Ngarda ngarli nggu marri
Solid families: Strong in heart and spirit
Moorditj moort

Anne Mead & Jasmine Mack

Aboriginal participants have suggested that communities change the name of this program each time it is facilitated so that it truly represents local hopes. In Roebourne, its Yindjibarndi name, *Ngarda ngarli nggu marri*, means 'Aboriginal people strong in heart and spirit'. While the Noongar name, *Moorditj moort*, means 'Solid families'.

Photo Jasmine Mack

Contents

Background:

Is there a program based on Aboriginal values?

This program began in Roebourne, Western Australia, when Deanna McGowan asked Anne Mead, 'Is there a "parenting program" based on Aboriginal values and world view?' As none were found, this program was developed. Many 'parenting programs' used in Australia are built on white people's thinking about how to be parents. We hope this program enables people from Aboriginal and other cultural backgrounds to build on what they know and value about families and children.

The program is based on a way of working known as narrative practice or narrative therapy and community work. Narrative practices centre people as experts on their own lives (Morgan, 2000; White, 2007). Families are assumed to have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives and that can be brought to the fore to sustain and further enhance their lives.

The 'Solid Families Tree' is our symbol and it underpins all parts of our program. This use of a tree metaphor is an adaptation of the Tree of Life narrative approach (Ncube 2006; Denborough, 2008).

This program has been developed in the context of Aboriginal women's groups. In the future we hope men's groups will develop their own version. We also hope that this program will be used and transformed by other cultural groups.

Acknowledgements

Many people have been involved in the development of this program.

Roebourne: We'd like to acknowledge all those who have participated throughout what has been a big journey. In particular, the support, enthusiasm and suggestions of: Deanna McGowan, Beth Smith, Donella Mitchell, Shenara Smith, Corissa Boddington, Zoe Shaw, and Claire McManus. Monica Togo who gave the 'fruit of the tree' a deeper meaning, linking present, past and future generations; and the many participants in the various trials and versions of the program. Marion and Jane Cheedy came up with the program's Yindjibarndi name. Tyson Mowarin of Weeriana Street Media Roebourne whose beautiful photos are included on pages 42, 67, 74, 83 and 85.

Perth: After participating in a professional development day run by Anne Mead on adapting and utilising the Tree, Karen Hosszu (School Psychologist) asked if this parenting program could be run at the Moorditj Community School. During this trial, further suggestions for improvement were made by Vicki Adams, Maureen Adams, Nadyne Cornwall, Noeleen Penny and Joy Ayton. Roma Winmar, Noongar Elder, dropped in several times to support and encourage and also gave the program its Noongar translation to be used in the South West of the state.

Organisations: Yaandina Family Centre (CEO Veronica Rodenburg) for support in initial stages; Nguluma Yindjibarndi Foundation (CEO Evan Maloney and Georgia Mills) who enthusiastically supported and encouraged the Warrgamugardi Yirdiyabura trainees to become involved as participants and future leaders; Roebourne Children and Family Centre (Claire McManus and Shenara Smith) for continuing the program; Moorditj Community School (Principal Brain Davies) who promoted and supported the Perth trial.

Behind the scenes: David Denborough from Dulwich Centre was Anne Mead's supervisor when she was working on the early version of this project as part of the Dulwich Centre One Year Training Program in Narrative Therapy and Community Work. He also discussed and edited this final version with Jasmine and Anne.

About the authors: Anne Mead and Jasmine Mack

Anne Mead and Jasmine Mack

Jasmine Mack is a member of both the Ngulama and Yindjibarndi language groups. Ngulama country is coastal land around Karratha/Roebourne. Yindjibarndi country consists of the tableland and ranges inland from Roebourne including Millstream-Chichester National Park. Jasmine first met Anne when working at Roebourne Primary School (where Anne was Principal).

The two reconnected when Jasmine was putting her energy into raising her young son and Anne had retired from the Education Department and was working as a psychologist in Roebourne with Yaandina Family Centre. Jasmine was employed part-time to support Anne in program development and delivery. Later, in Perth, Anne and Jas refined this Tree program and trialed it together at the Moorditj Community school. Anne and Jasmine share many hours of discussion and reflection about life in general, education, culture and cultural differences. They can be contacted by e-mail: Jasmine Mack – jas.mack@live.com.au / Anne Mead – atmead41@gmail.com

Before we begin: Cultural and practical considerations

Before describing the program, we thought it would be helpful to mention some cultural and practical considerations.

Naming the program

Women participants have requested that the word 'parenting' not be used in the name of this program. Parenting programs have too much of a 'Welfare' stigma. Participants have been clear that the program (and therefore its name) should instead focus on 'doing it our way' enhancing children's lives by nurturing and further strengthening the whole family. Where there is a local Aboriginal language, we like the women's idea of re-naming the program for that particular place.

Building trust and relationships in the group

Trust is the key. Without this there will be no relationships. This building of trust, and then relationships can take time, so go slow! At the beginning of the group, explore any existing connections between yourself and the group and between group members. These could be family, language group, country connections or shared interests. Sometimes sitting outside can be easier than being in a more formal setting. Beginning with a welcome and acknowledgement of country (for us this includes connecting to Elders past and present and considering what their hopes for the program might be) makes a respectful start.

Facilitation and introductions

We really recommend that this program has two facilitators and that at least one of these is of the same culture as the majority of the group. When this is not possible, then a local cultural consultant should be used. If the facilitator is not of the same culture as the majority group, then the group members become cultural 'informants' to teach the facilitator. Over time, local Aboriginal facilitators should be trained to conduct and adapt the program as needed.

Aboriginal people can feel uncomfortable going round the circle and having to speak in turn. An alternative is that people introduce the person next to them; or a ball is thrown around the group. Other warm up activities which include some movement can be useful if many of the group are unknown to each other.

When the group is known to each other and the leaders, then there is already a relationship. For other contexts where leaders don't know the group, and/or the group doesn't know each other; have your local co-facilitator introduce you. If you are both unknown, then introduce yourselves (Aboriginal person first) with *brief* information on where you and your family are from, including extended family.

Participants as co-developers

Even when the program has one or more Aboriginal facilitators, it makes a difference to ask all group members to be co-developers, to regularly ask for their feedback about how the program is going, and to make changes in response to this. We might ask 'how are we going?', or 'is this okay for you?' This is not only empowering, it makes it more likely for the program to meet the needs of current participants. The idea of having co-developers can extend to the families of group members at home. For example, after a discussion at home a male family member came into one of our groups to give feedback: he was passionate that we take action to build culture, not just talk about it.

Worldviews

The more we work on this program, the more we realise how important it is for facilitators to have an understanding of their own as well as other cultural world views, especially around family relationships and child rearing. Without some of this understanding, and particularly if the facilitators' own experience of child rearing is strongly built around Western parenting values, there is a high risk that 'parenting programs' can inadvertently contribute to continuing colonisation. As Jasmine describes, 'As Aboriginal people we have our own way of doing things. Even when Aboriginal people are urbanised, for many, our values and ways of growing up children have links to the traditional ways of our ancestors'. In general, Aboriginal children are expected and allowed to do things for themselves and others from an earlier age; they are also expected to be watchful and caring for younger family members from a very early age (Kearins, 1980; Malin, Campbell & Agius, 1996). In Malin's research, non-Aboriginal mothers talked of *wanting* independent children who cared for younger children; while the Aboriginal mothers did not talk about this their children actually demonstrated independence and watching out for younger children (Malin, Campbell & Agius, 1996).

Language

The language used in this resource is Standard Australian English. The dialect of English spoken by many Aboriginal people, however, is Aboriginal English. There are many words that have a different meaning to that of Standard English, sometimes subtle, and sometimes tipped on their head! For example, in Standard English 'cheeky' refers to a child's attitude to an adult. In Aboriginal English it can be a two-way process; children to adults or adults to children. The word 'Solid', as in our program name, has much broader meaning in Aboriginal English than the Standard English usage. Its Aboriginal meaning refers to something being good, positive or likable. When a family is described as 'Solid' this is saying that the family is strong in heart and spirit; 'grounded', really good. A family that is strong is respected and held in high esteem. They are a role model for others. If you use a word that has different meanings in the local context, the group may giggle, gasp or their body language may well inform you. You can't be told beforehand the meaning of every word that might be used, so it's a question of keeping ears open, watching the body language, and checking immediately if you think you've said something that has a different local meaning than you intended! The group will love being your teacher.

Questions

This program is based on Aboriginal values and narrative practices (Morgan, 2000; White, 2007, Wingard & Lester, 2001). Narrative practices use questions to make connections, to bring forth richer stories, and to draw out and make visible participants' own skills and knowledge. Particular questions evoke the 'wows' or 'I hadn't thought of that before'! For many people, narrative questions can seem unusual at first. This includes facilitators as well as the group members. It is useful for facilitators who are not familiar with narrative ideas to practise the questions and examples *before* each session. We have occasionally had to reword questions, but no more so than with other cultural groups. Of course, cultural considerations always need to be kept in mind and participants need to be given space and time to reflect before they are expected to respond.

Group work

In a large group, there may be advantages in splitting the group at times to enable more people a chance to be heard and more ideas shared. However, in a situation where most people are connected and have to some extent similar experiences, values, hopes and dreams (e.g. in more remote communities), one group may be preferred. A second decision relates to whether you only create a Group Tree, or a Group Tree *and* Personal Trees. The process of having all ideas recorded on the Group Tree builds connections and develops a sense of common purpose and community. Having this Group Tree displayed publicly can encourage talk amongst other community members. When Personal Trees are also created, they are individualised, can be taken home to share and referred to in the future, while remaining connected to the larger group.

Writing or drawing on the Tree

Throughout the program, the Tree is used as a record and reminder of key ideas and stories. Many people may feel uncomfortable about writing, especially if schooling has been limited. We have offered encouragement to participants to draw small icons to represent key ideas, rather than only having to write, but to date no-one has chosen to do so. So far, with support and plenty of time, and examples of words provided in the lists drawn up from the group conversations, participants have chosen to write words. When words are used for recording, great care needs to be taken that people know what the words say and mean, and have a way of identifying the words they want to write. In some locations, it may be that everyone draws small pictures, just enough to remind them what was talked about. If another language is strong and there is a proficient scribe of that language, then the group may choose that option.

Home yarning – linking with home

Throughout the group, participants are invited to do weekly 'homework', however, the term 'home yarning' is preferred as this is a process people happily engage in. This draws in other family members to the group process and creates a positive ripple effect.

Time required

You will need to work out how much time, and how many sessions to use, to facilitate this program. This will depend on your context. We have settled for a two-hour session once a week over at least ten weeks. Anything less did not provide sufficient time to work out ways of responding to 'storms'. Another reason for more time is that in many contexts very few people are able to attend every session because of 'sorry times', illnesses, or other difficulties. If the program is held in a context in which women can 'drop in' and talk with facilitators in between groups, this really helps especially for those who may have missed a day, or need extra time. When it has been a particularly bad time (seemingly endless funerals), sessions can be spread out even more and other activities can be introduced to allow a break for more frequent attendees. Our most memorable events have included a bush food and bush medicine day, and a health check day. During bad times we have also introduced other activities to the sessions. When one group member said she was depressed and this state seemed to be mirrored by the rest of the group, we discovered that in the previous 12 months most group members knew at least 13 people who had died. Laughter Yoga, which we learned from DVDs (www.youtube.com/user/madankataria) provided some small degree of temporary relief from the sadness.

Food

Sharing food can play a key part in building relationships and sharing discussions: minimally a 'cuppa' and healthy snack which can be had while yarning is going on. If there is more time (and money), a healthy meal can be shared at the end of each session while talking about health and nutrition matters. This still directly relates to the topic of the program; a diet with too much Coke and 'takeaways' is going to have families who are more tired and prone to illness and children who are much more difficult to 'grow up'!

Equipment needed

- A large sheet of calico (check there is available space to hang it) or large sheets of paper combined to create a large Tree image. It's good to have the outline drawn before beginning the group.
- Pens to colour the calico or large sheet of paper.
- To create Personal Trees: A3 paper, pencils and coloured pencils/textas. We usually work with ordinary pencils and colour the Personal Trees only near their completion.
- A white board or flip chart to collate ideas.
- Access to laminating the A3 sheets for Personal Trees.
- Optional: certificates, recorder, camera, Strength Cards (www.innovativeresources.org)

Outline of the program

This is a one page outline of the program to give you a sense of its structure:

Day 1

- Acknowledgement of country (and connecting to hopes and dreams of Elders)
- Introductions
- Background to the program: Its history, hopes and timeline
- Invitation to participants to be 'co-developers'
- Cultural differences in growing up children
- Tree as symbol: Visualisation exercise (Appendix A)
- Beginning the Group and Personal Trees (even if only to draw the outline!)
- Breathing exercise done at the end of every session (Appendix B)
- Home yarning is done between all sessions

Following sessions

- Welcome back
- Visualisation of Tree: Sitting and relaxing or looking at the group tree provides a calming beginning and focus (Appendix A).
- Reports back from home yarning. This can sometimes provide additional material for the Trees.
- Continue making the Group Tree (and often also Personal Trees): We create a large collective tree on calico (or joined paper sheets). After each part of the Collective Tree is talked about and recorded (for instance 'roots'), each individual considers all the ideas that have been discussed and selects those they wish to place on the 'roots' of their Personal Tree.
- Facilitators ask questions to support one of more group members to tell the story of one of the items they have just added to their Personal Tree.
- Participants share with each other stories of another item they have just added to their Tree. Leaders can unobtrusively move between groups. Mostly they listen but sometimes they might ask a question. They can also bring shared ideas back to the whole group.
- Discuss 'Home Yarning' for coming week.
- Close with breathing exercises (Appendix B).

