



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



**The Research Centre for
Children and Families**

Fostering Lifelong Connections

'The Bridge' & 'Building Bridges' Films

A Viewing Guide for Caseworkers and Social Work
Students

The Research Centre for Children and Families,
The University of Sydney

In partnership with NSW Department of Communities and Justice
and Uniting

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country of all First Nations across Australia and their enduring connections to land, sea and community.

Let us remember our Elders gone before us to the dreamtime, for it is their shoulders that we stand upon. Their skies are our earth to continue their work effecting a change that they, our ancestors, pioneered for.

We pay respect to our First Nations families and our little people, our children - the ones that never made it home and the ones that are yet to. It is for them that our children, given every opportunity, will be our future leaders of a brighter tomorrow.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which filming took place, the Tubba-Gah people of the Wiradjuri Nation.

Lyn Orcher, Aboriginal Caseworker, Uniting Permanency Support Program

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VIEWING GUIDE

A Note for Caseworkers and Social Work Students

Strong connections to family, community, culture and Country are foundational to the lifelong wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is recognised in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and the requirement to develop cultural support plans across Australia. Still, one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not live with Kin and one in five do not have a cultural support plan.

Child protection workers need to both encourage positive relationships between children's families and carers when they are in out-of-home care (OOHC) and support the development of children's cultural connections. These videos share practice guidance that draws on the expertise and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The videos explore key themes including identity, belonging, cultural safety and respectful curiosity.

'The Bridge' shares the experiences of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young person in out-of-home care¹. It explores his yearning to know his family and how reconnecting with them in turn strengthened his sense of identity and belonging.

'Building Bridges' shares the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caseworkers about the vital role they play in fostering children's connections to Kin, culture and Country. It explores their practice tips including the need to actively listen to the perspectives of children and young people and ask respectful, curious questions to build relationships with families.

What is the Fostering Lifelong Connections Project?

The videos were developed as part of the ARC-funded Fostering Lifelong Connections study (LP180101332) which aims to explore how the out-of-home care sector can support children to maintain and develop positive connections to family and culture. A participatory action research collaboration with six Aboriginal caseworkers from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and Uniting in Dubbo documented their experiences with supporting Aboriginal children's connections to family and culture.

¹ 'The Bridge' draws on the experiences of an Aboriginal young person in care, however, it is portrayed by an actor.

THE BRIDGE: A YOUNG PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE



Who am I?

Theme: Identity/Belonging

“As I grew older, I felt like there was something missing in me. Like I didn’t know who I was. I thought that was normal” – Aboriginal young person in care

Being separated from family and culture creates a sense of loneliness and an uncertainty around one’s identity. Knowing who we are and where we come from plays a significant role in shaping our place and purpose in the world. Whilst living with parents is not always possible, sustained connection to culture through other means such as Kinship care or family time is a basic human right, recognised in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child.

Reflection questions/activities:

- What makes you ‘you’? What are the things in your life that form your identity? What are the roots of your identity?
- Why are these things important to you?
- What thoughts or feelings could arise if parts of your identity were undermined or unknown to you?
- Discuss as a group what contributes to a person’s identity e.g., family, profession, ethnicity, religion, friends, community etc.
- Make an individual mind-map/list/drawing of the things that form your identity.
- What do you think the young person is trying to tell you about his identity? In the film, what does he know or not know?
- What do you think are important aspects of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child’s identity? Why do you think these things are important for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children? What might children feel or experience if parts of their identity were missing or unknown to them?

Further information

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, see for example, section 13 of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 NSW
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020



The Strength in Culture

Theme: Culture as a strength

“I love learning culture... because it makes me feel connected and some sort of togetherness... That knowledge, that love gave me strength” – Aboriginal young person in care

Connection to culture plays a significant role in the formation of identity. Developing lifelong connections to family and community support children and young people to develop their cultural identities. This importance is especially true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care who will depend on these connections during their time in care and once they leave care. The young person in the film was disconnected from his family and culture during his childhood in care. His strengthened sense of connection and belonging was clear as his new caseworker supported him to become more involved with his family who, in turn, supported him to actively participate in cultural practices such as story, music and dance. It is important that discussions, planning and support for family and cultural connections take place as soon as a child or young person enters care and at any age in a child’s development.

