



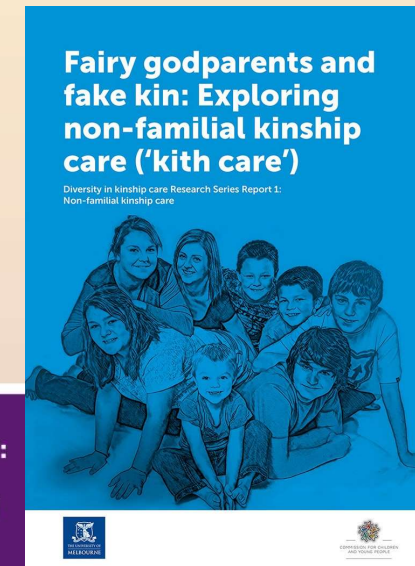
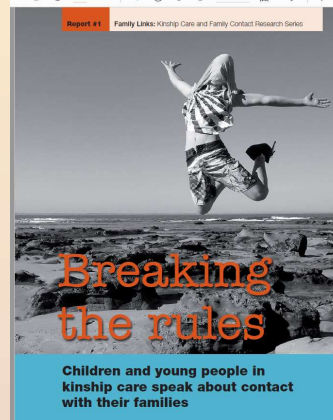
It is the story of us all:
Learning from Australian Indigenous
communities about family & kinship care

International Colloquium on Child Care in the Extended Family
School of Judiciary of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
November 6-8, 2023



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My background: Practitioner turned researcher & advocate













AUSTRALIA

An island country/continent.

One of the most urbanised countries in the world; most major cities on the coast. Sparsely populated 'Red Centre'.

Colonised by Great Britain 18th Century; independence in 1901.

Population: 26 million, mostly generated by immigration.

Nearly 1 million Indigenous people, approx. 4% of total population.



Indigenous peoples of Australia



- 92% Aboriginal people
- 4% Torres Strait Islanders
- 4% identify as both Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders
- 35% in major cities, 44% regional areas, 22% remote areas.



Map of Indigenous Australia



Approx 500 different nations: own territories, languages.

The Torres Strait Islands (part of Queensland)



Torres Strait Islanders

- 4% of Australia's Indigenous population are Torres Strait Islanders.
- Another 4% identify as both Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander.
- Mostly Melanesians; cultural links to Papua New Guinea (country to the north of Australia).
- Unique practice of Cultural Adoption now recognised in Queensland law.



Australian Indigenous history

- Terra nullius 'land belonging to no-one'
– an assumed mandate to take the land.
- Colonial history: devastating land dispossession, violence, racism, dislocation, massacres, introduction of disease & alcohol, removal of Aboriginal children up to the 1970s (The Stolen Generations).
- 1962: Indigenous people permitted to vote in national elections.
- 1971: Indigenous people first counted in the Australian census.







