

# Frequently asked questions about cultural safety with Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People



COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Before becoming the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, I developed and delivered cultural safety training to improve organisations' capacity to support Aboriginal people and community in receiving services, as well as supporting Aboriginal staff members. The questions below reflect many questions I've had throughout this work, as well as questions that have come to the Commission for Children and Young People since the introduction of Child Safe Standard 1.

I'm answering these questions as an Aboriginal person. I cannot and do not speak for all Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have a diversity of identity and opinions, as does everyone else. As with anyone, it is important to create respectful dialogue. Remember there is no room for assumption, stereotypes or racism. There is always the need for respectful conversation.

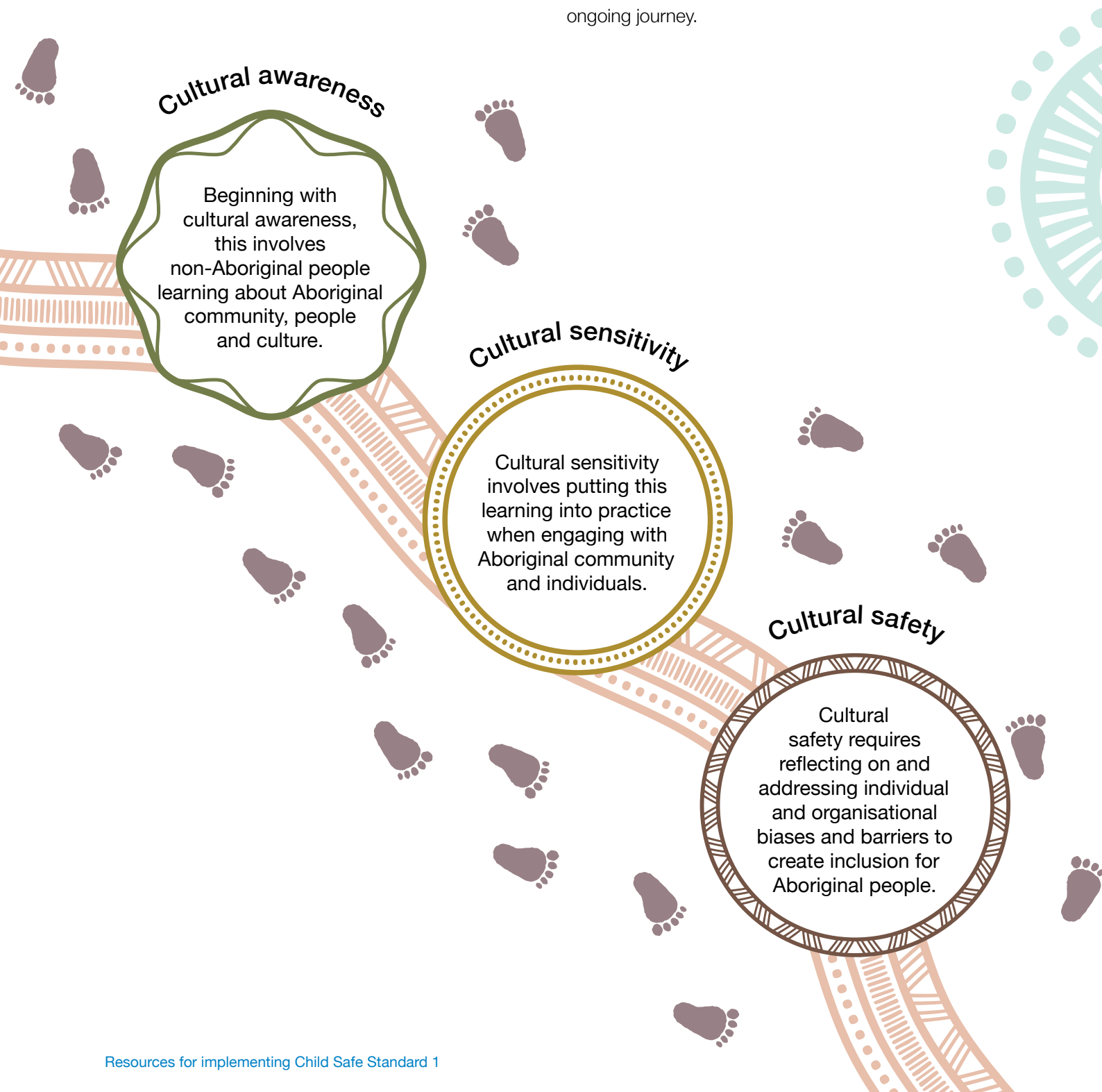


## I've heard about cultural awareness and sensitivity, and cultural competence... where does cultural safety fit in?

Great question!

