



Working with Aboriginal children, families and communities

See, understand and respond
to child sexual abuse.

Issued by FACS for use by Child Protection Practitioners.

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Family &
Community
Services

Resources

The kit contains a number of practical resources for you to use in your work with children and families. Below are the resources for the Working with Aboriginal children, families and communities section.



My Place My Story: An illustrated book for Aboriginal children which contains activities designed to open up a conversation about child sexual abuse.



Helping to Make It Better: 🖱️ Factsheets in clear, plain English that respond to common concerns for parents, address myths about child sexual abuse and provide parents with advice.



The Mothering Tree: An illustrated book which describes the myths of child sexual abuse, the impact of child sexual abuse and common responses to child sexual abuse.



Inside Out: A book which uses illustrations to describe common emotions felt by children who have experienced child sexual abuse.



Family Safety Circles: 🖱️ A tool to help children and parents to discuss 'who should know what' about child protection concerns.

Working with Aboriginal children, families and communities

About this chapter

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Sexual violence was not part of Aboriginal culture prior to colonisation.¹ Sexual abuse against Aboriginal children was perpetrated by colonists and permitted by law.² The NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce found that some of the children who were forcibly removed as part of the stolen generation were sexually assaulted while in institutions and foster care. These children are now the grandparents, mothers, fathers, uncles and aunts who may be struggling to respond to child sexual abuse in their communities today.

Reports about child sexual abuse are significantly overrepresented in Aboriginal communities. The NSW Taskforce found that Aboriginal people are very concerned about the overrepresentation of child sexual abuse in their families and communities and that most, if not all, Aboriginal communities have been affected. The NSW Taskforce also found that sexual abuse of Aboriginal children is grossly underreported, so that any statistical data is likely to underestimate the extent of the problem.

The reasons for this overrepresentation and underreporting are multi-layered and complex. An overarching factor is the unresolved intergenerational trauma and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people as a result of European colonisation. There is also a strong fear of FACS because of the past child protection practices with Aboriginal children.



Children Say...

'Nobody wants to roll up to DOCS and say: look, you know, my child is being sexually abused by an uncle, a father or whatever and I mean the reality is DOCS historically hasn't dealt with those notifications. Historically it hasn't been handled well for Aboriginal people.'



Confidential consultant speaking to the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce.

This chapter has been developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Policy Unit and senior Aboriginal practitioners. It will provide you with practical information and ideas for collaborative work with Aboriginal children, families and communities. The chapter focuses on working with Aboriginal people who are living with or connected to a community. It is important to remember that every community is different and every Aboriginal person's experience of community is different. It is important to consult with an Aboriginal practitioner to understand the way that each community operates, and to use tools such as eco-maps to explore the child and family's connection to the community.

¹ Taskforce, A. C. S. A. (2006). Breaking the silence: Creating the future. Addressing child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities in NSW. *NSW Attorney General's Department, Sydney* cites a 1987 Queensland Department of Community Services funded a court-based expert study that determined that child sexual abuse was not a traditional cultural practice.

² Fitzgerald, T. (2001). Cape York Justice Study: November 2001. Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Queensland (the Fitzgerald Report) describes the 1901 amendments to the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Opium Act 1897* (QLD). The amendment states that permits should be obtained to employ a female and that sexual assault was now an offence 'if medical proof showed the girl to be pre-puberty'. This amendment implies that sexual assault of pre-pubescent Aboriginal girls was occurring and implicitly permits the sexual assault of pubescent Aboriginal girls and Aboriginal women.



1 Part one: Seeing and understanding

Will help you to understand some of the barriers to reporting child sexual abuse that are particular to Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Key question:

- What might prevent this child, family or community from reporting sexual abuse?



2 Part two: Responding

Will help you to work with Aboriginal children, families and communities through effective cultural consultation and collaborative work with the community.

Key question:

- How can I effectively engage with this child, family and community?



① Part one: Seeing and understanding

Will help you to understand some of the barriers to reporting child sexual abuse that are particular to Aboriginal children, families and communities.

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- What might prevent this child, family or community from reporting sexual abuse?

1 Part one: Seeing and understanding



Factors that may impact on reporting child sexual abuse in some Aboriginal communities

Various government reports into child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities have shown that Aboriginal people are very concerned about child sexual abuse and desperately want to protect their children from harm. These reports have also discussed the widespread underreporting of sexual abuse concerns to the criminal or child protection systems.

