



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



“Listen To Us”

Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery

August 2015



Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique contribution of Aboriginal people's culture and heritage to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this report, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

Where direct quotes from children and young people have been included in this report, the children and young people are identified by age or age range, gender, region of origin and language group, where this information is known. Some children and young people self-identified their language group and it is recognised there can be more than one accepted spelling of a language group.

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Commissioner for Children and Young People

Ground Floor, 1 Alvan Street, Subiaco WA 6008

Telephone: (08) 6213 2297

Facsimile: (08) 6213 2220

Freecall: 1800 072 444

Email: info@ccyp.wa.gov.au

Web: www.ccyp.wa.gov.au

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Letter to Parliament

Hon. Barry House MLC

President, Legislative Council

Hon. Michael William Sutherland MLA

Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

“Listen To Us”: Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery.

In accordance with section 49 of the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, I hereby submit to Parliament for information the report, *“Listen To Us”: Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery.*

Jenni Perkins

Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

4 August 2015



Listen To Us

The title of this report, “Listen To Us”, uses the words of a 10 year-old Noongar / Martu / Wongi / Yamatji girl from Perth who participated in the consultations with the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

Many other children and young people from diverse language and cultural groups made similar comments, indicating their desire to be heard by decision makers.

They also spoke about the importance of their culture and language and the positive influence this has on their wellbeing.

Recognising this sentiment, the statement “Listen To Us” has been translated into some of the language groups identified by children and young people who participated in the consultation.

“Kulila langatju” – Ngaanyatjarra

(Translation provided by Daisy Ward, Ngaanyatjarra Lands School)

“Gurandu Guandala” – Tjupan

(Tjupan people – Verna Vos, Jeffery Barnard and Lorraine Barnard)

“Rangga barrenkoo-yarr” – Miriwoong

(Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre, Kununurra)

“Ni ngalak-ngat” – Noongar

(Noongar Boodjar Aboriginal Language Centre)

“Tjitji piniku kulila” – Wongatha

(Kado Muir via Noongar Boodjar Aboriginal Language Centre)

“Keriba mir asoli” – Meriam Mir: Eastern Torres Strait Islander

(Charles Passi: Mer Island in the Torres Strait)

“Warra-likarra-yarramirri” – Nyikina

(Dr Anne Poelina, Nyikina Traditional Custodian and Yimardoowarra marnin)

“Guliyamma ngaliyagurugu” – Banyjima

(Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre)

“Pinakarra nganaku” – Nyangumarta

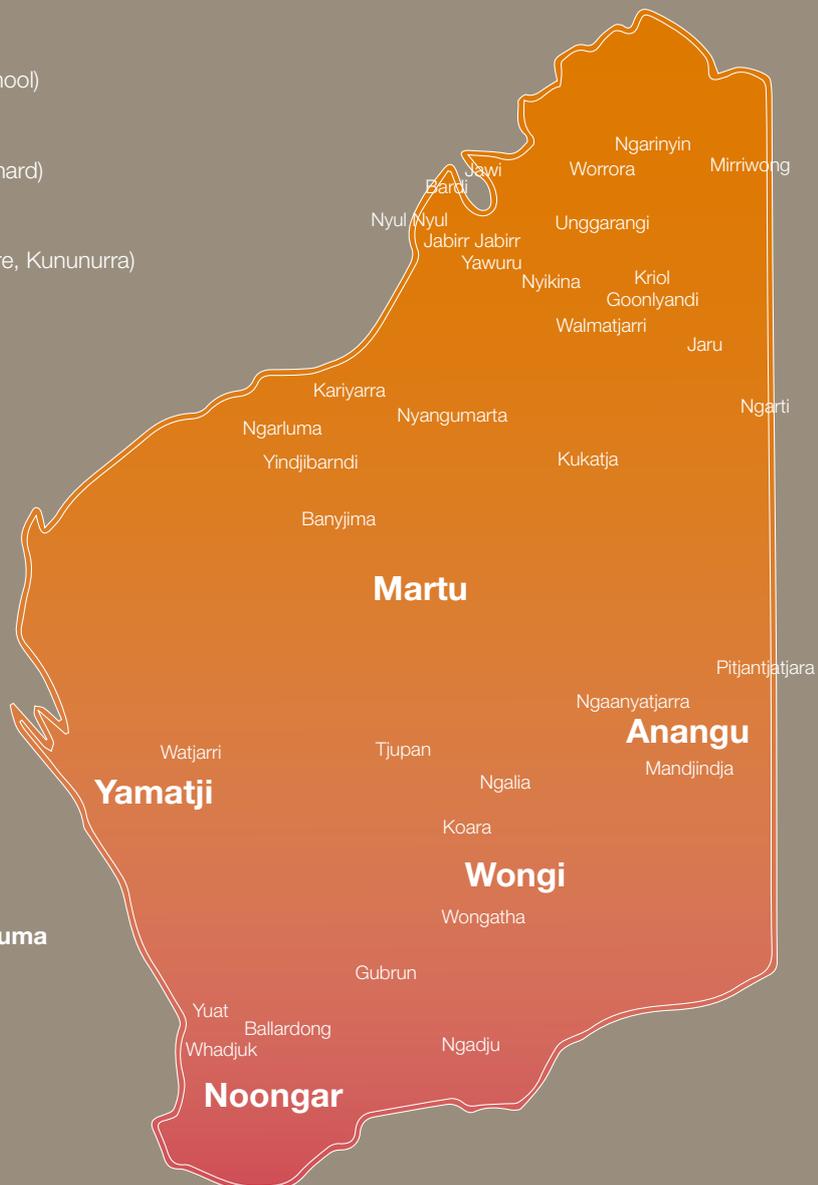
(Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre)

“Wanyabarrima ngaliyagurumangu” – Ngarluma

(Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre)

“Buranyangan-lu” – Jaru

(Kimberley Language Resource Centre)



“Listen to Us!”





Foreword

As Western Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have a statutory responsibility to promote and monitor children and young people's wellbeing and ensure their voices are heard. I must also have a special regard for the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Since the role of Commissioner was created in 2007, the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people has been a focus in all of the work of the office. Aboriginal children and young people have participated in all of our major consultations, on issues as diverse as mental health, disability, youth health and reducing alcohol-related harm.

In undertaking the role of acting Commissioner in December 2013, a particular priority for me was to hear from Aboriginal children and young people about what was important to them – about how they see their lives, what they need for their wellbeing and their hopes for the future.

More than 1,200 children and young people from across the state contributed to this consultation. They had a say through 17 face-to-face consultations run by community organisations, using unique and fun methodologies such as art, sport and music, or by responding to an online survey.

This is the largest single consultation to be completed by the Commissioner's office. It is arguably the biggest consultation ever undertaken with Aboriginal children and young people in WA.

The children and young people who had a say in this consultation identified many positive aspects about their lives and communities, including a respect for their culture and strong pride in their heritage. Many said they benefit from strong family connections and value education as a way of achieving their goals.

Some of the children and young people who participated in the consultation spoke directly about health and safety concerns for themselves and their families and friends. They also spoke about the need for more cohesive communities.

In preparing this report and its accompanying community report *Aboriginal Children and Young People Speak Out*, my aim is to bring the voices of Western Australia's Aboriginal children and young people directly to Parliament and the wider WA community.

Based on these voices and other evidence, this report outlines four approaches and eight strategies that enable us to challenge the status quo that is struggling to significantly improve Aboriginal children and young people's wellbeing.

These young people are our future leaders. I call upon everyone to take inspiration from their voices and work together to further shape policies, programs and services that respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people and promote a strong Aboriginal culture across Western Australia.

I sincerely thank all of the children and young people who participated, as well as the staff and management of the organisations who assisted with the consultations and online survey.

The overwhelming message from this consultation is simple and best expressed by the words of one 10 year-old girl who took part in this consultation: "Just listen to us".

Jenni Perkins

Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People WA



Foreword

As Ambassadors for Western Australian children and young people, we are proud to endorse this landmark report based on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

This report on the consultation undertaken by the Commissioner for Children and Young People delivers on important legislated functions of the role to ensure the voices of our younger generation are heard and to regard as a priority the wellbeing of our Aboriginal children and young people.

This report identifies and celebrates the many wonderful strengths of our Aboriginal children and young people and also highlights the need for a new and innovative effort to address the significant disadvantage too many of them experience.

For the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people to be improved, their views and insights must be sought and carefully considered when determining policy and developing or redesigning services. They must be involved in planning and decision-making processes undertaken by community organisations and all levels of government, local, state and federal.

We support the release of this report and hope for it to be a catalyst for change. This is a report that should not sit on shelves but be the start of meaningful engagement with Aboriginal children and young people in cities, towns and communities across the state.

As Ambassadors we will continue to work with the Commissioner to increase community awareness and understanding of factors that impact Aboriginal children and young people's health and development and, importantly, advocate for real change on the ground that strengthens their wellbeing.

Professor Donna Cross
Mrs Annie Fogarty AM
Professor Colleen Hayward AM
Mrs Tonya McCusker
Ms June Oscar AO
Professor Trevor Parry AM
His Honour Judge Denis Reynolds
Hon. Barbara Scott
Professor Fiona Stanley AC
Associate Professor Ted Wilkes AO
Mr David Wirrpanda
Mr Russell Woolf
Winthrop Professor Stephen Zubrick
Ambassadors for Children and Young People





Foreword

As an Aboriginal young person from the Yorta Yorta nation, I was very eager to take part in the consultation held by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. It was an opportunity for my views about what it means to be Aboriginal and living in WA, and what is important to me, to be heard on a broader scale.

I am proud of my culture and heritage and I am very pleased that this report showcases the absolute strength of culture among many Aboriginal children and young people. I love the pride expressed in many of their comments about who they are and their cultural heritage.

What is also clear is the variety of culture within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – we are in some ways very different and this is important to understand.

The comments in the report regarding our attachment to family resonate highly with me, as those thoughts and relationships are always at the forefront of our lives. For a lot of us children, family is the core of our worth, and that is obvious when reading the report.

It is also clear that some Aboriginal children and young people are facing big struggles, and many of these have got to do with drugs and alcohol in the community.

This report has so much potential but we need you to unlock it. “Listen To Us” is the name of the report but also what these children and young people are needing you to do.

I urge you to do everything in your power to answer these children’s needs and make Western Australia that much better. Indigenous lives matter, children’s lives matter, our lives matter!

Please make this your priority.

Estelle Clarke

WA Young Person of the Year 2015





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Background

This report presents the outcomes of a major consultation with Aboriginal children and young people across Western Australia conducted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

The role of the Commissioner under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* is broadly to monitor and promote the wellbeing of all children and young people under 18 years in WA, and to advocate for policies and services that improve their wellbeing.¹ In performing a function under the Act the Commissioner must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.²

In 2014, the Commissioner consulted with 1,271 Aboriginal children and young people from all major regions of WA about the most important issues in their lives, including 482 through an online survey and 789 in face-to-face consultations conducted by local organisations on the Commissioner's behalf.

The consultations highlighted many positive features of Aboriginal children and young people's lives that safeguard their wellbeing, but also that some are vulnerable and experiencing challenges that require greater attention.

These observations are consistent with the evidence that most Aboriginal children and young people are faring well but too many experience ongoing and, at times, significant disadvantage across a range of wellbeing measures.^{3 4 5}

Considerable work has been done in identifying the significant and ongoing disadvantage experienced by some Aboriginal people and communities, and what needs to be done to address the complex causes of this disadvantage.

The purpose of this report is to add to this body of evidence by emphasising what Aboriginal children and young people see as important and using their views as inspiration to increase the effectiveness of programs and services that support their wellbeing.





Culture

Culture is central to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, with evidence of positive associations between culture and wellbeing outcomes throughout life.^{12 13}

Culture supports children and young people's development, promotes resilience and can be a protective factor that reduces the exposure to, and effects of, risks to wellbeing.¹⁴

In the consultations, children and young people identified their culture as one of the most important features of their lives. Culture contributes to Aboriginal children and young people's identity and sense of belonging, and is a source of pride.

“My culture is who I am, it is a part of everything I do. It connects me to my family and makes me unique...” 17 year-old Jabirr Jabirr girl (Kimberley)

“[Culture] tells me who I am and makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I belong somewhere.” 13 year-old Yawuru girl (Perth)

While most children and young people expressed a strong sense of culture in the consultations, some said they did not know much about their culture and some said they wanted to know more. Loss of culture stems from both contemporary and historical circumstances, and can affect wellbeing.¹⁵

“I think it's very important to me because I don't want to lose my culture, I want to learn as much as I can.” 17 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

Many children and young people said it was important to them to practice their culture,¹⁶ which included being connected to country, learning and speaking an Aboriginal language, and taking part in traditional activities and cultural events.

All children have the right to practice their culture, and cultural practice is associated with positive wellbeing.^{17 18 19 20 21} Evidence suggests most Aboriginal children and young people are able to practice their culture, but a significant number are not.^{22 23}

Education and aspirations for the future

Successful participation in education is essential for children and young people to realise their full potential. Education is recognised as a key social determinant of wellbeing.²⁴ Aspirations have been found to have a significant effect on educational outcomes.²⁵ The development of aspirations can encourage greater engagement in education and is particularly important in transition periods from school to further study and employment.^{26 27}

Education and aspirations featured strongly in the consultations with Aboriginal children and young people. Many expressed a clear understanding of the connection between a good education and a good quality of life, said they enjoyed being at school and viewed their school as one of the positive things about their community.

“Go to school, get a good education, get a good job and then you'll be free.” 10 year-old boy (Kimberley)

“Education is my main thing I worry about in my life because it determines your future.” 14 year-old Noongar / Bardi girl (Wheatbelt)

The main factors children and young people identified as important to their education were family support, financial resources, academic achievement, regular attendance, staying at school and the integration of culture in the curriculum.

“You need support and love from your family and friends, and you need to push yourself to be the best.” 16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)



Almost all children and young people expressed clear aspirations for the future, however some children and young people identified a lack of opportunities and expressed concerns for the future.

“I really want to get a job but there are no jobs for people in the community. I want to do cleaning on a mine or something but I will have to leave my home and community to get work. I need help to get a job close to my community so I don’t have to move away from home by myself.” 16 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

Recreational activities

Participation in recreational activities such as sport, creative and arts-based activities, social events and other leisure pursuits supports children and young people’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development and wellbeing,²⁸ and is a prominent feature of children and young people’s lives. For Aboriginal children and young people, there is evidence that recreation programs contribute to school retention and educational outcomes, social and cognitive skills, physical and mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion and cohesion, connection to culture, and a reduction in crime and antisocial behaviour.^{29 30}

Many Aboriginal children and young people emphasised recreational activities as important to them, with sport mentioned most often.

“I love playing all the sport and playing footy.”
12 year-old boy (Great Southern)

“[The most important thing to me is] keeping fit, playing basketball.” 10 year-old girl (Kimberley)

As well as sport, children and young people highlighted enjoying water parks, playgrounds and other recreational facilities, being outdoors and in contact with nature, and having access to shopping, entertainment and cultural facilities. Children and young people who could engage in a variety of recreational activities valued that aspect of their lives, and this was most likely to occur in

the Perth metropolitan area. Children and young people living in regional communities, particularly smaller regional and remote communities, expressed an almost universal desire for more diverse and age-appropriate activities.

“My town needs better stuff.” 12 year-old girl (Great Southern)

“... we don’t have big shops, we don’t get to do things people in big towns get to do.”
11 year-old girl (Pilbara)

There is insufficient data on Aboriginal children and young people’s participation in sport and recreational activities, however existing evidence suggests many children and young people may be missing out, particularly if they are living in disadvantaged families or communities.³¹





Racism and reconciliation

Racism and discrimination are key determinants of health and wellbeing, with a growing body of evidence demonstrating the adverse effects of discrimination and racism on children and young people's health, development and social and emotional wellbeing.^{32 33 34 35 36}

Racism and discrimination are unacceptable in any form. Aboriginal children and young people can experience multiple forms of racism and discrimination, including intentional and unintentional behaviours, biases, beliefs, assumptions and stereotypes. Evidence shows that racism continues to be a significant problem in the Australian community.^{37 38 39}

In the consultations, Aboriginal children and young people spoke about experiencing racism.

