

2011

CARE with ME

Cultural Matching -
Caring for Victoria's Vulnerable Children



'CARE for all children in foster care'

Cultural matching – Caring for Victoria’s Vulnerable Children

Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry

3.5.3 What more might need to be done to meet the needs and improve the outcomes of children in out-of-home care and those leaving care regarding:

- Their education, health and mental health needs;
- **The needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse**
- backgrounds; and
- Arrangements for developmentally appropriate contact between

Acknowledgement

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- Centre of Excellence of child and family welfare
- Office of the Child Safety Commissioner
- Foster Care Association of Victoria
- Anglicare Victoria
- OzChild
- Good Shepherd
- Islamic Council of Victoria
- Various research specialists

Executive Summary

This paper explores the current cultural practices in out of home care (OOHC) in Victoria and the benefits of cultural matching children, young people and their families. It is intended to encourage discussion within the OOHC sector concerning the need for support services and engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community groups. The legislative requirements and associated guidelines outline consideration must be given to upholding and protecting the child's cultural and spiritual identity and connection to their community. The benefits of cultural matching and the issues are identified based on consultation with stakeholders. The principle recommendation of this report is for implementation of cultural practices and matching by community service organizations (CSO's) which promote the safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing of every child and young person.

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1. Introduction

Care with Me, a foster care support service, is undertaking a review of the current cultural practices and providing recommendations which promote positive outcomes for all children and young people in OOHC. This report examines the current cultural practices, legislative requirements and standards of care in OOHC. The benefits of cultural matching are outlined and the key issues identified concerning the barriers and implementation of best practices. Without the implementation of best practices, many children feel removed and disconnected, have difficult transitions in their lives and lose their sense of identity. It is important for all children to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and participate in society, irrespective of their family circumstances and background.¹

1.1 Out of Home Care

Out of home care (of which one option is foster care/home based care) provides temporary homes for children or young people up to the age of 18 who are unable to live with their families. Children are placed in foster care because their families are not able to care for them for a period of time (varying from overnight to long term). A foster carer and their family provide support and stability for a child or young person in their home environment.

Case managers and carers involved in OOHC are faced with increased complexity when caring for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community groups. This arises due to diversity and variation between cultures, ethnicities, religions and race. It is important for all community groups to be involved and play a pivotal role in the safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing of every child and young person.

1.2 Culturally sensitive practice

The introduction of the following legislative requirements, guidelines and principles provide a framework promoting positive outcomes for all children:

- *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA)*
- *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (CWSA)*
- *Standards for Community Service Organisations*
- *Charter for Children in Out of Home Care*
- *The Best Practice Principles*

¹ Department of Human Services 2007, *The best interests principle*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, viewed 25 September 2010, <http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/43011/ecec_best_interest_conceptual_overview.pdf

The implementation of these practices is essential for the development of sustainable services in which the safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing of every child is supported and protected.

Included in these key documents are various references to culturally sensitive practices which need to be adhered to. The *Standards for Community Service Organisations* outlines

Standard 2: The CSO promotes a culture which values and respects children, youth and their families, carers, staff and volunteers.

Practice outcomes:

- Supporting the provision of culturally competent services which are responsive to the needs of children, youth and their families

Standard 3: Staff carers and volunteers support positive outcomes for children, youth and their families.

Practice outcomes:

- Staff, carers and volunteers are culturally competent and demonstrate an awareness and an appreciation of the needs of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children, youth and families.

Importantly, cultural and religious considerations are listed as a right for children in OOHC:

Right: *To be able to take part in family traditions and learn about and be involved with cultural and religious groups that are important to me (the child).*

Explanation: *This includes factors such as learning the language my family and community speak, going to special events, being able to follow the rules of my religion, and wherever possible visiting traditional lands and places that are sacred and special to my culture or religion.*

1.3 CALD Statistics

It is incredibly difficult to obtain statistics on the number of children and young people in the out of home care system that come from CALD backgrounds. This is due to a number of factors, first and foremost that the question is not often asked of children and families – what is your CALD background?, and even if it is, Child Protection Practitioners are not good at recording it and ensuring that it is followed through with when making out of home care referrals.

Care With Me is aware though that in the North West metropolitan region there are approximately 405 children and young people in care, approximately 16 of which come from Muslim families. This information was only obtained by asking Child Protection to count the number of children with Arabic names, as this was the only way to know if the child/young person was Muslim or not, as their CALD backgrounds are not recorded (excluding aboriginality). This however then excludes any children/young

people that are Muslim but do not have Arabic names (eg. Turkish, Bosnian and Asian Muslims), thus making it impossible to have an accurate understanding of the number of Muslims in out of home care.

2. Benefits of cultural matching

There are numerous benefits to cultural matching in placements including shared experiences, similar beliefs, practical benefits as well as continuity in care. There are extensive value-based and practical benefits to cultural matching in foster care, including²

2.1 Shared values

Shared beliefs and values can provide an opportunity for carers to encourage and grow the child's learning about important traditions and beliefs. Ultimately, the child is able to maintain and knows who they are as individuals, which helps them when they return home.

