



Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) response to the National Children’s Commissioner Investigation into young parents and their children

August 2017

Responses to roundtable/ discussion questions

About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation in Victoria, protecting and promoting the rights of Aboriginal children, young people, families and the community. We provide programs and services to strengthen Aboriginal culture, encourage best parenting practices, and advise government in relation to child abuse and neglect in the Aboriginal community.

We deliver approximately 50 programs across the state, offering a broad range of services that seek to:

- Ensure child safety and community well being
- Targeted support for Aboriginal children, young people and their families
- Maintain strong connections to Aboriginal culture
- Support for vulnerable adult community members

Our services are underpinned by principles of prevention, early intervention and therapeutic healing. They are premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety. They include all types of Out of home care, supported play groups, cultural support planning, education, cultural activities, emergency relief, homelessness, drug and alcohol support, family mental health, justice services and family violence services including an Aboriginal Women and Children’s Crisis Service. We also deliver cultural training and develop resources for the Aboriginal community and funded agencies.

“A whole range of my family’s needs were met through VACCA” Service User feedback.

Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide comment in response to the National Children’s Commissioner’s investigation into young parents and their children.

We hold longstanding concern regarding the life trajectories of young parents and their children and research which identifies the significantly increased risk of teenage pregnancy for Aboriginal women



and young women placed in out of home care. Outcomes data identifies a range of adverse characteristics associated with young parenthood, including: higher incidences of smoking and substance use during pregnancy, late access to ante natal care, higher incidences of low birth weight babies and pre term deliveries, poor educational outcomes and lifetime disadvantage for young parents and their children.

VACCA would like to propose that the following principles are vital for establishing robust services for young Aboriginal parents and children in Victoria.

Aboriginal Self-Determination: Aboriginal Services First principle

Aboriginal people and communities have been severely harmed by past government legislation, policies and practices that have resulted in widespread harm and pervasive social and economic disadvantage for Aboriginal people compared with non-Aboriginal Victorians. We recognise that social exclusion, institutionalised racism and discrimination continue to impede our efforts to heal Aboriginal Victorians, despite the good will and progressive attitudes of many in government and our mainstream service partners, and we see this continue to be played out with devastating consequences in the up to 20% of particularly vulnerable Aboriginal families, today.

We put at the centre of our submission the urgent need to recognise and support Aboriginal Self-Determination, and to strengthen services to Aboriginal peoples by recognising the importance of a range of culturally relevant services being designed and delivered by Aboriginal community controlled and managed services, to Aboriginal children and families, in the first instance.

VACCA believes that the service system **must** give priority to reflecting the principle of *Aboriginal Services for Aboriginal people*. Our vision is for joined-up government channelling resources and expertise through ACCOs who then engage with, design and deliver services to their local community. As Professor Fiona Stanley, AC, of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research has stated:

Engaging Aboriginal people in the development of programs and methods results in them getting exactly the services they need, in their environments and for their unique circumstances. It also provides jobs, an additional advantage to them, which adds to the efficacy of the services. Aboriginal people will travel across the metropolitan area to attend an Aboriginal-controlled service. This means that while the overarching principles of services can be developed centrally by government agencies...the way that these services are implemented should be done in collaboration with those who will be affected, the people themselves. Otherwise they simply do not work (2005)

Culture

Aboriginal adults are almost three times more likely to feel high or very high psychological distress than non-Aboriginal adults. Increased psychological distress is attributable to: loss of culture; discrimination and racism; physical health problems; child removals and unresolved trauma; social and economic factors; violence and family violence; death of family members or friends. In addition, significant numbers of Aboriginal children and young people accessing mainstream services are not connected to their culture increasing their vulnerability and the associated risks (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, Atkinson, 2012; Mendes, Saunders and Baidawi, 2016). There is significant evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of Culture in supporting positive health and social



wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people including factors identified as important to social and emotional wellbeing for example connection to country, spirituality and ancestry, relationships with family members and peers and connection to Community. Increasing knowledge of culture can be internalised to facilitate healing through an increase in protective factors, self-esteem, pride and resilience. Brain research indicates that culture is integral to the development of personal identity, is a significant protective factor and has also demonstrated positive changes as an outcome of continuous and consistent opportunities to practice culture. Cultural programs increase the capacity of Aboriginal people to manage their traumatic life experiences and identify the supports and interventions that are most effective. This leads to increased service access and arguably participation in the economy and broader Australian society (Pattel, 2007; Poroch, Arabena, Tongs, Larkin, Fisher and Henderson, 2009; Caruna, 2010; Yellow Bird, 2012, COAG, 2012 and Berry, 2013). There is strong evidence to suggest that there are many young people leaving care who do not have Cultural Support Plans and have not been supported to connect to their family or their Community (Commission for Children and Young People, 2016).