"I have had many racist comments towards me by people in the community and I don't like it. I think there should be stronger campaigns about racism..." 16 year-old boy (Peel)

"I would make it so that everyone is treated the same and people don't judge us Aboriginals 'cause we have different coloured skin." 14 year-old Ngadjju boy (Perth)

Reconciliation and racism are aligned concepts, as reconciliation involves building positive, respectful relationships between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal people, and racism presents a significant obstacle to reconciliation.^{40 41} Reconciliation also aims to address inequities in the community. Aboriginal children and young people in the consultations spoke about reconciliation, equality and having their culture and identity respected as important to them.

"One mob, no more racism, equality, same nation." 13 to 15 year-old boy (Perth)

Building the evidence base

This report highlights the growing body of research in areas relating to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people. However, there are also many gaps in the data and in the evidence of what works, which contributes to limited knowledge on what is needed or effective and, consequently, fewer long-term, evidence-based strategies.

The evidence base could be improved substantially by building into policies and services clear objectives, outcome measures, data collection and evaluation as a matter of course. Done well, this would not be onerous and would go a long way to ensuring limited resources are used effectively.

Listening and taking action

An enormous amount of work and research has been undertaken, even more so in recent years, to determine how to strengthen the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and communities. Despite this, it continues to be of concern that across so many indicators such little progress has occurred.

This report adds to that body of research the voices of Aboriginal children and young people themselves, so that current strategies, programs and services can be positively influenced by their views and insight.

The report has identified principles of good practice to underpin services and programs, based on the best available evidence, and it is important that these be observed and utilised as a foundation of service delivery.

Key approaches

Drawing from identified good practice, relevant research and evidence, the work of the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the guiding principles under the legislation and listening to the voices of the children and young people, there needs to be a collective commitment to the following four approaches.





1. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, and their families, must be seen as core business for all agencies as there is an imperative to achieve truly integrated planning, funding and delivery of programs and services. This requires genuine partnerships between all levels of government, the community and private sectors.
2. Programs and services need to be flexible, understand and respect the diversity of Aboriginal children and young people and their communities, their language, their culture and their histories, and be able to respond to their unique circumstances, needs, strengths and capacities. This requires approaches that are local, cooperative and, ultimately, community-led and controlled.
3. Programs and services must recognise the importance of, and build on the strengths of, Aboriginal family and kinship.
4. Services and programs to support the safety and wellbeing of children and young people must be evidence-based and outcomes focused. This does not mean compromising the capacity to be innovative and try new approaches, but rather a commitment from service funders and providers to measure, evaluate and define meaningful and sustainable outcomes, to relinquish what does not work, and focus on what does.
2. Recognising that culture is important to individual and community resilience, Aboriginal children and young people must be supported to learn and practice their culture, and communities supported to restore, strengthen and celebrate their culture.
3. There needs to be greater efforts to address racism and support reconciliation with a focus on building cross-cultural understanding and connection with all Western Australians, with schools being an important setting for this work.
4. Multiple strategies are needed across agencies to support engagement and participation in education, which include strong partnerships between schools, families and communities, and work to better identify and remove the barriers to school engagement.
5. Better access to mentoring, role modelling and support programs is required to provide long-term support and advice regarding education and pathways to post-school education, training and employment options.
6. Aboriginal culture, knowledge and identity need to be integrated more widely into educational programs and philosophies.
7. Neighbourhoods and physical spaces need to be designed with and for children and young people to support their development, encourage community cohesion and positive interaction.
8. All children and young people need to have access to a diverse range of age-appropriate, low-cost recreation, sport and cultural activities to support their active engagement and social participation. It is important to recognise these programs can and do provide an effective vehicle to access other supports that impact positively on the wellbeing of children and young people.

Key strategies

In responding directly to the views expressed by Aboriginal children and young people in this consultation, more focused investment is required in the following eight strategies.

1. Supporting the role and capacity of parents by investing in culturally appropriate early childhood services – including pre-natal support, universal and targeted parenting programs, child health and allied health services jointly delivered and co-located on or near school sites – must be a priority.

Fundamentally, programs and services need to be underpinned by an ongoing commitment to listening and responding to the views of Aboriginal children and young people.





Overview of the consultation

Locations

- Both face-to-face consultation and online survey site
- Face-to-face site
- Online survey site

27 Aboriginal and remote communities

1271 children and young people participated (789 face-to-face and 482 through the online survey)

361 participants from the metro area (28%)

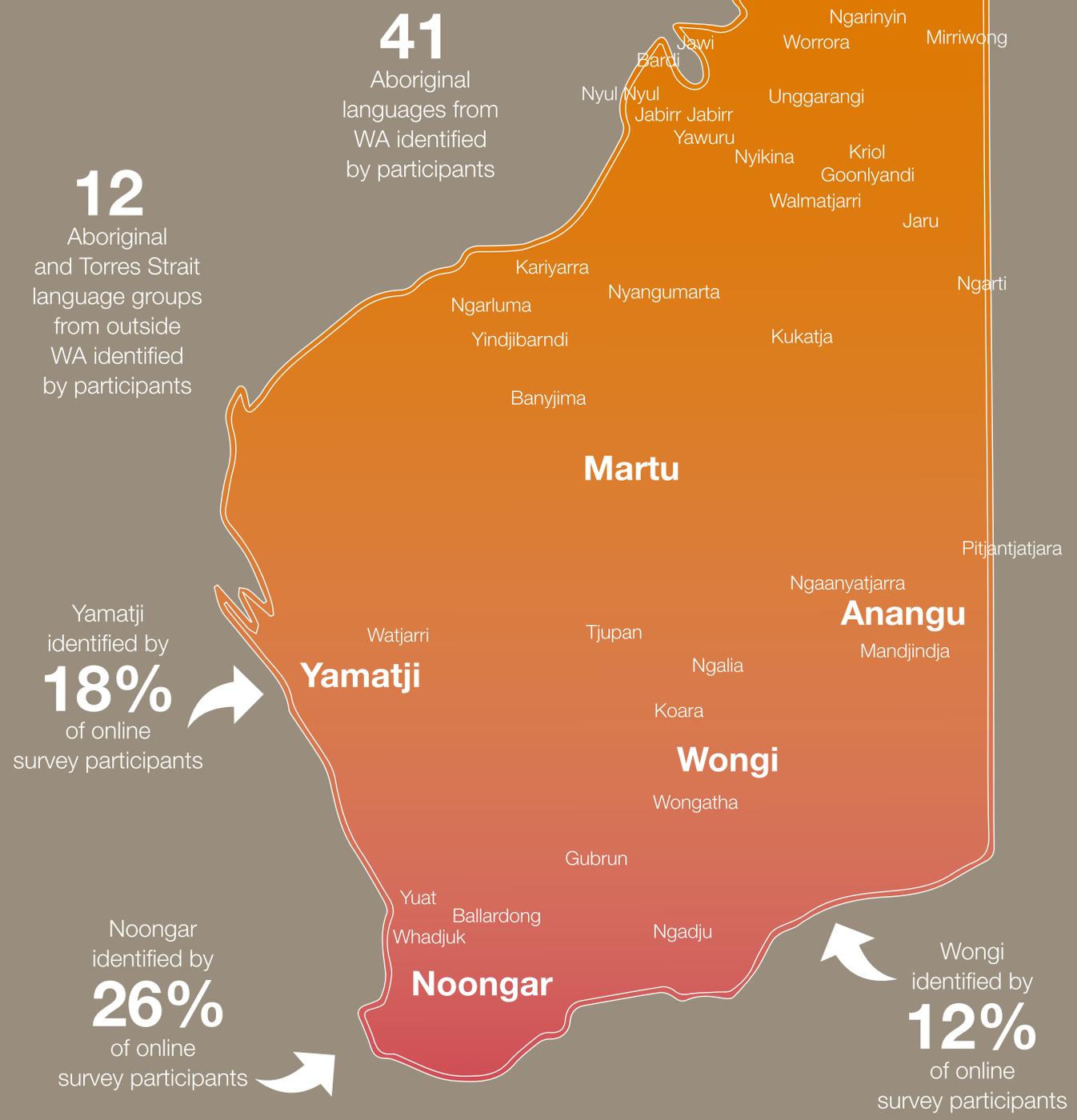
910 participants from regional areas including Kimberley (19%) and Goldfields (14%)

70 locations



Language groups identified by online survey participants

Name	Multiple language group
Name	Specific language





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- ²⁵ Homel J & Ryan C 2014, *Educational outcomes: the impact of aspirations and the role of student background characteristics*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- ²⁶ Mission Australia 2014, *Indigenous aspirations – Employment & educational opportunities for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth*, Mission Australia.
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Introduction

“We need to focus on the youth, they are our future...” 17 year-old Nyikina young person (Kimberley)





Why the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people is a priority for the Commissioner

The role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act) is broadly to monitor and promote the wellbeing of all children and young people under 18 years in Western Australia and to advocate for policies and services that improve their wellbeing. Some of the Commissioner's specific functions under the Act are to:⁴²

- monitor and review written laws, draft laws, policies, practices and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people
- conduct, coordinate, sponsor, participate in and promote research into matters relating to the wellbeing of children and young people
- promote public awareness and understanding of matters relating to the wellbeing of children and young people
- promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity
- consult with children and young people from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds and age groups throughout WA each year.

In performing a function under the Act the Commissioner must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.⁴³ The Commissioner must also have regard to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.⁴⁴

The following principles guide the administration of the Act:⁴⁵

- children and young people are entitled to live in a caring and nurturing environment and to be protected from harm and exploitation
- the contributions made by children and young people to the community should be recognised for their value and merit
- the views of children and young people on all matters affecting them should be given serious consideration and taken into account
- parents, families and communities have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of their children and young people and should be supported in carrying out their role.

Since the role was established in 2007, the Commissioner has monitored and promoted the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people as part of the Commissioner's ongoing advocacy work and through specific projects on wellbeing research, mental health, youth health, reducing alcohol-related harm, living with disability and living in regional and remote communities. The Commissioner has also consulted with many Aboriginal children and young people, families and communities across the state.

To build on previous work and inform further advocacy, in 2014 the Commissioner developed a project to consult with Aboriginal children and young people in more detail about what was important to them and their hopes for the future. The results of that consultation form the basis of this report.





Understanding wellbeing

Although there is a large body of research on wellbeing, there is no single widely accepted definition or measure of wellbeing. Most researchers agree that wellbeing is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that includes both objective attributes as well as a person's subjective evaluation of their wellbeing.⁴⁶ The Act defines the wellbeing of children and young people to include the care, development, education, health and safety of children and young people.⁴⁷

The major determinants of wellbeing for children and young people include the social, physical and economic environments in which they live, and their individual characteristics and behaviours. For Aboriginal children and young people, cultural determinants of wellbeing are recognised as very important factors.⁴⁸ A holistic understanding of wellbeing acknowledges the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community to Aboriginal people, which are protective factors.⁴⁹ Aboriginal people's wellbeing is also affected by historical experiences, intergenerational trauma, disadvantage and marginalisation.⁵⁰

It is important to understand what children and young people value about wellbeing to inform work to improve their wellbeing. In 2010, the Commissioner conducted research into what children and young people believed was important to their wellbeing. The participants identified the following factors as most important: a loving and supportive family, good friends, fun and activity, being safe, a good education, material basics, acknowledgement, and freedom and independence.⁵¹ Aboriginal children and young people further identified their extended family and elders, Aboriginal culture and traditional values and practices as very important to their wellbeing.

This is strongly echoed by the research of Dr Michael Ungar,⁵² the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Thinker in Residence in 2014, which identifies the nine things all children need, including parent-child connections, lots of nurturing relationships, a powerful identity, a sense of control, a sense of belonging or cultural roots, fair and just treatment and physical and psychological safety.

The findings presented in this report are consistent with this, along with the results of the 2010 wellbeing research and what the Commissioner has heard from Aboriginal children and young people throughout WA in the past.



Demographic overview

In presenting and interpreting data about Aboriginal children and young people, it is important to recognise and respect the diversity that exists within the Aboriginal population in WA. The Aboriginal population is linguistically and culturally diverse, and the challenges and opportunities facing individuals, families and communities vary widely across the state. This has significant implications for policy making and service delivery.

Census data from 2011 shows there are more than 36,000 Aboriginal children and young people in WA, representing 6.7 per cent of all WA children and young people under 18 years.⁵³

Children and young people make up 41.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population, almost double the proportion of children and young people in the non-Aboriginal population (22.4%).⁵⁴

Around 60 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people aged 0 to 19 years live outside the Perth metropolitan area, compared with 22 per cent of non-Aboriginal children and young people. However, it is notable that the largest single concentration of Aboriginal children and young people in WA is in the Perth metropolitan area.

Table 1: Aboriginal children and young people aged 0 to 17 years: number and in per cent, Western Australia, 2011

Age Group	Number of Aboriginal children	Number of all children	Percentage of Aboriginal children in total population 0 to 17
0 to 8 years	18,757	275,311	6.8
9 to 14 years	12,132	177,750	6.8
15 to 17 years	5,716	91,715	6.2
Total 0 to 17 years	36,605	544,776	6.7

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*

Table 2: Children and young people aged 0 to 19 years: number and in per cent, by region and by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Western Australia, 2011

Region	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal	% Aboriginal
Broome	2,271	2,361	49.0
Geraldton	3,727	13,488	21.6
Kalgoorlie	3,165	14,167	18.3
Kununurra	2,962	1,011	74.6
Perth	15,402	428,879	3.5
South Hedland	3,883	11,388	25.4
South-Western WA	6,581	95,584	6.4
West Kimberley	2,087	512	80.3
Total 0 to 19 years	40,078	567,390	6.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*



How Aboriginal children and young people are faring

As noted by Associate Professor Ted Wilkes, Ambassador for Children and Young People, it is important to recognise that “most Aboriginal West Australians are doing very well and have great family environments where Aboriginal children and young people have the support they need for their healthy development through to adulthood.”⁵⁵

However, it is well known that many Aboriginal children and young people continue to experience ongoing and, at times, significant disadvantage across a range of health and wellbeing measures. On the whole, Aboriginal people have poorer health and experience disproportionate levels of educational, employment and social disadvantage compared to other Australians.⁵⁶

The Commissioner’s report, *The State of Western Australia’s Children and Young People – Edition Two*,⁵⁷ highlights the following areas of concern in relation to Aboriginal children and young people’s health and wellbeing: infant mortality, birth weight, immunisation rates, births to teenage mothers,

smoking during pregnancy, hearing problems in early childhood, early childhood education, child abuse and neglect, injury, self-harm and suicide, interpersonal violence, family violence, educational attainment, housing and contact with the justice system. While there are some positive trends in the data (for example around infant mortality and immunisation rates) in many areas progress has been disappointing.

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments agreed to six Closing the Gap targets to address the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal Australians in life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. The most recent Prime Minister’s report to the Australian Parliament has highlighted that most Closing the Gap targets are not on track to be met.⁵⁸

The views raised by children and young people in this report align with what many stakeholders have identified as important in addressing the significant and ongoing disadvantage experienced by some Aboriginal people and communities, and what needs to be done to address the complex causes of this disadvantage.



