



SOLID VOICES @ TOMORROW



A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY CONTROLLED ORGANISATIONS
WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUNG PEOPLE



ChildProtectionPeak

Acknowledgements

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QATSICPP Acknowledge the Traditional Custodians on whose land we walk, talk and do business. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the many Elders, past and present who have tirelessly paved the way, guided us and given us strength to draw on knowledge systems of growing up children and their connections to family, community, country and culture.

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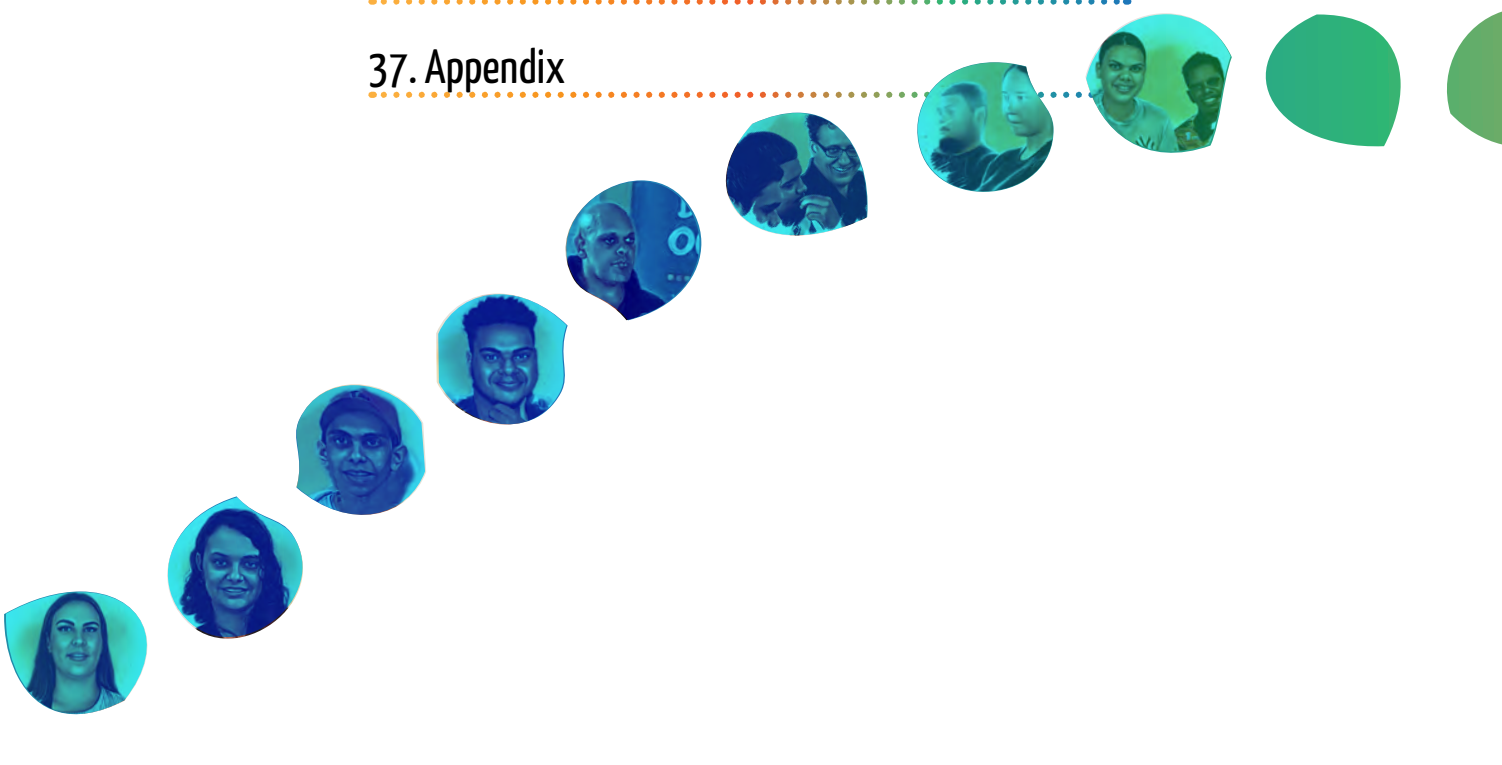
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QATSICPP Vision

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are physically, emotionally and spiritually strong; live in safe, caring and nurturing environments within their own families and communities; and are afforded the same life opportunities available to other children and young people to achieve their full potential.