Last Day - Celebration in which we invite other key people and share the stories of our trees

Personal Trees which have been completed, coloured and laminated are presented during the celebration!

Cultural differences in growing up children

Every culture does things differently, and we can learn from each other. The ways we are parented contributes to the development of particular values, strengths and behaviours. Different cultures place importance on different values and these are handed down through the generations. Sometimes we use the same word e.g. 'respect' but it might mean quite different things in different cultures!

One way of demonstrating variations in ways of being a family and in parenting is to bring into the group a person who comes from a different cultural background (not white-Australian or Aboriginal). When we can bring someone like this into the discussion we can ask our 'cultural' guests to consider the following questions:

- What was important in your culture in raising children?
- What would you get into trouble for as children?
- What was your family proud of in their children?
- What values were important to them?

If it's not possible to bring in a 'cultural guest', we can still share stories that demonstrate how different cultures put value on different practices/words. If there is limited access to other cultures and there are no people around who have done sufficient travelling to notice child-rearing differences, we have sometimes used resources from the library. If we didn't have a visitor, we sometimes used these two examples:

Manners
'Manners' are ways of being polite; of showing respect. But different cultures have different 'manners' or ways of showing respect. Some are used by some cultures, but not at all or only a little by others. For example, saying 'please' and 'thank you' is a European practice which reflects the hierarchical/deferential nature of European societies. As far as we know, the words 'please' and 'thank you' do not exist in any Aboriginal Languages.

Saying yes to save face
Sometimes Aboriginal people, especially Elders, say 'yes' because they don't want to hurt people's feelings. Japanese people can do this too. They want you to be able to 'save face'. In both Turkish and Japanese cultures, 'yes' may also just mean 'I hear you'. It might not mean they agree with you or that they are going to do as you asked.

We can learn from each other, and make choices that fit with our own values.

Cultural differences activity

We have found it helpful to consider cultural differences around family relationships and particularly parenting.

Brainstorm differences you have noticed between ways Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal (European) people are with babies and the ways they raise their children. Include examples from birth through to teenagers and create lists in relation to the following areas:

- *Practices during and after birth:*
  - *feeding (as babies, as they are introduced to solid foods, and as they get older)*
  - *sleeping*
  - *toileting*
  - *mixing with others*
- *What children are allowed to do, not allowed to do:*
  - *who to talk to and how*
  - *other forms of communication*
  - *discipline*
  - *responsibilities*
  - *sharing*
  - *making decisions*
  - *play*
  - *friends*

When the two lists of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways are created, discuss them. There are usually variations in every group as to what practices are done or not done and which are preferred. There may also be some crossover *between* the lists for some participants.

After the group has developed their own lists, you might like to share and compare their lists with those created by others. We have included here our lists which were generated from discussions in Roebourne over several years of the program. While our list can be used for follow-up discussions, please be aware of potential differences between and within groups. The following comments were simply the perceptions of diverse participants. There was not always total agreement! The aim is simply to spark discussions about cultural differences.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HOW WE LIVE	
Aboriginal	**White Australian**
AROUND BIRTH	
Suck nose (babies/young children)	Wipe nose (babies/young children)
Crying baby nursed Sometimes left to cry a little bit: 'makes lungs stronger'	Crying baby nursed Use pram more
Babies held and touched more	Baby put in pram or bassinet or bouncer
More family support at time of birth and after	Lots of advice, not so much help in some families
SLEEPING	
Bed when ready	Bed time=told=routine=curfew
Kids go to sleep anytime	Sleep routines
Let babies sleep when they want	Want babies to sleep lots
Share bed ... may sleep with babies until they are 5 or 6 years old	Sleep in own bed
Sleep near others. When they wake they are stimulated by talking and interacting with those around them.	Babies in bassinet away from others with dingly-dangly things hanging over to stimulate them when they wake.
DRESSING/WASHING/SELF-CARE	
Covered up: as long as they've got clothes on.	Dress up to go out
School: Any clothes + no shoes or thongs	Uniforms and shoes
Don't worry if they get dirty	Parents fuss if kids get dirty
Don't give children lessons on wiping nose. They learn by observing others	Teach children to wipe nose. Wipe little one's noses
No swim wear/Shorts t-shirt	Swim wear
HOMES AND FAMILIES	
Have kids around all the time	Day care
More family around and more important friends and families help look after our children We like to share our kids Stay at home or with family more	Less family around Lots more organised outside activities
Grandparents *always* help with children	Grandparents help with children if they are around
Family connections taught early to young children	May not know extended family
Hard to get luxuries	Have a lot of things
Help when we ask for a job to be done e.g. pick up rubbish	Children have chores
House may sometimes be untidy	Clean house all the time
Live comfortable	Flash house/things for house
Spender	Saving
Outside play	More time in family house and garden

Help each other more than compete with each other	Competitive between children in the family
Most fathers no help with babies	Fathers help at all ages
More about 'we' Child hardly ever alone, usually in groups	More about 'I' Child may be alone or talking with parents
COMMUNICATION	
We communicate in lots of ways. Not always talking. Often use facial expressions, signs.	Communication mostly by talking.
Back chat	Listen to parents
Talking to babies/young children more Children talking to each other more Not so much parent to child talking about things	Keep them quiet Parent child conversations
Teaching about culture	
EATING	
No shame: Bibi feed (breast feed) anywhere anytime	Shame of breast feeding in public. Cover up, bottle feed or breast pump milk and put into bottle for public feeding
'mouth' feed (mother chews for baby)	Food processor used to get food smaller Children hand feed themselves earlier
Same food as rest of family	Jars and tins of baby foods for little ones
Use fingers (or spoons) to eat Teach baby to eat from hand till they start using a spoon	Spoons (baby fed with a spoon, while s/he plays with his own spoon) then knife and fork
Get own food Help themselves any time of day or night	Wait for Mum
Eat everything Eat what they can and want	Fussy kids (eating) 'Eat all your meal'
Cooking outside on coals	BBQ plate
Sitting outside eating together. Sitting in a circle on the ground ensures you are on the same level. Also means communication is better. Sharing food also happens (e.g. off one plate) and this also means that people are not over-eating.	Family Meals all together (at the table) (or watching TV) Eating at the table. Table manners. Some white people say grace.
Treats: every day sometimes Parents buy sweets for them	Treats once a week – planned Children buy their own (pocket money)
Teach them bush tucker	
Give babies water from mouth ... like grandmothers used to	
School lunches ... give money or they have no lunch	Pack kids lunches
Damper and pancakes	Rolls and buns
Xmas home-made pudding	Xmas shop pudding
Teething bone	Teething biscuits
GROWING UP CHILDREN/MANAGING BEHAVIOUR	
Freedom	'Orders'
Independence	Beside Mum
No time limits	Time limits
Differences in rules home/school Differences in expected behaviour: school and home. Not so many rules for kids	Same rules home and school Same sorts of behaviours home and school Lots of rules for kids
Freedom to go into other people's houses	Have to be invited into other people's houses

Don't stop children from touching things	White people: 'don't touch'
Say what we think E.g. tell kids off in supermarket	Worry what people think E.g. speak through side of mouth in a whisper in supermarket to tell kids to stop.
Let them go to basketball courts in town or with mates for 1½ hrs (not pre-schoolers)	Don't let children out after dark (older)
We smack our children to teach them right from wrong	Some white people smack. Others punish by sending to room or taking something away.
Listen to child whining but not pay attention	Pay more attention when child whining
Aunties called Mum	Aunties are aunties
Some toilet trained. Mostly learn by watching other children	Always toilet trained (potty)

What children should know before they go to kindy (kindergarten)

From the women of Roebourne

To give another glimpse of different cultural expectations, this is what a group of Roebourne women thought their children should know before they go to kindergarten.

By the time children go to Kindy we think they would be able to:

- Recognise family; know who is family[1]
- Know those in the school who are family
- Stand up for self. If they are picked on, don't sook, be strong, don't take any notice, walk away, ignore or tell someone (*this might be someone at home*)
- Take plates to sink and try to help
- Ask for help if needed
- Share
- Look after littler ones, helping them
- If others fall over help them
- Care for others

In addition, by the time children are eight or nine they should know their language group and where they're from – their country.

What do we never want to lose?

We have found it very important to discuss the following question:

- What does the group like about the way children are raised in Aboriginal families and would never want to lose?

One interesting discussion in Roebourne when talking of changes over time has been around the sharing of beds and bedrooms. When a group was asked what they would do if they had a bigger house, the response given was 'give each child a bedroom of their own'. But then they realised there was a down side. Family closeness could be lessened and there could be more difficulties with children at bed time. They might be lonely, more worried and not settle! This highlights that as situations change aspects of parenting change as well, and in this process we can inadvertently lose something that was valued. As an aside, Anne once suggested to a non-Aboriginal parent whose two primary school aged children were not settling at night that she try putting them into one bedroom. It worked like a charm!

Where our knowledge comes from

In any group, no matter the culture, there will be personal or group histories that have influenced the development of parenting skills. We have found it helpful to talk about where and how we learn to be parents. You might even list where this knowledge has come from.

Messages from the dominant culture about parenting and the ways families should relate

Historically, the people who first colonised Australia (and many other countries) thought their ways were best and expected that everyone should bring up their children in the way they did. These ways were spread by missionaries, police, employers and later welfare agencies. Schools also added their bit! Now there is television, radio, newspapers and magazines as well as agencies giving messages about how we 'should' be as parents and families.

- What are the messages we get from television shows about how people should live?
- Whose cultural values are being shown?
- What effects are these messages coming from the dominant cultural group having on the way Aboriginal people live and how we grow up children?
- Does it make a difference to what we expect from ourselves, from our partners, from children?
- Which ways would you want in your family, which would you never like to have, which are you glad you don't have?

As we meet together, we need to keep thinking about how we want our families to be and not worry about what we think other people might say about how we should be.

We discuss all of this *before* we start to create our Trees.

Creating our trees

Our Trees will help us work out what we want for our families; the sort of people we want to be, and the sort of people we want our children to be. Even more, they provide a way of thinking about the actions we want to take to make our families stronger.

At this point we draw the tree outline, including roots, but we don't yet include fruits, flowers, or leaves. We suggest having some examples showing different tree types and different page orientations (landscape or portrait), otherwise all the Personal Trees may end up looking like the Group Tree on the wall. If roots are not shown on your examples, pencil them in! We start with light pencil markings which can be 'prettied up' and coloured in later. People may be uncomfortable drawing, concerned that their efforts may not be 'good enough' or not 'right', so care is taken to reassure and participants might also offer each other assistance.

