



Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care



VACCA

Connected by culture

VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD CARE AGENCY

Doing it Differently: Insights from Nugel

- Sue Anne Hunter
- Lisa Curtis

- *“our children will know who they are and where they belong. They will take pride in their cultural identity and will grow up strong and resilient”*
- *Professor Muriel Bamblett, VACCA CEO*



What is Nugel?

- Nugel is a Wurundjeri word meaning belong
- Under the Victorian Children Youth and Families Act 2005, S18 (1)states:
- *The Secretary may in writing authorise the **principal officer** of an **Aboriginal agency** to perform **specified** functions and exercise specified powers conferred on the Secretary by or under this Act **in relation to a protection order** in respect of an Aboriginal child.*
- Once a child is authorised, child protection role will cease and VACCA will take on all decision making responsibility



Why is section 18 necessary?

- Aboriginal children are over-represented in child protection, out of home care and youth justice populations
- Connection to Culture, Community and Country is vital to support the safety and identity of Aboriginal children, and is linked to better outcomes for Aboriginal children
- ACCO's are best placed to connect Aboriginal children and their families back to culture where there has been a disconnection
- Aboriginal children and families have a right to a service that is tailor made to them and their needs



What will be different?

- VACCA's Cultural Therapeutic Framework
- Culture and relationships at the centre
- VACCA In-house Legal Services (VACCA ILS)
- A different operating environment that is less risk averse



Cultural Therapeutic framework:

- UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.... In the context of VACCA's framework we will ensure:
 - Opportunities to practice Aboriginal culture, participate in and contribute to the Aboriginal community including the opportunity for children to: be taught their cultural heritage by their Elders; maintain connection to their land and country; maintain their strong kinship ties and social obligations; learn and use their traditional language; have an education that strengthens their culture and identity; have Aboriginality confirmed; and work with staff who practice Aboriginal Cultural values not just profess them.
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- Aunty Muriel Bamblett, 2017



Cultural Therapeutic framework cont..

- Provides a culturally appropriate, trauma informed approach towards the achievement of self-determination and healing
- Informed by an evidence base that acknowledges the significance of culture, Community, Country, family and self – determination to health and wellbeing
- Developed as a whole of agency approach that aims to support the implementation of cultural therapeutic practice consistently across VACCA



Cultural Therapeutic framework cont..

- Therapeutic practitioners who provide secondary consultation in relation to management plans for traumatised children
- Capacity to work directly with carers, parents and schools to develop and support culturally appropriate management plans
- Assist with specialist assessment and referrals



Culture and Relationships at the centre

- While VACCA must comply with the legislated functions and powers- VACCA will deliver a distinctly Aboriginal approach to protection for Aboriginal children taking a human rights approach to identify a child's best interests
- Family (including extended family) engagement
- Provision of healing approaches that address the impact of past removals and trauma
- Cultural strengthening activities- return to country, cultural support planning, possum skin cloak making, art mentoring, cultural camps
- Case planning processes that are based in family decision making and are flexible
- Provision of culturally safe environments



HEALING CHILDREN/YP THROUGH CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND CULTURE

- **Isaiah's story**
- Isaiah (13yo) is currently living in Home Based Care after first being removed from his parents care when he was four years old.
- He has been diagnosed with a reactive attachment disorder, a mild intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder.
- Triggers of stress can cause immense anxiety and result in escalated behaviours.
- Prior to transfer to Nugel, Isaiah had been having contact with his mum, Ruby, once a month at a Hungry Jacks opposite the DHHS offices.
- This was described as a “tense experience for all.”
- Isaiah and his mother would present as being very distressed, often “wailing,” when it was time to say good bye and Isaiah would often present with heightened behaviours after.
- Aboriginal culture had also been described as a “triggering” factor for Isaiah and he had minimal contact with the broader Aboriginal community.



HEALING CHILDREN/YP THROUGH CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND CULTURE

- After consultation with the VACCA Healing Team a new contact plan was established.
- Now contact occurs fortnightly at VACCA where Isaiah and his mum, Ruby, connect and engage through art activities facilitated by an art therapy student.
- Ruby has told Nugel staff that contact now feels like *“freedom where she can be herself”* as she no longer feels scrutinized and monitored.
- Goodbyes have also become easier.
- *“they’ve had a much more positive, calming, connecting experience, but also it seems that they trust that they are actually going to see each other again. Previously there was a sense that mum had to constantly prove herself for contact to go ahead. Now there is a sense that this is just what we do.”* (Nugel Program Case Manager)



HEALING CHILDREN/YP THROUGH CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND CULTURE