CEO Foreword

I am pleased to present our Solid Voices of Tomorrow guide. This resource is about having conversations with our young people; yarns about where they are at, where we are going, and walking together towards the future with them.

What do our young people actually care about?

It's critical for us not to assume. Whilst we were all young once, young people today are different. The world they're growing up in is different from what we grew up in. This resource and work to elevate the voices of youth is about honouring our young people. It's about us taking the opportunity to gain some insights from young people, about the ways they engage and speak up, so we can reorient our approach where needed. We know the best way to design something, regardless of what it is, is to ensure that the person that's intended for is involved in the design.

We can't just expect our young ones to come with us. We need to talk to them, talk about the places we want to go and talk about how we are going to get there. You need to run if they want to run, walk if they want to walk, or just stand still with them holding the space. It is on us to start where their journey starts and not for them to come to where we're at in our journey. We make our work more meaningful and our services more accessible when we support young people to be part of the conversation about their needs and what would make life better for them.

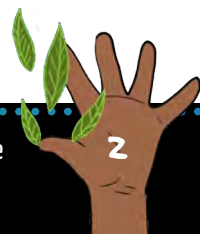
I hope this guide will provide the QATSICPP team and our members, some really good ways for us to think about how young people want to engage, the support they need to speak up and how we can keep them talking with us.

We have a responsibility to not leave our kids behind. This work reminds us that our young people have their own needs, dreams and aspirations, and we need to support them with these. In the process of yarning with our youth, we are growing up these young ones, and we are building future leaders. We need to see everyone that interacts with our services as a potential future leader in our services, and look for opportunities to bring young people closer in, to be an active part of what we do.

This guide would not have been possible without the generosity and hard work of our Solid Voices young people, our staff and the contributions of our members; my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved for sharing part of yourself to help create a resource we are very proud of.

Garth Morgan

Garth Morgan
Chief Executive Officer
QATSICPP





Introduction

“Today we ask you to imagine what is possible. We are not the problem, we are the solution.”

These are the voices of our young people; the introductory and concluding words of the Imagination Declaration (2019)ⁱ developed by a group of young people who came together in East Arnhem Land for the Youth Forum following the Uluru Statement From the Heart.

QATSICPP and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family services exist to serve our children and their families; to ensure their safety and wellbeing, to respect and uphold their rights and to promote their interests.

*We need to bring our children and young people along with us in everything we do. They **are** our future, but we need to get it right so they **have** a future (Aunty Rachel Atkinson, Chairperson, QATSICPP).*

The voices of children, young people and families, their experiences, their views, and their stories drive what we do, how we do it and what we achieve. The challenge for all of us is to hear and respond to their voices and stories; to build on our efforts and enhance our collective commitment to improving the lives of our children, young people and their families.

Engaging and empowering our young people to participate in decisions and actions affecting their lives is both a process and an outcome. It is better understood as a goal rather than an event. It requires an understanding of young people as active participants in their own lives and futures, who can contribute to change in other children and young people, communities, systems and society.





About the project

In 2021, QATSICPP initiated a project aimed at:

- identifying with young people how the voices of young people aged 14-25 years can be best heard and acted upon in identifying their needs, designing services to meet their needs, developing policies, evaluating services and initiatives, conducting research, and reforming service systems
- developing a resource to support our staff and our members in engaging and empowering young people to participate meaningfully in these processes including their voices being central to leading change.

