Victoria. There has been an increased understanding by child protection staff and other child and family welfare workers of the importance of cultural identity and community connection, as being critical to Aboriginal children's best interests. *Lakidjeka's* involvement has resulted in a more flexible and creative response to addressing risk issues. Fundamentally, the program has been instrumental in assisting child protection staff to make more informed decisions about Indigenous children.

For more information about *Lakidjeka*, contact Rodney Monohan or Suzanne Cleary at the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, 139 Nicholson Street, East Brunswick, Victoria 3057. Telephone: (03) 8388 1855. Fax: (03) 8388 1898. Or go to their website at: [www.vacca.org](http://www.vacca.org).

# Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (RAATSICC)

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## Indigenous child protection response, Cairns, Queensland

*Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (RAATSICC)* is a comprehensive service, which has established a network of 22 communities throughout the Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf of Carpentaria in far North Queensland. RAATSICC supports and encourages these local communities to develop a community approach to child protection issues and family support through effective community participation in decision-making. RAATSICC's central office is located in Cairns, Queensland with a total of 40 service centres established throughout the region.

RAATSICC takes a holistic approach to promoting the wellbeing of children and families by providing child care and child protection services in coordination with a range of family support services throughout the region. The services include:

- Domestic violence support and resource services;
- Child and family support and resource services such as parenting programs;
- Child protection support services.

An important aim of RAATSICC is to reduce the number of children placed in out-of-home care in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by providing a culturally appropriate response to the needs of children and their families.

## Getting RAATSICC up and running

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1990	The first meeting of Indigenous women was held in the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) to discuss domestic violence and child care issues.
	Funding obtained from the Queensland minister to establish NPA services.
1991	The NPA service was established with a focus on child care issues, and had its first meeting of women from both the Cape and Gulf areas.
1997	NPA changed its name to RAATSICC to reflect the broader geographical coverage of the service.
1999	The service was centralised in Cairns, Queensland and Commonwealth Government funding was secured to expand to include child protection services. The Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) model of response to child protection issues was mandated in the <i>Child Protection Act 1999</i> .
2001	Current range of programs established.
2004	The Crime and Misconduct Commission report led to the appointment of Recognised Entities (Indigenous representatives with expertise in child abuse issues). A nominated staff member from RAATSICC is the 'Recognised Entity'.

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## First meeting of Indigenous women

In 1990, a group of women from communities in the Northern Peninsula Area met to discuss concerns regarding child care and domestic violence issues. Other women from the region shared their concerns and in 1991 the group received funding from the government to establish a service to address these problems.



## ***RAATSICC established central office in Cairns***

In 1997, the service changed its name to RAATSICC to reflect the broader geographical coverage of the communities in the network. Two years later, RAATSICC established its centralised office in Cairns. Desley Thompson manages the service.

Due to the broad focus of RAATSICC's work, which includes both child protection and child care issues, the organisation works closely with both the Queensland Department of Child Safety, which is responsible for child protection matters, and the Department of Communities, which is responsible for early intervention and prevention services for children. By 2001, RAATSICC had established its current range of services.

## ***A more effective model of consulting with Indigenous communities recommended***

In 2004, the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission released a report that recommended a more effective model of consultation and response to child abuse concerns. In response to the report, Recognised Entities were established to participate in the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) child protection response meetings.

## **Providing an Indigenous response to child protection issues**

### ***The Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) model<sup>5</sup>***

The SCAN model comprises a multi-disciplinary response team that investigates child abuse concerns. The team includes representatives from the Department of Child Safety, the police, and services such as education and health. Representatives from other services such as disability, housing and mental health, may also be invited to participate in the meetings.

SCAN teams act as in an advisory capacity, and do not replace the Department of Child Safety's child protection response. Cases are referred to the SCAN team when there are suspicions that a child has been harmed or is at risk of suffering harm, and there are concerns the parents are unwilling or unable to protect the child from harm.

The Crime and Misconduct Commission's report led to the development of a new state-wide approach to responding to child abuse issues involving Indigenous children, which included Indigenous representatives, or Recognised Entities, participating in SCAN meetings when protection concerns involve an Indigenous child.

**'It's about establishing a good working relationship with people and organisations, as well as [building] rapport.'**

SCAN representatives provide assessment, response and case management direction regarding suspected child abuse cases. The SCAN model of responding to child protection concerns ensures that government departments and organisations work together to prevent child abuse and neglect. The model provides a forum for inter-agency discussion, planning and action between partners, including Indigenous organisations, health and education services, the police and child protection services.

