

Emerging Minds.

Emerging Minds response to the Inquiry into Aboriginal child removals and placements

10 March 2023

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About Emerging Minds

Emerging Minds is a non-profit organisation which has been dedicated to advancing the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Australian infants, children, adolescents and their families for over 20 years. Emerging Minds develops mental health policy, services, interventions, training, programs and resources in response to the needs of professionals, children and their families. We partner with family members, national and international organisations to implement evidence-based practice in the Australian context. Emerging Minds is currently responsible for leading the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health).

Emerging Minds conceptualises child mental health in 10 Guiding Principles (next page). These are key elements which consider the child as a whole and underpin the work we do.

Emerging Minds has a focus on supporting workforces in both child- and adult-focused services. We recognise the importance of the parenting role for adults experiencing vulnerabilities, and the impact of adult vulnerabilities on children's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health across their life course.

Early intervention and prevention responses to support parents/kin and children can be everyone's business! Emerging Minds advocate to all services and agencies to highlight the role they can play in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and their families.

Significance of this inquiry to Emerging Minds:

Emerging Minds supports prevention, partnership and participation, with an evidenced informed approach, bringing research, practitioner wisdom and lived experience to inform all it does. This is underpinned by a systems approach to quality improvement to support and sustain practice change to ultimately ensure the needs of infants, children, their families and communities are being met.

Emerging Minds is funded to support the following activities:

- assist clinical and non-clinical professionals and services who work with children to identify, support and refer children at risk of mental health difficulties and to promote resilience building within children and families;
- support professionals working with children who would benefit from early intervention, including children who have experienced trauma, children who may be at a high risk of mental health difficulties and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and;
- support professionals working with parents and guardians of these children with a view to assisting parents and guardians to care effectively for their child.

The Inquiry into Aboriginal child removals and placements acts as a circuit breaker to the impacts of harm and trauma being experienced by children, families, and communities.

Emerging Minds acknowledges the harm and hurt caused by past government policies and the lasting legacy and impacts of this. Emerging Minds also acknowledges the negative impacts and traumatic experiences being felt by Aboriginal families and communities as a result of unhelpful and harmful contemporary policies, the legislative and institutional structures within the child protection system.

Emerging Minds seeks to contribute to this inquiry by taking a strong ally position alongside others that respectfully walk alongside Aboriginal peoples. Emerging Minds acknowledges the lived and living experiences of Aboriginal peoples in South Australia and is driven to offer our expertise, support, and advocacy in creating authorising environments for infant, child and family social and emotional wellbeing and mental health needs to be met in a culturally safe, responsive and inclusive manner.

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Emerging Minds submission to the Inquiry into Aboriginal child removals and placements seeks to provide strengths-based, solution-focused and systems-centred responses to what could be improved and how. The submission will pivot around the three themes of prevention, partnership, and participation within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP).

Guiding Principles

10 Guiding Principles of Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Taken from: [Keeping child mental health in mind: A workforce development framework for supporting infants, children and parents.](#)

The Nine Guiding Principles of the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023

Taken from [National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)




1	Children and their local ecology The wellbeing of infants and children depends on their social and environmental contexts, more so than with any other age group. Infant and child mental health is best understood within a framework that accounts for individual child characteristics, family strengths and vulnerabilities, and broader social and economic factors.	1.	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is viewed in a holistic context, that encompasses mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these interrelations is disrupted, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ill health will persist
2	Relationships matter Relationships play a central role in children's social and emotional development and mental health. From the time of birth, children need stable and responsive relationships with caring adults	2.	Self-determination is central to the provision of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services.
3	Prevention and early intervention A focus on preventing or intervening early in the progression of mental health difficulties not only benefits infants and children but also creates a solid foundation for health outcomes later in life, making it a long-term investment in the future of Australian society.	3.	Culturally valid understandings must shape the provision of services and must guide assessment, care and management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health problems generally, and mental health problems, in particular.
4	Strengths and vulnerabilities At any point in time, children's mental health is influenced by a mix of strengths and vulnerabilities. Effective practice focuses on enhancing and promoting strengths, while accounting for vulnerabilities.	4.	It must be recognised that the experiences of trauma and loss, present since European invasion, are a direct outcome of the disruption to cultural wellbeing. Trauma and loss of this magnitude continues to have inter-generational effects.
5	Resilience Resilience is the ability to recover, adjust to, or grow after an adverse event or period of adversity. The single most important factor for developing resilience in children is the presence of at least one committed and supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult.	5.	The human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be recognised and respected. Failure to respect these human rights constitutes continuous disruption to mental health. Human rights relevant to mental illness must be specifically addressed.
6	Trauma informed Trauma involves experiences that overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Traumainformed care is a framework for service delivery based on an understanding of the effect of trauma on individuals, their coping skills and service needs	6.	Racism, stigma, environmental adversity and social disadvantage constitute ongoing stressors and have negative impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' mental health and wellbeing.
7	Developmental perspective Children are not small adults; they have particular emotional, social and physical capacities and needs. To be effective, service	7.	The centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and kinship must be recognised as well as the broader concepts of family and the bonds of reciprocal affection, responsibility and sharing

