Welcoming Our Little Ones

A guide for families to raise strong and deadly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Community artwork

What better way for our Wakwakurnaku Kumangka Pudnanthi (WKP) families to showcase their amazing achievement in co-creating a resource based on their own lived and living experiences than through their own artwork that represents an expression of themselves and what they had envisioned in the co-designing of the WKP group.

Each family that could contribute their time to this artwork used their handprints along with their minya (little) one's hands or footprint filled with their own design. This is a representation of their initial vision for the group of using their hands, which to them meant: connection, family and learning in partnership with their minya one and with each other.

Families used traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art designs to help inspire them as well as adding their own personal touch, including the expression of their own minya one's art with their own age-appropriate drawings. The lines joining the handprints of the mums and minya ones are representing the connections that the families have all made with each other and the dotted circles represent the contribution of each of the families to the resource, as well as the WKP group. Some of the traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art used to inspire this piece include the yarning circle, family, bushtucker, animal tracks and ocean waves.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti of South Australia Inc.

Wakwakurnaku Kumangka Pudnanthi

emerging minds®

Thank you

Nunkuwarrin Yunti and Emerging Minds would like to thank the families and staff from Wakwakurnaku Kumangka Pudnanthi family support group who co-created this guide based on the *Replanting the Birthing Trees* online course which was co-created with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders preferencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing.*

Thanks also to Elory, Carrie-Lee Miller, Harley Ngrakani Hall, Jamie Goldsmith, David Edwards, Lou Turner and the Emerging Minds' National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group for their contributions.

And thank you to the Australian Communities Foundation, Paul Ramsey Foundation and Dana Shen who made this work possible.

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This guide was written by and for families with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

What is this guide about?

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

This guide shares some stories to support families to raise healthy and grounded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

It is made up from shared stories from many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

No matter where you live or where you are at on your cultural journey, if an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child is part of your family, you may find this guide helpful.

You don't need to read the whole guide start to finish, just read the bits that suit you best right now.

Our journeys of learning

Lots of us are still learning about our cultures and where we come from. That is OK. We hope you might find an idea or two in this guide to help you on your cultural journey.

'When I came to the realisation that I had grown up without my culture, it made me feel displaced. By taking the time needed to acknowledge it, I was able to talk to others about it.'

GENEVA, MUM

We are all learning, one small step at a time. Lots of people are on this journey.

Ancient wisdom

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have ancient wisdom in parenting that has been passed down since the Dreamtime. This parenting wisdom is held deeply within us, and we can tap into it.

Our children are sacred. They are celebrated and delighted in, and often cared for by grandparents, parents, aunties, uncles, siblings, cousins and other kin.

'I'm only just getting to know my culture now. I want my daughter to grow up knowing her culture.'

KELSIE, MUM

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads matter

Dads play an important role in parenting. This traditional role includes teaching responsibilities, caring for Country and cultural knowledge. This is on top of the modern-day responsibilities of being a supportive partner, nurturing and providing for family.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, their role as parents and caregivers has been changed through colonisation.

Dads may wish to reach out for support to understand their new role in the family as they think about how to best support their partner and baby.

Information for dads is woven throughout this guide, or you can look for all the dads information in 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads matter' at the end of this guide.

You might also like to check out some guidance from Aboriginal dads in the video *Rebuilding our shields: Sharing the stories of deadly dads*. Scan the QR code to watch it.

Non-Indigenous parents

This guide is also for you if are a non-Indigenous parent with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child. As a non-Indigenous parent, you can't teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, but you can still support it and help your child feel proud of their identity.

'To non-Aboriginal parents, if you are encouraging Aboriginal culture in the family, you deserve a pat on the back. It is really important what you are doing. It is wonderful when non-Aboriginal parents encourage their children to know their culture. It will mean so much to your children when they are grown.'

AUNTY COLLEEN LOVEGROVE

'It's important to me to show my kids how proud I am of their culture in as many ways as I can in our day-to-day life.'

BEC, NON-INDIGENOUS MUM

Many non-Indigenous parents with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander partners get to enjoy learning about culture with their child. They can play an important role by reaching out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their partner's family and Community to help their child learn about their culture.

They can also encourage their kids to yarn with their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander aunties, uncles and Elders to strengthen their identity.

And as a child's identity comes from both parents, they can teach their child about the identity of their non-Indigenous family as well.

'I am grateful for the connectedness of my non-Aboriginal stepfather in fostering opportunities for me to connect with my culture in solidarity with my mum. I am in part the father I am today because of him.'

LOU, DAD

Can't find what you need in this guide? The Replanting the Birthing Trees resource hub has lots of information for families.

Are you a practitioner?

Scan the QR code to access the free online course *Replanting the Birthing Trees: Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children in the first 2,000 days.*

For workers to complete with families

Helpful services can sometimes be difficult for families to find and connect to. It is important that families have information (including on complaint processes) to help them navigate services.

This form is for workers to fill in with families about the service they are using and other local services available.

What is the service called and what does the service do?

Who can families contact at the service if they have questions or need support? What is the phone number?

What about after hours? Are there any helplines? E.g. 13YARN (13 92 76) or PANDA (1300 726 306)

What if families want to make a complaint? How do they do that and who can help them?

What other local services are there that families can use and what do these services do?

(Think about connecting to Community and culture, and support with things like health, wellbeing, housing, furniture, money, violence, sport or the arts, and anything else families say they need.)

Shared stories from pregnancy to birth

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

Why pregnancy to birth matters

'For thousands of years, mothers and traditional midwives have passed down knowledge about pregnancy and birth. For many of us, this traditional knowledge has been disrupted.' [1]

Culture starts being built in our babies in the womb. It is the time when the foundations for a strong mind, strong body, wellbeing and spiritual connections to Country and family begin.

'Little traditional things matter.'

AUNTY COLLEEN LOVEGROVE

What might work for me?

Singing to baby in the womb

Singing to babies in the womb can help develop identity. We can sing babies into their place in the family, Country and kinship.

Does your family have songs or lullabies that are important to you? Maybe you could make up your own? You may enjoy listening to some stories when resting or getting ready to sleep, such as *Dreamy: Sleep stories from First Nations storytellers.* Scan the following QR code to listen.

Or you might like to learn the *Baby Coming, You Ready?* song to sing to your little one in your womb, or you could ask special family or friends to do it. You don't need to be good at singing to do it! Scan the following QR code to listen.

'I sang to my baby in the womb. I sang little lullabies my mum had sung to me, or songs I found online.'

KELSIE, MUM

Birthing

Birthing can happen in a lot of different ways and in any location. It is about the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of mother and baby.