### ***Recognised Entities***

Recognised Entities (REs) are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander individuals or organisations who are external to the department and have expertise in, and knowledge of, child protection policies, procedures and issues. The input of Recognised Entities at SCAN meetings enables community-based perspectives to be considered when deciding how to respond to child maltreatment issues.

Recognised Entities have been authorised by their communities and approved by the department to provide family background and cultural advice on child protection matters involving Indigenous children. Recognised Entities work closely with child protection services to ensure that issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families are addressed in a culturally appropriate manner. By law, the department must

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<sup>5</sup> Information on the SCAN model is available on the Department of Child Safety website: [www.childsafety.qld.gov.au](http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au)

invite a Recognised Entity to participate in case planning discussions before any significant decision is made relating to an Indigenous child.

A staff member of RAATSICC is their appointed Recognised Entity. The Recognised Entity attends SCAN meetings on their communities' behalf, and provides background cultural and community knowledge in the meetings. The Recognised Entity's presence at SCAN meetings enhances professionals' overall understanding of the case, and assists in case planning direction.

'[We are now] able to provide child protection support services through participation on the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team and staffing a Recognised Entity position. [The Recognised Entity serves] on the RE committee, which involves community decision-making about child welfare... Before the REs there was no representation about care of our children or consultations. The biggest change is having a voice at that forum. It's made a difference giving them the community and cultural background [of the family], where [the problems are] coming from and why.'

The implementation of the SCAN process has improved RAATSICC's working relationships with the Department of Child Safety and other government departments.

'We've been trying to build partnerships with the department and I think it's happened. We're working together with the department [of Child Safety] in terms of [child protection] issues, and they'll ask us who's available [to work with them].'

### ***Child Safety Officers and Child Safety Support Officers***

Child safety officers are child protection workers employed by the department. Most are non-Indigenous, and some are Indigenous. Child safety support officers who are assigned to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are all Indigenous and provide support to the child safety officers.

### ***Response to referrals***

When a referral is received on a child from the Gulf or Cape region that the department has assessed requires further action, the department's child safety officer discusses the referral with RAATSICC's Recognised Entity. Together they decide on whether the protective concerns can be addressed by providing supports to the family, or whether the child needs to be removed from the family's care and placed in alternative accommodation.

If it is believed that the concerns can be addressed by providing family support, RAATSICC works closely with family support workers in the child's local community to assist the family so that the safety of the child can be assured.

'That's where the child and family support workers [in the community] come in... It's about how can we assist that family. It might be anger management for the father, parenting classes, and so forth.'

If the protective concerns cannot be resolved, the case is then referred to the SCAN team for further investigation. If the child needs to be removed, the Child Safety Officer will consult with the child safety support officer in order to find a placement in the same community or in the same cultural setting. Each community is assigned a child safety support officer, who works to support both the department's needs and the needs of the community.

### ***A holistic response to child protection concerns***

RAATSICC is able to respond in a holistic way to concerns by drawing on supports and services in the community to help families address issues before they get out of hand.

'We have a network of services: child care, domestic violence support, and so on. At the child care centres, [staff] see the child that's being abused directly, and some of our centres are hubs where they do parent education. Also we have resource units where

communities can borrow whatever resources they need. If they're doing training [for community workers] we can provide the books and videos as well. We've also developed posters for some of the workers. We've helped them in establishing their own resource development.'

RAATSICC also provide services such as funding for emergency supplies, disposable nappies and prams, without communities having to go through the department to get these needs met, which is often more complex and time consuming. Many communities are isolated and RAATSICC ensures they have regular communication with all the communities in the network 'so communities know we're thinking of them'.

### ***Early intervention for child protection notifications***

Participation in the SCAN meetings enables the RAATSICC Recognised Entity to be kept informed of recent trends in child protection risk factors that may compromise families and communities. RAATSICC staff can then intervene early to assist families and support communities so problems can be addressed as soon as possible.

'If we see that one community has [a high level of] domestic violence, that's when we can get the other workers in there to do some training or have some discussions.'

### ***Community knowledge and feedback directs service delivery***

RAATSICC staff visit communities on a regular basis, attend community events and meet with community members, including respected Elders, aunties and uncles. RAATSICC also hold regular meetings with their management committee, who are a source of information about community issues.

