

{Embrace}

Winter 2021 | Your inclusion support magazine

Tips to help children manage their emotions



Top 10 Aboriginal children's books for Victoria



FREE
poster
inside

VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY

One For All

No matter their cultural or family background, children love stories, learning new things and making connections.



NAIDOC Week celebrations – held across Australia each July – are a meaningful way to bring these elements together for children, exploring the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Most importantly, it's a time for each of us, no matter what age, to celebrate the rich cultural history that makes Australia unique.

As educators, there is so much we can do to support local First Nations communities. In this issue of *Embrace*, we feature an inspiring story about Casey Goodman, a dedicated educator who is spreading the reconciliation message to services, staff, children and families. And, on page 4, our friends at the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. share 10 Aboriginal children's books that every service should have on the bookshelf.

Here at the Victorian Inclusion Agency, we want all educators, leaders, children and families to feel included. Regrettably, in our last issue of *Embrace*, we published a poster that contained several language errors.

We realise that in this instance we did not check thoroughly enough that the language used was culturally and linguistically correct and therefore sincerely apologise for any offence the poster may have caused.

Included in this issue, please find a corrected version of the poster. Feel very welcome to use and enjoy it in your service, spreading the simple yet powerful message that inclusion and celebrating diversity often start with just one word – 'Hello'.

I hope that winter brings many happy moments for you and the children in your care.

Jane McCahon
Victorian Inclusion Agency Program Manager
Community Child Care Association

The Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. As part of the ISP, the Victorian Inclusion Agency is led by Community Child Care Association, and is delivered in partnership with Yooralla and KU Children's Services.

.....
The Victorian Inclusion Agency acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

{ Contents }

02 **Top 10 Aboriginal children's books for Victoria**

Grab one of these ten fabulous First Nations books for your service



04 **CHECKLIST How to create an inclusive environment**

How many can you tick off?

06 **Are you a strengths-based educator?**

Flip your thinking to help your relationships with children, families and colleagues (and become a better teacher)



09 **15 ways to use Innovative Solutions funding**

Your service is eligible for \$10,000+ in Innovative Solutions funding. Here are some real-life examples of what you can do with it

10 **FEATURE How to help children manage their emotions**

Practical tips and strategies you can try today

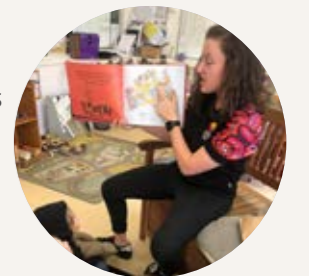


13 **Challenging behaviours: Free help is available**

Did you know that your Inclusion Professional can help you to bring back a sense of calm?

16 **Reconciliation takes action**

Meet a dedicated educator who is spreading the message of reconciliation to early learning services, children and their families



20 **OPINION Group times: A place for democratic possibilities**

Is it time to re-think circle time? Leading education and care consultant Catharine Hydon says yes.

VIA Contributors

We would like to thank the following people for their contribution to this edition of *Embrace*:

Jacinta Butterworth
and Cath Newell – Editors
Damian Bennett
Di Bewsell
Wendy Blakis
Bryony Catlin

Liz Da Silva
Kristabel Fitzgerald
Nikki Graham
Kate Kent
Michelle Lester
Caitlin Mason

Sandy Matthews
Jane McCahon
Lauren Milton
Ruby Perryman

Top 10 Aboriginal children's books for Victoria

Here are our top 10 children's books written by Victorian Aboriginal people who feel a sense of belonging to their nations, clans, land and culture.

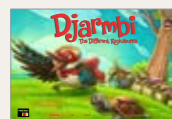
MATILDA DARVALL, Senior Policy Officer & MERLE HALL, Koorie Inclusion Consultant, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)



1. Our Home, Our Heartbeat

Adam Briggs / Kate Moon (illustrator) / Rachael Sarra (illustrator)

Briggs is a well-known and well-accomplished Yorta Yorta rapper from Shepparton in Victoria. *Our Home, Our Heartbeat* is his first children's book, and is adapted from his song 'The Children Came Back'. In a celebration of Indigenous culture, this book features Aboriginal people who have achieved and succeeded in a variety of fields. It's a fantastic resource to use in an early learning setting because educators and teachers can engage children through the music as well as the inspirational story. The National Gallery of Victoria has recorded Briggs reading his book, which can be viewed at: <http://bit.ly/OurHomeBook>

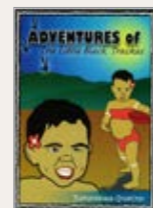


2. Djambi: The Different Kookaburra

Damian Amamoo

This storybook is set in the bush in Barmah on the Murray River and is based on a family of kookaburras. Djambi, the main character, finds it difficult to express his feelings and emotions, and his squawk sounds different to the other birds. This book has been written to address the topic of autism in a way that is culturally relevant and sensitive, and there are numerous culturally-specific references –

