

Catholic Schools
Child Safe Schools

RESOURCE GUIDE:
**Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Children**



**Addressing the Principle of Inclusion:
Child Safety in Catholic Schools in Victoria**

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Acknowledgement

These resources have been developed by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) in partnership with Professor Chris Forlin who is an international education consultant from Western Australia.

Every person needs to feel that their sense of self and identity is valued in some way by the people and environments that surround them (Frankland et al. 2011, p. 27).

Introduction

The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) is committed to the ongoing safety of children and young people and to supporting Catholic schools in providing a safe and nurturing school environment for all.

As part of the Victorian Government's drive to build safer futures for children, all Victorian schools are required to meet the Child Safe Standards (the Standards), introduced into Victorian law in late 2015. Ministerial Order No. 870 specifies the actions schools must take to embed a culture of 'zero tolerance' to abuse and comply with their obligations for school registration.

This Guide draws upon research, best practice and Catholic sector advice to provide child safety considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children in Catholic schools in Victoria. It should be read in conjunction with the *Introduction to the Principle of Inclusion: Overview of Resource Guides*.

Terminology: The term 'Aboriginal' is used in this document to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The words 'Koori', 'Koorie' and 'Indigenous' are retained in the names of programs and initiatives and, unless noted otherwise, are inclusive of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The term 'children' is applied to mean all children and youth enrolled in Catholic primary and secondary schools in Victoria.

Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

A 'Welcome to Country' is a formal greeting that has been performed for generations by an Aboriginal Elder or Traditional Owner of the land on which a gathering is held. This provides visitors with:

- safe passage through traditional lands of the host people
- temporary access to use of land and resources
- diplomatic rite involving the landholder's hospitality and a ritual exchange of gifts (usually gum leaves).

Traditionally, a Welcome to Country functions similar to that of a visa – it grants permission for a non-citizen to travel to, enter, transit or remain in a particular country for a short time. Today it is performed by a representative of the Traditional Owners of the land on which a gathering is taking place. The Welcome to Country can include speech, song, dance and a smoking ceremony.

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is a statement of recognition of the Traditional Owners and can be given by any person, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous. Pope John Paul II recognised the significance of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the land in his address to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at Alice Springs in 1986 when he said:

[F]or thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day ... Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God ... (Pope John Paul II 1986, para. 4).

Further information about 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners' can be found on the Victorian Government website <https://www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/welcome-to-country-and-acknowledgement-of-traditional-owners.html>.



Meeting the Standards

The Standards represent a holistic organisational approach to creating cultural change in organisations so that preventing harm and protecting children from abuse is embedded in the everyday thinking and practice of leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, and volunteers.

For Aboriginal children, cultural safety is an integral aspect of child safety practice. This is because strong cultural identity, positive community connections and connections to culture are sources of resilience, wellbeing and safety for Aboriginal families and their children. Schools need to consider cultural safety of Aboriginal children across the implementation of all the Standards.

Catholic schools in Victoria support an inclusive approach to education where diversity is respected and all children are valued and welcomed. Aboriginal parents view Catholic schools as a positive and viable option for their children because of the ethos and beliefs of our schools and the protective nature this provides.

With their gospel-inspired worldview, Catholic schools have many windows of opportunity to commit to the cultural safety, care and respect of Aboriginal children. This commitment is inherent to Christ's message of love, justice and the sanctity of each human person.

In particular, the principle of inclusion underpinning the Standards supports Aboriginal heritage, culture and spirituality in a way that reveals the Church's commitment to social justice and acknowledges the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

Principle of Inclusion

Valuing children and their rights is an essential feature of all child safe institutions. Australia is party to a number of international human rights treaties and has:

- agreed to be bound by the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989 (the Convention)
- endorsed the United Nations' *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 2007 (the Declaration).

Catholic schools uphold children's rights through their public commitments, their inclusive and respectful practices and by creating culturally safe environments. The Convention includes the best interests of the child (Article 3); the rights and responsibilities of families to guide their children (Article 5); the right for children to have their opinions taken into account in decisions that affect them (Article 12); the right to learn and use the language and customs of their families (Article 30); and the right to protection from sexual abuse (Article 34).

Like all other children, Aboriginal children are entitled to enjoy their rights free from any kind of discrimination, including discrimination based on their Indigenous origin or identity (Article 2 of the Convention; Article 2 of the Declaration).