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	delivery must be designed around infant and child developmental stages.	
8	Cultural and spiritual identity For some children and families, cultural and spiritual identity is central to health and wellbeing. Service provision is more effective if it respects and incorporates service users' cultural and spiritual understandings.	8. There is no single Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture or group, but numerous groupings, languages, kinships, and tribes, as well as ways of living. Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may currently live in urban, rural or remote settings, in traditional or other lifestyles, and frequently move between these ways of living.
9	Children's rights Upholding and protecting children's rights is essential to promoting their mental health. It is every adult's responsibility to uphold and fulfil the rights of children	9. It must be recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have great strengths, creativity and endurance and a deep understanding of the relationships between human beings and their environment.
10	Child, family and practitioner voice Services designed collaboratively with children, families and practitioners tend to be more effective, more acceptable to the individuals and families using the service, and more relevant to their local context.	

Response to the Terms of Reference

We have responded below to items of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference which are relevant to Emerging Minds. Our responses are framed with a focus on child social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

	Prevention Protecting children's rights to grow up in family, Community and culture by redressing the causes of child protection intervention
	Partnership Ensuring the participation of community representatives in service design, delivery and individual case decisions
	Participation Ensuring the participation of children, parents and family members in decisions regarding the care and protection of their children

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A strengths-based, solution-focused and systems-centred response that supports the elements of prevention, partnership, and participation within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP).

Supporting a systems-level approach

Emerging Minds supports moving beyond training and implementation to a systems approach focusing on co-creation and relationship-building, with the intention of increasing the relevance and sustainability of implementation capacity by building approaches in a range of settings. This can start with creating an authorising environment from funding through to practice. These are important elements when considering how to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child placement Principles being actioned in a sustainable way.

In supporting a systems approach it is important to understand what works across different contexts by understanding impacts on the system and organisational change.

- There are many organisational and system barriers that continue to compete with a practitioner's ability to change what they do
- Professionals continue to report limited change in the barriers to influencing practice change in the workplace.

At a system level organisations can struggle with the number of frameworks and or aligning these with funding requirements. Supporting ways to demonstrate how frameworks work together to meet improved outcomes for children and families can be a great start. Creating an authorising environment that is supported from funding and contract requirements creates clear expectations and accountability. This clear direction can then be built into the mission, values and strategic plan of an organisation and create an environment for change. Organisational policies, recruitment strategies, professional development including coaching, supervision, reflective practice beyond training become key elements to a quality improvement process that works toward supporting the Placement principles.

In setting the context for a systems approach that moves beyond practitioner training: A consistent theme from the qualitative data Emerging Minds receives from practitioners has been a perceived need for more assistance within the workplace to help embed the learnings and encourage practice change.

Barriers highlighted are associated with:
a lack of:

- supportive policy and funding conditions that promote child focused, family sensitive practice to support the social and emotional wellbeing of children and families.
- a lack of understanding of best practice for supporting infant, child, and family social and emotional wellbeing

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- working with widely differing contexts and workforces and changing social conditions (i.e. pandemics)
- a lack of understanding by practitioners and their organisations of the need to change practice to support early intervention and prevention.

as well as

- organisations not having the time and resources to address practice change
- organisations, depending on their sector, not seeing their own role to play in early intervention and prevention
- organisations struggling to convert knowledge to practice, and having difficulty articulating that the change required is a barrier

Supporting service-level approaches

Finding ways to work together on solutions that create an environment for positive change is the challenge. This involves services to consider how they can restructure and attend to the experiences of adults as parents.