Some ideas to think about before birthing are:

- Talking to friends, family and staff to figure out what your options are for birthing, at home, in hospital or on Country.
- Do you want to have kin at the birth? Do you need to ask to have more people there than the hospital usually allows? Or you might need to say if there are certain people you don't want there.
- Asking family and staff to respect what everyone's roles are, including baby's father's cultural obligations.
- Do you want to take the placenta home to plant? You can ask to keep it if you want to.[2]
- If you know you will be birthing off Country, can you take photos of Country to have at the birth?
- Are there sounds, messages or music from home you can play during the birth?
- Can you bring some things that remind you of Country to have with you at the birth? For example, some earth, water or a plant that you could take home and plant?
- Are there photos, artworks or messages from family and friends you could bring?
- Do you want to connect with mob back home during your labour or birth?
- Are there smells – oils or sprays – that can connect you back to home?[3]

'We planted all our babies' placentas under a tree in our yard outside their bedroom windows. It's our way of connecting them with their culture by carrying on this traditional practice of their nanna.'

ABORIGINAL FATHER AND NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER

Smoking ceremony for mother and baby

'A smoking ceremony is a traditional ceremony for baby and mother. It helps heal the mother after the birth and makes the baby healthy.'[4]

If your family has cultural connections

You might be able to ask your Elders or other Community members about local cultural protocols, and if OK, to help you arrange a smoking ceremony for mother and baby.

If you're not sure what to do

Many of us are away from family and Country, or at the starting point of our cultural journey, and it is not always under our control.

If you would like a smoking ceremony for mother and baby, reach out to your local Aboriginal community centre, medical service or birthing unit. They can help you connect to local Community and find out about local cultural protocols as well.

If this is hard, show this guide to your health worker and ask them to help you, or find someone who can.

'I would have liked a smoking ceremony after my traumatic birth … being able to start motherhood with a ceremony to help cleanse my mind and open my connection to my daughter.'

ZOE, MUM

Kinship

'Raising a child is not just up to one person.'

ZOE, MUM

Kinship is a community that looks out for children and families. Our children are surrounded by many people looking after them.

We see our babies recognising, connecting and responding to the faces and voices of the people around them.

Kinship can help children understand their connection to Land, Waters, skies and kinship early.

Kinship can also help us by having different people to turn to for different things, such as cultural things, or things we need help with but want to keep private.

'I think I would cry every day without my support network.'

CATHERINE, MUM

For the dads

Supporting mum

As a dad, you have a role in supporting mum when she is pregnant. Sometimes just being there is what is needed. You don't always need to talk, but listening is important. It's helpful for mum to tune into what the baby and their body needs, and it helps the growing baby if mum isn't too stressed.

If possible, being on Country together and connecting before bub is born is a good idea. Time goes quickly during pregnancy and once baby is born, it will be 'all hands on deck'! And if you live off Country and can't visit, you can still talk about it, describe it or watch videos or listen to podcasts that come from traditional countrymen.

Making time to talk to Country, the Ancestors and with each other about how you and mum want to parent together is a great way to feel empowered and send good messages to bub. Did you know that babies start to recognise voices while in the womb?

Talk about culture and love for your partner and baby. It helps everyone grow together, and stay grounded and connected.

Another practical way to support mum during pregnancy is by helping with doctors or other appointments. This can include:

- **Getting there** – help mum make appointments, avoid missing any appointments and get to them on time.
- **Feeling comfortable** – you have a right and responsibility to be at appointments and hear firsthand how the pregnancy is going. Talk about it – have a yarn about what comes up in the appointments and try to ask about anything you didn't understand.
- **Sharing the load** – checking in with mum by asking: 'What can I do to support you?'
- **Getting ready** – ask what to expect during labour and birth, and what dads can do to be supportive.
- **Backing each other up** – if appointments make you feel uneasy, or something is said that upsets you both, respectfully speak up. You are there to support your partner, bub and to be a good dad and that's a good thing.

'My partner said to me: "You comfort me and keep me safe when no one else has ever done it, besides my dad that is no longer with us," and I thought it was very powerful that she said that.'

HARLEY, DAD

Providing for family

Dads can provide for mum and bub in lots of ways. It might be hunting, fishing, preparing food and cleaning up afterwards.

'Busting ourselves and working to provide is hard. Sometimes we need to put a smile on for the kids. But don't bottle things up, find supportive family and friends. Sometimes connecting through helping others is good. Sometimes we need to talk about the things that break us and make us cry. Other times we need to make a joke to stop us from crying.'

HARLEY, DAD

But most important is that dads can provide love, nurturing and emotional support to their family. It doesn't cost money, it's available 24/7 and everyone is a winner when dads give care.

Being a strong Aboriginal man involves love: for mother, Country, Elders, family, children and kin.

Talking, singing and reading to baby in the womb

Dads can talk, sing songs and read books to bub in the womb. If you know your traditional language, you can talk to them in lingo. Talking to bub through mum's belly is a great way to share traditional stories. If you know how to play the Yidaki (Didgeridoo) you can play that for bub too. Singing songs or just talking is enough – as long as your baby hears your voice and your partner experiences you showing care.

This is a time for preparation

Pregnancy is a good time to start learning how to be a good dad. You can learn what babies need by talking to Elders, uncles, aunties, community workers, men's groups and Aboriginal health services.

You are not expected to know everything and no one is perfect. There is also no 'one size fits all' to being a parent. Be open-minded, learn new ways and find what works for you and your family.

'Sometimes fellas don't try because they are scared to be wrong. I had to learn that in so many ways. This is not once-off stuff, keep going for the rest of your life. And don't let your mistakes hold you back.'

HARLEY, DAD

Learning about culture so you can share it with your kids

Don't be afraid to ask family, friends or Community members to find out more about your culture and obligations as a man, father and partner. Learning about culture is a lifelong process as it has always been in traditional Lore.

As you learn, you may change and grow. You might:

- understand family and connections differently
- connect with Country and with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- learn about and undertake cultural obligations to family and Community.

Your connection to your baby can also grow by sharing your cultural knowledge with them once they are born.

More information for parents

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- Tiny feet, big journeys is a guide for pregnant women and families

- Baby Coming, You Ready? has information for mums

- Baby Coming, You Ready? also has information for dads

- SMS4DeadlyDads sends short texts with info for dads

The Living Story: Pregnancy and birthing

You might be interested in this video which shows families during pregnancy and birth. What do you notice?

Scan the QR code to watch *The Living Story: Pregnancy and birthing* (2 minutes, 3 seconds).

Deciding what to do

It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they found helpful. You'll find these in the section 'Ideas to share with you'.

References

1. Baby coming you ready? (n.d.). *Forming strong bonds with baby* [Web page]. Ngangk Yira Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and Social Equity, Murdoch University. Accessed 25 March 2025.
2. Moylan-Coombs, S., & Pross, E. (2016). *Wiyanga: A guide for mothers and families.* The Gaimaragal Group.
3. Pross, E., Ochre and Salt Pty Ltd, & De Vroome, M. (n.d.). *Tiny feet, big journeys: A guide for pregnant women and families.* Northern Sydney Local Health District.
4. Growing up Yolŋu. (n.d.). *Helping children become strong* [Web page]. Accessed 25 March 2025.