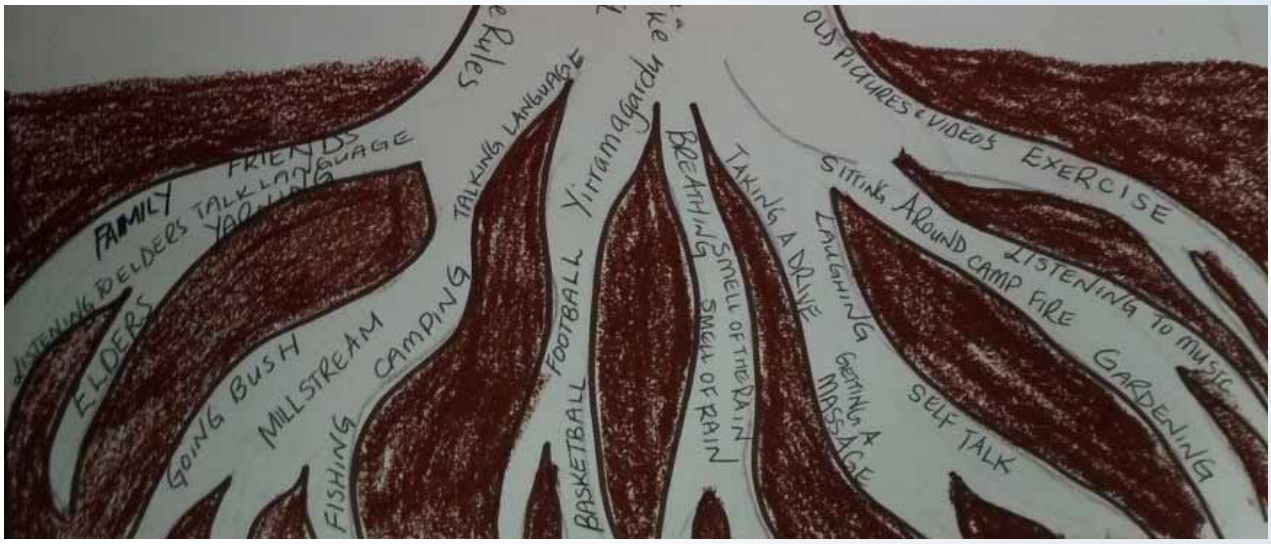
The process for creating every part of the tree involves the following steps:

- Whole group discussion using focus questions.
- When there are more than 5-6 people, if people are comfortable with the idea, we move into small groups to talk about the topic. In the small groups we write down words/phrases or draw little pictures so that these can be re-told to the whole group.
- Ideas are all written up clearly on the white board or flip chart.
- These words are then transferred to the Group Tree.
- If Personal Trees are being developed, the particular ideas which fit for individuals go onto their Personal Trees.
- One person in the group is asked to tell a story about one of the important ideas.
- The facilitator asks questions to help the storyteller draw out the details, strengths and skills in the story.
- We move back into small groups/pairs to tell further stories to each other about the particular focus area.
- When there is time, one or more of these stories may also be brought back to the whole group.

Focus Questions for Tree parts

Though the questions below are written as bullet points, they are not asked like that! They can be incorporated into discussions and/or offered a few at a time to expand people's thinking.

Roots: What makes us strong and keeps us going when times are tough



To start our tree we yarn about our ways of staying strong. We always write down all of our ideas (in small groups, on scrap paper first). Then they go onto the whiteboard (or flipchart) to keep everyone's words so we can put them on our group tree and then pick the ones we want for our own Personal Trees. The list helps us fix up our spelling too! We think about:

- What keeps us going when we feel down/helps lift us up when times are hard?
- What activities make us feel good about ourselves, make us feel stronger, calm us down and/or keep us going?
- What places do we go to or think about that make us feel stronger?
- Are there any people we feel strong with, who help to keep us strong?
- Who are the people in our past who were strong for us? Who showed us how to be strong?
- Is there anything we say to ourselves that lifts us off the bottom, that gets us thinking more positively?

After the words have been reported back and put onto the Group Tree and Personal Trees, it's time to tell stories. This yarning time makes the experience more powerful. After one person has been interviewed, others may tell each other a story.

Yarning time about 'roots': Questions to expand the stories.

Each week we will tell stories from our tree. We will ask some questions. We start with the whole group.

Here are some examples of possible questions. We would rarely, if ever, ask this many!

- Where/how did you learn this way of keeping strong?
- When is earliest/first time you can remember ...
- If it's going to, or thinking about a place, where is it?
- Are there family connections to this place?
- What is it about that place/person/activity/thinking that makes you feel stronger?

- Do you have a picture in your head? Is there anything you smell/hear/feel that helps to make these good memories stronger?
- Do the people who showed you, or took you to that place, know how important this has become for you?
- If they heard this, how do you think they would feel to know that you were still so connected to it? What would their faces tell you?

Note re storytelling protocols:
In some Aboriginal contexts, asking questions about what another individual might say, e.g. 'What might your mother say if she knew you were following her example …?' may cause confusion. Saying words you have not heard, but think another would say, may not be culturally appropriate. It may be akin to asking people if they know certain stories of others. In these circumstances, a common response might be 'Yes, I know that story but it is not mine to tell'. (Please note this is not the same as acting as interpreter, or being asked to repeat what has actually been heard.) If a facilitator is wanting to evoke the support of a person who isn't present (as in the example above), one could ask instead about what might be seen on the mother's face: 'If your mother was here and hearing what you were saying, how might she look?' Or even, 'how do you think she might feel if they knew you are doing this?' It is important to keep checking in with local cultural consultants about whether your planned questions are appropriate; the sorts of questions you should never ask, and to get their support if there has been confusion.

We then repeat this process in pairs or in small groups so that everyone has the chance to tell a story from the roots of their Tree.

'Home Yarning' for Tree Roots

Every week we will go home and yarn with family about what we have been doing here. Together, think about what you want for your family. Then you can bring their ideas back to the group.

- *Yarn to your family about your stories and their stories.*
- *What makes them feel stronger? What keeps them going? Where or how did they learn this?*

(In one group some members asked for 'home yarning cards' as a reminder)

Two examples of stories from the 'Roots' of our Trees:

We are including some examples of stories here to show the questions in action, and to demonstrate the sorts of wonderful stories that can emerge through this process. We suggest you *don't* read these stories to the group because that could imply their own stories are not 'good enough'. Instead, we suggest you generate stories from the participants of the group.

Q is used in all stories to indicate the questions/comments of the group facilitator. **R** is used for response. When there is more than one person responding, **R2** is used. Please note that people's names have been changed.

Memories of my grandmother

Q: *Jenny, you have lots of ways that keep you going when you're down; ways that keep you strong … is there one that stands out for you? One that you could tell us a little about?*

R: Yeah … memories. The main memory is the memory of my grandmother and the stories that she used to tell about being a strong, independent woman. One of her main messages, I remember, is her telling me that I can be this strong independent woman too, just like she was and like her oldest daughter, my Aunty. They had to be strong because my grandfather had a few wives and each wife had a job. One was the mother that looked after the kids; one had to be a stockman, which was the grandmother I'm talking about; another one was in charge of cooking and other things.

So I think I've learned we all have a place and being strong doesn't mean you have to fit into the man's world or the white world. Being strong means being who you are, being the best of who you are.

Q: *Can you tell us a little more about your grandmother? Other stories about her that you might think about when you're feeling down?*

R: Yeah ... like I said, she was the stockman so she did the fencing and the outside mending too. One of the stories I always remember is that when she was in labour with one of her kids, the windmill broke down and they needed water, so she climbed up to the top of the windmill and fixed the windmill in between contractions. Physically that's strong, but to have the willpower to get up and to go, 'Okay, no-one else here can do it, there's no man here, so I've got to do it!' That is really something. There are lots of stories from much later in her life and bringing up the children and being strong in knowing what she wanted. She was always telling this story, it's funny (laughs) ... about when they first moved into town and she encouraged our grandfather to get his Citizenship[2] so they could get a house and then, when he got the house and the kids could go to the White school, they kicked him out!

Q: *You mean the wives?*

R: Yeah. The wives kicked him out and they and the younger children lived in the house [the older ones were already working] ... it's funny but she had to be strong to do that and she wasn't thinking about herself, she was thinking about her kids and her family.

Q: *I'm not clear ... why was he kicked out?*

R: I think ... he was not the best husband ... and he kept finding more and more wives!

Q: *Oh, okay.* (General laughter)

R: They didn't need him anymore because they weren't going to have any more kids! I suppose because women were right down the ladder ... there was the white man, the white woman, and then Aboriginal man and Aboriginal woman at the bottom ... so they needed him to get into the white world [house and schooling] ... but once they were in ....

Q: *So now she has gone, when you're feeling down, what is it that comes to your mind that helps?*

R: When I went to visit, when I was with her, I didn't need to say anything. But just go in and sit on her bed and just be there ... it was ... I don't know ... just a feeling of her strength and where she had been and what she had done and what she had achieved. And then sometimes ... she'd tell stories or sometimes I'd tell her stories ... but we could just sit there all afternoon and not say anything. When I did go there and I was not in the right place at that time ... I was really down ... I didn't have to tell her my problems ... she just knew.

Q: *Just being with her helped when you were down?*

R: Yeah. Now she has gone, I see her and remember the stories she told ... I didn't realise when she was alive how strong a connection that I did have with her. It's only now that she's not here, that I realise how strong she was ... and how she was a safe, strong place for me.

Q: *You didn't realise till she was gone just how important she was to you ... if she was hearing you talking now, what do you think she would do? How would she be?*

R: I see her sitting down on her bed with her arms folded 'cos that's how she was when she was listening ... and if someone important came to talk about stuff, like Native Title, that's how she would sit and you would know she was really listening. So she wouldn't be looking at me, just sitting strong and proud, and then she might say, 'Don't worry about what is going on around you, just do for you and your kids'. And then she would add, 'make sure you tell your daughter too!' (Laughs) [*This comment, 'make sure you tell your daughter too' was referring to telling her the whole story of her great-grandmother, and about being strong*].

I will tell her all the stories. She's going to be strong like her Gumula great-grandmother [*Gumula is the name of this grandmother's Language group*].

Comment from the group: She was a strong lady eh? (General agreement)

The story of the red tailed cockatoo

Q: *Sally, from all that you have put on the roots of your tree, which one would you like to tell us about?*

R: I want to tell you about how the red tailed cockatoo came into my life. I went to the South West with my sister and daughter, that's not my country, but I met an old man who had lived for many years in Central Australia. He did Reiki and healing with me, and during the session the man saw a red tailed cockatoo above my head. I had an out-of-body experience. I saw tribal people. I saw Dad. I was crying. I always go back to my country in my dreams. I didn't see a red tailed cockatoo but the man said the bird was my totem. It had been there all along to give me energy and make me feel good. But he also said I had to give back, maintain my garden and plant more Trees for the birds. I needed to care for my environment and give back. This meant a lot to me. I was diagnosed with a terminal illness six years ago. Doctors said I had a maximum time of five years to live.

Next day, my daughter and I went to a lookout overlooking the ocean where there is a very old men's business fishing trap. As women, we had been told we couldn't go right down to the trap so we stayed on the lookout spot. I saw two Red Tailed Black Cockatoos. It was my birthday. I took some photos. I looked at the photos on camera. I could see the birds on the camera but when I uploaded the photos from the camera; the birds weren't there. It was really weird ... Spooky!

Q: *In what ways do the red tailed cockatoos build your strength? Help you to stay strong when life is tough?*

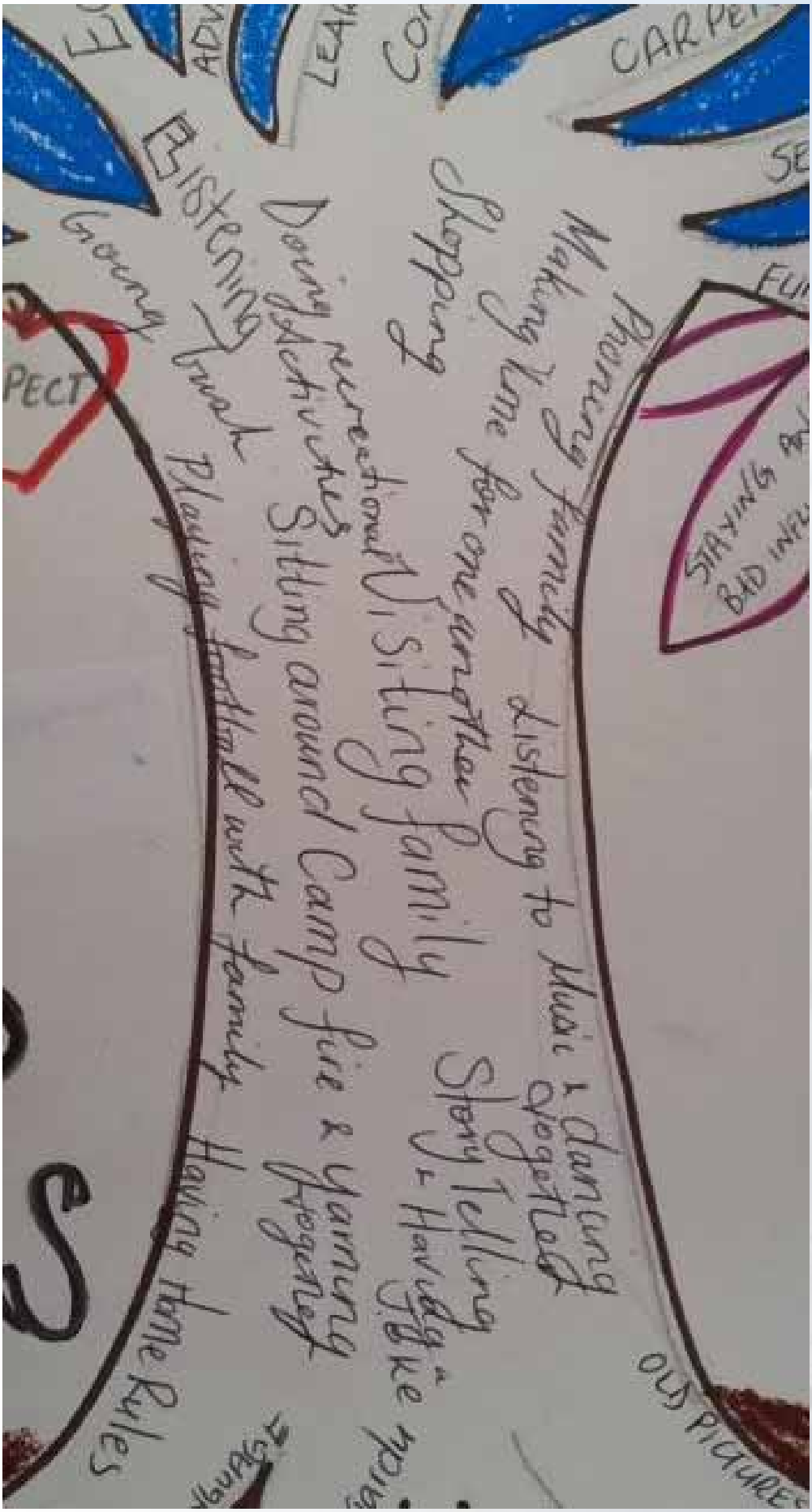
R: I constantly think about the birds. When I am in the garden or when I am away from it I use the Red Tailed Cockatoo to keep me strong. Their energy keeps me going. When I came back home, thinking about them made me go out and clean up my garden. I went out and bought more plants and they are thriving now. It feels right to be giving back to the birds, constantly. My garden looks good and lots of birds come to it. I haven't seen any Red Tailed Black Cockatoos, but they are there in my mind. I made a little shrine in the garden. It's my quiet place, my peaceful spot where I gather my strength. I am now in the place I was ten years ago. I feel healthier and I have my mental energy back. I am strong for me and my granddaughter and my family.

