

How welcome would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel at your service?

by Lyndsay Mundy and Julie Peters

We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we are, 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.

'Early childhood education is critical to providing opportunities for all children to learn and have the best possible start in life. Early childhood education programs [... are] associated with a lower incidence of personal and social problems in later life, such as dropping out of school, welfare dependency, unemployment and criminal behaviour' (Closing the Gap, 2010, p.19).

The aim of this article is to discuss the importance of inclusive practice in mainstream child care. It will also inform services of ways to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families feel welcome in child care by sharing experiences from other child care services.

Every child has the right to receive high quality child care and to feel comfortable and accepted in their surroundings. Yet many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are missing out on the benefits of child care. Services should ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their community are aware of the benefits and feel comfortable with their child care service.

SDN Children's Services

SDN Children's Services run 23 centres and offer 1,124 licensed full-time early childhood education and care places across NSW and ACT. SDN has made an organisational commitment to its centres becoming more accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Since the start of the initiative, SDN has attracted more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children into their centres by creating welcoming environments and accessible programs.

Ginie Udy, CEO of SDN, emphasises that the first step towards making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families feel welcome in a service is to raise staff awareness of, and sensitivity to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences and history. SDN appointed Deb Mann as their Aboriginal Programs Manager to help with this process. Local Aboriginal Elders were

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.3, 2.2, 3.4, 3.6-3.7 and 6.2
OSHCQA Principles:	1.1-1.3, 2.2, 3.3 and 4.2
QIAS Principles:	1.1, 1.4-1.5, 2.1-2.2 and 3.1

also consulted as to the best form and content of training. Ginie stresses the importance of getting a real commitment to creating an accessible service as there are likely to be challenges along the way.

Ginie acknowledges that they did make mistakes. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt that there hadn't been enough consultation with communities or that the wrong people had been consulted. SDN talked through these issues with those concerned and while it would have been easy to give up after these challenges, they decided to accept that they may make mistakes and to persevere.

Building relationships

SDN has built good relationships with local Aboriginal Elders, and now have an Aboriginal person on their Board. All this helps community members feel more comfortable about working with a mainstream service to care for and educate their children.

Lots of celebrations and events are held at centres so that families can interact with staff, each other and build a sense of community with the centre as a whole. For example, at SDN Redfern families can sit on the edge of the sandpit and chat to educators, or chat with other families under the enormous tree in the yard or at regular BBQs. These gatherings encourage and build trust between the centre and the community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators can provide invaluable guidance in the development of cultural programming that develops children's learning and strengthens cultural identity.

SDN has deliberately advertised positions in Indigenous media and community centres, as families are more likely to use a centre if there is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander educator employed. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff currently make up three per cent of SDN's workforce.

Inclusive practices

SDN believes that high quality services would be doing many of the things that make a service inclusive in their normal programming. For example, by exploring family trees, providing culturally appropriate equipment, posting an Aboriginal flag and celebrating events such as Sorry Day and National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week, children will naturally ask questions. Following children's questions is the basis of any good program.

It is important to remember that becoming culturally accessible is an ongoing process and there is no end point or right answer as to how it is achieved. As Ginie recognises, "Our journey has been very long and we're still going in what I call a 'zig zag': a bit here, a bit there, back, forward and round and round". SDN is committed to continuing the journey across all of their centres.

Child care can help teach children to be 'two-way strong'. 'Being two-way strong means children develop strong foundations in both the culture/s and language/s of their family and of the wider world, allowing them to move fluently across cultures without compromising their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities'

(Foundations for Success, 2008, p.1).

Rainbow Paradise Preschool Childhood Development and Education Long Day Care Centre

The Rainbow Paradise Centre in Blacktown, NSW, offers families and their children a warm and safe environment that encourages diversity



and acceptance, and builds awareness of the importance of inclusive practice in the local community. The centre has approximately 25 children, 60 per cent of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

It is the centre's policy to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within the centre and in the local community. They believe that cultures and traditions should not just be topics that are touched upon once a year, but should be part of the daily education program; that way, inclusiveness will become second nature to the centre and the children will grow up with a broader knowledge and understanding of Australia.

Inclusive practices

The children are involved in culturally appropriate activities every day. They are greeted in languages such as Fijian, Greek and the Aboriginal Durrug greeting (the centre is on Durrug land). They use 'clapping sticks' while singing songs, listen to music sung in various languages, learn traditional dances, listen to Dreamtime stories and read from Aboriginal picture books. They also have group and informal one-on-one discussions about culture.

Educators at the service are intent on giving the children the opportunity to find out about their cultural identity. Many children come to the service not really knowing anything about their culture. By consulting with a family, educators find out as much as they can about the child's background and then integrate the information into the service's daily education program.

Community Engagement

Gina Moelau, the owner and Director of the service, spends time talking informally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that come to Rainbow Paradise.

She is aware that cultural barriers exist, so makes families feel comfortable with the service and her staff, often talking with the families at length in the grounds of the service rather than in her office – which is their preference and can be less intimidating. Aboriginal families are invited to perform Aboriginal dancing, art and storytelling. Families attending the service feel proud to promote their culture, and by performing at the centre they form a close connection with staff and children.

Gina's husband Mark is Aboriginal, from Tokelau Island, and has a close relationship with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Mark gets feedback and suggestions from the community on new activities for the children. Mark also goes into the wider community to talk about what the centre has to offer; it is important to spread the message about inclusive practices as much as possible.

Educators

Gina advises that it would be more difficult to gain trust if she did not have an Aboriginal staff member, Terri-Anne Grimes, a Team Leader. The families instantly feel more comfortable when they see Terri and she loves what the centre offers the children in terms of inclusive practices. Terri has a bond with all of the children and the families really appreciate her being there.

Terri has explained that she would feel more comfortable leaving her children at a centre that had an Aboriginal staff member. This does not mean that you should give up if you don't have an Aboriginal staff member in your service, but you will have to work harder to gain the trust of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Inclusive practices are the first step to gaining trust and will improve the tolerance, acceptance and knowledge of the children at your service.

Conclusion

One of the most challenging things about truly incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into child care is taking the first step. The potential for making mistakes can be a deterrent, but as long as you are open, hold consultations and ask the local community for help and advice, your service will be on the right track ■

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

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