

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children living with disability

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, it's essential to listen to their needs and heed their hard-earned wisdom – especially when working with a child and family living with disability.

This series of tip sheets has been co-designed with Aboriginal families who care for children living with disability. It is primarily designed for non-Indigenous workers supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families where a child is living with disability.

The information in these tip sheets comes from intergenerational wisdom, generously given to help other families and children.

There are no easy answers in this work, nor one single way of working. Instead, these tip sheets present important themes for non-Indigenous workers to be aware of; things to think about, reflect on and be curious about.

These tip sheets focus on three domains:

- Taking a holistic approach
- Culturally safe practice
- Working skillfully to support families



Before using these tip sheets

Before using these tip sheets, we advise you to work through the following resources, to ensure you have critical foundation skills for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families:

1. [Working with First Nations Families and Children – A Framework for Understanding](#)
2. [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Children Toolkit](#)

Acknowledgement

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Taking a holistic approach

TIP SHEET #1

Taking a holistic approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families means understanding that social and emotional wellbeing is maintained through connections to body, mind and emotions, spirituality, Land, community, family, language and culture. It is about seeing the child, family and community as being interconnected.

This tip sheet is intended to provide guidance to support a holistic approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families living with disability.

Every child is unique

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living with disability are, first and foremost, children. They have hopes, dreams, challenges, struggles, desires and aspirations. They have spiritual and cultural values which connect to and maintain who they are and where they come from. When you engage with children, before considering what they can't do, take the time to see them for who they ARE. Are they funny, clever, cheeky, sporty, shy, or a deep thinker? If you go in with a judgemental stance, looking for deficits, then that is what you will find. Instead, ask yourself: what else can you see?



Not all families are the same. Once you have met one family, you have met one family. Each family will be unique in its structure and history. Tread lightly and respectfully, and take your time. Keep in mind that you don't know that particular family's journey, nor how fragile they may be feeling. Have empathy.

We often talk about the importance of self-care. Families are often told to look after themselves so they can look after their children. But what does self-care look like?

Each family will be different, so how can you help them to think about self-care that is actually achievable and suits them? For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, this may include finding support in kinship networks, in a place or 'Country' that helps them to connect, or in routines and ways of doing things that help maintain their spirit and connection to culture. Remember, they may not necessarily be on that journey yet; at this stage you might just be floating the idea.

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- What is important for this child and family?
- What strengths and positive qualities do you recognise in this child and family?
- How might you use your communication skills (including body language) to sensitively navigate conversations? Remember to keep checking in with the family so you can make sure they are feeling comfortable.

Cultural connections strengthen families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a much broader support system than the typical non-Indigenous family structure. The complex connections and extended kinship structures that surround these children may not always be visible to you as a professional. You may only see different family members once or twice, but they are still there and can have an impact on the child's social and emotional wellbeing.



Families and kinship networks share their experiences. They support each other and help each other by sharing stories and wisdom. They will also share negative service experiences, so that other family members will be able to avoid the same situations.

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- What does this family and their community look like?
- What sustains this family? Who sustains this family?
- Do this child and family feel like they belong? Do they feel valued?

Services can place additional burdens on families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have learned to distrust services. This protective behaviour makes sense when you consider the history of colonisation and intergenerational trauma experienced by these communities. Many First Nations people won't answer unknown numbers, and miss out on attending services as a result. How can you behave and introduce yourself as someone who can offer support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and not perpetuate this distrust of services?

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the pain of colonisation and the ongoing policies and trauma it has caused means that you as the practitioner can represent the systems that have hurt them. As a result, interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can come with a high level of anger and distrust. Sometimes the systems you work in are inadvertently still hurting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This may mean that people express sadness or even anger, that can feel like it is directed personally at you. It is important not to take this to heart, as for the most part 'it's not about you'. It is the legacy of past experiences and contacts. Though these situations can be uncomfortable, they are also opportunities to learn and grow your practice and develop your relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Instead of seeing these responses as an attack on you or your role, listen to how history and past experiences have impacted the child's and family's life, and think about how you can find ways to build trust.

Families may be facing many practical barriers to accessing services. For rural and regional families, location and transport are major issues; though even within cities, accessible and affordable transport is often a barrier. Consider what you might be able to do to support basic needs such as housing and access to technology and reliable transport. What practical support can you provide? What appropriate referral options could you discuss with the family?



There may be language, literacy and numeracy barriers for families. How might you recognise if this is an issue and what might you be able to do to help? For example, do you need an interpreter? Could you help families to fill out any paperwork, rather than expecting them to do it alone? The Menzies website offers information and resources for families that may be useful - refer to 'Additional resources' at the end of this resource.