Q: *You mentioned your sister and your daughter. Do other family members know how important the Red Tailed Black Cockatoo is to you?*

R: (Laughs) Everyone. Everyone. All my family, my granddaughter, my children, everyone important to me.

Trunk: Building relationships

The trunk of our tree is about ways of building good relationships in our family and with our children.



The following questions can help to come up with ideas for the trunks of our Trees:

- What do you enjoy doing with your family, children and friends?
- Think about what people in your family did with you that felt good and safe?
- Think about others who showed you they cared in a good, safe way. What were those ways?
- Were there things you saw other people doing that you think would be good for relationship building?
- When there is a good relationship, what do you see people doing or hear them saying?
- They don't have to be big things, often it's the little things like 'spending time' that count.

Yarning time about the 'trunk': Questions to expand the stories

- What is the history, the story of this way to build relationships? When and how did you learn about this?
- Who helped you learn this way of building relationships?
- When/how do you carry this into your relationships with the children in your family?
- Would the person who introduced you to this idea know that you are carrying it on?
- How might they feel about that?
- If you want to start or do more of this with your family, how could you do that?

Going Bush: An example of a story from the 'Trunk'

When there are similar items on a particular tree part, e.g. 'going bush', we sometimes ask questions of the whole group which can spark a rich conversation. Or we might ask one group member to tell us their stories of 'going bush'.

Q: *Going bush seems to be a common way of building relationships … I can see several of you have said 'going bush' …*

R: Yes. One of the stories from my trunk is about spending time going bush with my kids, my son and my two young brothers.

Q: *Could you tell us about early memories of going bush?*

R: When I was young I remember going bush all the time, we went bush a lot. We would pile into one or two vehicles, sometimes up to 20 of us, all family. I dreaded the trip because I often got car sick but once we were there we ran loose. The country was our playground. We made our own fun. Sometimes it would be one thing over and over, like swinging and jumping from a rope into the water.

Q: *What was it about going bush that was so important for you and for relationship building?*

R: It was very important. We learned so much when we were out bush. Kids could learn to be independent; looking out for others. It's a good way of building relationships; knowing who is connected and how. We learned stories about doing certain things, and the consequences of not doing those things or not behaving in the right way.

R2: Going bush is great for that eh?

Q: *When you were older, did you continue going bush?*

R: I was very fortunate to be part of Cultural Centre trips going out bush, mapping country and learning the history and stories of our area. I got excited every time, especially when I could take my kid and my brothers and be with other close family members. The best time was sitting around the camp fire listening to stories. It's really important, learning about cultural roots. It was nice having the opportunity to hear stories that I had heard as a child and had forgotten. It strengthened me and connected me even more to my family. Relationships are built through knowing and sharing. When I go bush, no matter how stressful everything has been, it's a good place to reflect, who you are, where you come from. There are no expectations. You can just relax. That's what I want for my kids, my son and my young brothers.

Q: *Now that you live in Perth, miles from your own country, do you go out bush here, or is it something for back home?*

R: There are more obstacles now that we are in the city. We keep the family connections going by phoning home often; talking and yarning. It's easy to get lost in the city. Sometimes I just need a 'fix', need to be on country. Then I do everything I can to get home and get out bush with family.

The country here is different but we still walk around here, but we don't camp. There is bush fairly close. We talk and yarn as we walk. We talk about the difference between here and home, the differences in the trees and the wildlife. It keeps the connection to our country as well as us getting used to this area. Talking and walking builds connections between us. It's easy to talk when you are relaxed and walking.

Q: *What would family at home think about you carrying on your connection to the bush and building that relationship between the boys and the bush?*

R: They'd be pretty proud. They wouldn't say it to me. They would be yarning to each other and they might say the boys (my brothers) had told them I took them for walks in the bush here. It would be a story about what we were doing here. It wouldn't be a spoken evaluation like 'she's doing a good job'. It would never be that. But I would learn that the stories had been told, and I would know they are telling those stories because they are proud. They'd be happy. They'd be happy because the boys are happy**.** I would hear those stories in my head, spoken in language. Makes me feel stronger.

R3: We should all get out bush more often. Kids need it.

'Home Yarning' for Trunk

Yarn with your family about what you put on the trunk of your tree. Yarn with your family about their stories:

- What do they think builds good relationships?
- What do older family members remember doing as children with their families or their Elders?
- Take action: do some of what you have put on the trunk of your tree!

An example of home yarning that was brought back to the group

Q: *How did everyone go with the home yarning about building relationships?*

R: I told my uncle about the 'storytelling' that I put on my Trunk, 'cos he was the one who started me on doing that.

Q: *What did you uncle say when you told him?*

R: He just smiled. He was very pleased. Then he said, 'Oh I can't believe you can even remember that!' I said, 'Don't be silly, that was a special part of my life when you done that'. He just gave me a hug.

Q: *Seems like it's a special story, did you tell that in your small group last week?*

R: Nup. I talked about talking to my sister every day on the phone.

Q: *Well it seems like this might be another special story about building relationships, would it be okay to tell us that story?*

R: Okay.

Q: *Can you tell us about the beginning, how did you learn about 'storytelling' and relationships?*

R: I think I was about nine or ten at the time. My uncle used to tell us stories to keep our minds off the violence that was happening in our house at the time; lots of people drinking and lots of violence.

Q: *So your uncle was telling you stories in those hard times and building relationships with you. Do you do storytelling now with children in your family?*

R: I think I've told my daughters all the stories that my uncle told me. And when they're sad or something, I make up some stories. I don't think my uncle made his up, but sometimes when I can't think of a story, I make some up. When my uncle told me them stories I felt much better, so when my daughters are sad I tell them stories to make them happy.

Q: *How do you think telling stories builds relationships?*

R: Well it's about family and culture. It's connecting to the old people, making connections right through.

Q: *How would you feel if one day your daughters told you they were telling your stories and your uncle's stories to their children?*

R: I'd feel proud ... good and happy and proud to know they listened to my stories and got a lot out of them.

Fruit: Gifts and values: what is important to us

Before we do the branches we are going to think about the Fruit.

Inside the fruit is the seed and from the seeds come the next generation of trees. If we grow strong children this helps them to become strong people who will build strong families and grow the next generation of strong children. Then we will have strong people, strong families and strong communities.

In the fruit on our trees we are going to put the gifts and values that we want to develop and pass down to future generations.

Focus questions:

- What sort of people would you like in your family?
- Are there cultural values you want to be strong in your family?
- What are the ways of living you would be proud to see in the children?
- If you think about people in the community now or in the past who you know were strong and respected, what is it about them that you would like to make strong in your family? In the children?
- Sometimes it helps to think of what you *don't* want? And then go back to how you would want them to be instead …

If people are having difficulty naming values or gifts to put on their Fruit, at first we wait for a while and ask questions to expand the few ideas that do come forth. You may find that when a word is explained it contains other values/ concepts or attributes within it.

If people continue to struggle, then we have successfully used Innovative Resources' Strengths Cards (www.innovativeresources.org/). We have them ready just in in case. If you decide that you might use them, select cards that seem appropriate before the session. We pre-select those with words or concepts that would be relevant in our context. When we use them, after acknowledging and listing the ideas already given, we spread the cards on the table and introduce them with, 'we might get some more ideas from these cards' and then we discuss each in turn. We ask, 'Which ones are most important?' Members of the group select cards that represent the values and attributes that are most important to them. These are listed alongside those previously mentioned.

When the words are written up, people select the ones they want for their Personal Trees. Once everyone has recorded the values/attributes onto their personal Trees, we continue as in the previous sessions by interviewing one person in the group:

Yarning time about 'Fruits': Questions to expand the stories

- In what ways is _____ important to you?
- Would you like to tell us the story of how it came into your life?
- Was there, or is there, anyone else in your life who values this important quality?
- Do they now know you also think this is important?
- Would children in your family know this is important to you?
- How would they know this?

Because this session on 'Fruits' is critical to embed personal and cultural values, after more stories in small groups or pairs, we always return to the larger group for further discussion.

First we explore the positive side:

- How would you know a child was 'showing respect'? (*using one of the frequently chosen values*).
- If they were 'showing respect' what would they be doing/saying?
- How do children learn these ways of being? How do they learn to 'show respect'?

And then, when children still need to learn these particular values:

- When children are messing up, getting into trouble, which of the values and ways of being are they going against?
- What can people do about this? What works?

While we have used children as an example here, we also consider the whole family: how do family members 'show respect' for others?

An example of a story for the Fruit of the Tree

Even when people have had horrific episodes in their lives, some of which have been omitted from the following story, they will also have significant stories of survival and ways they have held onto values.

The gift of caring

Q: *Joan, caring is one of the gifts you would give to children in your family. Can you tell about how caring came into your life?*

R: I was put in a home when I was young. I took up a protective role when I realised younger, littler kids were being bullied. I remember stepping in when an older girl belted a little kid. I gave her what she had given them.

She was always bullying younger ones. I got into trouble. I didn't care. It wasn't fair that kids were picked on because they were weaker and didn't stand up for themselves. I was always getting into trouble because I was standing up for them.

Q: *What word would you give that? Standing up for them?*

R: Oh yeah. I guess it's about justice and fairness.

Q: *Where do you think it came from, that sense of justice and fairness?*

R: I developed a strong sense of justice as a result of seeing all that bullying by other kids and staff too. And not getting much justice in my own life. I had gone back home for a while but my father chucked me out again, didn't need me anymore. My mum couldn't object, he would've killed her. But out on the streets, I was always protective of younger ones.

Q: *Who else would know that you think caring is important?*

R: My kids, they would know.

Q: *What about the girls on the street and in the home?*

R: They would know. They knew I cared about them and that I would help them. I found a sense of worth in caring for others, when I'm needed, when I'm caring for others. Being needed gives me a sense of purpose. There's one old lady, I hadn't seen her for years. She started crying saying, 'I've always remembered what you did for me, what you did changed me'. I couldn't remember what I'd done. But it must have been something very important to her. She wouldn't have cried if it hadn't been important. I felt a bit overwhelmed too: that by caring and doing something for someone else, they could be that touched! Caring is really important, and I want my descendants to be caring too.

A second example: Respect

Q: *It seems like respect is something many people would like to give to their children as a special gift. Why is respect important to you? And for your kids to know about?*

R: I think being able to give someone the gift of respect is very important … maybe the most important thing for a person to have.

R2: I put respect because I believe every family member should have respect and should show respect to their Elders plus, like everyone really …

Q to R2: *Do you have a story you would like to share with us about respect? How respect came into your life? As a child, when did you know respect was important?*

R2: I just grew up with it, I don't know, like from when I was just little my family taught me how to respect. They gave me the respect I wanted so I gave it back. I gave them the respect they needed back to them.

Q: *So now do you keep doing that for your kids, showing them respect and expecting respect?*

R2: I want to … (falters)

Q: *What does respect look like? If they're going to respect you and respect others, how do you know your kids are showing respect?*

R2: Really, just listen to people if they're talking ... don't cut in on them when they're yarning … just sit down and listen.

R3: Yeah, when kids are butting in all the time when you're trying to tell a story, that's not respect.

R4: That's something I think too, like when kids butting in all the time, you'll be trying to tell a story and they keep butting in … not even listening.