Shared stories from birth to 1 year old

Scan the QR code

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Why birth to 1 year matters

'My daughter, my first-born child, she represents that first hope and that first experience of becoming a father.'

LOU, DAD

What might work for me?

Stories of culture and connection

Many of us continue to learn our stories of culture and connection throughout life. We are all at different parts of our learning journeys and that is OK. One thing is the same for all of us: this journey of learning culture has no end.

Whatever our cultural knowledge, we can talk to our children about family and kinship connections. We can explain how they are related to the people around them.

Many of us are affected by the impacts of the Stolen Generations and other things that happened to break up our families and disconnect us from Country. But it's good to introduce our little ones to the kin we do have to strengthen their family connection.

In the video *Recognising and connecting early* (34 seconds) you'll see a grandfather (ŋathi) introduce himself to his baby granddaughter, Gutjan. He's excited that she can recognise him and is talking to him.[4]

Scan the QR code to watch *Recognising and connecting early*.

We can also help connect our children to special places, animals, plants and other culturally important things. This knowledge is often passed down from the Ancestors to Elders, then to children. Sometimes this doesn't happen. It is OK to look at other ways to get information about important people and places from the internet, books, films and even videos on YouTube. Any information about a person's culture, family and Country can help a person discover their identity and where they belong.

'I have enjoyed being able to learn about my culture and share it with my baby – we are learning together.'

ZOE, MUM

Connection to Country

Connection to Country creates a feeling of belonging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Country is made up of all things: Land, Waters, sky, animals, plants and its traditional people. All of these things about Country are part of a child's heart, mind and spirit.

We can connect our children to Country by talking about it and touching it.

Some of us don't get much chance for outside time, so we need to find ways to make this time for ourselves and our children. An easy way we can do this is to find some grass, ground or sand and walk with our bare feet outside to feel connected and grounded ourselves. This can help us to connect to Land and Ancestors.

'Children need to understand the connection between the land, water, and the stars in the sky, and how their ancestors cared for the land and water from generation to generation.'[5]

Lore

Lore is the traditional customs, stories and laws passed down through generations. It guides all parts of life. It is different in every cultural group.

Not all of us get the opportunity to go through our traditional Lore. But we can learn about the important things in our culture from Elders, other people and places so we can build our children's connection to the old ways.

Children learn the rules and what they should and shouldn't do through cultural stories and their connection to Country. It can help our children feel connected, and know they are being guided by their Ancestors and are not alone.

'If I have other people's children around me, I protect them as if they are my own.'

KELSIE, MUM

For the dads

Staying strong to keep mum and kids safe

Dads can protect mum and baby. But sometimes we need to reach out to our supports to help us stay strong.

'The first year of life can shape how kids cope. Everything has got to be calming. It can't be chaotic and screaming.'

JAMIE, DAD

If you are feeling worried or no good, you can call 13YARN on 13 92 76 to talk confidentially to another Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. It will be a culturally safe conversation with no judgement.

Understanding identity

Dads can help children know who they are and where they come from. Telling children who their mob is and how they are connected to Community is important.

'I learned about my bloodlines and who I am through talking to family and reaching out. It is a journey that happens over years.'

HARLEY, DAD

Storytelling

Dads can pass down cultural knowledge and values by sharing stories. Or maybe you can find local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Community members who can share stories if you don't know any. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

There are also many places online you can find cultural yarns, watch a video or listen to a podcast from people sharing their story – WellMob has a list of podcasts to check out. Scan the QR code to go to the WellMob website.

More information for parents

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- SMS4DeadlyDads sends short texts with info for dads

- The booklet *Koori parenting, what works for us* shares ideas from Aboriginal parents with childhood trauma on what helped them break cycles of intergenerational trauma.

The Living Story: Birth to 1 year

You might be interested in this video which shows families and babies from birth to 1 year old. What do you notice?

Scan the QR code to watch *The Living Story: Birth to 1 year* (2 minutes, 5 seconds).

Deciding what to do

It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they found helpful. You'll find these in the section 'Ideas to share with you'.

References

4. Growing up Yolŋu. (n.d.). *Helping children become strong* [Web page]. Accessed 25 March 2025.
5. SNAICC–National voice for our children. (2012). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's cultural needs.* SNAICC Resource Service.

Shared stories from 1 to 3 years old

Scan the QR code

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Why ages 1 to 3 matter

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn to communicate with family members, Community and other children in their early years, and it's during this stage that their brains develop faster than at any other time in their lives.[6]

What might work for me?

Connection to a larger system

Children have a special place in families and Communities, culture and the future.

'They love the attention from their aunties and cousins. They just love each other.'

CATHERINE, MUM

Parents can teach their child about who they are in relation to everything else: their family, kin, Community, environment and Ancestors.

These relationships create a child's identity and connection to everything in life. We can teach our children how we are all part of Country and the Spirits that live within it: earth, rock, wood, water and all things that make up our environment have a living spirit. We can be mindful with our children and sit in nature and connect with Country. Whether it be a park, bushland, in a sandpit or bare dirt or near some water.

Our toddlers need to be free to roam around and explore while we are there to listen to them and talk about Country. What sounds can we hear? What does the ground feel like under our feet? What can we smell or see? Being present on Country, wherever it may be, can be calming for both us and our children.

Older children learning to support little ones

'Having older and younger kids together works when we help the older kids learn how to care, share and play with the younger ones. When they grow up, they will be each other's supports.'

KELSIE, MUM

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn to care for younger ones from an early age. They help each other and work together. This is the way it has always been in our culture.

By learning their responsibilities young, they set a good example for others. This gives them feelings of trust, support and confidence.

It's always good to involve older children to play and help with our little ones. We can encourage them to teach their younger siblings or cousins things that they may be good at, like playing with a ball, reading to them or doing some craft. Look for older children's talents and suggest they try and share that with the little ones.

'My stepdaughter has really nurtured my youngest child's love of art more than anyone. He's always loved watching her and tries to draw like she does.'

BEC, MUM

Song and dance

Song and dance are important parts of culture. Dreaming stories of Ancestors are shared through song, dance and story. These are often part of our sacred ceremonies. Song and dance can help our toddlers connect to people, their spirituality and parts of Country including animals, special places and the Elders or people who may have shared this information.

Children learn about their connections and identity by joining in song and dance. Dancing also helps them with listening, movement and balance. It's good to try and learn some traditional songs and dances together, even if it's something shared through YouTube, a website or social media.

'I have been dancing since I was pregnant. Now my daughter loves dancing and singing.'

KELSIE, MUM

Kinship

If grandparents are around and we feel they are safe, we might want our toddlers to spend time with them. They might know some songs and dances, or have stories about growing up and Country. They are often good for a yarn about the old days.

Our grandparents, aunties and uncles can help nurture, soothe, laugh, play, sing, tell stories and just be there for their grandkids, nieces and nephews. They can support our parenting and also give us a break if we are feeling tired and stressed. They can gently teach our kids the rules of life, who they are and where they belong, while keeping an eye on the children for safety.