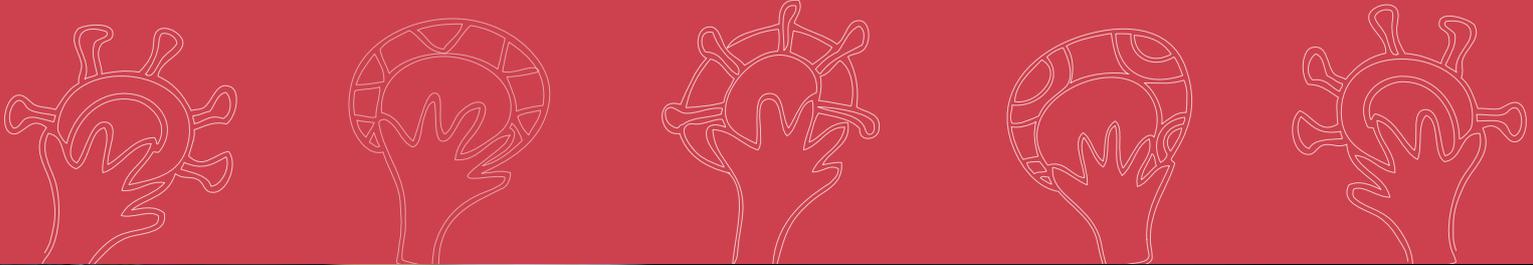


- ⁴² *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), Section 19.
- ⁴³ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), Section 20 (1)(a).
- ⁴⁴ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), Section 20 (1)(b).
- ⁴⁵ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), Section 4.
- ⁴⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014, *Determinants of wellbeing for Indigenous Australians*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p. 1.
- ⁴⁷ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), Section 5.
- ⁴⁸ Commonwealth Government 2013, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023*, Commonwealth Government, p. 9.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 21.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 21.
- ⁵¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2010, *Children and Young People's Views on Wellbeing, full report: Wellbeing Research Project*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 5.
- ⁵² Ungar M 2014, *Report of the 2014 Thinker in Residence: Resilience*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.
- ⁵³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*, Table 'Estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous population', Remoteness Areas, Single year of age, 30 June 2011, data cube: Excel spreadsheet, cat. no. 3238.0.55.001, [website] viewed 11 Feb 2015 <www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3238.0.55.001June%202011?OpenDocument>
- ⁵⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*, Table 'Estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous population', Remoteness Areas, Single year of age, 30 June 2011, data cube: Excel spreadsheet, cat. no. 3238.0.55.001, [website] viewed 11 Feb 2015 <www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3238.0.55.001June%202011?OpenDocument>
- ⁵⁵ Wilkes T 2014, 'Opinion piece – Our Kulunga (children)', *The West Australian*, 2 June 2014, p. 20.
- ⁵⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: an overview 2011*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 3.
- ⁵⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.
- ⁵⁸ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government.



Overview of consultations with Aboriginal children and young people

"I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about."
9 year-old boy (Midwest)





Background

In 2014 the Commissioner undertook a project to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal children and young people to speak about the issues most important to them and their hopes for the future. The Commissioner wanted to hear Aboriginal children and young people's views to inform the Commissioner's ongoing work in advocating for them and promoting public awareness about issues of wellbeing.

Methodology

Reference Group

A Reference Group was established in July 2014 to guide the development of the project and its implementation. The Reference Group included representatives from the government, community, education and research sectors, as well as Aboriginal young people. The members were:

- Associate Professor Ted Wilkes, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University
- Associate Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, Pindi Pindi Centre for Research Excellence in Aboriginal Wellbeing and Australian Catholic University
- Professor Juli Coffin, Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service; with Mr Andrew Roland, Ms Sophie Coffin and Mr Tyson McEwan, young people
- Mr Peter Mitchell, Men's Outreach Services and Alive and Kicking Goals
- Mr Lachlan Cooke, ICEA Foundation; with Ms Isovaine Huddlestone and Mr Sam Petera, young people
- Ms Michelle Webb, Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute, Curtin University
- Ms Michelle White, Ms Connie Yarran and Ms Yolande Yarran, Community Arts Network Western Australia
- Mr Les Mack, Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation; with Ms Che Smith-Harring, young person

- Ms Josie Janz-Dawson, The Wirrpanda Foundation
- Ms Susan Michoff and Ms Luisa Latai, Shire of East Pilbara
- Ms Jane Wheller, JD Hardie Centre; with Ms Felicia Ryder, young person
- Ms Nicole Hanna, Ms Bernadette Delaney and Ms Tanya Tucker, East Kalgoorlie Primary School
- Mr Rory Whitelaw, Department of Aboriginal Affairs; with Mr Jayden Councillor, young person

The Reference Group met formally on three occasions and members provided additional support and feedback out-of-session.

Project ethics

The Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee advised the Commissioner that formal ethics approval from the Committee was not required as this project was being undertaken as part of the Commissioner's legislated responsibilities and constituted consultation, not research. The project was guided by the Commissioner's Ethical Research and Consultation with Children and Young People Policy, which adopts the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007*⁵⁹ as its primary and overarching guide.

The Commissioner's Participation Consent Policy and Participation Policy guided the process to obtain informed consent from children and young people and their parents or guardians for their participation in the consultations. The project Reference Group provided additional oversight to ensure the consultations were conducted in a safe and culturally appropriate way.



Online survey

The Commissioner developed an online survey to give all Aboriginal children and young people in WA an opportunity to participate in the consultations. The survey had 19 questions (see Appendix 1) that were developed from the findings of previous consultations and research conducted by the Commissioner. The questions were devised in consultation with the Reference Group and were tested by Aboriginal children and young people. The questions inquired into what was most important to children and young people, and their views about their community, culture and aspirations for the future.

This survey was promoted through the Commissioner's stakeholder networks, local media, *The Koori Mail* and Facebook, as well as through face-to-face consultations (outlined in the

next section). The Commissioner also contracted Ingrid Cumming, research consultant from Curtin University, to promote the survey. Staff from the Commissioner's office visited the following regional communities to promote the survey and ensure the Commissioner heard from children and young people living in all major regions of the state: Broome, Carnarvon, Djarindjin Community, Kalgoorlie, Kookynie, Laverton, Leonora, Lombadina Community, Menzies, Mount Margaret, Northam, One Arm Point, Port Hedland, Warburton and Wiluna.

Children and young people were required to confirm they were under 18 years of age, identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and had permission from an adult to complete the survey. A total of 482 children and young people who met these criteria responded to the survey.





Face-to-face consultations

The Commissioner called for expressions of interest from individuals or organisations to conduct consultations at a local level with children and young people on behalf of the Commissioner. Seventeen organisations were contracted and held consultations with a total of 789 children and young people under 18 years, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 3: Face-to-face consultations with Aboriginal children and young people

Contracted organisation	Number of children and young people	Location of consultations
Centrecare	111	Perth, Laverton, Norseman, Leonora, Kalgoorlie and Gibson
City of Fremantle	25	Fremantle
City of Mandurah	28	Mandurah
Derby Aboriginal Health Service	31	Derby
Edith Cowan University	16	Perth
Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation	46	Geraldton
Gnuraren Aboriginal Corporation	51	Busselton
ICEA Foundation	19	Perth, Broome and Kalgoorlie
Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre, Murdoch University	38	Roebourne and Fremantle
Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women's Resource Centre	19	Fitzroy Crossing and vicinity
Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia, Curtin University	31	Beagle Bay
Save The Children Australia	42	Kununurra
Shire of East Pilbara	18	Newman, Marble Bar and Nullagine
Southern Aboriginal Corporation	30	Albany
Swan Alliance Communities for Children	168	Perth
Wanslea Family Services	100	Albany, Mt Barker, Gnowangerup and Tambellup
Yulella Aboriginal Corporation	16	Meekatharra
Total	789	



The Commissioner provided each organisation with a template of questions (see Appendix 2) with flexibility to make alterations where they believed it was appropriate. Each organisation was required to provide a report to the Commissioner detailing the consultation methodology, the number of participants and the views that were expressed, including direct quotes from children and young people.

Creative methodologies were encouraged and the consultations run by these organisations included music, art and physical activities. The Commissioner received artwork, music videos and song lyrics created by Aboriginal children and young people, which were published on the project web page and Facebook page.



How to use this report

The purpose of this report is to add to the current body of evidence by emphasising what Aboriginal children and young people see as important and using their views as inspiration to increase the effectiveness of programs and services that support their wellbeing.

Five key themes emerged from the views expressed by Aboriginal children and young people in this consultation. The views of Aboriginal children and young people concerning these themes are outlined in the following chapters, along with an overview of current research and principles of good practice.

The Commissioner's ongoing advocacy aimed at strengthening the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people will focus on the need for a collective commitment to four approaches to service delivery, and the need for more focused investment across eight key strategies.

The companion publication, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Speak Out*, outlines in more detail the responses by Aboriginal children and young people to the consultation questions.



⁵⁹ National Health and Medical Research Council 2007, *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007*, National Health and Medical Research Council.



Family and community

“Family, my family means the most to me in my life. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to them...” 14 year-old girl (Perth)





Why a focus on family and community is important

The wellbeing of families and the strength of the communities in which they live play a fundamental role in determining the health and wellbeing of all children and young people. Families are generally the principal source of security, support and development for a child or young person. Research consistently shows that the relationships children and young people have with their families, particularly their parents, are among the most significant influences on their development and wellbeing.⁶⁰ Children brought up in stimulating and nurturing family environments have better outcomes throughout life.⁶¹

A family's social relationships and the social context in which a child or young person develops also have a strong influence on wellbeing.⁶² Families with strong social and support networks have increased access to information, material resources and people to assist them in their daily lives and in times of need.⁶³ Living in isolation from family and support networks is associated with poorer health, development and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.⁶⁴

In the consultations, Aboriginal children and young people most frequently nominated their family as the most important factor in their lives.

"I believe that family will always be there when no one else is." 17 year-old Bunjima young person (Pilbara)

"My family is the most important thing in my life." 12 year-old girl (Great Southern)

"I think family is really important to me, because they're the only ones that'll be there through thick and thin." 17 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

"Family is important because they are there when you need help." 11 year-old boy (Perth)

"If you don't have a family you can't live." 8 year-old boy (Perth)

When they spoke about how much their family meant to them, children and young people referred to not only their parents but also their siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents and other relatives.

"I love my dad and mum and my cousins." 13 year-old boy (Great Southern)

"I love having brothers and sisters to look after me." 11 year-old boy (Kimberley)

"I love my mum and cousins. Oh yeah, and I love my nan and grandad." 10 year-old boy (Great Southern)

"My cousins are the most important thing to me." 10 year-old girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

This broad view of family among children and young people is consistent with how family is understood in Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal people often have extensive and complex family relationships that extend beyond immediate relatives to family established by kinship systems.⁶⁵ Extended family structures can be a valuable protective factor for Aboriginal children and young people. They allow for the responsibility of raising children to be shared among more people, foster the development of 'social capital' and other support mechanisms, provide children and young people with a sense of belonging, and help children and young people establish their identity in culturally specific ways.⁶⁶ However, extended family networks can sometimes negatively affect wellbeing, such as by extending grief and loss from traumatic events to a wider group of people.⁶⁷

Aboriginal children and young people also identified their friends and community members as very important to them.

"I love the community because everybody basically knows one another. I have a lot of family and friends that live in the community... and I love that." 15 year-old Whadjuk / Yuat / Ballardong / Tjupan young person (Perth)



“It’s great here because I know everybody.”
11 year-old girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

“[I love] having family and friends around...
it’s a peaceful town.” 12 year-old girl
(Great Southern)

The importance of community connectedness to Aboriginal children and young people is consistent with research that shows it is central to many Aboriginal people’s views on wellbeing.⁶⁸ Aboriginal people tend to report high levels of social connectedness and a very strong ability to get support in times of need from outside the household.^{69 70} For children and young people, these support networks contribute to positive mental health, behavioural, educational and employment outcomes, and help mitigate the effects of disadvantage or adversity.⁷¹ Strong and cohesive families and communities are important for building resilience in Aboriginal children and young people generally.^{72 73}

What children and young people say about their families and communities

It is important to understand children and young people’s views and experiences of their families and communities to inform policies and services that are inclusive of children and young people. In the consultations, four major themes emerged from the discussions with children and young people about their families and communities: relationships and belonging, feeling safe and secure, disadvantage and the physical environment.

Relationships and belonging

Aboriginal children and young people overwhelmingly spoke positively about their relationships with family, friends and community members. Family members were seen as a source of security, support and encouragement. Children and young people also said their relationships with friends and other community members made them feel happy and supported, and provided a sense of belonging.





“Family, we are a strong family, very close, always there when we need [each other].”
15 year-old girl (Perth)

“Family keeps you safe, we have a culture of sharing.” 7 year-old boy (Perth)

“I grew up here from when I was born, so I just love the place because it’s my home town and my family lives close by...” 16 year-old boy (Peel)

“I like that I have heaps of family in this town and that I grew up here and it gives me heaps of memories...” 15 year-old Noongar girl (Wheatbelt)

“I like the friends that I have plus most of my family live here.” 14 year-old Yamatji boy (Gascoyne)

“[What’s great about where I live is] all the old people know you. Seeing people in the front yard. Going for a walk. Calling out to people... Feeling like you belong here...” group of 12 to 15 year-old girls (Pilbara)

“[It’s great] that I have all of my friends and family where I live.” 8 year-old girl (Kimberley)

Some children and young people made the point that they are important in their community. They saw themselves as contributing to it, which provided a sense of pride. Many said they aspired to continue supporting their community as they grew up.

“I’m a sports captain and a role model in the school. People look up to me I guess.”
12 year-old girl (Perth)

“Being a role model to the younger ones is important to me.” 15 year-old girl (Pilbara)

“[In the future] I would like to be high in the community and well respected.” 14 year-old boy (Peel)

Although an overwhelming majority of children and young people spoke positively about their social relationships and sense of belonging, some expressed concerns about family and community functioning, as discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

A very small number of children and young people expressed a sense of isolation from their families and communities, which may be because of family breakdown, being in out-of-home care or through living away to attend school.

“I want to be close to family [and to be] all together...” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

“...I don’t know a lot of people around here.”
14 year-old boy (Perth)

“I don’t like where I live. I want to be close to all my family, they live up north...” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

A concern raised by children and young people was that they did not feel their views about their community were always heard and respected by adults.

“Adults have to start listening more to us kids, instead of just telling us what to do all the time.” 16 year-old girl (Great Southern)

“Young people need to be heard out more.”
Girl of unknown age (South West)

“Thank you for listening to me because it finally gave me a chance to speak.” Girl of unknown age (South West)

“...Listen to us.” 10 year-old Noongar / Martu / Wongi / Yamatji girl (Perth)

Research suggests communities often do not include children and young people in a meaningful way or make them feel respected and listened to.⁷⁴ Children and young people have the right to be heard and to have their views taken into account by adults.⁷⁵ Children and young people can provide unique insights into issues, offer creative solutions to problems and help ensure decisions are relevant to their needs.



Feeling safe and secure

Feeling safe and secure is one of the fundamental needs of children and young people and was a prominent feature of the consultations with children and young people.

Many children and young people said they valued living in communities where they felt safe.

“It is nice and peaceful [here] and everyone looks after each other.” 14 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

“I live in a very safe place.” 17 year-old girl (Peel)

“It’s [a] safe, small town.” 6 year-old boy (Great Southern)

Some children and young people raised concerns about safety and, on a small number of occasions, mentioned issues that suggest they are living in environments in which they are highly vulnerable.

“I want to be safe in my town. There’s too much swearing at us girls... fighting, drugs, girls getting snatched, it’s not safe if you’re by yourself...” 12 to 15 year-old girl (Pilbara)

“I don’t feel safe when I’m walking so I make my sister come with me.” 13 to 15 year-old girl (Perth)

“The children [here] are exposed to things that they should not be, such as drugs and alcohol, family abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and physical abuse. They need places where they can go and feel wanted and needed. ... They need people that care about them, people that are willing to give them their own time to listen and help and be their friends.” 17 year-old Banyjima young person (Pilbara)

“[We need] more safe areas for the young kids to play and have fun with their friends.” 14 year-old boy (Peel)

“There’s lots of bad people. We want the good people.” 11 year-old girl (Kimberley)

Crime, violence and antisocial behaviour were problems specifically mentioned by some children and young people.

“[Make it] safer for everyone around the community, stop crime.” 15 year-old girl (Perth)

“If I was a boss I’d want people to stop fighting in my community.” 15 year-old Kitja young person (Kimberley)

“Tell people how to stop breaking into houses.” child younger than 10 years (Goldfields-Esperance)

“Get rid of all the people that bash other people for no reason at all! I hate people being violent and if I had all the power in the world I’d stop all violence.” 17 year-old girl (Peel)

A very small number of children and young people spoke about being aware of self-harm and suicide, and experience with the child protection and criminal justice systems.