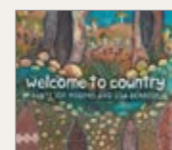
both traditional and contemporary – that help make this book warmly familiar to Aboriginal children. It's a positive, insightful and engaging book for teachers, families and young children, and delivers an important message about appreciating diversity. A PDF version of the book can be accessed for free: <http://bit.ly/DjambiBook>



3. Adventures of the Little Black Trackas

Merle Hall / Gary Saunders (illustrator)

The *Adventures of the Little Black Trackas* is a cultural education kit for children in the early years, aged 0–8 years. Words used in the book are in both English and Bangerang language. The kit contains five books and includes a CD with each story, as told by a different child. Each book is beautifully illustrated and features a little black tracka tracking a variety of animals, insects, bird feathers, water animals or family members. The books are packaged together in a folder that also contains activity ideas for use by early childhood educators.

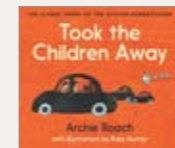


4. Welcome to Country

Aunty Joy Murphy / Lisa Kennedy (illustrator)

Welcome to Country, written by Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Joy Murphy, is a storybook that gently teaches children about

the importance of understanding where we come from and how to relate to the land and water surrounding us all. Woiwurrung words, such as 'wominjeka', are introduced through the story, and we are offered an insight into how Aboriginal communities relate to one another through acknowledging territorial boundaries, seeking permission to enter other lands and performing Welcomes to Country. A video of Aunty Joy reading her book can be viewed at: <http://bit.ly/WelcomeToCountryBook>



5. Took the Children Away

Archie Roach / Ruby Hunter (illustrator) with paintings by Peter Hudson

Took the Children Away is a story written by well-known singer Archie Roach, and illustrated by his late partner Ruby Hunter. It tells the heartbreaking story of Uncle Archie's experience of being forcibly taken from his family when he was two years old. Many people will have heard Uncle Archie's award-winning song of the same name, on which this book is based. This book can be used to introduce the topic of the Stolen Generations to children. A video of Uncle Archie talking about and reading his book can be viewed at: <http://bit.ly/TheyTookTheChildrenAway>



6. Auslan and Yorta Yorta Language

Merle Miller

This is a unique book that teaches readers about both Auslan and Yorta Yorta language. Each page displays a photograph of a young, deaf Aboriginal girl who demonstrates how to sign Auslan for phrases such as, 'Hello how are you?' It then describes the Yorta Yorta language for the same phrase. There is also an accompanying explanation on each page of how to sign using Auslan. This book is great for teaching children in education and care services about people who have hearing impairments and the different ways in which we all communicate.



7. How the Murray Was Made: A Bangerang Story

Irene Thomas / Robert Brown (illustrator)

This is a book that explains the creation story of how the Murray River was made. It tells of how an old woman was walking

with her dingos, looking for grubs and berries. She walked for a long time dragging a digging stick behind her, which made a track along the ground. The sound of the stick woke the snake, and he became very angry and thrashed to and fro, causing the track to get bigger. Soon after, it rained and this was how the Murray River was made. This is an engaging and interesting way for educators and teachers to introduce the topic of belief systems.



8. Respect

Aunty Faye Muir / Sue Lawson / Lisa Kennedy (illustrator)

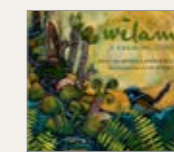
Aunty Fay is a Boon Wurrung and Wamba Wamba Elder who wrote this book with Sue Lawson, an award-winning children's author. This book teaches us how to respect our Elders, our family, our friends, the Country on which we live, and most importantly – ourselves.



9. Family

Aunty Faye Muir / Sue Lawson / Jasmine Seymour (illustrator)

Family is a follow up to *Respect*, and both books are part of a four-book series called 'Our Place'. This book teaches us about the different roles people in our families play in forming who we are now and who we become in the future, through an Aboriginal perspective. It also introduces the idea of diversity amongst people, families and communities, using the concepts of language and Country.



10. Wilam, A Birrarung Story

Aunty Joy Murphy / Andrew Kelly / Lisa Kennedy (illustrator)

This book tells the story of Melbourne's beautiful Yarra River, and features Woiwurrung language to explain its rich history. Bunjil, the wedge-tailed eagle and creator spirit, is a key character, along with other animals. It's a wonderful storybook to use with children in an early childhood setting because it's a culturally-inclusive way to think about an important landmark in Melbourne.



CHECKLIST: How to create an inclusive environment

Use this handy checklist to embed inclusion at your education and care service.