By understanding the barriers to reporting and disclosing sexual abuse, we begin to see that underreporting is not a problem for individual children and families, but rather one that needs to be understood and addressed in the context of racism and the marginalisation of Aboriginal people.

Go to



the **'Working with children'** chapter to understand the barriers to disclosure for the general population of children. These barriers are also likely to be experienced by Aboriginal children.

We know that the vast majority of children face barriers to speaking out about their abuse and that many parents and communities struggle to immediately respond to children with belief and support.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners say...

'Don't assume that because the family is Aboriginal they will automatically be connected and supported by that community. Consult with an Aboriginal practitioner.'

Lisa Matheson, manager casework



Diagram One

(overleaf on page 10-11)



will help you to see and understand how the barriers to disclosure can be compounded for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

The diagram is based on the findings of the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce and a 2011 paper by the Australian Institute of Criminology which examines the reasons for non-disclosure of violence in Aboriginal communities.³



³ While the article Willis, M. (2011). Non-disclosure of violence in Australian Indigenous communities. *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice*, (405), 1. does discuss general violence in Aboriginal communities, the findings are relevant to child sexual abuse violence.

1 Part one: Seeing and understanding



Factors that may impact on reporting child sexual abuse in some Aboriginal communities continued...

Diagram One

Factors that may impact on reporting and disclosing child sexual abuse in some Aboriginal communities.

There are many positive aspects to living in small and interconnected communities, which have been widely discussed and acknowledged. However, living in small communities can also present barriers to reporting and disclosure due to beliefs that:

- confidentiality will not be kept
- the child and their family may be isolated from the community as a result of the disclosure
- there may be violent retribution from the community towards the child or their family as a result of the disclosure
- reporting the concerns will mean that societal rules and obligations to maintain family relationships will be broken
- speaking out may lead to violence between family members or the wider community
- the power and influence held by the offender or their family will mean that speaking out about abuse will affect the child and family's access to food, housing and other vital services.



In some Aboriginal communities, historic and current experiences may cause mistrust and fear of police and the legal system, which may lead to concerns that:

- girls cannot discuss private sexual matters with male police officers
- police and the judiciary may not respond to the victim in a culturally appropriate way
- the child and other family members may not understand the language and customs of the legal system
- the child will be seen as less credible and the report will not be taken as seriously because of racism and marginalisation of Aboriginal people
- some members of the judiciary and police may hold the view that child sexual abuse is a cultural practice (these views are offensive and have been strongly refuted in the Northern Territory inquiry into child sexual abuse)
- some police or the judiciary may believe child sexual abuse is 'normal' in Aboriginal communities and are therefore unwilling to act.





The association of FACS with the past practices of forced removal of children from Aboriginal communities may lead to concerns that:

- children will be removed from their family and community
- parents will be blamed for their child's sexual abuse
- the responses of child protection practitioners will not be culturally appropriate.



The community may hold concerns about the consequences for the offender including the possibility of:

- deaths in custody
- racism and ill-treatment in goal
- exclusion from the community
- community violence, 'payback' or culturally-related violent retribution against the suspected offender.



In some Aboriginal communities there may be concerns about talking about sexual matters generally.

This lack of discussion about genitals, puberty and sex may lead to increased feelings of shame and self-blame about sexual abuse. The stigma associated with homosexual sexuality in some Aboriginal communities may mean that male victims of sexual abuse by male offenders experience even greater barriers to disclosure.



Some Aboriginal people may have limited access to culturally appropriate services and workers (including female police officers and doctors).

This may be particularly true for communities in remote and regional towns. A lack of access to services can also include a lack of culturally appropriate information on what constitutes sexual abuse and information about what to do or say if you are concerned about child sexual abuse.



In 2006, the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce reported that violence had become so widespread, across generations it was now seen as normal in most Aboriginal communities.

The NSW Taskforce also found that exposure to pornography was commonplace and that children were being exposed both deliberately and accidentally. This constant exposure to violence, pornography and highly sexualised language can mean that children see sexual abuse as normal and in some way inevitable. This normalisation can also prevent safe people in the community from recognising and responding to child sexual abuse.