The management committee is made up of community members from diverse backgrounds throughout the region who have expertise in domestic violence, health care, community service and legal issues. RAATSICC staff rely on feedback from community members to assist them to address issues as they develop. The organisation is able to direct their services to where there is the greatest need.

'[We've got a] really good management committee... All of our management committee is made up of women from the communities themselves. The communities are different but the problems are common. So they can really relate to the issues. And their knowledge is invaluable because they're living it. At the coal-face. They live and breathe it. And they're really good to lead us as workers and they talk to us all the time and they can be contacted all the time so we can just ask them, "How should we go about this?" And they'll share that with us.'

RAATSICC holds regular meetings with their network of community members in order to keep up-to-date about what is occurring in the communities, and to share information and skills. The meetings are also an opportunity for community representatives to draw support from RAATSICC, who can lobby on their behalf when communities have difficult issues that need to be addressed with the department.

'The [community] network is where all the strength comes from; the network itself. They own it. The network meetings, that's where [feedback on what's needed] comes out. And the community will stand up to the department, through us. They'll rely on us to do that for them.'

### ***Responding to workers' needs for services***

Another strength of the service is their responsiveness in being able to identify and meet service needs in communities, not just for families, but for community workers themselves.

'[We developed a] therapeutic register to support community members to assist their clients... We sourced professionals for the list. [The register is] also for workers who need debriefing. We put an ad in the paper, sourced people we knew who would work with

Indigenous people, and looked in the yellow pages. We pay for the [professionals] to go up to communities.

It had been identified as a gap in service – professional intervention, debriefing for workers. There had been no one doing this, so workers were taking that on and getting burnt out. Many workers had been in their position for years and years and had never had debriefing. Community workers work on a crisis basis. No time to sit down and plan. Now we follow a process. We've got 48 hours to respond to a therapeutic request.'

RAATSICC also provides training to child care workers and family support workers in their communities. RAATSICC produces a monthly newsletter that goes out to their community network and keeps them apprised of scheduled training programs, as well as providing information on changes to legislation, worker profiles, articles on topics relevant to workers, and upcoming community events.

### ***Feedback from the department***

RAATSICC receives feedback on whether they are doing a good job from a range of sources, and this helps them to know that they are on track in terms of service delivery. As well as feedback from the management committee, RAATSICC receives feedback from a range of services including the Department of Child Safety and the Department of Communities.

'Both departments give us good feedback on occasion. And not just doing good work in one area but across the board. It's also our transparency, they don't have much to argue with.'

### ***RAATSICC provide consultations to other organisations***

RAATSICC staff have input into the cultural competency training of community service officers, and is often asked to provide advice and guidance to departmental staff and non-government organisations.

'[Non-government organisations] come and call on us to help to do this or recognise our skill and knowledge in certain areas and utilise that and that makes you feel that you're doing something right and other professionals recognise that.'

RAATSICC has become known throughout the state as having expertise in developing workshops and programs, and their programs are used by other organisations and departments.

'The department wanted to do a domestic violence workshop and they went to the domestic violence service here and asked if [the service] could do a session in [another region] and they [told the department], "You need to go to RAATSICC." So other non-government organisations are telling the department to go to RAATSICC. Not just in this area but throughout the state, and even throughout the country. I went into [a metropolitan agency's] office and I saw one of the RAATSICC parent education programs there. So if you see that in Adelaide somewhere, that's too deadly.'

For more information on RAATSICC, contact Desley Thompson at Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Suite 6, 135 Abbott Street, Cairns, Queensland 4770. PO Box 6242MC Cairns, Queensland 4870. Telephone: (07) 4041 0899. Fax: (07) 4041 5082. Or go to their website at: [www.raatsicc.org.au](http://www.raatsicc.org.au).

# Safe Families

## Indigenous response to child protection issues, Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs, NT

*Safe Families* is a program that takes an Indigenous, family-inclusive, community-centred approach to responding to child protection issues, in order to keep Indigenous children and young people out of the care system. The program is an initiative of the Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs, Northern Territory. *Safe Families* provides services to Indigenous people residing in Alice Springs and the 18 town camps established on the town's fringes. The service provides a responsive, flexible, needs-based service rather than the structured response and service delivery approach taken by child protection departments.

Tangentyere Council is a voluntary organisation that was formed to address the needs of Aboriginal people living in town camps on the fringes of Alice Springs. The council comprises members from a range of kinship groups in the town camps, and relies on community involvement to create a safer and more stable living environment for camp residents.