Legislation – slow progress

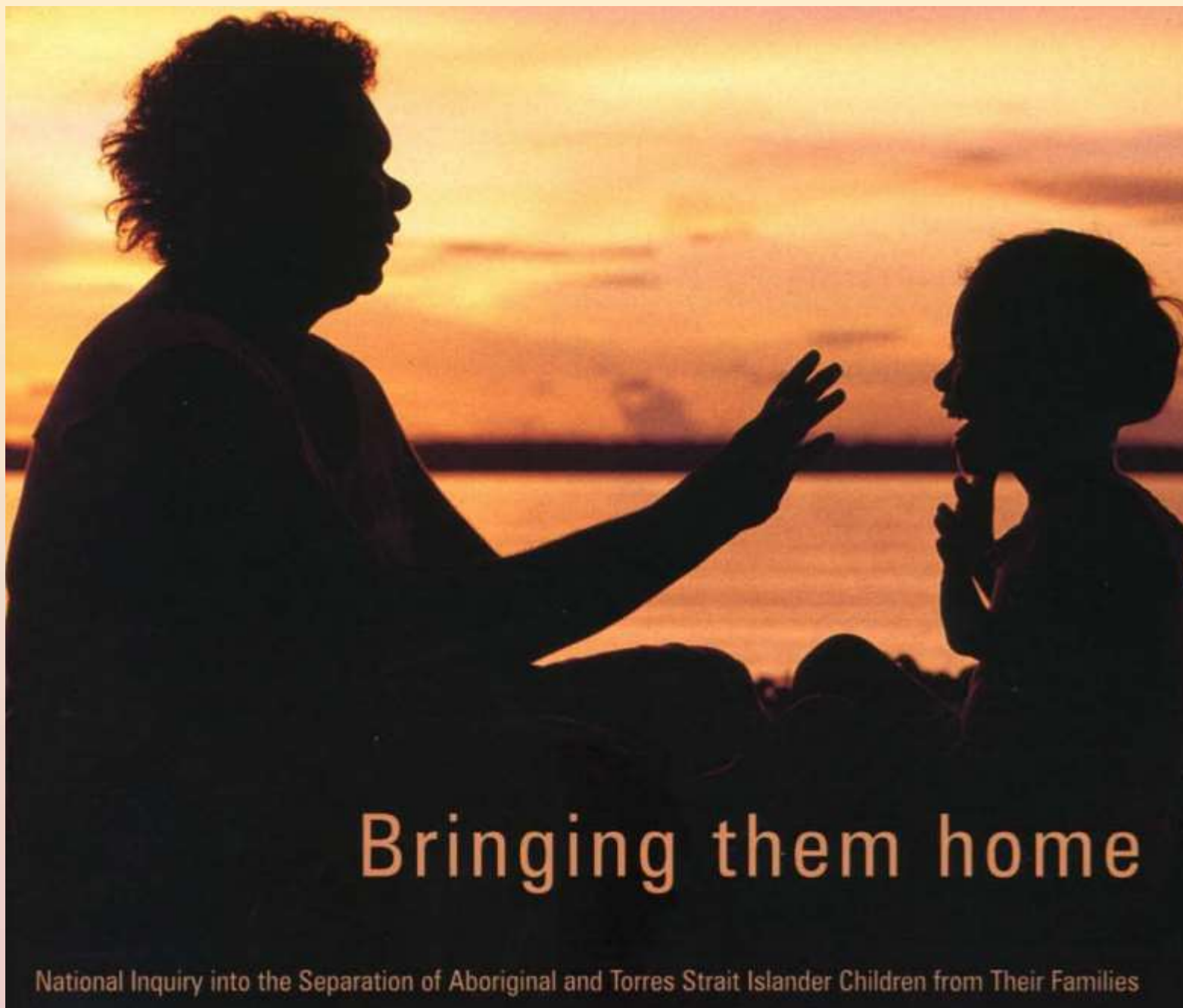
- 1992: The High Court
'Mabo decision': Australia was not terra nullius when European settlement occurred. The Meriam people of the Torres Straits were entitled to possession of the Murray Islands.
- 2023: Failed referendum to enshrine an Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander consultative body 'The Voice' in the Constitution.



The Stolen Generations

- The name given to the large number of Aboriginal people who were forcibly removed from their families for several decades up to the 1960s.
- There are more than 33,000 survivors, all of whom will be aged 50 and over in 2023.
- One third of all Australian Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander adults are descended from Stolen Generations.





Bringing them home

National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families

Repercussions



- Fear of authority, child protection, research.
- Fear of loss of children, contact with them.
- Poverty, trauma and its effects.
- Determination to break the cycle of care.



Indigenous children in care

- Around half of Aboriginal children in statutory care are in kinship care – but not always kinship care as Aboriginal people understand it.
- Kinship is defined by a child's Aboriginal community according to specific rules of kinship.
- Protective placements made with non-Aboriginal family or friends may or may not meet with the approval of the community.
- Consultation is essential.



Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

- Removal of any Aboriginal child must be a last resort.
- If, after consultation with an Aboriginal welfare organization removal of a child is unavoidable, authorities must listen to that organization's direction.
- The child must be placed within the extended family
- If not possible, the child may be placed within the Aboriginal community close to the child's family.
- If no Aboriginal placement is available, the Aboriginal organisation may agree to the child being placed with a non-Aboriginal family providing the child's culture, identity & contact with the Aboriginal community are maintained.



Family Links: Kinship Care and Family Contact research project

- Survey of kinship caregivers receiving government caregiver payments in Victoria, Australia (431 responses).
- Focus groups & interviews with
 - 21 children/young people in kinship care
 - 20 parents of children in kinship care
 - 68 caregivers
 - 18 kinship care workers.
- Nested study of Aboriginal kinship care (13 staff/caregivers).