A culturally safe environment is more than cultural sensitivity: it is one that does not ignore, challenge or deny cultural identity. Cultural safety upholds the rights of Aboriginal children to:

- identify as Aboriginal without fear of retribution or questioning
- have an education that strengthens their culture and identity
- maintain connections to their land and country
- be taught their cultural heritage by their elders
- receive information in a culturally sensitive, relevant and accessible manner
- be involved in services that are culturally respectful.

Creating Safe Environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

Keeping ... [Aboriginal] ... children and youth connected to their communities and strong in their identity and culture is essential to their wellbeing and the cornerstone of resilience (Jackomos, 2014, p. 6).

Raising awareness of cultural safety

Being strong in culture is protective for Aboriginal children's safety and wellbeing because it can support strong identity, high self-esteem and strong connections (Royal Commission 2017b).

For Aboriginal people, cultural safety and security is two-fold: it requires environments of cultural resilience *within* Aboriginal communities and the cultural competency of those who *engage with* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (ATSI Social Justice Commissioner 2011). This has implications for the awareness of staff and the practice in Catholic schools. Staff in Catholic schools operate within a receptive environment of faith and provide a safe place in which Aboriginal perspectives will be respectfully and justly embedded into the curriculum and school practice.

Practical ways to raise awareness and strengthen cultural safety for Aboriginal children:

- Establish educational and social relationships with the local Aboriginal communities and local government councils.
- Introduce Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum as an inclusive part of school life.
- Encourage the visibility of Aboriginal artwork, signs, words and symbols.
- Celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander days of significance throughout the year.
- Fly the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander flags – this simple act acknowledges the Aboriginal story of the land their school is built upon.
- Create an Acknowledgement of Country for the reception area. Include an acknowledgement at the beginning of significant school assemblies or days of celebration.
- Become a Friends Igniting Reconciliation through Education (FIRE) Carrier Project school, initiated through the Opening the Doors Foundation, part of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry.
- Create a 'Cultural Safety Charter' or 'Statement of Commitment' which promotes the cultural safety of Aboriginal children; make it visible and include parents/carers in this process.

Policy and practice

Catholic school leaders are responsible for ensuring that the school develops readily accessible, easy to understand and user-friendly information for all staff, children and families about the school's policies and inclusive practices for keeping children safe.

Catholic schools have developed child safety and reporting policies. For these policies to be effective, it is important that leaders ensure they are living documents and that different members of the community, including Aboriginal families, can easily understand the commitments and procedures and are supported to implement them.

Catholic schools have also developed a 'Child Safety Code of Conduct' for staff and volunteers specifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviours with children. Typically, schools' Codes express an expectation that staff demonstrate 'culturally safe' behaviour with Aboriginal children. Staff will need the opportunity for cultural awareness training to ensure they understand culturally safe behaviour and relationships with Aboriginal children.

Practical ways to build staff understanding of cultural safety

Make time to learn about the unique context and experiences of Aboriginal communities. Aspects to include:

- cultural protocols when working with children, families and communities
- family and kinship structures that are an integral part of Aboriginal society
- current policies that direct Aboriginal child care such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) 'Nugel program'
- key Aboriginal child care and other relevant organisations
- underlying historical and systemic factors impacting on Aboriginal parents, families and communities when thinking about the causes of and responses to child abuse and neglect.

More broadly, build knowledge of histories, values, languages and cultures. Consider:

- Aboriginal concepts of country and community and the importance of land to Aboriginal spirituality and identity
- European colonisation and its impact on the traditional lifestyle, culture and language of Aboriginal groups
- government and protection policies that governed the lives of Aboriginal peoples
- the Bringing them Home Report.

Listening to children's voices

Research suggests that enabling children and young people to identify and raise their safety concerns is a vital feature of child safe organisations. By understanding how children think about feeling and being safe, adults can open up opportunities to better respond to safety concerns and create and implement strategies that are more effective (Moore et al. 2016).

One way that schools can support children's safety is to provide them with opportunities to identify the risks they encounter and what worries them. In partnership with adults, they should also be given opportunities to develop strategies to prevent and respond to these risks and concerns.

While all children are vulnerable to some extent, inadvertent discrimination and lack of cultural safety can increase Aboriginal children's vulnerability and prevent them from speaking out when they have concerns or experience harm. This insight is supported by the Royal Commission's findings which suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors faced additional barriers that reduced their ability to disclose or report abuse (Royal Commission 2017a).