*Safe Families* has developed a unique model of working with families and communities that prioritises Indigenous ways of caring for and protecting children and young people. The *Safe Families* way of responding to child protection concerns draws upon effective frameworks of care that currently exist within Indigenous families, communities and culture.

*Safe Families* helps children and young people aged up to 14 years who have been identified as being 'at risk', who are subject to child protection intervention, and who present with multiple and complex issues including: involvement with the juvenile justice system; a child maltreatment history; homelessness; substance abuse; family violence; mental health issues; family dysfunction and family breakdown. *Safe Families* can intervene early to assist the family and prevent the need for statutory child protection involvement by providing voluntary out-of-home care placements for children at risk within their kinship and community network.

The *Safe Families* model was developed following consultations and workshops with local Indigenous leaders, community groups and service providers. The need to enhance outcomes for young people as well as support families to improve their capacity to provide care underpinned the development of the model.

An important goal of the program is to empower communities to become more skilled and knowledgeable about child protection issues so they can develop the capacity to address protective concerns themselves, and keep their children in the community.

**'It's about the community being capable to involve itself in statutory work. If a child comes into care they don't necessarily have to leave their community... We take a human rights approach [to child welfare]. It's a right to be brought up within your community. If your extended family doesn't have the capacity [to care for the child] it doesn't mean that the community doesn't have the capacity... You need a belief in the community's capacity.'**

An aim of the program is to promote the healthy development of Indigenous children and young people, and to enhance their positive transition towards adulthood. *Safe Families* does this by supporting participation in education, employment and independent living, as well as enhancing capacity to develop social competence, self-confidence and a positive identity.

### Getting *Safe Families* up and running

2000	Initial idea to develop housing alternatives for young people at risk that incorporated broader safety issues for children and young people.
2001	Consultations and workshops with community members from Alice Springs and town camps, departmental staff and non-government organisations.
2002	<i>Safe Families</i> commenced operation.



### ***The need for alternative housing for young people at risk***

The initial drive for the development of *Safe Families* came about due to a lack of safe, supportive housing alternatives for young people who had been identified as being at risk of homelessness and exposure to harm.

A crisis accommodation service for young people had been established, but it was not equipped to address the protective concerns facing the young people who accessed the service in a comprehensive way. This service provided crisis accommodation for children and young people, but was often misused by parents as a child-minding service without a concurrent focus on increasing parent's capacity to provide safe care for their children.

### ***Community consultations were held to determine the type of service needed***

Driven by non-government organisations in Alice Springs, consultations and workshops were conducted with staff from the organisations and the department to determine what kind of service was needed. Community consultations also took place with Indigenous leaders, community groups and service providers. Focus groups were conducted in town camps to decide what kind of service would be most appropriate. Tangentyere Council then submitted a proposal to work with children and young people at risk and their families and were successful in securing funding to establish the service.

### ***Developing a model that embedded respite in broader child safety goals***

Professionals recognised the need for a respite service that was embedded in broader child safety goals and contributed to minimising child maltreatment and making families more responsible. A reference group of professionals and advisers was established to provide direction during the establishment of the service.

It was acknowledged in the consultations that it was important that the model incorporate the capacity to address immediate problems as well as long-term issues in a collaborative manner with other organisations and government departments. Short-term accommodation for the young person at risk was to be accompanied by a comprehensive response that included addressing parenting issues, financial management, substance abuse, health issues and education. It was also important that the service assisted young people and their families to develop and maintain strong positive family relationships and community networks.

### ***Determining the age range of the target group***

*Safe Families* identified the age group that was most in need of the service. The initial idea was to provide services to children up to 12 years because at the time that was the age group that seemed to be most vulnerable. However, due to the need to access the service by older children, staff now work primarily with 7–14-year-olds, and there are some younger children engaged with the service as well.

### ***Hiring staff and commencing operation***

The service engaged and trained house staff. Staff with *Safe Families* worked with the Northern Territory Ministry of Housing to make housing available and a priority for their clients.

The service hired a coordinator and two Indigenous family workers to focus on child protection and family support issues, to ensure families were supported while their children were in alternative accommodation. Due to a shortage of staff with appropriate skills and training the service hired talented people who demonstrated the potential to be skilled up while on the job. *Safe Families* commenced operation in August 2002.

### ***Professional accountability of staff***

In line with the inclusive, consultative way of working with families and communities, *Safe Families* staff are consulted on, and invited to participate in, decision-making processes. An important aspect of the service is that professional and cultural accountability is the responsibility of staff and this accountability becomes the service's quality assurance process. Staff have high standards of professionalism and are accountable to their colleagues in ensuring their own work is of a satisfactory standard. The organisation has a culturally appropriate Enterprise Bargaining Agreement and there is low turnover of staff.