VACCA has extensive experience in the development and implementation of Cultural programs. Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive with many speaking of the transformative impact on their sense of self and belonging and their capacity to draw individual strength (resilience) from a collective experience. The impact of Cultural programs goes well beyond the timeframe of the delivery of the program and filters into other aspects of the child or young person's lives, as the knowledge and skills passed on builds a sense of belonging and identity and empowers the child or young person. The strength of Cultural programs comes through the planning, developing and consultation with community, Elders, artists and children and young people, through sharing cultural knowledge and stories.

“VACCA teaches other people about our deadly culture”. Service User feedback

Because of this, VACCA believes that it is crucial that culture be embedded into all programs delivered to Aboriginal people.

Our concern regarding the life trajectories of young parents and their children, and our commitment to the principles outlined above, is demonstrated in our relationships with our partner agencies and our investment in programs specifically targeting young Aboriginal parents.

VACCA relationships with service partners and service provision for young parents

VACCA work with a range of programs associated with the delivery of services to young parents and at risk teenagers, including Koori Maternity services, Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officers, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, Aboriginal Youth Services, Aboriginal Best Start Program, Indigenous Family Violence Services and our partner Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations which provide a range of early childhood and parenting support services. We also work closely with mainstream Maternal and Child Health programs, Parenting and Skill Development Services (PASDS) and primary health practitioners across our service catchments. In addition, VACCA works closely with Koorie Education Support Officers (KESOs) in both primary and secondary education settings to engage with and support at risk young parents and their children.

VACCA is part of a 16 member consortium funded to deliver the Koolin Balit *Footprints for Success* Program which aims to support the engagement of Aboriginal parent's with universal and specialist



pre and post-natal services. The program has achieved good results but is currently funded only till June 2018. Additionally we are on the Steering Committee for a second Koolin Balit program conducted by the Djerriwarrh Health Service based in Melton and covering three LGA's in the western region of Melbourne

We directly provide:

Aboriginal Stronger Families, a program providing intensive, culturally informed in-home support through an integrated and therapeutic model of assessment and professional support to vulnerable Aboriginal children and families. Parents engaged in the program are supported to address the issues that place their children at risk of removal, or that have resulted in their child being placed in care, and to build their capacity to safely care for their children at home.

Integrated Family Support Service, an in-home support program that supports individuals and families, including young parents, caring for children, to address issues and improve their quality of life. Focusing on the strengths of the individual and family, case workers support young families engaged in the program to identify and work to achieve goals, drawing on culture as a strength and protective factor.

Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder Program, specifically targeting young Aboriginal women who are pregnant and those with new born infants where a Child Protection report has been made or where there are indicators of vulnerability or concerns for the wellbeing of the unborn or newborn child.

Brining up our boorais and bubups, VACCA run supported playgroups across 8 sites in metropolitan Melbourne that provide children a good start in life through improved early childhood development, care, education and school readiness. The program provides preschool children (0-5 years) and their families/ carers with:

- Support for learning, developmental and wellbeing needs of preschoolers in the years prior to starting school through learning activities which are high quality, culturally responsive and trauma-informed.
- Education to build the capacity of vulnerable families to be effective in their roles as the child's first teacher.
- Information and facilitation of Aboriginal child rearing practices and positive parenting.
- Opportunities to build relationships with local early years services including maternal child health, preschools and support the child's transition to school.
- Connection to Community and culture.

In addition VACCA delivers culturally specific parenting information through the following programs and services:

Koorie Families And young fellas Connecting & Sharing (FACeS) a group based family strengthening program that aims to build on and increase the confidence in parents, carers and families of Aboriginal children.

Orana Gunyah, a crisis accommodation and support service for Aboriginal women and their children escaping or experiencing family violence.



Giving boorais a healthy start to life through cultural strengthening and connection, a group-based, cultural strengthening program for young mothers (as well as their partners) living in the north and western metropolitan regions of Melbourne, designed in partnership with Tweddle.

Although not designed or funded specifically for young Aboriginal parents, VACCA also provides support to young parents engaged in our other programs including; *Kurnai Youth Homelessness* program based in Morwell which provides a culturally appropriate entry point, crisis support and case management service to Aboriginal young people who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, and our newly funded *Therapeutic Family Violence services* providing a trauma-informed therapeutic approach to working with Aboriginal families impacted by family violence within a broader framework of Culture, Connection and Healing.