You might have seen or done workshops that were called any of these things. The diagram below shows the differences between cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural safety.

You might have also heard of 'cultural competence' or 'cultural capability'. I've avoided using these terms as they can imply an end point in your learning, or that a single resource or type of training is all you need. The work to create culturally safe places for Aboriginal children and young people is an ongoing journey.



## What if we don't have any Aboriginal children or young people in or engaging with our organisation? Do we still have to implement Child Safe Standard 1?

Yes.

Under Victorian law, all organisations that are subject to the Child Safe Standards must meet the requirements of each of the 11 Standards.

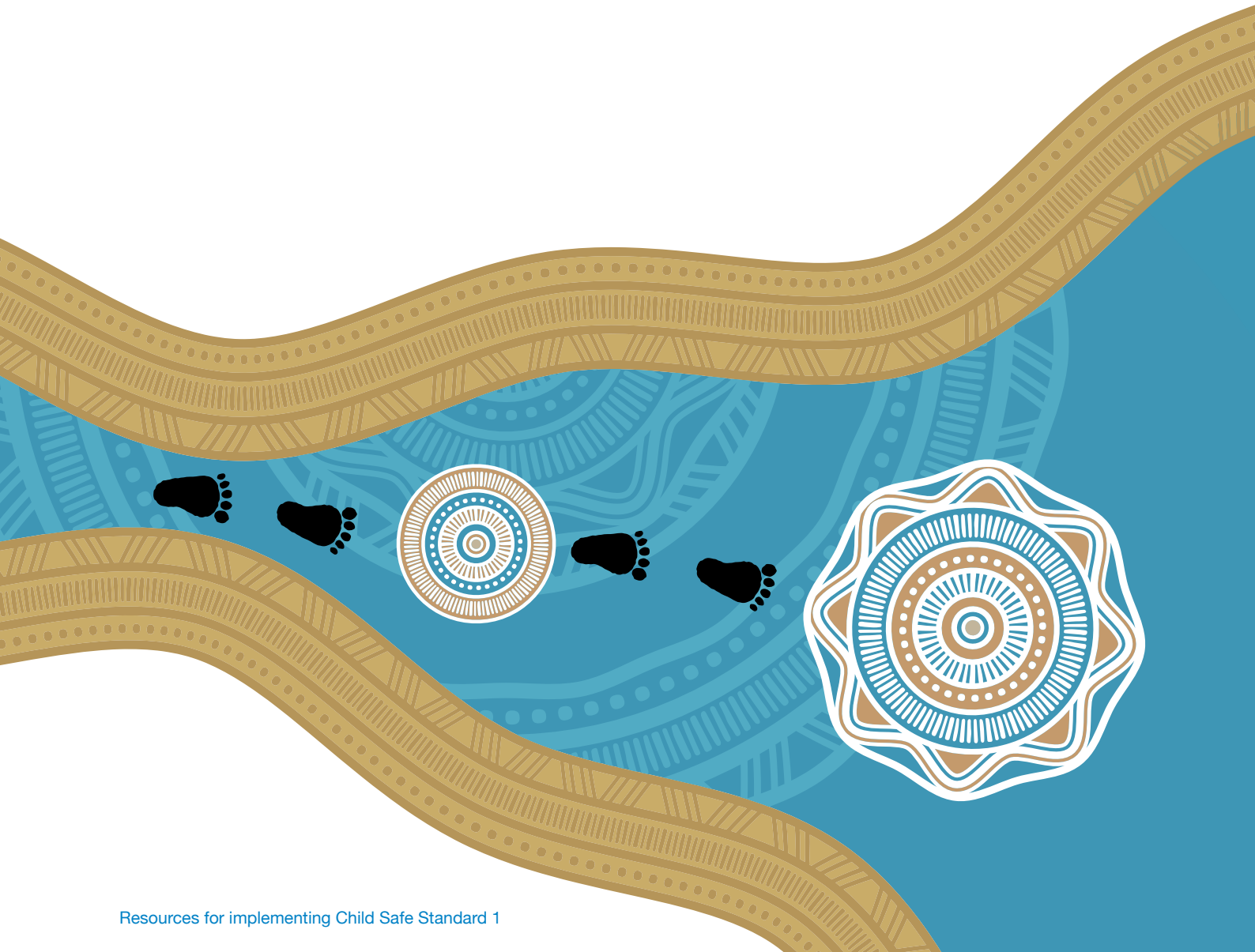
Cultural safety is about respect, understanding and inclusion, based on someone's cultural identity. But these are transferrable ideas, to other people's identities.

