



CREATING CHANGE through PARTNERSHIPS

An introductory guide to partnerships
between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
and non-Indigenous organisations in
child and family services



This resource was researched and drafted by Andria Mastroianni and John Burton from SNAICC – National Voice for our Children.

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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have unique richness, diversity and strengths in child rearing. The majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are strong, resilient and nurturing and provide supportive, loving and positive environments for children.

However, some families and communities also continue to face significant challenges in overcoming the impacts of colonisation, including historic and ongoing discrimination and exclusion, systemic child removal, intergenerational trauma, dislocation from land and culture, community disempowerment and poverty. Members of the Stolen Generations and their descendants – who comprise an estimated 33% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult population – still experience adverse outcomes across a broad range of health, socioeconomic and cultural indicators (AIHW, 2019).

Data across areas of family safety and wellbeing and early childhood development show that some families are in need of additional support. While most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children start school on track for a positive educational experience, a significant minority begin at a disadvantage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 2.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains at the time they start school (AEDC, 2018) and are now 10.2 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children (SNAICC, 2019).

Engagement with child and family support services is critical to strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and improving life outcomes for vulnerable children. Statistics indicate a low national level of access to support services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and support services regularly identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as 'hard-to-reach' (Family Matters, 2019).

However, this is more properly characterised as a service system that presents significant barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement; barriers that can be overcome by service adaptation and quality service provision (Ware, 2012).

Two key means to increase access to and engagement with children and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples are for services to be:

- working within a cultural competence framework
- engaging in effective partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. (SNAICC, 2012).

Based on all available evidence, genuine and respectful partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and non-Indigenous service providers have multiple benefits, including:

- ongoing cultural competence and safety capability development for non-Indigenous service providers
- governance and service capacity development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- development of shared capacity to respond to community needs
- development of individual and community capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in areas including workforce and community leadership.

These benefits are consistent with national and state and territory government policy frameworks that acknowledge the need for, and support, a partnership-based approach with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations for service delivery.





However, while partnerships have long been recognised as important for developing effective and culturally competent and safe services, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had negative experiences of tokenistic relationships labelled as partnerships. This has led to a level of mistrust of governments and non-Indigenous services and a belief that they may use partnerships to ‘tick boxes’ of cultural competence and community engagement, without a deeper commitment to sustainable relationships or local community empowerment.

Tokenistic involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people doesn’t lead to better services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It can, in fact, hold up progress, as the appearance of partnership masks deeper mistrust, maintains power imbalance and fails to promote reconciliation. Achieving better outcomes requires a shared commitment to building deeper, respectful and more genuine relationships.

SNAICC has developed this resource with the aims of:

1. Introducing organisations to the importance of genuine inter-agency partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous service providers.
2. Providing an overview of the principles and practices that are effective to create and sustain genuine inter-agency partnerships.
3. Introducing service providers to the range of best practice materials available to support services in genuine partnership development.

Partnerships and self-determination

Genuine partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and non-Indigenous service providers are important because they can support the creation of an environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities can work towards self-determination – the collective right of peoples to determine and control their own destiny. *The Bringing Them Home* report explained self-determination in the following way:

Self-determination requires more than consultation because consultation alone does not confer any decision-making authority or control over outcomes. Self-determination also requires more than participation in service delivery because in a participation model the nature of the service and the ways in which the service is provided have not been determined by Indigenous peoples. Inherent in the right of self-determination is Indigenous decision-making carried through into implementation (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).



COMMUNITY CONTROL LEADING TO BETTER OUTCOMES

International and Australian evidence strongly supports the importance of Indigenous participation for achieving positive outcomes in service delivery for Indigenous children and families.

Canadian research has shown a direct correlation between increased Indigenous community-control of services and improved health outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Lavoie, J. et. al., 2010) and a direct connection between Indigenous self-government and reduced rates of youth suicide (Chandler, M. and Lalonde, C., 1998). Numerous Australian reports and inquiries confirm a lack of robust community governance and meaningful Indigenous community participation as major contributors to past failures of government policy, and commonly highlight the importance of building capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled children and family services (ANAO, 2012; NSW Ombudsman, 2011; Wild, R. and Anderson P., 2007).

Partnerships that support self-determination extend beyond consultation to provide the resources that genuinely give power to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to design and implement policy and programs and to make the decisions about children's development and wellbeing.

