



NSW Department of Education

Collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop and deliver Respectful Relationships Education and primary prevention programs

Acknowledgement

We use the term Aboriginal throughout this document to respectfully represent all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and recognise all Aboriginal Nations as the Traditional Custodians and original inhabitants of the lands now known as NSW.

We recognise that the impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) on Aboriginal Peoples are deeply rooted in the legacy of colonisation, dispossession and systemic injustice. These harms are compounded by intergenerational trauma, the forced removal of children, and the ongoing denial of cultural identity and safety. We acknowledge the courage and resilience of Aboriginal victim-survivors, including members of the Stolen Generations, who have endured and spoken out against violence, and who continue to lead healing in their families and communities.

We honour the leadership of Aboriginal women, men, children and Elders who have called for change, and we commit to walking alongside communities in ways that uphold cultural strengths, self-determination and healing.

The Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) team acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Custodians of Country across Australia. We honour their enduring connection to land, waters, skies and community, and pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present, who continue to hold and share cultural knowledge, law and stories that sustain communities and Country.

Support services

We recognise that conversations and information relating to DFSV can provoke challenging thoughts or feelings for some people. Please find the details of relevant support services below:

- 13YARN Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support line: 13 92 76
- 1800RESPECT National DFSV counselling service: 1800 737 732
- Full Stop Australia: 1800 385 578
- The Rainbow Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) Helpline for LGBTQIA+ people: 1800 184 527
- MensLine Australia: 1300 78 99 78

Aboriginal symbol by
Kayleb Waters, Gomeroi artist
and Cultural mentor, 2025.

This symbol represents
community (families,
parents, Aunts, Uncles,
Elders, schools, teachers,
LAECGs, LALCs)..

Purpose

This document is designed to provide guidance for school leaders and teachers to engage respectfully and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when developing RRE and primary prevention of DFSV programs. It recognises the importance of a culturally safe, strengths-based approach that upholds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and knowledge.

It reflects and aligns to the [Walking Together, Working Together: Partnership Agreement between the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and the NSW Department of Education 2020–2030](#) and the [Guiding Principles in Leading Aboriginal Education](#).

Context

Culture is a protective force, offering pathways to healing that are relational and holistic. Elevating Aboriginal knowledge and practices is essential to transforming how NSW responds to DFSV.

Aboriginal women and girls experience DFSV at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women and girls and Aboriginal men and boys, driven by forces including racism, sexism and the ongoing impacts of colonisation.

Children and young people are often overlooked in DFSV strategies and services, and their needs are grouped in with their families, without recognising their own unique experiences of violence and abuse. Aboriginal children and young people exposed to DFSV experience lifelong impacts.

Aboriginal parents and carers must be able to seek support without fear of child removal.

Guiding principles

Developing RRE and primary prevention initiatives in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requires humility, cultural safety and genuine partnership. When schools work alongside communities, listening, learning and co-creating, they help build environments where all students can thrive, and where education supports the prevention of DFSV in culturally safe, strengths-based ways.

[Trauma-informed practice in schools](#) recognises the impact of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and systemic inequality on families and communities. Programs must acknowledge these realities while supporting healing and resilience.

Addressing intersectionality is a key principle of RRE. Recognise varied experiences, for example, the unique perspectives of women, men, young people, LGBTQIA+ community members, people with disability, and those in remote versus urban settings.

School leaders should see collaboration as an ongoing partnership rather than a project-based interaction. This results in building sustainable relationships beyond individual programs.

Cultural safety and respect

Create learning and engagement spaces that uphold the identities, values, worldviews and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and Elders.

Acknowledge and respect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Cultures and Histories.

Actively challenge racism, stereotypes and deficit-based narratives.

Respect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights. Communities decide what knowledge can or cannot be shared, how it may be used, and that formal agreements may be appropriate.

Self-determination and voice

Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are meaningfully involved in decision-making and the development, delivery and evaluation of programs.

Centre community voices, particularly those of Elders, community leaders and local organisations.

Recognise and value the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in understanding, preventing and addressing DFSV.

Holistic and strengths-based approach

Honour holistic views of wellbeing, incorporating connections to culture, community, Country and spirituality.

