

Key considerations when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates

Background

Emerging Minds supports practitioners and organisations to respond to the social and emotional wellbeing needs of children. We have found that collaborating with people who have lived experience of service provision is a vital part of this work. It has been essential for our organisation to develop authentic partnerships with child and family partners, in ways which allow them to share their unique stories and contribute to the work that we do. This is particularly important for the work we do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Note: Emerging Minds has been given direction from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Reference Group that the name 'child and family partner' does not reflect their purpose. The preferred and recommended title – 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates' – better reflects that:

- the context of extended kinship systems is much broader than the child and family
- each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, family and community comes with unique and diverse cultural experiences; and
- the reference group felt that it was important to their work to advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's needs on a broader, structural systems level.



Incorporating lived experience perspectives

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[Practitioners] need to recognise that a blakfulla's upbringing is a lot different from a whitefulla's upbringing.

JOSIE-ANNE WILSON

We need to take great care and pay attention to additional and specific considerations when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates. These considerations can be quite different to other work we undertake with child and family partners, contributing through their lived experience. This resource has been created to highlight some of the considerations for us to be mindful of when approaching incorporating lived experience perspectives in this context.



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**We want to teach our kids
to dream, not just survive.**

ROSETTA MILERA

This statement captures a perspective that non-Indigenous families wouldn't necessarily understand or experience, but is often inherently present for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Relationships and connections are central to any engagement within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A commitment to learning and building relationships is the most important and fundamental step in seeking input and engaging respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities. It is important to create safe spaces where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates feel comfortable to engage. This is not a straightforward task considering that historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and understandings have been disregarded, and sometimes suppressed.

Nurturing positive relationships

Non-Indigenous practitioners are inadvertently part of a system that has a history of not always being helpful, and has at times been harmful, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There can be an underlying fear and mistrust of services that non-Indigenous practitioners need be aware of and invest time in to purposefully restore and rebuild. This can be achieved through nurturing positive relationships that are based on mutual trust and respect for similarities and differences.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates carry anger and hurt from previous engagements with services and systems, and the ongoing effects of colonisation, it's important to remember that this is not about 'you' personally – but you do need to take extra care with how you are coming across. You need to be able to consider your own values and beliefs, including unintended biases or even prejudices, and how these can have the potential to impact the values within your work.

Breaking down barriers and taking extra steps to build respectful, reciprocal, and non-judgemental relationships will go a long way towards creating a space where stories of strength and resilience can shine through.

We also need to be aware of the prevalence of grief, loss, and trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates – both now and intergenerationally – and that people will be at various stages in their own healing journey. A respectful, reciprocal and mutually rewarding working relationship will itself contribute to the healing process. Conversely, if we do not practice care and self-reflection, working relationships and interactions can re-trigger or contribute to vicarious trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates.

Honouring voices and cultural boundaries

Traditionally, research and education have been led by non-Indigenous people conducting research 'on' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, using methodologies underpinned by privilege, racism and assumptions of knowledge superiority. This is then reflected in societal policies, health care and education systems, creating unhelpful perspectives and understandings 'about' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that do not honour the voices of children, families and communities.

When Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander practitioners or organisations contribute to our work, it is important for us to recognise that they are not just speaking with us in a professional capacity, they are also bringing their own and their family's living and lived experiences. This can contribute to 'cultural loading' and can have a significant impact. Non-Indigenous people will not necessarily be aware of this, without taking the time to reflect on what it might take for a community member to speak up and contribute in this way.

It cannot be assumed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates are experts on all aspects of First Nations cultures and community experiences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have different cultural boundaries, which can determine the authority they have to discuss certain things. We need to be respectful when we are informed that there is a topic that can't be discussed.



Providing information

All relevant information for a project you are wishing to codesign or consult on, should be provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates in a way that makes sense, and you will need to check that they have understood what is being asked of them. Consider the language you are using, as well as the method of delivery (i.e. conversation, text, email, etc.). It can't be assumed that you have necessarily given enough information through providing a document to be read: you will also need to provide the necessary information in a clear way through conversations, to ensure the person you are working with understands what the project requires of them, and what you will be providing them with in return.

When you're arranging any meetings in person with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates, it's essential to approach the topic of their COVID-19 vaccination status with care and sensitivity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been hurt in the past by harmful medical practices that have ignored their rights to make choices over their bodies. This has implications for your practice with lived experience advocates, as the resultant distrust of systems may be more likely to influence their choice as to whether they get vaccinated. While we do have a duty of care to our organisation and others we come into contact with, we need to acknowledge and be respectful of the reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may choose not to get vaccinated. It's essential to remain non-judgemental about their decision and suggest alternatives for working together safely.

Additional resources to support our work

When you are beginning to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates, you can provide a copy of our *Talking points for work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocates* and *Working with Emerging Minds as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience advocate* guides to help you through conversations that attend to some essential considerations. It will be more important though, for you to take the time necessary to establish a trusting relationship that will reassure and reduce any existing fears about why you are wanting to work with them.



Artwork by Josie-Anne Wilson – Ngarrindjeri

'It's my story about the many years of struggles our people have overcome to maintain strong family connections of togetherness.'