Enabling and respecting self-determination means that partnership cannot be imposed on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or organisation; it needs to be based on the aspirations and interests of that community to engage in partnerships and service delivery. One of the key outcomes of any partnership should be, where required and wanted, to build the operational and leadership capacity of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander entity, in line with the aspirations of that entity for increasing its role and service offering for families. It also requires recognising the existing strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, including that in many cases a partnership to 'build capacity' may not be wanted

or required when an organisation already has significant capability and is already best placed to lead service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Key considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations need to consider the value of a potential partnership for meeting the needs of children and families in their community and for advancing their own service development aspirations. It is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations undertake due diligence to ensure that any potential partnership will benefit you and your community.

Some key questions for consideration by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations prior to engaging in partnerships include:

- What services do we want to develop and provide and do prospective partners have the right skills and expertise to support us in developing those services?
- Are prospective partners committed to working respectfully in ways that are culturally safe for our organisations, and for our community?
- Do prospective partners have the capacity to question Western knowledge and privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families?
- Are there other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations we could partner with to support our service goals rather than partnering with a non-Indigenous provider?
- Will the partnership lead to better supports and outcomes for children and families?
- Are there services we don't currently deliver and/or don't want to deliver that we need to partner on to ensure families in our community have access to necessary supports?



- Do prospective partners share our commitment to building capacity, skills and leadership in the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community?
- Are we best placed to be the lead partner in a program or service for our community, and if not, is that something we want to change as our capacity develops over time?

Answering these questions is an important step to inform whether and how an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation negotiates to establish any partnership to deliver services for children and families in your community.



PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

SNAICC has identified through research with promising partnerships across Australia (SNAICC, 2012), that the core principles that underpin genuine and successful partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and non-Indigenous service providers are:

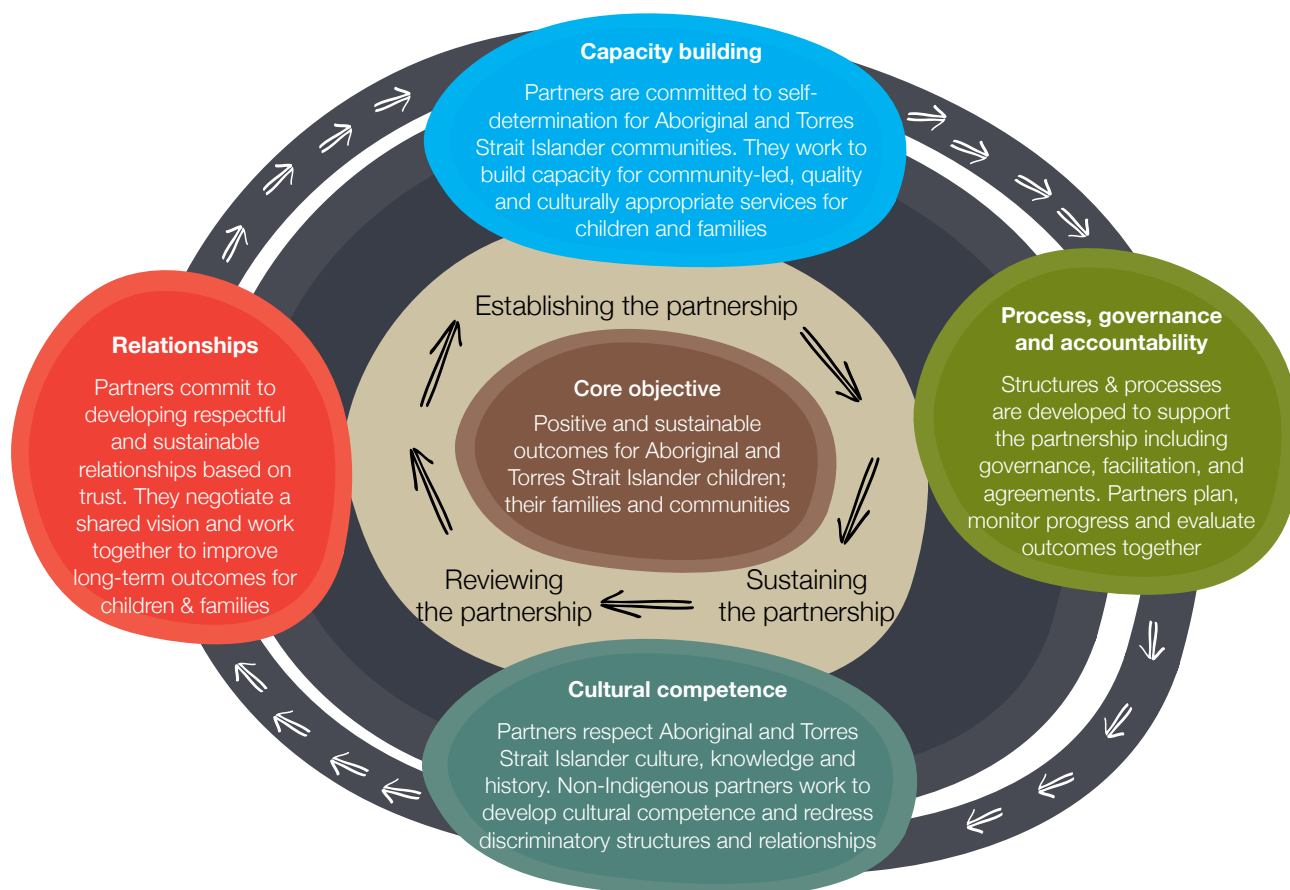
Principle	This requires...
Commitment to long-term sustainable relationships based on trust	Significant time spent building relationships between staff, organisations and community. Partners commit to ongoing relationship, not only an activity or project.
Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history	Commitment to build cultural understanding, to consult and listen to the local community, and to value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and professionalism.
Commitment to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead the response to child and family needs. Building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, organisation and workforce capacity.
Aim to improve long-term wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities	Identifying and sharing respective strengths in supporting children and families. Partnership resources viewed as community resources and shared for the benefit of children and families.
Shared responsibility and accountability for shared objectives and activities	Negotiated and shared vision is developed. Partners jointly develop indicators of success and work together to monitor and evaluate progress.
Valuing process elements as integral to support and enable partnership	Agreements clarify commitments, roles and accountability. Time and resources are allocated to joint planning, review, and partnership development.
Redressing unequal or discriminatory relationships, structures and outcomes	Recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage reflects historical and continuing discrimination, and working to correct resulting power and resource imbalances.
Working differently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families	Developing cultural competence and safety in service delivery. Recognising non-Indigenous approaches are often not the best way to engage and support Indigenous families.