Consider this – demonstrating respect for Aboriginal children and young people, their community and culture shows children and young people, and their families of other cultures they might receive respect also. Or another child or young person who has an identity that they don't always feel safe in sharing.

But just to ask...

How do you *know* you do not have any Aboriginal children or young people in your organisation? What are you basing this on? How people look or act or talk? If so, this implies you could be relying on stereotypes about Aboriginal people.

There may be Aboriginal children and young people and their families who have chosen not to tell you about their Aboriginal identity. Remember, a person does not have to disclose if they are Aboriginal or not. Part of cultural safety is providing an environment where people feel safe to not only disclose their Aboriginal identity, but also to express their culture. What is your organisation doing to support and enable people to identify as Aboriginal?





## How can I find out if there are Aboriginal children and young people in or engaging with our organisation?

Identity is personal. There are many parts of an individual's identity that they might not be comfortable sharing with others. It is their choice to tell others or not to.

Some Aboriginal people will proudly tell you their identity or display it in ways that make it clear that they are Aboriginal. Some will not, and there are many reasons for this, including:

- They don't know how other people will treat them.
- They don't want to experience discrimination, stereotypes, or prejudices, such as 'you don't look Aboriginal'.
- They don't want to be asked lots of questions.
- They want to know that a place is safe for them before sharing that part of themselves.

Many organisations, such as health services, hospitals, and schools, are required to ask about the Indigenous identity of people accessing their services. If this is your type of organisation, find out what information your organisation has about going about this respectfully.

If you are new to asking about Aboriginal identity, and want to ask so you can better connect with, support and encourage engagement with Aboriginal children and young people and their families, here are some tips:

- Leave all assumptions about Aboriginal identity that are based on skin colour or personal traits and attributes behind. They are not useful to the work of cultural safety.

- Let someone know **why** you want to know, and **how** that information will be used. This goes for any personal information you are gathering about someone. Think about it from your own perspective – if someone asked you a personal question, you would want to know why, who has access to that information, and how it will be used. Finally, you should never share any personal information about someone else without their clear permission and consent.
- Use open questions such as 'Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?' or 'Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?'. Asking a question such as 'you're not Aboriginal, are you?' not only demonstrates an assumption, but depending on how you say this, you could be seen as positioning Aboriginal identity as a negative.
- Use club or organisation forms to ask the question and ask everyone to fill them in.
- Start a conversation and ask 'is there anything you'd like me to know about you and your family that would help you feel more welcome, or make sure you get what you need from us'. Let people know they can tell you at any time what would help them.
- Put up signs that demonstrate all identities are welcome in your organisation and encourage people to share **any** needs they have based on identity.
- Don't assume a child or young person's identity by their parent's or another family member's identity. Some Aboriginal children and young people will have a non-Aboriginal parent and family members.

Also remember that identifying as Aboriginal is completely voluntary. If someone says 'I'd prefer not to say' or 'I don't want to answer that', for whatever reason, you should not push for an answer.



## There's someone at our club who says they're Aboriginal...but they don't look it.... Are they lying?

Take a moment to think about this from a personal perspective. How you would feel if someone challenged you on your identity, or said you weren't who you said you were? I have had my Aboriginal identity questioned many times and have been told I don't look Aboriginal, usually by people who have a very specific and limited understanding of Aboriginal people.