Build on existing cultural strengths and protective factors such as kinship systems, collective values and cultural continuity.

Approach prevention not only through individual behaviour change but also through community-led strategies that support healing and resilience.

Steps for school leaders and teachers

1. Establish relationships and trust

Consult with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, community members and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Engagement with Aboriginal communities should begin at the earliest stage of planning, before program directions are set. This ensures communities shape the vision rather than being asked to respond to pre-determined agendas.

Engage in conversations with openness, humility and patience. Trust-building is ongoing, not a one-off conversation or consultation.

Show respect for cultural protocols, such as using appropriate greetings, observing Welcome to Country and/or Acknowledgement of Country, and learning local place and language names.

Build a reciprocal relationship with Aboriginal communities. Identify what the school can give back to communities through acknowledgement or resourcing.

2. Engage in meaningful consultation

Seek advice on who holds the appropriate cultural authority in the local area. Engaging with the right people ensures that programs are informed by authentic perspectives, avoids relying on a single individual's viewpoint, and reduces the risk of approaching someone without the authority to speak on behalf of their community. This would be done through talking with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc (AECG) or Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC).

Ensure consultation is collaborative, not tokenistic. Communities should be co-designers rather than being asked to endorse pre-developed programs.

Allow adequate time for discussion, feedback and adaptation based on community advice. Be mindful of not overburdening communities with repeated requests, and respect community priorities and capacity. Not all requests can or should be met, and schools should approach with patience and awareness of competing demands.

Provide clear information about the program's aims, scope and potential impact to enable informed decision-making.

3. Co-design curriculum and resources

Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, cultural teachings and community knowledge in RRE learning materials.

Respect Elders, Knowledge Holders, Cultural educators and community representatives as the experts that they are. Renumerate these experts for their time, knowledge and expertise. Plan for renumeration in budgets from the outset to avoid unintentional exploitation of community goodwill.

Work with local Elders or cultural educators to incorporate traditional values of respect, care and responsibility in age-appropriate ways.

Ensure resources are strengths-based and celebrate culture rather than framing culture only in relation to problems.

4. Professional learning for staff

Support teachers with cultural safety training, delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators.

Include ongoing reflection on personal and systemic biases.

Provide guidance on how to safely respond to disclosures of violence, with awareness of culturally specific services and supports.

5. Program implementation

Deliver education in ways that are flexible, safe and affirming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities.

Seek community participation in program delivery, for example, guest speakers, cultural mentors or co-facilitators.

Ensure student learning environments are safe from racism and underpinned by school-wide respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

6. Ongoing reflection and evaluation

Use participatory evaluation methods that allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to define what success looks like.

Revisit partnerships regularly to reflect on progress, challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Embed structures that sustain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community partnerships beyond individual staff contracts or short-term programs.

- For example, establish an Aboriginal Education team, if doesn't already exist.
- Incorporate cultural protocols into school policies or formalise regular consultation processes.

Embedding these practices aligns with the principles outlined in the Partnership Agreement, supporting ongoing, respectful engagement and helping ensure that relationships are maintained even during staff changes.

Share outcomes with transparency and accountability.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• listen more than you speak and reflect on what you hear.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• assume one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person can speak for all.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ask permission before using cultural content and follow cultural protocols.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• use tick-box consultation after decisions are already made.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• value diverse voices within communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• extract knowledge without giving back.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• commit to long-term, ongoing partnerships that survive staff changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• rush the process – trust builds over time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• recognise and engage with the appropriate cultural authority for the local area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• overburden communities or ignore their capacity and priorities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensure reciprocity – acknowledge, remunerate and give back for knowledge, time and expertise shared.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• use Community knowledge without transparency, clarity or proper agreements.

Table 1 – dos and don'ts when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

References

NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [*Guiding principles in Leading Aboriginal Education*](#), Aboriginal Education and Communities, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 September 2025.

NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [*Working in partnership with the NSW AECG Inc. – AECG Partnership Agreement*](#) (Walking Together, Working Together), Aboriginal Education and Communities, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 September 2025.

NSW Government (2023) [*Re-imagining Evaluation: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework*](#), Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation: Publications and resources, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 September 2025.



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