These principles form the bedrock of genuine and successful partnerships, and have major implications for partnership development, operation, management and resourcing.



OVERVIEW OF HOW TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN GENUINE INTER-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

The framework below provides a way of understanding and thinking about partnership development. It draws on the evidence of what is important for genuine partnerships in service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The outer boxes describe the four key domains that inform all the processes that take place in the inner-circle with the aim to achieve the core objective at the centre of the diagram.



KEY STRATEGIES

THE FOUR KEY STRATEGIES OUTLINED BELOW EXPAND FURTHER ON HOW YOU CAN USE THIS FRAMEWORK TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN GENUINE PARTNERSHIP.

STRATEGY 1

BUILD YOUR AND YOUR ORGANISATION'S CULTURAL COMPETENCE

In genuine partnerships, non-Indigenous organisations have a responsibility to develop culturally competent and safe professional practice. Cultural competence forms the basis of an organisation's readiness to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. Delivering culturally safe services requires ongoing learning and commitment, particularly for non-Indigenous organisations. In a partnership, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and people can often take roles in sharing and teaching about their cultures and supporting others to develop their knowledge and understanding, but these roles need to be valued and resourced within a partnership.

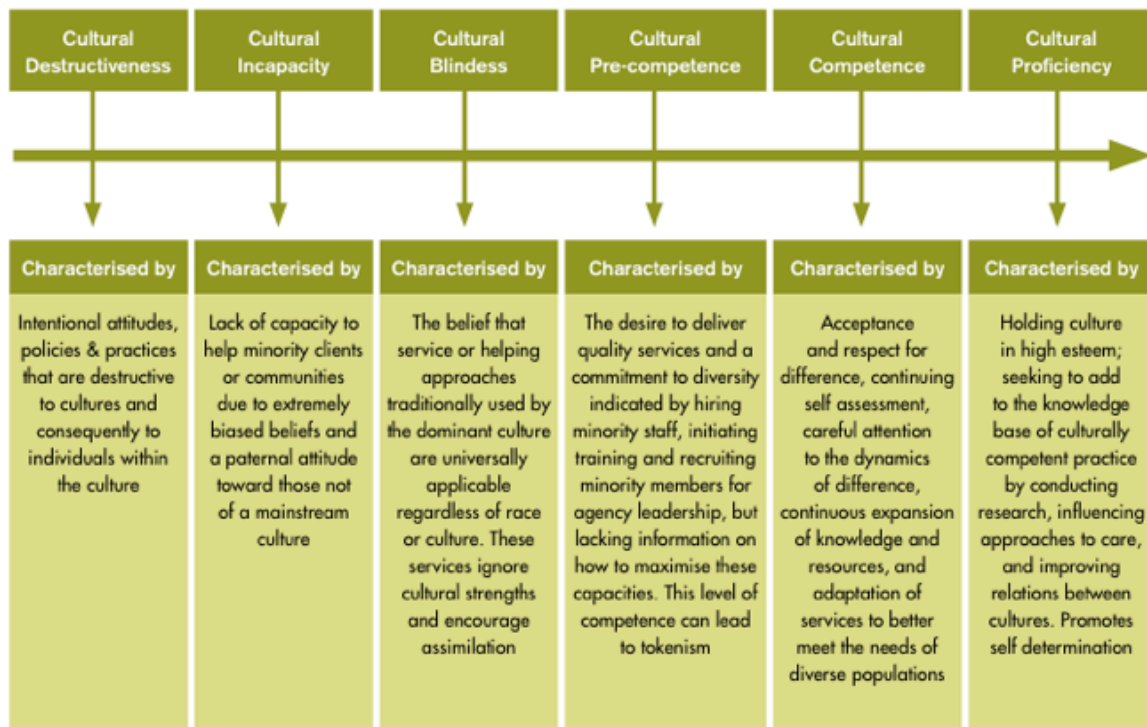
One of the key outcomes of a partnership should be to build the cultural capability and safety of non-Indigenous parties. All service providers have a responsibility to respect and protect the internationally recognised rights of children and all Indigenous peoples to maintain and practice their cultures (UNCRC, article 30; UNDRIP, article 11). Research demonstrates that cultural competence is important for all services to better engage with and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and that family support services are most impactful when programs incorporate cultural knowledge and are focused on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (AIFS, 2012). **However, it must always be remembered that no one can become fully competent in a culture that is not their own, and that developing cultural capability does not serve as a substitute for enabling and supporting the genuine cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.**

There are a number of resources that non-Indigenous organisations and governments can refer to when starting their cultural competence learning (see the Further resources section below). Keep in mind that while you can begin by reading and learning more, genuine cultural competence is not something that can be learnt from a book. Cultural competence develops primarily through relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

REMEMBER: Developing cultural competence is a continuous learning journey, not a destination. It requires a change in attitudes and practices through which individuals and organisations demonstrate genuine respect and value for a culture that is not their own. The continuum below provides a way to think about a cultural competence journey (VACCA, 2008).