2.2 Child feels secure

A child feels secure in a family where their beliefs are shared. This allows them to heal and work through the difficulties that brought him or her into care. Having shared worldviews between the child and their carer helps determine the importance and methods of achieving wellness in a culturally appropriate way. Ensuring children are healthy individuals is seen to be a commitment by carers and considered a mutual benefit to the child, family as well as the cultural community.

2.3 Smooth transition

The geographic proximity of the foster child to the birth family and home community is beneficial for culturally matched placement. This helps maintain a connection with the extended family and preexisting support networks in order to observe practices without offending others or disturbing routine. Additionally, the transition is easier due to the common understanding of roles, expectations and duties of family members.

2.4 Low stress

As stated by foster carers, a recognition of similarities "helps them adapt", provides "an immediate connection", "easy to fit in" for the child and the foster care family. Caregivers who share the same cultural background as their foster children find it easier to interpret the child's motivations and behavior, and have a joint understanding of family values and responsibilities.

2.5 More in common

In terms of day-to-day foster home functioning, having the same language and similar family customs assists to ease the transition into the home for both the child and foster family. Effective

² Arnault, D Brown, J George, N Sintzel, J 2009, 'Benefits of cultural matching in foster care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 31, pp 1019-1024

communication and the ability to understand what the other is expressing is vital in building and maintaining healthy relationships.

IF ONLY.....

A dream of an ex-foster care child

An ex-foster care child tells of his story and dream of wanting a system where children are remembered.

Abdullah states *“If only I had an opportunity to be heard and seen as an individual. I missed being with my family and surrounded by things I loved and was familiar with – the food, clothes, music, traditional celebrations and customs.*

I felt abandoned by my parents,

I felt abandoned by my community.”

Key messages

- Children want to be heard and included in decisions that affect their lives
- It is important for children to remain connected to their family and community
- Children want to be in a familiar environment which reflects their cultural identity, practices and traditions



3. Key issues and findings

Care with Me has conducted broad community consultation with key stakeholders to determine the barriers preventing cultural matching of care. Although there are legislative requirements, sector guidelines and international research indicating the benefits of cultural matching, the implementation of cultural practices within the home based care system has not been adhered to.

The following underlying issues and findings were identified.

ISSUE	KEY FINDINGS
<i>Lack of support services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Little or no formal support services available to assist with the consideration and maintenance of a child's cultural and religious background in OOHC.
<i>Cultural barriers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Previous attempts to engage and recruit carers from CALD groups in Victoria have failed largely as a result of cultural barriers, lack of acceptance within the community and insufficient resources. For example, in 2002 a failed attempt occurred with the pilot Vietnamese community based program.
<i>Inadequate records</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outdated database systems and poor record-keeping have been kept on the cultural background of foster care children, families and carers. This has created issues in formulating accurate statistics and reliable information to quantify valuable data.
<i>Lack of priority</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inadequate recruitment and support has been provided to CALD community groups to encourage them to become foster carers. No formal programs have been established to deal with these issues.
<i>Social exclusion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After in-depth discussion with ex-foster care children from diverse cultural backgrounds, statements have been made of feeling rejected by their community and ashamed from the stigma attached with being in care. They felt a lack of cultural and religious support from services providers and the wider community.
<i>Australian research</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No Australian based research has been conducted to examine the importance of cultural matching and recognition of a child's background in OOHC.
<i>Inadequate training</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caseworkers need access to cross cultural awareness training detailing the assessment process and resources available to engage with various CALD communities (currently specialised training is available for careworkers with children of Aboriginal background).

4. Recommendations

Care with Me recommends the following action be undertaken to improve cultural practices and outcomes for children and young people in OOHC.

4.1 Government funding and review

- Increased federal government funding focusing on providing cultural support services within the OOHC
- Reviews by the Victorian Ombudsman and Department of Human Services (DHS) to examine the reliability and efficiency of the current cultural practices, recording-keeping and statistical information on children, families and carers from CALD groups within OOHC.

4.2 Support services for CALD groups

CSO's implement best cultural practices and matching for children and young people in OOHC by having support services for CALD groups which improve;

- Their level of awareness of OOHC
- The recruitment of culturally diverse carers
- The opportunity of children and young people to find culturally and religiously appropriate care
- The integration of these carers into existing foster care programs
- Their understanding of OOHC through information sessions tailored to meet their needs and specifications
- Channels of communication through the usage of culturally appropriate mediums and educational materials in a range of languages.
- The intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation between the existing carers and the prospective CALD carers.

4.3 Professional training and skill development

- Improve the standard of accreditation of caseworkers to include appropriate ongoing intercultural training which outlines the steps, processes and resources available to engage with CALD community groups

- Development of sustainable support service providers which act as intermediaries between CSO's and community groups
- Hold industry wide conferences and forums with key stakeholders discussing cultural matching and practices in OOHC
- Undertake Australian based research on cultural matching in OOHC
- Employment of caseworkers with a range of specialist skills from CALD groups.