“We need help to stop our friends and family from being sad and killing themselves.” 10 year-old Noongar / Martu / Wongi / Yamatji child (Perth)

“No drinking, no fighting, no partying in the house, no smashing the house, no going off, no tryin’ to kill yourself.” 10 year-old Pitjantjatjara child (Goldfields-Esperance)

“I’m sad that my Dad’s in jail.” 8 year-old boy (Great Southern)

“I want to go back to my family.” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

Evidence shows Aboriginal children and young people are significantly more likely to witness or experience crime, violence and antisocial behaviour than non-Aboriginal children and young people, all of which present risks to wellbeing. Aboriginal children and young people are 10 times more likely to be hospitalised due to interpersonal violence.⁷⁶ They are also involved in one-third of family and domestic violence related incidents reported to WA Police.⁷⁷ National research in 2011



found that 28 per cent of Aboriginal young people aged 11 to 24 years were extremely or very concerned about family conflict.⁷⁸ The negative effects of exposure to family violence on children and young people include mental health problems, antisocial behaviour, school difficulties and substance abuse.⁷⁹

Aboriginal children and young people are also significantly more likely to experience self-harm and suicide (though the overall numbers are low), be in out-of-home care and come into contact with the criminal justice system.⁸⁰

Alcohol and drugs were seen to impact family and community functioning, neglect, feeling of safety, violence, antisocial behaviour and crime. Some children and young people spoke strongly about this issue and said they wanted alcohol and drugs banned from their communities.

“Our town is in a drug, alcohol and violence crisis.” 17 year-old Nyikina young person (Kimberley)

“I want my family to stop drinking.” Yamatji child younger than 10 years (Goldfields-Esperance)

“I don’t want my mother and father to be taking hard drugs and ganja. I wish I had food. I don’t want to be my family servant. Also I don’t want to be blamed for everything.” 11 year-old Noongar girl (Perth)

“Ban alcohol and drugs from this place... because everyone does it here except the old people and young people.” 11 year-old girl (Kimberley)

“...there aren’t any events for us so most of my friends are involved in drugs and all they do is drink on the weekends.” 16 year-old Noongar / Tjupan / Wongi young person (Goldfields-Esperance)

“Stop people drinking alcohol too much.” 13 to 15 year-old boy (Perth)

“...Stop kids from smoking and using drugs... and those people selling drugs...I’d dob the police on them.” 15 year-old girl (Pilbara)

“Help the young ones get off the street and stay away from drugs and alcohol.” 18 year-old girl (Great Southern)

The use of alcohol and drugs plays a significant role in the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people’s life expectancy and health, and is a focus of the Council of Australian Governments’ Closing the Gap strategies.⁸¹ While Aboriginal people are more likely to abstain from drinking alcohol, those who drink are more likely to drink at risky levels.⁸² The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey found an estimated 15.4 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people aged 4 to 17 years were living in households where overuse of alcohol caused problems.⁸³ The 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed that Aboriginal people were almost twice as likely to be recent users of illicit drugs as other Australians (25.0% compared with 14.2%).⁸⁴

Parental use of alcohol or drugs can lead to a range of harms for children, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), witnessing verbal or physical conflict, being exposed to other inappropriate behaviour, verbal abuse, physical injury and neglect.^{85 86} Parental alcohol and drug use is often associated with a range of other issues, such as mental health problems, unemployment, housing and poverty.⁸⁷

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey also found that 27 per cent of young Aboriginal people drank alcohol and 30 per cent have used marijuana at some time.⁸⁸ Alcohol and drugs are contributing factors for illness, accidents and injury, and can have severe long-term social and economic impacts for young people.^{89 90}



Disadvantage

Some children and young people spoke about the financial challenges confronting their families.

“Both my parents work hard because dad says things are not cheap no more. I get scared because dad says it’s going to get harder to get a job because nobody wants to give Aboriginals work. He has two jobs and I hardly see him, which makes me sad...”
11 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

“We need more money and food because we don’t have enough.” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

“[We need] more jobs for the parents so they and their families will not get to the stage where they’re living in debt.” 13 year-old young person (Pilbara)

A number of children and young people specifically mentioned the problem of homelessness and overcrowding in their community.

“...stop overcrowding.” 11 year-old Martu child (Goldfields-Esperance)

“Help people with accommodation to get off the streets so it is safe for them...” 15 year-old girl (Perth)

“I would give the people who live on the streets and have nowhere to go a place to go and feel safe.” 16 year-old Noongar / Tjupan / Wongi young person (Goldfields-Esperance)

“Provide shelters for the homeless.” 13 to 15 year-old boy (Perth)

“This town needs less homeless people and more home people.” 13 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

“[We need] more houses for more people because [there’s] not enough houses for everyone...” Martu child younger than 10 years (Goldfields-Esperance)

“[If I was the boss of my town I would have] more houses...it’s a bit overcrowded.”
10 year-old girl (Kimberley)





Some Aboriginal people experience little or no disadvantage, however a larger number are highly disadvantaged.⁹¹ This disadvantage often stems from multiple causes including immediate social and cultural determinants, and deeper causes such as historical experiences, intergenerational trauma and marginalisation.⁹²

Research shows that Aboriginal people are more likely to be unemployed, have lower levels of household income and wealth, be lone parents and live in neighbourhoods that are more disadvantaged.⁹³ Children and young people living in families with inadequate income are at greater risk of poor health and low educational outcomes. Low-income families are less likely to have sufficient economic resources to support a minimum standard of living, which can affect children and young people through lower access to appropriate housing, heating, nutrition, medical care and technology. Children and young people from low-income families can be more prone to psychological or social difficulties, behavioural problems, lower self-regulation and elevated physiological markers of stress.⁹⁴

Aboriginal people in WA experience higher levels of housing disadvantage than other Australians, including more homelessness and overcrowding, lower levels of home ownership and higher levels of housing stress.⁹⁵ Around one-third of Aboriginal children and young people live in overcrowded conditions.⁹⁶ Homelessness affects children in many ways, including physical health, educational attainment and social relationships, and may be linked with subsequent homelessness in adulthood.⁹⁷ The effects of overcrowding on children and young people include increased risk of illness, irregular sleep, poor school performance, parent-child conflict, abuse and poor mental health.⁹⁸

Physical environment

The quality of the physical environment is an important issue for children and young people as it affects how they learn, play and interact with others. Designed well, the physical environment supports healthier and happier communities, enhances the development of children and young people, and has been associated with higher levels of physical and mental health and educational attainment and lower levels of maltreatment and delinquency.^{99 100}

In the consultations, children and young people spoke about the spaces where they spend their time, what they liked about where they lived and how it could be improved. In some cases, children and young people raised concerns about the quality of buildings and infrastructure, and the cleanliness of their surroundings.

“I want the community to look better because lots of people come here for meetings and the school is the only place with grass and tidy. It’s important to know that the community needs help to get everything working properly and make it a better place to live.” 16 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

“I would change how [my town] looks and have more open space.” 14 year-old girl (Peel)

“[If I was boss of my town I would have] more parks and a better town.” 16 year-old girl (Perth)

“I want to tell the Commissioner that we need better roads.” 12 year-old boy (Goldfields-Esperance)

“I’d rebuild the roads, clean the whole town, make a big clean-up day...” 14 year-old boy (Pilbara)

Some children and young people specifically spoke about wanting improvements to their schools.





“This school needs to get changed. It’s looking olden days. It was better in the olden days... It had a pond and a farm...It needs to get knocked down, and get changed back up... Students [are] not coming to school... Because we don’t have things they used to do...trips, camp, other things, going out bush, culture...” group of 12 to 15 year-old girls (Pilbara)

“Make the school bigger, with more teachers.”
10 year-old boy (Kimberley)

“[If I were the boss of this town] I would make a better school...” 13 year-old boy (Gascoyne)

The quality of the physical environment can vary widely from one neighbourhood to another and between urban, regional and remote settings. Remote communities are more likely to provide a poor physical environment for children and young people as they are more likely to have a lower standard of housing and infrastructure and lower access to essential services.¹⁰¹

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that all children and young people have the right to live in a clean and safe environment, and that governments have the responsibility to provide children and young people with an environment in which they can grow and reach their potential.¹⁰² Principles of child-friendly communities, such as those developed by UNICEF,¹⁰³ encourage authorities to make sure children and young people’s rights are reflected in policies, laws, programs and budgets. To meet these responsibilities, it is vital to acknowledge children and young people’s right to influence decisions and express their opinions about their communities.¹⁰⁴

Principles of good practice

The consultations with children and young people and the available evidence suggest the following principles should guide policies and services targeted at promoting strong families and communities.

- Parents, families and communities have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of their children and young people and should be supported in carrying out their role.¹⁰⁵
- The participation of children and young people should be encouraged in the making of decisions that affect them. Children and young people have the right to be heard and to have their views taken into account by adults.¹⁰⁶ Children and young people should be provided with the support they need to contribute effectively to their communities. The Commissioner’s publication, *Involving Children and Young People: Participation Guidelines*, explains how organisations can encourage the participation of children and young people in planning and decision-making processes.
- The strengths and significance of extended family and kinship structures must be respected and acknowledged.
- All families and communities should have access to appropriate, universal support services, with more intensive interventions available to families and communities that need them.
- Strength-based approaches should be encouraged that enhance people’s existing skills and build on the strengths and capabilities in families and communities. This will promote prevention and early intervention where children and young people are at risk.



- An integrated approach to resolving family and community problems is essential as, almost always, there are multiple factors that combine to create environments where children and young people are at risk. Collaboration between service providers and the integration of services promote better use of resources and more effective interventions.
- Policies and services must be culturally respectful and appropriate, and developed in partnership with families and communities. This helps build trust between people and service providers. It also enables customised solutions to be developed to address local needs and circumstances.
- It is important for services to be sustainable, which requires long-term funding and an adequate, skilled workforce.
- Services must be accountable for achieving outcomes for children, young people, families and communities. Data collection and evaluation should be built into policy and service development.

Building the evidence base

There is a significant amount of data available highlighting the particular challenges Aboriginal children and young people face around the issues discussed in this chapter. While there continue to be some gaps in the data (for example, around the prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders), there is also a clear need to build the evidence base on what is effective in supporting Aboriginal families and communities. Program evaluation and data collection should be built into policies and services as a priority. Developing the evidence base will support more effective interventions and use of resources.





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Culture

“My culture is who I am, it is a part of everything I do. It connects me to my family and makes me unique...” 17 year-old Jabirr Jabirr girl (Kimberley)





Why a focus on culture is important

Culture is central to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. There is a wealth of evidence that highlights the positive associations between culture and wellbeing, including across key indicators such as health, education and employment.^{107 108} Culture is also a protective factor that can reduce the exposure to, and effects of, risks to wellbeing.¹⁰⁹ Aboriginal people commonly identify their culture as a factor that builds resilience, moderates the impact of stressful circumstances and supports recovery from adversity.¹¹⁰

Aboriginal people's culture has been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. It is grounded in tradition but, like all cultures, it is dynamic and continues to evolve in response to circumstances today.¹¹¹ Far from signifying the end of tradition, these adaptations bring new vitality to Aboriginal culture.¹¹²

Children and young people in the consultations identified their culture as one of the most important features of their lives.

"Culture is everything!" 11 year-old Wongi girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

"[Culture] means the world to me!" 14 year-old Kariyarra girl (Pilbara)

"To me [culture] means that I have something to live up to." 13 year-old boy (Mid West)

"You got no culture, you got no life." 12 year-old girl (Pilbara)

"Your culture is in your heart and you have to respect it." 7 year-old boy (Perth)

"[One of the most important things to me is] culture because I have a spiritual connection with Aboriginal culture and it helps me as a person." 16 year-old Koori boy (Perth)

"For me [what's important is] learning about my culture and how I relate to it and being able to spend time learning about my culture with my grandmother and family and [to] be shown the different types of things and responsibilities." 12 year-old Noongar boy (Goldfields-Esperance)

For Aboriginal children and young people, culture plays a key role in their development, identity and sense of belonging, and promotes wellbeing and resilience.¹¹³ The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that all children have the right to practice their culture.¹¹⁴

What children and young people say about their culture

Identity and belonging

Many Aboriginal children and young people spoke about their culture as a fundamental part of their identity and sense of belonging.

"[Culture] makes you feel comfortable with yourself and people accept you for who you are. Also you feel a connection with the land and spirits." 16 year-old Koori boy (Perth)

"[Culture] tells me who I am and makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I belong somewhere." 13 year-old Yawuru girl (Perth)

"...Our culture is so good because it's the oldest one in the whole world. It is important to me to hang onto the information because I don't want us to lose our culture. That's when we lose our way." 10 year-old Noongar / Martu / Yamatji / Wongi boy (Perth)

"Learning about our ways, that is important to know so I can be who I am..." 16 year-old Ngaanyatjarra girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

Many children and young people spoke about their culture as a source of pride.

"[Culture means] being proud of who I am – I'm an Aboriginal female." 15 year-old Noongar / Wongi girl (Perth)





“[Culture means] showing respect to other people and being proud of being a young Aboriginal man.” 16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

“[I am] proud to be an Aboriginal from the Kimberley.” 13 year-old girl (Kimberley)

Nurturing a strong sense of identity and pride in Aboriginal children and young people can play a role in developing positive health and wellbeing.¹¹⁵ Children and young people who have a strong sense of identity and can make positive statements about themselves are better equipped to learn life skills and are more likely to experience positive wellbeing.¹¹⁶

Respect, relationships, learning from elders and being a good role model were also highlighted by children and young people as important aspects of their culture.

“[The most important things about culture are] respecting my family and being loved.” Yamatji girl younger than 10 years (Mid West)

“[Respecting culture] shows respect to you and your family...” 14 year-old Gooniyandi girl (Kimberley)

“[The most important things about culture are] learning from the old people...” 14 year-old Jaru boy (Kimberley)

“I would like to learn more about culture from elders.” 13 year-old Torres Strait Islander / Noongar boy (Perth)

“The most important thing in my culture is to be a good role model, stand up for what’s right, stick up and protect family and be proud of myself.” 13 year-old (Pilbara)

“[The most important things about culture are] teaching young kids about their culture and to give them the opportunity to teach their younger brothers and sisters and others when they get older.” 14 year-old Ngadju boy (Perth)

Today many Aboriginal children and young people live in extended family households with a variety of role models and they themselves can be role models to younger children. This can be a source of self-esteem and personal development.¹¹⁷ Positive role modelling encourages compassion, autonomy, self-reliance and early learning for young children.¹¹⁸ Role modelling also plays a significant role in Aboriginal culture as a way for cultural knowledge to be passed on from one generation to the next.

While many children and young people expressed a strong sense of culture in the consultations, some children and young people said they did not know much about their culture and some said they wanted to know more.

“For me culture is very important... it is something that I want to learn more about because it is something I’m lacking! I haven’t learnt much about the language of my culture. I still have to learn so much about my culture!” 15 year-old Whadjuk / Yuat / Ballardong / Tjupan boy (Perth)

“Unfortunately I don’t know much about my Torres Strait background as a majority of it is from the stolen generations and my Nan doesn’t talk about it.” 16 year-old Torres Strait Islander young person (Kimberley)

“I think it’s very important to me because I don’t want to lose my culture, I want to learn as much as I can.” 17 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

Loss of culture often stems from the continuing impact of historical policies of dispossession and assimilation, as well as the marginalisation and intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people. Loss of culture has been associated with poor social and emotional wellbeing.¹¹⁹





Practicing culture

Many children and young people said it was important to them to practice their culture, including being connected to country, learning and speaking an Aboriginal language, and taking part in traditional activities and cultural events.

Connection to country and looking after country were common themes in the consultations.

“[It’s important to] keep the culture going [and to be] looking after country.” 11 year-old Mangala boy (Pilbara)

“The most important thing [about culture] is revisiting places that meant a lot to our people.” 12 year-old Aboriginal boy (Kimberley)

“[Culture is] important because you are connected with the land and food.” 10 year-old Noongar / Nyangumarta girl (Pilbara)

“[The most important things about culture are] knowing how to live with the land and how to carry on traditions.” 16 year-old Noongar young person (Great Southern)

“[The most important things about culture are] respecting land and language and teaching the little ones about culture.” 11 year-old Nyangumarta child (Pilbara)

“[It’s important to] clean all the stuff here. Put stuff in the bin... Respect your own land.” 11 year-old Yawuru boy (Kimberley)

“[It’s important to]... look after country... [and keep the] community clean.” 14 year-old Walmatjarri boy (Kimberley)

Connection to country is a central feature of Aboriginal culture. Country includes not just land but also the people, animals, plants and stories associated with that land. Maintaining a physical, spiritual and emotional connection to country is fundamental to many Aboriginal people’s beliefs about wellbeing and has been associated with positive wellbeing.¹²⁰

National data from 2008 suggest that more than half of Aboriginal children and young people and two-thirds of adults maintain a connection with their country, even though many do not live on it.¹²¹

Children and young people also spoke about learning and speaking an Aboriginal language as important to them.