A project team was established within QATSICPP to oversight and conduct the project. The team includes 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people recruited as young consultants to inform the process and co-create the Resource Guide. The project team engaged with other young people with wider experiences within the child protection and youth justice systems; conducted knowledge circles with our staff, QATSICPP member services and allies, and gathered knowledge of how our communities are engaging and empowering young people in their communities in Queensland, elsewhere in Australia and, where relevant, overseas (see Appendix One for further detail on the process undertaken).

The project and resulting resource are focused on the voices of young people who use, or may need to use, our services and their involvement at an organisational and systemic level about matters that directly affect them and other young people.

It is not focused on their involvement in decisions and actions about them as individuals when they are receiving assistance. However, the resource builds on the guidance that is already available to support service providers and staff in this area including the QATSICPP Practice Standards.

Further, while it is acknowledged that non-

Indigenous service providers play an important role in working with our young people and their families, this resource is intended for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations and their staff.

Non-Indigenous service providers are encouraged to access the work of the *Western Australian Commission for Children and People: Engaging with Aboriginal Children and Young People Toolkit* (2018), which supports the development of Aboriginal led solutions in developing and implementing programs for children and young peopleⁱⁱ.



About the need for a Resource Guide

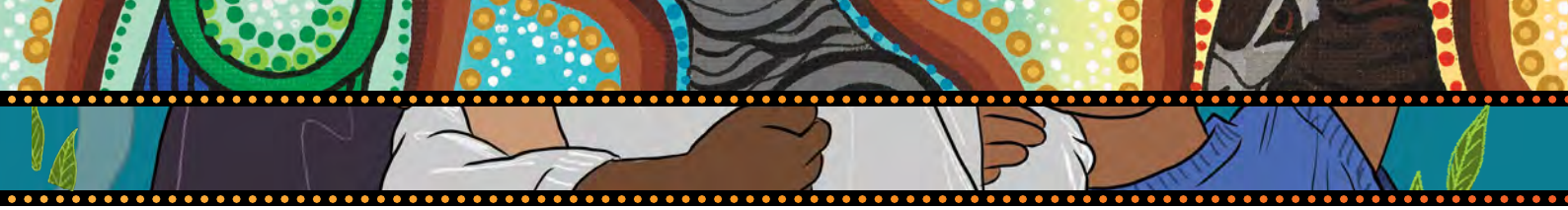
The way in which we understand the engagement of young people and how we approach it is important as young people are dependent on us as adults, organisations and systems to support their involvement and empower them.

There are different ways of thinking about engaging young people and hearing their voices including rights basedⁱⁱⁱ and developmental approaches^{iv}. However, these understandings of participation are western based. While relevant to all young people and organisations working with them, they do not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of young people or our ways of knowing, doing and being.

A review of Australian and international literature suggests that efforts to apply these understandings in practice tend to focus on engaging and empowering young people in general. As such they do not:

- consider the participation of Indigenous young people in the context of their communities and cultures or
- draw on Indigenous knowledge and methods in engaging and empowering them.





Two resources were identified that have been developed to support mainstream organisations in engaging and empowering Indigenous young people in Australiaⁱⁱ and Canada^v.

In 2020, the Koorie Youth Council developed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth participation framework, focused on helping mainstream workers and organisations to support young people’s participation in decision making processes. It identifies the values, knowledge and actions required to effectively do this work^{vi}. While this framework is relevant to all workers and organisations, there has not yet been a resource developed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations providing detailed guidance on how to engage and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

It is therefore critical that our young people, community controlled service providers, researchers and allies, inform an understanding of the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the context of their communities and cultures, and co-create culturally based knowledge about engaging and empowering our young people to fill this gap.



About the Resource Guide

This resource guide is intended as a guide for service providers rather than a prescription. It sets out what should be considered when an organisation is seeking to engage young people at an organisational and/or a systems level.