✓ EXPERIENCES

- We offer a balance of individual and group experiences (art and craft, books, blocks, cubby house/quiet space, games, stories, songs, etc.) that are reflective of children’s cultural backgrounds and needs
- Experiences are inviting and are reset during the day
- We give children the opportunity to continue with an activity they’re deeply engaged in
- We regularly modify and extend experiences to support children’s interests and participation

✓ ROUTINES AND VISUALS

- Strong routines and rhythms help the day flow
- We support children’s needs/ expectations using a visual routine about the day

✓ TRANSITIONS

- We give prior warnings before transitions (*tip: have you considered the use of visuals or timers?*)

✓ MODELLING

- We regularly model social/play skills, communication skills and strategies to support children to regulate their emotions

✓ CONNECTION VS CORRECTION

- We connect with children regularly to support belonging and encourage positive behaviours (*tip: ways to connect might include positive praise, a thumbs up, a reassuring smile, joining in play, etc.*)

✓ CONSISTENCY

- We have access to a consistent educator/s within our learning space to support our program delivery and strong relationships
- Our routines, visuals and programming expectations are clear and consistent

✓ POSITIONING

- We use the ‘one up, two down’ concept to stay connected with children in a busy environment
- Educators are aware of their expectations for positioning
- We are positioned to support children’s emotional regulation and social interactions, and to modify or extend on these

✓ TEAMWORK

- When it comes to our expectations, goals and our daily program, we’re all on the same page
- We have regular team check-ins to update one another, share constructive feedback and offer support

✓ SUPPORT

- We access free mentoring and program support through the Victorian Inclusion Agency to support every child, including those presenting with challenging or trauma-related behaviours, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children with a disability or developmental delay
- We have a Strategic Inclusion Plan to ensure all children can meaningfully participate and feel that they belong
- We have considered accessing Innovative Solutions funding to address barriers to inclusion at our service (*hint: you might like to use this funding on bi-cultural support, translation, professional development or coaching around challenging behaviours, trauma or educator wellbeing, etc.*)
- We have developed a Reconciliation Action Plan through the free Narragunnawali program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to feel welcome and ensure all children learn about the histories and cultures of Australia’s First Nations peoples
- We support our team’s wellbeing and mental health by accessing free support from organisations like Be You

? **Need help with the above?**
Call **1800 177 017** for free mentoring and program support from our expert Inclusion Professionals.



Are you a strengths-based educator?

Flip your thinking to help your relationships with children, families and colleagues (and become a better teacher)

CAITLIN MASON
Consultant, Community Child Care Association + former Inclusion Professional

When someone tells you that you could be better at something if only you approached it in the exact same way as they do, it's normal to think 'yeah, but my life is different to yours. I don't think that would work for me.'

This is where a strengths-based approach can help. Using this approach, someone might say 'tell me about you and your goals, and let's brainstorm some strategies that might work for you'.

As educators, we can apply this thinking when we work with children, families and each other. By talking about what we can do rather than what we can't, and focusing on what we're striving to achieve and the resources we have to get there, we can uncover a world of untapped potential around us.

So, what does this look like in practice? Let me give you a couple of examples.

Several years ago I was lucky to work with Nadia, an educator who wanted to include a child with high support needs called Ryan. Nadia worked with specialists to understand Ryan's different physical needs and how to keep him safe in the program. But when I came to visit, Nadia was stressed about what play experiences she could implement for him. When we looked around at the program, Ryan was there, surrounded by his peers, but we could hardly say he was actively participating.

One thing was immediately obvious – the biggest barrier to Ryan's inclusion was not his lack of ability. It was our mindset.

Flip your thinking

We needed to shift our focus from all the things Ryan couldn't do, and start working with what he could do so that he would feel empowered to engage in his own learning.

We started by asking Ryan's parents about his favourite play at home. They told us he loved cause-and-effect toys. Nadia placed a range of these at a table. All the children were interested, and Ryan went straight for the ball maze with bells and whistles.

At first, Nadia needed to spend some time helping Ryan grasp the ball and manoeuvre it into the holes but – very quickly – he wanted to try it for himself. He practiced and persisted until he got the hang of it.

At the same time, other children were wanting to have a go. It took a few days but eventually Ryan – a child with quite severe physical disabilities – was able to not only manoeuvre the ball into the holes but had also learnt about taking turns with his peers. There were giggles and squeals of delight as each child celebrated not only their own success with the ball maze, but also Ryan's.

Continued on next page



Create opportunities, then build and extend

Once we started to get the ball rolling (literally!), the possibilities grew and grew. Nadia planned new experiences that extended this play – a ball pit that became a fantastic interactive space for children, then cars and ramps that extended this play again.

What shifted all of this was the power of using a strengths-based approach rather than a deficit view. Instead of being limited by all the things Ryan couldn't do, Nadia used Ryan's interests and capabilities to find a meaningful goal and build from there. The more she used this frame of thinking, the more she could see how much Ryan was capable of, and the more his peers could see it too. Most importantly, it showed Ryan that he was in a place where he was supported and could move forward.

Not just for children

So, how could this approach work with families and colleagues?

Often we miss opportunities to engage with parents and colleagues because we hold a position of power in our program and environment. Do we really provide a voice to families and co-workers that acknowledges and supports their strengths and capacity?

