

Reconciliation and the Code of Ethics

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Long before Kevin Rudd's apology, the issue of Reconciliation was Australia's most significant unresolved moral crisis. More than two centuries have passed and still we seem to take tiny steps towards a lasting respectful relationship between Australia's first people and those who have more recently made Australia home. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were owed those words of rectitude, and we felt that finally things would change. But time has ticked on and reality tells a different story.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have a life expectancy rate up to 20 years less than non-Indigenous people, they are less likely to attend early childhood services, more likely to have regular interactions with child protection and have a higher rate of disease. The Little Children are Sacred report alerted Australians to the harm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children face in their communities. Still, governments have struggled to respond – unable to act effectively to 'close the gap'.

Early childhood professionals must be an active voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and we can start by using Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics. Our Code states:

In this Code of Ethics the protection and wellbeing of children is paramount and therefore speaking out or taking action in the presence of unethical practice is an essential professional responsibility.

The Code reminds us of our ethical duty to speak and act on behalf of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that do not share the same futures as many non-Indigenous children.

The Code urges us to:

base [our] work on contemporary perspectives on research, theory, content knowledge, high quality early childhood practices and [our] understandings of the children and families with whom [we] work.

We must start by listening. We must learn all we can about the history and contemporary life of Indigenous Australians. We cannot generalise about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as there are differences in languages, customs and contexts across clans. We cannot hope to be advocates if our understanding is limited to the inadequate First Nation histories some of us have studied. Our foremost ethical duty is to listen and learn in order to generate respectful relationships.

Every aspect of the Code can spark reconciliation. Every time we, as early childhood professionals, listen and learn from Aboriginal parents about their family, we demonstrate the respect that builds the foundation of reconciliation. Every time we look at a policy initiative and ask how an Aboriginal child in a remote community can benefit, we restore the justice that secures reconciliation, and every time we recognise the work of early childhood programs that give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the best start in life we make reconciliation a present reality, not a future ambition.

Look at the Code and see how you can contribute to reconciliation and change. For example:

In relation to children:

- Talk to children about Australia's Indigenous peoples—as accurately as possible.
- Tell children about the injustice that Indigenous children face—and help them to act on behalf of other children to 'close the gap'.

In relation to myself as a professional:

- Develop your own cultural understanding—find a copy of 'The First Australians' to learn more about Australia's first people.
- Read about contemporary understandings of Indigenous culture.
- Look for reports and other documentation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, their access to and experience of early childhood services.
- Advocate on all levels—tell stories of truth and possibility, and listen to others as they share both challenges and successes.

In relation to the Community:

- Develop relationships with Aboriginal and Indigenous agencies and community organisations—start by getting to know the early childhood staff at these agencies.

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