CULTURAL COMPETENCE CONTINUUM



<p>BUILDING AND MAINTAINING CULTURAL CAPACITY ISN'T ALWAYS EASY</p> <p>Some of the challenges expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey¹, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Maintaining our cultural competence to provide effective services to the organisations has been a challenge.' • 'We are a non-Indigenous organisation that has a history of not respecting the knowledge that comes with local Indigenous groups, and a history of trying to Westernise responses to issues and discounting the ideas and solutions developed by Indigenous community members and organisations. This makes it really important that if we say we will do something, we follow through. Also, we need to be honest if we can't support something, and say so.' • 'Sometimes our work appears tokenistic; not taking the time to get to know the organisation and therefore not having strong relationships has made things challenging.'
<p>HELPFUL HINTS!</p> <p>Some of the things that have helped partnerships to flourish, expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'As a non-Indigenous organisation we are aware that we don't have all of the knowledge and history on our own, and we are genuinely committed to learning from our partners and to continuously improve our services. We maintain a joint commitment to deliver safe, appropriate and family-centred services.' • 'We have established a set of protocols for staff visiting community, which have been endorsed by a senior cultural advisor in this region. This process of creating protocols for engaging with Aboriginal communities is being implemented across our service footprint through our Reconciliation Action Working Group. Our partnerships have been working well because we have been able to seek guidance from our Aboriginal staff to help non-Aboriginal staff to work respectfully and in a culturally appropriate way.' • 'We have a strong commitment to employing playgroup facilitators from community. We work to engage Elders and community leaders to assist in strengthening connections to families. We support the families to connect to culture and traditions through the playgroup experience and we are led by the expertise of the local families and services.'
<p>WHAT ELSE CAN WE TRY?</p> <p>Useful strategies to build the cultural competence that underpins genuine partnerships include:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify local cultural training provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or organisations and build this into induction and training for staff (your partner organisations may be able to support with this). • Develop a cultural capability development plan for your organisation. SNAICC has a tool available for cultural capability planning, that can be found on page 32 of SNAICC's Partnership Training Manual. • Establish staff sharing and shadowing arrangements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to create opportunities for cross-cultural learning between staff. • Create a plan for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment at your organisation, including in senior positions and for supporting the retention and professional development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