Q: *How do your kids know they shouldn't do that? Not to butt in. Do you tell them, or is it something they have watched and copied?*

R2: I just tell them don't butt in, 'cause I don't butt in on you when you're talking. That's being really rude. You gotta listen and show respect. I say, wait till I've finished talking. When I'm talking to other family members just wait.

Q: *Who else in your life thinks that respect is important?*

R2: I reckon everyone in my family 'cos you need respect to do everything. Like when my Pop was alive and he wanted us to do stuff for him, he never really had to ask us to do it. If I saw that he was finished his tea I would just go and get the cup and go 'do you want another tea?' without waiting. Yeah, respect is just looking after each other, making sure everyone feels the same, not out of place …

Q: *What would your Pop think, like now you're so strong and teaching children about respect.*

R2: You know everything I've put on my Tree, it all comes under respect. Even the things we haven't talked much about yet. Like the Flowers are about keeping family safe, because if someone gets drunk at your house and they won't leave, they're not respecting you. And being honest … if you're respecting you'll always be honest. It all comes down to respect. If I could just give my kids respect as a gift, it would cover everything.

R3: It would be a solid gift.

Q: *How do you think your Pop, or your Mum, would feel if they knew you had learned all about respect from them … and knowing that you've used them as role models for respect?*

R2: They would feel pleased I guess … knowing that they learned us kids respect. Mum respected us. She had four daughters and she was a single mother and she respected us, she put our needs before hers. Whatever we needed she done the best for us.

Q: *She gave it to you and now you're giving it to your kids*

R2: Hey! I didn't even realise that until now!

Home Yarning about Fruit

Talk to your family about what they think is important and why. Get them telling stories!

- Talk to children about these gifts/Fruits, and what it would be like in a family without these special gifts.
- Talk about how you show these gifts/Fruits in your family? Are we good role models?

Branches: The Future

Now let's move to the branches. They reach towards the sky: reaching up, into the future. So we use the branches to think about the future.

- What would you like your family to be doing in the future?
- How will you get there?
- Do you have any hopes for children, for your family, and in some contexts also for your community?
- And what about you? Do you have any hopes for yourself?

Sometimes participants have used separate branches to represent hopes for themselves and hopes for others.

Photograph by Tyson Mowarin

Yarning time about 'branches': Questions to expand the stories

Which hope would you most like to tell about?

- How long has this hope been around?
- How have you held onto it?
- Who else knows about it?
- What can you do to start it happening?
- Or if it has started, how do you keep it going despite the obstacles that try to get in the way?
- If this is a hope for the children in your family, have you shared it with them? Have you talked about how together you can make it happen?
- If this hope came to you from someone else, do/did they know you carried it on, that you still want to achieve it?

An example of a 'branches' story

Education

Q: *Carol, you have 'education' as important for the future, for yourself and for children in your family. Could you tell us your story about education?*

R: I thought Year 11 was enough. I dropped out a bit at year 9 and by year 11 I didn't think I needed any more. I realised education was important when I had to read my in-laws mail. School wasn't important in their family, alcohol was. It hit home for me then. It wasn't important to them and now they couldn't read their own mail. My partner wasn't too good either. He could read a bit more than his parents but not enough to really help them.

Q: *How did others in your family feel about education when you were growing up?*

R: In my family, my grandfather's family were all educated. My grandfather was the first Principal of this school. But it was more my mum's family than my dad's who kept telling us it was important, and especially Mum who made sure we went to primary school when we were small.

Q: *And your children?*

R: I make sure my children go to school, my partner does too, he agrees with me and wants them to have a good education, better than his. My two kids who are at school bring books home and we all practice. Their dad gets them into it too.

R2: (Another group member): Good he's doing it too … breaking the cycle.

R3: (And another group member) He came to the literacy day at school too!

R: Yeah, I made him (little laugh). He was a bit embarrassed in case people found out he wasn't too good at it.

Q: *You're giving the children messages about going to school and doing school things at home. Do they know about your future dreams for them?*

R: Oh yes, sure, I keep telling them they have to finish school. They're not going to drop out. And when they're big enough to go to TAFE (higher education institution).

Q: *You also said education is important in your future too. Could you tell us about that?*

R: When my children are all at school, it will be a while yet [she was pregnant], I want to go back to school, to TAFE.

R2: You can do it.

R: I don't know what I want to study, I just know I'm going back. There's a TAFE near our house. When we go past it, I always tell my kids I'm going to go there when you're all at school. And you're all going to go there too, when you've finished high school.

Q: *Do other family know about your intention to go back to study after your children are at school?*

R: I think they do. They would want me to.

Home Yarning for branches

- Share your thoughts about the future and your hopes for yourself and children in your family.
- Ask children in your family about their hopes for the future.
- Talk about how you are working to get your hopes for them and for yourself to happen.
- Would they like you to be doing anything else to help them achieve their hopes?

Taking a stand against the Storms that affect our Trees

Before we complete the Flowers and Leaves of our trees, we're going to think about the Storms that might mess up our Trees. What are the Storms that get in the way of us being Solid Families?

Our Trees can get stronger or they can become weaker. In the bush, droughts, cyclones or fires can destroy or weaken the trees, but in good conditions they regrow. In our lives there are also things that can strengthen or weaken our families and our children. The Storms in our lives can weaken us. Some of the 'Storms' may need to be tackled at a community or Shire Council level. Other things that weaken families happen in our homes between people and we need to work on them together. Sometimes it's even what we say to ourselves, the put-downs we give to ourselves, that makes us weaker.

Photograph by Tyson Mowarin

What is happening in our community?

Let's talk about the things that can happen in communities, homes and families that mess up lives and that stop us having strong solid families.

At this point, discuss in small groups first, and then in the big group, the things that happen in our communities and families that can interfere with families being strong, or growing stronger.

Make a list of the Storms in your community/town/families.

Discussion:

- Are there some 'Storms' on this list that would be difficult to change without support and action at an agency, Shire council or government level?
- What could be done so they learn about your concerns? *This could involve supporting or joining other groups, having a meeting with broader community, writing letters, protesting. While preliminary planning can occur at this point, other times may need to be set up to plan and undertake ongoing action.*
- Now let's look at the Storms on our list that we can work on by ourselves or in our families. These are 'Storms' over which we can have a bit more control. *Issues commonly named have included drinking, drugs, 'cards', our response to, or use of, violence.*

Storms we can face

There are many different ways that we can support groups to talk about the difficulties/Storms that families are facing. A number of activities are included in Appendix C to support and extend this discussion. We suggest using as many different activities as the group needs. We don't include notes from these discussions about Storms on the Group Tree or on the Personal Trees. We return to the Trees *after* these discussions and record actions we can take against the storms.

At a minimum, it is important to talk about:

- How do these Storms affect families and children?
- What do they do to our Trees?
- What can we use from our Trees that will help us take a stand and help us to keep going when life is tough?
- Do you know anyone who has taken a stand against ___?
- How did they do that? Or if personal, how did you know there was another way?

To assist others to take action, discuss in as much detail as possible, the actions that were involved in taking the stand. You could make a record of the stories as a future resource for individuals or the community. Check with the owners of the stories before inclusion. Also check whether they want names changed or omitted.

Talking about a particular 'Storm'

Pick a 'Storm' and think about all the ways it sneaks its way into people's lives and the effects it has on families. If there have been common threads or a shared concern, with permission of the group go with this. Or have small groups discuss different 'Storms'. The following questions can assist the discussion:

- How does this Storm get into people's lives?
- What helps to keep it going?
- Are there times when this Storm is less powerful/easier/better?
- Are there places where it is easier?
- Are there people who support and make it easier for you/your families to take a stand and stay strong?
- What is helpful/not helpful?
- Storms don't give up easily, what can families/people do to get up and keep going?
- Is there anything on our Trees that can help?

Home yarning

Group discussions and activities about responding to storms can go over several sessions so the home yarning will link to whatever has been spoken about in the particular session. Here are some possibilities:

Yarn at home about people you know who have taken a stand against their storms. If possible, talk to people who have taken a stand against the Storms in their lives and made them smaller or got rid of them altogether. Ask them:

- How did those people do it? It must have been hard.
- How did they keep going?
- Ask permission to tell their stories (without names) and have them recorded at the next session.

After another session talking about Storms, home yarning might include:

- Are there any Storms the family would like to take a stand against? Talk about how you might do that. What steps will you take?
- How will those problems try to stay in your lives?
- How will you keep taking a stand?
- How will you support each other?

Flowers: Keeping our children and families safe

Now that we have a clear picture of the Storms in the lives of our families and communities, let's return to our Trees and consider the Flowers. The Flowers are about keeping families and children safe and strong.

- What are the ways we can keep children and families safe and strong from the storms we have talked about?
- How do we teach children to keep themselves safe?
- How do we teach children to help each other be safe?
- How do we keep ourselves safe and strong?

After making a list and placing the responses on the Group Tree, we choose the ones we want for our family and put these onto our Personal Trees.

Yarning time about 'Flowers'

Once we have identified some of the ways we are going to try to keep children/families safe, we talk together about how we are going to carry out what we have written on the Flowers. And then we share some stories.

Two examples of keeping our children safe: Flower stories

Please note that these stories focus on people's skills and responses about keeping families safe. We don't talk about specifics of abuse that has occurred. We focus on people's *responses* rather than on stories of abuse.

Breaking the cycle of family violence

Q: *Mary, you said that 'teaching children about family violence' as well as about 'boundaries' was really important to you. Given that as a child you have told us how you lived in a situation where violence and abuse were normal, how did you learn it could be different?*

R: This is a very personal experience for me … I was drinking and hitting my sons a lot. I was becoming my mother. Then one day I hit my son so hard ... something happened ... I said to myself 'Mary, you're becoming your mother' and from that day on I never touched my son or my other sons again. From that day, I never hit them again. It's embarrassing to say I hit him that hard. We were beaten so severely as kids, all the time. It was beaten into us to beat. So that's what I did, until I saw my son's face after I hit him so hard. It was shocked and maybe the shock of it all reverberated back into me. That was it. I said sorry and that was it. Never did it again.
Yeah I drank, but it was never to the excess of when I hit my son. I stopped. Even to this day I will not drink during the week, only on Saturday night, even though my sons are now in their 20s, early 30s. I knew the boys should be going to school. I went to school but I was coming home to a drunken mother and brothers and sisters and being beaten by them. I didn't want that for my sons so I stopped drinking during the week and they went to school.

Q: *How did you know there was another way of being a parent? You knew you wanted to give violence up, but how did you know how to do it differently?*

(long silence)

Q: *Did you see other role models outside the family? Or did you observe others? How did you learn another way?*

R: I swear to God to this day I can still see my son's face when I hit him and I looked at him. We were in the kitchen. I thought 'I am mother, I am my mother' and it stopped right there.

Q: *You knew you didn't want to do the same as your mother, so the next time something happened that made you angry ... how did you know another way to deal with it?*

R: Yeah.

Q: *How did you know how to be different? … Did you talk to someone?*

R: I didn't talk to anyone. It was just me. I had cut myself off from family. Maybe it just took that hit to wake me up ... I didn't have anyone backing me up then.

Q: *So you are a parent who turned from violence and did things differently, even though you had never experienced that yourself.*

R: I was telling a friend about my mother, she pitted us off against each other, older ones would beat us younger ones for any stupid reason ... all too much ...

Q: *I am thinking that somewhere, somehow, you gained some knowledge or understanding about how you could do it differently. From what you have said during sessions, it seems like you found a way in the middle somehow, not beating children but not letting them run amok either?*

R: I taught my kids never to raise a hand to each other. They weren't going to have a relationship like I had with my brothers and sisters who beat us all the time. If my sons got into an argument they were not to hit. To this day they will not raise a hand to each other.

Q: *You had your own ideas of how you wanted to be but you had to sort of experiment with that because you have said before that you had no model of it?*

R: I guess that's right.

Q: *You talk about your Mum beating you and encouraging the violence from siblings, how did your Dad treat you, even though you have said he wasn't at home a lot?*

R: Totally differently … a lot of love. I will always cry over Dad. When he was dying, he was with us all the time. This was when we were a bit older …. not where we grew up … he laughed and talked a lot. We knew then he loved us, he showed us, he told us. It was having a parent finally …

Q: *So did that support you when you tried to do something differently?*

R: Yeah … oh yeah ... yes … (laughs) … Oh my God yes … my dad … Oh wow … (laughs).

Q*: From the background another group member: He taught you something didn't he? … Something powerful!*

R: All these stories … starting to put things together. Didn't click till now … Wow.

Q: *If your Dad was here, what do you think his reaction would be to this news that he helped you become a better parent?*

R: Proud … tears in his eyes.

R2: (Another group member) I'm learning such a lot from you. You've taught me something. You've taught me how to be a better parent. You've taught me that smacking can hurt so much but I do that when I get frustrated … I don't want that for my kids.