It's well known that the NDIS system places huge stress on families. This stress will in turn impact the child. What support could you provide to families (including extended family) to reduce NDIS system pressures? Can you provide advice to help them navigate the system or link them to people or advocates who can?

Referrals expire, creating a disruption in services. Can you organise ongoing referrals for families (including for transport)?

Can you facilitate communication between services to minimise disruption to care?

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When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- How do you think this family feels engaging with you? How do you think they perceive you?
- How do you think the child living with disability perceives you?
- How might you want to alter your behaviour with this family, compared to how you might act when engaging with a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family?

Culturally safe practice

TIP SHEET #2

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A special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. *Dadirri* recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call “contemplation”.

‘The contemplative way of Dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.

‘We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water our thirsty earth. When twilight comes, we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun. We watch our bush foods and wait for them to open before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage through their initiation ceremonies.

‘When a relation dies, we wait for a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly. We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and meetings. The right people must be present. Careful preparations must be made. We don’t mind waiting because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony.

‘We don’t worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of Dadirri (that deep listening and quiet stillness) the way will be made clear.

‘We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping the timber. The leaves are scorched, and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree, we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be reborn.



‘Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man’s ways; we have learnt to speak the white man’s language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We are hoping people will come closer. We keep on longing for the things that we have always hoped for: respect and understanding.

‘We know that our white brothers and sisters carry their own particular burdens. We believe that if they let us come to them, if they open up their minds and hearts to us, we may lighten their burdens. There is a struggle for us, but we have not lost our spirit of Dadirri.

‘There are deep springs within each of us. Within the deep spring, which is the very spirit, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling to Deep. The time for rebirth is now. If our culture is alive and strong and respected, it will grow. It will not die, and our spirit will not die. I believe that the spirit of Dadirri that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves but in our whole nation.’

Dadirri

Written by Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, edited by Judy Atkinson.



Cultural competence is a life-long journey for all of us, not a destination. This tip sheet is intended to provide guidance to support culturally safe practice when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families living with disability.

Recognise your role in the system and its impact

Understand the history of services and the associated fear. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have developed distrust of services over many generations and may feel anger and pain towards systems that have oppressed and traumatised them and their ancestors. Despite your best intentions, you represent a system that families may find traumatic or triggering to engage with. How might families respond to you, and what might they be reluctant to discuss with someone from the 'system'? How can you acknowledge the system is not perfect, and build a relationship with families so they may begin to see you and not the system you work for? Remember the ongoing impact intergenerational trauma can have, and tread lightly.

Be aware of white privilege and power. Reflect on how it might feel for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family to have you come into their home. What assumptions do you have about what a 'home' is and what 'family' looks like? How can you show you respect and honour their home and family? What unintentional power imbalances are there, and how could you address these?

Be aware of stereotypes, stigma and biases (implicit and explicit) you and others may have. What can you do to do address these?

Take some time to reflect on what your disability service is like for families and children to visit. What might they experience as they walk through the door, wait in the waiting room, or sit in a consultation room? Would it be a culturally-safe experience? How could you create a culturally safer space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children? For example, think about how you might add Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artwork and other imagery to the space. Is it always necessary to have families come in to see you? Or can you be flexible in bringing your service to them, in a place they feel safe and comfortable?

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- What qualities do you think you need to bring when working with this child and family?
- What attributes do you think you have that can help build trust?
- How can you build trust while acknowledging power imbalances and the impact of services which have caused pain and suffering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families?

Respect families' knowledge

Respect the family's knowledge about their children. Listen deeply to what they need. Don't tell them what they need.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have a different understanding of health and wellbeing than non-Indigenous families. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, social and emotional wellbeing is maintained through connections to body, mind and emotions, spirituality, land, community, family, language and culture. How can you keep an open mind and learn about families' ways of understanding health and wellbeing? What strengths might you be able to uncover in their ways of understanding?

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family's way of understanding disability and wellbeing may be very different to a non-Indigenous way of understanding. It may be more holistic, include connection to Land, culture and spirituality. Children's behaviour may be seen as an understandable reaction to a situation, or as a way of communicating their feelings. Can you be open to learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children about new ways of understanding?



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities use storytelling as a way of passing on knowledge, values and traditions. These stories can also be used to keep children safe. Can you be curious about how the families you work with might use storytelling to support children's social and emotional wellbeing?