I sometimes reflect on an experience I had with a parent who was difficult to engage with and whose daughter displayed behaviours that challenged me. After several attempts to convey my concerns, I did some critical reflection on our relationship and what I was expecting from her.

We did not have a collaborative partnership and when I struggled with her daughter's behaviour I placed a lot of judgement on her mother's capabilities at home. We were not in a position to work together equally because my view of this parent was deficit-based.

Tapping into hidden potential

I realised that if we were able to have a side-by-side relationship, we could help each other help her

daughter. I decided to take a strengths-based approach that would re-frame this parent's role and mine as having shared expertise about her child.

I started with our relationship – I decided to stop spending my time at pick up and drop off telling her about her daughter's challenging behaviours and the strategies I was putting in place. Instead, I spent time really getting to know her.

We started talking about her dog, which she walked to and from the service every day. With regular check-ins and chats about the dog, we built our relationship to the point that she came in and showed the children how to bathe and brush the dog. She became much more connected to the centre through this relationship, and her daughter recognised the shared connection and value she and her family added to our service.

From this space we were able to start talking about behaviour and emotion-sharing strategies, but with much more knowledge of each other's spaces and strengths. We were able to plan strategies and access resources together that made sense for home and the service. The outcome was a framework around her daughter that provided security, mutual respect and built on skills each of us already had.

See the glass half-full then fill it the rest of the way

I hope you can see from these examples how a strengths-based approach can help your relationships with children, families and colleagues, and – ultimately – make you a better teacher. Remember, children (and adults) do well when they can!



Want to introduce a strengths-based approach in your service? Call 1800 177 017 for free mentoring and program support from our friendly Inclusion Professionals.



15 brilliant ways to use Innovative Solutions funding



Did you know that all CCS-funded education and care services are eligible for \$10,000+ in Innovative Solutions funding to support their inclusive practice – to access this opportunity call **1800 177 017**.

Need a little inspiration?

Here are some examples of what services are using their funding for!



- 1 Working with an early childhood consultant to introduce a yoga/meditation program that supports children's self-regulation
- 2 Connecting with an Aboriginal Elder from the local community to enhance educators' cultural competence and embed First Nations perspectives across the service
- 3 Mentoring and capacity building with a child protection organisation to help educators understand complex behaviours exhibited by children affected by trauma and how best to respond to them
- 4 Working with a disability organisation to embed Auslan across the service and support the inclusion of a child with a hearing impairment
- 5 Working with a health professional to train educators in epilepsy emergency management and support the inclusion of a child with a medical condition
- 6 Working with a music therapist to introduce an all-abilities music program across the service
- 7 Coaching and mentoring with a psychologist or play therapist around supporting children with complex behaviours
- 8 Trauma-informed coaching and mentoring with a psychologist around preventing burnout and supporting children's emotional wellbeing
- 9 Coaching and mentoring with an allied health professional around zones of regulation and sensory processing disorders
- 10 Mentoring and capacity building with an early childhood consultant around autism, its impact on children's learning and development, and how to support an autistic child alongside their same-age peers
- 11 Coaching and mentoring with an early childhood consultant around how to use visuals and an augmented language device
- 12 Training educators in tube feeding management to support the inclusion of a child with a medical condition
- 13 Connecting with local ethnic community councils to enhance educators' cultural competence and embed culture
- 14 Working with an Aboriginal organisation to develop a new garden project that embeds First Nations perspectives
- 15 Working with a multicultural organisation to support educators to communicate with families and children with English as a second language to include their culture within the service

To learn more about Innovative Solutions funding, go to viac.com.au/inclusion-development-fund



How to help children manage their emotions

Practical tips and strategies you can try today

BRYONY CATLIN
Trauma-based Practice Officer, Community Child Care Association

Teaching children about feelings and how to express their emotions promotes self-regulation, empathy and meaningful connections. Use the following ideas when children are experiencing big feelings, and to inform intentional learning activities in your program.

Make emotions part of the everyday

Use everyday interactions with children to name and share emotions. This helps to make feelings part of the everyday curriculum and supports children to begin to understand how others might be thinking and feeling. Say, for example, you see young children in the sandpit throwing shovels in the air, while other children are playing close by. You can use this as a teachable moment by letting the children know 'I'm frightened you might hurt yourself or someone else when you throw the shovels in the air', before you redirect the behaviour. Using this type of language begins to shift children's thinking to what other people might be feeling in the moment, which is a building block to later skills such as empathy.

Say what you see

Let children know you see them by telling them what you notice about the way they feel or how they felt at parts of the day. For example, if you saw two children excitedly greet each other during morning drop-off, you might say, 'You were so excited when your friend came to kinder today! They had a big smile when you ran over to greet them. I think they were really happy to see you too.'

