

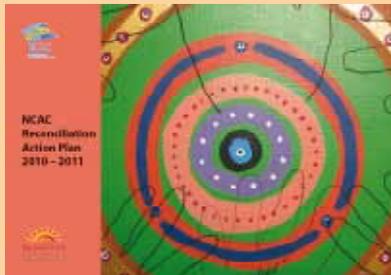
NCAC's reconciliation journey: The launch of our first Reconciliation Action Plan

by Julie Peters

We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where NCAC is located and this article was written, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and recognise they are the first people of Australia.

In recent years NCAC has engaged in a number of activities, such as cultural awareness training for our employees, that have contributed to NCAC's vision for reconciliation. These activities have led NCAC as an organisation to formalise our commitment to reconciliation by developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). In January 2011, we proudly launched our first RAP.

The RAP is the culmination of six months of work done by NCAC's Indigenous Project Working Group, a group of people from across the organisation with a passion for reconciliation and closing the 17 year life expectancy gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians.



NCAC's vision for reconciliation

As an organisation, NCAC has been conscious of inclusive practices and of the importance of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture, especially within our own community. NCAC's vision for reconciliation is to be truly inclusive as we work towards the organisation's vision of 'Quality experiences and positive outcomes for all children' by ensuring all employees are educated about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture. NCAC intends for all employees to have the opportunity to be knowledgeable about the life expectancy gap. NCAC looks to put all children in Australia first and to promote quality inclusive practices in early and middle education and care programs.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.5 and 6.5
OSHCQA Principles:	1.2, 1.4, 2.2, 3.2 and 3.3
QIAS Principle:	1.4

What is a RAP?

Reconciliation Australia is an organisation dedicated to closing the life expectancy gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. One of their key strategies in achieving this ambition is to encourage and support organisations to develop their own RAPs.

A RAP outlines an organisation's commitment to forming, building and maintaining relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. It calls for organisations to encourage respect and spread knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history through employee initiatives and work activities. A RAP also encourages organisations to consider providing opportunities that benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to help close the gap in life expectancy.

The RAP document requires organisations to commit to measurable targets. For NCAC, examples of measurable targets include putting a timeline on employee training in cultural awareness and identifying the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources NCAC will produce.

NCAC's RAP process

NCAC formed the Indigenous Project Working Group in 2009. This working group met and discussed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and what NCAC could do to help close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. From these initial meetings, the working group became interested in increasing awareness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities about the benefits of using formal child care in a child's early years and in increasing cultural diversity in mainstream child care services. These have become action outcomes of NCAC's RAP.

The working group developed a proposal for NCAC to write a RAP to formalise the commitment to reconciliation. This proposal was fully supported by NCAC's Board and Executive Management. Once the proposal was approved, the working group set about writing the document using information from Reconciliation Australia's website as a guide. This process included recognising what steps NCAC had already taken toward reconciliation and building upon those steps. Once the first draft was complete, the working group met with a wider consultative group of NCAC employees who had expressed interest in being involved in the project. Through consultation with members of NCAC's Board, it became clear that the RAP could make a significant impact on NCAC employees if measures were put in place to help them increase their knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This drafting process took six months of consultation, writing and approval.

NCAC's reconciliation journey so far

NCAC has incorporated an Acknowledgement of Country into formal meeting agendas and now asks a local Aboriginal elder to open large formal occasions with a Welcome to Country. NCAC also celebrated National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week for the first time in 2010 and invited local Aboriginal artists to design an artwork specifically for NCAC. This involved NCAC employees' contributions and messages. NCAC will continue to recognise and celebrate significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander observances throughout 2011.

NCAC staff travelled to Alice Springs in July for the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) Conference. This gave them an opportunity to increase the reach of our resources and to speak to other organisations about our reconciliation journey. For this conference NCAC developed a range of specific resources aimed at encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to use formal child care. NCAC consulted with a local Sydney Aboriginal artist on the design of the resources and these were, and continue to be, very well received. Posters developed for the conference are now available for services to order, free of charge, through our website. As of January 2011, over 20,000 posters had been distributed. We have also written articles, available on our website, that encourage inclusive practices in all services.



Aboriginal artists, Kylie Russell (left) and Aunty Elaine Russell, with the artwork they produced for NCAC's inaugural NAIDOC Week celebration

These are just a few examples of what NCAC has achieved during our reconciliation journey. The primary focus now is for NCAC to give employees the opportunity to continue to build upon their knowledge, respect and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. NCAC hopes employees will have the necessary tools to continue their own personal journey toward reconciliation into their future roles.

The benefits of having a RAP for your organisation

Having a RAP forces you to think about what your organisation can do to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A RAP will start conversations around your work place and will give employees an opportunity to learn about the first history and culture of Australia. This may spark further conversations with the children and families at your service. The actions that come out of your RAP can also be incorporated into your daily learning program for children. A RAP can give educators and staff at a service an opportunity to participate in professional and personal development that relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, history and culture.

Any organisation, big or small, can develop a RAP. If your service or organisation is currently working toward reconciliation and closing the gap, then a RAP is a document that will formalise your commitment and help you to think beyond what you are already doing. While a RAP only needs to be approximately ten pages, developing it takes a lot of time and requires consultation with Reconciliation Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations in your local community.



Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Greg, NCAC's Indigenous Project Working Group and John Lawrence and Geraldine Atkinson (NCAC Board Directors) with the Koomurri dancers at the official launch of NCAC's RAP in February.

How does a RAP relate to your quality practice?

Outcome 2 of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is about the way 'children are connected with and contribute to their world' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 25). Part of this learning outcome is about children responding to diversity with respect. One way educators can promote this learning is through engaging 'in interactions with children that promote respect for diversity and value distinctiveness' (DEEWR, 2009, p.27). By committing to a RAP, all employees at your service will be encouraged to learn, acknowledge and respect the history and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This increased knowledge and practice will in turn promote a strong sense of wellbeing, community and diversity in the children at your service and within the wider local community.

Making a commitment to reconciliation and doing what you can to close the gap will give your service the opportunity to think beyond what you may already be doing for your local community. Outcome 1 of the EYLF: *Children have a strong sense of identity* states that: 'Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities. This includes their relationships with people, places and things and the actions and responses of others' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, history and culture are part of every Australian child's wider community. By doing what you can as

a service to close the gap, you are contributing to better outcomes for all children.

Conclusion

NCAC is very proud to have launched its RAP. Developing and implementing this document has been an enjoyable learning experience for those involved. It has given NCAC an opportunity to really think about what can be done to help close the gap and the organisation is now working through the actions to which it has committed ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: **Children have a strong sense of identity**
- Outcome 2: **Children are connected with and contribute to their world**
- Outcome 3: **Children have a strong sense of wellbeing**

References and further reading:

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming – the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: Author.
- Gangari Bamford Maguire & Associates. (2009). Including Aboriginal Australia in your service. *Putting Children First*, 30, 9-11.
- Mundy, L., & Peters, J. (2010). How welcome would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel at your service? *Putting Children First*, 34, 12-14.
- NCAC. (2011). *NCAC Reconciliation Action Plan*. Available from www.ncac.gov.au

Useful website:

- Reconciliation Australia: www.reconciliation.org.au