It is not a pleasant experience.

Let's unpack this.

To say someone 'looks' Aboriginal means that you expect them to fit a specific picture. Take a moment to reflect on what that is, and what you have been told about how Aboriginal people are 'supposed' to look? What has informed this?

Throughout the 1800s and 1900s, Aboriginal people's identity was determined by how much Aboriginal blood they had in them, which in turn determined how they were treated. Laws allowing for the removal of 'half caste' and 'quarter caste' Aboriginal children from their 'full blood' Aboriginal parents and saying only 'full blood' Aboriginal people could stay on missions and reserves saw the creation of the Stolen Generation and breaking cultural and familial ties to far too many Aboriginal children and young people, not to mention intergenerational trauma.

Aboriginal people have challenged this through reclaiming Aboriginal identity by talking about connection to Aboriginal identity through bloodlines alongside cultural connection.

Remember that Child Safe Standard 1 is one way of making Aboriginal children and young people feel safe. If you're questioning their identity, it's highly unlikely they are going to feel safe enough to stay at your organisation or club.

I strongly encourage you to read or watch Stephen Oliver perform his poem 'Real' to give you a deeper understanding of why Aboriginal identity isn't just about colour, and how hurtful challenging Aboriginal identity can be. A quick internet search will find it. Also have a look at the writings of Claire G Coleman, Dr Anita Heiss and Professor Victoria Grieves Williams on this topic.





## I thought treating everyone equally was the right thing to do. Is Child Safe Standard 1 asking me to treat Aboriginal children and young people differently?

Most of us think that if we treat everyone equally, with respect and fairness, then everyone will get the same outcomes. This is a good way to behave, but not all people and communities have been treated with respect and fairness. This has created different experiences and inequality between people and communities.

Cultural safety involves understanding that historically, Aboriginal people did not have same opportunities as non-Aboriginal people in Australia, and so, especially for Aboriginal children and young people, we need to think about things from their perspectives. What do they need to make sure they have a positive experience? This might necessarily mean doing things a little differently for them.

While we can treat everyone the same, or equally, it might not achieve an equitable outcome. To get an equitable outcome, we need to consider what individuals need, and respond accordingly.

Consider this scenario: A sporting club has a policy that states children under the age of 13 must be picked up from the club by a mum or a dad. What might be the challenges of this? Some children may:

- not have a mum and dad or either;
- live with extended family such as aunties, uncles and grandparents or older siblings and cousins; and
- live in out-of-home care arrangements that have them in the care of people who are not relatives.

This is just one example of how a policy or rule that seemingly treats everyone the same actual creates challenges for people.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed a useful video about equality and equity: [Let's talk about equality and equity](#).

You can read more about the differences between equality and equity in the Commission's [A guide for creating a Child Safe Organisation](#) under Child Safe Standard 5.

But...does Child Safe Standard 1 **ask** you to treat Aboriginal children and young people 'differently' or just show them respect and inclusion that recognises their Aboriginal identity is important to them?



## I don't want to be offensive, but I'm not sure what words I should use. Aboriginal, Aborigine, Indigenous, Koori...?

People in Australia have been brought up hearing and using words such as 'Aborigine' and 'half caste' without understanding the history behind them and why many Aboriginal people find them offensive.

Individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have their own preferences as to how they should be identified, and these should be respected and used. Words such as 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' are generally accepted, along with 'First Nations' or 'First Peoples'. For example, Victoria has the [First Peoples' Assembly](#). It is also more appropriate to use the term 'Aboriginal people', and not 'Aborigines'.

Remember that words like 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' have been introduced to Australia. These are words that also refer to many other communities around the world. They are not our own words.