Women often connect with other mothers and let the children play and explore together. Dads can do the same. Sometimes it's good if both parents can get together with other like-minded parents to support each other and let the kids play together.

'The aunties, sisters and cousins will be helping the mother to do tasks and spend time with her, providing cuddles and developing the child's sense of belonging and connection to all the family. The sisters will take turns holding the toddler on their hips and take them to play. The uncles and brothers will provide fun, loving care, teasing and protection. They will teach culture through stories, playing and encouraging the child to try new things.'[7]

Learning through experience

'I remember my mum telling me off when I told one of my children off for climbing a tree; she said to me, "That is what the trees are there for, for that child to climb, she will learn and grow with that tree, and then she will know to care for it".'[7]

One of the great strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of raising children is giving them the freedom to explore the world. Parents encourage children to play together, so they learn skills early, build resilience and understand responsibilities.

Parents see themselves as guides for their children's social and emotional growth. They help the child's spirit to emerge as they grow and experience life. While we cannot protect our children from everything, we can be there to show them what is right and wrong, and to understand the importance of family, kin and Country.

'The grandfather will be helping the child to explore, know and understand Country and its importance to their wellbeing and who they are. He will be showing how he hunts and cares for Country and how to be strong in connection to Country, waters and skies and telling stories of how things came to be.'[7]

Early years is a time for spirit

The early years are a wonderful time when culture becomes a part of a child's spirit. As we have explored, the whole family can get involved. Children experience culture by learning, seeing, feeling and doing cultural practices. What things can we do to encourage this learning?

If we haven't grown up with culture it can be hard to understand about spirit. Having respect for our Ancestors, Elders and Spirits, and talking to Aboriginal Community members might help us get started.

For the dads

Pride in culture

Dads can encourage children at this age to be proud of their identity and culture. If you can support them to embrace their identity now, there will be no stopping them!

Things like reading them an Aboriginal children's book, sharing your knowledge about Country and culture and attending Community events with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Even painting up for special events like NAIDOC start to build a sense of identity. And if you know any traditional language, you can teach it to your kids.

> *'It is hard to be proud of who you are if you don't know who you are and how you fit in. That is why identity matters. But identity is often overlooked by services, so we have to keep looking to find the supports we need.'*
>
> JAMIE, DAD

Connecting to Country

Dads can take their toddler to lots of places to connect to Country. You can take them on outings to special places, or just stop, watch and listen to nature wherever you may be.

Kids love to connect to their senses – giving them time and space to be in nature helps them start to connect to Country and may even calm them if feeling tired or cranky. Some ideas for connecting you could do with your toddler include:

- **Water:** Sitting on the riverbank, creek or beach and listening to the waves or watching the water flow by
- **Earth:** Feeling the dirt, sand or grass between your toes
- **Fire:** Safely watching a campfire or having a smoking ceremony or cleansing
- **Plants:** Touching the trunk of a tree, running your hands through soft grass or picking berries, fruit or cones
- **Animals:** Watching how birds, insects or bigger animals move, and dancing or moving like these animals

Learning about their culture and connecting to Country is good for children. It also helps make sure Country will be cared for in the future. This is part of traditional custodianship. So is holding care, knowledge and connection for our children.

More information for parents

In the video *Play and learning* (9 minutes, 22 seconds) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers talk about singing, playing games, reading books and drawing with their children (ages 0–8 years).

Scan the QR code to watch *Play and learning*.

The Living Story: 1–3 years

You might be interested in this video which shows families and children 1–3 years old. What do you notice?

Scan the QR code to watch *The Living Story: 1–3 years* (2 minutes, 3 seconds).

Deciding what to do

It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they found helpful. You'll find these in the section 'Ideas to share with you'.

References

6. Healing Foundation (n.d.). *Child Development stages* [Web page]. Healing Foundation and Emerging Minds. Accessed 25 March 2025.

7. Emerging Minds. (2023). *Replanting the Birthing Trees: Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children in the first 2,000 days* [Online course]. Emerging Minds Learning.

Shared stories from 3 to 5 years old

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

Why ages 3 to 5 years matter

Relationships and connections with family and kin let children know that they are loved and their world is safe.[6]

What might work for me?

Practice through play

'What I love about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and especially with kids, is the way older ones look after the younger ones.'

BEC, MUM

Children learn many skills at this age. They practice by playing, pretending and copying others. They learn from family and other children. They are given some freedoms and trust to take care of each other, solve problems, and begin to understand their own strengths and limits.

Children often want to try new things on their own, but sometimes they find it frustrating. When they explore, adults and family members like parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings watch over them. These family members help, teach and support the children. This is an important stage of grassroots learning before they go to school to begin their formal education.

We all encourage children to be curious and excited, and we comfort them when they feel frustrated or worried while learning new things. How can you play with your children to help them grow their strengths, gently meet challenges and become stronger in their culture and connections?

'I am always telling the older ones that you are the ones teaching the younger ones, because they follow you every day – you are the teachers.'

CARRIE, MUM

Learning from Elders

An Elder is a respected person in Community who is known as someone who holds cultural knowledge and has permission to share it.

Connecting little ones with Elders can be a valuable way to support wellbeing, development and pass knowledge on.

Lots of families have missed out on cultural learning so Elders can teach children about Country, helping them connect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity.

'When there has been disconnection, families might need to find a sense of belonging and connection through Elders in the community they live in. They might not be able to connect back with their own mob and Country.'

BEC, MUM

Think about when you were young and some of the things you learned or heard from your Elders. What older people can you sit with, involve your child in a yarn with or be on Country to learn about culture from?

Shared food

Collecting and preparing traditional bush foods is a group activity that all children can enjoy and look forward to. This activity involves people of various ages working together. Children practice the skills needed for this as part of their daily life.[8]
Some kids might need encouragement to join in.

'For me this looks like taking my little one shopping and he gets to choose some foods. In one supermarket we even found a bush foods section. Another thing we do is find traditional recipes – for me it's Torres Strait Islander recipes – and then buying the things to cook it.'

GENEVA, MUM

'For our family, we try to find bush foods that we can grow where we live. We have gone to nurseries and found out what will grow best where we live. And we have tried different plants. Some have worked and some haven't.'

BEC, MUM

'Hunting and gathering is seasonal. This knowledge has been passed down from our grandparents, parents, aunties and uncles for years. I live off Country, but during the different seasons, family back home usually go hunting and gather what's in season. Then they will send it to us and other family members that have also moved away from home. It's our way of keeping connected to our family and Land.'

CARRIE, MUM

What can you do to get your children involved in collecting, preparing or sharing food at gatherings or for the family dinner?

Sharing is our way of life

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, young children are valued members who join Community activities. Relationships between children and adults can be more equal than they might be in other cultures. Children are free to explore and are taught to be independent and responsible, especially for each other. They learn values like independence and caring for others.