R3: I hound myself to be a better parent but now I can see myself as your Mum ... me thinking I'm doing the right thing. Being a mother is a hard, hard thing, sometimes we take it out on our kids. You've opened my eyes to see that. I am a good parent but I'm taking out my frustration on them sometimes. I could do it differently. You've been teaching me how.

R: Thank you for sharing that, it makes me stronger.

Keeping family safe

The following story was from another group. It began as one person's story and then became a group story.

Q: *What are the ways people keep their family safe? Liz, when you look at your flowers, is there a particular one you could tell us about?*

R: Umm … I make sure my kids come home before the sun goes down, so that's a rule: come home before the sun goes down. And I tell them, if you don't trust someone, don't go there, don't go with them, just stay with people you trust.

Q: *I've heard two things here, the home by sundown rule, and the trust, which one would you like to talk about first?*

R: The rule, be home by sunset, that came from Mum.

Q: *When you were a child?*

R: Yeah ...

Q: *(To the group) Did anyone else have that rule?*

Several others: Yep I did.

Q: *So was it almost like a whole community rule?*

R2: No, not the whole community, and some people say it, but they don't really mean it. Like I'd be walk'n home at sundown and them other kids they didn't have to move, they didn't have that rule really, only when they felt like it.

Q: *What would have happened if you didn't go home?*

R2: I would've been in trouble yeah. Mum would've come look'n for me and yeah, I'd 'a got into trouble.

Q: *And your children if they don't come home when the sun goes down?*

R: I go look for them and then they'll get into trouble (laughs).

Q: *What does getting into trouble look like?*

R: Well, all my Mum really done like, come there 'n growl and make a big thing in front of my friends. And when we by ourselves she didn't say anything. Like her intention was to make me feel shame I reckon. (Laughter and general agreement)

Q: *And the other part, about not going to or being with people they don't trust, have I got that right? Have I remembered that correctly?*

R: Yep.

Q: *So how do they learn that? How do you teach them about trust? About who they can trust?*

R2: I just tell them, I don't know really … it's hard to explain. I think it's how we react to people, 'cos they are always with us, probably just watch, and if I don't talk to someone, like normally, properly, they see and feel, and then they know.

Q: *Do you actually say anything to them …*

R2: Not like that … well maybe if you don't feel safe around them then I'd say don't go with them. And that's, yeah, that's with family too.

Q: *So we're not talking about strangers, were talking about everyone, family too?*

R2: Yep, 'cos sometimes you can't trust everyone in the family.

Q: *Where do you think the message about trust came from?*

R2: Mum told me that too.

Q: *And for others, did you have that message too?*

All: Yep (again general agreement).

R3: (Different group member) I think we were excluded from a lot of things because we moved out of town when I was six so I didn't get those messages … (long pause). Thinking about it more, I had an older brother and sister and they were always there, so they protected me, watched out for me. Maybe they had been given the messages. I don't know, I can remember feeling like there was a house across the road and I would keep away from that house … I had a feeling … I can't remember Mum or Dad saying 'don't go to that house' … I probably just learned that off my older brother and sister.

Q to R*: You learned about being safe from your Mum, does your Mum know what you do to keep children safe?*

R: Yeah, but sometimes she says things like, 'why don't you want them to play down the road?' And I say, 'but I heard that kid's family not that safe' and then she knows and she's okay.

Q: *Do you think that is a general thing, and especially now that there are more families who are not connected to you, that you have to watch out more?*

R: I think there was a lot of abuse when we were younger, but everyone is more aware of it now. It's not just strangers, it's family too and people you know. That's what I think, what do you think? (to others)

All: Yeah (general).

R2: Like, when I was young, people don't really talk about being abused and no-one said stuff, but now I reckon people talk about kids being abused … it seems like people are getting the message it's not okay, but still no-one does much about it. That's why we have to make sure kids know about keeping themselves safe, and lookin' out for each other.

R: It's hard to confront people because, unless you've got someone at your back … families close down around their own … so we have to protect our own families and our own children. Make our family strong.

R3: It hurts mothers too. If a kid says 'My pop done this to me', it will make her mum feel sad … and if the kid tells and no-one does anything about it, that hurts the kid more. Sometimes they won't even tell their mothers 'cos they think she won't do nothing. We have to watch out for other children ... try and keep the community safe.

A long conversation followed about child abuse and the difficulties there are when abuse or rape is reported: families closing down and protecting their own; mums who need more support, and what they as a group might do. The following actions were decided upon:

- *Talk to the school about arranging a time to talk with classes about protective behaviours.*
- *Doing some work with High School girls*
- *Decide together about what is essential for children to know and at what ages those concepts should be introduced.*
- *Get the women's group going again. We need to support the mums who are struggling.*
- *Continue on getting the message out there about the effects of abuse.*

Home Yarning

We suggest that group members continue the yarning about what they have put on their Flowers: what they are going to do to keep children and families safe.

Exploring ways to respond to children's behaviours

Now that we have talked about the Flowers, ways of keeping children safe, others have found it helpful to share ideas about what we might do if children are not being the sort of people we want them to be:

- Are there boundaries/rules needed to help children grow strong? (Groups sometimes talk about traditional boundaries being taught through stories.)
- How do we encourage/teach children to stay inside the boundaries?
- What do we do when the boundaries are pushed? Broken? When talking about the behaviour and the preferred behaviour doesn't work, what do we do?
- How do we 'carry through'?
- How do children know what will happen when they go outside the boundaries?
- How do we know when to step in … when misbehaviour starts? Or when all hell has broken loose? Or somewhere in between?
- What would you have wanted them to do instead? Make sure children know this!
- How can everyone in the family be a role model for other family members?

Depending on the time available and if group members are willing, there may also be opportunities for demonstrations of role plays at this point. Sometimes we've used puppets, while other times participants have played the roles of children and parents. We try to think about all ages represented in the group, knowing that what works for pre-schoolers won't work for teenagers! Ideas usually come up in the group discussions which we write up and share. On the following page is a range of strategies and ideas that have come from discussions in the groups. You may like to share these with the group *after* they have come up with their own ideas.

Sharing and learning from success stories

As the program continues, we follow up and seek out stories about how participants are going in using these strategies. When a success is reported, we ask the participant to describe the steps, everything she said and did in some detail. We repeat these steps aloud as we write them up as an acknowledgement of the person and for the learning of others. We ask questions so that every step is very clearly and vividly described. Here is an example of a success story:

A mum in Roebourne was having problems with her kids fighting as soon as they came home from school. Growling didn't help. Yelling didn't help. Hitting didn't help. Then she remembered her Tree. Next day she ignored their fighting and asked who wanted to make some jelly. Cooking was on her Trunk. The next day she said she was going for a walk. Going for a walk was on her Trunk and her Roots. They went with her. On the week-end they all went fishing. The fighting after school stopped!

It's important to note that various terms/practices that are often recommended in parenting programs, such as 'time out', 'you're grounded' or 'rewards', may not always make sense in Aboriginal contexts. For instance:

'Time out': In practice, what does 'time out' mean especially if you have a crowded house? In the groups we have run, mums have more successfully used 'Thinking Time' instead. This might involve standing where you are, or off to the side, and thinking about what you have done and what you need to do about it. After thinking time, when the child knows what they need to, they do it! Or Mum gives herself 'Time Out' to calm down and think! (Good role modelling!)

'You're grounded': Where would they be grounded and how? This only works if the adult is consistent and the house hasn't got other extended family members around all enjoying themselves! The most useful variation of this is if they have messed up with friends, they don't get to go out with them the next day.

'Rewards': Rewards are also problematic. If a family has some money, the children are likely to be given some, or something, then and there. The mums in previous groups have found that spontaneous comments and actions work better, like, 'You did well. We can go fishing.'

Strategies for thinking about and responding to children's behaviours

The following eight strategies have come out of our group discussions about ways of responding to children's challenging behaviours:

Strategy One: Make links with the Fruit of our Trees (preferred behaviours and values). Rather than always telling our kids what to do, we can ask questions that link back to desired behaviours: '*When someone does ___, does that show 'respect/caring'?'*

Strategy Two: Identifying and involve role models. We can identify important role models for our children. Who are the people who the children will listen to and who will guide them? We can then ask these people to speak to our children.

Strategy Three: Involving children in the process. Sometimes we can involve our kids in coming up with plans. We can ask them:

- What behaviours fit the 'Fruit'/ the sort of person you want to be?
- What will help you to remember/learn these behaviours?
- What should we do if the bad behaviour keeps happening?
- What are your ideas for times when ____?
- Is there anything I can do to help you remember ___?

Strategy Four: Consistency. We can't allow children to side-track us. For example, if we want the child to go to school, we can stick to the point in as few words as possible, breathe and firmly repeat the same words or similar ones: 'Time for school'; Time to go! Now'; 'I'll walk with you'; 'You ARE going'. Although we wouldn't use all of these at once!

Strategy Five: Look for patterns

- When does this behaviour usually occur?
- Who is around/what is happening?
- What happens just before? (*This is often difficult to work out! Drawing comic type pictures can sometime help put the behaviour in a central square and then go back, what was happening before, and before that? And what happens after?*)
- Once we've worked out the pattern we can try to change it.

Strategy Six: Practice. Some of us have found it helpful to practice how we might talk to the children about issues, or what we might say if we need to growl at them. We can practice with each other or even use puppets.

Strategy Seven: Getting rid of the negative 'shoulds' and replacing them with realistic thinking. If we have got a whole lot of negative yarning in our heads (especially about all the things we 'should' do as parents but think we are failing at), then sometimes we've found it helpful to write all that is going on in our heads on one half of the board/ paper. On the other half we can put more realistic expectations! This has been helpful.

Strategy Eight: Stories, stories, stories. If in doubt, we always remember stories, stories, stories! We share stories with children about what happens to people who continue doing the behaviour of concern. And we yarn together about why the desired behaviour is important. These stories often include how the older children can become role models and helpers of the younger ones.

Home yarning

As possible parenting interventions are discussed by group members, we suggest trying these suggestions at home and coming back to the group to discuss how they went.

Talk about boundaries with family and children:

- What boundaries should we have?
- Ask family members about their ideas on how to teach boundaries
- Discuss what happens when children go outside boundaries …
- Are there ideas on the Tree that can help?
- How can adults and older children be good role models?

Leaves: The changes we want to make - the actions we will take

Let's look back over our tree and see what particular actions we want to take against the Storms in our lives. Our Leaves are about changes we want to make and the actions we want to take from here on. Think about some of the Storms you or family face that you might want to get out of your life, or at least to make them into little willy willys (whirlwinds) instead.

Photograph by Tyson Mowarin

If there has been a common theme, this can become the focus for the Group conversations and actions people are going to take can be placed on the leaves of the Group Tree. If there is no common theme, then group members talk about their Personal Trees first; creating Leaves for their Personal Tree and then transferring this information onto the Group Tree.

If there is a relatively common problem:

In the large or small groups, we discuss the actions that could be taken by members of the group to address the problem (Storm) that has been identified. Questions to be asked will depend on the topic but can include:

- How does the problem operate? When? Where? Who with?
- What supports it? How are you tricked by the problem into thinking you need it in your life?
- Is there a pattern? When and where does it happen?
- When is it better? We need to do more of this.
- When is it worse? We need to change this pattern.
- Who can help? How can they help?
- Is there anything on your trees that can help?

Actions to tackle this problem will be placed onto the leaves of the Group Tree. If it is a shared concern that everyone is going to work on, then the Leaves on people's Personal Trees will represent the steps they personally will take to help tackle this Storm.

Often, individuals in the group may see that there are common problems, but the one/s they want to tackle first may be different. They can take action against more than one Storm, but not against many major Storms all at the same time! They might place other positive actions that they wish to take on the leaves of their Tree, actions that will support them in making changes.

You may have little groups of two or more people who have similar Storms. If so, those people can work together, but mention that the way they are going to tackle these Storms could well be different. During this process, the facilitator may need to offer support with spelling/writing. You may need paper beside each person so they can write down the words they will need. People working on separate Storms may still work in a supportive group of others who are working on separate problems. There is often a similarity in actions, e.g. giving up the grog (alcohol), or giving up playing cards (gambling) on school nights.

Think about the Storms you want to stand up to, the Storms you want to cut down to size, and then decide what will you do if the going gets tough, or you slip back:

- How will you get yourself up again?
- How will you keep yourself going when there are setbacks?
- What will you say to people who want you to go back to the old way?
- Look back over your Trees to see what is on there that could help with your Storm.

On your Leaves put your plans for taking actions. Put the steps on paper and then draw leaves around these action plans. You can also put the ways you will keep yourself going when the Storm brings in others to push you off track; or when you get tired and it all seems too much. How will you overcome that? Put enough onto the Tree for you to remember what it is you are going to do. If there is a sequence of steps, these can be on a cluster of leaves or a large leaf!

