



Cultural Safety and Wellbeing

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Snapshot

- Supporting the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities through the delivery of culturally safe services is critically important for achieving positive outcomes for clients. Lack of cultural safety, racism and fear are the main barriers to accessing essential services.
- We conducted an evidence review to identify activities, practices or principles that ensure the cultural safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities in early intervention services.
- The evidence review included four types of evidence across the health and human services sector:
 - Cultural safety and wellbeing frameworks;
 - Practice guides and related information;
 - Programs, practices or activities developed to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
 - Research studies published in academic or industry journals.
- The review identified six critical elements that are common across the evidence:
 - Recognising the importance of culture;
 - Self-determination;
 - Workforce development;
 - Whole of organisation approach;
 - Leadership and partnership;
 - Research, monitoring and evaluation.
- Implications are discussed for program design and delivery.


Introduction

In Australia, cultural safety has been defined as:

“An environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning together”¹

¹ Williams 1999, cited in Bin-Sallik, 2003.





When Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities receive culturally safe services, they should feel that their culture and identity is respected². Cultural safety is therefore more than the absence of racism, it the “positive recognition and celebration of cultures... that empowers people and enables them to contribute and feel safe to be themselves.”³

This Evidence to Action note describes evidence found on cultural safety for Aboriginal people within a human and health service context within Australia. The review found 13 academic research papers, 14 cultural safety frameworks, 11 practice guides/fact sheets and 20 programs/practices/activities that actively promote cultural safety. After a comprehensive quality assessment of this evidence, critical elements and example activities to implement them were identified. These are the key practices that are understood to be significant for effectively delivering culturally safe services.

Why is this important?

Cultural safety means an environment which is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. Over the last decade, there has been increased recognition within the human services sector that cultural safety is a pre-condition for Australian First Nations people to access, be involved in and thrive within services.

What did the evidence review find?

Method

Rapid Evidence Assessment was used to search and critically appraise evidence from the year 2000 onwards and relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Australia only.

The Evidence Portal Technical Specifications were not used in conducting this evidence review. As cultural safety is an emerging field of practice, there are no formal research studies that would meet the assessment criteria in these technical specifications.


The types of evidence included in the evidence review were:

- Cultural safety and wellbeing frameworks⁴;
- Practice guides and related information;

² SNAICC, 2021

³ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021, p. 7

⁴ This category includes cultural inclusion, cultural respect, cultural responsiveness, and cultural capability frameworks



- Programs, practices or activities developed to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
- Research studies published in academic or industry journals.

Evidence was sourced for inclusion in the review through online database searching and submissions provided by organisations.

The search strategy comprised multiple search terms:

Search term 1	Search term 2: related terms	Search term 3: service context	Search term 4: document types
Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander	Cultural safety	Child protection	Framework
Indigenous	Cultural competence	Early intervention (in relation to CP)	Practice / practice guide / tip sheet / activity/activities
First Nations	Cultural responsiveness	Family and community services	Program
	Cultural capability		Program/service specification/description
	Cultural wellbeing		Program evaluation

Evidence Review Findings

Table 1 below summarises the evidence found in the review.

Table 1: Evidence extracted and reviewed

Type of evidence reviewed	Number reviewed	Evidence summary
Research studies published in academic/industry journals	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few Australian studies have examined topic of cultural safety. • Most studies are qualitative in nature and focus on perspectives of practitioners. • No largescale statistical studies. • The research base is emerging, cannot be classified as strong.
Cultural Safety Frameworks	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Category includes frameworks that relate to cultural safety; cultural respect; cultural responsiveness, cultural capability; cultural security. • Frameworks relate mostly to healthcare. • Frameworks dated 2005 to 2021.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frameworks produced by federal and state government agencies, peak bodies/industry groups; and research/evaluation organisations. • Frameworks typically include little information on the process of development but almost all describe consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders. • Primary audience for these frameworks are workers in the public health system.
Practice guides, tip sheets, fact sheets	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This category of evidence includes practice guides; action plans; companion documents to cultural safety frameworks; practice/implementation information.
Program, practices or activities that actively promote cultural safety	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation received from a diversity of organisations including mainstream and Aboriginal service providers, and large and small organisations. • Large variety of submissions e.g. Aboriginal healing framework; journal articles; descriptions of practice and outcomes frameworks; program information; cultural safety audit and planning resources; cultural awareness training options; reconciliation action plans; organisational cultural safety policies; inclusion support statement; and Aboriginal employment strategy.

Critical Elements and example activities to implement them

A content analysis of the above evidence identified six critical elements and related activities to implement them. The critical elements are summarised at Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptions of critical elements