From early childhood, children learn to respect Elders, family, Community and Country. They learn about their cultural stories and practices through adults. This can be an important part of who they are and sets them up with good values for life.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up surrounded by love, curiosity, and harmony in a rich and safe cultural world. This keeps our living cultures strong and gives kids a strong foundation to grow from.

'With our babies and our children, we like to encourage them to look after one another and our mob, and it's about sharing, teaching sharing and looking after one another and that helps them belong in whichever groups they go in. And I think with the babies, we like to encourage that from a very early age that, when a new person comes in, they're our families.' [9]

How can we spend time with our children alongside good people who can share their knowledge, wisdom and skills?

For the dads

Nature play

Dads can do nature and sensory play with their kids. Maybe throwing and catching natural materials, or touching plants and animals together. This is good for children, and good for the relationships between parent, child and Country.

Teaching values

Dads can pass on important cultural values to children. This may include yarns about roles and responsibilities, such as respect for Elders and caring for Country. Children might be interested in languages, what place names mean, and personal or family stories that start with, 'When I was a kid …'

> *'The biggest thing you learned from fathers and uncles was about caring. Going out hunting, the food was divided up. Another thing was understanding your own family tree. How you behave and speak to each other with dignity and respect.'*
>
> **DARRYL KICKETT**[10]

Dads being there for kids

At ages 3 to 5 years, kids will be starting preschool or kindy soon. Dads can help teachers encourage their child's identity by telling them it is important and sharing some cultural knowledge.

You can show an interest in what your kids are learning, and help them with counting and reading. And you can let them know you are always there for them.

> *'Take the time to understand your child's views. It is hard to find the time when we are busy, but ask how they are and help them manage their difficulties. Your kids need to know they can ask you as a father for help when they need it.'*
>
> **JAMIE, DAD**

Make time to talk about how life is going. Eating food together at least once a day is good for kids. Making time to sit and yarn together at breakfast or dinnertime is an easy way to switch off distractions and tune in together as a family.

> *'Don't teach it – show it. Be loving and nurturing. Always say you love them.'*
>
> **HARLEY, DAD**

Cultural events

Dads can take children to local cultural events. This might help the whole family connect and feel a sense of belonging.

If living off Country, trying to connect with local mob is important. While this isn't always possible, showing up to local community events or school cultural days is a good way to meet the local mob. Once your child is at school, arrange a yarn with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers or support staff. Get to know other members of the community at sporting events, arts exhibitions or other public gatherings. It's often the informal yarns you have with mob that create the best opportunities to share culture and the benefits of Community with your child.

Going to local NAIDOC Week and other Community events that celebrate culture is a great way for your kids to meet other young ones. Take along a picnic blanket and a feed, and join in as much as you can. Even going to the local park to play on the swings, or ride scooters or bikes, can be a great way to meet other young families.

Ideas for cooking

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- You might like to search for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recipes online. Or search for a recipe that includes bush foods, like wattle seed or lemon myrtle.
- Check out SBS NITV for some good cooking shows.

- Deadly Tucker cookbooks have some good recipes.

- The *Living Strong: Healthy Lifestyle Cookbook* has healthy recipes including some traditional cooking ideas.

- The WellMob website has resources on eating well and bush tucker.

Eating well

Bush tucker

The Living Story: 3–5 years

You might be interested in this video which shows families and children from 3–5 years old. What do you notice?

Scan the QR code to watch *The Living Story: 3–5 years* (2 minutes, 4 seconds).

Deciding what to do

It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they found helpful. You'll find these in the section 'Ideas to share with you'.

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10. Collard, L., Adams, M., Palmer, D., & McMullan, J. (2016). *Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project.* The Fathering Project.

Ideas to share with you

Scan the QR code

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It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they think might be helpful ...

Discovering your cultural connections

- If you know your mob or Elders, reach out to them.
- Talk to a friend, family or Community member and ask what they know or do.
- Reach out to your local:
  - Aboriginal birthing unit (if you or your partner are pregnant)
  - Aboriginal Community or cultural centres
  - Aboriginal land council
  - Aboriginal medical service.
- Find other sources of spiritual support to ground you. Just one person might be all you need.
- Sometimes just feeling your feet in the dirt, sand or water, and remembering your culture is all around you, is what is needed.

Figuring out what you want to do

- Read through the ideas in this guide, then decide what suits you and your family.
- You don't have to try all the ideas you read about. You might have your own ideas – make a list if it helps.
- You might talk to your partner, family or Community to help you decide what to do.

Asking workers for what you want

- If you are having (or already have) an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child, then you have the right to access culturally safe care. But if Indigenous health care isn't offered, ask or look into other options. It is normal to find it hard to stand up for our rights and ask for what we want, but if we don't it may not happen.
- You can show this booklet to health workers (e.g. doctors, midwives, social workers, etc) and tell them what things you would like to happen.
- Your baby or child has the right to grow up in their culture. It is OK to keep asking workers until they help you or find someone who can.

When things don't work out

- Some of us have had bad experiences in hospital or with services and have been treated poorly. If this has happened to you, know it is not your fault and you are not alone, others have been there too.
- You don't have to accept being treated poorly or discriminated against. If you feel you have been, ask to talk to a service or hospital leader, like the practice manager or ward supervisor, and be calm and polite when you report your experience.
- Sometimes connecting to culture can help us feel safe and reassured – just knowing there is a spiritual connection there for us.
- It you have had a difficult birth, or your child has been really sick, it can be helpful to connect with other parents who have similar experiences. Try to find connections online, at community centres or in playgroups.
- Remember it is your right to make a complaint if you want to. You can ask a service about their complaints process and ask for help to make a complaint.
- If you are feeling worried or no good, you can call 13YARN on 13 92 76 to talk confidentially to another Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. It will be a culturally safe conversation with no judgement.
- If you are really struggling with pregnancy or early parenting, and your mental health is suffering, reach out to organisations like PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia). They have a confidential helpline (Monday to Saturday): phone 1300 726 306. There's also an online space for Indigenous parents with an anonymous mental health quiz. To start the quiz, use the QR code:

When bad things from the past come into our present

For those of us looking to break cycles of trauma, the booklet *Koori parenting, what works for us* shares ideas from Aboriginal parents with childhood trauma on what helped them break cycles of intergenerational trauma.

Scan the QR code to open *Koori parenting, what works for us* on your phone or tablet.

'When you have childhood trauma from your own childhood, it is hard to let someone else look after your kids. For me it has taken time and been with baby steps.'

BRITTNEY, MUM

Singing and reading

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

Singing in language

There are many songs and dances that are about special places, plants and animals and Creation stories that connect to our cultures.

Singing can be soothing for us and our children. It's a good way to soothe ourselves when feeling a little tired, worried or stressed. And if we don't think the world is ready for our voice yet, we can always hum along to a song!

Some songs available in First Languages are:

- Lullabies in Gumbaynggirr, Anindilyakwa and Gomeroi

- *Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes* in Kaurna.

You might like to check out First Languages Australia to ask for help finding songs in a language that you are connected to. Scan the QR code to go to the First Languages Australia website.