Reflection questions/activities:

- What elements of the young person’s culture are shown in the film?
- What other elements and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities do you know? Share this with a group (optional).
- How could you increase your cultural capability toolkit when working with Aboriginal child/ren/young person in out-of-home care?
- What kind of feelings did the young person share when he experiences his culture with his Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community?
- What parts of your culture are you most proud of or empowered by? How do you celebrate your culture?
- Knowing these feelings, how might connection to culture be helpful in restoring or building an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child’s identity?
- How might culture be related to healing?

Perspectives From a Child in Care – Listening to the Child’s Voice

Theme: Listening to the voice of the child, what do children want from our caseworkers?

“He showed me that I shouldn’t have to feel confused, that I should know my roots, where I’m from and who I am” – Aboriginal young person in care

Caseworkers are an essential link for children in out-of-home care to build relationships with their family and culture. Their role to create positive communication between carers and families gives children in out-of-home care the capacity to be connected to culture, and thus form their identity. However, these relationships can involve complex interpersonal dynamics and caseworkers often experience high workloads which can impact their capacity to focus on relationship-building.

In the film, the young person touches on the fact that he’d had numerous caseworkers in the past and because of this, he was unable to build up a positive relationship or trust. He expressed how caseworkers didn’t know him or follow through with their promises. His new caseworker, Trevor, stood out to the young person because he created a comfortable environment for him to talk freely and spent time getting to know him so that he wasn’t a stranger to him. Trevor listened to the young person and was proactive in taking the first steps to arranging family time.

Reflection questions/activities:

- Think about an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child or young person that you work with and reflect on the following:
- What are some of the wants and needs this child or young person has communicated with you?
- How have you been guided in your casework by the voice of this child or young person?
- How would you describe your relationship with the child or young person?
- How could you strengthen and improve this relationship?

Additional tips for caseworkers

- Be authentic!
- Get to know children – ask questions about their interests, play their favourite sport with them and have regular conversations with them.
- Try to avoid making promises you cannot keep.
- Listen to children about what they want to see or be a part of.
- Link children in with other children and young people in out-of-home care so they have people with shared experiences.
- Ask and involve families and communities. Ask Elders about cultural and family connections.
- Grow your own knowledge of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, practices and languages – and share this knowledge with children.
- Find, develop or fund cultural workshops and camps with local Aboriginal communities.
- Life Story Work. Ask children who they want to see. Whether it be their family members, siblings, aunts or uncles – let them guide you on their family tree.
- Family Finding. Act with urgency to identify children’s family members and other sources of support and to help them build permanent and caring relationships

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BUILDING BRIDGES: CASEWORKER PERSPECTIVES



The Overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Care

Theme: Trauma awareness

“40% of kids in out-of-home care are Aboriginal”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are vastly over-represented in the out-of-home care system. One third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across the country are not placed according to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. It is vitally important to ensure that children and young people in care spend time with their families and cultural community. This is their right and it contributes to identity development and the fostering of lifelong support. ‘Building Bridges’ explores the role a caseworker can play in ensuring connections to family, culture and community.

Reflective questions/activities

- What are some initial thoughts/feelings that you have, towards this statistic?
- What do you think are some of the reasons for the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in our OOHC system?
- Reflect on the experiences of the Stolen Generations.
- How do colonial policies and practices impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities today?
- Most organisations employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caseworkers and/or have separate teams for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caseworkers. Why is this important?
- How can you support your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues to improve the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families involved in the out-of-home care system?