Use books and stories

Consider exploring a curriculum of feelings through books and stories that show different situations and emotional responses from characters. Storytelling helps to build and integrate different parts of the brain including the parts that are connected to language and feelings, so make sure to give children plenty of opportunities to retell stories too!

Encourage dramatic and imaginative play

Play is how children explore and understand their world. Provide children with lots of opportunities to take on different characters, emotions and identities by using dress-ups, puppets and small world play. Consider combining small world play and figurines with sand or other sensory materials. Sensory play regulates different parts of the brain that are responsible for staying calm.

Stay with children as they ride the wave of big emotions

When children experience intense waves of emotions, their brain and body can become overwhelmed. When this happens, they need us to be there with them while they experience their feelings. Having a calm and present adult manage what they are experiencing in the moment helps children feel safe and connected, which will ultimately help them to calm their nervous systems. The more this occurs the more children can build on their ability to understand and regulate their own feelings and be there for others.

Create an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance

Remember, we all have feelings and that all feelings are valid and okay. When we teach children that certain feelings are 'bad' or 'good' we are reinforcing an idea that it's not okay to have feelings, especially the intense ones. Feelings need to be felt. As educators, we can let children know it's safe to feel their feelings but that there are still limits on behaviours that might be unsafe or unkind. This contributes to a sense of being and belonging.



Narrate children's emotions for them when needed

Don't expect children to be able to always verbalise how they feel and why. Those parts of the brain are not fully developed in young children and are not always 'online'. This means that children don't always have access to the ability to provide detailed information about their thoughts, feelings and actions, especially during heightened emotional states.

When a child becomes upset, you can help them out by telling a story of what happened and take guesses about how they might be feeling and why.

This helps integrate different parts of the brain that are responsible for staying calm and regulated. Say, for example, you notice a small group of children playing a superhero game. One child has an idea and is trying to tell everyone what they think should happen next in

Continued on next page



the game, but no one is listening and the other children continue to play the game. This child's response is to stamp their feet angrily and then to run away from the group in tears. In this situation, you could approach the child and in an empathic tone say, 'You were trying to share your ideas about the game but everyone kept playing. It's so frustrating when you have something to say and no one is listening to you.' When we come from a place of calmness and understanding and provide children with the language, we are helping to build their emotional literacy.

Promote movement

Our brains and bodies have strong connections that can influence our emotions and ability to have a handle on our feelings. Keeping active through movement and rhythm experiences, such as dance or back-and-forth ball play, can help regulate the lower areas of the brain which can have a calming effect, increasing children's ability to stay in charge of their feelings and cope with upsets.

Teach children to take a breath

Have you ever had the experience of taking some deep breaths and then being able to think clearly? Deep breathing helps our brains switch from the alarmed state to the calm state, meaning we have a better handle over our reactions to our feelings and can access clearer thinking. When we teach breathing exercises to children we are giving them the tools to be able to regulate and stay in charge of their feelings. Try having children trace the outline of each finger with their hand, breathing in and out as they move up and down each finger (go to bit.ly/5FingerBreathing for a handy printable).

It's important to remember to teach children breathing techniques when they are in a calm and engaged state and not when they are in the middle of a meltdown. In a meltdown, different parts of our brain go 'offline', including the best parts for thinking, memory recall and learning. Trying to teach children new information when they're highly emotional is the equivalent of teaching a drowning person how to swim.



Resources

For more helpful strategies, read *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind, survive everyday parenting struggles, and help your family thrive* by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson



Need help including children with challenging behaviours?

Call **1800 177 017** for free mentoring and program support from our expert Inclusion Professionals.

Challenging behaviours: Free help is available

Did you know that your Inclusion Professional can help you to support children exhibiting complex behaviors? Read on to discover how Wendy Blakis, one of our talented team members, brought back a sense of calm at Cire Occasional Care Service.

The background

Located in Melbourne's outer east, Cire Occasional Care Service has children from 12 diverse cultural backgrounds as well as many children who have additional and complex support needs, such as trauma backgrounds, autism spectrum disorder, profound hearing loss and speech and language delays.

The challenge

Run as a multi-aged care environment for children 0-5 years, nine different session times saw children transition in and out of the service at varying times of the day.

Children became frustrated when they were unable to effectively express their needs and wants, make choices, participate in routines, transition between program experiences, and understand what was happening or expected of them.

Their behaviours communicated exasperation and heightened anxiety through physical actions such as pushing and grabbing others, snatching items or toys, having meltdowns, being oppositional or withdrawing.

.....
Continued on next page



Using a visual routine about the day supports children's needs and expectations

Educators were using many different strategies and types of communication tools, sourced from various health professionals and families, to support children's belonging and relationships in the room.

However, the frequency and intensity of the presenting behaviours combined with many 'voices' meant that educators were struggling with consistent implementation.

Educators' wellbeing was affected. Their anxiety was heightened, they were exhausted, feeling depleted and unequipped to manage these behaviours effectively which, in turn, impacted their ability to critically reflect on their pedagogical practices and provide a safe and enjoyable care environment for all children.