# How to respond to child protection issues from an Indigenous perspective

## Safe Families – an Indigenous child protection response

*Safe Families* utilises an Indigenous way of working with child protection issues, using a family-inclusive, community-centred response. As models of extended kinship family care are entrenched in Indigenous culture they can guide the way in which *Safe Families* responds to child protection concerns. At-risk young people can be supported by extended family members within existing kinship networks.

The service takes the perspective that the provision of care and support from within the Aboriginal community is vital to supporting and maintaining family, community and cultural connectedness.

*Safe Families* takes a holistic approach to addressing concerns and operates an integrated service response model that includes:

- Early intervention such as education and primary health care;
- Voluntary family placements – placing young people with extended family members where possible;
- Crisis accommodation such as residential care;
- Comprehensive case management that maintains family and community connections and incorporates support services to strengthen families;
- Parent and family services and support to enable family oriented responses.

The *Safe Families* Model incorporates a six-step intervention strategy as follows:<sup>6</sup>

1. **Referral:** These come from the child protection service, the police, youth services, the Youth Night Patrol and the courts.
2. **Crisis Accommodation:** This can be town-based; family of origin; identified community; extended family; or town camp-based accommodation.
3. **Assessment:** Through participation in family meetings the young person is referred to a youth service organisation; or participates in a similar program through *Safe Families*.
4. **Accommodation medium- to long-term:** Through a family mapping process a medium- to long-term placement is identified and assessed.
5. **Case management:** The need for support services for both the child or young person and the family is identified and allocated. These include:

### Youth

Counselling	Health
Advocacy	Education
Mediation	Income
Support	Training
Liaison/linking	Life skills
Education	Cultural needs
Ongoing assessment	Employment
Basic needs (e.g. food, clothes)	Accommodation

### Family

Counselling
Advocacy
Mediation
Support
Liaison/linking
Education
Care agreement reviews
Ongoing assessment

<sup>6</sup> Some of the information in this model is drawn from the *Safe Families* Partnership Agreement, Indigenous Youth Crisis Accommodation Service, Alice Springs

6. **Review:** Review and assessment of placement and progress is conducted. The review includes a youth worker, a family worker, the young person and their carer, as well as the family. At the end of the assessment one of three options is reached:
- (a) An exit plan is drawn up and the child remains in placement or is returned to their natural family;
  - (b) A referral is made to the statutory child protection department where placement has been unsuccessful and there are no other family placement options;
  - (c) An ongoing case management plan is drawn up where further involvement of the service is required.

## **Protecting children the *Safe Families* way**

‘We’re always negotiating with the department as to how they see the risk, and how we see the risk.’

*Safe Families* takes the perspective that families and communities are central to the lives of young people and need to be incorporated in any case-planning decisions. Staff work with both the young person and their family to improve family cohesion, strengthen family resilience and increase their capacity to address risk factors that may place young people at risk of harm.

### ***A holistic, integrated response to child protection concerns***

The service works in a holistic way and provides support and assistance to families as well as young people. Where a child is removed from their parents, *Safe Families* supports families to create a safe living environment so the young person can be reunited with their family. *Safe Families* operates in partnership with other youth service providers, government departments and community members. The service provides an integrated response to addressing child protection concerns, which includes:

- Early intervention to strengthen families to deal with crisis;
- Family placements for children and young people in crisis;
- Crisis accommodation;
- Comprehensive case management;
- Parent and family support.

The *Safe Families* model of working with young people and their families is based on a holistic understanding of the young person’s needs and provides comprehensive case management that supports both the young person and their families. A main strength of the program is that it responds to the needs of the young person and their families as they arise, rather than responding to issues as directed by the department.

‘[Safe Families] is quite flexible in its response [to child protection issues]. We respond to whatever need comes through the door.’

*Safe Families* initially responded to child protection concerns after a notification of maltreatment had been received. However, *Safe Families* now focuses on early intervention and attempts to engage the young person and their families before the family becomes involved with the child protection system.

### ***Providing cultural input into statutory decision-making***

*Safe Families* continues to build strong relationships with departmental staff by participating in ongoing regular meetings to discuss cases, providing the department with feedback on cases, and conducting joint home visits with departmental staff. Staff find that through regular consultation and communication, departmental staff are willing to do things the *Safe Families* way because the organisation gets results.