Additional resources

- The Bringing Them Home Report:
https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf
- Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation: <https://kinchelaboyshome.org.au/>
- Grandmothers Against Removals:
<https://www.grandmothersagainstremovals.com/>

What is the Role of a Caseworker? The Power of Conversations

Theme: Caseworker strategies; building positive relationships between parents/families and carers (including foster and Kinship); being a part of the child's support network; focusing on children's needs

“We're the ones who fill the gap between the carers and families” – Aboriginal Caseworker (Uniting)

The role of the caseworker is to build bridges, to help guide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care back to their family and culture. This connection is essential for children to gain a sense of who they are, where they've come from and where they belong, and this helps fill in the missing pieces of their identity. By actively listening to the voice of the child, asking questions and being curious, the caseworker can work with families to foster and build lifelong connections.

Reflective questions/activities:

An important part of Fostering Lifelong Connections is building positive relationships between families and carers. Positive relationships between families and carers can help children and young people feel safe, secure and supported.

- Why do you think it is important to support children's connections to family and culture?
- What do you value in your relationships? What do you think are core values that support positive relationships? Think of someone that you have a good relationship with – what are some reasons why it is a good relationship?
- As a caseworker, what are some practical ways you can promote these values in the relationships between families and carers? How can this be implemented in your day-to-day role? How can this be implemented in your organisation?
- Are these strategies achievable? If not, what are the barriers or challenges that are preventing you and how can you address them? Discuss with your peers.
- What are some fears carers might have about connecting children with their families and culture? How can you support carers to overcome these?



***“We’re all one big family around these kids” – Aboriginal Caseworker (Uniting)
Mind-map activity:***

- Who are the important people in your support network? Draw a mind-map of the people that are important in your support network. Reflect on what might happen if you no longer had these people in your life to support you.
- Think of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child in out-of-home care – this could be a child that you have worked with. Who are the people in this child’s life that are important to them? Who are the people that will support this child to connect to Country, their culture and their community? (Potential answers: parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, Elders or community people, Kinship or foster carers, caseworker, school teacher, friends, etc.)

Practicing Cultural Safety and Respect

Theme: Cultural safety, respectful curiosity

“Ask questions, be curious because you won’t know if you don’t ask” – Aboriginal Casework Manager (DCJ)

As part of your reflections on ‘The Bridge’ and ‘Building Bridges’, an important question you might ask is “What can you do from here?” Whether you are already working or aspiring to be a social worker, there are many opportunities for professionals to build and improve our practice and support the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. By being curious, asking questions and being willing to take action, we can work together to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with their cultures that they deserve to be proud of. An important part of this work is to build networks with Aboriginal people and organisations.

Reflective questions/activities:

- After watching these videos, create a list of things you have learnt. Next to this, create a list of things that you want to learn further. What questions do you have? Where can you find the answers to these questions? What are some things that might be stopping you from seeking these answers?
- Discuss with your peers some ways you can improve your individual practice in connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their families and culture.
- In your organisation, what steps can you take as a team, to improve your practice in connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their families and culture?

“When you listen to the voice of the child, they help you do your job better. They guide you and remind you of what’s important” – Aboriginal Caseworker (DCJ)

Reflective question/activities

- What is cultural planning? What is the process for you as a caseworker? Why is cultural planning an aspect when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children?
- How often do the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children influence your decision-making in cultural planning? What do you think Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children think about cultural planning?
- What are some factors that could potentially deter us from prioritising the voice of the child? How can we address this issue?
- Activity: Reflect on the current policy and templates for cultural planning within your organisation. Discuss with your peers the strengths and limitations of these templates.

Post-Viewing Activities: Take Action!

Want to know more information about how to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care?

- SNAICC: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/>
- AbSec: <https://www.absec.org.au/>

Want to know more about how to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

- Emerging Minds: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-families-and-children/>

Want to know more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kinship systems?

- Online Kinship modules: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/our-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-community/kinship-module.html>



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<https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>

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