To understand the changes needed to support prevention, partnership and participation to is important to recognise that Adult needs and views often dominate during service delivery. Therefore attending to the experience of adults as parents, and to the needs of children, requires deliberate attention and effort at all stages across the life span. Early in the life of the child, early in identification of struggles for a family and early in connection with any service. Prevention and genuine partnership responses to support parents/kin and children can be everyone's business! All services and agencies have a role to play in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and their families.

To make this change conversations about children and the role of parents in supporting the social wellbeing and development of children need an happen throughout any engagement and are an important part of the client assessment and support in all services. When making an assessment of families with complex problems, it is not enough to simply name such problems; assessments need to examine how such problems affect the parent, influence parental capacity, parent-child relationships and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes for parents and children. Knowing the types of problem parents are experiencing (such as intergenerational trauma, racism , substance use, mental health problems, financial stress, and illness) can help to identify issues that may affect parenting. This can also help identify how these vulnerabilities in families can impact on the parenting role and the child.

Talking about children needs to be part of the relationship-building process and information-gathering process. This is regardless of if it is a parent entering an adult focused service, a child and family service or a child entering a child focused service. Keeping a child focused family sensitive lens in all we do is important.

Talking about children and the parenting role early in the working relationship makes raising concerns or offering support less threatening. This respectful relationship early in any interaction allows parents to talk about the things that are going well as well as their worries and concerns for them as parents and their child.

Because Parents may minimise or underestimate the impact of their problems on their children due to the assumption that children have only a limited awareness of the problem these supportive conversations are imperative, because

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research with children has shown that they know earlier and in greater detail about their parents' problems than their parents believed (Dawe et al., 2007; Gorin, 2004; Humphreys et al., 2008; Mullender et al., 2002).

Practice that keeps the development, and social and emotional wellbeing of a child in mind considers both the strengths and vulnerabilities (or worries) in a family. It considers the stressors the parent faces and how these may impact on the parenting role, the parent child relationship and what children are seeing, hearing, feeling and how they make sense of their world. This means that to support the social and emotional wellbeing and health within a families', parenting and the needs of children need to be clearly identified and considered and supported across service delivery.

Exploring the role system and organisations can play to support a fundamental shift to action the placement principles means moving from what needs to be done at a practice level to developing the skills knowledge and quality improvement strategies to make incremental and sustainable change across all levels.

To support this quality improvement systems level thinking Emerging Minds offers the following concepts drawn from their collective work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities.

Development of strengths-based approaches that reflect the impact of colonisation within the context of historical and contemporary trauma

Trauma aware healing informed care

Trauma aware healing informed care is grounded in an understanding of, and responsiveness to, the ongoing legacy and impacts of invasion/colonisation on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander peoples.

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse paper: Trauma-Informed Services and Trauma-Specific Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, states that services that are trauma informed:

- Understand trauma and its impact on individuals (such as children), families and communal groups.
- Create environments in which children feel physically and emotionally safe.
- Employ culturally competent staff and adopt practices that acknowledge and demonstrate respect for specific cultural backgrounds.
- Support victims/survivors of trauma to regain a sense of control over their daily lives and actively involve them in the healing journey.
- Share power and governance, including involving community members in the design and evaluation of programs.
- Integrate and coordinate care to meet children's needs holistically.
- Support safe relationship building as a means of promoting healing and recovery.

For children and young people, a social and emotional wellbeing informed approach ensures healthy growth and development, from birth to 18 years and throughout adulthood.

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All children are vulnerable but given the context of intergenerational trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – the prevalence of disadvantage, gaps in education, life expectancy and reaching their full potential in a whole range of life domains – they are, unfortunately, more at risk.

The need to elevate and amplify the significant place that culture and cultural identity holds in the care of children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is central to family, community, and cultural life. Kinship relationships, systems, and processes within communities are an intrinsic to the ways of being, doing, and knowing in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities 'grow children up' to understand and contribute to all aspects of life.

A child's sense of safety is created by family and community, and it is a responsibility shared by both. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples invest in children to continue traditions, customs, and stories.