Setting up the project

- Cultural respect training
- Aboriginal representation on research reference group
- Visits & discussions with services agreeing to participate
- Participating services reviewed draft report.
- Journal article co-authored with Aboriginal participant.



The survey

- 431 responses.
- 54 caring for Indigenous children:
 - 15 indigenous caregivers
 - 39 non-indigenous caregivers
- The 54 caring for total of 109 Indigenous children.



The caregivers of Indigenous children

	<i>Over 50</i>	<i>Average no. of children in kinship care</i>	<i>% single</i>	<i>% children under 10</i>	<i>Total caregivers</i>
Indigenous	67%	2.4	89%	70%	15
Non-indigenous	56%	1.6	44%	57%	39

- Mostly women; mostly grandmothers.
- 47% of Indigenous carers 3-4 children in their care;
13% of non-Indigenous carers had 3-4 children in their care.

Note: Life expectancy of Indigenous women is 65 years;
Life expectancy of non-Indigenous Australian women 83 years.

The consultations

- Three Aboriginal services

- 2 rural, 1 metropolitan.

- 13 participants

- 11 Aboriginal; 2 non-Indigenous with Aboriginal family

- 3 men, 10 women

- 5 caregivers, 11 service workers (overlap).



Themes of the consultations

- The nature of family
- Meaning of safety
- Culturally appropriate assessment
- Contact and connection with family
- Support needs
- Cultural awareness
- Learnings for working with all families.



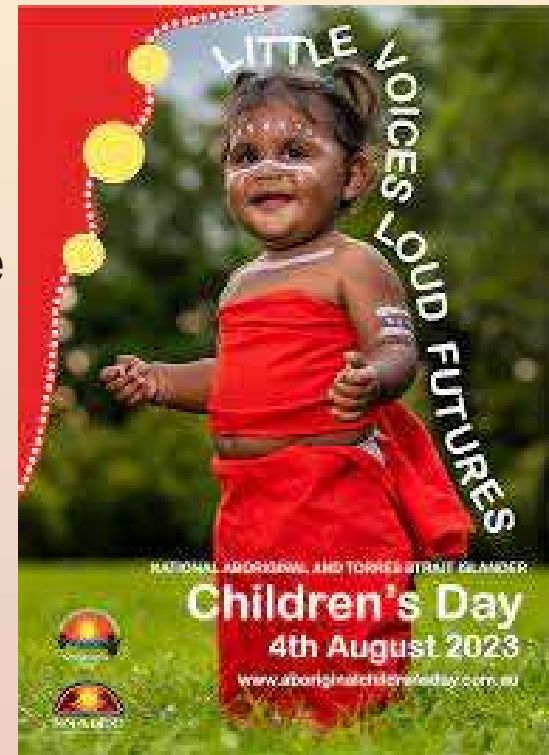
The nature of family

- Families are large and diverse
- Aunties, uncles and cousins everywhere
- 'Who is family' is defined by the community itself
- People may be adopted into the family
- Contact and connection are everything
- Culture and family are inseparable.



Safety first

- Freedom from physical & sexual abuse
- Freedom from emotional abuse
- Cultural safety...



Cultural safety



- Shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge.
- Learning together with dignity; truly listening.
- Strategic reform to remove barriers to health, wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal people: addressing unconscious bias, racism, and discrimination.
- Supporting Aboriginal self-determination: sharing power (decision-making and governance) and resources with Aboriginal communities, especially in the design, delivery and evaluation of services for Aboriginal people.

Culturally appropriate assessments for care in the extended family

- Awareness of history and its impact
- Aboriginal participation
- Cultural obligation
- Household constellation
- Police checks
- Cultural context of threats of physical punishment.





Mandatory checking of police (criminal) records

Look, a lot of our mob are pretty alright, but they don't like police nosing around. We tried this, and we tried that to get our mob on board...I don't know how we're going to do it. I think it needs to be done away from our office, maybe at a community hall or something with a feed, to give them a police check.