1. Do you think that current policies and programs for young parents and at risk teens are adequate and effective? If not how do you think they could be improved?

There are a range of areas where the system falls short of identifying and addressing the risks and subsequent life trajectories for at risk teenagers, vulnerable young parents and their children.

In our view, a significant factor in implementing measures to mitigate the risk of teenage pregnancy is the extent to which there is an understanding in health, education and welfare settings of the groups of young women who are at increased risk.

There is substantial evidence that the following groups of young women are at higher risk of unplanned pregnancy than those in the general community;

- Young women born to teenage mothers
 - Young women from socially disadvantaged backgrounds
 - Young women resident in rural or remote locations
 - Young women who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders
 - Young women who are sexual abuse survivors or have been subject to other abuse
 - Young women in out of home care and care leavers
- (RACGP)(Mendez)

Our experience is that the higher risk for young women in these groups is not well understood across the sectors listed above. Opportunities for referral to appropriate services for sexual health, contraceptive information and specialist interventions which may avert unplanned pregnancies are subsequently overlooked. Where referral opportunities do currently exist, there is a lack of assertive outreach approaches, and a need for the use of more active engagement methods (explained below).

In relation to the needs of Aboriginal young parents and at risk teens, we highlight the following:

Screening for Aboriginal Identity is required

We find screening for Aboriginal identity is inconsistent in hospitals, primary care services and some tertiary level agencies including Child Protection. Failure to clarify Aboriginal identity as early as



possible may mean that opportunities to engage young women with culturally appropriate services including the Aboriginal Health Service and *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* Program are missed.

Aboriginal young people in Out of Home Care

Aboriginal children and young people: population and placement trends

Victoria is home to 14,578 Aboriginal children aged 0 to 17 years, representing **1.2 per cent of all children residing in the state**. There are marked differences between the age structure of the Aboriginal population and the total population. **Children make up almost one half (43.5 per cent) of the Victorian Aboriginal population**, almost double the proportion of children in the total population. According to the latest projections, the **number of Aboriginal children in Victoria is expected to increase by 22.9 per cent by 2021**, while the number of **non-Aboriginal children in Victoria will decrease by almost 1.0 per cent**.

The average placement rate for **Aboriginal children** in care in Victoria is **62.7** per thousand children (and as high as **120** in some hotspot areas), eclipsing the placement rate of **5.1** per thousand for **non-Aboriginal children**¹.

Rates of **intentional self-harm** among **Aboriginal young people** (aged 15 – 24 years) are **5.2 times** the rate of **non-Aboriginal young people**.²

Of the approximately 800 Aboriginal children born each year, up to **160 (20%) will be born into vulnerable circumstances**, of which **80** of these vulnerable children will be subject to **unborn reports to Child Protection**.

The ‘take away’ from this brief summary of data is that Aboriginal children will continue to grow as a percentage of all Victorian children, and if we just keep doing what we have been doing, then we can expect the numbers of Aboriginal children in crisis and in mainstream protection and placement services will continue to grow disproportionately larger.

There is much evidence that compared with young people in the general community, care leavers face considerable challenges in transitioning to adulthood and are significantly more likely to become parents in their teenage years. One 2006 study estimated the rate of teenage pregnancy for care leavers as 24 times higher than those in the general population (Mendez). As Aboriginal children and young people are over represented in OOHC, they become a significant group of at risk teens. In 2015 Aboriginal children were 9.5 times more likely to be residing in OOHC than non-Aboriginal children in Australia (SNAICC) and in July 2017 there were 1708 Aboriginal children in OOHC (Child Protection data).

What is needed?

Active engagement

For a number of young Aboriginal families access and engagement with services will be impacted by:

- experience of grief and loss and trauma
- disconnection from family and community

¹ 2015 Report on Government Services 2015, Table 15A, p18

² ABS Report 2014



- fear and mistrust of welfare services due to past experiences
- a sense of disempowerment where services have been imposed on them.

For this reason it is imperative that programs operate in a relationship based, child focussed and family centred way to build trust and a partnership approach to service delivery. Services also need to employ a proactive model of client engagement to engage and sustain the participation of the family with the program. Active engagement strategies may involve:

- multiple home visits to establish trust
- multiple follow ups if there is no response
- face to face contact
- offering concrete, practical or material support to meet an immediate need, such as transportation or bill payment
- working alongside another trusted Aboriginal universal service, Community Elder or significant person with whom the family has an established relationship
- meeting at an alternative location or time to suit the family's needs.

