



Community Report

**Aboriginal perspectives  
of health and  
wellbeing  
in early  
childhood**



VACCHO Inc



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

## Background – What is this research about?

This research project began in 2006 with the aim of exploring Aboriginal perspectives of health and wellbeing in early childhood in an urban setting. The research was part of a PhD undertaken by Naomi Priest within the Jack Brockhoff Child Health and Wellbeing Program, McCaughey Centre, Melbourne School of Population Health at the University of Melbourne.

## Methods – What we did

The research involved interviews with 25 people living in Melbourne including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and health and education workers. These were held at participants' homes, workplaces or at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) as chosen by participants and

ranged in length from 15 to 90 minutes. The interviews were open ended and guided by these questions:

- Can you tell us about your family?
- What is wellbeing for an Aboriginal child?
- How would you describe a healthy Aboriginal child?
- How do you know an Aboriginal child is developing well?
- How do you know an Aboriginal child is ready for school?

## Results – What we found

From these interviews, a detailed map was developed of issues seen as important to health, development and wellbeing for Aboriginal children in an urban area. This map can help to communicate Aboriginal knowledge and understandings of early childhood health, development and wellbeing to those making decisions about policies and services for Aboriginal children. Four broad themes were developed from the interviews: **Strong Child; Strong Environment; Strong Culture; and Strengths and Challenges: Harder for Koori Kids/Koori Kids Doing Well**. A diagram of our results and a sample of quotes from participants are included below.

## How will this research be used?

This project helps communicate to researchers, policy and decision makers, health and education workers, and the general community the views of Aboriginal people living in Melbourne about what is important to child health and wellbeing. It is hoped that this information will help ensure that the needs of Aboriginal children living in an urban area are understood and that services to promote their health and wellbeing are culturally appropriate and respectful.

This project has been presented at a number of conferences throughout Australia and we also hope to publish research papers so that our results can be used by other researchers and decision makers to promote wellbeing for Aboriginal children in urban areas.

Some Aboriginal people involved in this project have suggested that it would be good to talk to Aboriginal children in Melbourne about what they themselves think about their own health and wellbeing. We are now working on this next step.



## STRONG CHILD

### Physical health and development

*Wellbeing is being healthy. May*

*You'd want to know they were meeting those developmental stages, like holding their head up, you know, on the floor. Jenny*

### Strong spirit

*They have their own little spirit within them, they have to be able to explore that spirit themselves and be who they want to be. Tracey*

Happy

*Child wellbeing is about being happy. Meg*

Confident

*They must believe in what they do, and what they think and back themselves. That's the important thing in life. Tom*

Resilient

*Most of the Koori kids that I actually see are very resilient. That's what you actually find. Sally*

Responsible

*As a young child for myself getting some responsibility actually taught you things. Taught you responsibility, taught you about doing things... everybody has a role. Ian*

## STRONG ENVIRONMENT

### Secure and supported

*Kids develop a lot stronger in themselves in the decisions that they do make if they have that direction and support. Support is extremely important. Annie*

Other aspects of being secure and supported described were: breastfed, loved, bonding and attachment, strong family, stability, positive role models, someone to trust, friends in and outside of the Koori community.

### Safety

Free from violence and abuse – Free from drug and alcohol abuse

*To be kept safe, I think that's very important, kept safe from sexual abuse, domestic violence, and any violence. Sally*

Cultural safety

*It's about that place about people—young people, children—being safe. And that's safe as in I can be who I want to be... Culturally safe, you know, and confident. Meg*

### Material needs

A home

*Having a home, having a stable home... you've got to have a home. Sally*

Good food

*Good healthy, eating right, at that age the food that you eat is your future. Tom*

Clothed

*Make sure they are clothed. Jenny*

*It's not just about how they dress, just because they come in with trackpants that are too short or inappropriate... it's not because Mum can't be bothered going to the shop... Mum might not be able to afford to buy new shoes. Charmaine*

Other aspects of children having a strong environment described by participants were: learning environment, school readiness, access to services, culturally appropriate services, health care, child care/pre-school, support for parents, and breaking the cycle.

## STRONG CULTURE

*I think that's the heart and soul of it all. TJ*

*When people say wellbeing to me all I need is culture because within that is everything you'll find anywhere else. Janaya*

### Identity

*They can't have good wellbeing within themselves if they can't have identity and know where they are from. Terri*

### Proud and strong

*I think it's very important that we are proud of who we are... It's the heart of it. Ian*

### Gender and age roles

*It's encouraging parts of the culture, that it's OK for children to throw a boomerang, for the boys to play a didg, for the girls to use clapping sticks. Steph*

### Kinship and family connection

*When a little Koori kid is growing up in the family they have got a wide range of uncles and aunties that may not be blood related but because they've been friends of the family they just take on that role. Sally*

### Respect for Elders

*Talk to Elders and get their opinions, and they give really good advice too, so you know it's not just jarbo, it's really good stuff. Harry*

<b>Connected to community</b>	<i>You can't become disconnected from community and, yeah, it's when you become disconnected from your cultural background I think you become disconnected with yourself and that's impossible so you can't really be a sick individual. In order to stay well you need that connectedness. Susie</i>
<b>Connected to country</b>	<i>Wellbeing for an Aboriginal child very strongly comes from connection, connection to who their mob is, you know an understanding of where their land is, an understanding and a belief in identity. You know understanding who your family is, who your mob is, your land, very very important. Lee</i>
<b>Ceremony</b>	<i>If there is a dance night on, you get the kids involved so that they have their turn. They actually learn what sort of moves we have, and what paint represents us, and where to put it and how to respect it and when to wear it and when not to wear it. Rod</i>
<b>Art and artefacts</b>	<i>You know, go out get some didgeridoos, boomerangs, you know, artefacts. Harry</i>
<b>Language</b>	<i>We encourage our kids to speak bits of lingo; just gives them a bit of identity. Susie</i>
<b>Not tokenistic or superficial</b>	<i>Just don't ring up somebody to come out and play a didge and throw a boomerang. Culture goes beyond just doing that, do you know what I mean? Steph</i>  <i>Culture-wise, to non-Indigenous people, I see as you have got to be out there in your lap-lap eating bush food and all that, blah blab blah. Terri</i>

## STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Participants also described a number of challenges that made it harder for Aboriginal children to experience wellbeing: history, racism, living across two worlds, Stolen Generations, and the NT intervention.

*It definitely is a lot harder it certainly is. Mary*

Throughout all of the interviews participants were very keen to highlight that there were positive stories to be told for Koori children.

*That's not to say that there's not a lot of families that are still, you know, doing the best they can and doing it well. That's what we are seeing a lot of too. I don't think that story gets told enough, you know, we don't talk enough about all the well families... Their respect and closeness to their children. One of the things I see is how they put their children first. Lee*

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## Who should I contact for more information?

If you would like to find out more about this project or about next steps please contact:

### Naomi Priest

The University of Melbourne  
McCaughey Centre and Onemda Koori Health Research Unit  
Melbourne School of Population Health  
E: npriest@unimelb.edu.au T: +613 9419 3000

### Sue Hedges

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service  
E: shedges@vahs.org.au T: +613 8344 0926