Critical elements	Descriptions
Recognising the importance of culture	Culture “underpins and is integral to safety and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children” (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2017, p. 2). This is why culturally safe service delivery begins with understanding the

	importance of culture in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Culture is integral to a sense of identity as the First Peoples of Australia, and being connected to culture is a protective factor for Aboriginal children, young people and families (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021).
Self-determination	Self-determination is a founding principle of cultural safety (Ramsden, 2002). The right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples is affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and endorsed by the Australian Government.
Workforce development	Culturally safe service delivery is dependent upon a highly skilled and capable workforce. For practitioners working in child protection and early intervention, this requires both clinical and/or skill-based competence, as well as cultural competence (Menzies & Grace, 2020). This can be achieved through two key strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Recruiting, training and supporting more Aboriginal workers in the sector (see for example Bessarab & Crawford, 2010); and · Providing education and training to non-Aboriginal workers so that they learn the history of Aboriginal people's experiences with the welfare system; develop high levels of cultural awareness and appreciation; and know how to deliver culturally safe and effective services (Davis, 2019).
Whole of organisation approach	Adopting a whole of organisation approach to cultural safety requires consideration of the policies and focus of the service, the physical location and environment, management and governance systems, human resources, and organisational processes such as data collection. Cultural safety should be embedded into the organisation's way of working and not be an add-on component of practice.
Leadership and partnership	Organisational leaders are responsible for embedding cultural safety within organisational governance, strategic planning, and program implementation, and for building long-term partnerships with Aboriginal communities and representatives. Embedding cultural safety into all aspects of an organisation relies upon building effective partnerships between the service and Aboriginal clients and communities. Such partnerships ensure that program offerings can meet local community needs, and be informed by Aboriginal worldviews, as well as local expertise and knowledge.
Research, monitoring and evaluation	Research, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation is identified as foundational to culturally safe service delivery.

While the critical elements are fixed, the way these can be implemented can be tailored to local contexts and client needs. See Table 3 for a summary of critical elements and example implementation activities.


Table 3: Summary of critical elements and example implementation activities

Critical elements	Example Implementation Activities
Recognising the importance of culture	Acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners of the lands and waters of Australia.
	Mark organisational spaces and services as valuing First Nations cultures and welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients by displaying for example Aboriginal signage and artwork; incorporating Aboriginal history, language, stories and songs into services where appropriate.
Self-determination	Cultural safety initiatives within the TEI sector are directed and guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and others with local cultural expertise and/or authority.
	Co-design services with the local Aboriginal community to ensure that their cultural knowledge, values and beliefs are embedded in service offerings, and that community support needs are addressed.
	Seek feedback from Aboriginal clients on their experience of receiving support and feelings of empowerment.
Workforce development	Recruit Aboriginal staff and volunteers and actively support them through ongoing training, mentoring and career progression strategies.
	Provide all staff with ongoing cultural safety training and reflection opportunities to provide them with the skills and knowledge required to engage safely and competently with Aboriginal children, families and communities.
Whole of organisation approach	Conduct a cultural safety audit of organisation (governance, mission, management, staff, partnerships, service offerings/programs, information management/data collection) to identify any workplace deficiencies and/or gaps in services.
	Respond to audit findings by developing and implementing cultural safety action plans to address identified issues.
	Develop services that are known to be culturally safe and implement new services according to cultural safety guidelines.

Leadership and partnership	Organisational leaders make a commitment to improving the long-term outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities through prioritising their participation in accessible, high-quality early intervention that is trauma-informed and culturally-safe, and targeted to the specific needs of the client.
	Organisational leaders commit to enhancing the cultural safety of clients and actively model cultural safety expectations and behaviours for all staff.
	Recognise sectoral and organisational leaders of cultural safety and highlight their activities and share best-practice initiatives across the sector and organisation.
	Organisational leaders to adequately fund investment and resourcing for cultural safety initiatives and related service improvements including ongoing staff training and reflection, and conduct of a cultural safety audit.
	Seek, establish and maintain meaningful partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to support ongoing communication and the provision of services that address local needs.
Research, monitoring and evaluation	In consultation with Aboriginal staff and community representatives, co-design indicators of cultural safety for Aboriginal children and families accessing services, as well as mechanisms to collect data to assess if cultural safety outcomes (see TEI Outcomes Framework) are being achieved.
	Undertake assessment activities or evaluations of staff cultural safety training programs to determine their effectiveness in increasing staff knowledge, changing attitudes, and ability to deliver culturally safe programs and care. This should be done on an ongoing basis.
	Support knowledge transfer and the development of evidence-based sectoral practice by sharing examples of organisational and program success within your organisation.

Limitations

This evidence review is subject to some limitations. Cultural safety is an emerging and evolving field of research, particularly in relation to the child protection and early intervention service context. The history of forcible removal of Indigenous children and discriminatory service provision has



been well-documented⁵, however, the application of cultural safety as a policy framework and focus of research is relatively recent. This became evident during the search for academic literature. Fewer studies were identified for inclusion than anticipated, with most of these research studies being qualitative in nature (no large-scale statistical studies were identified), and focusing on the experience of practitioners, rather than those receiving services, or indeed the overarching system and governing agencies.

Further, the evidence included in the review is documented evidence only. It is recognised that there are many programs devised and delivered by practitioners working in the human services sector which are designed to safeguard the cultural safety of clients. In recognition that online databases may be inadequate in finding this evidence, invitations to submit information were sent out through the evidence review process and many informal conversations were had between the team and practitioners about cultural safety and the challenges of program co-design and implementation given the evolving nature of the practice. This form of evidence does not often capture the practice wisdom of practitioners, and collecting anecdotal accounts of practice is not within the scope of the review.

Where to from here?

The findings of this evidence review have implications for the design and delivery of programs in the human services sector. These programs should aim to consider implementing the critical elements identified as part of the process towards delivering culturally safe programs. These activities may be flexibly adapted to suit the diversity of First Nations people throughout Australia, as well as the diversity of programs.

As the field of research and practice continues to develop through increased activity, it is anticipated that the place of cultural safety for those delivering services will be realised and the value of culturally safe services will be better experienced by those receiving it.


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⁵ See for example National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997



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