The process

Management at Cire wanted to support educators, children and families by accessing help through the Victorian Inclusion Agency. When Wendy began working with this service, support through Immediate Time Limited funding had been requested.

After addressing this initial need, Wendy supported the Educational Leader to begin developing a Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP). Discussions between Wendy, the Educational Leader and management helped identify that educators were receiving strategies and information from multiple professionals, were feeling pressure from families to implement those strategies and were using lots of different approaches inconsistently.

The next step was to support the team to explore the drivers underpinning children's behaviours and identify the strategies that would address the multi-aged needs of the children, multiple entry times and the diverse needs of the group. An updated SIP drew together pedagogical elements, such as using the same visual cards for the whole group, using wording and gestures, waiting and giving a child time to offer a response, communication with families and professionals to support the delivery of a consistent approach between home and care, and having clear expectations for the environment. It was then possible to take positive steps, such as naming and intentionally teaching about emotions, within a united team environment.

The project

Wendy suggested the service access Innovative Solutions funding to develop a project that would build the team's capacity to use visual communication systems. She posed questions to support the service to work out how this project could be structured to maximise learning and minimise the impact on staffing ratios (a valid service concern) in the care environment.

Wendy was able to tap into her wide-ranging professional network and share a list of several agencies that were equipped to deliver the project. In discussing support needed for the coming year, Wendy was also able to prompt engagement with state-funded Department of Education and Training Victoria systems such as Early Start Kindergarten (ESK), Access to Early Learning and the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Subsidy.

This project has now been approved and will include intense coaching and mentoring in the room for four weeks. It aims to support educators to apply new skills and embed visual communication systems into their pedagogical practice throughout the day.

The results

- ✓ A calm, inclusive care environment where every child can meaningfully participate.
- ✓ Educators are supported by SIP planning and Wendy will continue to work with educators to review and develop actions.

- ✓ Information has been provided to families and support services working with children. All stakeholders can feed into and continue the cycle of planning to support children.
- ✓ The approval of two Immediate/Time Limited Support and one Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) support case applications.
- ✓ Children attached to the IDF case have now progressed into the service's standalone kindergarten program. Strategies have been shared in this new environment to promote consistency and holistic planning.
- ✓ The Innovative Solutions case has recently been approved and plans are underway to commence implementation.
- ✓ Despite there being several staff changes in the care environment, the SIP continues to ensure that strategies are consistent and effective, and that all children experience belonging.



Get in touch with our experienced team on **1800 177 017** to access free inclusion support for your education and care service.

Reconciliation takes action

In 2019, educator Casey Goodman started the Moreland Reconciliation Network Group. Her aim? To support early childhood services in her local area to share their reconciliation journey. We sat down with Casey to chat about the personal experience that sparked her work in this space and to unpack what we can do as educators to take positive action.



Casey, it's a great thrill to speak to you about your inspirational work.

Thank you. Absolutely my pleasure! Before we get into the interview, I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the Traditional Owners of the land that I live, learn and teach on. I wish to pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and extend that respect and Acknowledgment to the Traditional Owners of the lands of your readers.

What initially sparked your reconciliation journey? What influences have sustained your ongoing commitment to reconciliation in early education and care?

In December 2017, my family, including my parents and younger siblings, became approved foster carers for the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. Having amazing, strong Aboriginal children in our family home and my parents' care led me to reflect on my role in the early childhood education sector.

I work with children each day but was questioning if I had the skills and knowledge to support a child in the classroom who may identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

I knew I had some learning to do, I knew I needed to educate myself – and that's exactly what I've been doing ever since. This experience in my home changed how I view my role in early years education and has created a commitment I cannot ignore. If I do nothing, the children in the classrooms I work in are receiving the same whitewashed education that I did and will spend adulthood unlearning and relearning. Let's do something to change that!



You're the Leader of Reconciliation and Aboriginal Programs at Moreland Community Child Care Centres (MCCCC). How did you land this position and what does it involve?

It was actually a slow and gradual process, and it takes me back to 2019 when our Pedagogical Leader identified that we needed to embed Aboriginal pedagogies and perspectives across our curriculums and programs, but didn't know quite how to.

We began connecting with the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) 'Talking Reconciliation' special interest group and attended the 2019 ECA Reconciliation Symposium to learn more. Through a leadership program with MCCCC, my interest in and passion for exploring reconciliation and privileging Aboriginal pedagogies and perspectives within the curriculums and programs grew.

In 2020, I moved into a dedicated role, one day per week, to connect and build relationships with local Aboriginal organisations, people and consultants, and provide staff with up-to-date resources. I also attended professional learning, coordinated Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) working group meetings and connected with networks.

I now work two days a week in the dedicated role, supported by the MCCCC leadership team, a strong educational leadership team and a staff cohort that are doing so much amazing learning, unlearning and relearning.

