

Positive partnerships: Working alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing

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



Key messages

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations are established across the country and offer culturally secure and empowered ways of working with their communities.
- Aboriginal concepts of health, mental health, and wellbeing are holistic. They account for the social, cultural and political determinants of health at the individual, family and community level, and are often referred to as 'social and emotional wellbeing'.
- Working in culturally secure and strengths-based ways with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families is optimised by an understanding of Aboriginal concepts of health and wellbeing and partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled health services.

Who is this resource for?

This fact sheet is designed to support non-Indigenous practitioners who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, parents and families. While it is suitable for all practitioners, it may be especially helpful in building the cultural competency of psychologists and other mental health professionals.

What is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation?

Across Australia, there are over 140 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) – primary health care services initiated and operated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. ACCHOs are governed by a locally elected Aboriginal Board of Management and reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' understanding of health:

“

Health is not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community, in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their Community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.

(NATIONAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED HEALTH ORGANISATION, N.D.)

Over the decades, ACCHOs have been recognised as providing better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than mainstream health services (Panaretto et al., 2014). This demonstrates the importance of holistic and culturally secure care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Many ACCHOS have designated Social and Emotional Wellbeing teams. These teams work closely with clinical staff to support the holistic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The following image from the national leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in Australia, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), highlights the distribution of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations across Australia.



What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing?

Watch as Zac Cox, Senior Manager, Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) and Mental Health at Kimberley Aboriginal Mental Services (KAMS) describes what social and emotional wellbeing means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (1 minute, 14 seconds).



WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE

Social and emotional wellbeing is the term given to the historical, political, social and cultural determinants that affect the Self, in addition to connections with seven core domains that support Aboriginal peoples' wellbeing. The seven domains include connections with one's:

- body and behaviours
- mind and emotions
- family and kinship
- community
- culture
- Country and land; and
- spirituality.

Social and emotional wellbeing is a multi-dimensional concept based on the interconnectedness across the seven domains. The following diagram illustrates how the self; the domains of wellbeing; the social, historical, political and cultural determinants of health; and a person's experiences and expressions are all connected.



SEWB Diagram adapted from Gee et al., (2014)



[WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE](#)

Figure 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Model of Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Gee et al., 2014).

Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing is a national priority of the Australian Government. This is outlined in Target 14 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020):

Target 14

Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.

Outcome 14

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

What do we know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing?

Exposure to major stressors in the early stages of life can be harmful to the developing brain and to psychological health in childhood. At the population level, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are exposed to high levels of intergenerational trauma, poverty, racism and violence (Twizeyemariya et al., 2017).

In the following video (1 minute, 43 seconds), Zac provides an example of the systemic disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are over-represented in the child protection system and correctional services. They report higher levels of psychological distress than non-Indigenous people of the same age, and are overrepresented in suicide and self-harm statistics (Leckning et al., 2021; Zubrick et al., 2004; McPhee et al., 2021).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families face complex and unique barriers in accessing services and receiving appropriate support to heal from trauma and improve their social determinants of health.

Understanding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander model of social and emotional wellbeing will help you to identify some of the culturally specific risk and protective factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families may be experiencing. The social and emotional wellbeing framework also helps you to understand the importance of holistic and integrated care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The following table (Table 1; Cox et al., 2022) explores the risk and protective factors related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing in more detail.



Table 1: Understanding risk and protective factors related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing

Domain	Description	Positive/protective factors	Challenge
Connection to mind and emotions	Includes mental health disorders and the importance of positive feelings and wellness.	Belonging, mindfulness, accessing support to manage stress, overcome trauma, and/or recover from other mental health illnesses. The National Apology, truth-telling and treaty.	Threats to safety, social disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, experiences of racism, misdiagnosis and mislabelling.
Connection to body and behaviours	Includes physical health and considers the importance of optimal functioning – your body, health, spirit (Liyan), and mind being at their best.	Sports and exercise, hunting and gathering and other activities on Country, traditional diets and medicines, access to culturally safe services.	Smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, junk food, chronic and communicable diseases. Exclusion from health, wellbeing, and other essential services.
Connection to family and kinship	Includes family and kinship relations, systems of reciprocity and caring (i.e. respect for Elders).	Learning family history, sharing experiences with other Aboriginal peoples, being part of healthy relationships and family connections.	Removal of children from families, incarceration, family violence, grief and loss, lack of cultural education.
Connection to community	Includes cultural structures of responsibility and obligation.	Self-determination and community control. Having Aboriginal mentors, role-models, advisors and Elders. Cultural revitalisation. Participating in community activities. Community harmony.	Social exclusion and systemic racism, lateral violence, family feuding, disconnection and isolation.
Connection to culture	Includes cultural expressions and activities (yarning, ceremony, camping, fire, art, dance, song, storytelling, funerals); cultural knowledges (language, protocol, lore, ethical practice), and cultural identity (pride, values, belonging).	Learning about, involvement with and participation in cultural activities and knowledges to build cultural identity. Passing on cultural activities and knowledges to young people or people who have been disconnected from culture.	Cultural dislocation; cultural genocide; cultural clash between two worlds; disconnection from language, Country and family; assimilation policies.
Connection to land and Country	Includes the experience of belonging to Country, a traditional spiritual connection to kin and culture through Country, and a yearning to heal Country.	Returning to Country as a way of healing the body, mind and spirit and reconnecting with community, cultural renewal. Traditional medicine and diet. Land rights.	Removal from Country, dispossession of land, destruction of sacred sites, environmental degradation.
Connection to ancestors and spirituality	Includes Indigenous knowledges and belief systems. Traditional and cultural healing practices, sacred sites and men and women's lore grounds. Values of wisdom and hope.	Accepting traditional and evolving expressions of Indigeneity and spirituality that coexist with other religions and mindfulness practices that enable peace and balance.	The impact of mission life, religion, assimilation policies such as Stolen Generations, and cultural genocide. Symptoms of trauma such as misuse of drugs.

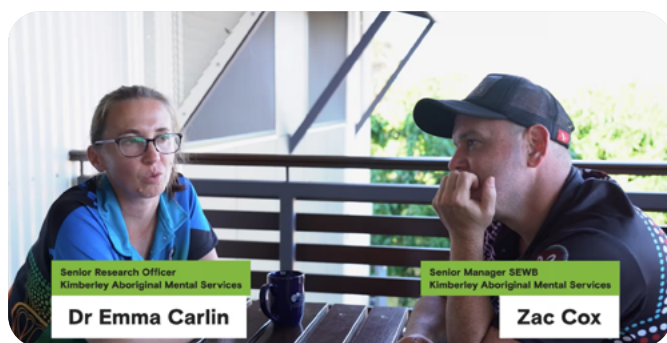
Working alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations

If you are working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients and are not already connected to your local ACCHO, please reach out. NACCHO has a free online directory of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations you can use to find the nearest service.

Your local ACCHO may have a social and emotional wellbeing team that can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Social and emotional wellbeing teams are experienced in working with a broad range of service providers to ensure the interdisciplinary care needs of clients are met. Many ACCHO social and emotional wellbeing teams operate in a family systems approach and can support parents and caregivers alongside children, to optimise the impact of healing interventions and support work. Social and emotional wellbeing teams also operate at the community level, facilitating better connections with service providers and building community members' literacy around mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Strong partnerships between ACCHOs and other providers can strengthen the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families.

Watch as Dr Emma Carlin, Senior Research Officer at KAMS discusses the importance of connecting to your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health organisations (31 seconds).



 WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE



Thank you for being an ally and supporting the next generation of strong, deadly, and self-determined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommended citation: Carlin E. & Cox Z. (2023). *Positive partnerships: Working alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing*. Adelaide: Emerging Minds. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10208116.

Resources

You can [learn more about social and emotional wellbeing service delivery](#) by visiting Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services' website or checking out the [Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing research project](#). You can also download a free PDF copy of KAMS' [Social and Emotional Wellbeing Welcome Guide for the Aboriginal Workforce](#).

We also recommend exploring the following Emerging Minds resources:

- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children toolkit](#)
- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positive partnerships podcast](#)
- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children: A framework for understanding online course](#)

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This resource was co-produced with:



Transforming Indigenous
Mental Health and Wellbeing
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The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

5 | November 2023

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