¹ SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey was a survey of family and community services to understand their experiences of partnerships and what supports they required.



REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

In reflecting on your cultural competence, consider:

- Have you read the leading cultural competency framework documents?
- Have you learned about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, customs, history and language? Which organisations and people have helped you to learn?
- Who could you learn more from? Are there relevant cultural awareness programs you can attend?
- How have you supported and encouraged other people to learn?
- Which stage of the cultural competence continuum do you think you are at?
- Have you developed a cultural competence development plan for your organisation?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Leading cultural competence framework documents identified by SNAICC include:

- The SNAICC [Working and Walking Together](#) resource, which is designed to support family relationship services to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- The VACCA [Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework](#) developed for the Victorian Department of Human Services. This framework is incorporated within agency registration standards for community service organisations providing child and family services and out-of-home care services in Victoria. This framework reflects an acknowledgement by the Victorian Government 'that recognition of Aboriginal self-determination and the provision of culturally competent services are fundamental to improved outcomes.'
- The VACCA [Building Respectful Partnerships](#) resource, which was developed in a partnership between VACCA, Berry Street and MacKillop Family Services. This resource is designed as a practice guide to describe culturally competent and respectful practice across an organisation, with the aim to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families and strengthen partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous organisations.



STRATEGY 2

SPEND TIME BUILDING RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES AND THEIR ORGANISATIONS

A significant commitment to and investment in developing relationships of trust is necessary to enable genuine and respectful partnerships. This is especially important for non-Indigenous service providers that need to re-establish trust that has been damaged by the history of mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Below are some key ways for non-Indigenous service providers to establish respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, communities and organisations.

CONNECT. Partnership development takes time, resources and commitment. Take the time to get to know people within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, to understand community leadership structures and the role of community organisations, and to listen to Elders.

LISTEN to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Consult with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community through their own representative organisations and leadership structures. Listen to the needs that they identify and respond by working with them to provide supports that they request. Be aware of and use common protocols for respectful engagement with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

STICK AROUND. Strong partnerships and the building of trust that underpins them take time to develop. To build the trusting relationships that enable you to work effectively with communities to support their wants and needs, you need to commit to working with them for a sustained period of time. One way that you can signify your intention to engage in long-term collaboration is to create a partnership agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which clarifies the partnership objectives and the commitment of all parties.

However, agreements rarely drive the relationship. Their quality reflects the process of relationship building, and the open and honest negotiation that underpins the agreement. Good partners recognise that special attention is needed to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in agreements, including recognition from non-Indigenous partners of the important leading role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in identifying needs, and designing and delivering responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.



SOME TIPS FOR CREATING A GOOD MOU

- Make sure the MOU is focussed on what the partnership is about. It should be a way to describe what you are doing and why in plain language that everybody can understand. Everyone involved should be able to relate to, refer to and use the MOU to guide the partnership.
- Make sure that the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved are clearly articulated, including who will take the lead on funding applications. It is also important to establish any training, capacity building or skills transfer that will occur throughout the partnership, and who is responsible.
- Pay attention to when the agreement will end or be up for renewal. In many partnerships that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations it has been recognised as important to have 'sunset clauses' through which the partnership ends and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation takes full control of services for their community. It is also important to agree on a detailed transition plan, including timelines for transition over an extended period to better support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation if required. If complete transition of services is not the intention, it will still be important to think about how roles will change over time.
- A core component of an MOU is the partnership governance structure or committee. If setup well, this group will be an engine room for driving and oversight of the partnership, and accountability to the community. Pay particular attention to how this is created and described. Does it enable a leading role for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation/s and community in the response to community needs?
- Celebrate the signing of an MOU and hold an event that includes the broader community to inform them about the partnership and build excitement around what it can achieve and contribute to the community.
- Make sure that the agreement includes a clause that states the intention that the agreement will not be legally binding. This will assist to ensure there are no unintended legal consequences of the agreement. However, even though the MOU is stated to be not legally binding, it is advisable to get legal advice.
- See SNAICC's [Partnership Training Manual](#) for further information on agreement making.