“It make[s] me feel black on the inside speaking our language...” 11 year-old Ngaanyatjarra girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

“I like learning different languages because language is strong...” 14 year-old Kariyarra girl (Pilbara)

“Learning your language [is important] so that you can teach your children and grannies. Language is a special thing to have, it makes you different from other tribes.” 17 year-old Banyjima girl (Pilbara)

“The most important things about culture to me are about keeping it strong throughout our generations [by] keeping the stories and languages alive.” 14 year-old Gubrun / Kokatha girl (Perth)

Language is intrinsic to cultural identity, the expression of culture and community cohesion. Aboriginal languages have been described as the foundation on which Aboriginal people’s capacity to learn, interact and shape identity is built.¹²² There is evidence that speaking a traditional language supports wellbeing and can be a protective factor for Aboriginal children and young people.^{123 124} Two-thirds of Aboriginal children and young people do not speak an Aboriginal language to a meaningful degree, and many Aboriginal languages are at risk of becoming extinct.¹²⁶ Loss of language may result in the irrecoverable loss of cultural knowledge and can affect social and emotional wellbeing.^{127 128}

Oral communication, particularly storytelling, was another aspect of cultural practice children and young people highlighted as important.





“We all need to know our stories. I have a story. Our Tjukurrpa [Dreaming] is very important...” 16 year-old Ngaanyatjarra girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

“[The most important things about culture are] respecting my elders [and] learning about my people through my parents. Learning my Aboriginal history through both my parents’ sides [is important].” 11 year-old Noongar boy (Perth)

“...My language is important to me because we got told stories by our grandparents about [a] long time ago and culture shows who I am.” 14 year-old Gooniyandi girl (Pilbara)

“[The most important things about culture are] going out bush with the family, being able to listen to elders and pass on their stories, food, and learning traditional ways and values to balance out life in a western society.” 16 year-old Wongi girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

“[When] sitting around the campfire the old people tell us stories about [a] ‘long time ago’ and the Dreamtime...” 12 year-old girl (Kimberley)

“It’s important [to] go through lore. No killing the birds because you would be made to eat it, ‘cause it’s not right and you only kill what you’re gonna eat.” 15 year-old Yamatji boy (Gascoyne)

Oral communication is recognised as a key contributor to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities.¹²⁹ Oral communication is used widely in Aboriginal communities to pass on cultural practices, values, language, lore, history and family relationships.¹³⁰ Today, alongside traditional storytelling practices, modern methods and media are also used, such as contemporary music, theatre, film, radio and the internet.¹³¹

Traditional activities such as ceremonies, dancing, music, hunting and gathering food were aspects of cultural practice highlighted by children and young people. These activities may be done in traditional settings or at events such as NAIDOC Week.

“Language, ceremony, family traditions and dance makes me feel connected and complete.” 13 year-old Noongar girl (Perth)

“[The most important things about culture are] dancing and ceremonies, Dreamtime stories.” Noongar / Yamatji boy younger than 10 years (Perth)

“I help my grandmother [with] everything. She taught [me] how to dance... We get up in the morning and do beads every day. She teaches me how to talk, talk language. At [the] river she teaches me bush tucker. It is important for me to spend time with her. There is no one around to teach us apart from the old ladies.” 14 year-old girl (Kimberley)

“[The most important things about culture are] going out to the bush, eating kangaroo and emu, going swimming in the river and sleeping outside.” 14 year-old Yamatji / Noongar girl (Gascoyne)

“[The most important things about culture are] getting fish to eat and going out in the bush and shooting kangaroos and eating them.” Wongatha boy younger than 10 years (Peel)

“I like being Aboriginal. I like NAIDOC Week at school; we do lots of Aboriginal things...” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

Participation in cultural activities has been linked with positive physical and mental health,¹³² improved outcomes in schooling from early childhood to post-school qualification,^{133 134} and greater employment participation.¹³⁵ In a 2009 national study, almost half of Aboriginal parents surveyed said they taught their children traditional practices such as painting, dance, singing, ceremonial dress-making, collecting food and hunting.¹³⁶ National data from 2008 found that 73 per cent of four to 14 year-old Aboriginal children and young people were involved in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations in the last 12 months.¹³⁷





Principles of good practice

The following principles acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal culture and should guide policy making, and the provision and design of services and programs for Aboriginal children and young people.

- Culture is fundamental to the lives of Aboriginal children and young people and central to their wellbeing.
- As stated in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, all children have the right to practice their own culture, language and religion.¹³⁸
- Children and young people should be encouraged and supported to connect with and practice their traditional culture, while recognising and respecting contemporary influences on their cultural identity.
- The Aboriginal population is culturally diverse and this diversity should be acknowledged, valued and respected.
- Policies and services for Aboriginal people must be culturally appropriate, secure and safe, and developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities.
- The development of policies and services to improve Aboriginal children and young people's connection to culture must involve their participation, as well as that of their families and communities.

Building the evidence base

The effect of culture on wellbeing is difficult to measure and it has been suggested the evidence base is lagging behind community views on the benefits of keeping culture strong.¹³⁹ While there is a growing body of research, more robust evidence needs to be gathered specifically on the benefits of cultural identity and cultural practice to Aboriginal children and young people.





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Education and aspirations for the future

“SCHOOL! It’s the only place which will make anything and everything happen.”
15 year-old Noongar / Ballardong young person (Perth)





Why a focus on education and aspirations is important

Successful participation in education is important for children and young people to realise their full potential. Education is critical to a person's development from the early years to adolescence, as well as for creating pathways to employment in adulthood and facilitating participation in social, cultural and economic life.¹⁴⁰ Education has significant implications for wellbeing and is increasingly recognised as a key social determinant of health.¹⁴¹ The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that all children have the right to access a good quality education.¹⁴²

Aspirations have been found to have a significant effect on educational outcomes.¹⁴³ The development of aspirations can encourage greater engagement in education and is particularly important in transition periods from school to further study and employment.^{144 145}

Education and school are two of the most prominent aspects of children and young people's lives and were major themes in the consultations with Aboriginal children and young people. Discussions about aspirations also featured strongly in the consultations.

Aboriginal children and young people expressed a clear understanding of the connection between a good education and a good quality of life. Many children said they enjoy being at school and view their school as one of the positive things about their community.

"Go to school, get a good education, get a good job and then you'll be free." 10 year-old boy (Kimberley)

"What matters to me? Family and school. Coming to school. School's important because you can learn." 13 year-old girl (Pilbara)

"The teachers at school will help." 9 year-old girl (Goldfields-Esperance)

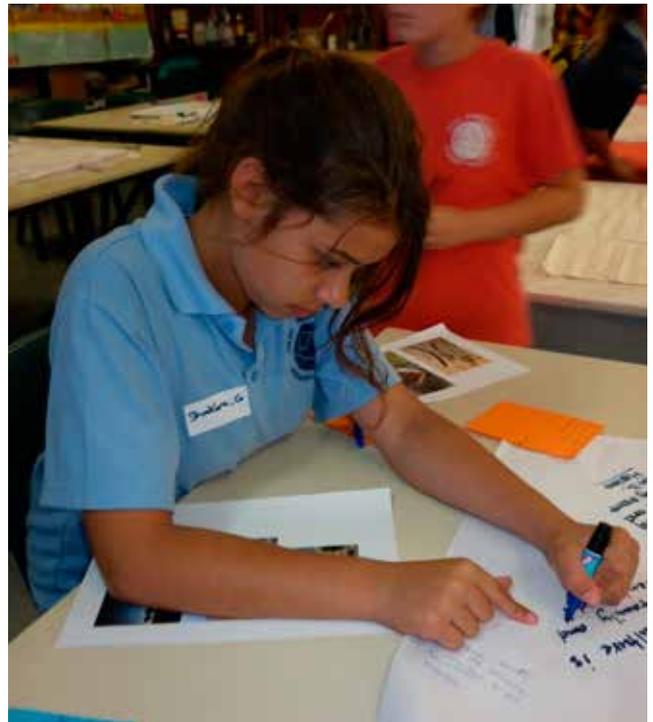
"I think education is really important... Sometimes I like school and that but sometimes I don't." 11 year-old girl (Great Southern)

"Education – better chance in life. Because without it you won't get a job..." 10 year-old Nyikina child (Kimberley)

"Education is my main thing I worry about in my life because it determines your future." 14 year-old Noongar / Bardi girl (Wheatbelt)

"The two most important things in my life right now are the people in it and my traineeship. They both have a massive factor on my quality of life and I am so grateful for both." 16 year-old Torres Strait Islander young person (Kimberley)

"[I need] a good education to get to uni to be an engineer. I might need help with transport, money, a place to live [and] a tutor to help learn all the hard things..." 10 year-old Noongar child (Perth)





What children and young people say about their education and aspirations

Family support

Many children and young people identified support from their parents and families as important for their education, a good future and a happy life.

“You need support and love from your family and friends, and you need to push yourself to be the best.” 16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

“I need help from my parents to help [me] to get there.” 15 year-old girl (Wheatbelt)

“[I need] support from my parents and the school.” 14 year-old Bardi / Yawuru young person (Kimberley)

“Mum wants me to do well in school and go to uni...” 14 year-old Kitja young person (Perth)

“I have very much so struggled with Year 11 in university courses as there is a lack of support from teachers. However, I’m eager to continue on and complete Year 12 in a university pathway and hopefully continue on to university. I come from a family where future study into university isn’t as valued and sometimes there can be a lack of encouragement from them as they have not made these achievements themselves. However, I believe that continuous encouragement and praise could boost many Aboriginal kids’ self-esteem as well as more opportunities available to make us more eager to achieve our goals.” 16 year-old Wongi young person (Goldfields-Esperance)

Parental engagement is associated with higher attendance and positive educational attainment.^{146 147} Factors that have been found to be associated with low parental engagement in children’s education include: poverty, poor parental education, unemployment and poor job prospects, parental problems such as ill-health,

substance misuse or family violence, community and socio-economic problems such as racial prejudice, inadequate housing or study facilities at home, and fewer models of educational success in a formal school environment.¹⁴⁸

Aboriginal families experiencing these factors need more support and resources to overcome barriers to engaging with their children’s education.^{149 150 151}

Research suggests addressing the substantial gaps in school attendance and achievement of Aboriginal students is likely to require interventions that promote and support schools’ abilities to engage with parents and their local communities.¹⁵²

Cost of education

For some children and young people, the cost of education was seen as a barrier to schooling and fulfilling their aspirations, although many children were aware of the possibility of support through programs such as scholarships.

“University should be open for everyone not just rich people.” 11 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

“[We need] more money to help kids get [a] better education...” Yamatji child younger than 10 years (Perth)

“I want schools to be much cheaper for us Aboriginal students so we don’t feel that we’re making our families poor just because we go to school. Also give every Aboriginal student a scholarship and apprenticeship.” 15 year-old (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town] I would include more opportunities and support for children who want to go to school but can’t afford to buy basic school supplies...” 17 year-old Jabirr Jabirr young person (Kimberley)

“[The help I need for my future is] more scholarships.” 11 year-old (Wheatbelt)



Achievement

Some children and young people spoke of the difficulty they faced doing well at school and saw success as something to aspire to rather than something that would happen automatically. Some children and young people identified wanting more support or access to special programs that could meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

“I know in school I’m not doing the best right now. I probably need some people to help me out with some extra things, like a tutor or something. It’s one of the biggest things I’m struggling with right now. I definitely know that if I don’t get stuck into my school work, I’m not going to go anywhere.” 14 year-old girl (Perth)

“[I need] more assistance at school [because] I’m struggling.” Yamatji child younger than 10 years (Perth)

“[We need] more engagement programs at high schools.” 16 year-old Yamatji young person (Gascoyne)

“Our people need more support in education and schools like my school need extra support to help children like me.” 11 year-old Noongar child (Wheatbelt)

“I think we should have to do our homework and get help if we need it.” 10 year-old girl (Great Southern)

Although many Aboriginal children and young people do well at school, there are significant and highly concerning disparities between the achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in WA. Data from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests for reading, literacy and numeracy indicates that Aboriginal student achievement in WA is significantly lower than non-Aboriginal student achievement for every subject across every age group, though there has been some progress in recent years.^{153 154}

The disparity between the educational achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people is intrinsically linked to multiple aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage, including access to quality health services, employment and housing. These combine to form the social determinants of educational success. As a result of the complex interplay between different determinants, gains in education may be limited unless other aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage are improved, such as health, nutrition, housing, employment and the effects of intergenerational trauma.^{156 157}

The achievement and retention of Aboriginal students in school is affected by factors relating to the family and household environments.¹⁵⁸ The legacy of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families continues to have a negative impact on the environments in which Aboriginal children live in today.¹⁵⁹ Evidence shows that low educational outcomes among Aboriginal people are linked to intergenerational poverty and poor social inclusion.¹⁶⁰ The education and socioeconomic background of a child’s carers has also been shown to play a significant role in educational outcomes.¹⁶¹

Living in a remote area is also associated with lower school achievement and completion, demonstrating that improvement in overall figures will require significant improvement in remote and very remote schools.^{162 163 164}

A student’s physical, social and emotional health can affect their ability to fully participate in their schooling. Health, in particular vision impairment and hearing loss, can affect a child’s ability to learn. Aboriginal children and young people experience higher levels of disability are twice as likely to have a low birth weight (a key indicator of health status) and are more likely to suffer ear diseases and hearing problems than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.^{165 166}

A range of school-based factors are also associated with Aboriginal children and young people’s engagement and achievement at school.





High quality teachers and a strong leadership culture in the school have been identified as key factors in improving educational environments for Aboriginal students.^{167 168} Teachers who know about and value Aboriginal culture and heritage, and who have high expectations of, and positive relationships with Aboriginal students, have been shown to make a significant positive contribution to improving the educational outcomes of these students.¹⁶⁹

Successful participation in early childhood education is a key contributor to attaining positive life outcomes, and evidence strongly suggests that success in early years education is key to achieving educational parity.¹⁷⁰ Attendance at early childhood educational programs is considered to have a number of benefits including better intellectual development and independence, sociability and concentration, language and cognitive development, and preparation for the successful transition to formal schooling.¹⁷¹
¹⁷² In Australia, research findings indicate that although all children benefit from early childhood education, the benefits are most pronounced among vulnerable children.¹⁷³

Research indicates that the proportion of Aboriginal children found to be developmentally vulnerable on starting school is more than double the incidence for non-Aboriginal children.¹⁷⁴ This has significant implications for ongoing academic success and demonstrates the particular importance of quality early childhood programs for Aboriginal children.¹⁷⁵ Despite widespread recognition of this need, Aboriginal children continue to be under-represented in early childhood programs.¹⁷⁶

Attendance

Many children and young people consulted by the Commissioner recognised the importance of regular attendance at school and expressed concern for their peers who did not go to school every day.

“If you don’t go to school you can’t learn stuff to get a job.” 11 year-old boy (Perth)

“I would change a lot of things in my community if I was a boss like having more role models for the younger kids to teach them right from wrong and have respect and to encourage kids to get to school ‘cause learning is very important in life.” 11 year-old child (Goldfields-Esperance)

“I need to go to school more.” 8 year-old girl (Perth)

“[Make] children go to school and have a good education...” 14 year-old Nyul Nyul young person (Kimberley)

“Kids [need to] go to school every day.” 14 year-old Jaru young person (Kimberley)

“I would make things better for kids at school [and for] kids that found school work hard and [I would] go around their schools and help them out and ask their parents if they would like their kids to have help [and ask them] why their kids are at home.” 15 year-old Noongar girl (Wheatbelt)



While many Aboriginal children and young people attend school regularly and consistently, lower attendance levels remain a significant barrier to learning for more than half of all Aboriginal students. Research shows that disparities in attendance rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students begin in early schooling and are carried into, and become wider, in secondary school.¹⁷⁷ Across Australia, it is estimated that 40 per cent of Aboriginal students at primary school and 20 per cent at secondary school attend school on a regular basis.¹⁷⁸ Absences among Aboriginal students tend to be higher in more remote areas, with rates peaking for males in the upper school years of remote communities.¹⁷⁹

There is a direct association between attendance and achievement at school. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey suggested that as much as one-third of the gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children could be attributed to poorer rates of school attendance for Aboriginal children, and other research has found that NAPLAN test scores decline with even small periods of absence from school and continued to decline as absence rates increase.^{180 181}

The effects of absence on school achievement also accumulate over time and are evidenced in students' results in future years.¹⁸²

Poor school attendance indicates a student may be at risk of disengagement from the school system. An estimated 15 per cent of primary and over 30 per cent of secondary Aboriginal students are at severe educational risk, compared to 1 per cent and 5 per cent for non-Aboriginal students, respectively.¹⁸³

Policies that do not take into account the real reasons children do not attend school are unlikely to be effective.¹⁸⁴ Children and young people identified factors at home and at school which had an impact on school attendance.

