



# Cultural diversity and mental health

Helping children and young people understand, respect and appreciate cultural differences gives them a sense of belonging in your learning community.

## Why is culture important?

Australia's rich cultural diversity is one of our greatest strengths.

We're home to the oldest continuing living culture in the world – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.8% of the Australian population, represented by hundreds of different traditional groups. The beliefs, practices, ceremonies and customs within these groups can be quite diverse.

Over a quarter of resident Australians were born overseas

Migration has also contributed to the richness in diversity of cultures, ethnicities and races in Australia. More than a quarter of the population were born overseas and almost half had one or both parents born overseas. There are more than 300 separately identified languages spoken in Australian homes. A quarter of Australians speak a language other than English at home.

So, you'll have contact with families from different cultural backgrounds.

Children and young people in your care will form friendships, learn with and interact with people from many cultures different to their own. When children and young people grow up to understand, appreciate and respect the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity around them, we gain a positive and inclusive community, which benefits everyone.

This benefits individuals because when people feel accepted, respected and included, they have better mental health. Children and young people develop the skills and attitudes that will assist them in their relationships and working life, which contribute to their social and emotional wellbeing.

It also benefits communities, as environments where people enjoy positive mental health are more pro-social and more productive.

## Be You Professional Learning

Check out tips for building mentally healthy learning communities in the module [Understand](#), and how to promote inclusion and diversity within your learning community in the module [Include](#).

## Cultural diversity

This refers to the varied cultures present in a region or the entire world.

Culture isn't necessarily linked to a person's racial or ethnic background – people may identify with particular groups based on their birthplace, country of origin, ethnicity, language, behaviour, traditions, values, beliefs or worldviews.

We learn to communicate and understand our world through the context of these cultural experiences, which, in turn, shape the way we see ourselves and what we think is important. Cultural perspectives influence how we parent, how we understand children and young people, how we help them grow up and how we teach them new skills.

Cultural experiences and practices help us feel we belong to our community.

This doesn't mean that everyone from a particular cultural group will hold the same values or do things in the same way. Valuing and respecting diversity encourages people to see differences among individuals and groups as common and positive.

Because of the diverse nature of Australia's population, many children and young people belong to more than one cultural, racial or ethnic group or community. Developing a sense of belonging within multiple communities can be challenging, as there can be different expectations and priorities in each community. On top of this, children, young people and families may face other challenges specific to their background.

## Challenges that may affect children and families

### Parenting between cultures

There can be many differences in parenting practices between cultures, including (but not limited to) the ways children and young people are shown affection, attitudes towards discipline and how much emphasis is placed on family responsibility compared with promoting children's independence.

Some cultural practices can have very strict codes of behaviour according to a person's age or gender. Families might also be concerned about their children and young people losing their cultural identity.

Belonging to multiple cultural groups can sometimes be challenging for children and young people, too.

Children and young people from diverse cultural backgrounds often have different values and expectations at home and at childcare or school, which can create confusion. It can also mean they're faced with difficult choices.

### Language and communication

Language can be a major barrier for families new to Australia. Language barriers can undermine people's confidence, make everyday life harder, and make it harder to form social connections.

### Discrimination and racism

Discrimination refers to treating individuals or groups differently based on their perceived membership to a certain group.

The Australian Human Rights Commission reported that in 2017, 20% of Australians said they experienced discrimination in the past twelve months. Those from non-English speaking backgrounds continue to experience higher levels of discrimination (34.2% in 2017). Moreover, particular migrant communities often encounter particularly intense forms of discrimination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience racism in systemic and institutional ways. In 2016, 46% of Indigenous respondents reported experiencing prejudice in the previous six months, compared to 39% for the same period two years before. Thirty-seven per cent reported experiencing racial prejudice in the form of verbal abuse, and 17% reported physical violence.

Both direct discrimination (such as name calling and bullying) and indirect discrimination (such as ignoring or excluding) are hugely damaging to mental health. They impact negatively on children, young people and adults – both individuals and entire communities.

### **Migration and resettlement**

People migrate from one place and settle in another for many reasons. It may be voluntary, or it may result from fear they will be harmed or discriminated against if they stay, based on factors such as race, religion, or political opinion. In this case, they might flee from their country in dangerous and stressful circumstances and ask to be recognised as refugees.

Settling in a new country or community can be complicated, regardless of the reasons for migration.

Families need to find housing, employment, schools or early learning services, and so on. They need to develop new social networks. Family, friends and others who would normally provide support may have been left behind in the move. There can be feelings of loneliness, isolation, or worry for those left behind. Not knowing how things work or what services are available in the new community can make resettling challenging and stressful.

### **Effects of trauma**

Migration prompted by particularly stressful experiences, as is often the case for refugees, can lead to additional challenges. Traumatic experiences may have occurred through being exposed to violence, war or torture.

Children, young people and families may have lived under threat and in fear; they may have witnessed the violent deaths of relatives or friends; or experienced hardship and danger when coming to Australia. Some have received harsh treatment in immigration detention on arrival here. Refugees may continue to have strong feelings of fear, as well as shame and guilt about past events.

Everyone's experience of and reaction to trauma is different, including young children. Learn more about how to support children and families who've experienced [trauma](#).

## **Culture and mental health**

Belonging is a fundamental human need.

It relates to feelings of being valued, accepted and cared about by others.

Respect for diversity is related to people's sense of belonging.

When diversity is valued and respected, people are more likely to develop social connections to others and a sense of belonging to their community.

When a child or young person feels their family, cultural background and individual uniqueness are respected and valued, their sense of identity, belonging and self-esteem is strengthened. They're more likely to participate in social experiences and form strong relationships in their early learning service or school community. This acts as a buffer to stress when they're experiencing difficulties.

Those who have supportive and positive relationships in their life (that is, people to talk to, trust and depend on) are less likely to experience feelings of depression and anxiety compared to those who have fewer social connections. Feeling cared about and respected is a protective factor for mental health and wellbeing.

Culturally diverse children, young people and families in your learning community are more likely to have experiences that may interfere with their sense of belonging.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to experiences of racism and exclusion. This can impact on their social and emotional wellbeing, their learning and their social relationships.

Your role in promoting a mentally healthy learning community is important to children and young people's individual sense of belonging.

It's also important for building stronger communities into the future, because attitudes and behaviours towards people who are different to oneself are learnt in early childhood.

Learn more about how you can support individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds, and [promote and celebrate diversity](#).

## References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2021). Cultural diversity: Census. ABS. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/2021>

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2021). Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. ABS. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>.

Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders: Australia's first peoples. Canberra: AHRC. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/students/hot-topics/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islanders-australia-s-first-peoples>.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2018). Anti-Racism in 2018 and Beyond: A report on the activities of the national anti-racism strategy (2015- 18). Canberra: AHRC. Retrieved from [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/NARPS\\_2018\\_FINAL-WEB-VERSION.PDF](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/NARPS_2018_FINAL-WEB-VERSION.PDF).

Beyond Blue. (2018). What is mental health. Melbourne: Beyond Blue. Retrieved from <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/what-is-mental-health>.

Ferdinand, A., Paradies, Y. & Kelaher, M. (2012). Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities: The Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Experiences of Racism Survey. Melbourne: The Lowitja Institute. Retrieved from [https://www.lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/LEAD%20Report-WEB\\_0.pdf](https://www.lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/LEAD%20Report-WEB_0.pdf).