<p>BUILDING RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST TAKES TIME AND WORK</p> <p>Some of the challenges expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Finding time to develop relationships can be a challenge and is often also a challenge in service delivery. Trust can take significant time to be gained with organisations and community groups. The need to meet targets can overshadow the need for time to develop trusting relationships which are just as important.' • 'Partnership takes time and this is rarely reflected in funding agreements that are largely output driven. It is important that we take the time to learn about each other and see whether our organisations resonate with each other. For example, do we have the same values and mission? This is critical to establish early on in a partnership.' • 'Relationships and understanding is built with time, and at times it is difficult to spend the time you would like to foster the relationship or to have the appropriate availability.'
<p>HELPFUL HINTS!</p> <p>Some of the things that have helped partnerships to build respectful relationships of trust, expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'The relationships are the most important element. For us, if we rely too much on one person to be the "keeper"; of the relationships, it doesn't work, so we try to bring others along in a kind of succession process.' • 'Good communication and engagement with the Elders is really helpful.' • 'The ability to share ideas and talk about systemic issues is helping us to improve services.' • 'Spending time together, listening to stories and valuing shared ideas and contributions from all has had really positive results.'
<p>WHAT ELSE CAN WE TRY?</p> <p>Useful strategies to build the relationships that underpin genuine partnerships include:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build your connections with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community by speaking with Elders, attending community events, and undertaking shared activities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. • Hold a partnership building session to discuss your values and goals with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners and to build shared understanding. This will set the basis for establishing partnership agreements and activities. • Create opportunities for staff to interact and share knowledge about best practice for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. This might be through informal get-togethers, shared planning sessions, or shared training. • Torres Strait Islander peoples and better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Explain to partners and community members what this means to you.



REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

- Have you read the leading relationship-building documents?
- Have you identified what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in your community work in a similar field to you and that you should connect with?
- How can you develop respectful relationships with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community?
- Have you introduced yourself to and spoken with Elders in the community about what their priorities are?
- If you are engaged in a partnership, have you developed a partnership agreement?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Leading relationship-building documents identified by SNAICC include:

- SNAICC's [Opening Doors Through Partnerships](#) report, which provides practical steps that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, non-Indigenous service providers and government can take to develop and support genuine partnerships that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs. The report profiles case studies of good partnership development from across Australia, including interviews with service providers.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Institute of Family Studies, [Engagement with Indigenous Communities in Key Sectors](#) produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, which provides an overview of how non-Indigenous organisations can effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- SNAICC's [Partnership Training Manual](#), which provides helpful hints in establishing respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.



STRATEGY 3

LISTEN AND LEARN FROM ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES TO DETERMINE HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES

Non-Indigenous organisations need to listen to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to determine if, when, where and how they can use their resources, knowledge and skills to support the priorities of communities.

Adopting a genuine partnership approach requires not duplicating or competing with existing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled family and child support services. SNAICC has developed a separate resource on approaches to partnership in the context of applications for grant funding that can be accessed at www.snaicc.org.au.

Before embarking on a new program or policy, use the abovementioned strategies to engage in a respectful and meaningful dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations so that you understand the existing community strengths and needs. Doing this should inform you about whether a new program or policy is needed and, if so, what partnership support – if any – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations will want and need to design and deliver it.

Taking the time to listen to and learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about what supports they need from partners is crucial for achieving self-determination. Genuine listening and learning should put non-Indigenous organisations in a position where they can answer the question: what financial and other resource support can we provide and share to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in their efforts to improve safety and wellbeing for children and families?

Examples of resources that could be shared in a partnership include:



SNAICC has created a capacity transfer tool to support organisations in planning for capacity transfer in partnership across the domains of people, culture, structure, systems and leadership. This tool is available on p25 of the SNAICC [Partnership Training Manual](#).

IMPORTANT: Don't assume that an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation will necessarily need or want your support. Begin a dialogue and genuinely listen to determine whether you can provide assistance and what support is most needed.