Engagement of Fathers

In our experience, too often family and parenting programs fail to appropriately engage with fathers. VACCA takes a whole-of-family approach that recognises the important role fathers, extended family and kinship systems play in strengthening the safety, wellbeing and healthy development of children. It is our approach and opinion, that there needs to be direct support provided to young Aboriginal fathers at the individual, family and community level. Programs need to be inclusive of fathers, provided that doing so does not compromise the safety of the mother and child in any way.

We believe that this can occur through:

- encouraging young Aboriginal fathers to be involved in all aspects of the assessment, planning, decision making and intervention phases, during the active engagement strategies identified above
- engaging young men in cultural activities, education, counseling and health services, wherever available.
- co-facilitating groups with providers of parenting, family relationship, health, youth and men's behavior change services
- linking men with relevant specialist support services and program for fathers
- linking men with community programs.

Sexual health counselling and access to contraceptive information

In our view care leavers constitute a highly vulnerable group of young people who frequently lack the protective factors of strong connections with family, culture, community. In the light of this disconnection and the significantly higher risk of teenage pregnancy for Aboriginal young people we consider sexual health counselling and access to contraceptive information and advice must feature more prominently in care planning for all young women in out of home care. Our experience is that this is not consistent policy or practice across the child protection or out of home care sectors.

Pre and post-natal planning



In situations where young women fall pregnant or deliver a child whilst in care, we consider it critical that pre and post-natal planning occur as early as possible with the young woman, extended family (as appropriate) and relevant health professionals to maximise the prospect of effective pre-natal care and the safety, stability and healthy development of the child. In practice this means engaging Koorie Maternity Services, parents and families in care team meetings, to ensure active participation in the planning and execution of care plans for the parents and child/ren.

Extension of the leaving care age

Funding for out of home care currently concludes on young people reaching the age of 18 which further contributes to the likelihood of adverse life trajectories for young people in care. It is our experience that many young people, who leave out of home care, become homeless or enter the criminal justice system within a short time. *“Of those young people who leave care, 50 % will end up, unemployed, homeless, in jail or have become pregnant within a year”* (The Home Stretch Campaign). We consider these findings disturbing and unacceptable.

VACCA has been a strong supporter of the national *Home Stretch Campaign* for some time. This campaign, conducted by agencies and individuals concerned at the inadequacy of current policy, is lobbying all state governments to provide the option for young people to remain in out of home care till the age of 21. Given the findings referred to above and the life challenges faced by care leavers, it is our view that additional support (post care) should be available till the age of 25.

Residential care and professional foster care options

Lack of service capacity is a further issue which detracts from effective outcomes for young parents. We are aware of pilot initiatives for group residential care of young women with unborn or new born children in out of home care. In addition to these initiatives we consider there is merit in exploring options like the professional foster care model, to recruit professional foster carers/in house mentors for the mother and her child to provide care and parenting support and lead tenant placements for young parents who require less intensive support.

In our experience, the current capacity of residential parenting programs does not effectively meet the needs of young Aboriginal parents and their children.

VACCA has regular and frequent contact with residential parenting programs that have a valuable role in assessing parenting capacity and working intensively with young parents. Though these programs have always had limited availability, they are increasingly difficult to access for all but the most at risk cases. While it is important that the most critical cases receive priority, we are concerned that the current lack of availability effectively precludes intervention with families where there are early indicators or parenting issues requiring an intensive response. These programs, at times, also have difficulty engaging young Aboriginal mothers, and as such need to employ active engagement strategies (as previously discussed) and ensure they are culturally appropriate (discussed below).

We consider new residential campus style parenting and outreach service models specifically designed for Aboriginal families and staffed by Aboriginal people such as *Orana Gunyah* (a crisis accommodation and support service for Aboriginal women and their children escaping or experiencing family violence) would:



- Enable more immediate access for Aboriginal families.
- Provide a culturally appropriate program and environment.
- More effectively engage young Aboriginal parents.
- Provide access to specialist parenting skill and development expertise.
- Enable *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* (see details later) workers to focus upon measures to address identified risks, case management, providing and actively supporting specialist referrals and consolidating parenting skills.

Centre and home-based parenting services

This situation is one we also experience with centre and home based parenting services which generally have long waiting lists resulting in purposeful assessments and interventions being delayed or unavailable to young Aboriginal families who would benefit greatly from them. In our view, young parents and families that we work with require timely access to a variety of residential, centre and home based parenting programs and interventions. However they are currently not reliably available for many of the young parents with whom we work.

