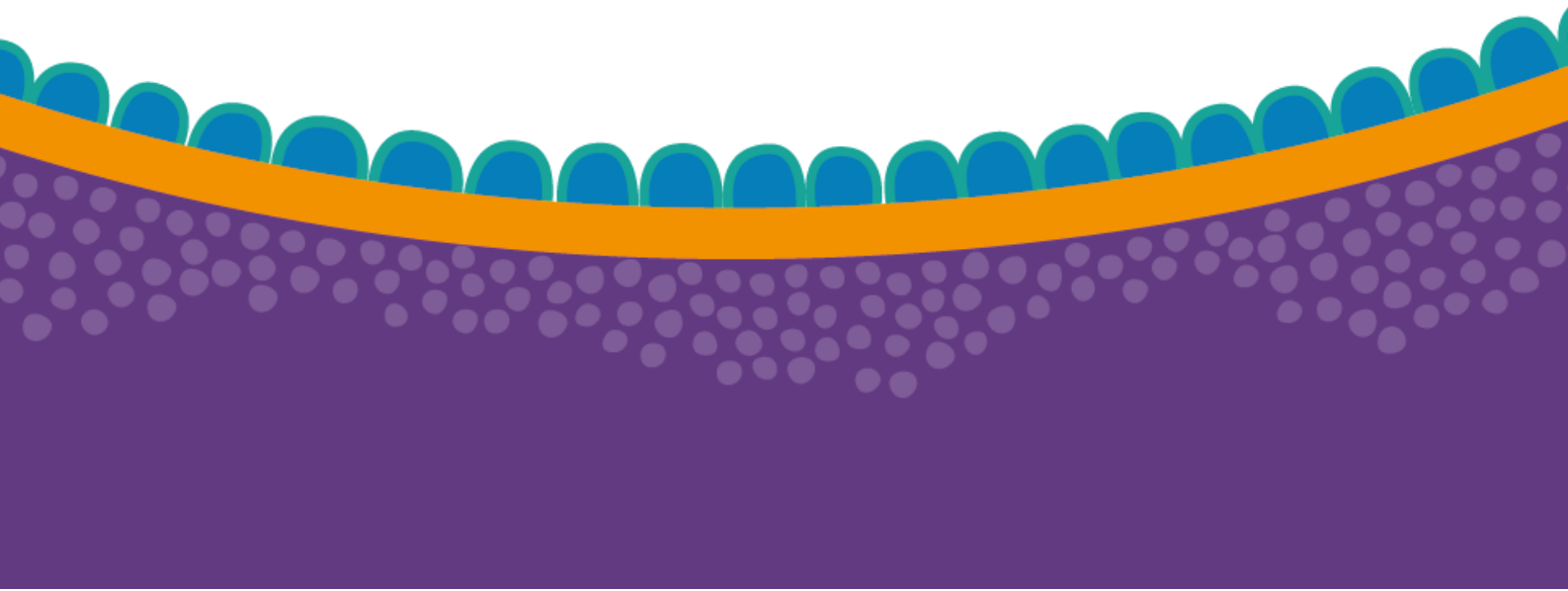
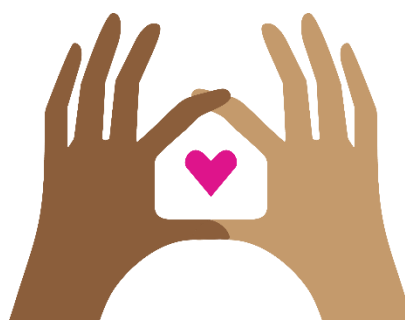




Fact sheet

# Aboriginal family-led decision making

*Empowering families in the decision making processes that lead to better outcomes for Aboriginal kids*



This factsheet was developed by the NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (AbSec) in partnership with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).



This introductory factsheet is one in a series that describes the four key enablers that underpin the Aboriginal Case Management Policy. The enablers include:

- Aboriginal family led decision making (AFLDM)
- Aboriginal family led assessment (AFLA)
- Aboriginal community controlled mechanism (ACCMs)
- Proactive efforts

These factsheets define the enablers broadly. They have been designed to promote discussion amongst Aboriginal communities and service providers about how they could be effectively implemented at the local level. Local communities are unique and how the key enablers apply need to be founded on the strengths and needs of children, families and their communities.

DCJ is committed to work with Aboriginal communities to identify how the key enablers can be applied to improve work practices across the community services sector. The enablers are founded on the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles.