That's a pretty impressive journey for you and MCCCC! What have been the highlights in your role? Any big wins?

On your point about highlights, it's important to note that this work isn't about recognition. I actually felt I shouldn't be the one to take the mic on this piece but I also feel strongly that there is power in non-Indigenous educators and teachers seeing that other non-Indigenous educators and teachers are taking action.

The biggest highlight in my role has been noticing a shift in my colleagues' cultural awareness and understanding, and observing them move from using 'tokenistic' as an excuse not to engage to now looking at their educational curriculums and programs as opportunities to engage meaningfully with Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies. This is noticeable in the children's learning outcomes – the children in our four-year-old kinder room today have only ever known a classroom or learning space that starts the day with an Acknowledgment of Country. How amazing is that!

What have been the biggest challenges in your role? What are some of the lessons you've learned along the way?

Challenges include the differing levels of knowledge, understanding and awareness of staff. It can often mean that moving forward happens in different stages and takes longer in some areas than others. But we must not leave anyone behind – we all have a part to play. It will always be the children at our services who benefit most from this work or, on the other hand, miss out if we give up too easily.

Continued on next page



“It’s important to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our classrooms so that children aren’t always hearing a non-Indigenous person speak about these very diverse cultures.”



The biggest lesson for me on a personal level has been the inner reflective work that I do each day by asking myself: *What am I doing? Why am I doing it? How am I doing it? And how can I make sure that I’m holding space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and peoples?* As an educator, I can positively contribute by ensuring that the future of this country is in the hands of children who are aware – aware of Traditional Owners’ histories and languages, aware of their role to be allies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and aware of the importance of listening with respect.

In 2019, you started the Moreland Reconciliation Network Group. Can you tell us a little about the group?

The network was created so that early childhood services in the area could connect and share their reconciliation journeys, and support and encourage each other in this continually developing space. This group engages in robust, professional and reflective discussions, and shares resources so that Indigenous peoples are not tasked with being educators for those who should be working to educate themselves.

How has your Inclusion Professional supported your work?

Magnificently! Our Inclusion Professional, Liz Da Silva, has been exceptionally supportive of my work in the reconciliation space. She has connected me with the Innovative Solutions Cultural Facilitator and arranged multiple meetings to mobilise additional guidance and support.

Additionally, Liz has been an excellent support in sharing my resources and network group amongst her contacts. Liz has also been vital in my experience with Innovative Solutions funding applications and kindly gave her time to support me in this process.

Why do you believe reconciliation is so important in early education and care?

We have rich and diverse Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages, which must be shared and acknowledged in early childhood education. It’s important to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our classrooms so that children aren’t always hearing a non-Indigenous person speak about these very diverse cultures. We need to be doing work as teachers and educators to make a stand against past colonial policies and institutional injustices to ensure that our learning communities and classrooms are culturally safe, supportive and respectful, and include consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

How has your reconciliation journey changed you as an educator?

It’s changed the ways I teach and educate young children every day. Each time I walk into a classroom, I look out for all the ways I can embed and privilege an Aboriginal perspective or pedagogy. I share resources and links with families so the learning journey can continue beyond the four walls of the classroom. I make sure that my knowledge of how to embed Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies is shared with the teaching team. It’s a ‘one in, all in’ approach of taking them on the journey with me.

What advice do you have for educators just starting on their reconciliation journey?

My advice is to be open and comfortable learning alongside children, families and colleagues. Put your hand up and say you don’t know the answer but be

willing to research and investigate to find out more. Be mindful not to push your personal political stance within the classroom but work hard to share the voices, lived experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members from far and wide with children.

As teachers and educators, we can invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into our classrooms. It’s important that children hear first-hand and see Aboriginal peoples speaking about matters that affect their communities.

When finding and sourcing resources to share with colleagues, families or children, be sure to use factual information from reputable sources.

There is no right or wrong way but as [Aboriginal early childhood advisor] Jessica Staines says ‘it is better to do something than nothing at all’.

What’s the next big goal you are working towards?

My next big goal is helping to get the RAP published. It’s been in the making for three years and we’ve worked really hard to make consistent, meaningful progress on our commitment and actions.

Most importantly, on a personal level, my goal is to continue to learn and understand more, to listen to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and when there is a call to action, make sure that I’m doing my part. I want to attend and support community events and connect to community in a deeper, more meaningful way.



Have you included reconciliation actions in your Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP)?

Here are some examples to inspire you:

- Reflect on current practices with your Inclusion Professional and explore ways you can embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and cultural safety principles in your program
- Introduce a daily Acknowledgement of Country and teach children and families about its cultural importance
- Participate in Indigenous events to build reciprocal relationships with local Elders and your local Aboriginal Corporation
- Link with your Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) to build a deeper understanding of Koorie culture, history and experience
- Connect with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI) or the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to deepen your First Nations knowledge and inclusive practices
- Join a reconciliation network, such as ECA’s ‘Talking Reconciliation’ special interest group, to share your reconciliation journey with like-minded services
- Develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) on the free Narragunnawali platform for schools and early learning services (www.narragunnawali.org.au)
- Apply for \$10k+ in Innovative Solutions funding to enhance your team’s cultural competence and embed First Nations perspectives across your service (viac.com.au/inclusion-development-fund)



Group times: A place for democratic possibilities

Is it time to re-think circle time? Leading education and care consultant Catharine Hydon says yes.