Young people, programs, organisations, communities and cultures are diverse. Approaches to engaging and empowering young people must therefore be responsive to that diversity and work within the local community and cultural context.

This guide builds on our efforts in honouring and

engaging our young people in what we do, how we do it and what we achieve. Drawing on our ways of knowing, ways of doing and ways of being, we need to continue to learn from our young people, our communities, and each other about how we can best do this over time.

The guide details five building blocks for engaging and empowering our young people in decisions and actions that affect their lives:

- 1. Voice** - explores what having a voice means, the diversity of local community and cultural contexts, and the benefits of participation for young people, organisations and communities.
- 2. Preparation** - identifies key questions for getting ready, identifying your priorities and developing a plan.
- 3. Finding and engaging young people** - provides practical strategies for identifying who to involve, then finding and initially engaging young people.
- 4. Supporting and resourcing involvement** - outlines processes for actively involving young people including the use of informal and formal approaches, yarning, co-design and tips for keeping young people involved.
- 5. Taking action** - identifies strategies for honouring and acting on the voices of young people, and building on what you have achieved.

Through using this guide in our work and reflecting on what works well and what can be improved, we will continue this co-creation process and further develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander model of youth participation.





1. VOICE

Young people have unique experiences, views, and stories about their needs, issues and decisions that affect their lives.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people should be actively involved in service design and delivery. After all, they hold the knowledge and wisdom about what it means to be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young person today^{vii}.

Young people are knowledge holders and can contribute their voices to:

- *identifying needs and designing services and resources to meet those needs*
- *developing or reviewing policies that govern an organisation*
- *evaluating the effectiveness of services and resources*
- *researching issues and solutions*
- *advocating for reform of service systems to better meet needs and achieve outcomes.*

Our young consultants spoke about what having ‘a voice’ means and why it is important:

They have knowledge about what it feels like to be young in the modern world, knowledge about what they are going through, their feeling etc ... if they have trouble, negativity inside of them, they also have knowledge about that too - it's about coming together to tell life stories and make something from it, this encourages other young people to not be ashamed and feel comfortable in speaking up

Having a voice and people listening is a way of getting closer to people and making stronger connections

Enabling young people to combat stereotypes and racism directly

What I say to people is important I know that but I didn't always realise it, it's like sometimes the adults think I have said something wise or good but I can't see what they see

Speak up and get people to hear your point of view

If you don't have a voice your opinion won't be heard, nothing will change, you can't take opportunities, everything will keep repeating. No one can read your mind

So that you can become independent and decide what to do in your life

Being united with one another – promoting culture and rights, and closing the gap

So people don't take away what our ancestors have achieved

Young people are the voice of the future



Community and cultural context

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures are diverse. The participation of young people therefore needs to be understood and located within their local community and cultural context. The foundation is the same but how it is applied needs to be different.

One young worker raised cultural issues relating to respect for Elders and their role in decision making and the effect on young people speaking up.

The voice of Elders and reluctance to speak up broadly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'issues' is very relevant amongst us Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth -



when it comes to Indigenous youth speaking up on issues – we feel we don't have the cultural authority to speak on some issues ... it is really tricky we want to conserve the culture of Indigenous people but how do we get around it ... organisations need to address this because we do need this feedback to make the services better but we need the help of community to enable the youth to speak up...

Some of our young consultants commented on how the local community and cultural context may affect the what, when and how of participation:

It depends on what is involved – if it involves cultural practices and traditions young people don't really get a say but if it involves a mental health program for young people then we should be involved.

Issues where advice or statement is being provided to government from the community go through the Leaders Group – there is no direct voice for young people but a Youth Council could be set up under the Leaders Group to provide their views.

For issues where a service or organisation is seeking feedback from young people to inform its work and the input stays within the organisation there would be no need to go to the Leaders Group.