Connection to Land; spirituality and ancestry; kinship; and cultural continuity are all important protective factors and sources of resilience, strength and healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are experiencing the ongoing impacts of intergenerational and contemporary traumatic experiences.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach

Trauma-informed care can be described as a framework for human service delivery that is based on knowledge and understanding of how trauma affects people's lives and how practitioners and services are contextually responsive to meeting these needs.

Diagram: Using trauma-informed approaches in practice

Healing Foundation. (2013). Growing our children up strong and deadly: Healing for children and young people, 11. Canberra: Healing Foundation. [Available here.](#)



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Building on the ideas in the above illustration, there are several key principles that are essential in the design and delivery of trauma-informed services.

Key principle	Trauma-informed outcome
Understand trauma and its impact	This is critical to avoid misunderstandings and disengagement. Trauma-informed policies and workforce training and development strategies embedded across an organisation are essential to promote an understanding of trauma and its impact on service users – individuals, families, and communal groups.
Promote safety	Individuals and families who have experienced trauma require spaces in which they feel physically and emotionally safe for healing to occur. The voices of children and young people should be included in the design of program spaces and procedures.
Ensure cultural competence	Culturally competent services are respectful of, and specific to, the cultural backgrounds of service users. Cultural knowledge and practices are incorporated into service activities. Culturally competent staff are aware of their own cultural attitudes and beliefs as well as the individuals, families, and communities they support.
Support client control	Self-determination and autonomy are central within the design of service. Clients are supported to regain a sense of control over their daily lives and are active participants in the healing process.
Share power and governance	Power and decision making is shared across all levels of the organisation, whether related to day-to-day decisions or reviewing and creating policies and procedures.
Integrate care	Integrating care involves bringing together all the services and supports needed to assist individuals, families, and communities to enhance their physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and cultural wellbeing.
Support relationship building	Relationships that are safe, authentic, and positive assist healing and recovery.
Enable recovery	Services empower individuals, families, and communities to take control of their own healing and recovery and adopt a strengths-based approach.

Strengths-based approaches

A strengths-based approach recognises the resilience of individuals and communities. It focuses on abilities, knowledge, and capacities rather than a deficits-based approach which focuses on what people do not know, or cannot do, problematising the issue or victimising people. It recognises that the community is a rich source of resources; assumes that people are able to learn, grow and change; encourages positive expectations of children as learners and is characterised by collaborative relationships. It focuses on those attributes and resources that may enable adaptive functioning and positive outcomes.

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Strength and protective factors

There are many strengths and protective factors which have allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to survive despite high levels of adversity. These include:

- strong cultural identity and belief systems
- extensive kinship systems which are socially inclusive
- broader attachment models
- cultural and spiritual strengths including connection to country and ancestry
- strong child rearing practices
- early autonomy and self-reliance
- cultural ways of learning
- role of traditional healers and ceremony
- focus on healing
- strong cultural connection to song lines

It is important to identify how these strengths can be supported and utilised to enhance the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to develop resilience and reach their full potential.

Development of a child and family centred social and emotional wellbeing, informed service sector

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (2017–2023) provides a dedicated focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. It sets out a comprehensive and culturally appropriate 'stepped care' model that applies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' across Aboriginal Community Controlled and mainstream services and across sectors.

Cultural security and inclusion

There is a need to promote and strengthen the cultural structures and networks that exist in the fabric of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collective parenting practices to be able to provide optimal support to children and young people in the context of their community.

The resurgence of culturally informed early interventions that embed First Nations' perspectives on ecological connections, kinship systems, child rearing practices, songs, dance, the stories from ancestors and reclaiming of language is essential for social and emotional wellbeing to be realised in this context.

For services to be responsive the centrality of culture, voices and lived and living experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities need to underpin service design. Culturally responsive and people inclusive practices when co-creating service design will also support and best facilitate the creation and implementation of resources that encourage practitioners to take a holistic, cultural strengths-based approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities.

Working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families requires a

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comprehensive approach. This includes:

- developing a cultural framework for understanding and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities that preferences needs and responses within a cultural context
- understanding the historical legacy and continuing impacts of invasion/colonisation
- having a multidimensional approach to health and wellbeing
- having regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child development and rearing practices
- understanding the contemporary risk and protective factors, and social determinants as they apply to Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children.

This submission calls for the amplification of culturally responsive approaches in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing needs of infants, children their families and communities within the delivery of services across sectors.