It is very important that Aboriginal children are empowered to voice any suggestions or concerns they may have regarding their own or others' wellbeing and safety. Potential barriers and culturally aware strategies for listening and communicating should be considered. Procedures should be explained and clearly visible within a school outlining how children can provide suggestions or raise their concerns and they should be aware of who they can go to if they feel unsafe.

These inclusive processes actively bring to life the words Pope John Paul II spoke in Alice Springs in 1986, words echoed by Pope Francis in his Papal Letter to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) in 2016:

Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost.

Engaging Families and Communities

Families and school communities thrive when they work together to better support children's engagement, learning and wellbeing. Parental engagement for child safety means that schools take deliberate steps to identify multiple ways to meaningfully build trust and work with all parents in their community.

Working together implies more than communicating information from school to home. It involves authentic exchange: listening with openness to parents' perspectives, realities and responses through respectful conversations. Diversity is strength where there is a willingness to engage with difference, to be curious about experiences different from our own and to be open to understanding those experiences from a different point of view.

Aboriginal families and communities value interdependence, group cohesion and community, where raising children is a shared responsibility. In engaging with Aboriginal families, it is important to understand the complex kinship relationships that exist in the local community and the cultural protocols that will enable families to feel comfortable and supported when talking about child safety concerns.

Promote and facilitate the presence and engagement with Aboriginal families:

- Build a relationship based on trust and respect.
- Work with families in a neutral, comfortable and positive setting. Many parents and grandparents have had negative experiences with schools and are likely to drop the child off and pick them up at the gate. This results in minimal interaction with the school.
- Listen to what parents have to say and talk in ways that do not make the family feel 'powerless'. Use language that invites people into a conversation rather than overwhelms.
- Invite parents into the learning space of their child – if the parent is unsure, get them to 'bring a friend'.

- Be understanding of Aboriginal communication styles, e.g. silence – thinking things over, code-switching or translating – trying to find the right words so that the non-Aboriginal person will understand.
- Involve others from the Aboriginal community as this provides cultural support for the family.

Identifying and Responding to Risks to Child Safety and Wellbeing

Being aware of and pre-empting potential risk is a key factor in minimising harm and improving child safety. As Catholic schools work to further improve practice and embed the Standards, they must also consider how well they are promoting the cultural safety of Aboriginal children and young people and what they can do to better make their organisation a safe and welcoming place for Aboriginal families.

Research conducted for the Royal Commission suggests that racism puts Indigenous children at risk of abuse while culture protects them (Anderson et al. 2017).

Proactive strategies schools might consider to minimise risk in their school communities include:

- Invite families into conversations about child safety and the prevention of abuse to gain an insight into their perspectives, concerns and hopes.
- Check in with Aboriginal families to ensure that the school's commitment to child safety and its procedures and strategies are understood.
- Empower families and children to raise complaints and ensure any concerns are taken seriously.
- Work with the Aboriginal community to increase staff training on cultural safety and minimise language and cultural barriers.
- Utilise programs that deal with racism and discrimination such as 'Racism. No way'.
- Collaborate with nearby Catholic schools with Aboriginal student enrolments to develop relevant strategies for your local context.

For Further Information – Diocesan Contacts

For Catholic Education Office advice, please contact the ATSI Education Officer at each Diocesan Office:

Catholic Education Melbourne (03) 9267 0228

Catholic Education Office Ballarat (03) 5337 7135

Catholic Education Office Sale (03) 5622 6600

Catholic Education Office Sandhurst (03) 5443 2377

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United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/4aa76b319.pdf>.

Resources

Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Victoria at <https://www.cam.org.au/acmv>.

Maggolee at <http://www.maggolee.org.au/>. ('Maggolee' is an initiative developed by Reconciliation Victoria for local councils to work collaboratively with Aboriginal communities. The name is taken from the Woi wurrung language of the Wurundjeri people meaning 'here in this place'.)

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) at <https://www.vacca.org/>, including the VACCA Nugee program at <https://www.vacca.org/foster-carers/nugee/>.

This is one of three Guides designed to assist Catholic schools to integrate the *Principle of Inclusion* as part of school strategies and practice for the safety and wellbeing of children in their care.