If people are working on their Leaves on their Personal Trees, then at the end of the process return to the Group Tree and transfer the information from Personal Trees onto the Group Tree.

An example of a conversation

In the Moorditj program, the common concern was around losing connection to culture. The group felt this had left the young people without any sense of identity of who they were, without any purpose, and that this left them open to drugs, drinking and in general 'messing up'. Rebuilding a strong sense of Culture was very important for families, and especially for the young people. We talked together about:

- What do we mean when we talk about culture?
- When you talk about culture, what do you think about?
- What is it about culture that we are losing?
- What would be happening if we were regaining/maintaining it?
- What would you want to see happening?
- What could be kept up? What do we need more of?
- How could this happen?
- Who can help? How can they/we help?

An example of a Leaf story

Creating a context for people to share stories of the actions they or other people in their families/communities are taking to address Storms can be significant. Here is an example of a story of a group member speaking about her father's actions in regaining culture and how she is determined to keep this going.

Regaining and building our culture

Q: *In everything we have done, you have talked about culture a lot. From everything you've talked about, what is the most important? What stands out for you?*

R: For me, the most important part of culture is identity: knowing who we are; standing strong in who we are; a person who is proud of their culture.

Q: *Who did you learn this from? Can you tell us the story of how you learned about culture and identity?*

R: From when I was young. Dad had been on the grog a lot, but then he made the decision to get off and getting his culture back helped him do that. He talked with the old people, and learned it all again. He worked to bring the culture back. We went out bush a lot. He started a business taking white folks out bush for day trips on weekends. As well as going out with Dad by ourselves, we went with him when he took the white people out. Whenever we could, we went bush; we loved it. It was hands-on, lots of learning. Camping out at night. Dad drummed it into us 'this is who you are'. That message was a part of our upbringing.

Q: *Did you realise your culture and your knowledge about culture was different to others?*

R: I realised we were different; white people didn't know all this stuff. But even when I was young, I knew other Aboriginal kids didn't do the things we did as much as we did, and didn't know as much about what Dad was teaching us. I knew I was privileged, Dad was pretty much the only one who taught others, and I realised others didn't know what I knew. Dad found out about culture and worked to bring it back. I'm shocked now, in the last ten years, how much some Aboriginal people don't know. They are losing their identity. They don't know who they are. They're lost.

Dad works in the prisons especially with the troubled ones. They need culture the most. All of our family works in places where we can work with Aboriginal people; two of us are in schools, one is in Department for Child Protection; one works for Conservation and Land Management. We are passing it on and giving it back. We're givers not takers.

Q: *And what about the next generation? Your children, your father's other grandchildren?*

R: Dad is now taking it to the next generation making sure his grandchildren learn about culture. It's something they'll remember and pass it on. Even now our kids pass on the stories of what they're doing and learning to other kids. Dad is teaching them dancing and singing. They love it. They perform for the white people when they are on their day trips.

Q: *So what is the future for you?*

R: Dad made a choice, I've made a choice. I want to learn as much as I can, it's ongoing through us. I teach my kids too. Because my husband is from up north, my son went back there for a while so that he could learn about his culture from the other side. I make sure he can get to learn all of his culture.

Q: *How does your Dad feel about the work you do, with the children in your family and here at the school?*

R: He's proud, real proud, of me for carrying it on.

Home Yarning for leaves:

Talk about family Storms and how a stand might be taken against them. You might want to add these ideas to your Tree! Tell them what you have put on the Leaves of your Tree and the actions you are going to take. Ask them for their support. If the time is suitable, ask some of them to the celebrations next week.

An example of what can come from home yarning

The week after the discussion about culture, one group member's adult son came in. He was passionate about something being done to revive and maintain culture and came to the group to say this was a time for action, not talking! This raised the possibility that guests might be brought into the group to develop action plans in particular areas of concern. Participants might be able to recommend appropriate people.

Closure and celebrations

By now, it's time for a celebration! This is a great opportunity to invite family members, Elders, and other people who are important to members of the group.

With Trees completed and laminated, we hold a presentation in which everyone is awarded their Tree and sometimes the group members have also wanted certificates.

Trees and stories are shared and the guests are invited to share their stories too. If you have a created a collective story that gathers together the words of the group (see Denborough, 2008) you might read this aloud in the celebration. (Appendix D includes an example of a collective story).

Participants can talk to their guests about:

- The meaning of the parts of their Tree
- What they have put on each part
- What has changed in their lives
- Plans for the future
- Next steps: how they will keep themselves going

Participants are also asked for feedback on the program. The invited guests might also have some feedback about changes they have seen or the yarning that has been done at home.

A tree can also be planted if that fits the context. It can be important to consider who will water it to get it started on its way to independence!

Appendix A: Visualisation of the Tree

We started doing a visualisation of the Tree fairly early in the development of the program. It has enabled people to understand the 'whole' before working on individual parts. It provides the focus to start the day and it assists in remembering the symbolism of each part of the Tree. It also enables people to know what has been missed when competing demands on people's lives have affected their ability to be present at every single session. The visualisation exercise is now done at the start of every session.

Visualising our tree

The facilitator talks slowly and calmly and pauses at the end of each sentence and also wherever there are further dots.

Sit back in your chair. Close your eyes. Breathe slowly in and out. You are in a calm and peaceful place. Your favourite type of tree is there. Stand back and look at the whole tree. The trunk. The branches. The fruit. The flowers. And the leaves.

The roots of our tree are strong. Deep in the soil. The root part of our tree reminds us of our ways of being strong when we are feeling down. The ways we lift our spirits ... The things that we do, that help us get up and keep going ... places we go to or that we remember … that lift and strengthen our spirits … people we talk to, or think about ... that make us feel stronger.

Now look at the trunk. The trunk is strong too. It holds up the rest of the tree. The trunk of our tree is about building relationships with our children … all the ways we can make them feel good about themselves … how we show we love and care for them … the things we do together that bring us closer … the talking that makes them feel strong.

Now take a closer look at the branches. They will remind us of the hopes and dreams for the future. Look at the flowers … Without the flowers there would be no fruit … no seeds for the future ... The flowers are about keeping family safe from harm and from the storms so they can grow children strong and proud.

Look at the fruit … the fruit holds the seeds ... The seeds fall to the ground, the beginning of the next generation ... The fruit of our trees are there to remind us of the special gifts we want for our children ... These gifts are about them becoming the sort of person that makes us proud. They are gifts of the values and ways of being we want to pass on to future generations … to make strong families and strong communities. The branches support everything on the top of the tree. Including the fruit.

Look at the flowers. Without the flowers there would be no fruit … no seeds for the future. The flowers are about keeping family safe from harm and from the storms so they can grow children strong and proud.

Now the leaves ... The leaves come back after storms. Here we have our important messages for the future … the changes we want to make. The actions we will take.

Now move back from your tree ... Look at it growing strong ... Think about it bending before storms, but always surviving ... Think about yourself being strong … like your tree.

Appendix B: Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises were introduced into the program when participants talked of constant stress; getting angry and 'exploding' before they had time to think. The value of breathing exercises is explained to the group and several exercises introduced. At the beginning, anyone who was a little reluctant was told they could do the exercises sitting, but that standing allows deeper breathing. By the end of the program most people were standing to participate and also reported the value of focusing on breathing in their lives.

We do this breathing exercise at the very end of every session as this served as a bridge between the group and participants' home life.

When we first introduce the exercise we use this explanation:

An Aboriginal man who was in a men's group learning to manage their anger, said:

> I read somewhere… 'when you get angry, stop, take a deep breath, and then say what you're thinking'. When I do that, sometimes I see that the person is really listening.' (Anderson, et al., 2013, p.16)

It's important to start practising keeping our cool as early as we can, so that by the end of the program we can do it well. When we are getting angry with our partners, our kids, or other people, we need to have thinking space; to think clearly, to listen and to stay cool. Good breathing gives us thinking time so that we can walk away for a while, or speak in a way that doesn't make things worse.

You could use these exercises or your own.

Exercise one:

- Stand straight (anyone anxious may prefer to sit)
- Place hand just above belly button.
- Breathe slowly, down to your hand; hold breathe for count of five.
- Slowly breathe out and hold for another count of five.

IN … 1,2,3,4,5
OUT … 1,2,3,4,5

Repeat several times

Exercise two:

- Breathe in through your nose as you slowly raise both arms over your head
- Hold breath as your hands are above your head
- Breathe out through your mouth as you slowly lower your arms to your sides. Counting can be added to slow breathing.

Repeat several times

Appendix C: Three activities to support people in standing up to Storms

We have included here three additional activities to support people in talking about and taking action in relation to Storms in their lives.

1. Sharing stories of taking a stand

We've found it can be quite significant to share stories of people taking a stand in relation to problems in their lives, particularly if these stories can describe the step-by-step details of actions people took and the skills and know-how they drew upon to make changes in their lives. We've included here some questions to assist get the conversations going, and some examples of stories that have been shared during groups in Roebourne.

Questions to spark storytelling

- Has anyone got a story to tell about how you, or someone you know, has got rid of a problem in their lives?
- Anyone who has been able to stand to the storms?
- What was it? How was it affecting family? What were the steps you/they took? What do you think kept you/them strong?
- Or perhaps you would rather tell a story of when you stopped doing something that was hurting you and your family?

Stories from a group in Roebourne

These stories could be read to the group as examples. They are brief and highlight the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Only playing cards now and then

One of us used to sit up all night playing cards. She played with pay-day money. It was great fun sitting with the oldies talking and laughing. There was hardly ever any money for food, her kids were suffering, so then she decided she had to stop. Now she just plays now and then. Now she goes home when she's tired.

Chucking the alcohol away

One of us had a Mum who fed her kids but she was a full on alcoholic, so she didn't do much else with them. When she got very sick she chucked the alcohol away. She keeps her mind off the gurri (alcohol) by keeping occupied: cleaning the house, going fishing with the grandchildren, always doing things. Now her sister has trusted her to bring up her grandson, she's had him from newborn to one years old. That little boy is keeping her strong.

Another person started drinking when she was 12 years old. The gurri blocked out the emotional pain from abuse, and made her feel she was in a safe place. But she had no money to buy food, clothes or shoes for the kids. There was never any money for anything special for the kids, they were missing out on lots of things. Their clothes weren't washed. They didn't go to school. She lost count of how many times she tried to get the grog out of her life. When she was only one in the group who was sober, she would feel lonely. People would run her down, 'She's a snob'. But she decided she just had to stop for her kids and she also got sick of being sick all the time. Trying to give up has been the hardest thing. She stopped for two months, then for four months and then for six. Each time it was hard but each time she got stronger. And she's still getting stronger. Because she had grog as a friend for so long, her body still aches for it. But she keeps thinking about her kids and how much they missed out on and how much they need her to stop.

Going cold turkey – getting off gunja and other drugs

One of us started using gunja (marijuana) at 15. There was no money for stores, no clothes or toys for the kids. Sometimes she was freaking out. That made her frightened. She went 'cold turkey'. When she had her son she didn't stress out for it so much because she kept thinking what would happen to her son if she kept using.

One of us went from gunja to stronger drugs. Pushed needles or anything else she could lay her hands on. One day she thought she was going to die. She had her son with her and was so 'off her face' she couldn't hear him crying. When people told her, she couldn't move to pick him up. When she snapped out, she was told 'your son's in hospital'. That scared her. She was sent to Graylands (mental health institution). Coming off was very hard: sweaty, shaking, paranoid about someone out to get her. She never wanted to go through that again. She hasn't touched any drugs since.

Realising what violence does to the kids

One of us was in a violent relationship, and was being violent herself. One day she decided she didn't like her kids seeing violence. Now when her man is drinking she doesn't follow him, she goes to a different house. At home she kicks him out if he starts being stupid ... getting jealous and things. Once when she got really angry and was afraid she might get violent, she rang the Safe House, and went there and talked and calmed down and thought about what she wanted to do and how she wanted to be. Then she went back home.

Another person said her children got sick of seeing their Mum getting busted up. They said 'we've had enough'. She got tired of seeing the kids crying. At last she went to the Safe House. They talked with her and with the kids. She then realised what the violence was doing to the kids. She stayed in the safe house until she could get a house for herself and her kids and she was strong enough to leave the man. Before that, for fifteen years she had left and gone back every time because he would always say he was sorry.

Yarning after the stories

After people have shared their own stories, or spoken about the examples you have read aloud, the following questions can help to start a general conversation. We have found it's often better to invite participants to speak generally (not in the first person 'I'):

- What do you think people find hard about keeping going? (rather than 'what do *you* find hard …')
- What do you think leads people to decide to take a step against their storms?
- What would be all the small steps that would be needed for _____?
- What difficulties might get in the way?
- What would be needed to keep going when it was tough or when there were setbacks?

Other stories

Other stories from Aboriginal communities about ways people have responded to and dealt with problems can be found in the further reading section at the end of this resource (The people of Ntaria/Hermannsburg, 2009).