The role of young people in communities is both complex and changing. Our young consultants voices are reflected in those of young people participating in the Koorie Youth Council's work^{vii};

Some young people identified the changing role of young people within contemporary communities and society. Young people discussed the complexities that they can face in participating meaningfully within their communities while still being respectful of and not undermining the longstanding

cultural pillar of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies.

Natalie Lewis (Commissioner, Queensland Family and Children Commission) also reflected on the voices of young people and their role^{viii};

I truly believe the legacy of our Elders endures in the promise of our children. That promise cannot be fulfilled without committing to a new narrative for our children- one that is characterised by hope and limitless potential, rather than by crippling disadvantage. We need to clear the page and enable them to be the authors of their own stories. Our children have aspirations and expectations that we don't often hear; their voices become background noise, drowned out by our versions of what we believe is best for them.

One of our QATSICPP Members identified the need to understand the connections and relationships between families within a community and how this might impact on how you hear from young people, and provide opportunities to hear from all young people in ways that are culturally safe. Young people participating in the Koorie Youth Council's^{vi} work discussed the effects that community conflict and lateral violence can have on them and their families, including their experiences of participation within the community and decision making processes.

The following factors are important in how we consider and respond to our local community and cultural context.

Young people:

- differing perspectives and emotions about speaking up
- understanding of, and connection to, their community and culture varies considerably and how this may impact their participation
- highlighting the need to incorporate opportunities to acknowledge the local community and cultural context and promote young people's understanding and connection.





Local community and culture:

- understanding family connections and relationships within communities
- understanding local family and community decision making process and structures, and young people's place within these particularly when you are entering land that you are not from
- informing and engaging families, Elders, groups in planning and engaging young people.

Whenever you are thinking about seeking the views of young people, what you do and how you do it needs to take into account the nature of the issue you are concerned about, the discussions you want to have, and who is affected by the issue.

You need to think about who to inform and involve:

- young people receiving a service from your organisation, a group of young people who may be affected, or all young people in the community
- families of the young people involved
- Elders
- whole of community.



Benefits

Participation empowers young people as knowledge holders and active agents in all aspects of their lives. It has benefits for young people, organisations and communities.

For young people, participation

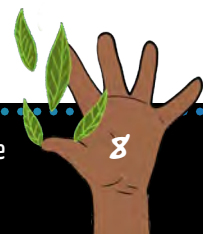
- values them
- promotes self-esteem, development, cultural identity, well-being
- develops a sense of inclusion and belonging
- promotes reciprocity and giving back to the community
- builds skills
- promotes leadership
- provides pathways to employment.

For organisations, it

- ensures services and resources are relevant to their needs
- enhances access to and use of services and resources
- improves quality of policies, services and resources
- promotes partnership and mutual ownership
- builds staff skills and promotes work satisfaction
- provides for greater transparency and accountability
- meets requirements of international conventions, legislation and standards
- informs service systems reforms
- leads to better outcomes for their health and wellbeing.

For communities, it

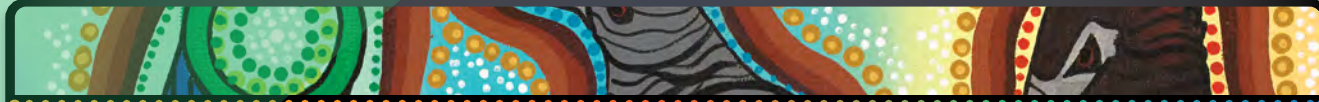
- supports exchange of understanding and knowledge
- strengthens community life
- promotes continuity of culture
- community caring for community.







Gullara's story



Hi I'm Gullara, I'm 19 years old and studying a double Science/Law degree at JCU. I've always been big on education, and I grew up learning how to live in two worlds. I'm the oldest of five siblings. I've always lived in Mareeba, on farm land with mango and sheep.

I first heard about Solid Voices through Aunty Gail at Mulungu. My dad encouraged me to participate. People need role models and people want to hear youth voices. I want to help my community, which is why I study what I'm studying. With law I can represent people and with science I can care for country.