When working with families, be respectfully curious about cultural identity, cultural obligations, connection to Land, connection to mob, and important kinship relationships. Remember the importance of developing a trusting relationship as a foundation to these discussions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families need respect, self-determination, and control over the services they receive. What can you do to support this? Would you help them to:

- connect to their own knowledge and skills?
- support empowerment in self-advocacy?
- lead the decisions that affect them?
- create opportunities to problem solve?

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- Does this family have a different way of understanding things than you do? How can you accept and work positively with these different understandings?
- How can you support self-determination in this family?



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Working skilfully to support families

TIP SHEET #3

The skills and knowledge required by non-Indigenous practitioners to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities can be supported by a framework of genuine curiosity, an appreciation of the richness and diversity of First Nations cultures, and a willingness to hear and understand the unique lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

This tip sheet is intended to provide guidance to support skilful practice when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families living with disability.

Take time to build relationships

Relationships are key. It's important not to rush families, and to remember that you only get one opportunity to make a good first impression. Relationships are a time investment: if you are time poor, you will be relationship poor. This can be difficult to manage within the NDIS framework, where practitioners may feel under pressure to demonstrate results. What can you do to make sure that building an authentic relationship is not overlooked?

Allow families' stories to be heard. Don't rush to problem solving; instead, listen deeply and allow the family to develop their own solutions. As a professional, you don't need to know everything. You don't need to go in with the answers. What would happen if you took your expert hat off and went in with an open and curious mind?



When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- When you enter the family's home, think about your tone of voice and body language. How might the family be experiencing your communication?
- How might the child living with disability experience your communication?

Respect families' understanding

Social and emotional wellbeing concerns are common among children living with disability. Be aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may take a more holistic view than the typical non-Indigenous way of understanding 'mental health'. There are many strengths associated with this holistic way of understanding.

How do the families you work with understand the disability diagnosis for their child? Do they take a holistic view, and if so, what strengths does this perspective offer? Are there any important gaps in their knowledge that you could help them to fill?

How does this family understand the child's behaviour? There are many reasons a child with disability may act in a challenging or difficult way: it is often their way of communicating a need and they may require support to have this need met, understood by others, or to find other ways of expressing it.

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- What are the strengths in this family's knowledge and understanding of disability and social and emotional wellbeing?
- How can you recognise and support this child's social and emotional wellbeing? Is this something you might seek supervision or additional training for if required?

Offer practical, 'systems'-focused support

Remember that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may not be empowered to ask for help and may receive limited support through the NDIS.

How can you provide clear and helpful information to help them navigate the system with ease and get the support their children deserve?

Are there any booklets that are easy to understand (with more diagrams than text) you could provide to help families understand and navigate the system? For example, helping them to understand how NDIS and NDIA are different and navigate the planning process.

Keep in mind that families know their children best. How can you collaborate with the family to ensure they are involved in the development of their child's plan? How can you support the family to understand the different plan management options available to them, and to choose the option that will be the best fit for their unique situation?

What knowledge do you have of your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community? Are there any Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in your area that you can learn about and refer families to for disability support?

Navigating systems and referrals in the disability space can be an incredibly stressful experience for any family. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, it will be important to take a holistic view and work hard to foster self-determination in your role, supporting advocacy, appointments, referrals, care plans, equipment, and so on.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have said that to them, a good disability worker:

- shows genuine care, empathy and compassion
- listens and is respectful in a mindful way
- reflects (e.g. when they make mistakes, they learn from them)
- values the families and children they work alongside; and
- builds safety and trust.

When engaging with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family living with disability, ask yourself these questions:

- How can you offer practical, 'systems'-focused support to this family in a way that doesn't undermine their self-determination?
- What do you need to keep in mind to make sure you are being respectful and culturally safe in your work with this family?



Additional resources

Menzies have developed a range of resources which provide a culturally appropriate set of tools to enable better understanding of, and improve engagement with, the NDIS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Print materials:

- [Yarning about NDIS](#)
- [Can I get NDIS?](#)
- [Yarning about NDIS: How we can help you connect](#)
- [Yarning about NDIS: Care plan](#)
- [NDIS 'No shame' brochure](#)

Fact sheets:

- [How the NDIS can help your child \(0-6 years\): Fact sheet 1](#)
- [How the NDIS can help your child \(0-6 years\): Fact sheet 2](#)
- [How the NDIS can help your child \(0-6 years\): Fact sheet 3](#)
- [What is NDIS? \(0-65 years\)](#)
- [Can I get NDIS? \(0-65 years\)](#)
- [Understanding the NDIS \(0-65 years\): Eyre Peninsula, South Australia](#)

You can find more information and resources on the [Menzies website](#).

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