Aboriginal people working with an Indigenous service have an advantage when working with Indigenous families, as they operate in a culturally appropriate way and are more likely to be trusted by families and young people. Workers have often known the family for many years and are also likely to have known the child since they were small. They therefore have background knowledge about the family and the issues that the child may be dealing with that is not available to departmental workers.

**‘Our greatest strength is our ability to provide clarity [about a case]: Our workers have known the families for years. We’ve also become quality assurance for the department, because we see families in greater depth and greater detail.’**

As workers are Indigenous and have community and cultural knowledge, they provide valuable cultural and background information to departmental workers to assist them with case management decisions. Because workers are members of the community they have informal networks they can tap into that are not accessible to the department.

*Safe Families* staff act as cultural brokers in the wider community when cultural input is needed and have become an effective lobby group for supporting Indigenous issues. Staff also advocate for children and young people, especially in regard to minimising system abuse of Indigenous children and young people, such as interventionist responses by child protection departments that lack a full consideration of the child’s cultural needs. Staff are able to minimise the potential for systems abuse of young people because they are able to talk issues through with families, who are usually known to them, thereby avoiding a higher level of statutory intervention.

### ***Alternative accommodation***

*Safe Families* provides up to six weeks in residential care for young people who need alternative accommodation. The residential service means that children and young people don’t have to leave the community if a short-term or emergency placement is required. However, young people may stay in the facility for longer than six weeks if no suitable alternative is available for the young person. The service takes the perspective that it is better to keep the child until a suitable placement is found, rather than placing a child in a situation that may not be a good match or satisfactory in the longer term. The residential facility is staffed by *Safe Families* workers who are available on a 24-hour basis. The residential service provides valuable respite for families who may be struggling to cope with the day-to-day care of the young person. Family support services work with families to improve the standard of care they can provide to their child and keep them out of the child protection system.

### ***Ensuring children are culturally safe***

A focus of the service is ensuring Indigenous children’s cultural identity is maintained. Workers take the view that while children can be physically unsafe they can also be culturally unsafe. For example, culturally inappropriate responses may incorporate judgmental views about issues such as allowing a child access with family members who may be materially disadvantaged. Culturally unsafe practices compromise the child’s ability to remain connected with family, community and culture. *Safe Families* aims to prevent children and young people from being placed in culturally unsafe placements by providing them with alternative accommodation in an Indigenous residential placement when they cannot remain with their families.

Because *Safe Families* is embedded in cultural and community frameworks of care, the service is successful in working with children and young people who are ‘hard to place’.

The service has been successful in case managing Indigenous children who can’t be placed elsewhere, or where previous placements have broken down. Suitable care alternatives such as emergency residential care enables young people to avoid being placed in units or specialist services that carry a stigma and tend to label the young people as ‘unmanageable’. The result is that children and young people stay with *Safe Families* longer than they do with other services, and all of the children that have come through the service and have not returned to their parents’ care have ended up in a stable placement.

**‘Giving kids labels and calling them “unmanageable” means that when workers are doing assessments around foster carers they say, “This foster carer needs specialist skills to manage this kid.” A lot of kids who come into residential placements become**

unmanageable. A lot of those behaviours are developed in inappropriate residential placements. They develop behaviours that mean foster care is unsuitable for them. We reduce the welfare stigma. Of the kids that we had through last year, there were six that we had for three to four months, I can't think of one who didn't end up in a stable placement; and they were long-term out-of-home care kids... Aboriginal people have an absolute advantage when it comes to operating residential services for Aboriginal people.'

For more information on *Safe Families*, contact the program manager of *Safe Families* at the Tangentyere Council, 3 Brown Street, Alice Springs NT 0871. PO Box 8070 Alice Springs, NT 8071. Telephone: (08) 8952 8282. Or go to their website at: [www.tangentyere.org.au](http://www.tangentyere.org.au)

## Conclusion

*Lakidjeka*, RAATSICC and *Safe Families* provide culturally relevant child protection support services to families that become involved with the child protection system in their state or territory. They bring an Indigenous perspective to child protection issues, and respond in ways that draw on the strengths of the communities and extended families of the children who are placed in out-of-home care. By working with existing frameworks of care within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship networks and communities, and by taking a holistic approach to meeting the needs of children in care, they are able to enhance the likelihood that children will remain connected with their families, communities and culture when they need to be removed from their parents' care.