② Part two: Responding



This section will help you to work with Aboriginal children, families and communities through effective cultural consultation and collaborative work with the community.

Key question:

- How can I effectively engage with this child, family and community?

2 Part two: Responding



Questions to consider in your cultural consultation with an Aboriginal practitioner

You need to consult with Aboriginal practitioners to do a good job of supporting Aboriginal children. Consultation addresses the historic lack of self-determination experienced by Aboriginal children and families and mistrust of child welfare agencies.⁴ To make sure your consultation is effective it is important to prepare with questions that will help you to understand the child, family and community. These questions are based on the [Aboriginal consultation guide](#), adapted for this resource in consultation with the Aboriginal Policy Unit. You can find the consultation guide on the Casework Practice site.

Child

- Does the child identify as Aboriginal? If not - why? If yes - what community, country and nation do they belong to or identify with?
- Does the child belong to the same family / kinship group as the suspected offender?
- Does the child identify safe people in their family or community?
- Does the child identify people in their family or community as unsafe?
- Does the child have access to child sexual abuse services and medical treatment?

What cultural information do I need to know in order to:

- engage with the child
- understand the child's relationship with the parent / suspected offender / other family members
- understand the language that the child may use to talk about sexual abuse?

What cultural norms and beliefs should I be aware of when engaging with this child?

In Practice



Consultation is an important part of casework. Consultations should be formal and documented by the Aboriginal practitioner.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners say...

'You do not need in your own right to become the Aboriginal cultural expert. The family are the cultural experts - your role is to develop expertise at being a connector and engager with a family.'

Kylie Jacky, director, Review of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care.



⁴ The Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW discussed the importance of both internal and external Aboriginal consultation. *The Working with Aboriginal people and communities: a practice resource* provides an overview of the historic mistrust of welfare agencies as a result of past policies and practices of the NSW and Australian Governments.

Family

- Does this family identify as Aboriginal? If not, why not? If they do, what community, country and nation do they belong to or identify with? Are they related to each other by blood, marriage or community?
- Does this family belong to the local community? If not how long have they been in this community? What brought them here?
- Does this family live in an isolated location where services are difficult to access?
- Does this family have regular contact / a relationship with community Elders? If so, who are they?
- Does this family experience any family dynamics that may impact on the current child protection concerns?
- Does this family have links with any other welfare or support agencies (including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services)?
- Who are the leaders in the family?
- Who are the less powerful / respected members of the family?

How has the family experienced the following and how may this impact on their response to the current child protection concerns?

- The stolen generation?
- Sexual abuse?
- Aboriginal deaths in custody?
- The child protection system?
- Other government agencies (including the legal system, health and education)?
- Non-government agencies?

What cultural information do I need to know in order to:

- engage with the family
- understand the family's relationship with the suspected offender
- understand the language the family may use to talk about sexual abuse and sexual matters generally
- understand the family's relationship with the community
- assess the family's ability to keep the child safe.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners Say...

'Aboriginal deaths in custody are a very real concern for families. When a family is thinking about reporting child sexual abuse to the police they might be weighing up the risk to the child and the risk to the offender also.'

Debbie Faulkner, Senior Project Officer, Aboriginal, Sydney District



Suspected offender

- Does the suspected offender identify as Aboriginal? If not, why not?
- Does the suspected offender hold a position of power / leadership within the family or community?
- Does the suspected offender have a support network of people in their community / family?

What cultural information do I need to know in order to:

- engage with the suspected offender
- understand the suspected offender's relationship with the child / parent / other family members
- understand potential grooming tactics that may be used by the suspected offender?

2 Part two: Responding



Community

How does the community respond to the child, the family and the suspected offender?

Does this community:

- understand the current child protection concerns
- understand the dynamics of sexual abuse, for example, grooming, risk factors for abuse, and the impact of abuse
- demonstrate an ability or willingness to respond to child protection concerns
- function well and generally keep children safe (consider rates of substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic and family violence and sexual assault in the community)
- have access to child sexual abuse services?

Who are the Elders / leaders / respected people in the community and how are they connected to the family, child and suspected offender?

How have community members experienced the following and how may this impact on their response to the current child protection concerns?

- The stolen generation?
- Aboriginal deaths in custody?
- The child protection system?
- Other government agencies?



Our Aboriginal Practitioners say...