## Overview

Developed by AbSec, after extensive consultation with Aboriginal communities and a range of stakeholders, the ACMP and related Rules and Practice Guidance provide a high level operational framework for all caseworkers and practitioners working with Aboriginal children, young people and families.

The ACMP applies across the entire support continuum, from targeted early intervention, child protection and Out-Of-Home care. It applies to the delivery of programs and services by a range of stakeholders including DCJ case workers, Aboriginal Controlled Organisations and other funded service providers.

Importantly the ACMP recognises the rights of Aboriginal families and Aboriginal communities in caring for their children, and the key enablers provide broad guidance on how they should be involved.

## Aboriginal family-led decision making and the ACMP

Aboriginal family-led decision making (AFLDM) is a core element of the ACMP. It is a set of processes that allow families to have meaningful participation within case planning.

The primary objective of the ACMP is the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people. AFLDM works towards this objective by empowering families in the decision making process, leading to better outcomes for children and young people.

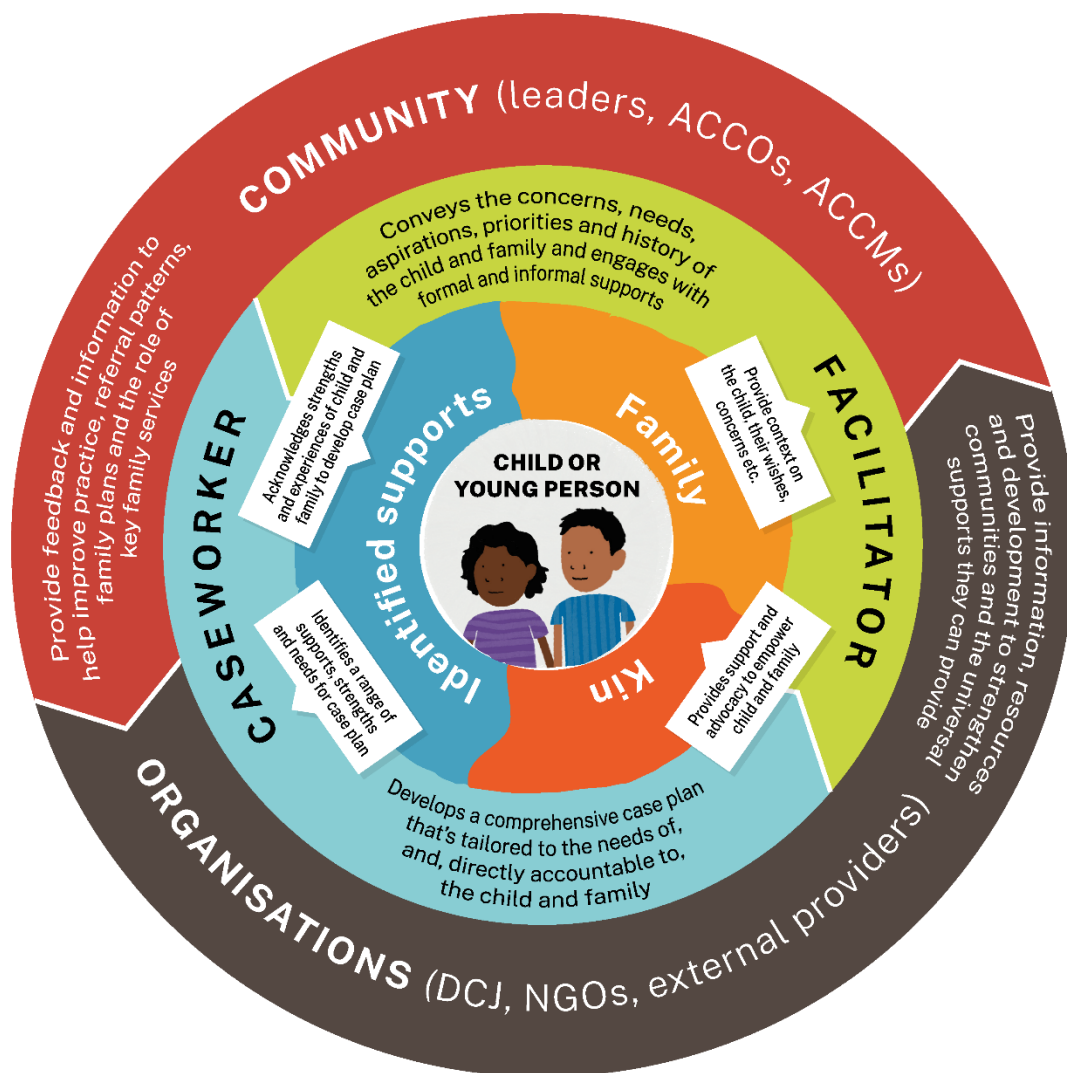
Caseworkers respect families are **experts in their own lives** and will **work as partners with the whole family** to enable meaningful participation.