“Some kids don't go to school because teachers snap at them. I'd have kinder teachers who understand what's going on.”
13 year-old girl (Kimberley)

“I would include more opportunities and support for children who want to go to school but... have unsupportive families.” 17 year-old
Jabirr Jabirr young person (Kimberley)



“... I would build a hostel for all the kids to go to when their parents are out of town so the kids can still attend school.” Kariyarra child younger than 10 years (Pilbara)

“I want a job, need to go to school but don’t like it.” 11 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

“...in reality the school doesn’t cater for anyone over the age of 14 and it barely caters for those kids at school.” 17 year-old Kitja young person (Kimberley)

“It can take just one bad experience at school for an Aboriginal child to lose trust in teachers, white ways, in [themselves] and the school system...” 13 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

“The children... don’t like going to school because they know that there are people in the school that are just there to work and make money. They can tell when people don’t care about them.” 17 Year-old Banyjima young person (Pilbara)

“Try to stop racism in all schools.” 16 year-old girl (Peel)

The causes of non-attendance are complex and multidimensional. Recent research has identified three broad categories of non-attendance:¹⁸⁵

1. children who do not go to school because they dislike it
2. children who identify other activities as of greater benefit than school
3. children who would like to go to school but are unable to (for example, due to poor health, transport or access difficulties).

Important predictors of non-attendance include health problems, household stress, housing issues, family crises, bullying and unfair treatment.¹⁸⁶ Other factors identified by researchers as contributing to non-attendance relate to a lack of recognition by schools of Aboriginal culture and history; a failure to fully engage parents, carers and the community; ongoing socioeconomic disadvantage; and remoteness.^{187 188}

Staying at school

Many children and young people recognised and acknowledged the importance of staying at school to achieving a happy life.

“Stay at school and get a good education.”
9 year-old boy (Perth)

“Get all kids to go to school.” Age and gender unknown (Great Southern)

Aboriginal students are less likely to progress to Years 11 and 12 than their non-Aboriginal peers. The apparent retention rate for Aboriginal students is significantly below that of non-Aboriginal students, with just one-half of WA Aboriginal students continuing from the first year of high school to graduation (49.5%).¹⁸⁹

The WA Department of Education requires all students to be in an approved education, work or training situation until the end of the year they turn 17 years. The percentage of Aboriginal students participating in education, employment, training or some combination of these has fluctuated, increasing from 77.4 per cent in 2009 to 79.0 per cent in 2011, and then declining to 74.6 per cent in 2013.¹⁹⁰ This is lower than the percentage of non-Aboriginal students (92% in 2013).

The gap in Year 12 or equivalent attainment for Aboriginal students is significant for the impact it has on limiting the successful transition to employment and further education.¹⁹¹ The lack of pathways to post school options particularly impacts Aboriginal students in remote areas.¹⁹² The significant variance in results according to remoteness (for example, the proportion of Aboriginal students achieving Year 12 or equivalent ranges from 65.5 per cent in outer regional areas to 36.8 per cent in very remote areas) reflects a range of factors including barriers to access to secondary education.¹⁹³ Aboriginal students in remote and very remote areas may need to travel significant distances to attend secondary school or leave home to complete their schooling.¹⁹⁴



Culture and education

Some children and young people said they believe greater integration of Aboriginal culture and ways of learning into the formal education system would be beneficial.

“Have more school activities for the Aboriginal kids so they will want to come to school and would learn at the same time so they don’t roam around on the streets.” 12 year-old Torres Strait Islander young person (Kimberley)

“I’d make sure that in schools Aboriginal students would get the chance to learn more about their culture, and to make schools less stressful for all students to make learning easier without the unwanted stress...” 14 year-old Gubrun and Kokatha young person (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town I would make it so there was]...more learning language in school.” 12 year-old Kariyarra young person (Gascoyne)

“I think kids in primary school and high school should get more classes to learn the Aboriginal culture and how they lived back in the Aboriginal time...” 12 year-old Noongar young person (Perth)

“Closely involve the Indigenous elders with the decision making of the local council and integrate their culture into the curriculum of the school.” 17 year-old young person (Mid-West)

“Make schools for black kids ‘cause we learn different to wadjellas, we think different, a school where wadjella kids could come too so we can share our ways and teach them...” 13 year-old Noongar young person (Perth)

“Teach kids culture in school”. 14 year-old boy (Perth)

Cultural programs have an important role to play in increasing the engagement and self-esteem of Aboriginal students.¹⁹⁵ Incorporating and valuing Aboriginal culture in schools, including through teacher training and across the curriculum, has been shown to be associated with increased

attendance and positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.^{196 197 198} Effective partnerships between schools and Aboriginal families and communities can provide avenues for increasing teachers’ awareness of and respect for the cultural heritage of Aboriginal students, as well as the development of a culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum which includes Aboriginal perspectives.¹⁹⁹

Aspirations

Children and young people in the Commissioner’s consultations expressed varied aspirations for their future lives and employment. Many had clear goals to contribute to their community and the broader society.

“I’d like to be a lawyer, [a] land rights lawyer, or go to America and do acting, or be a teacher [here]...” 14 year-old boy (Pilbara)

“I want to be a bushman with a station and I want to work in the stockyard with my family. I need elders and people to teach me how to be a stockman.” 14 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

“There’s so much I can do...what about a wildlife officer...I can do that.” 15 year-old girl (Great Southern)

“[I want to be] a scientist, [or a] DCP worker [and] look out for people doing drugs.” 10 year-old boy (Perth)

“I want to finish school and go to university to be an electrician, electrical engineer, get my license and work in my home town, fix up houses there.” 16 year-old boy (Pilbara)

Some children and young people were more focused on the more immediate goal of successfully completing school rather than aspiring to a particular job or career.

“I haven’t thought about it yet. All I know is I have to stay at school for now.” 13 year-old girl (Great Southern)





“[I can get] a good job by staying in school, studying hard and going to uni.” 12 year-old Bardi Kitja young person (Kimberley)

“When I grow up I wanna have [an] education so I can get a good job.” 11 year-old Kariyarra child (Pilbara)

In some consultations, such as in some regional communities experiencing particular social problems, certain children found it more difficult to express their aspirations for the future. Other children and young people identified a lack of employment opportunities in their community and expressed concern about the implications this had for their future wellbeing.

“I really want to get a job but there are no jobs for people in the community. I want to do cleaning on a mine or something but I will have to leave my home and community to get work. I need help to get a job close to my community so I don’t have to move away from home by myself.” 16 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

“[If I were boss of this town I would make]... more jobs and let the Aboriginal people have them...” Noongar / Wongi child younger than 10 years (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town] I would start CDEP [Community Development Employment Project scheme] again so people have somewhere they can work because there are no jobs for people in the community...” 16 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

Evidence shows many Aboriginal young people have lower aspirations than their non-Aboriginal peers. They identify more barriers to achieving these aspirations and have less understanding about how to navigate educational and employment pathways to achieve their aspirations.²⁰⁰

Mission Australia’s 2014 *Indigenous Aspirations* report indicates Aboriginal young people who are aware of opportunities to transition from school to further study or employment have higher aspirations and are more likely to stay engaged in education and make positive plans for the future.²⁰¹



Principles of good practice

Factors associated with positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people include:^{202 203}

- having high expectations of students and staff
- promoting positive Aboriginal identity
- active collaboration with parents and communities
- a ‘whole of institution’ approach
- well-trained and supported, high quality teachers
- the inclusion of Aboriginal culture and knowledge in the curriculum
- a learning environment that is students-focused and responsive to individual needs, including mentoring and intensive case management where required.

Building the evidence base

Despite Aboriginal people being more likely to be involved in quantitative and qualitative research than most other Australians, there remains a general lack of data across a range of educational and other measures.²⁰⁴ It is also difficult to source information that reflects the diversity of Aboriginal populations.²⁰⁵

There continues to be insufficient evidence available that demonstrates the effectiveness of many programs designed to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Too many programs have only been short-term, have not been replicated in other sites, or have not been robustly evaluated. Longitudinal data that tracks progress over longer periods is particularly valuable yet rarely collected.²⁰⁶

On a positive note, nationally comparable student attendance data is now being collected as a result of the new COAG Closing the Gap target in the school attendance of Aboriginal students.²⁰⁷ The availability of this data will improve the evidence base in this important area.



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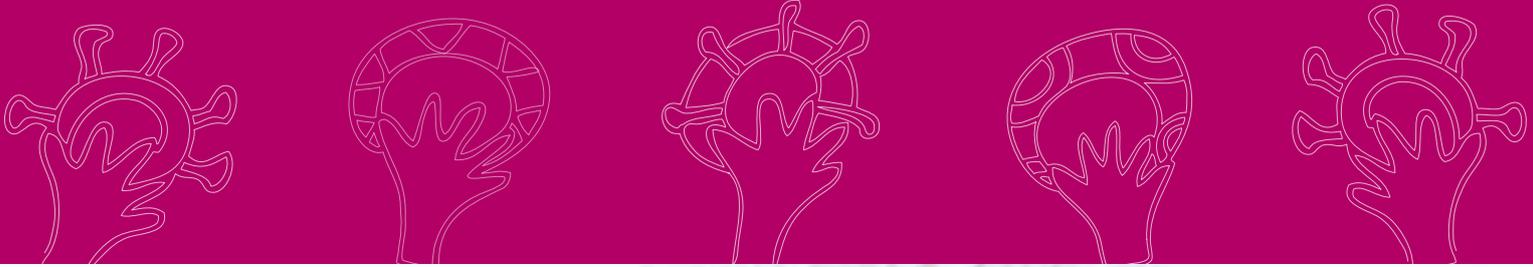


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Recreational activities

"I like sport because it keeps me fit and healthy." 16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)





Why a focus on recreational activities is important

Participation in recreational activities supports children and young people's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development and wellbeing.²⁰⁸ Under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children and young people have the right to relax and play and to join in a wide range of activities for this purpose. Recreational activities include sports (both team and individual), creative and arts-based activities, social events and interest groups and other activities to pursue personal interests for enjoyment. Such activities can be through formal, organised events such as team sports, or unstructured, informal arrangements such as socialising with friends, shopping, fishing, hiking or computer gaming.

Engaging in recreational activities is a prominent feature of almost all children and young people's lives.

Many Aboriginal children and young people emphasised recreation as important to them, with sport mentioned most often.

"I love playing all the sport and playing footy."
12 year-old boy (Great Southern)

"[The most important thing to me is] sport – because in sports you meet friends that help and support you [in] life."
10 year-old Nyikina boy (Kimberley)

"[The most important thing to me is] keeping fit, playing basketball."
10 year-old girl (Kimberley)

"[The most important thing to me is] staying active, living healthily..."
15 year-old girl (Peel)

"Sport, I like sport because it keeps me fit and healthy..."
16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

As well as sport, children and young people highlighted enjoying water parks, playgrounds and other recreational facilities, being outdoors and in contact with nature, and having access to shopping, entertainment and cultural facilities.

There is clear evidence that sport and physical activity by children and young people contributes to better physical and mental health, higher social competence and subjective wellbeing, and protects against ill-health and the development of chronic health conditions.^{209 210} Participation in other leisure and cultural activities provides an opportunity for emotional and creative expression, supports a child's ability to persist with tasks, and promotes mental health and wellbeing.²¹¹

The *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015 – 2030* recognises the importance of sport and recreation to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.²¹² For Aboriginal children and young people, there is evidence that sport and recreation programs contribute to school retention and educational outcomes, social and cognitive skills, physical and mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion and cohesion, connection to culture, and a reduction in crime and antisocial behaviour.²¹³ Sport has been identified as a factor that supports achieving Closing the Gap targets in health, education and employment.²¹⁴

In remote communities where there are often limited infrastructure and programs, providing locally relevant recreational activities can be useful in building a sense of purpose, hope and belonging, and deterring engagement in unhealthy or negative activities.²¹⁵

In regional and urban areas where Aboriginal people are in the minority, sport and recreation activities provide an opportunity for improved social inclusion in the broader community.²¹⁶



What children and young people say about access to recreational activities

In the consultations, children and young people spoke extensively about their favourite activities, and the spaces and facilities they could access in their community. Children and young people who could engage in a variety of recreational activities valued that aspect of their lives.

Children and young people living in Perth were more likely to be satisfied with the variety of options available to them.

“Where I live there are a lot of Aboriginal kids around that I go see and go out to the movies, or down the park and play basketball and stuff so it is sort of fun...” 14 year-old girl (Perth)

“It’s a good place to be. It’s got good parks, good shopping centres...” 10 year-old girl (Perth)

Children and young people living in regional communities, particularly smaller regional and remote communities, expressed an almost universal desire for more diverse activities. This is consistent with what the Commissioner has heard from children and young people living in regional and remote communities on many previous occasions. Aboriginal children and young people most frequently mentioned wanting more shops, cinemas, pools, water parks, sporting grounds, skate parks, playgrounds, youth centres and art and cultural centres. They also expressed a strong desire for age appropriate activities that facilitated peer interaction.

“My town needs better stuff.” 12 year-old girl (Great Southern)

“... we don’t have big shops, we don’t get to do things people in big towns get to do.” 11 year-old girl (Pilbara)





“If I were the boss of the town I would make sure we have a lot more children’s activities weekly and skate parks and those sorts of things so the children will not be at home all day after school doing nothing. So I believe that will make a big change.” 13 year-old young person (Pilbara)

“[We need] more centres for young people to do things.” 11 year-old girl (Kimberley)

“I’d like there to be more for adolescents. Recently, they’ve shut down the bowling alley, the pools are a bit outdated and there appears to be no place for the older youth. Hence, many [get into] things like alcohol, going to parties, etc.” 16 year-old Wongi young person (Goldfields-Esperance)

“We need somewhere to go and hangout together, and even have a party with some music and dancing. Somewhere that’s for us older kids.” 16 year-old girl (Great Southern)

“I’d have more activities for younger kids and make more sport programs.” 15 year-old boy (Great Southern)

Children and young people’s access to recreational spaces and facilities varies between communities. Some of the main factors that influence access include: local government decisions about the provision of facilities, programs and public open spaces, a community’s geographical features, differences in socio-economic status, children and young people’s proximity to facilities, and availability of public transport.²¹⁷

State-wide data on children and young people’s rates of participation in sport and recreation shows some mixed results, however the data is not disaggregated by Aboriginality. In 2012, nearly two-thirds (63.6%) of WA children aged five to 14 years participated in at least one organised sport or physical activity, and nearly three-quarters (74.4%) attended at least one cultural venue or event. However, almost one-quarter (24.7%) did

not participate in any sport or cultural activity, and these children were more likely to be living in disadvantaged families or communities.²¹⁸

Data also shows that less than one-half (48.9%) of five to 15 year-olds in WA met the recommended amount of physical activity in 2012, though there was improvement compared to recent years.²¹⁹

National data shows that Aboriginal people have lower rates of participation in sport than non-Aboriginal people.²²⁰

The Department of Sport and Recreation takes the leading role in increasing participation by people in sport and recreation by providing facilities, developing community programs and increasing the capacity of sport and recreation organisations. The Department’s KidSport program provides financial assistance to children and young people to contribute towards club fees to engage in sport and recreation. From September 2011 to November 2014, almost 10,000 Aboriginal children and young people received support through the program.²²¹





Principles of good practice

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has developed principles of 'what works' in implementing sport and recreation programs in Aboriginal communities. These include:²²²

- providing a range of activities that appeal to people with different interests
- providing a quality program experience to increase engagement
- linking with other services and opportunities, such as health, counselling, education and employment programs
- for sporting programs, providing long-term, sustained contact between experienced sportspeople and participants to allow time for skills to be consolidated
- promoting a program rather than a desired outcome to improve uptake (for example, promoting a fitness program as games or sports rather than a get-fit campaign)
- involving the community in planning and implementation to promote cultural appropriateness, engagement and sustainability
- keeping participants' costs to a minimum to ensure broad access
- scheduling activities at appropriate times to increase engagement (for example, after school, on weekends and during school holidays for children and young people)
- facilitating successful and positive risk taking to provide an alternative to inappropriate risky behaviour
- creating a safe place by building trust and providing opportunities for participants to work through issues without fear of retribution or being stigmatised
- providing stable funding and staffing to promote program sustainability.

