



Trauma and resilience: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

“Our people have grown our children up strong for over 40,000 years. Our culture and wisdom ensured our young ones grew into prosperous adults” (Healing Foundation, 2013, p.11).¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have a long history of resilience and growth in the face of adversity and trauma. Schools and communities are very well placed to assist children and families with appropriate supports and resources.

Circumstances surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have led them to a wide range of experiences. Some communities have a collective sense of suffering because of recurrent and historical traumas, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities affected by the history of removal of Aboriginal children and disconnection from culture, country, family and language. Historical traumas such as removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children, dispossession, assimilation policies and further disconnection from family, culture, country and language have left many entire communities to deal with varying experiences of ongoing intergenerational trauma.

¹ Healing Foundation. (2013). *Growing up our children strong and deadly*. Canberra, ACT: Author.

Taking care of yourself

Reading and thinking about trauma in relation to children can sometimes bring up distressing and confronting emotions. This information could also remind you of people who are deceased. When reading this resource, remember it is important to take care of yourself, tune into how you're feeling and reacting to the content, and identify a place you can get support if you need to.



“The support of family, strong cultural identity, good health, positive self-identity and engaging in activities such as storytelling and drawing can help build an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child’s capacity to be resilient” (Armstrong et al., 2012).²

Experiencing trauma and ongoing life stressors like these have a significant impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are two-and-a-half times more likely to report experiencing psychological distress (like anxiety or depression) than non-Indigenous Australians.³ Finally, this trauma can sometimes be compounded because some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reluctant to ask for, or accept, help from the health system, because of experiences they have had in the past.

Even though children living in these communities are often surrounded by love, warmth and humour, they may also be affected by the continuous suffering of the community. If children also experience life stressors (such as poverty, or loss and grief) themselves, the effects of the community trauma can be compounded and affect their social and emotional wellbeing too. Sometimes the adults around them may not always be able to act protectively or support children because they are struggling with their own stressors. When this happens, children can benefit from having other people that they trust to go to when they need support.

Schools can also play a critical role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have experienced trauma and their families by promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing; helping them to build resilience; and being a place that families can come to for information, support, and referrals to further assistance if necessary.

2 Armstrong, S., Buckley, S., Lonsdale, M., Milgate, G., Bennetts Kneebone, L., Cook, L. & Skelton, F. (2012). *Starting school: A strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*. Melbourne, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2010). *The health and welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, October 2010* (ABS Cat. no. 4704.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

The information sheets in this series have been developed for schools and anyone who wants more information about:

- what trauma can look like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities
- how trauma can affect children’s social and emotional wellbeing
- how resilience can develop in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities
- what schools can do to support children who experience trauma
- how KidsMatter helps.



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