The ACMP outlines that AFLDM processes are to occur at **key points** of the case planning process: assessment, development and review of case plans<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Case plans refers to both family action plans for change (preservation and restoration) and out-of-home care case plans.





**Diagram: Key participants and relationships in Aboriginal family-led decision making**

This diagram demonstrates how family and kin should be integral in the decision making process about the care, safety and welling of their children. Unlike previous practice it recognises how a community facilitator can be involved providing support and advocacy, and how the community can provide valuable information and support about culture and history. (ACCMs are Aboriginal community controlled mechanisms. ACCOs are Aboriginal community controlled organisations).

**Principles of Aboriginal family-led decision making**

Aboriginal self-determination<sup>2</sup> underpins all work with Aboriginal families, as identified in section 11 of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (the Care Act).

When working with an Aboriginal family you must ensure that the following principles are present in order to adhere to the ACMP.

Aboriginal family-led decision making:

- occurs across the support service continuum and is not a one off process
- is guided by Aboriginal cultural values and traditions relevant to each family

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal Case Management Policy (p5)



- seeks to involve wider family and community networks, and Elders, in a collective decision-making process (section 12 of the Care Act)
- ensures families choose how they are supported, including the type and level of support they receive during the process
- places Aboriginal families in the centre of the process; identifying concerns, solutions and responsibilities for addressing child safety and wellbeing
- seeks the views of children or young people, which is central to the process; encourages their active involvement in decision-making processes (where appropriate)
- ensures families are provided sufficient information about identified concerns, available supports, and how the child protection system operates, in order to support their participation in decision making processes
- provides transparency, respect, inclusiveness and trust in relationships to guide processes for decision making
- ensures proactive efforts and follow-up efforts are integral to the process
- ensures families and their extended networks have private family time to consider concerns and build solutions, independent of the statutory agency and other professionals
- involves an Aboriginal perspective with an understanding of the child protection system, the needs of the child and family and the expectations of the local Aboriginal community (i.e. guidance can be provided by an Aboriginal advocate).

## Integrating Aboriginal family-led decision making in case planning with children and families

Aboriginal family-led decision making is not a one-off process. It needs to occur early and **across the continuum of support**.

It reflects a commitment to create a network of care for Aboriginal children and their families, drawing on both informal and formal supports. Integral to this process is the family and their choice.

Aboriginal family-led decision making involves identifying achievements and existing strength and supports within the family and the community and being able to change goals or priorities as the process develops. It also addresses outstanding concerns and issues raised by both DCJ and the family.

Aboriginal family-led decision making gives families the chance to establish their **own Family Plan which works alongside the case plan**.

The Family Plan is developed by the family and their network, during 'private family time' (see below) without statutory intervention or other professionals present.

### AFLDM in practice

Prior to any case plan meeting, families are informed of the worries and concerns that need to be addressed. Caseworkers inform those in the AFLDM process that the Family Plan should address issues with consideration to their current context and case goals.



During any case plan meeting, Aboriginal families are primary to decision-making, identifying their goals and priorities and their plan of action to achieve them. Families are given every opportunity and all supports required to establish their own plan without caseworkers, professionals or other non-family members.

Adequate support should be **chosen by the family** and does not need to be limited to a support person, facilitator, family circle, and/or an Aboriginal community controlled organisation.

**Follow-up efforts** are required to continuously guide practitioners in the support system and for families to foster a supportive care network, address risks and prevent future harm or interventions. See 'pro-active casework and follow-up efforts' for more information below.

It is important outcomes that have been achieved are documented and shared with the appropriate parties.

The AFLDM process can be broken into five main stages:

### 1 Introductions and information sharing

This involves the primary worker and other professionals sharing their child wellbeing concerns with the family. Other services can outline their role as well as supports they can provide to the family.

Families should always decide the type and level of support they need. This could include an Elder, a community member, a cultural support person, or an Aboriginal community facilitator.