GENUINELY LISTENING TO AND UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF LOCAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES TAKES WORK

Some of the challenges expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:

- 'Consistent communication due to both services being busy and not having the capacity to meet regularly is our biggest challenge.'
- 'We could be more connected, but changes of staff and everyday busy-ness gets in the way of regularly connecting.'
- 'Unrealistic expectations, misunderstanding of roles and shifting of common purpose is a challenge.'

HELPFUL HINTS!

Some of the things that have helped partnerships to flourish, expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:

- Joint training and development of staff across both organisations and programs has been so helpful in our partnership.'
- 'Our partnership is successful because of a mutual commitment to supporting parents and carers, to producing quality resources, aligned values, strong communication that includes clear plans, timelines, regular check-ins and addressing hiccups early.'
- 'Mutual respect and recognition of the strengths and needs of Aboriginal people and each organisation has been helpful.'

WHAT ELSE CAN WE TRY?

Useful strategies to support capacity for community-led responses through partnerships include:

- Have the 'hard' conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners about where non-Indigenous organisations can support community aspirations and also where they should step aside so that the community can lead.
- Develop a capacity building plan for the partnership. Remember that capacity benefits should flow both ways and any plan should recognise the strengths that all partners bring. SNAICC has developed a capacity transfer plan that is available on p25 of the SNAICC [Partnership Training Manual](#).
- Share staff training opportunities across organisations so that key knowledge, skills and relationships can be built concurrently.
- Discuss and agree early on what the end point or future state of the partnership should be. What will the partnership look like when capacity transfer goals are reached?



REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

In reflecting on the opportunity for capacity building, consider:

- Have you read the leading capacity-building documents?
- Are you committed to genuinely listening to and acting on the recommendations of your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community?
- To what extent are your programs being co-designed and delivered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations?
- How can you make active efforts to resource and support capacity development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled agencies?
- Are there resources you have that could be better allocated to support partnership goals?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Leading capacity-building documents identified by SNAICC include:

- SNAICC's [Partnership Training Manual](#) that aims to support and sustain genuine inter-agency partnerships in service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- SNAICC's [Collective Impact Toolkit](#), which provides guidance on how communities and organisations can work together to change outcomes for children and families, while respecting and supporting the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations in leading on responses to child and family needs.
- SNAICC's [Opening Doors Through Partnerships](#) report, which provides practical steps that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, non-Indigenous service providers and government can take to develop and support genuine partnerships that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs. The report profiles case studies of good partnership development from across Australia, including interviews with service providers.



STRATEGY 4

ESTABLISH THE PROCESSES, GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIRED FOR EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS

A strong and enduring partnership requires the development of a clear and effective governance structure for the partnership and the establishment of processes that support and sustain the ongoing development of the partnership.

Particular attention needs to be paid to how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is represented in partnership governance. This will differ depending on the context of your community and partnership. Sometimes it will be appropriate for the community to be represented through the relevant community-controlled organisation, and sometimes it will be important for other community leaders and Elders to be included. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation in your partnership will be best placed to advise on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance works where you are.

In establishing a partnership governance structure, pay careful attention to issues of control and power balance. In many cases, and often for reasons relating to histories and the continuing realities of discrimination, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties have been disadvantaged in partnership negotiations. They may have fewer resources and less initial service delivery capacity than governments and larger non-Indigenous organisations. As a result, they may have less bargaining power.

Also pay particular attention to how commitments to self-determination and community capacity building are reflected, and how the governance structure seeks to address historical and continuing discrimination and resulting power imbalance.

As partnerships develop and especially as they become more involved and complex, it will be important to formalise partnership processes and integrate them into the way your organisation works. Establishing clear partnership processes and agreements can help to ensure that partnerships are not reliant on the relationships between particular individuals and can survive changes in staff and leadership. Important partnership processes include:

- agreements on the values, principles, goals, roles, responsibilities and activities of the partnership (see the tips for agreement making under Strategy 2 above)
- regular meetings for partnership planning and review at all levels, from partnership governance, to individual activity planning between staff
- integrating partnership processes into the policies and procedures of each organisation
- formalising arrangements for resource and staff sharing.

Taking a bottom-up, collaborative and participatory approach to the **evaluation of your partnerships**, and any programs that arise from them, is important for ensuring that you are collaborating and sharing power. Participatory models of evaluation enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to be involved in defining the criteria for what makes a successful program and partnership and to contribute to the assessment of progress and the making of plans to improve the partnership work.