I hadn't done something like Solid Voices before but I wasn't worried or nervous about anything with it – I just checked it out and went with the flow, I was happy to see how it went. I mean, I don't see how adults can solve problems for youth, if they don't know what's going on in their (the young people's) heads. I always felt comfortable to participate in the Solid Voices yarns but especially after Brisbane when we got together with the workers and the young people – and we got to actually say stuff to workers who are working with the youth in our community - I felt more confident that this was going somewhere, it could have an impact in the real world.

Overall the project was a wonderful and great experience, but I would like to hear from more young people who are experiencing the issues/barriers, facing the challenges. People with lived experiences of the things being spoken about. I think to get those voices you need to be really going to the youth, not waiting for them to come to you, and putting lots of energy into getting to know them and building their trust.

In five years time I want to be graduated at uni with my double degree and taking on new opportunities. I like doing stuff like Solid Voices, I meet new people and I get a bit of side money to help pay the rent.

I want to use my voice to push for the importance of education.

These problems in our communities are a wheel, that needs to be broken. It's cyclical, intergenerational trauma, and the wheel keeps coming round again. It's all a circle, don't just try and change the direction, break the wheel. I see listening to youth voices as part of breaking that wheel.





2. PREPARATION

Because engaging and empowering young people is a process not an event; is based in relationships; and should be tailored to their local community and cultural context; each organisation's approach and practice will be different.

It is important to identify your goal, establish your starting point, set your priorities and develop a plan that builds your organisation's capacity over time.

Key questions include:

What is your goal?

- your organisational commitment to engaging and empowering young people
- what you want to seek the views of young people about and how their views will be used to influence change.

What is your starting point?

- Who are the young people you seek to work with?
- age, gender, abilities?
- who engages with your service/s and who doesn't?
- young people's networks

What is your local community and cultural context?

- other services or projects involving the young people you seek to work with
- community and cultural protocols and decision-making processes, particularly where organisations are travelling to different land.

How do you currently engage individual young people in your day-to-day work?

- identifying their needs, setting goals and working with them.

Are there ways in which your organisation currently involves young people as a group?

- processes and structures involving young people.

What resources do you have available to support the involvement of young people?

- internal resources (knowledge and skills, tools, funds etc)
- external resources (connections with community resources, other organisations, consultants, peak bodies, universities and research bodies).

How do staff, board, and community members feel about involving young people as a group?

- attitudes, experiences, skills and knowledge.

There may be things identified that need to be addressed first before you can proceed or that need to be considered in identifying priorities and developing a plan.



Identifying priorities

Taking into account your starting point, what are the priorities? There may be:

- a need to have a process established to identify the priorities involving discussions with young people, families and community members
- particular needs/issues that need to be addressed
- a program that has been operating for a period of time that needs to be reviewed or evaluated.

Keep in mind, the aim is to build capacity over time. Unless you already have well established processes for engaging and empowering young people, it may be best to start small, deliver well and build on success.

Developing a plan

Develop a plan that identifies your goal, the key steps involved, who needs to be involved, the resources required and timeframes.

Consider your starting point and make sure you address any issues or requirements relevant to your planning and what you want to achieve.

Once you start acting on your plan be open to reviewing and amending it as you go along. Young people and others will themselves have views about the plan and key steps that need to be considered. Learning from experience together will help achieve the goal. It is also helpful to share your learning with each other as we all seek to better engage and empower young people.



Solid Voices crew with Cassy from Black Card Cultural Tours



Jaylen's story

Hi my name is Jaylen, I'm from Aurukun, Cape York, I lived in Weipa for a bit, and we moved to Townsville when I was in grade 10. I'm in Grade 12 now, I'm working as a rugby league referee, I'm also doing my Certificate 3 in Community Services at Cowboy House, running activities for kids from grade seven to 12. I also work as a boarding supervisor supporting students who come from communities all over Cape York to study in Townsville, helping them to get used to living in Townsville. I have a huge passion and love for sports, rugby league is my favourite, that's the one for me. I also enjoy camping.