It is important to note the development of a given program may not automatically result in a particular personal or social outcome given the effects of programs tend to be indirect and may take time to form.²²³

Children and young people should always be involved in identifying local needs and in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and facilities to ensure they are relevant and sustainable.

Building the evidence base

The availability of data on the participation by Aboriginal people, including children and young people, in recreational activities is very limited and it has been acknowledged that more robust data collection is required.²²⁴

There is also inadequate evidence of the effects of participating in recreational activities on Aboriginal children and young people's wellbeing. A contributing factor may be that benefits are often indirect and long-term, and it is difficult to identify causal links between programs and specific outcomes.²²⁵ It has been suggested that policymakers and researchers need to refine indirect measures and build a body of program evaluations to provide evidence around the nature of specific benefits and the mechanisms by which they are produced.²²⁶ A further area of research is longitudinal studies of program outcomes to capture and assess the magnitude of benefits that take longer to form.²²⁷

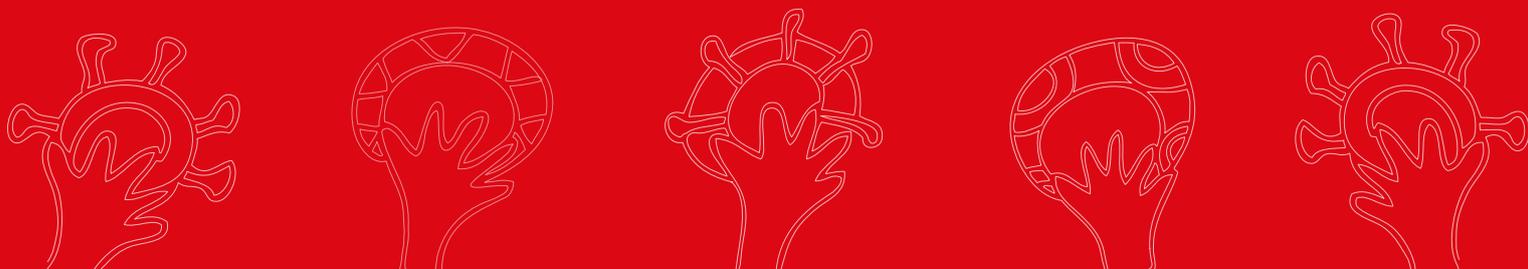


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Racism and reconciliation

“One mob, no more racism, equality, same nation.” teenage boy (Perth)





Why a focus on racism and reconciliation is important

Racial discrimination is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. A growing body of evidence demonstrates strong associations between racial discrimination and health outcomes, including psychological distress, poor physical health, binge drinking and use of illicit substances.^{228 229 230} More broadly, racism and discrimination are also associated with trust and people who have experienced discrimination are less likely to trust schools, doctors, police and other people more generally.²³¹

“[If I were boss of this town] I would extinct racial discrimination.” 16 year-old Noongar / Yamatji young person (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town I would want a] less racist society.” 17 year-old boy (location unknown)

Although there is insufficient research specifically investigating the impact of racism on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, existing studies show that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to harm from racism.^{232 233} Exposure to racism has been linked to adverse impacts on child health, wellbeing and development, and there is growing recognition of the adverse effects discrimination and racism have on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.^{234 235} Racism and bullying can also influence children’s experiences of school, leading to negative impacts on school attendance and achievement.²³⁶

Racism, broadly defined, includes “attitudes, judgments, discriminatory behaviours, and institutional practices that function to systematically disadvantage groups of people defined by their ‘race’ or ethnicity.”²³⁷ Racism is unacceptable in any form. Aboriginal children and young people in WA can experience multiple forms of racism and racial discrimination.





These include intentional and unintentional behaviours, biases, beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes.

“I have had many racist comments towards me by people in the community and I don’t like it. I think there should be stronger campaigns about racism [where I live], and not just about Aboriginal people, about Chinese, African and Muslim people as well because there are many other races in this community that get racially abused, not just us Aboriginal people.”
16 year-old boy (Peel)

“No bullying and racist comments...”
10 year-old girl (Pilbara)

Racism can include a range of actions from jokes or offensive or hurtful comments, name-calling or verbal abuse, harassment and intimidation through to physical abuse or violence. Racism can often manifest unconsciously through prejudice or bias.^{238 239} A broad definition of racism acknowledges that racism operates at individual or interpersonal levels as well as systemic and institutional levels.²⁴⁰

Racism and reconciliation are closely aligned concepts. Reconciliation involves building positive, respectful relationships between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal people.²⁴¹ Reconciliation also aims to address the inequity between Aboriginal people and the wider Australian community. While racism presents a significant obstacle to reconciliation, strategies that aim to address racism can help to build understanding and respect – concepts that are fundamental to reconciliation.²⁴²

Although the Commissioner did not ask Aboriginal children and young people specific questions about racism or reconciliation, these topics were frequently raised by children and young people during the consultations. It is clear that racism and reconciliation are important issues to many Aboriginal children and young people.

What children and young people say about racism and reconciliation

Experiencing racism

Aboriginal children and young people told the Commissioner that they experience and witness racism. Many reported feeling judged or discriminated against, and said they wanted less racism and more equality, reconciliation and mutual respect.

“I would make it so that everyone is treated the same and people don’t judge us Aboriginals ‘cause we have different coloured skin.” 14 year-old Ngadju boy (Perth)

“I would eradicate racism between black and white to build respect...It is a bit confusing growing up Aboriginal in this society because we are taught to be proud but lots of times we aren’t really accepted, even when we try to be like them.” 13 year-old Noongar young person (Perth)

“I would like to change the way we treat each other because it’s on us to do what we’ve got to do to survive, so treat everyone with fairness and equality.” 17 year-old Koori young person (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town I would] stop racism.” 12 year-old girl (unknown location)

Some children and young people spoke about being made to feel uncomfortable or out of place because they were Aboriginal. At one consultation site a group of boys said they felt unwelcome and uncomfortable when they went into the shops at a local regional centre and when they travelled to Perth.

“When we go there to shop, people stare at you.” 12 to 16 year-old boy (Pilbara)

“[It’s] like they haven’t seen a blackfella before, walking into a shop... [they] don’t think we’ve got money...” 12 to 16 year-old boy (Pilbara)



Although the evidence varies, it clearly demonstrates that many Aboriginal children and young people experience racism and discrimination. A 2011 survey of 755 Aboriginal people in four Victorian communities found that 97 per cent of participants had experienced at least one racist incident in the preceding 12 months, with most people experiencing racism multiple times across a broad range of settings.²⁴³ According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data from 2010, 11 per cent of Aboriginal children aged four to 14 years nationally reported being bullied at school for being Aboriginal.²⁴⁴ In the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 22 per cent of young people aged between 12 and 17 years reported having been refused service or treated badly because they were Aboriginal.²⁴⁵ The 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) found that 27 per cent of respondents aged 15 years and over experienced discrimination in the last 12 months.²⁴⁶

Young people also spoke about what they perceived as ignorance among the non-Aboriginal population about Aboriginal culture and government policies relating to Aboriginal people. They felt this unfairly skewed people's opinions of them. This view reflects research which demonstrates that negative stereotyping and negative media depictions of Aboriginal people can result in preconceived and ill-informed ideas about Aboriginal people and culture, contributing to racism.^{247 248}

“My life right now is pretty good apart from the fact that my people are still being put down by people who know nothing about us. This really affects my life as I hear it all the time...”

14 year-old Yamatji young person (Perth)

“Many non-indigenous people struggle to understand why we receive so much help. As much as I try to explain to some people, they don't understand. I want there to be a way to show them or tell them why it is Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders receive help. I believe this is important [for] many people's lives so we don't have to feel bad or embarrassed for the help offered to us.”

17 year-old Nyikina young person (Kimberley)

Being protected from discrimination

Some children and young people indicated that they were unaware of existing complaints-based frameworks and legislative protections against racial discrimination.

“[At football] we were given a speech about discrimination. Until this point I didn't know that there were rules against it in football. I have been subject to this many times in the years... I think we should be told about this earlier in our sporting life so we can stop it.”

14 year-old Yamatji young person (Perth)

“[If I were boss of this town I would] make laws about racism.’ 15 year-old Wongi young person (Goldfields-Esperance)

Evidence demonstrates there is only a low level of awareness of anti-discrimination legislation in the Australian community.²⁴⁹ This lack of awareness can be compounded by the unique range of barriers that children and young people face in making complaints about their experiences or the way they are treated.²⁵⁰





Reconciliation

Children and young people in the consultations spoke about the relationship between respect and equality and people's knowledge about Aboriginal history and culture.

"[If I were boss of this town I would want] everyone to know the true history of Australia, lots of opportunities for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, more cultural centres in schools and in the wider community, everyone [to be] equal, everyone [to be] treated with RESPECT..." 17 year-old Yawuru young person (Kimberley)

Some children and young people said they wanted more non-Aboriginal people to be educated about and exposed to Aboriginal culture to aid reconciliation.

"The things I would change would be the attitude towards my people by educating them better about my culture, language, traditions. This is because most people around here and [those] I go to school with assume rather than look at fact. They only look at the bad parts

of our culture, such as crime rates, rather than good things, such as our traditions, cultures, athletes..." 14 year-old Yamatji young person (Perth)

Children and young people identified public celebrations and events as important to promoting understanding and providing opportunities for the wider community to recognise, celebrate and value Aboriginal cultural identity.

"[If I were boss of this town I would want] more things to celebrate... so people can understand more, like the stolen generation." 16 year-old girl (Perth)

"[We need] more Harmony Day celebrations." 14 year old Noongar/Yamatji young person (Mid West)

Children and young people who were engaged with organisations proactively supporting constitutional recognition identified this as an important step towards reconciliation.

"[I want to tell the Commissioner] to recognise Indigenous Australians in the constitution." 16 year-old girl (Perth)



Principles of good practice

All forms of racism require carefully considered, evidence-based solutions.²⁵¹ Anti-racism strategies need to be implemented at individual, institutional, and cultural levels in order to address racism operating at each of these levels. There is, however, limited Australian evidence on the most effective ways to address racism, in particular racism experienced by children and young people.^{252 253}

The evidence that is currently available suggests that reducing racism should:

- include sustained multifaceted interventions
- include universal as well as targeted strategies across different settings (for example, schools, workplaces and sporting clubs)
- be consultative and developed in accordance with the specific and local circumstances of the community for which it is intended
- use both ‘top-down’ strategies (for example, advertising campaigns) as well as ‘bottom-up’ strategies (eg, addressing specific racist behaviours)
- be evidence-based, monitored and regularly evaluated.^{254 255}

Successful strategies:

- target specific negative and false beliefs
- provide accurate information about Aboriginal culture and the impact of racism
- focus on specific areas of discrimination, for example employment
- invoke empathy and break down barriers
- focus on changing behaviours as much as attitudes
- highlight shared community-wide values and directly involve participants (rather than a passive lecture-style approach)
- increase personal and organisational accountability
- involve Aboriginal communities in their design, development and delivery.^{256 257}

These are based mainly on successful interventions targeting adults. More research is needed to build our knowledge about the specific characteristics required for successful programs targeting children and young people.

Building the evidence base

Given findings of experiences of racism and the impact of racism on health and wellbeing, combatting racism is a critical aspect of redressing inequalities in health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

There is limited evidence in Australia to help us to understand the extent to which racism is experienced by children and young people and the impact this has on their health and wellbeing. Existing studies into the impact of racism on children and young people tend to focus on older children.^{258 259} Further research is needed to build the evidence base in this area to build a clearer picture of the complex role racism plays in the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Research, evaluation and monitoring, including longitudinal studies, are necessary to build the evidence base about the experiences and outcomes of racism and discrimination for Aboriginal children and young people. This evidence base is important to improve policy and practice, to design effective anti-racism interventions and as a basis for advocacy.^{260 261}

In recognition of the impact of racism on childhood development the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified racism as a proposed measure in its recent scoping paper to develop an early childhood development indicator-based reporting framework.²⁶²

Further work will be undertaken to develop potential data sources and indicator development.





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Listening and taking action





This report reflects the voices of over 1,200 Aboriginal children and young people from across Western Australia. It is a picture that provides both hope – in terms of hearing the voices of many inspiring young people who have strong aspirations and are ready to make enormous contributions to their community – and deep concern over the significant and ongoing challenges some face.

Much of what they have told us is congruent with what we hear from Aboriginal parents, families and elders, and what a growing body of evidence shows is important for the wellbeing of children and young people. That is:

- the importance of strong families and communities which provide a sense of belonging and wellbeing
- the importance of culture and its contribution to a strong sense of self and wellbeing
- the value placed by young people on education and their aspirations for the future, and the importance of support from family and friends to help achieve at school
- the importance of access to a broad range of recreational activities which support positive emotional and social skill development, community engagement and physical and mental health and wellbeing
- racial harmony and a broad community respect for Aboriginal culture.

Their voices also provide insight into the challenges faced by some children and young people who are impacted by issues such as exposure to crime, violence, abuse, disadvantage, inadequate housing and alcohol and drugs, and the consequences of this for family and community functioning.

Many shared their concerns about the future and a lack of local opportunities to get a job, their experiences of racism, and their hopes for stronger, community-wide reconciliation.

An enormous amount of work and research has been undertaken, even more so in recent years, to determine how to strengthen the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and communities. Despite this, it continues to be of concern that across so many indicators such little progress has occurred.

This report adds to that body of research the voices of Aboriginal children and young people themselves, so that current strategies, programs and services can be positively influenced by their views and insight.

The purpose of undertaking these consultations with Aboriginal children and young people is aligned with the key principles of the Act which prescribes the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA – to bring children and young people's voices to prominence and provide opportunities for the organisations and the broad community to respond to their views in a meaningful and practical way.

The report has identified principles of good practice to underpin services and programs, based on the best available evidence, and it is important that these be observed and utilised as a foundation of service delivery.



Key approaches

Drawing from identified good practice, relevant research and evidence, the work of the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the guiding principles under the legislation and listening to the voices of the children and young people, there needs to be a collective commitment to the following four approaches.

1. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, and their families, must be seen as core business for all agencies as there is an imperative to achieve truly integrated planning, funding and delivery of programs and services. This requires genuine partnerships between all levels of government, the community and private sectors.
2. Programs and services need to be flexible, understand and respect the diversity of Aboriginal children and young people and their communities, their language, their culture and their histories, and be able to respond to their unique circumstances, needs, strengths and capacities. This requires approaches that are local, cooperative and, ultimately, community-led and controlled.
3. Programs and services must recognise the importance of, and build on the strengths of, Aboriginal family and kinship.
4. Services and programs to support the safety and wellbeing of children and young people must be evidence-based and outcomes focused. This does not mean compromising the capacity to be innovative and try new approaches, but rather a commitment from service funders and providers to measure, evaluate and define meaningful and sustainable outcomes, to relinquish what does not work, and focus on what does.





Key strategies

In responding directly to the views expressed by Aboriginal children and young people in this consultation, more focused investment is required in the following eight strategies.

1. Supporting the role and capacity of parents by investing in culturally appropriate early childhood services – including pre-natal support, universal and targeted parenting programs, child health and allied health services jointly delivered and co-located on or near school sites – must be a priority.
2. Recognising that culture is important to individual and community resilience, Aboriginal children and young people must be supported to learn and practice their culture, and communities supported to restore, strengthen and celebrate their culture.
3. There needs to be greater efforts to address racism and support reconciliation with a focus on building cross-cultural understanding and connection with all Western Australians, with schools being an important setting for this work.
4. Multiple strategies are needed across agencies to support engagement and participation in education, which include strong partnerships between schools, families and communities, and work to better identify and remove the barriers to school engagement.
5. Better access to mentoring, role modelling and support programs is required to provide long-term support and advice regarding education and pathways to post-school education, training and employment options.
6. Aboriginal culture, knowledge and identity need to be integrated more widely into educational programs and philosophies.
7. Neighbourhoods and physical spaces need to be designed with and for children and young people to support their development, encourage community cohesion and positive interaction.