Many Aboriginal people prefer to be referred to by the region or areas they identify with. For example, the term Koori/Koorie describes Aboriginal people of South Eastern Australia (includes Victoria and part of

New South Wales).<sup>1</sup> Deadly Story has created a short video called [I love being a Koorie Kid because...](#) that helps explain what it means for a child to identify as Koorie.<sup>2</sup>

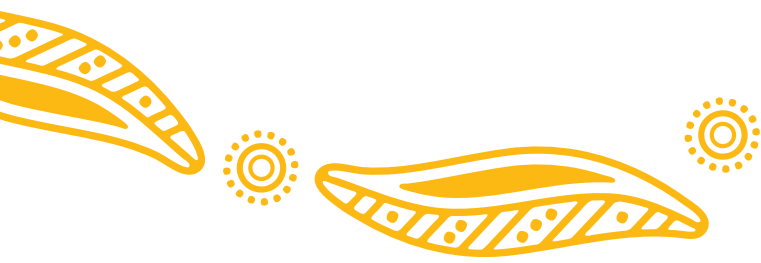
There are many hundreds of Indigenous languages from hundreds of Countries across Australia. Many Aboriginal people will prefer to use the name of their Country, such as Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta, Gunditjmara, Taunaurong. For example, I introduce myself as a Yorta Yorta and Indian woman, to reflect my heritage and identity from my Aboriginal mother and my migrant father. Many Aboriginal people have connections to more than one Country, so will say these Countries when they introduce themselves, and may invite you to use these terms also. They might refer to themselves as multiclan or multination.

It all comes back to showing respect for someone's identity. If an Aboriginal child or young person wants to tell you their Country, they're sharing something important with you, something they take pride in. Take the time to listen and learn.



<sup>1</sup> AIATSIS, Australia's First Peoples, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/australias-first-peoples#toc-what-term-is-best-to-use->

<sup>2</sup> Deadly Story, I love being a Koorie Kid because..., <https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/our-stories/i-love-being-a-koorie-kid-because>



## **I want to make our physical space more culturally safe. Can I put up Aboriginal artwork?**

Absolutely!

Aboriginal artwork is beautiful, diverse, represents culture and comes in so many different forms – painting, weaving, sculptures, pieces using wood, glass, and other materials. Most importantly, it is constantly evolving, from practices passed down through generations. It can tell stories of the past and the present, of relationships to country, of sadness and joy, of ceremony, of healing.

It is always important to acknowledge who the artwork is by, and make sure you're sourcing it from Aboriginal owned businesses, from the artist themselves, or from businesses that are ethical and transparent in their sourcing of Aboriginal art.

There has long been a history of Aboriginal people's artwork being stolen or copied without permission, or people not being paid appropriately for their work, so you want to make sure that you're being responsible when you purchase art works. If you find Aboriginal art on the internet, make sure you are using it in accordance with reproduction permissions. You may need to contact an artist or business directly. Purchasing local Aboriginal art can be one meaningful way to create a culturally safe environment.

Another way to encourage cultural safety is to have an Acknowledgement of Country plaque or sign. This acknowledges the Country where your organisation is physically located and pays respects to the Elders of that Country. Again, if you decide to purchase one of these, make sure you're buying from an Aboriginal owned business, or one that is ethical and transparent in its practices.

## **I'd like to invite an Aboriginal person or Elder to our organisation to talk about their culture with staff or do something with our children and young people. How would I go about this?**

How would you invite anyone to your organisation to speak? You might do some research online, you might make a phone call or email them, you might explain what you would like to do, and hopefully the person says yes.

Same for contacting an Aboriginal person or Elder!

You might like to start with contacting an Aboriginal community cooperative, or a Traditional Owner group. There are lots of people who do visits to different organisations to talk about culture and history, or to do activities with children and young people.

Building a relationship first is key. You might ask them to come for a visit before speaking, so they understand your organisation and what you do. Make sure that you discuss and agree with the person what it is you're wanting, and what they can provide, so neither one of you is left unhappy with the situation. Be open to their ideas as they will have knowledge and experience that you won't have. If you have invited an Elder, they may bring a support person along.

Be considerate that this person might be doing this as part of a business and should be paid for their time. They may also be giving their personal time, so again, consider offering a payment or gift.