- Isaiah has also surprised staff in his interest in engaging with culture.
- After his first art therapy session, Isaiah said he wanted to paint a pony with the Aboriginal flag on its body and red, black and yellow for its mane and tail.
- Isaiah has also participated in a cultural camp organised by VACCA's Cultural Support Team.
- *"The way they described culture as being a "triggering" factor for him, you would have never thought that that was something that he would do.....We were sitting down at night time, and Uncle Ron was there telling some dream time stories and Isaiah was sitting just watching the fire, it looked like he was just doing his own thing, it looked like he wasn't really listening. But then, when Uncle Ron started playing the didge, Isaiah just started dancing. I don't think he was even aware that he was doing it. He kind of freaked himself out a bit, but it just came out of him. It was amazing. At the end of the camp he asked if next time we could make it five nights." (Nugel Program Case Manager)*



VACCA ILS:

- Creates a model that is culturally appropriate and lawyers who are committed to the principle of self- determination
- Encourages a “model litigant approach”- quality, timely, factual, thorough and well prepared litigation cases will progress quickly through court
- Adopts an early advice approach to legal advice that informs case practice and case plan direction, supports staff and minimises risk
- Development of Nugel’s own court report template that has a Human Rights focus, and has been very well received by Magistrates and practitioners at Marrum-Ngala Ganbu



Operating Environment

- While VACCA Nugel is bound by legislative requirements, we are not bound by DHHS practice advice
- Ability to hold risk rather than crisis response to each risk event
- Assess risk through a lens of culture
- Opportunity for fresh eyes



Current status/challenges/learnings:

- First authorisations occurred on 24 November 2017
- 32 children authorised currently; some at home, some in care, reunification and long term care orders
- In preparation for establishment of second team
- Process for selection of children and authorisation is extremely time intensive and challenging at times
- Access to information is a critical and ongoing challenge; how do we access files for relevant non-authorised children quickly
- Reports on siblings and unborn reports and how we work together with Child Protection
- Interaction with shared services such as AHCPES, Secure Welfare, PCU



Current status/challenges/learnings cont:

- Ongoing work in relation to MOU's, system and process development
- Challenge of being a small team; vacancy management; focus on both service delivery and program development
- Opportunities that arise from being integrated into a program that has Stronger Families, Cradle to Kinder, Cultural Support Advisors, Family Violence, Foster Care, First Supports etc



FAMILIES RE-ENGAGING THROUGH NEW RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON MORE TRUST

- **Corey's story**
- Verbal handover to Nugel was for a non-reunification case plan as his mother had been disengaged and had agreed that she could not have Corey back in her care.
- Prior to the transfer to Nugel, Corey had not seen his mother for two months and prior to that there had been a similar breakdown of contact of four months.
- SINCE TRANSFER TO NUGEL
- Corey's mother has been actively engaged and consistently attends fortnightly contact.
- She has weekly contact with the NUGEL Case Manager and has expressed that she has always wanted Corey back in her care.
- *"You have to understand she has a long CP history, she has five older children and they were all removed so I think she is pretty distrusting of the system." (Nugel Program Case Manager)*



FAMILIES RE-ENGAGING THROUGH NEW RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON MORE TRUST

“We seem to have a lot of parents where when we get the brief it will say “don’t know where Dad is, haven’t seen Mum in months” and then all of a sudden we are involved and Dad is calling us straight away or Mum is calling us straight away.”

NUGEL Program Case Manager



FINDING FAMILY THROUGH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY NETWORKS

- **Isaac and Michael's story**
- Isaac and Michael are on long term care orders and have been with their carer for six years.
- Although they were identified as Aboriginal when they first entered the care system, for most of their time in care there was little information about their Aboriginality which at times was questioned.
- Now, the Koorie Support Worker in conjunction with Nugel have been able to find out about their family, their community, their mob. They now have a huge family tree.
- *"During one cultural support meeting, one of the staff at the VACCA office said: 'I've got a guy in my office he's from Western Australia, if you think that is who their mob is, give me some names, I'll take them back – I'll get him to ask when he's back in Western Australia. So then the guy at Southern VACCA he went to WA for Christmas – and then he asked around – and they were able to identify this Great Uncle who lived over in Western Australia. If you weren't from an Aboriginal organization that wouldn't have happened, a mainstream organization just wouldn't have had the resources or networks.'" (NUGEL Program Case Manager)*



A SERVICE SYSTEM THAT WRAPS AROUND WHOLE FAMILIES

“We are all here in the same building, in the same space. We’re all able to easily share the appropriate information.”

NUGEL Program Case Manager