I think I first heard about the Solid Voices project on Facebook or maybe an email, it popped up and I thought, Yeah righto, I'll give it a go, I wanted to try something different, something new - I'd never done anything like this before.

I enjoyed the project from the start, all the discussions were pretty relaxed, there wasn't a lot of pressure to say anything, just speak up at our own pace. I enjoyed just hanging out with a new group of people. What kept me coming back was the potential for new friendships, they seemed like good people. Also the QATSICPP staff were friendly and helpful, I don't care about that money and all that.

I think I was already confident of myself going into the project but in the project I got more confidence in speaking up in groups of people.

I think the project changed my views on what it means to 'speak up' - at the start I thought it was just speaking your mind, whatever, but it was very real in the project.

For this project, I am most proud that I built my confidence and went up there and did it. What's next for me? Well, I know one thing and that's what I am doing here now is good and I will continue do that.







3. FINDING AND ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

Who to involve?

The young people who should be involved are those who are, or who potentially are, impacted by the issue and area of engagement (service design, policy development, evaluation and research, or systems advocacy) you are focused on.

Our young consultants stressed that all opinions are valid and important. They identified the following considerations:

- those who are already receiving a service from the organisation or who could potentially seek assistance
- ensuring a mix of age, gender, experiences, backgrounds, geographic area
- those with awareness, experience and knowledge of the issue or area
- those who are able to speak up and contribute to change.

Keeping in mind the local community and cultural considerations identified earlier, there may be other members of the community important to include in the conversation as well.



Finding young people

Strategies for finding and initially engaging young people need to be linked to who you are seeking to involve and what you are trying to achieve.

You have a head start with those young people who are already involved with your organisation. You have some knowledge of them and already have a relationship with them. However, depending on the purpose of your process you may still need to find other young people who are not accessing your services. Finding young people who are not already involved with your organisation is more complex.

Our young consultants suggested the following strategies for finding young people:

- *outreach to where young people informally hang out and approach them directly*
- *identify points of contact with young people including key community members and groups, schools and other organisations involved with young people and seek their assistance in letting them know about it*
- *word of mouth through other young people*
- *hold a community event providing food and activities to attract young people and others*
- *advertise through flyers, radio, TV, and social media*

It is important to use a range of strategies suitable to those young people you are targeting. This will increase the number and range of young people that you reach including those from different backgrounds, with different experiences and perspectives.

Communication

Developing information to equip young people, community groups and organisations about how to involve young people.

The successful participation of children and young people depends on genuine and effective communication. You need to clearly tell young people:

- *who you are*
- *what you are trying to achieve*
- *how you plan to achieve it*
- *what role children and young people will play*
- *where, when and how you plan to engage with them (time frame and commitment required)*
- *why you are engaging with them both generally as children and young people and that specific target group*

- *how you will check back with them to ensure that you've heard, and will share, their views accurately*
- *who will see/hear their contributions and what will be done with them.*

This information needs to be adjusted for different purposes and audiences to attract young people.

Providing this information to young people is important to them making an informed decision about whether or not they want to be involved. You should consider your organisation's policies for seeking consent from young people and where you may need the consent of parents and the community. There may be different stages of your work where you need to check young people's consent including when taking photos, recording their voices and views, and sharing information with others. Keep in mind that informing young people and seeking their consent are important to building and maintaining trust and respect.

If you are considering undertaking formal research with young people either directly or in collaboration with others such as universities or research bodies, it is important to consider the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research^x and seek ethics approval or ensure it has been sought for the project. Centred around the core ethical value of integrity and acting in the right spirit, the code identifies four principles and their associated responsibilities as follows:

1. Indigenous self-determination

- Recognition and respect
- Engagement and collaboration
- Informed consent
- Cultural capability and learning

2. Indigenous leadership

- Indigenous led research
- Indigenous perspectives and participation
- Indigenous knowledge and data

3. Impact and value

- Benefit and reciprocity
- Impact and risk

4. Sustainability and accountability

- Indigenous lands and waters
- Ongoing Indigenous governance
- Reporting and compliance.