2. Interviewing the problem

A second approach to talking about problems/Storms involves interviewing the problem as if it is a character. If we can talk directly to some of these problems, sometimes we can get ideas of ways to get them out of our lives!

We can have some fun with this one. It involves becoming a bit theatrical and interviewing the problem as if it is a character. Don't be put-off by thinking people won't want to do this! We have been amazed at some of the results. The worst case scenario is no-one volunteers, in which case the facilitators can do it. The group can be asked to help with responses and will usually do so. It is a good idea to have the 'problem' seated in a different chair rather than in the participant's normal chair. This helps separate the person and problem. You will still need to check that the person is okay after the 'interview', and sometimes assist them to get back into being themselves.

Here are some sample questions to use to interview most problems:

- Hello *[Mr/Mrs name of the problem]* could you tell us how you hook people in? How do you get them addicted to you? Or how do you get them to do what you want them to do?
- What effects do you have on people's health and lives?
- I've heard you stop people from looking after and caring for their kids. How do you do that?
- How do you affect kids when you get into their parents' lives?
- Does anything make you weaker?
- Has anyone ever taken a stand against you? Told you to get out of their lives?
- How did they do that? *[Aim to get detailed steps, ask further questions if necessary …]*
- Did you let them go easily? How hard was it for them to finally give you up once and for all? Did they do it straight off or did it take a while?
- Does anyone have any other questions for Mr/Mrs _____?
- Would anyone like to say something to Mrs/Mr _____? Or tell him/her what you think of her/him?

Please note, it's important for these interviews to include some frivolity. It's also important that at the end the problem becomes weaker and weaker and physically droops behind the desk/table/child's 'stage' for effect!

We have often also made up a costume for the problem 'character':

- Gunja: We've made a Gunja head dress with marijuana shaped leaves on it, or put dried herbs into small plastic bags and used them as earrings, or hat decorations.
- Alcohol: We've worn beer can or wine cork earrings, or used a beer carton as a very large hat.
- Gambling: We've attached playing cards to hats, earrings, or necklaces.
- Violence: This one is trickier. Once we placed the picture of bare clenched fists onto an A4 piece of paper, stuck this onto a ruler, and the character Violence hid behind this to speak.

For more information about interviewing problems see Epston & Roth (1998); McLean (1995); Sliep & CARE Counsellors (1996); Wingard (1996a, 1996b, 2010).

3. Problem solving

A third approach to talking about Storms/problems involves collective problem-solving.

We sometimes go through the following questions about a particular problem raised by a group member. It's important not to make a decision about which proposed solution someone might try until there are lots of suggested ideas. What works for one person may not work for another!

Narrow the problem down: What is it exactly?

- Where does it happen?
- When does it happen?
- Who is involved?
- What support it/keeps it going?

What are all the possible solutions?

- List as many as you can.
- Don't worry yet if they are good, bad or otherwise.
- A bad idea might trigger a good one!

Go through the list and decide on those worth trying:

- What will be needed to make each work?
- Which one will likely be most successful?
- Will you start with one solution or combine a couple?

Make your decision.

- Decide who will do what, when and how
- You might need a backup plan for some of the ideas

Review (Follow up in coming weeks of the program)

- What worked? Didn't work?
- Do you need to try or add something else?
- How do you keep successes going?

Appendix D: The Mooriditj Community School's collective story

We have included here an example of a collective story developed from the words of mothers and grandmothers from the Mooriditj Community School. You may wish to create a similar collective document (Denborough, 2008) from the words of participants in groups you facilitate. These documents serve as a permanent record, acknowledgement and reminder, or important words and stories shared during the program.

We all have stories. Our group includes people who had supportive parents and who were good role models for how to be parents and grandparents. One of us had a Dad who became strong after he gave up the grog. Others of us had tough childhoods; taken from family because of abuse, and then being put into other abusive situations. Abuse and prostitution became normalised in some of our homes, new placements, institutions, or on the streets. No matter what our childhoods were like, or whether we are raising children or our grandchildren, we now all share wanting to be strong and to be the best Mums and Nannas we can be so that our children and their children will be strong in mind, body and spirit.

Strong roots

The roots of our Trees are about what keeps us strong and lifts our spirits when life is getting us down. This is what keeps us going:

For all of us, learning and knowing about our culture is a way of building strength. As is spending time with our kids, grannies, family, partners and friends; lots of yarning, laughing, and having fun. When the yarning and storytelling is around a camp fire that makes us even stronger.

For those with supportive parents, this is a source of strength; if they have gone, visiting their graves helps.

We all have different activities that keep us grounded and strong: sports; art; looking at photos; music; cleaning; gardening; or dancing, especially for one dancing with a granddaughter**.** Her dogs keep one of us strong.

There are places that we go to. For some of us it is the beach, for others it is the bush or amongst the tall trees. Smells help too. The smells of the sea and beach or bush smells. For all of us, the smell of bush tucker cooking, and the camp fire smoke, lifts our spirits.

When we can do it, collecting or, for some, hunting the bush tucker, making the camp fire, and seeing bush animals, keeps us strong too.

For one of us, meditation rekindles the spirit as does the full moon and a shrine. Several of us get strength from our spiritual beliefs and a trust in God. Having a space and a bit of 'me time' also helps, as does thinking positively.

Stubbornness, determination and deciding what was important help several of us. And one of us said she asks herself, 'Who will look after my children if I don't cope?'

Our trunk

Our trunk is about how we build relationships with our children and grannies.

For all of us, showing our love in ways that suit us: hugging; kissing; playing together; doing things together (school work, art, playdough, going to their activities); listening to them; yarning together; telling them stories; visiting family together; giving them our unconditional love; trusting them and being proud of them.

We think boundaries for our children are important, so they know about the good and bad, and how they might know the difference. Having simple rules is important in building our relationships too. Children then know what to expect and trust us.

Our branches

The branches are about our futures and our children's futures.

In different ways, we all want to learn more about our culture so that we have more to teach our children, so that they can be stronger in their culture. We want to learn and have them able to travel back to their roots. For most of us, it would be good to have more time camping and hunting. For all, we hope to have more time in the bush to learn about bush food and bush medicine.

All of us want our children to be successful in school, and get a good education. We all want to keep learning ourselves. Good health is important too.

We want lots of shared joys and times together. In the future we want our children and grandchildren to grow culturally, spiritually, and to have strong identities, grounded and solid – standing tall in who they are.

We want them to be resilient; to have peace and trust.

Some of us said being hard-working and independent will be important for their future lives.
We think having a purpose is important for the future, and we talked especially about the boys and men's purpose. Purpose is important for us too: being good role models is part of this. One of us wants to do more to help the kids in school. For those of us with unsafe childhoods, safety is really, really important for our grannies' futures.

Our fruit

The fruit of our Trees are the gifts we want to give our children. These gifts are about the sort of people we want them to be.

The fruit falls to the ground and from the seeds grow the next generation, so we want to give our children and grannies respect for themselves, their culture, their Elders, and others.

Another gift would be being kind, caring and looking after the Elders, each other, and those younger.

Cultural knowledge is a gift we would all like to give. For some of us this means learning alongside our children/ grandchildren.

Contentment and peace are gifts at least one of us would wish for our children/grandchildren and future generations.

Others want to give the ability to trust and to be trustworthy. Another wants to give wisdom.

Achieving what we are aiming for in our futures would become a gift to our children and their descendants.

Flowers

The flowers of our tree are about keeping our children safe.

For all of us, simple rules and boundaries, knowing the 'right path', and teaching them about right and wrong are important. We try to make sure there is safety at home, at school and in the street. Making sure our kids know how to get help; ringing 000. We also try to get to know the good Police, the ones who are there to help.

For one whose Granny (grandchild) has been in danger, safety is about not opening the door, knowing how to answer the phone, and how to cut off callers. For all, phone bullying is a concern, so we talk with children about this.

We talk with kids about who we know might be safe or unsafe. We yarn about risks and when taking risks might be okay, and when not. Having children feel okay and safe to talk needs to be built up with lots of yarning along the way. One of us had a dad who talked about safe sex with us. This was good as he knew about boys.

For all of us, it's really important to have kids watching out for each other and to care and help each other.

Leaves

The leaves of our Trees are about passing culture onto our children.

This is what we want to pass on and to have the school support:

- Language: Noongar and Aboriginal English. We would like to learn more of our traditional language/s too.
- Identity: we want our kids to know who they are. We want them to know their country, family/roots, history (family, community, state, country) and the diversity across Australia. We want them to be proud to say 'I'm Aboriginal'.

We also want our children to:

- take responsibility for themselves and others
- show respect
- learn our cultural stories, sacred sites, music and dance
- know about bush medicines and bush foods (including making a damper) and the language, names of plants and animals. For some of us, this also means catching and cooking the animals.
- camp and know about camp fire setting and lighting
- understand Men and Women's business

We all thought about what areas of culture we really want to work on, and how we might do that. We wrote this into leaves on our own trees. We will need to support each other and some of us will need to do a lot of learning ourselves.

We also thought about what Moorditj, our Aboriginal school, could think about and do. We talked about how more training for teachers in cultural awareness and sensitivity is needed. One of us is thinking, if she can get up the courage, she will go onto the school council. We thought it was important that we had a voice and spoke up.

We all have stories. This is the collective story from the Moorditj Tree.

Notes

1. This is wider than the 'nuclear' family: it is what would be called the 'extended family' within white Australian culture. These different expectations can cause issues at school when teachers are culturally unaware as children's knowledge and skills can be under-valued or not valued. One angry grandmother said, 'How can they say she isn't ready for school when she can say the names of 26 relatives without any repeats?'
2. In WA before the 1967 referendum Aboriginal people could apply for a Citizenship certificate (In NSW and Qld they were called exemption certificates). To do so they had to prove they were working, they were not associating with other Aboriginal people, they had given up traditional ways, and they were not using their own Language. They had to live like a white person. They had to have white referees (often the police). With the certificates, which Aboriginal people disparagingly called 'Dog Tags', they could vote, drink alcohol, go into hotels, and their children could to go to the white school. Legally they were no longer considered Aboriginal. This grandfather continued to associate with other Aboriginal men. He practised Aboriginal Law and was considered a Senior Law Man.

Further reading

Further stories of ways in which Aboriginal communities have overcome hardships and injustices can be found in these two publications:

Denborough, D., Koolmatrie, C., Mununggirritj, D., Marika, D., Dhurrkay, W., & Yunupingu, M. (2006). Linking stories and initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 19–51. (Also accessible via: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/linking-stories-and-initiatives.pdf)

The people of Ntaria/Hermannsburg (2009).*Yia Marra: Good stories that make spirits strong – from the people of Ntaria/Hermannsburg*. Adelaide & Alice Springs, Australia: General Practice Network NT, Western Aranda Health Aboriginal Corporation & Dulwich Centre Foundation.

References

Anderson, D., Edwards, B., Hammersley, M., Sather, M., & Smith, G. (2013). Finding the Voice to Speak: Women and men talk about relationships. *International journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *1*, 11–24.

Denborough, D., Koolmatrie, C., Mununggirritj, D., Marika, D., Dhurrkay, W., & Yunupingu, M. (2006). Linking Stories and Initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *2*, 19–51.

Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Epston, D., & Roth, S. (1998). Consulting the Problem about the Problematic Relationship: An exercise for experiencing a relationship with an externalized problem. In D. Epston (Ed.), *Catching up with David Epston: Published papers 1991-1996.* Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications. First published in M. Hoyt (Ed.) (1996). *Constructive Therapies: Volume 2*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Kearins, J. (1980). *Child-rearing practices in Australia: A variation with life-style*. Perth, Australia: University of Western Australia.

Malin, M., Campbell, K., & Agius, L. (1996). Raising children in the Nunga Aboriginal way. *Family Matters.* Autumn*, 43*, 43–47.

McLean, C. (1995). Schools as Communities of Acknowledgment: A conversation with Michael White. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, *2&3*, 51–66.

Morgan, A. (2000). *What is narrative therapy? An easy-to-read introduction*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in

Southern Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 3–16.

Sliep, Y., & CARE Counsellors (1996). *Pang'ono pang'ono ndi mtolo* – little by little we make a bundle. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, *3*, 3–11. Reprinted in C. White & D. Denborough (Eds.) (1998), *Introducing narrative therapy: A collection of practice-based writings* (pp. 141–156). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Wingard, B. (1996a). Grief: Remember, reflect, reveal. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, *3*, 30–35. Reprinted in B. Wingard & J. Lester (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (pp. 45–55). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Wingard, B. (1996b). Introducing 'sugar'. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, *3*, 26–29. Reprinted in B. Wingard, & J. Lester (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (pp. 19–25). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Wingard, B. (2010). A conversation with Lateral Violence. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *1*, 13–17.

Wingard, B., & Lester, J. (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (pp. 45–55). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.