In relation to parenting services, our *Koorie FACeS Program*, was developed by VACCA to supplement culturally specific parenting resources for Victorian Aboriginal families. It is a family strengthening program that aims to build on and increase the confidence in parents, carers and families of Aboriginal children. It focuses on an increased understanding and knowledge of self, Aboriginal culture, parenting practices and styles to build resilience against negative children's behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse.

The *Koorie FACeS* program is structured for groups of 10-12 adult participants, with five sessions delivered weekly. Each session is approximately three hours in duration. Sessions are ordered sequentially, enabling participants to build on previous learning's. At the conclusion of the program, a celebratory lunch is held and family portraits taken. The modules are: Understanding Our Past, Being a strong Koorie, Being a strong Koorie family, Connecting with your young fellas and Managing your young fellas. The program uses discussions, storytelling, activities and role plays to help Aboriginal families to understand the past, and develop individual, family and community strengths. Aboriginal Elders are frequently involved in the program.

Adequate and appropriate housing for young parents including care leavers

The current situation for young parents including care leavers with children, is that there are few realistic housing and support options where extended family are unable to provide accommodation or support, or where this is not considered in the child's best interests. We consider the critical tasks of promoting and assisting young people in care to develop safe and supportive social relationships and the early identification and engagement of extended family members (and their involvement at all stages of planning) are currently not well planned or executed.

We consider access to safe, secure and affordable housing a critical factor in providing effective services to young parents with vulnerable children, however this is frequently difficult to find and many young parents live in housing which is unsafe and unsuitable for the needs of young children.

Culturally appropriate services in the absence of those provided by ACCOs



Mainstream programs and services must be culturally appropriate. They must include systemic, behaviours, attitudes and policies, which acknowledge the real barriers and issues for Aboriginal people in accessing services and employ staff who are culturally competent. The Victorian Auditor General's report on the *Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians (2014)* identified a range of barriers for Aboriginal people in accessing mainstream services provided or funded by government. These included a lack of culturally safe services, a lack of awareness of available services, racism, shame and fear, complex administrative processes and poor affordability. We concur with these observations from our experience as the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation in Victoria.

2. Are there any particular examples of early interventions which decrease the risk profile and trajectory of young parents, young parents to be and their children? If not, what early interventions are likely to achieve this result?

VACCA suggests that programs such as *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* decrease the risk profile and trajectory of young parents. In delivering the *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* program we implement a range of interventions which contribute to decreasing the risk profile of young parents. We have achieved good results in preventing children entering the child protection system, managing risk and assisting parents to develop skills and confidence in caring for their child. The following aspects of our program are important in achieving these results:

- *Early referral and engagement:* Early referral of young women to the program provides the best opportunity for effective engagement, assessment of needs and risks, intervention and achieving sustained change over time.
 - Development occurs rapidly in the pre and post-natal period and referral as early as possible (in the prenatal period) provides the opportunity to collaboratively address healthy parental care, nutrition, substance use and lifestyle factors with the young woman.
 - We aim to maximise the health of the mother and her child and avoid the characteristics associated with births to teenage and young mothers including pre term delivery, birth complications and low birth weight. Unfortunately like other services, our experience is that many young mothers delay or avoid ante natal care and referrals are frequently received following the birth of the child.
- *Collaborative assessment and goal setting:* We aim to maximise the investment of young families in goal setting and interventions to achieve a healthy pregnancy, birth and safe and nurturing childhood. Following assessment and goal setting, interventions are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of program participants. Key workers and others provide personalised care and build relationships of trust.
- *Strengths based practice:* We have a strengths based – partnership approach to working with young parents. We work with parents to address problems and plan for future adverse situations by collaboratively identifying and building on existing personal and interpersonal resources. We aim for the development of an equal relationship with families, shared power and facilitate an agenda for intervention driven by families themselves.