Reading about culture, history and traditions

Our Yarning offers a list of books you might like to read to your children. You don't have to buy them though – visit your local library and ask them to help you find books that suit your child's age. Or try searching online.

Scan the QR code to see the list of Our Yarning books.

If we find reading difficult or tiring, we can listen to audiobooks instead. Common Ground's Dreamy website has some audio stories that are great for slowing down and connecting to Country around children's bedtime.

Scan the QR code to visit the Dreamy website.

Learning traditional language

There are lots of language resources out there you could share with your family including apps you can download to your phone.

Scan the QR code to check out the language resources on the WellMob website.

What is your family's story?

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are doing well in their lives, and where things are tough, they are getting through. The fact you are here reading this now means you're finding your way. You are learning about connecting to culture and wellbeing for your child and family.

For lots of families, invasion and colonisation have disconnected us from culture, Country, kinship and Ancestors. Because of this, we may not have had the same opportunity as others in this country.

Many parents are struggling with housing, jobs, money, school, racism and health care. Parents often fear child protection, and services might use language that is confusing or makes them feel unsafe.

What is your story of survival and resilience?

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have stories of survival and resilience. Stories about times when they got through, even if they faced big challenges.

You might like to have a think about a few of these questions, or talk about them with your family or a trusted person.

What are the strengths and skills within your family?

Where did these strengths come from?

What supports you or your family to get through tough times?

What cultural practices does your family use or would like to use?

What are your hopes and dreams for your family?

What keeps your spirit strong?

It is important to think about the good things we have in our life and not let the bad things that may be happening get *all* the attention. Check out the *Stronger You wheel* or the *Stay Strong care plan* at the following QR codes.

If this is hard to do by yourself, you can ask a worker to help you. These resources can help you set some goals and remind you of the things and people who keep you strong.

Stronger You wheel

Stay Strong care plan

Words and meanings

Scan the QR code

If you would like to listen to this guide use the camera on your smart phone to scan the QR code and select the 'Read content' button under the title of the web page you land on.

Ways of knowing, being and doing

Together, these ideas shape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of life – deeply connected to culture, Land and Community.

- **Ways of knowing:** This is about how you learn and understand things. It includes traditional knowledge passed down from Elders, learning from nature, and understanding through stories and experiences.
- **Ways of being:** This is about who you are and how you live your life. It includes your values, beliefs and how you connect with the world around you.
- **Ways of doing:** This is about how you act and what you do in your daily life. It includes practices, traditions, and the skills you use to take care of Country, your Community, family and yourself.

Women's business

This means special things that only women do and know about. It includes traditions and roles just for women. It also involves important ceremonies and practices related to birth and raising children. These are passed down from mothers and grandmothers to their daughters. Women's business is about the important work and knowledge women have in their culture.

Men's business

This means special things that only men do and know about. It includes traditions and roles just for men. It also involves important ceremonies and practices related to teaching younger men skills and knowledge. These are passed down from fathers and grandfathers to their sons. Men's business is about the important work and knowledge men have in their culture.

Non-binary and gender-diverse people

Some people don't see themselves just as a man or a woman, or a mum or a dad. Or they might have a spirit that is different to the body they were born in. We may know people who identify as LGBTQIA+, sistagirls, brothaboys, two-spirits (2S) or Rainbow Mob. They might see themselves as a parent instead of a mum or dad.

They have their own special roles, traditions and knowledge in the Community. They might take part in both men's and women's business or have their own unique ways of contributing to Community. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, all people, no matter their gender, should have a valuable place and role.

However, it's important to recognise that gender diverse people might also face discrimination, isolation or violence, despite their significant contributions to Community.

You might like to read more about gender diverse or trans mob, or connect in with their social and support networks. Scan the QR code to read more about gender diverse and trans mob.

Cultural protocol

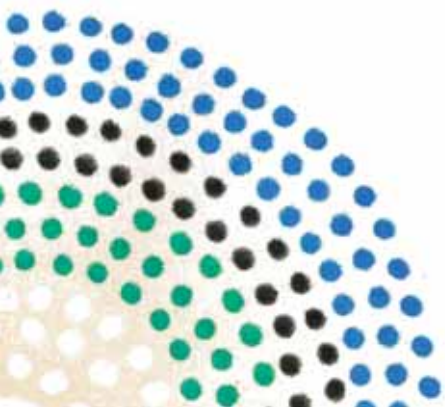
Cultural protocol means respecting and following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, customs, practices, values and Elders, in all their diversity. Diversity means different languages, places and practices.

Lore

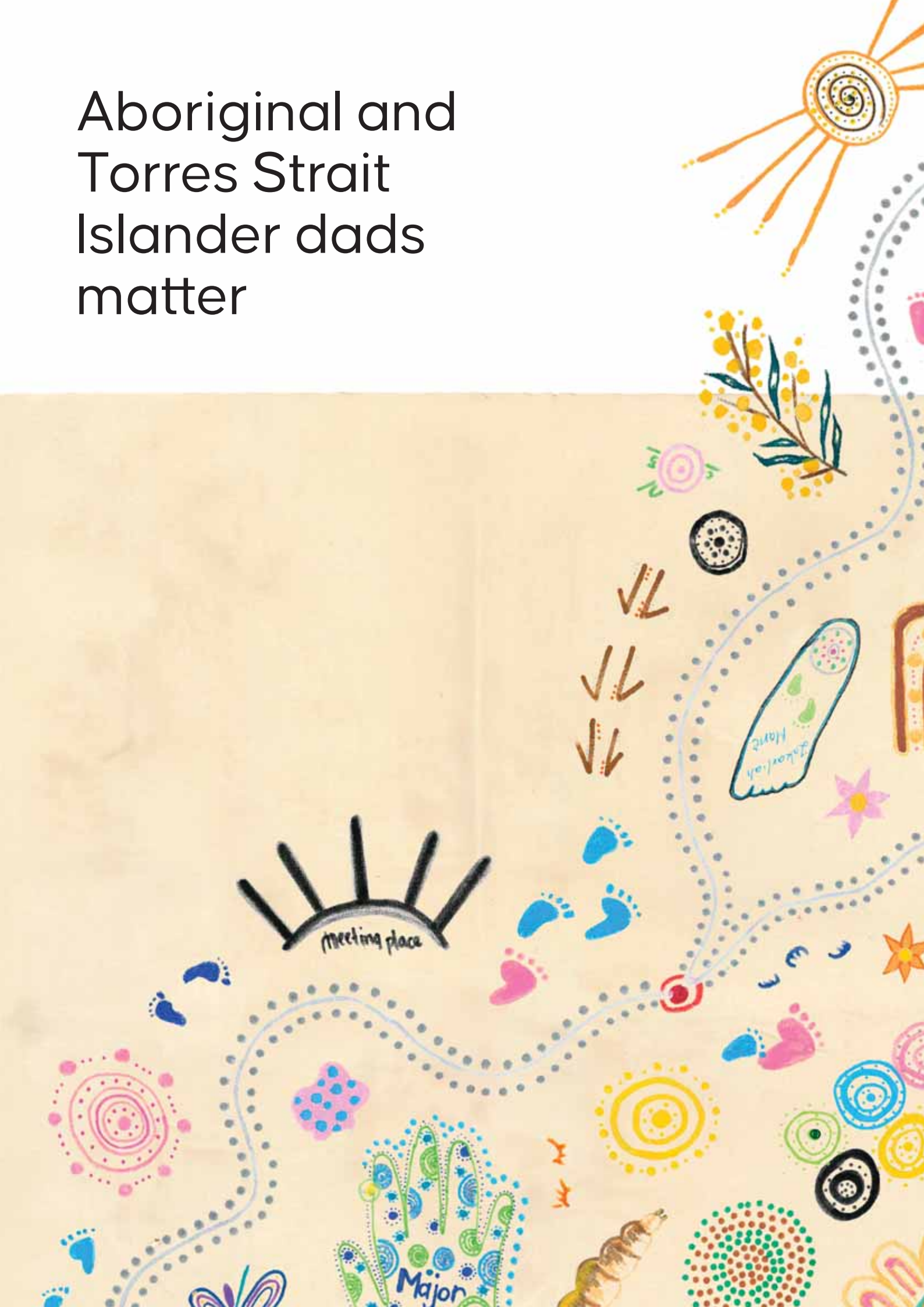
Lore is the traditional knowledge and teachings passed down through generations. It includes laws, beliefs and practices that shape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of life, and connection to the Land and Spirit.