'Take the time to understand the language an Aboriginal person is using when they are talking about sexual abuse. For example, an Aboriginal person might say that a child has been 'messed around with' or 'fiddled with' to describe a child who has been sexually abused. If you don't ask the questions you won't understand what they mean and you might stop them from talking to us again.'

Kaylene Kennedy, manager casework



What cultural information do I need to know in order to:

- build trust with the community
- understand the community's relationship with the suspected offender
- assess the community's ability to keep the child safe
- assess the impact of the community on the risk to the child
- understand language that may be used by the community to talk about sexual abuse or sexual matters?

What cultural norms and beliefs should I be aware of when engaging with this family?

In Practice



External consultation might be useful to gain a different perspective on the child protection concerns or get more detail about the community.

External consultants could include:

- Aboriginal teachers
- Aboriginal community liaison officers employed by NSW Police (be mindful that police officers are legally required to act on any information that a crime may have occurred)
- Aboriginal health workers
- Aboriginal staff working in local, state and commonwealth government and non-government agencies.

It is important to make sure the external consultant understands their role and the importance of confidentiality. The Aboriginal Consultation Guide provides a privacy declaration form that should be signed by all external consultants.

You will need to have the parent's permission before exchanging information when an agency is not a prescribed body under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, 1998.



When my child said she had been
sexually assaulted by someone in our family

People said that she must be lying

People said that she must
have made a mistake

People said he would have never
done these things

People said he was always so kind

People said he was the one all the
children loved the most

People said that children have a
way of making up stories

People said that these stories were said about our
children and never others

But I said she was telling the truth

I said that this was no mistake

I said that he must have done these things

I said that he obviously wasn't so kind

I said that he was the one who
didn't love children at all

I said that this was a story we all
had to hear

I said that this story should not happen to our
people or any other people

Not to our children or any other children

But it had.



A poem by an Aboriginal mother,
found in 'The Mothering Tree - healing from the sexual assault of your child',
a Rosie's Place publication.

2 Part two: Responding



Working with the community

A strong community can provide support to children and families, help children to talk about abuse, support children after disclosure and hold offenders to account. There are many examples of Aboriginal practitioners, elders and community members taking a stand against child sexual abuse, creating child-safe communities and ending the cycle of violence. Despite this, there are also concerns, reflected in successive reports and findings on child sexual abuse in Aboriginal Communities in NSW, Queensland and the Northern Territory, that child sexual abuse (perpetrated by people inside and outside Aboriginal communities) is widespread, and that social dysfunction, intergenerational abuse and violence in some Aboriginal communities mean that it is also normalised.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners say...

'A child is not just victimised by the offender; they may also not be supported in the community. In Aboriginal culture it is important that you don't just look at the individual child and their family. You need to also think about the community and their capacity to respond supportively to the child. The community's capacity to support the child will depend on their knowledge of the dynamics of child sexual abuse, the impact of abuse on children and the level of services available to the child, the parent and the suspected offender.'

Kelly Ramsden, manager client services



The advice to Aboriginal communities below is slightly adapted from 'Through Young Black Eyes' - a training resource designed to help Aboriginal communities keep children safe.

The resource also provides practical advice on preventing child sexual abuse, recognising child sexual abuse and responding to child sexual abuse.

Important things you should say

To the children:

- You are important, you will be listened to, you are not alone.
- You are right to talk about these things with people you trust.
- We will work together in a respectful way to keep you safe.
- Abuse and neglect is not your fault.

To community leaders and parents:

- The child's safety needs to be everyone's priority and everyone's responsibility.
- Listen carefully, children who are believed and supported can recover from abuse.
- Workers and volunteers who are caring for children need to support families to notice and speak up about abuse.
- Be brave and encourage community members to be aware and disclose abuse.
- Don't protect perpetrators - challenge them to change.
- Build on what is already working.
- Let community members know that an offender is out of jail so that they keep their children safe.

To offenders:

- All types of abusive behaviours must stop.
- Show courage and take responsibility for what you have done.
- Seek advice and support to help you change.
- Don't protect other perpetrators.



'The trauma of child sexual assault makes it very difficult for people to develop healthy relationships... because you've got, you know, children being raised by like, three generations in a row where sexual and family violence has been part of their life.'

Confidential consultant speaking in the taskforce report.






