



## Getting it right:

How education and care services can engage with the Koorie community



One of the questions the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is most often asked by people working in the education and care sector, is 'How do I engage with the Koorie community?' There is no magical answer – but respect and patience go a long way in getting it right.



VAEI's Early Years Unit recently invited Aunty Vera Briggs, a long-time advocate for Koorie education and one of VAEI's treasured life members, to talk to the Victorian Inclusion Agency about community engagement. VAEI says, 'There aren't many more people we could think of who are in a better position to offer advice about this subject than Aunty Vera'.

## Aunty Vera's community engagement advice

### Start local

When it comes to advising others about how to engage and work with the Koorie community, Aunty Vera believes that 'knowing who's who in the zoo' is essential. Her advice is to start local and approach the Aboriginal organisations in your area, such as cooperatives and Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs). She also suggests getting out and about during events that are significant to Aboriginal people, to show your support and become a familiar face around community.

### Follow appropriate cultural protocols

The next thing Aunty Vera recommends to anyone wanting to engage with Aboriginal people is to follow appropriate cultural protocols. These include:

- **respectful communication** – knowing the correct terms to use when addressing people (such as Aunty and Uncle in some circumstances) and understanding Koorie English (for example, knowing that the word 'deadly' has positive connotations for Aboriginal people)
- **genuine consultation** – making sure you have not only asked about but really listened to the views of local Aboriginal people regarding what they want for their children and community

- **investment of time** – not expecting everything straight away, but being prepared to wait
- **committing to personal education** – understanding that you are an active participant in your own learning and not expecting or relying on Aboriginal people to teach you everything you want to know.

### Work in multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral groups

Working in multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral groups is also something Aunty Vera believes is fundamental to achieving successful outcomes in Koorie early childhood education and care. These groups could include individuals from the Koorie Education Workforce such as a Koorie engagement support worker or one of the Koorie preschool assistants, the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the local council kindergarten coordinator, and Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health services. If positive relationships are formed and common goals established, these individuals can come together to share relevant information and complement each other's areas of knowledge and expertise to benefit the early learning experiences of Koorie children.



### Provide a Koorie-inclusive environment and program

Ultimately, early childhood education and care services need to provide a Koorie-inclusive environment and program for Aboriginal families to feel comfortable enrolling their children, so building relationships with the local Koorie community in the areas where services are located is vital to the process of becoming and continuing to be Koorie-inclusive.

### Undertake a cultural audit

Aunty Vera believes there is huge value in conducting a checklist or cultural audit at education and care services to identify what staff are already doing well and in what areas they could improve. (VAEI is in the process of developing a Koorie-inclusive checklist for education and care services, so watch this space.)

### Who is Aunty Vera Briggs?

For more than three decades, Aunty Vera Briggs has worked tirelessly in Koorie education and training because of a strong desire to help people in her community widen their available options and pursue new aspirations for education.

Aunty Vera began working in Koorie education in 1970 when she was employed as a kindergarten assistant in Deniliquin. From the mid-seventies Aunty Vera held the position of Koorie educator in Moe, after which she was promoted to the position of Koorie cross sectoral coordinator. She then became a Koorie education development officer (later renamed as a Koorie engagement support officer). Aunty Vera remained in this role until she retired in October 2016.

Aunty Vera has been involved with VAEI since 1981 when she became a member, and later a chair, of the Morwell Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. She was made a life member of VAEI in recognition of her significant contribution to Koorie education.

Facilitating community involvement has always been extremely important to Aunty Vera. In recent years she has focussed on working with local families, kindergartens and primary schools to encourage a smooth transition for Koorie children starting school so that they can have a successful prep year and a strong start to formal education.

She is also a proud and loving grandmother and a wonderful role model to seven grandchildren.



Image courtesy of Latrobe City Council



### Resources

VAEI's Aboriginal Early Childhood Cultural Protocols

[www.vaeai.org.au/earlyyears](http://www.vaeai.org.au/earlyyears)