Traditional custodianship

Traditional custodianship duty of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people means using cultural knowledge to take care of Land. This includes protecting nature, looking after important cultural sites and keeping the environment healthy for future generations.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads matter



Welcome to *Welcoming our little ones: A guide for families to raise strong and deadly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.*

This guide shares some stories to support families to raise healthy and grounded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

It is made up from shared stories from many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

This section focuses on information for dads. For the full guide please flip the booklet over.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads matter

Dads play an important role in parenting. This traditional role includes teaching responsibilities, caring for Country, cultural knowledge and Lore. This is on top of the modern-day responsibilities of being an emotionally supportive partner, nurturing and providing for family.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, their role as parents and caregivers has been changed through colonisation.

Dads may wish to reach out for support to understand their new role in the family as they think about how to best support their partner and baby.

You might like to check out some guidance from Aboriginal dads in the video *Rebuilding our shields: Sharing the stories of deadly dads.* Scan the QR code to watch it.

Non-Indigenous parents

This guide is also for you if are a non-Indigenous dad with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child. As a non-Indigenous dad, you can't teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, but you can still support it and help your child feel proud.

> *'To non-Aboriginal parents, if you are encouraging Aboriginal culture in the family, you deserve a pat on the back. It is really important what you are doing. It is wonderful when non-Aboriginal parents encourage their children to know their culture. It will mean so much to your children when they are grown.'*
>
> **AUNTY COLLEEN LOVEGROVE**

> *'It's important to me to show my kids how proud I am of their culture in as many ways as I can in our day-to-day life.'*
>
> **BEC, NON-INDIGENOUS MUM**

Many non-Indigenous dads with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander partners get to enjoy learning about culture with their child. They can play an important role by reaching out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their partner's family and Community to help their child learn about their culture.

They can also encourage their kids to yarn with their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander aunties, uncles and Elders to strengthen their identity.

And as a child's identity comes from both parents, they can teach their about child the identify of their non-Indigenous family as well.

'I am grateful for the connectedness of my non-Aboriginal stepfather in fostering opportunities for me to connect with my culture in solidarity with my mum. I am in part the father I am today because of him.'

LOU, DAD

Pregnancy to birth

'For thousands of years, mothers and traditional midwives have passed down knowledge about pregnancy and birth. For many of us, this traditional knowledge has been disrupted.'[1]

Culture starts being built in our babies in the womb. It is the time when the foundations for a strong mind, strong body, wellbeing and spiritual connections to Country and family begin.

"Little traditional things matter.'

AUNTY COLLEEN LOVEGROVE

Supporting mum

As a dad, you have a role in supporting mum when she is pregnant. Sometimes just being there is what is needed. You don't always need to talk, but listening is important. It's helpful for mum to tune into what the baby and their body needs, and it helps the growing baby if mum isn't too stressed.

If possible, being on Country together and connecting before bub is born is a good idea. Time goes quickly during pregnancy and once baby is born, it will be 'all hands on deck'! And if you live off Country and can't visit, you can still talk about it, describe it or watch videos or listen to podcasts that come from traditional countrymen.

Making time to talk to Country, the Ancestors and with each other about how you and mum want to parent together is a great way to feel empowered and send good messages to bub. Did you know that babies start to recognise voices while in the womb?

Talk about culture and love for your partner and baby. It helps everyone grow together, and stay grounded and connected.

Some other practical ways to support mum during pregnancy is by helping with doctors or other appointments. This can include:

- **Getting there** – help mum make appointments, avoid missing any appointments and get to them on time.
- **Feeling comfortable** – you have a right and responsibility to be at appointments and hear first hand how the pregnancy is going. Talk about it – have a yarn about what comes up in the appointments and try to ask about anything you didn't understand.
- **Sharing the load** – checking in with mum by asking: 'What can I do to support you?'
- **Getting ready** – ask what to expect during labor and birth, and what dads can do to be supportive.
- **Backing each other up** – if appointments make you feel uneasy, or something is said that upsets you both, respectfully speak up. You are there to support your partner, bub and to be a good dad and that's a good thing.

'My partner said to me: "You comfort me and keep me safe when no one else has ever done it, besides my dad that is no longer with us," and I thought it was very powerful that she said that.'

HARLEY, DAD

Providing for family

Dads can provide for mum and bub in lots of ways. It might be hunting, fishing, preparing food and cleaning up afterwards.

'Busting ourselves and working to provide is hard. Sometimes we need to put a smile on for the kids. But don't bottle things up, find supportive family and friends. Sometimes connecting through helping others is good. Sometimes we need to talk about the things that break us and make us cry. Other times we need to make a joke to stop us from crying.'

HARLEY, DAD

But most important is that dads can provide love, nurturing and emotional support to their family. It doesn't cost money, it's available 24/7 and everyone is a winner when dads give care.

Being a strong Aboriginal man involves love: for mother, Country, Elders, family, children and kin.

Talking, singing and reading to baby in the womb

Dads can talk, sing songs and read books to bub in the womb. If you know your traditional language, you can talk to them in lingo. Talking to bub through mum's belly is a great way to share traditional stories. If you know how to play the Yidaki (Didgeridoo) you can play that for bub too. Singing songs or just talking is enough – as long as your baby hears your voice, and your partner experiences you showing care.

This is a time for preparation

Pregnancy is a good time to start learning how to be a good dad. You can learn what babies need by talking to Elders, uncles, aunties, community workers, men's groups and Aboriginal health services.