Responding to child sexual abuse through community education

Community Education

Many of the reports into sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities have recommended that FACS respond to sexual abuse by working closely with the Aboriginal community. The information below builds on the experiences of CSCs in regional and remote NSW who have worked with Elders and community members to increase awareness of the signs and the impacts of sexual abuse and encourage the community to notice and speak out about any concerns. There is evidence that this approach has led to an increase in reports about sexual abuse in these communities.

When you are working with an Aboriginal child and family you should always consult with Aboriginal practitioners in FACS or Aboriginal practitioners from another agency before consulting with Elders or community members.

If you are consulting with a community member or Elder about a specific child or family, it is critical that confidentiality is discussed and they sign a confidentiality form. Community members should also understand the reason for why you are consulting and what you intend to do with the information provided.

Consultation templates and confidentiality agreements can be found in section five of the [Aboriginal consultation guide](#)  on the Casework Practice site.

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
<p>Community education will only be effective if you are working respectfully alongside the community to reduce their fear of child protection.</p> <p>Education is also important in raising awareness of the range of ways that FACS works to support and protect children who have been sexually abused, emphasising that removal is not the only option.</p> <p>Aboriginal practitioners will be important in helping you understand the community, and your District Aboriginal Cultural Inclusion Plans will provide you with cultural, historical and geographical knowledge about the community.</p>	<p>Make sure the CSC is welcoming and approachable, or meet somewhere that the community feels most comfortable. For example, how are people greeted when they come to the CSC? What do they see? Are they treated respectfully and like other people from the community?</p> <p>Understand the history of the Aboriginal community with child protection services.</p> <p>Understand how the community operates. For example, who are the leaders? What are the community's strengths? What are the community's concerns? Who are the families with a strong history and tradition in the community?</p> <p>Develop relationships with Elders.</p> <p>Attend community gatherings where appropriate.</p> <p>Address common fears and concerns, such as confidentiality, child removal and the impact of the stolen generations, clearly and honestly.</p> <p>Address community concerns about any past or current FACS practices directly, and develop a plan to respond to these concerns.</p> <p>Acknowledge that there are things you don't know and ask for help from Aboriginal practitioners, Aboriginal partner agencies and Elders.</p>

2 Part two: Responding



Responding to child sexual abuse through community education continued...

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
<p>Before providing community education, it can be helpful to demonstrate that you are ready to learn from the community. This strategy can help build trust and may also prevent you from making errors. Wherever possible, work collaboratively with an Aboriginal practitioner.</p> <p>Ask about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">the language the community uses to discuss sexual matters or sexual abusecommunication ideas and things that you should do / avoid doing when working with children and families in the communitywhat their experience has been with FACS and other agencies like policewhat the community understands about sexual abuse and what they would like to achieve by working with you.	<p>‘Talking about sexual abuse can be uncomfortable. Are there some words that most people in the community feel comfortable using when talking about [private parts / sexual abuse / sexual matters]?’</p> <p>‘If I was going to talk to a child in your community about sexual abuse, what should I know? Are there some things that I definitely should do? Are there some things I definitely shouldn’t do?’</p>





Go to



the responding section of the **'Working with children'** chapter for information on recognising when children are trying to tell us about abuse and responding positively. Many of these approaches and tools are also useful for community members and partner agencies.

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
<p>Provide education about the dynamics of sexual abuse, the signs of sexual abuse and the impact of sexual abuse on children.</p>	<p>The Mothering Tree</p> <p>The 'Planting the seeds' and 'Thoughts and feelings' chapters of 'The Mothering Tree' resource can be used to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ common myths about child sexual abuse ■ grooming strategies used by offenders on children, family and community members. <p>The 'Tending the Saplings' chapter of 'The Mothering Tree' describes how sexual abuse can affect children.</p> <p>The 'Through Young Black Eyes' resource provides age-specific detail about the impact of sexual abuse.</p> <p>Traffic Lights</p> <p>Use the 'Traffic Lights' resource and the information in the 'Working with children' chapter to discuss the verbal and non-verbal signs that a child is being sexually abused.</p>
<p>Talk to the community about how they can help children recover from sexual abuse. This helps the community to understand how critical they are in helping children recover. It also reinforces the importance of reporting concerns so that children have access to the services and support to keep them safe from further abuse and help them to recover.</p>	<p>The Mothering Tree</p> <p>The 'Mothering Tree' resource describes how family and community can respond to children who have been sexually abused.</p>
<p>Negative labels can marginalise children and dismiss their experience in all communities. Notice and challenge any negative labels that the community is using to describe children or dismiss concerns about child sexual abuse. For example: 'she is a liar; she leads men on; she wears slutty clothes; I knew she wanted my man / boyfriend'.</p>	<p>Asking questions about negative labels can help the community understand how they impact on the child:</p> <p>'Tell me more about that label? Where does it come from?'</p> <p>'What do you think that label means for [the child]?'</p> <p>'It sounds like you are worried about her behaviour, can you tell me what's happening? Why do you think that might be happening?'</p>



