



Early Years Learning Framework

PERSPECTIVES ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The Journey for Educators: Growing competence in working with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures.



Why focus on Cultural Competence?

The Early Years Learning Framework '*...forms the foundation for ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experiences quality teaching and learning*' (DEEWR, 2009). It is well documented that the years from Birth–8 are critical in a child's development. Early childhood services that are accessible and effectively engage with families are essential to promoting positive outcomes for children in these formative years. *The Journey for Educators: Growing competence in working with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures* is identified

in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as one of the pedagogical practices that informs curriculum planning and enhances children's learning. This practice explicitly supports educators to develop respectful and reciprocal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within their local context (DEEWR, 2010, p24).



Cultural competence is:

‘...much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.

Cultural competence encompasses:

- being aware of one’s own world view
- developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views
- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.’

— *Early Years Learning Framework, p16*

The main aim is that each of us will think outside our own cultural paradigm when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and be able to transfer this knowledge and understanding into our professional practice in an effective and respectful manner.

Elements of the **National Quality Standard** require educators to focus on reflecting on the cultural diversity of the broader community, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

How will you start to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and cultural heritage?

The first step is to acknowledge the huge influence of **culture**.

It is essential to understand that we are all immersed in our own culture – with its associated beliefs, attitudes and behaviours – which guides and at times determines our personal and professional interactions.

What is culture?

Culture is the shared patterns of behaviours and interactions that are learned through socialisation. These collective patterns identify the participants of a cultural group while also distinguishing those of another group.

A definition

Cultural competence is:
'...a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.'

— Cross, et al, 1989, *piv*

What does 'culture' mean to you?

Inherent in our human nature is a tendency to be ethnocentric, i.e. we believe that our own cultural way of life is the norm and the standard by which all others are judged.

What does 'culture' look like in your setting?

Culture is central to our feelings of 'being' and 'belonging' and also to our sense of identity. If children and families are to feel welcome and are to develop a positive sense of identity in our settings then we need to think about how each family's culture is visible in what we do.

How do you help children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities?

It is hard to define our own culture, and understand what assumptions we make, as we exist within it. Therefore an ongoing process of self-reflection and examination of your own worldview and culture is an important part of the journey towards growing cultural competence.

How much knowledge about culture and cultural identity is needed to bring about sustained behavioural change?

Cultural competence is **not** a 'competency' or a set of 'competencies'. It is not something that can be ticked off. It must be a **genuine desire** to gain understanding of and valuing of culture and identity. We need to learn with and from others.

Whilst there are a range of definitions for cultural competence, all agree that cultural competence for an individual is a personal capability comprised of attitudes, values and beliefs that develop over time through a personal journey of learning.

Since cultures are constantly changing, cultural competence is not a state that can be achieved or arrived at.





The perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competence shared in this paper align with the intent of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard.

Cultural competence is **most effective** when:

- we understand our own culture and background as well as being open and respectful to other cultures
- we recognise and acknowledge our own stereotypes and biases and the subtle and not so subtle ways these biases may affect our interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- we acknowledge and understand that cultures are not static; a wide range of variations exists within cultures that affect family choices and practices
- we are respectful of Aboriginal ways of knowing and communication
- families are actively involved in planning and evaluating learning
- it is integrated into whole site practices.

Cultural competence is **least effective** when:

- programs highlight culture through one-off events about food, dance, dress, music, language and art
- centre philosophy and practices are simply about cultural knowledge, awareness and cultural contact – this **does not** necessarily lead to competence
- we assume that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are one and the same. Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people are diverse and not homogenous. Variations exist between nations and language groups

- we assume that one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community member speaks on behalf of all community members
- we assume that successful practices with one family will work for another
- we expect all Aboriginal people to 'identify'. Respect their choice
- we provide tokenistic, one-off artefacts and experiences within the program.

Links

Examples of practice that will support critical reflection can be found at www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Resources/44971

References

Towards a culturally competent system of care. Cross, T. L., Bazron, B. J., Dennis, K. K., & Isaacs, M. R., Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1989

Belonging, Being, Becoming, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, DEEWR, 2009

Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework, DEEWR, 2010