Progressing Parental Engagement
School Fact Sheet

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian families

What’s in this Fact Sheet?

Information to help your school:

• Review parental engagement strategies and create change
• Show respect for the experiences and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
• Assist Indigenous Australian families to ‘reach in’ to schools to maintain active participation in educational decision making.

Why is this information important?

Parents play a big role in helping their children to be confident and enthusiastic learners by helping kids believe they can do well at school, that trying hard and doing their best is important, as well as helping them be organised, to navigate challenges and solve problems.

For schools, this means recognising that families and schools need to work together to support children’s learning. There are many things schools can do to make parents feel welcome, which is an important element of successful parental engagement.

Schools benefit through the effect of successful parental engagement on student learning outcomes, and through improved family and community satisfaction with the school. The involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in parental engagement can have additional benefits for the national reconciliation process, building social and human capital through relationships of trust, mutual support and community engagement.

What are some of the challenges for Indigenous families?

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can face particular challenges when it comes to engaging with schools. Past negative schooling experiences, poverty, unemployment and poor job prospects, inadequate housing, poor physical and mental health, racism and the living legacy of cultural dislocation continue to affect the lives of many Indigenous people today. The impacts of poverty are universal, but for Indigenous people these can be magnified by the legacies of dispossession, trans-generation trauma, and racism.

Some Indigenous parents believe they should not, or cannot, ‘interfere’ with the school system, and may not have models of educational success in their family/extended family.

Indigenous families have many strengths to address these challenges, including through organisations which deliver community initiated and controlled solutions.

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1. On occasion, the term Indigenous is used interchangeably with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in this Fact Sheet.
What can schools do?
Schools can make a big difference by creating a working partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, to assist parental engagement.

**Tip 1: A culturally inclusive school**
Connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to support parental engagement is easier where those strategies are not a one-off event, but part of a wider, structured and holistic approach to culturally respectful practice in the school.

- Reconciliation Action Plans play an important role in promoting a culture of inclusivity in schools, by building strong and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, students, parents, families and carers; demonstrating respect for the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage; and supporting Indigenous students and their families to participate fully in school life and promoting active school participation in community events.
- Invest in school capacity for culturally reflective practice – identify key staff to lead parental engagement strategies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Reduce power imbalances in practical and visible ways – have the school principal available at school drop off and pick up times, and be prepared to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at a more neutral or familiar location (such as a local Indigenous organisation).

**Tip 2: A partnership approach**
A philosophy of ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing at’ creates a school where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families see themselves as active participants, working in partnership with teachers to share their culture and support their child’s learning.

- Positive communication empowers Indigenous families. Give messages which stress the important role First Nations Peoples have to play in enriching the school’s life, as well as their own child’s unique learning.
- Involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the design and implementation of a culturally responsive and respectful environment with a focus on equal access and participation in school life.
- Create a warm and welcoming environment with parent-friendly spaces that encourage interaction between the school and parents, and between all parents.
- Actively create a range of opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to share their stories, cultural perspectives, food and customs.

**Tip 3: Reach out and get involved**
The school is a community focal point. Having strong, open two-way relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups and organisations reduces misunderstanding and fear, and emphasises that teachers and parents both have important, though different, roles to play.

- Encourage school participation in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events.
- Acknowledge the importance of encouraging relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders and other support networks, to assist in the process of promoting two-way communication and engagement with Indigenous families in the school community.
What do ACT Indigenous parents have to say?

“... really good communication from a teacher. The teacher would be able to talk to the children and not at the children, and I think, flexibility. Obviously if you’re teaching and the child’s not learning, maybe you shouldn’t be afraid to change your direction. It’s not a fail, never look at it as a fail.”

“I think if the teacher wants to meet the parents somewhere, whether it’s a coffee in the tea room or something, engage with them, reach out more to the parent, I think that would help. Just to talk about how the child’s doing and also to learn from mum and dad about what they can bring to the learning, I think that has to happen more.”

“So there’s still the stereotype, the cultural difference, cultural divide still for our [mob] to really want to partake in school gatherings, like you’re talking about. They still feel removed from that and I think that’s the biggest issue.”

“I find that’s what is a loss in lots of schools is they don’t have their grandparents, their aunts, their uncles, their cousins around.”

“Every time he comes home he’s learnt something new and it just blows me away. He came home, I remember the day, he came home and he shot off all the colours and he counted to ten and could tell me all the shapes and I didn’t even know that he knew and it just prompted me to pick up my game about what I’m doing at home.”

“Mum, this teacher wants me to do an Aboriginal dance, just because it’s NAIDOC Week and it’s not from where we’re from ... So, that’s the other thing too, the teachers meaning well but they’re not knowing the proper way of doing things.”

“You should celebrate culture all through the year not just at NAIDOC.”

Where can I find more information?

What Works. The Work Program - Sustainable school and community partnerships:

Engaging Indigenous parents in their children’s education:

ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Group (ATSIECG)
A consultative group that consults with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, caregivers and students and provides advice to the Australian and ACT Governments and other parties seeking parent, family and community perspectives on a range of education issues. www.betteroutcomestogogether.org.au

ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Board (ATSIEB)
An elected Body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people living in the ACT, acting as an advocate for their interests, and providing direct advice to the ACT Government on the interests and aspirations of the ATSI community. www.atsieb.com.au

Reconciliation Australia
Reconciliation Australia is an independent, national not-for-profit organisation promoting reconciliation by building relationships, respect and trust between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. www.reconciliation.org.au
About this project
The ACT Education and Training Directorate partnered with the non-profit Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), The Catholic Education Office of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn and the Association of Parents and Friends of ACT Schools. Together, the alliance developed a shared understanding of parental engagement in the ACT, based on what the evidence shows has the biggest impact and the things that matter most to ACT families and schools. The international evidence has been reviewed and parents and teachers have been consulted on what is important to them.

More resources will be available in 2015.

Our Partners
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