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Supporting practice-level approaches

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities have remained connected to their culture, kinship and Country for over 60,000 years. There is much that practitioners can learn from this wisdom that can help support *all* families and children.

For non-Indigenous practitioners to succeed as allies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, they have a responsibility to consider the relevant healing practices for the families they support. If we are to break the dominant discourse of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living away from their families, practitioners must embrace the principles of self-determination and recognise, understand and embed cultural healing practices in the support they provide.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is viewed in a holistic context that encompasses mental, physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality is defined as at the core of being – their very identity. Spirituality gives meaning to all aspects of life, including relationships with one another and the environment. There is a kinship with the environment: all objects are living and share the same soul and spirit (Grant, 2004).

In the Australian health and welfare context, an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts is particularly important for practitioners. The skills and knowledge required by non-Indigenous practitioners who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families should be supported by an appreciation of the richness and nuance of First Nations cultures, and a willingness to hear and understand their stories.

When listening of the narratives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples share, practitioners should aim to look behind the 'problem story' and explore culturally based practices – such as storytelling and extended relationships of Country, kinship, and Community – to better support the needs of families. First Nations children with a strong cultural identity are well placed to make positive social connections and feel a sense of belonging to their Community.

Relationships and connections are central to any engagement within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Relationships matter

The highly crisis-driven nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mainstream service experience epitomises a lack of genuine long-term relationships between non-Indigenous practitioners and First Nations clients. There is a need for practitioners to listen to communities and develop services that are welcoming, inclusive and non-threatening – enabling an understanding of the lived experiences of the families and communities the services are designed to support.

Not having this understanding can be a hindrance to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, can reinforce a history of marginalisation, and can deny First Nations people the opportunity to tell their stories.

Relationships and connections are central to any engagement within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A professional and personal commitment to learning and building relationships is the most important and fundamental step in engaging and working respectfully and effectively with First Nations children, families and communities. And learning starts with listening.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will also want to know **you** as a person. The kinds of things they may be considering about you might include:

- Is this someone who will respect the different cultural understanding I bring?
- Is this someone who will support me without judgment?
- Is this someone who recognises my history and experiences?

Understanding intergenerational trauma

Colonisation and subsequent policies, such as the forced removal of children, have had devastating consequences on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The disruption of culture and the negative impacts on the cultural identity of First Nations peoples have had lasting negative effects, passed from generation to generation (Healing Foundation, 2013). Trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people requires careful consideration from a social and emotional wellbeing perspective.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have experienced great suffering and trauma due to colonisation and subsequent policies. They understand hardship. They have also experienced social service systems that are unhelpful, offer false promises, or are inherently racist. It is important that practitioners make every effort not to replicate this, but instead are willing to be compassionate, direct, honest and clear with families.

For practitioners to truly engage with communities and families in this work, it is important to be able to have hope and belief in the people they work with, and their ability to achieve positive change and safety. Listening to the narratives of families can help practitioners to understand these historical hurts, in order to provide better practice and service responses – giving depth and meaning to concepts such as self-determination and intergenerational trauma.

Creating the opportunity for parents to tell their stories is the most important step in helping them to understand the impacts of historical and complex trauma on their relationships with their children.

Healing through strength-based, hope-inspired practice

When faced with stories of hardship, hopes and strengths are at times overlooked by practitioners – yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are multi-storied, with narratives of resistance to the dominating story of disadvantage. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents come to services amidst many adversities and challenges, practitioners may stop listening for signs of hope and strength that can reinforce children's safety.

Practitioners using a strengths-based and hope-inspiring approach, characterised by curiosity and respect, are more likely to listen and enquire about the skills, strengths, and know-how that parents and families have drawn-on in response to hardship. A strengths-based and hope-inspiring approach is possible even where parents are behaving in ways that make their children feel scared or insecure.

Once parents can recognise their own stories of skills, strengths, and know-how, these can be copied and repeated, and a blueprint for safe and nurturing care of children can be developed. These stories can contain rich descriptions of how parents and children have overcome problems – and practitioners can therefore become interested not only in historical adversity, disadvantage or trauma, but also intergenerational stories of capacity, resilience and contribution.