2 Part two: Responding




Responding to child sexual abuse through community education

continued...


PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
<p>While the Helpline is the pathway for all risk of serious harm concerns, some Aboriginal people feel uncomfortable reporting private concerns to a stranger over the telephone. By considering alternative strategies, you are able to show the community that you understand the barriers to reporting and are willing to address them.</p>	<p>Consult with community members about how to reduce any fears about the reporting process and develop alternative reporting strategies.</p> <p>Some possible strategies to encourage reporting could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ community members reporting in person at the CSC ■ child protection workers meeting with the community (school, home, health service) to hear community members' concerns ■ community members reporting to partner agencies and these reports being taken seriously ■ community members reporting alongside partner agencies. <p>Important: while different strategies can be used as an alternative to a direct report, you have a responsibility to make sure all concerns of serious risk of harm to a child reach the Helpline.</p>

 **Go to** 

the 'Working with young people at risk of sexual exploitation'  chapter for information on recognising sexual exploitation and the differences between sexual exploitation and a consensual relationship. It will also give you ideas for how to respond to sexual exploitation by supporting young people, their family and their community.



In Practice



We know that some Aboriginal communities can be targeted by offenders because of the belief that the young people living there are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.⁵

When working with a community to respond to child sexual abuse, remember to be curious about the young people in that community.

Ask questions about where they tend to hang out and who they hang out with. Be curious about what young people know about sex and ask the community if they have any worries about their sexual activity. Encourage the community to recognise the warning signs of sexual exploitation and support young people who are risk.

⁵ Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, Wild, R., & Anderson, P. (2007). Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007. Department of the Chief Minister.

Responding to child sexual abuse through collaborative work



In Practice

The taskforce report has described concerns that police in some communities were less likely to respond to reports of sexual abuse from Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people. FACS Aboriginal practitioners have also expressed similar concerns. These concerns can have a significant impact on disclosure of sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities.

FACS is committed to addressing the concerns of Aboriginal families and communities. JIRT has developed the **Enhanced Services Memorandum** to improve access of Aboriginal children who are alleged to have been sexually abused to the JIRT program. This memorandum has significantly increased the number of Aboriginal children who have been accepted for a JIRT intervention. Many of these children would not have met the JIRT eligibility criteria before the memorandum was introduced.

You can also be an important advocate for Aboriginal children and families who are navigating the criminal justice system. Wherever possible, work alongside your JIRT colleagues to:

- understand the reasons why police are not proceeding with charges and explain these to the child and family
- listen to the community and show that you are willing to work collaboratively with police to address their concerns.



'It's very hard for children to build up to give a direct disclosure, only to see nothing happen for such a long period of time, because that inaction, it's not so much what people are saying to them, it's their actions that mean more to them... they feel nothing is happening, nothing has changed.'



Confidential consultant speaking in the taskforce report.



Go to



the seeing and understanding section of the **'Working with the criminal justice system'** chapter to understand the criminal process and the many reasons why police may not charge a suspected offender.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners Say...

'It is important to consult with Aboriginal practitioners to understand what is going on for the family, but we don't want non-Aboriginal practitioners or men to feel like they don't have the confidence or cultural knowledge to talk about sexual abuse with Aboriginal people. It is important for you to ask the difficult questions and speak up when you are worried about sexual abuse.'

Lyn Lawrie, caseworker



2 Part two: Responding



Working with partner agencies to respond to child sexual abuse

The history of harmful interventions by the child protection system may mean that many Aboriginal people feel more comfortable discussing child sexual abuse concerns with agencies other than FACS. The universal nature of agencies such as Aboriginal Medical Services, Early Childhood Health Services and Education may also mean that community members are less likely to be stigmatised when seeking help or advice. Building a relationship with these agencies and addressing child sexual abuse together can be a powerful tool in keeping children safe.