- *Exploration of family, community and cultural resources and social networks:* Many of the young people referred to our program are disconnected from family, culture, community and supportive social networks. Relationships with these important elements for Aboriginal people are explored and opportunities to locate and rebuild connections with extended family for lifelong support are facilitated where possible and promoted. Activities which promote healing, strength and connection with Aboriginal culture run alongside all VACCA interventions.
- *Development of a plan* to maximise continued schooling where the young women attends school or strategies to re-engage with education, training or employment following the birth: This element is discussed in detail in the response to question four
- *Planning to address lifestyle factors detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the young parent/s and their child.* Many of the young people referred to the program have a range of detrimental lifestyle factors including: smoking, alcohol and drug use or are subject to family or other forms of violence. We work in partnership with specialist professionals and agencies to address these factors concurrent with the development of parenting skills.
- *Collaboration with partner mainstream and specialist agencies:* We have strong and effective professional relationships to assist us in managing the complexity and diversity of need for young Aboriginal parents.
- *Realistic timeframes for change:* The program works holistically and flexibly with families from pre-birth for the first four years of their child's life. As the skill base and confidence of parents grow, the child moves from infancy, and the needs of parents and children change, so too do the interventions and resources available.

Of the above mentioned aspects, the following are key practices elements that VACCA utilises when working with young at risk young parents and their families across all of our programs: *Early referral and engagement, Collaborative assessment and goal setting, Exploration of family, community and cultural resources and social networks, Development of a plan, Collaboration with partner mainstream and specialist agencies, Realistic timeframes for change, all within a Strengths based practice.*

We acknowledge that parenting occurs in a broader interpersonal, family and social context and as such in all of our programs we work holistically with families to address their needs and create a safe and nurturing environment for children. We work from a community development perspective and aim to develop relationships with young parents which build their capacity as parents and individuals, enable empowerment, develop confidence and build resilience and sustainability. We consider all of these aspects important in decreasing the risk profile and trajectories of young Aboriginal parents.

“VACCA offers a range of family programs to help me be a better parent/carer for my family” Service User feedback

While some of our programs are specifically tailored to the needs of parents, their Aboriginal children and the identified risks (*Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder, Family Services, Stronger Families, Koorie FACeS, Giving boorais a healthy start* etc.) it is our experience that decreasing the risk profile and trajectory of young parents and their children is not solely about parenting. When working with young parents engaged in any of our programs, much of what we do involves actively resourcing and



supporting these young parents to create ongoing stability for themselves and their children including:

- Assisting young parents to locate safe and secure housing suitable for young children.
- Assisting with measures to enable income security.
- Assessing, referring and supporting parents to address substance use and other lifestyle issues.
- Implementing measures which enable young parents to remain in or re-engage with education, training and employment to improve their life trajectories.
- Collaboratively implementing measures to keep women and children safe from partner and other forms of violence.
- Building confidence and resilience in young people in their interactions with others in authority.
- Connecting or re-connecting to their Aboriginal culture.

We are particularly conscious in our work of the shame and social stigma experienced by many young parents in their dealings with schools, agencies, health care professionals and sometimes in their interactions with family members, peers and others in their social network. We are aware that such real or perceived experiences can be debilitating and long lasting, sometimes resulting in isolation and may contribute to a reluctance to seek early ante natal health care (Mendez) (RACGP)(Price – Robertson).

“I don’t have to work with child protection workers because VACCA does it”

Service User feedback

We consider important aspects in overcoming the impact of social stigma for young parents include the presence of warmth and respect in all our interactions, an absence of judgement and the development of trust while maintaining a focus on the safety and health of the mother and her unborn or new born child.

Other important factors in programs with the aim of decreasing the risk profile and life trajectories of young Aboriginal parents include:

- Imbedding Aboriginal culture into program delivery: as previously highlighted, connection to culture is a protective factor for Aboriginal people and can increase resilience of young parents and their children.
- Realistic timeframes for change and program duration.
- An absence of punitive measures for parents who leave the program early.
- Capacity for parents who are previous program participants to re-join the program.
- Appropriate after care and support arrangements for young parents (most particularly care leavers).

3. Are you aware of any particular examples of early interventions that improve their capacity for safe and effective parenting? If not, what early interventions are likely to achieve this result?



Australian research identifies that parenting programs appear to be less effective for families suffering economic disadvantage, likely to refuse participation or drop out early highlight the challenge of assisting vulnerable young parents in caring for their children. (Department of Community Services)

In our experience, interventions which seek to build an Aboriginal parent's understanding and capacity to provide safe and nurturing parenting are most effective when:

- Strong cultural foundation and approach permeates the program
- Interventions are tailored to the parent's specific needs and circumstances
- The interventions are valued by the parent/s
- Parent/s views and goals are sought and incorporated
- Parents have a sense of ownership
- The interventions are relationship based and include involvement for extended family
- Interventions build connections with family, community and culture

Research regarding brain development during adolescence has particular relevance for identifying the necessary elements of programs for young parents. The finding that "*brain systems involved in evaluating risks, delaying gratification and controlling behaviour are identified as not maturing until late adolescence or early adulthood*" is particularly concerning in its significance for young parents with responsibility for an unborn child or infant given they are critical aspects of parenting. (Steinberg in Price – Robertson 2010)

In the light of such findings, programs which aim to build a young parents capacity and understanding in these areas must identify creative and sustained strategies, external measures to ensure the safety of the child and measures to test the understanding of the young parent and ability to parent safely in a range of situations. We consider this research also has applicability when determining appropriate interventions with young parents related to smoking, substance use and violence prevention.

