

reflections

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CULTURAL RESPECT AND SAFETY TRAINING: GOWRIE SA

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Gowrie SA has had a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) since 2010. In response to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, we decided a RAP for the whole Gowrie SA organisation would provide a tangible way for us to actively participate in building positive relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in our workplaces.

As part of our RAP work, we needed to strengthen the understandings of our staff regarding Australian history, the rights of Aboriginal people, and the impacts of past and current government policies. To assist in achieving this, it was decided to offer staff a variety of professional learning experiences relating to reconciliation each year, with a specific commitment to have 20% of the whole staff team undertake annual intensive 'Cultural Respect and Safety Training'.

This Cultural Respect and Safety Training has several distinct features, which runs across two days with our staff undertaking the training over two separate days a fortnight apart.

Participants are required to engage in personal self-reflection about racism, dominant culture in Australia, power and white privilege, and how they and our organisation are involved in each of these in both conscious and non-conscious ways. This leads to participants heightening their cultural consciousness in the development and delivery of our programs for children and families. In addition, the training is co-facilitated by Aboriginal Sharon Gollan and non Aboriginal facilitators Cara Ellickson or Kathleen Stacey, providing access to diverse experiences and modelling a collaborative partnership.

The majority of our team has completed the training, and all new staff undertake it in the first twelve months of their employment at Gowrie SA. Over six years, we have seen the positive impact of this training and we have also grown our partnership with the training staff.

We believe this work has generated significant attitudinal change in our staff. They have learnt to be more open-minded; to not just listen but to really hear the stories and information shared with us, and to participate in the training exercises while considering the effects and lens of white privilege. It has not been easy. We had to unlearn racism, and the standard version of Australian 'history', in order to see the truth as opposed to the version/s we learned through schooling. We have had to acknowledge that those of us from the dominant culture have a responsibility to fully participate in the reconciliation process, even if it makes us uncomfortable. Some of us have had to confront evidence of racism within ourselves, our families and our communities. We have found that our personal beliefs have been exposed and challenged.

Sharon has shared with us that, due to the history of previous connections between Aboriginal families and Gowrie SA Child Centre, including those of her own family, she was not coming in 'cold'. However, in the early stages of offering the training, it is likely that the facilitators did not know our leadership team well enough to be confident about the level of cultural safety in our organisation. Equally, we did not yet have the level of awareness amongst our staff that would provide a deep sense of safety and respect for the facilitators and the information they were sharing with us.

[The training] "... opened my eyes on my experience, the experience I have of others, and most important, their experience of me"

participant feedback

On reflection, there were often times where we were defensive, or preferred to debate concepts, rather than listen deeply. We also wanted to draw on the experience of other marginalised groups (such as refugees) as a comparison, rather than recognise the distinctly different experiences of Aboriginal people as the focus of the training. We were at the very beginning stages of our learning.

Over the years, we have had to appreciate the responsibility of the leadership team to better prepare staff for the possible challenges in this training - to remind them of the importance of listening openly, and with respect, to the history and stories that are shared with us. This was a critical opportunity to demonstrate accountability and act on our learning about what will create cultural safety, while supporting staff through the journey of their learning. We are proud to say that we have made progress in this. We prepare staff for the potential range of emotions that may surface for them during the sessions as part of their learning. Senior staff debrief with the facilitators after each session and

identify any action we should take to support and/or follow-up staff members. We also offer opportunities for staff to consider this work more deeply within their work and personal life.

We are now at the point where some of our staff are attending this training for a second time. Being part of this training a second time offers insights that perhaps we weren't ready to hear the first time. This allows us to continue our learning journey. Over the years we have developed a much stronger relationship with our facilitators, and we are creating an environment where respect is mutual and cultural safety for our facilitators is a priority.

[This training has] "empowered me to bring focus to services who are unaware"

participant feedback

This development has flowed into our planning and practice across our programs. Across all our rooms within Gowrie SA, staff are embedding an authentic curriculum approach to reconciliation education with children and families. Staff are also more open to having dialogue and debate about the celebration of Australia Day, and about the Uluru Statement. As an organisation, we now commit to promoting and attending key reconciliation events throughout the year. All of these things contribute to having an impact on the cultural safety experienced by our Aboriginal children and families, with a flow-on effect that more Aboriginal families are accessing our services. On a personal level, we know that some of our staff support Aboriginal organisations, attend survival day events, or Aboriginal art and cultural events in their own time. This commitment to self-education has really come about through the growth in learning and knowledge provided by this training.

For your professional learning and support contact your state based Gowrie listed below:

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