You are not expected to know everything and no one is perfect. There is no 'one size fits all'. Be open-minded, learn new ways and find what works for you and your family.

> *'Sometimes fellas don't try because they are scared to be wrong. I had to learn that in so many ways. This is not once-off stuff, keep going for the rest of your life. And don't let your mistakes hold you back.'*
>
> HARLEY, DAD

Learning about culture so you can share it with your kids

Don't be afraid to ask family, friends or Community members to find out more about your culture and obligations as a man, father and partner. Learning about culture is a lifelong process as it has always been in traditional Lore.

As you learn, you may change and grow. You might:

- understand family and connections differently
- connect with Country and with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- learn about and undertake cultural obligations to family and Community.

Your connection to your baby can also grow by sharing your cultural knowledge with them once they are born.

More information

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- Baby Coming, You Ready? has information for dads

- SMS4DeadlyDads sends short texts with info for dads

Birth to 1 year old

'My daughter, my first-born child, she represents that first hope and that first experience of becoming a father.'

LOU, DAD

Staying strong to keep mum and kids safe

Dads can protect mum and baby. But sometimes we need to reach out to our supports to help us stay strong.

'The first year of life can shape how kids cope. Everything has got to be calming. It can't be chaotic and screaming.'

JAMIE, DAD

If you are feeling worried or no good, you can call 13YARN on 13 92 76 to talk confidentially to another Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. It will be a culturally safe conversation with no judgement.

Understanding identity

Dads can help children know who they are and where they come from. Telling children who their mob is and how they are connected to Community is important.

'I learned about my bloodlines and who I am through talking to family and reaching out. It is a journey that happens over years.'

HARLEY, DAD

Storytelling

Dads can pass down cultural knowledge and values by sharing stories. Or maybe you can find local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Community members who can share stories if you don't know any. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

There are also many places online you can find cultural yarns, watch a video or listen to a podcast from people sharing their story – WellMob has a list of podcasts to check out.

Scan the QR code to go to the WellMob website.

More information

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- SMS4DeadlyDads sends short texts with info for dads.

- The booklet *Koori parenting, what works for us* shares ideas from Aboriginal parents with childhood trauma on what helped them break cycles of intergenerational trauma.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn to communicate with family members, Community and other children in their early years, and it's during this stage that their brains develop faster than at any other time in their lives.[2]

Pride in culture

Dads can encourage children at this age to be proud of their identity and culture. If you can support them to embrace their identity now, there will be no stopping them!

Things like reading them an Aboriginal children's book, sharing your knowledge about Country and culture and attending Community events with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Even painting up for special events like NAIDOC start to build a sense of identity. And if you know any traditional language, you can teach it to your kids.

'It is hard to be proud of who you are if you don't know who you are and how you fit in. That is why identity matters. But identity is often overlooked by services, so we have to keep looking to find the supports we need.'

JAMIE, DAD

Connecting to Country

Dads can take their toddler to lots of places to connect to Country. You can take them on outings to special places, or just stop, watch and listen to nature wherever you may be.

Kids love to connect to their senses – giving them time and space to be in nature helps them start to connect to Country and may even calm them if feeling tired or cranky. Some ideas for connecting you could do with your toddler include:

- **Water:** Sitting on the riverbank, creek or beach and listening to the waves or watching the water flow by
- **Earth:** Feeling the dirt, sand or grass between your toes
- **Fire:** Safely watching a campfire or having a smoking ceremony or cleansing
- **Plants:** Touching the trunk of a tree, running your hands through soft grass or picking berries, fruit or cones
- **Animals:** Watching how birds, insects or bigger animals move, and dancing or moving like these animals

Learning about their culture and connecting to Country is good for children. It also helps make sure Country will be cared for in the future. This is part of traditional custodianship. So is holding care, knowledge and connection for our children.

More information

In the video *Play and learning* (9 minutes, 22 seconds) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers talk about singing, playing games, reading books and drawing with their children (ages 0–8 years). Scan the QR code to watch *Play and learning*.

3 to 5 years old

Relationships and connections with family and kin let children know that they are loved and their world is safe. At this age the foundations for learning, healthy habits and behaviours are set up.[2]

Nature play

Dads can support nature and sensory play with their kids. This is good for children, and good for the relationships between parent and child and Country.

Teaching values

Dads can pass on important cultural values to children. This can include yarns about roles and responsibilities, such as respect for Elders and caring for country. Children might be interested in languages, what place names mean and personal or family stories such as 'when I was a kid …'

'The biggest thing you learned from fathers and uncles was about caring. Going out hunting the food was divided up. Another thing was understanding your own family tree. How you behave and speak to each other with dignity and respect.'

DARRYL KICKETT[3]

Dads being there for kids

At ages 3 to 5 years, kids will be starting preschool or kindy soon. Dads can help teachers encourage their child's identity by telling them it is important and sharing some cultural knowledge.

You can show an interest in what your kids are learning, and help them with counting and reading. And you can let them know you are always there for them.

'Take the time to understand your child's views. It is hard to find the time when we are busy, but ask how they are and help them manage their difficulties. Your kids need to know they can ask you as a father for help when they need it.'

JAMIE, DAD

Make time to talk about how life is going. Eating food together at least once a day is good for kids. Making time to sit and yarn together at breakfast or dinnertime is an easy way to switch off distractions and tune in together as a family.

'Don't teach it. Show it. Be loving and nurturing. Always say you love them.'

HARLEY, DAD

Cultural events

Dads can take children to local cultural events. It can help the whole family connect and feel a sense of belonging.

If living off country, trying to connect with local mob is important. While this isn't always possible, showing up to local community events or school cultural days is a good way to meet the local mob. Once your child is at school, arrange a yarn with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers or support staff. Get to know other members of the community in sporting events, arts exhibitions or other public gatherings. It's often the informal yarns you have with mob that create the best opportunity to share culture and the benefits of community with your child.

Going to local NAIDOC Week and other Community events that celebrate culture is a great way for your kids to meet other local kids. Take along a picnic blanket and a feed and join in as much as you can. Even going to the local park for kids to play on the swings or ride scooters or bikes can be a great way to meet other young families.

Ideas for cooking

Scan the QR codes to open information on your phone or tablet.

- You might like to search for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recipes online. Or search for a recipe that includes bush foods, like wattle seed or lemon myrtle.
- Check out SBS NITV for some good cooking shows.

- Deadly Tucker cookbooks have some recipes

- The *Living Strong: Healthy Lifestyle Cookbook* has healthy recipes including some traditional cooking ideas.

- The WellMob website has resources on eating well and bush tucker.

Eating well

Bush tucker

Deciding what to do

It is OK if you don't know where to start. Other families have shared some ideas they found helpful. You'll find these in the section 'Ideas to share with you'.

References

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2. Healing Foundation (n.d.). *Child Development stages* [Web page]. Healing Foundation and Emerging Minds
3. Collard, L., Adams, M., Palmer, D., & McMullan, J. (2016). *Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project*. The Fathering Project.