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Collective families

A child's sense of safety is created by family and community, and it is a responsibility shared by both. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people invest in children to continue traditions, customs and stories. It is therefore essential that the next generation is safe and nurtured physically, emotionally, spiritually and culturally. A child's safety is supported by understanding and strengthening cultural child-rearing practices.

Lohoar, Butera and Kennedy (2014) found that a collective community focus on child-rearing benefits children. They set out how collective approaches to child-rearing can help children to:

- be physically safe
- develop feelings of self-confidence and trust in others
- cultivate discipline and learning through positive role modelling; and
- access a wider range of support when they experience difficulties.

Collective approaches to child-rearing can provide parents with practical, social and psychological support, by:

- identifying situations when a child's safety is at risk
- providing practical childcare support
- helping parents to cope with the stresses of child-rearing; and
- providing parents with confidence, security and trust in the local community.

Keeping connections

Connection to culture supports safety and protects children. Anderson et al. (2017) outline the increasing recognition worldwide that positive connection to one's culture also helps children to develop their identity; fosters positive self-esteem, emotional strength and resilience; and increases the number of secure attachments around the child.¹

Connection to Land; spirituality and ancestry; kinship; and cultural continuity are all important protective factors and sources of resilience, strength and healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are experiencing problems.²

As children, families and communities respond to difficulties, they are drawing on skills and knowledges that are linked to their hopes and to what is important to them. These responses may not be enough in themselves to overcome the difficulty, but they remain very significant.

It is important to identify these skills and knowledges, particularly those that might otherwise be easily overlooked or downgraded. By making these more visible to the families themselves, as well as others, and then exploring their links to local community and cultural traditions, practitioners can find additional solutions.³

It is also important to include and nurture signs of wellbeing that take into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and spirituality, and build on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community life.

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The place and care of children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is central to family, community, and cultural life. Kinship relationships, systems, and processes within communities 'grow children up' to understand and contribute to all aspects of life.

Staying curious

Working with families should be underpinned by curiosity, seeking to uncover the history of the family's strengths to help understand the situation behind any current problems or issues, and to seek the best possible solutions. Questions to ask include:

- Where are the strengths, hopes and skills within the family?
- Where did these strengths come from? What is the history of these strengths?
- Where are the points of support and connection for the family?
- What methods do the family use to talk about and solve problems?
- What has supported the family to get through tough times in the past?
- What are the family's hopes and dreams?
- What is the preferred story within the family?

'By affirming family strengths and potential in the midst of difficulties, we help families to counter a sense of helplessness and failure while reinforcing their shared pride. We help them build confidence and competence through experiencing successful mastery and learning that their efforts can make a difference.'⁴

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Concluding comments

Emerging Minds is supported by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing National Consultancy Group made up of practitioners and advisors from a range of sectors.

The group's role is to support and guide Emerging Minds in building an evidence base to support effective work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This includes informing and advising content development and practice materials to be used when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The members of the group are: Felix Kerry, Chair; Dana Shen; Eric Milera; Carol Michie; Nancy Jeffrey; Bill Wilson; Rosie Schellen; Kathy Rigney; Major Sumner, and Brian Butler.

Emerging Minds in our work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities acknowledges and supports mainstream systems embedding in knowledge, evidence and advice from:

1. **Social and Emotional Wellbeing**
[National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)
2. **The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: A guide to support implementation**
[928_SNAICC-ATSICPP-resource-June2019.pdf](#)
3. **Reviewing Implementation Of The Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle South Australia 2020** [Reviewing-Implementation-of-the-ATSICPP_2020_SA.pdf \(snaicc.org.au\)](#)
4. **Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026**
[Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

In moving forward to translate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child Placement Principles into action Emerging Minds supports a systems approach that considers the following organisational changes to support embedding child, parent and family centred social and emotional wellbeing informed practices to improve mental health across the life course:

- Practices that identify and address the needs of parents and their children are understood, implemented, and.
- Service managers and clinical leaders have the knowledge and skills to implement systems and processes that support practice across the following service-level elements:
- Service that adopted a 'best practice' approach to child focused and parent sensitive practices that are:
 - embedded Proactive and responsive to the needs of the family
 - Family/kin focused
 - Trauma-informed
 - Culturally appropriate
- Champions provide leadership, support training, mentoring and advice to staff on child focused and parent sensitive practice to ensure parenting needs are identified and supported.