Important aspects of the *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* program which take account of these issues are assertive outreach, the relationship based identification of goals and interventions, and the long term nature of the program. These aspects acknowledge the developmental realities of parenting for young people through:

- the development of a trusting relationship and sharing of power
- an agenda for change driven by families with support
- providing ongoing motivation
- sticking with young parents, building resilience and resourcefulness
- facilitating families to identify new goals as their circumstances change
- maintaining an ongoing focus on the foreseeable risks to unborn children and infants
- supporting Aboriginal parenting approaches and embedding culture

"I felt heard by VACCA" Service User feedback

Family Violence is not our culture was produced by VACCA in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, a Community Initiative



Project as part of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. This DVD aims to show how young Aboriginal families can break out of cyclic family violence; how with the support of VACCA's programs, and with strong culture, strong people and strong families, family violence is not a part of any relationship. The film features a young Aboriginal couple, parents to two children, who share their personal experience of overcoming cyclic family violence in order to provide a safe and stable family life for their children. The young couple were motivated to share their story to provide hope for other young Aboriginal parents (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzSOyA5bleA> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyS-PPWzleY>)

As previously explained, the *Koorie FACeS* is a group program that focuses on an increased understanding and knowledge of self, Aboriginal culture, parenting practices and styles to build resilience against negative children's behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse.

Critical to the success of the program are the following features:

- the program is informed by the needs of the Aboriginal community and is guided by best interests of the child
- the program is delivered in an interactive, reflective and culturally safe learning environment
- it uses a strengths based model that draws on the knowledge, experiences and expertise of participants
- the program is delivered by skilled, committed and respected Aboriginal community facilitators.
- Facilitators take an active role in addressing barriers to participants' access and engagement in the program
- Elders are engaged in the delivery of the program, providing an educative and mentoring role.

Giving boorais a healthy start to life through cultural strengthening and connection was developed by VACCA as a community based response designed to improve health knowledge and encourage healthy behaviours in young pregnant Aboriginal women and mothers during the pre and post-natal period. The program, funded by the Victorian Government Koolin Balit, strategy was designed to improve the health, development, social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, from pre-birth and during their critical first years of life, through the delivery of a group-based, cultural strengthening program for the young mothers (as well as their partners) living in the north and western metropolitan regions of Melbourne.

The program was designed by VACCA in partnership with Tweddle Child and Family Health Service, to address two priorities identified in the Koolin Balit strategy; A healthy start to life and, A healthy childhood. The aim of the program was to provide early intervention to empower the women through culture to gain confidence in the care of their newborns and to promote strong child development. A foundation premise of the program was the central role of culture in a healthy start to life. The program recognised that as a consequence of racism and colonialism and continuing poverty; many Aboriginal women and men have been isolated from their culture. A particular focus was addressing cultural ways of nurturing children and presenting knowledge to support positive behaviours in pregnancy and raising children through a cultural lens.

Established to provide culturally appropriate ante and post-natal education and support the program offered health education in a culturally safe space and identified cultural practices to support a healthy start to life. The model engaged an Aboriginal facilitator and a non-Aboriginal



facilitator, who was a maternal health educator. An important finding of the evaluation was that the program design of a culturally informed community based response to preparing women to be able to provide the best start for their babies, was successful in increasing the confidence of the mothers. This increased confidence appeared to be related to increased knowledge of healthy behaviours and an increased engagement with culture and community.

4. Are you aware of any particular interventions that increase their likelihood of becoming economically secure? If not, what early interventions are likely to achieve this result?

The potential longer term outcomes for young women who become pregnant in late adolescence are well documented. They include:

- underachievement and/ or disengagement from education
- rapid repeat pregnancy within two years of the birth of their child
- socio economic disadvantage, reduced employment possibilities
- long term reliance upon income support payments
(Mendez)(RAGP)(Seitz and Apfel)

In turn these outcomes place the children of teenage mothers at increased risk of poor health, educational disadvantage and social adversity in their own lives. (RACGP)

Staff in our *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* and *Stronger Families* programs are critically aware that young parenthood can limit a parent's ability to engage in education and perpetuate a lifetime cycle of disadvantage. Both programs have effective links with educational providers and provide support for young expectant mothers to remain engaged with school for as long as possible and strategies to facilitate their reengagement following the birth of their child.