Go to

the responding section of the **'Risk assessment and casework'** chapter to find two ideas for responding to the risk of child sexual abuse. These ideas are practical and creative and can be used by community members and partner agencies who have a strong relationship with the child and family and see them regularly.



Our Aboriginal Practitioners Say...

'When working with isolated Aboriginal communities, time needs to be spent regularly visiting the community to build trust. It is important for the worker to build relationships with the local police also, especially the Aboriginal Liaison Officers as they will have knowledge of the community.'

Debbie Faulkner, senior project officer



PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
Develop a shared understanding of confidentiality.	Understand how partner agencies record information and how they discuss child protection concerns with family and community members.
Talk to community agencies and seek their local knowledge about sexual abuse in the community.	<p>Consider the following questions:</p> <p>How do they respond when they hear about sexual abuse on the grapevine?</p> <p>Are they aware of certain children or families where sexual abuse is a concern?</p> <p>Are they aware of certain geographical areas where sexual abuse is occurring?</p> <p>Is the sexual abuse being perpetrated predominantly by people inside or outside the community?</p> <p>How do they believe the community is responding to the concerns?</p> <p>What are the barriers to reporting that need to be addressed in this community?</p>



Our Aboriginal Practitioners Say...

'I have heard about protective practice mapping that is being undertaken in remote communities (Ali Currung) in the Northern Territory. Children are asked to map their community to identify the hot or cold spots. For example, a hot spot would be places where children are known to be sexually abused, view pornographic material or where known perpetrators live and frequent. A cold spot would be somewhere the child is safe.'

Winsome Matthews, manager, Housing Aboriginal Communities Program (HACP)



PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:	PRACTICE IDEAS:
<p>Work with partner agencies and interagency forums to increase their ability to respond to child sexual abuse.</p>	<p>You may wish to provide education on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the signs of sexual abuse ■ how to support children who they suspect are being sexually abused ■ how to respond to children who speak out about sexual abuse.
<p>Help partner agencies develop policies and practices that reduce the barriers to reporting child protection concerns and build trust between the community and child protection practitioners.</p>	<p>Some suggestions could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ being open about child protection concerns with the family (where possible) ■ reporting child protection concerns (at the CSC or Helpline) alongside community members ■ explaining the role of child protection to children, families and community members.
<p>Encourage partner agencies to develop creative child-centred responses to child sexual abuse.</p>	<p>Some possible suggestions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ being aware of the link between child sexual abuse and other presenting issues (for example, mental health or substance misuse issues) and asking about sexual abuse as part of the intake process ■ three- to six-monthly follow up with families who do not accept the service initially ■ flexible outreach-based therapeutic counselling services ■ community healing groups ■ holistic counselling services that can involve the family and community (where possible) ■ practical help accessing services such as transport, accommodation and support.



'Counselling has only made a big difference to me because I've searched and searched until I found the right one. I found a Koori counsellor, a beautiful gem of a lady. Had I not met her when I was what, 18, 19, yeah I wouldn't be in this chair and able to talk about what I have been through... she said you know 'your culture loves you, you know, your spirituality loves you, you know, your mob loves you. You know even your mum and dad and even though all these terrible things have happened, they love you.'

Confidential consultant speaking to the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce



Case Study



Alyssa's (13) story

Alyssa's story



How can a CSC engage a community?

Zoe is a non-Aboriginal manager client services at Appelton CSC. At the interagency Christmas party Zoe is approached by Rachel, an Aboriginal health worker from the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS). Rachel says that Alyssa, a 13 year-old, came to the AMS yesterday with symptoms of genital herpes that were confirmed on examination. Rachel asked Alyssa about how she thinks she got herpes and Alyssa told her that she is getting paid in 'yandi' (marijuana) for having sex with some older guys from outside town and that lots of her friends are doing it too. Rachel asked Alyssa if her friends were from the community also and Alyssa refused to answer and said that she should 'mind her own business'. Rachel explains that she is not originally from the community and that when she first started working at the AMS the girls and women were very reluctant to attend for sexual health check ups. However, Rachel says that over the last few years she has developed strong relationships with the young women in the community and that they now seem comfortable and confident to ask about their sexual health. Rachel does not want to make individual reports to FACS or to the police because she is fearful that this will lead to retribution from the community and may stop the girls and women coming to the AMS. Rachel also believes that her concerns are related to the whole community and are not just a matter for individual children and families.