<p>ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND PARTNERSHIP PROCESSES CAN SOMETIMES BE TRICKY</p> <p>Some of the challenges expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Actually getting things happening has been a challenge. Day-to-day pressures impact on joint delivery. Recruitment issues pose additional challenges in remote areas.' • 'Our organisation is large and very resource rich, and is often leant on too much. It is a lesson for us all to stick to the parameters of a partnership – the roles and responsibilities being clear and agreed to by all parties is important.' • 'Some regulations and compliance requirements are not culturally reflective and we have to consider other ways to support learnings and procedures to overcome this.'
<p>HELPFUL HINTS!</p> <p>Some of the things that have helped partnerships to flourish, expressed in SNAICC's 2019 partnership survey, by organisations currently in partnerships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Regular meetings, open communication and flexibility in regards to service delivery has worked.' • 'Transparent and clear goals and intentions which are documented by MOU and based on mutual respect is important.' • 'Collaboration, shared learnings and capacity building, as well as formalising some processes is useful.'
<p>WHAT ELSE CAN WE TRY?</p> <p>Useful strategies to support capacity for community-led responses through partnerships include:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an MOU that sets out the values, principles, goals and activities that make up your partnership. Refer to the tips for agreement making under Strategy 2 above. • Consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners on how the community should be represented in the governance of the partnership and what roles community members can play in the partnership work. • Develop a participatory partnership evaluation strategy that creates opportunities to discuss together what your goals are, how you will achieve them, how you will measure and reflect on progress, and how you will improve in response to what you learn. • Allocate resources to partnership development and review processes. Consider whether independent facilitation might support development of partnerships and reflection on partnership work.



REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

- Have you read the leading governance, process and accountability documents?
- What should the partnership governance structure look like for your partnership?
- How should the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community be represented in the governance of the partnership?
- Does the balance need to shift over time with capacity development of the partners?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Leading partnership governance, process and accountability documents identified by SNAICC include:

- The Australian Institute for Family Studies report [Evaluating the Outcomes of Programs for Indigenous Families and Communities](#) has some useful guidance on participatory models of evaluation.
- AbSec and SNAICC's [Developing Capacity Through Partnerships](#) resource which profiles the process of establishing capacity building partnerships for the development of Aboriginal community-controlled out-of-home care services in New South Wales.
- *Noongar Child and Family Wellbeing Council* and WACOSS [Partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver trusted services with stronger outcomes for Aboriginal people](#) highlights values and practices for fair and equal partnerships and the means to measure their success, holding parties to account for their commitments.
- SNAICC's [Partnership Training Manual](#), that aims to support and sustain genuine inter-agency partnerships in service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- SNAICC's [Working and Walking Together](#) resource includes a chapter, which provides guidance on undertaking action research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



ADDITIONAL USEFUL RESOURCES

Want to know more about building and maintaining partnerships? The following resources are available online, and can help:

- SNAICC's [Opening Doors Through Partnerships](#) report provides practical steps that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, non-Indigenous service providers and government can take to develop and support genuine partnerships that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs. The report profiles case studies of good partnership development from across Australia, including interviews with service providers.
- SNAICC's [Working and Walking Together](#) resource: supports family relationships services to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations.
- SNAICC's online [Partnership Audit Tool](#) provides guidance and exercises to assist you in establishing partnerships and reviewing their strength.
- SNAICC's [Partnership Training Manual](#) is an interactive guide that aims to support and sustain genuine inter-agency partnerships in service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- SNAICC's [Whose Voice Counts? Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in child-protection decision-making](#) research report outlines the central importance and elements of Indigenous participation to quality and effective child protection decision-making for Indigenous children.
- APO NT [Partnership Principles](#) are designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach for non-Indigenous organisations engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal communities.
- ACOSS [Principles for a Partnership-Centred Approach](#) are designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous NGOs in tendering for program funds and engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Noongar Child and Family Wellbeing Council and WACOSS [Partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver trusted services with stronger outcomes for Aboriginal people](#) highlights values and practices for fair and equal partnerships and the means to measure their success, holding parties to account for their commitments.
- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency's (VACCA) [Building Respectful Partnerships – The Commitment to Aboriginal Cultural Competence in Child and Family Services](#) is a practice guide on building Aboriginal cultural competence.



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