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- Child focused and parent sensitive focused service delivery is audited regularly.
- Results are feed back to staff and service users and plans are in place to address identified issues.
- Service leaders are working towards a child focused and parent sensitive environment. In this environment:
 - posters that welcome child and family /kin are on the walls
 - rooms are large and comfortable enough for children and families/kin
 - visiting/appointment times are appropriate for parents with children
 - staff acknowledge and talk to children when they visit or are in waiting rooms
 - a play area is provided for younger children and age-appropriate magazines or other activities are available for older children who are visiting or attending with their parents
 - layout and processes ensure that children attending the service with their parents are safe and their well being is considered.
- Forms and documents are child focused and parent sensitive.
- Electronic or written forms that record personal information, goals and plans include specific space to identify and record:
 - the name, date of birth and gender of all dependent children and the usual custody/caregiving arrangements for each child
 - strengths and vulnerabilities in relation to parenting, and actions to address any identified vulnerabilities
- family care plans – ‘just in case’ or ‘crisis’ plans that outline the parent’s wishes for caregiving arrangements for dependent children if the parent is temporarily be unable to care for them.
- Systems and guidelines are in place to ensure that pregnant and postpartum service users have access to appropriate supports and services that also consider the needs of the child
- Interagency planning and information sharing processes are in place
- Processes are in place to support and enable coordinated interagency planning and information sharing to best meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and their families
- Processes focus on the best interests of the child while addressing issues of privacy and confidentiality and identifying and supporting parenting/family strengths.
- Time and resources are allocated to support and sustain knowledge, skills and practice to support parenting and the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of children.
- Learning pathways to social and emotional wellbeing and child mental health literacy are part of induction protocol for all levels of the organisation
- Learning pathways to child focused parent sensitive practice to support social and emotional wellbeing of infants, children and families is embedded into professional development and continuous learning for working engaged with children and or parents
- All job and person descriptions state a requirement to:
 - Demonstrate literacy:
 - in infant and child and family mental health
 - in social and emotional wellbeing as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families
 - Demonstrate understanding:
 - in the impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples
- Interagency planning and information sharing protocols and processes are in place.

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- Written pathways outline the pathways of support and treatment available within and across services that support parenting and child outcomes.

Practitioners who have contact with parents demonstrate competence in:

- Engaging parents to support developmental and social and emotional wellbeing, child mental health
- Trauma informed and healing responsive practice
- Supporting conversations with parents about the impact of adult stressors on them as parents and family adversity on children's daily lives
- Practices that focus on enhancing and promoting strengths while accounting for vulnerabilities (worries for the family)
- Practices that are non-judgmental and decentered from practitioners bias

Practitioners:

- Identify specific family and kin goals within family plans
- Support connection to community support for parents and families and kin.
- Support kin connection
- Link to culturally appropriate family and parenting support programs as and when needed
- Link parents and children to more specialised assessment and treatment programs if needed.

Culturally appropriate evidence-based programs are available for the most vulnerable children and their families including:

- Age and developmentally appropriate psych-education programs
- Parenting support programs tailored and responsive to the needs of families where there are vulnerabilities
- Supporting parents to build resilience for their children and families

To support these practices supervision needs to be reflective to ensure:

Conversations about children, parenting and family/kin supports are routine

Practices and support provided nurture:

- Parent-child relationships
- Emotional wellbeing
- Routines that support family functioning
- Communication and meaning making
- Support networks that wrap around the child and family
- Community/Cultural peer supports
 - Kin, culture and community

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[Link to In focus: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing](#)

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Resource Highlights and Web-links

In focus: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing

Relationships and connections are central to any engagement within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children toolkit

Finding the secret garden

Who is this toolkit for?

How was this toolkit developed?

Acknowledgements

Stories of deadly dads: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers keep strong

Online course

Using Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems as a framework for father resilience

Podcast paper

Mental health support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

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In focus: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/in-focus-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-wellbeing/?audience=practitioner>

Podcast: Mental health support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/podcast/mental-health-support-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-families/?audience=practitioner>

Lunchbox session/short films: Healing through voice, culture and Country: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/healing-through-voice-culture-and-country-short-films/?audience=practitioner>

Webinar: Cultural considerations in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/cultural-considerations-supporting-aboriginal-children/?audience=practitioner>

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Stories of deadly dads: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers keep strong:

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