Zoe thanks Rachel for sharing her concerns with her. She tells Rachel that she is very worried about Alyssa and her friends and asks Rachel what she would like her to do with that information. Rachel says that she understands that Zoe will need to make a report to the Helpline. Rachel gives Zoe Alyssa's last name and Zoe makes a report. This report is sent directly to the JRU from Helpline with a less than 72-hour response time.



Further information

Rachel and Zoe also talk about how important it is to work together to understand the risks to young women in the Appelton community. They agree to continue to think about a community-based response for responding to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in the community.



Go to



the **'Working with children'** chapter (pages 20-25) for creative ideas on how to help children to talk about sexual abuse. These ideas are generally suitable for all children; however, you should consult with an Aboriginal practitioner to ensure your approach is appropriate for the particular child, family and community you are working with.



A possible response:

Zoe talks to the manager client services at the local JIRT and they agree to keep her up to date on their conversations with Alyssa. They promise to let Zoe know if Alyssa tells them about other children who are being offered 'yandi' in exchange for sex. Zoe and the JIRT manager client services decide that the CSC will focus on a collaborative community based approach while JIRT responds to the report about serious risk of harm to Alyssa.

Zoe consults with a group of Aboriginal practitioners at the CSC. The practitioners acknowledge that they have also heard the same concerns when they have been at social events, and say that although they have asked the community members to report, this has not happened. Two of the Aboriginal practitioners, Wendy and Sonia (who are from the local community) agree to work with Rachel to develop a community-based response.

Wendy, Sonia and Rachel decide to gather a group of older women and provide education on child sexual abuse. Zoe, Rachel and the community Aboriginal health worker use the 'Mothering Tree' and 'Through Young Black Eyes' resources to talk to the older women about the dynamics of sexual abuse including grooming, signs of sexual abuse and the impact of sexual abuse. Zoe provides education on how FACS works with child sexual abuse, and Rachel talks about the services that the AMS and sexual assault counselling services can provide.

Zoe and Rachel learn from this group of older women about how widespread sexual abuse is in the community. They learn that many of the women were sexually abused as children by their family members and also in institutions and foster care. The women talk about how sexual abuse has impacted them and what it has meant for their children and grandchildren. The women say they are worried that the young women in

the community are exchanging sex for yandi and alcohol. They also speak about their concerns that pornography is widespread and that children as young as eight are being exposed to violent and degrading pornographic images. The women also discuss the barriers to talking about sexual abuse in their community, and their fear that by speaking out about the abuse they will be inviting the scrutiny of child protection services and the police and they will risk their children being taken away.

Zoe and Rachel acknowledge these concerns. They discuss how important the support of family and community is in helping children recover from sexual abuse, and they explain how they want to work with the women and the community generally to keep the children safe.

The women agree to form a leadership group to address child sexual abuse. This group meets monthly with senior managers in FACS, police, health and education and plans community-based responses to sexual abuse. The leadership group is successful in increasing the number of reports to FACS. The group is also instrumental in increasing police surveillance and disruption in public areas that are known to be used for sexual exploitation. The leadership group works with education and health to develop workshops for the young women in the community. The workshops help the young women identify abusive dynamics in their relationships and provide them with referrals for counselling and support where necessary. The young women report feeling more confident to speak out about sexual abuse as a result of these workshops and the older women make a commitment to listen to and believe the young women.



Key messages from this Chapter

Understand how the intergenerational trauma and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people can create barriers to reporting child sexual abuse. By understanding and acknowledging these barriers you are more likely to develop an appropriate response.

Aboriginal consultation should be used continuously to inform every aspect of work with Aboriginal people. Spend time preparing questions for your Aboriginal consultation. This will assist your consultant to provide the best possible information and suggestions.

A consultative, community-based approach is widely believed to be the most effective way to keep children safe from child sexual abuse. This approach focuses on building relationships with community members, education about the dynamics of sexual abuse and protective behaviours, and collaborative work with other agencies.

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