It's about half an hour before lunch, and one of the educators in the 3-5 room encourages the children to join her on the carpeted area near the blocks... What ensues is a typical group time.

Children are reminded to sit on their bottoms and use their listening ears as the educator sings a familiar action song. Halfway through the song, a couple of children are reminded to keep their hands to themselves, and another child is coaxed to leave the water play and join the group.

The educator reaches for a storybook and begins to read. Some children appear captivated by the story, watching closely as the pages turn. Others are keen to interrupt with their ideas and seem determined to change the subject. And then there are children for whom the whole task is too much as they roll around in their own world.

No doubt you have a collection of similar stories of group time encounters. At their best, they are opportunities for collaborative learning that cultivate a sense of belonging. At their worst, they exclude children who cannot manage the expectations, and serve as a means of crowd control that slips easily into taken-for-granted practice.

However these encounters are understood in your setting, group times, like all aspects of our curriculum design, benefit from robust reflection and rigorous review to ensure the teaching techniques we use are fit for purpose and result in learning outcomes for children.

Gathering children together for group times has long been considered an indispensable component of early childhood practice. I certainly remember being taught how to plan for formal group times

and recall being terrified as my lecturer assessed my capacity to maintain order and compliance in my final teaching placement.

For many of us, being able to deliver a pitch-perfect group time is a tangible manifestation of our capacity to teach young children – and a moment where the control pendulum is firmly swinging our way. As a result, as soon as children can sit upright, educators seem compelled to hold group times where children sing or listen to stories or – too often – wait to transition to the next part of the day.

It is not, of course, that group times are in themselves pedagogically flawed or that they offer limited learning opportunities for children. Rather, group times may have become so much part of our standard practice that we have missed the possibilities they might deliver.

Might we step back from the expected understanding and the taken for granted that shapes much of our practice to imagine group times as an exercise in democracy? Loris Malaguzzi, the founder and guiding force behind the extraordinary work of the early childhood programs of Reggio Emilia, positioned democracy as central to a new understanding of education.

A school with the ambition of constructing its own experience and being identified with participatory values has to adapt its contents, and its working methodology and practice ... It must be capable of internally living out processes and issues of participation and democracy ... while always focusing on children... (Cagliari, 2016, p. 354)

If we positioned democracy as core to the work of education and care, then group times would be understood as locations of democratic participation, places where the citizens met and deliberated, where children's voices were heard. They would be transformed as encounters of welcome and belonging where children – together with adults – build relationships, listen and work together to solve problems and discuss matters of shared importance. Carolyn Edwards frames this approach to education like this:

Instead of assuming that the purpose is to help that individual become an autonomous and self-regulated decision-maker, we need to start from the point of view that democratic citizenship is fundamentally about participation – becoming a protagonist in a group, a community whose participation is continually transformed by, and transforms, the directions and activities taken. The goal, therefore, is interdependence rather than independence, and the child who can think "with others" rather than "for himself or herself" is the one who best exemplifies the gift bestowed by education as relationship. (Edwards, 1995, p.15)



So, the possibilities are clear, when we plan for group times, let's plan for democracy.

Let's bring the people (children and adults – and sometimes an animal or two) together to consider how 'we' are collectively travelling, where we discuss who needs what and how we can make our shared spaces more inclusive and engaging.

Let's meet more often in response to relevant matters that arise – a leak in the water trough or an escaped turtle. Let's come together in smaller groups where more voices can be heard and in different places (inside, outside and maybe in the shed). Let's read stories and sing songs that help us know each other better and build respect and solidarity. Let's play games that develop skills and celebrate what we can do.

In this way, group times can be reimagined as dynamic and inclusive gatherings of the community of learners.



References

- Cagliari, P. C. (2016). *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches*. London: Routledge.
- Edwards, C. P. (1995). Democratic Participation in a Community of Learners: Loris Malaguzzi's Philosophy of Education as. *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies. Paper 15.*



You've got mail

Fancy a carefully curated, digital dose of educator resources in your inbox between issues? Our **monthly newsletter** for early childhood and OSHC offers just that.

To receive our newsletter straight to your inbox (with the opportunity to opt out at any time), visit viac.com.au/forms/subscribe-inclusion-news

Hurry, 4,000+ educators have already subscribed!



Thinking of you during this time,
Your Victorian Inclusion Agency team

Talk to us today about the ways we can help you remove barriers and support the inclusion of all children. Our service is free!

www.viac.com.au



One For All

