

# Reconciliation in children's education and care: What is it? And why does it matter?

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Joanne (Jo) Goodwin and Catharine Hydon, *Reconciliation in Action*  
(Early Childhood Australia, 2023).

Reconciliation is about building and maintaining a relationship of trust, unity and respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community; accepting the past injustices; promoting respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, languages, culture and heritage; and actively working to ensure justice and equity for all Australians.

The need for reconciliation arose from a growing awareness within the Australian community that the injustices of the past involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—in particular, the removal of children from their families and the systematic dispossession of people from their land—needed to be acknowledged, and that genuine efforts must be made to restore justice, equity and mutual respect. The reconciliation movement reached an important milestone when, on 13 February 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd tabled a motion in Parliament apologising to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—especially the Stolen Generations, their families and communities—for laws and policies that had 'inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The apology included a proposal for a policy commission to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of 'life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

The reconciliation movement has grown to include many members of the community, including a substantial number of schools and ECEC settings. Educators view the reconciliation cause as an important aspect of early learning and as a way to make a positive impact on the beliefs and understanding of our community.

## Extending and deepening our understanding of reconciliation

In recent times, Reconciliation Australia (2016, 2023b) expanded the definition and understanding of reconciliation to identify five deeper dimensions that are required to achieve reconciliation in Australia. Together with the broader Australian community, educators can support young children to play a part in progressing these dimensions.

Efforts to incorporate reconciliation in early childhood education will often start with the use of resources that can help children explore the concept through stories, languages, art and culture. Extending on and deepening reconciliation in an early years context also means telling the true story of our Australian history to children in appropriate and sensitive ways, while also challenging prejudice and racism among children, families and staff, and exploring ways to address the inequities that lead to gaps in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is not an easy undertaking.

The table that follows interprets the ideas that underpin Reconciliation Australia's dimensions of reconciliation and describes how sustained and embedded efforts towards reconciliation in ECEC might look in practice.

**Table 1. Reconciliation goals for ECEC settings and ways to achieve them (adapted from Reconciliation Australia’s [2016, 2023b] five dimensions of reconciliation)**

Goals of Reconciliation in ECEC settings
<p><b>Race relations</b></p> <p>All Australians understand and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures, rights and experiences, which results in stronger relationships based on trust and respect and that are free of racism.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Positive two-way relationships built on trust and respect exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and educators, and the non-Indigenous Australian early years community.</p>
<p><b>Equality and equity</b></p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate equally in a range of life opportunities, and the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and upheld.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families participate equally and equitably in all aspects of ECEC—i.e., we close the gaps in life outcomes—and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are universally recognised and respected in the daily work of early childhood settings, i.e., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families participate in matters concerning children’s learning and development.</p>
<p><b>Institutional integrity</b></p> <p>The active support of reconciliation by the nation’s political, business and community structures.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> All early childhood political, business and community institutions actively support all dimensions of reconciliation in the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.</p>
<p><b>Unity</b></p> <p>An Australian society that values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of a shared national identity.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are actively valued and taught as part of every ECEC curriculum and professional learning, thereby contributing to a shared national identity.</p>
<p><b>Historical acceptance</b></p> <p>All Australians understand and accept the wrongs of the past and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australia makes amends for past policies and practices and ensures these wrongs are never repeated.</p> <p><b>Goal:</b> There is widespread acceptance by all early childhood professionals of our nation’s history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated, i.e., there is truth, justice, healing and historical acceptance. Each professional has an ethical and professional obligation to advocate for equity and justice for all Australians.</p>

## Why include reconciliation in ECEC settings?

Reconciliation matters in early childhood for the same reason it matters in the context of the wider Australian community. A respectful relationship of trust, unity and respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community will make for a progressive and stronger nation. If ECEC educators can work together to foster these respectful relationships at a grassroots level, today's children will be the beneficiaries of a reconciled community.

Furthermore, when we include children in the work of restoring justice and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, our whole community benefits and the effects are long term. In contrast to the whitewashing of Australian history experienced in education of the past, we now have the opportunity to lay the foundations for a more cohesive and united nation by building children's knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and showing them ways to value and celebrate our collective identity.

Participation in reconciliation is also a matter of professional ethics—a commitment clearly articulated in ECA's *Code of Ethics* (ECA, 2016). Early childhood education is not separate from the matters that captivate the attention of the communities in which we work. In agreeing to see children as citizens with agency, we agree to include their voices in matters of national importance. Reconciliation is part of our national debate, and if we are to realise the possibilities that this idea brings to whole communities, children must be part of the process.

### References

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## Reflective questions

- Why is teaching reconciliation in early childhood education important?
- What do you consider to be the benefits of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, knowledges and ways of being into an early childhood curriculum?
- Describe some of the barriers to undertaking this work in your service, and how you might address them.
- How do the five dimensions of reconciliation in Australia connect with your work as an educator, and the work of the ECEC sector as a whole?
- How could you take action to progress these dimensions? The relevant goals to act on include:
  - creating positive two-way relationships built on trust and respect
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participating equally and equitably in all areas of life
  - institutions actively supporting all dimensions of reconciliation
  - national unity, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are valued
  - acceptance of our nation's history.

Take the next step in your reconciliation journey with *Reconciliation in Action*, a curated collection of stories from multiple perspectives of reconciliation, as it is now and as it might be in the future.