8. All children and young people need to have access to a diverse range of age-appropriate, low-cost recreation, sport and cultural activities to support their active engagement and social participation. It is important to recognise these programs can and do provide an effective vehicle to access other supports that impact positively on the wellbeing of children and young people.

Fundamentally, programs and services need to be underpinned by an ongoing commitment to listening and responding to the views of Aboriginal children and young people, and it is the role of all organisations that work with Aboriginal children and young people to ensure these meaningful conversations continue.





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- Associate Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, Pindi Pindi Centre for Research Excellence in Aboriginal Wellbeing and Australian Catholic University
- Professor Juli Coffin, Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service; with Mr Andrew Roland, Ms Sophie Coffin and Mr Tyson McEwan, young people
- Mr Peter Mitchell, Men's Outreach Services and Alive and Kicking Goals
- Mr Lachlan Cooke, ICEA Foundation; with Ms Isovaine Huddlestone and Mr Sam Petera, young people
- Ms Michelle Webb, Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute, Curtin University
- Ms Michelle White, Ms Connie Yarran and Ms Yolande Yarran, Community Arts Network Western Australia
- Mr Les Mack, Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation; with Ms Che Smith-Harring, young person
- Ms Josie Janz-Dawson, The Wirrpanda Foundation
- Ms Susan Michoff and Ms Luisa Latai, Shire of East Pilbara
- Ms Jane Wheller, JD Hardie Centre; with Ms Felicia Ryder, young person
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- Mr Rory Whitelaw, Department of Aboriginal Affairs; with Mr Jayden Councillor, young person

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- Centrecare
- City of Fremantle
- City of Mandurah
- Derby Aboriginal Health Service
- Edith Cowan University
- Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation
- Gnuraren Aboriginal Corporation
- ICEA Foundation
- Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre, Murdoch University
- Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women's Resource Centre
- Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia, Curtin University
- Save The Children Australia
- Shire of East Pilbara
- Southern Aboriginal Corporation
- Swan Alliance Communities for Children
- Wanslea Family Services
- Yulella Aboriginal Corporation



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- Anglicare WA, Broome
- Rohanna Angus, Headspace, Broome
- Evelyn Ronan, Carnarvon Police and Community Youth Centre
- Daisy Ward, Warburton
- Junior Harris, Chairperson Warburton
- Joadi Harris, Goldfields
- Caroline Long, Wiluna
- Lena Long, Wiluna
- Roseanna Angus, One Arm Point
- Michael McKenzie, Broome
- Donna Johnston, Port Hedland
- Cissy Gore-Birch-Gault, Kimberley
- Rachael Bin Saleh, Broome
- Pearl Scott, Goldfields
- Rowan Scott, Warburton
- All Western Australian public schools who participated





Appendix 1 - Online survey

Jenni Perkins is the Commissioner for Children and Young People of Western Australia. Jenni would like to hear from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people about things that are important to them.

Jenni will use the results of this survey to help write reports about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people feel, and what can be done to make their lives better.

We might use some of the comments you make in the survey in these reports, or to help the Commissioner talk about her work, but will not use your name.

If you are a child or a young person under 18 who is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and living in WA, you can do this survey. Before you start the survey you will need to have permission from an adult who looks after you.

Your views are important to us and we would like to hear them. The survey will take about 20 minutes to do and has 19 questions.

You can contact the office on **6213 2297** or by email **info@ccyp.wa.gov.au** if you have any questions about the survey or project.

Do you have permission from an adult who looks after you to do this survey?

Are you male or female?

Are you Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

What's your language group/who's your mob? (for example, Noongar, Yamatji, Martu?)

How old are you?

What community/town or suburb do you come from?



Tell us about the two things in your life that are most important.

How important are each of these things to you? (1 = really important, 2 = quite important or 3 = not important)

- Family
- Friends
- Community
- Culture
- Going to School
- Getting a Job
- Playing Sport
- Being a good role model

What are the most important things about CULTURE to you?

How important are these different parts of your CULTURE?

(1 = really important, 2 = quite important or 3 = not important)

- Respect (for country and one another)
- Identity (knowing who you are and where you come from)
- Language
- Traditional activities like ceremonies, dancing and music
- Connection to country
- Elders
- Being a good role model
- Stories
- Looking after country
- No shame
- Being proud
- Looking after our environment

What are the two things you like most about where you live?

Thinking about where you live, how much do you like each of these things?

(1 = like it a lot, 2 = like it a bit or 3 = don't like it)

- The land
- Youth Centres
- Going bush (camping, hunting, fishing, walking country)
- The people
- Beaches
- Access to Transport
- Pools
- Schools
- Programs
- Jobs
- Shops
- Food

If you were the boss of your town, what would you change to make it a better place to live? You can write about any ideas you have, big things or a group of small changes.





How important are each of these things to make your town a better place to live?

(1 = really important, 2 = quite important or 3 = not important)

- Better schools
- Better hospitals and medical facilities (doctors, dentists, chemists)
- More support for young people
- More support for young parents/single parents
- More helpers at school
- More culture in schools
- More help for people with disabilities
- Less alcohol and drugs
- More youth workers
- More role models
- More play equipment
- More help for people on the streets
- Back to country trips
- More support to keep families strong and together

When you think about what you want for the future and a good life, what help do you need to get there?

Thinking about your future, how important are each of these things to you?

(1 = really important, 2 = quite important or 3 = not important)

- Have a house
- Have a good job
- Have a drivers licence
- Be a good role model
- Live a healthy lifestyle
- Have money and savings
- Finish school and have a good education

How important do you think it is to get support and help to achieve your goals?

(1 = really important, 2 = quite important or 3 = not important)

- Support and help from teachers
- Support and help from family
- Support and help from friends

Ok, this is your chance to tell the Commissioner anything else that you think is important for her to know about you and your life.

Thanks a lot for doing this survey. It's really important that we get to hear from children and young people about what they think of their lives and what they want to do.

We will look at this information from you and other children and young people and report back to you when the survey is finished.





Appendix 2 - Face-to-face consultation template

The following reporting template was provided to organisations conducting consultations on the Commissioner’s behalf.

Report on consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

- Please provide as much information as you think appropriate to accurately capture the views of the participants. The text boxes will automatically expand as you type in content.
- The report on the consultation must be provided in this template. Other information and resources can be attached.

Organisation:	
Date(s) of consultation:	Venue:

Overview of participants

Total number of participants:									
Ages	<10yrs	11yrs	12yrs	13yrs	14yrs	15yrs	16yrs	17yrs	17yrs>
Gender	Female:					Male:			
Location	Regional					Metro			

Summary of methodology

Please summarise the strategies or methods you used to facilitate the session

Summary of findings and themes

Please provide a brief summary of the key points made by participants





Response to consultation questions

1. What are the most important things in life to you?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.'
(boy aged 9)

2. What does your culture mean to you?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)

3. What's great about where you live?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)

4. If you were the boss of this town what would you want here?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)

5. Where do you want to be in the future?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)





6. What help do you need to get there?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)

7. What do you want to tell the Commissioner?

Summary of main points

Direct quotes from participants (please use the style below and include a range of comments to reflect diversity of views)

'I think it's good for someone to make sure we kids aren't forgotten about.' (boy aged 9)

Additional notes and resources

Please provide any other relevant information

Attach to this report additional resources from the consultation such as consent forms, artwork, photos, video, notes, etc.



Appendix 3 - Location of consultation participants

Location	Number of participants	Region
Albany	81	Great Southern
Bayulu	5	West Kimberley
Beagle Bay	36	West Kimberley
Bidan community	1	West Kimberley
Bidyadanga	1	West Kimberley
Broome	61	West Kimberley
Burringurrah Community	1	Gascoyne
Busselton	51	South West
Carnarvon	45	Gascoyne
Collie	2	South West
Coolgardie	3	Goldfields
Cue	1	Mid West
Cullacabardee Community	1	Metropolitan Area
Dalgunua community (DarIngunaya)	1	West Kimberley
Derby	36	West Kimberley
Djarindjin Community	1	West Kimberley
Djugerari Community	1	West Kimberley
Esperance	27	Goldfields
Fitzroy Crossing	12	West Kimberley
Geraldton	53	Mid West
Glen Hill	1	East Kimberley
Gnowangerup	17	Great Southern
Halls Creek	5	East Kimberley
Immintji Community	2	West Kimberley
Janujuwa community	1	West Kimberley
Joy Springs Community	1	West Kimberley
Kalgoorlie	51	Goldfields
Karratha	3	Pilbara
Katanning	1	Great Southern
Kiwirrkurra	1	Goldfields
Kookynie	3	Goldfields
Kununurra	47	East Kimberley
Laverton	13	Goldfields
Leonora	29	Goldfields

-  Face-to-face consultation
-  Face-to-face consultation and online survey
-  Online survey



Location	Number of participants	Region
Lombadina Community	1	West Kimberley
Looma Community	2	West Kimberley
Mandurah	28	Peel
Marble Bar	5	Pilbara
Meekathara	16	Mid West
Menzies	4	Goldfields
Merredin	2	Wheatbelt
Mount Barker	22	Great Southern
Mount Margaret	13	Goldfields
Mowanjum	1	West Kimberley
Narrogin	2	Wheatbelt
Newman	8	Pilbara
Nookanbah (Yungngora)	2	West Kimberley
Norseman	10	Goldfields
Northam	17	Wheatbelt
Nullagine	7	Pilbara
One Arm Point	13	West Kimberley
Onslow	1	Pilbara
Perth Metropolitan Area	360	Metropolitan Area
Pinjarra	3	Peel
Port Hedland	49	Pilbara
Punmu	1	Pilbara
Quairading	1	Wheatbelt
Roebourne	42	Pilbara
Tambellup	13	Great Southern
Tom Price	2	Pilbara
Wangkatjungka community	2	West Kimberley
Warburton	21	Goldfields
Warmun community	4	East Kimberley
Wickham	2	Pilbara
Wiluna	4	Goldfields
Wingellina	1	Goldfields
Wyndham	4	East Kimberley
Yandeyarra	11	Pilbara
Yaruman (Ringer Soak) Community	1	East Kimberley
Yiyili Community	1	East Kimberley
Total	1271	



Appendix 4 - Aboriginal Languages identified in the online survey

WA languages	
Anangu	Goldfields
Ballardong	Wheatbelt
Banyjima	Pilbara
Bardi	West Kimberley
Gooniyandi	West Kimberley
Gubrun	Wheatbelt
Jabirr Jabirr	West Kimberley
Jaru	East Kimberley
Jawi	West Kimberley
Kariyarra	Pilbara
Kitja	East Kimberley
Koara	Goldfields
Kriol	Kimberley
Kukatja	Pilbara, Kimberley
Mandjindja	Goldfields
Martu	Goldfields, Pilbara
Miriwoong	East Kimberley
Ngaanyatjarra	Goldfields
Ngadju	Goldfields
Ngalia	Goldfields
Ngarinyin	Kimberley
Ngarluma	Pilbara
Ngarti	Pilbara, East Kimberley
Noongar	South West, Great Southern, Wheatbelt
Nyangumarta	Pilbara
Nyikina	West Kimberley
Nyul Nyul	West Kimberley
Pintupi	Pilbara and Goldfields
Pitjantjatjara	Goldfields
Tjupan	Goldfields
Unggarangi	West Kimberley
Walmatjarri	West Kimberley
Watjarri	Mid West, Gascoyne



WA languages

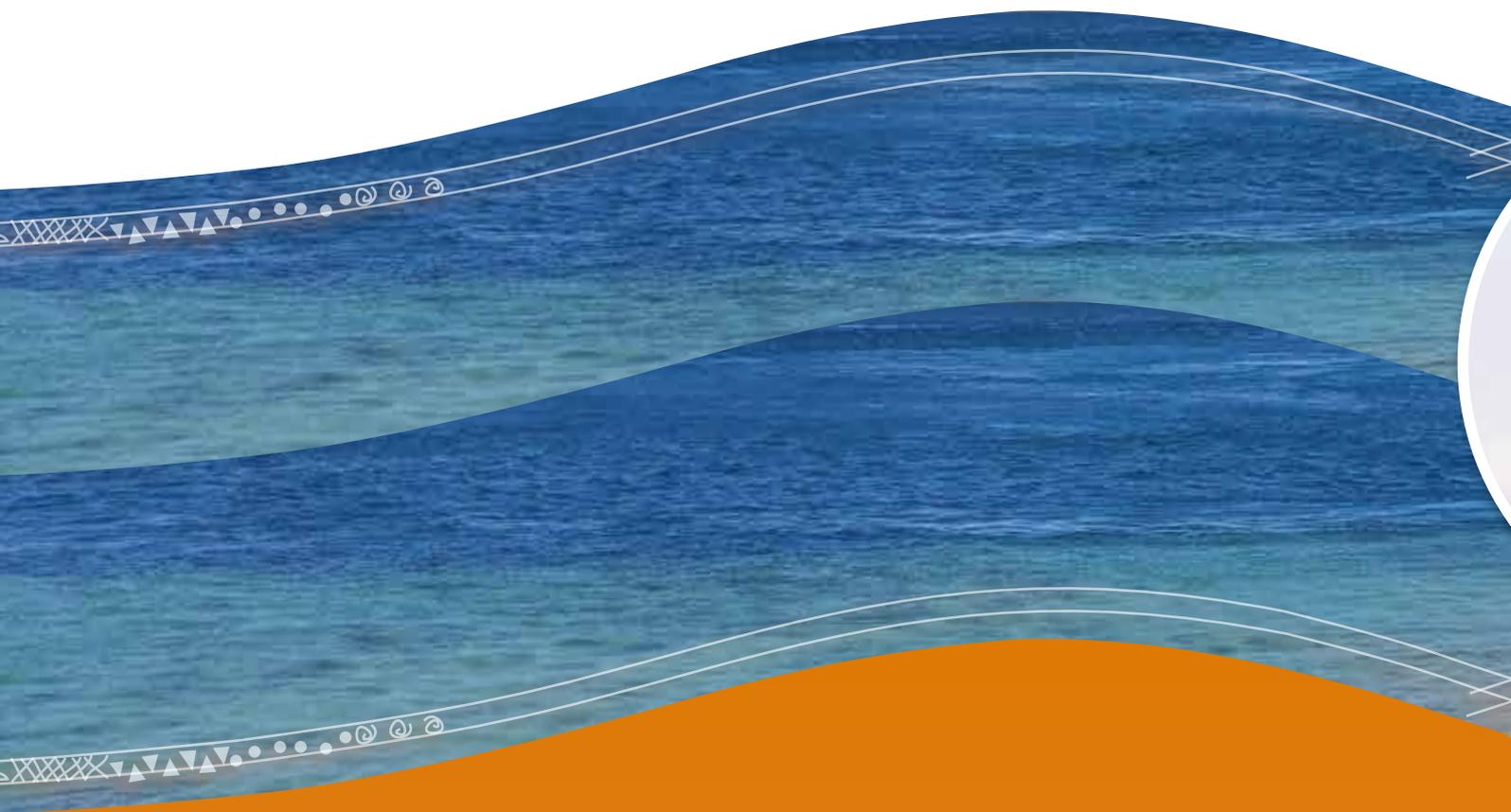
Whadjuk	Metropolitan Area
Wongatha	Goldfields
Wongi	Goldfields
Worrora	West Kimberley
Yamatji	Mid West, Gascoyne
Yawuru	West Kimberley
Yindjibarndi	Pilbara
Yuat	Wheatbelt

Langauages from other states and territories

Arernte	Northern Territory
Barkindji	New South Wales
Kaurareg	Queensland
Kokatha	South Australia
Koori	New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania
Meriam Mir	Queensland
Murrawari	New South Wales
Murray Islander	Queensland
Nunga	South Australia
Thursday Islander	Queensland
Torres Strait Islander	Queensland
Wirrangu	South Australia
Yolngu	Northern Territory
Yorta-Yorta	Victoria







Not all children and young people pictured in this publication took part in this consultation. They are all Western Australian children and young people who have provided permission to the Commissioner to use the images.