The *Out of Home Care Partnering Agreement* between the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Catholic Education Commission and Independent Schools Victoria, provides a sound base for joint education planning and support of young people in out of home care in Victoria.

There are many barriers to school age mothers returning to school and completing their education including inflexible school policies and sometimes a lack of practical arrangements for child care and transport which such planning must address. (Price - Robertson) In our experience, the social stigma and fear of judgement by peers and others referred to previously in this response is also a significant factor in many Aboriginal young women electing not to continue their education following pregnancy or the birth of their child.

We consider the following programmatic features and interventions support educational achievement and improved life trajectories for young parents:

- A clear programmatic focus upon the importance of continuing educational achievement either at school or alternate setting.
- Development of alternate non-school based group educational programs for young pre and post-natal mothers.



- Education and support staff who are flexible, non-judgemental, non-authoritarian in their approach and who understand the realities of young parenthood.
- Flexible programs and support arrangements, tailored educational and vocational assessments.
- Encouragement and support for participants to contribute to their learning agenda.
- Provision of education, training and employment options to all program participants including young women who had left school prior to becoming pregnant.
- Opportunities for social support and building relationships.
- Availability of practical support, child care and transport arrangements
- Strong links with education, training and employment providers
- Incentives to promote attendance (including assertive outreach), recognition of achievement
- Incentives to engage and support access and participation of fathers and partners with education, training or employment.
- Involvement of Aboriginal role models and mentors.

In addition to withdrawal from education, further pregnancies for young mothers particularly in the 12 – 18 months following the birth of their child have been identified as significantly limiting future opportunity for young parents to become financially secure. A number of studies have identified that supporting young women to delay further pregnancy has substantial benefits for her ability to parent her firstborn child and her ability to re-engage with education or employment. (Seitz and Apfel)

Interventions associated with support for delaying further pregnancy include;

- Engaging young women as early as possible in the pregnancy.
- Maximising engagement via the provision of regular and frequent home visits in the pre and post-natal period
- Exploration of the implications of further pregnancy, sexual health and contraceptive counselling with young mothers and their partners.

As outlined earlier in this response we consider safe and secure housing to be critical to the achievement of improved longer term outcomes for young parents and their children. Stable housing enables security for young parents and the ability to plan and reengage in education or employment. We consider there is a need for further innovation and resourcing with respect to young parents in this area.

Young people engaged in VACCA's Youth Advisory Committee have identified that there is a need for programs to be provided (particularly to young people in and exiting out of home care) that assist young parents:

- Learn how to pay bills and how they work
- Learn how to keep bills down/low
- Understand budgeting, and:
 - how to open a bank account
 - how to use internet banking



- how to use Centrepay – how to set it up etc.
- how to understand job network
- Understand the difference between public and private housing
- Learn how to create a resume
- Build job skills and gain confidence in applying for work.
- Increase skills to prepare for living independently

All of these skills will support young people's ability to earn money and spend it wisely

Our vision is for services provided by ACCOs

- Despite the strong evidence, previously highlighted, that demonstrates the benefits of cultural programs for Aboriginal people, the current system in many respects is reliant upon a range of mainstream and specialist services (including family violence, drug and alcohol and homelessness services) in achieving the best possible outcomes for families.
- Our experience is that while some mainstream agencies have culturally appropriate systems in place, many continue to have work practices which are not conducive to engaging or working effectively with Aboriginal people. This often presents as a lack of flexibility, awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people in service access, the intergenerational impact of forced separation and the importance of family, culture and community in achieving healing, and effective and sustainable outcomes.

A system of culturally specific and accessible services is required for Aboriginal children and families which are delivered by Aboriginal organisations, to provide early assistance and support, target resources to our most vulnerable children and young parents and use our strong culture and people to heal those in need.

We believe new programs providing specific parenting assessment, education, support, resources and specialist maternal and child health for young Aboriginal parents are required which are accessible, culturally appropriate, and tailored to the needs of young parents. In particular we see the need for programs that emphasise intensive in-home support service provision.

These services must be funded on a long term basis that allows for adaptation and learning and outcome evaluation to ensure that ACCOs can measure their effectiveness in transforming the lives of Aboriginal young parents and their children.



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