These support people can create a culturally safe environment where families can fully participate in family-led decision making processes for Aboriginal people.

### 2 Private family time

The family is provided with alone time to consider child wellbeing concerns and discuss and develop their own Family Plan for the wellbeing and support of the child.

One of the key elements of Aboriginal family-led decision making is dedicated time that the family is provided, in private, during case planning or family action planning meetings to develop the Family Plan.

Who attends private family time is decided by the Aboriginal child, parents and their Aboriginal family.

Family time enables the family to apply their own knowledge and expertise consistent with their cultural decision-making practices.

### 3 Developing a Family Plan

Discussion of what is needed to support the child and/or family and to reach an agreement in the best interest of the child.

Families sign the agreed Family Plan to confirm they have been involved in and led the process.

### 4 Agreement on the Family Plan

All agencies involved in the AFLDM process agree to what goes into the Family Plan before it is signed off. The Family Plan is finalised and a copy is given to all involved.

It is the role of DCJ or NGO practitioners to transfer the family plan onto the relevant family action plan template for change or out-of-home care case plan document encompassing all of the goals, tasks and supports the family agreed to.



## 5 Review of the Family Plan

Reviewing family action plans for change and out-of-home case plans are done with the family.

Reviews are focussed on how well the Family Plan is meeting the needs of the child and family, including progress made towards goals, as well as actions taken by all parties, including family, kin/carers and caseworkers.

The next review meeting is arranged at the end of the current meeting.

As per existing processes and timeframes, for preservation and restoration ongoing reviews occur every 90 days in line with risk assessment and family action planning processes. For children and young people in long term care this occurs yearly or with a change in circumstance.

### **Proactive casework and follow-up efforts**

Aboriginal family-led decision making is not a one-off process and proactive efforts need to be made on an ongoing basis. This is to ensure that families are adequately supported to achieve the identified goals.

Some examples of this include:

- scheduling AFLDM meetings well in advance
- ensuring all participants have the means to attend
- explaining to participants the nature of AFLDM's continuous approach
- inform participants of meetings in advance, including advice on how to prepare
- facilitating ongoing communication of participants (e.g. email or call with information that can be used in the next meeting).

Families need to be involved in all casework and case planning processes. If the child or young person is in OOHC, the family must be kept up to date on all matters relating to the child or young person, including updates on their progress and any changes to their care situation. The caseworker is responsible for ensuring all participants are provided with this information, and that each participant has followed up their contribution to help implement the plan.

In conjunction with strong family involvement, proactive casework should lead to holistic and sustainable family action plans and case plans for Aboriginal children and young people. Caseworkers must:

- consider and document the opinions and views all of relevant participants
- use appropriate cultural planning methods
- consider the educational, spiritual, personal, physical, developmental, mental health, medical, emotional, and social needs of the child or young person.

Proactive casework provides support and empower families to undertake their actions. For example, if an action resulting from a meeting involves a family engaging with a service, casework should support this by completing a referral and assisting the family to attend their first appointment.

All proactive efforts need to be recorded as a note in the child's case file.



## **The role of Aboriginal community facilitators in supporting families through decision making processes**

An Aboriginal community facilitator is a term used to describe a support person who partners with the family to prepare them for their role in the decision making process. This person is independent of DCJ, nominated by the family, is a member of the family or community and has the responsibility of leading the process.

Aboriginal community facilitators can:

- support family members to engage in case planning processes
- advocate on the behalf of families to ensure that appropriate processes are followed
- ensure all relevant voices are heard and the rights of Aboriginal children, families and communities are respected throughout the decision making and case planning process.

When an Aboriginal community facilitator supports the family, they are responsible for creating a culturally safe environment during AFLDM processes based on transparency, inclusiveness, honesty and respectful communication. Caseworkers, when present, should work with the facilitator to ensure environments meet the needs of the child or young person.

An Aboriginal facilitator:

- has knowledge of the local Aboriginal culture, history, nations, communities and families
- is trusted within the local Aboriginal community
- is culturally informed, ensuring a holistic response is provided to address family challenges
- has a suitable level of knowledge of the child protection system.

It is anticipated Aboriginal community facilitators and other support persons have collaborative relationships with Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) in the local community. These relationships can ensure greater consistency and support for Aboriginal families.

As AFLDM becomes an essential element in the work of caseworkers across the support continuum the role of facilitators will evolve and become formalised.