## I'm worried that what we do in our organisation will seem tokenistic... how do we avoid that?

Any action will be quickly seen as tokenistic if cultural safety is approached as a 'tick-a-box' exercise, without understanding the value of this work for everyone in the organisation. For example, putting up an Acknowledgement of Country plaque, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags is tokenistic if members of your organisation do not understand why that has been done. Such actions will be further undermined if an Aboriginal child, young person, or their family, is still met with stereotypes and racism within the organisation.

At the heart of Child Safe Standard 1 is inclusion and respect. Cultural safety is about how an Aboriginal child or young person, and their family, feel when they come into an organisation's environment, whether that's online or at a physical place. Listen to children and young people when they talk about what they need to feel safe and think about how you'll ensure that safety in your organisation.

## I've heard about Reconciliation Action Plans. What are they, and can they help cultural safety?

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) are a way that workplaces and organisations can demonstrate a commitment to reconciliation. Reconciliation is about the strengthening of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia.

The implementation of a RAP is not a requirement of Child Safe Standard 1, but they can be a useful tool to ensure work is done towards cultural safety in your organisation.

For more information about RAPs, visit [Reconciliation Australia](#) or [Reconciliation Victoria](#).

## Why is 26 January difficult for many Aboriginal people?

For many Aboriginal people, 26 January is not a day for celebrations as it signifies the beginning of invasion and colonisation. This doesn't mean that Aboriginal people are not proud of this country, but it can be a day of pain and grief for many. This is why some Aboriginal people and their allies refer to this date as ***Invasion Day***, ***Survival Day*** and ***Day of Mourning***.

It is important for organisations to recognise that this day may be difficult for Aboriginal children, young people, their families, and Aboriginal staff and volunteers. Culturally safe organisations respect the

perspectives of Aboriginal people and provide them with understanding and support.

There are many ways that non-Aboriginal organisations can demonstrate respect on 26 January. For example, some organisations, including the Commission for Children and Young People, give staff the option of taking a different day off instead of the public holiday. Reconciliation Victoria has put together some other suggestions and protocols for organisations to follow on 26 January: [Approaching 26 January Respectfully](#).

### Did you know...

Aboriginal activists declared 26 January a Day of Mourning in 1938.

Australia Day, on 26 January, was not declared an official national public holiday until 1994.



## What's the difference between Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country

Prior to British invasion, when Aboriginal people would leave their own Country, and enter another, there were traditions and practices to be observed to make sure people did not break the rules of the Country they were entering. The Welcome to Country we hear today is a continuation of that tradition.

A Welcome to Country is delivered by Traditional Owners, often Elders, to welcome visitors and to demonstrate respect for Country. Often a Welcome to Country is done at the start of a significant event, such as an opening of a new building or service or celebrating events during NAIDOC and Reconciliation Weeks. You can contact your relevant Registered Aboriginal Party for more information (a list of these is available on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council's website at: [Victoria's current Registered Aboriginal Parties](#)).

An Acknowledgement of Country is a way for any person, whether they are Aboriginal or not, to recognise that Aboriginal peoples are the Traditional Owners of the land where a meeting or event is being held, and that Aboriginal people's connection to Country is continuous. An Acknowledgement also demonstrates respect. An Acknowledgement of Country is commonly delivered at meetings and events. If you are delivering an Acknowledgement of Country, it is important to be genuine and not tokenistic. Take a moment to think about:

- the Country you're on
- if you're from a different Country, where that is
- the event that you're at
- your own understanding of Aboriginal culture and history, and recent learning you have done.

You can read more about Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country on the [Reconciliation Australia](#) and [AIATSIS](#) websites.

## Racism is a difficult topic to talk about. How do we raise it with children and adults?

Racism can be difficult to talk about, but the pain an Aboriginal child or young person feels when they experience it far outweighs any discomfort a non-Aboriginal adult might feel when their behaviour or attitudes are called racist. Children and young people are relying on adults to have those difficult conversations to make their lives safer.

The best way to talk about racism is to acknowledge that it happens, and that it's unacceptable. Listen to children and young people when they say they have experienced racism – remember, they might not specifically use that word, but they may talk about being treated differently and negatively because of their identity. Make sure that any child or young person knows who they can talk to when they experience racism, and their concerns will be treated with respect and empathy.