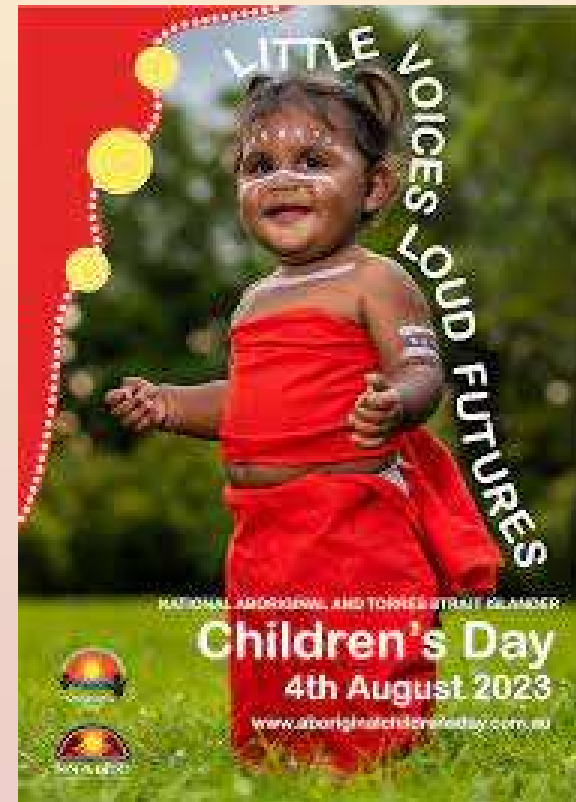
Patience is a virtue...



Look, the first thing I tell a lot of non-Indigenous people, and sometimes Aboriginal workers too, our mob is very loud. They're only loud when they're stressed and kids have been removed [or] they haven't got housing, they've got a crisis, they've got a death in the family. They need to have that time to let them express their feelings and don't take it personally. But even though that might happen, make sure their safety is in place...they just had a baby, they're at wits end.... Sit down and let them be, they calm down.... They're frustrated, who else do they go to? Don't judge them I suppose.

Children's contact with family

- It's an imperative
- It may happen, despite any rules
- Listen to kids, listen to everyone
- Emotional & physical support
- Staff training
- Issues with cultural support plans.



Support needs of families

- Financial difficulties
- Housing, transport
- Need for information about responding to traumatised children
- Emotional needs of caregivers
- Parents' needs.



Cultural awareness

- Training for non-indigenous workers
- Connection between Child Protection and Aboriginal communities
- Barriers within families.



Dealing with the cultural divide

The grandmother is non-Indigenous... she's very negative towards the community.... it's a different perspective now on the grandmother's part because we sat down and explained it all... And we're going to introduce the community....and now she's a very happy Grandma. In the first place it was, 'You're not taking my grandkids anywhere'.



Learning for work with all families

- Patience, non-judgemental attitudes
- 'Language shapes thought'
- Creativity in responses
- Listening
- Building trust and relationships.



That little one...

That little one was doing really nasty stuff, cutting stuff...for us, it was how you can't replace the mother or father...for us as a family it was understanding where she sat, and knowing that when she fell, we were there to pick her up.



To be effective cross-culturally...

We need:

- Empathy and sensitivity
- Language
- Creativity
- Listening to children, parents, caregivers
- Building trust and relationships.



‘If you get it right with us, you get it right with everyone.’
(Muriel Bamblett, CEO Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency)

Building the pool of Indigenous caregivers

- Empathy and sensitivity.
- Take care with the language we use.
- Creativity in meetings, discussions.
- Listening to children, parents, caregivers
- Building trust & relationships.



Reconciliation



- Strengthening relationships between Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people, for the benefit of all Australians.
- Our part may be to reduce the number of Indigenous children in inappropriate care arrangements.
- Reconciliation is an ongoing journey.



“It is the
story of all
of us.”

**Learning from Aboriginal
communities about supporting
family connection**

Report available from
mkiraly@unimelb.edu.au

Also at this (ugly) link:

<https://vgls.sdp.sirsidynix.net.au/client/search/asset/1161379>

Journal article

Kiraly, M., et al. (2015). ‘It’s a family responsibility’: Family and cultural connection for Aboriginal children in kinship care *Children Australia* 40(1): 23-32.

Every culture is different...

I am no expert on Indigenous issues...but I learned to...

- Recognise the effect of colonial history
- Listen and learn
- Accord respect, even if you don't understand
- Take time to build trust
- Ask, don't tell.



Thank you for listening.

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