The building blocks in this guide are consistent with these principles and associated responsibilities.



Initial engagement

Building on the information you have provided to young people and others; you then need to encourage and support young people to take part.

Our young consultants identified the following strategies for initially engaging young people:

- *providing a positive message*
- *making sure young people are clear about what you want and what is involved*
- *building trust through speaking with parents and linking with local people and organisations to promote and support young people's involvement*
- *providing regular communication so that young people know what is going on*
- *being flexible as to what happens and when it happens*
- *understanding that young people have other interests and demands on their time*
- *providing incentives and knowing the people who are hosting it or being supported to participate by someone you trust*
- *going back to young people who initially seemed reluctant to speak up - giving young people space and time to speak up*
- *providing practical support – food and refreshments, transport, clothing*





You may need to check what young people understand by having a voice and being involved in making decisions. Young people may:

- not have had the experience of being involved in decisions and actions that affect their lives
- not value their own views and opinions or not think that adults value their views and opinions
- have had a negative experience of being involved in the past.

Whatever their past experience, this is a good place to start with young people so that everyone is on the same page. Remember this is something that may need to be revisited from time to time. It is important to explore and discuss the benefits to young people of being involved.

Our young consultants identified the following benefits:

- *sharing their experience and helping other young people*
- *connecting with and learning from other young people*
- *receiving a financial incentive for their participation*
- *building their knowledge and skills*
- *providing something to put on their resumes when seeking employment*
- *providing access to leadership opportunities*

The expertise, time and effort that is asked of young people and put in by young people should be recognised and valued. The benefits identified by young people reflect non-financial and financial incentives for their involvement. Financial incentives may be direct or indirect. Direct payments include cash or gift cards while indirect payments include providing or pre-paying transport, providing childcare (for young parents) and providing food and refreshments.

Keep in mind that what motivates young people to be involved and stay involved may change over time.



Engaging at risk young people

It is particularly important that we find and engage young people who are at risk of entry into or have entered tertiary service systems such as child protection, youth justice, mental health, or homelessness amongst others. These young people are particularly vulnerable and often disconnected from their culture. We need to ensure their voices are heard and acted upon so that services are better able to understand and meet their needs, and address systemic issues impacting them, their families and communities.

These young people may not be accessing services, or if they are, they may experience difficulties in engaging and maintaining involvement. Disadvantage, racism, trauma, disconnection from culture are likely to impact young people's engagement and participation. They may feel left out, unsafe, have had negative experiences of seeking assistance, and have expressed emotions and behaviours that have challenged services in working with them and perhaps led to disengagement. Our young consultants commented:

For these young people it is even more important to be respectful, humble and polite when approaching them as this counts for a lot as they have not had a lot of this in their life – but also accept that some young people are just not ready to talk and just want to be left alone.

It is important to emphasise [the] importance of hearing these young people's voices early on, so they feel valued and don't turn to negative sources of value (e.g., negative peer groups). Part of the reason this group might be reluctant to engage in services is that services haven't taken the time to listen to them in the first place. It is even more important with this group to explain what your organisation does and how what they do is relevant to the young person.





The Kunnanara Empowering Youth projectⁱⁱ used the following strategies to engage ‘hard to reach’ young people about reducing youth incarceration rates during school holiday periods and increasing community and child safety:

- speaking with young people in their familiar environments. i.e., school or hang out places
- ensuring those agency staff who have existing relationships and regular contact with young people were aware of the engagement required, and could undertake these conversations
- holding community events that catered for the interests of ‘at risk’ youth, and where engagement with young people by agency staff could occur in an informal setting
- ensuring local Aboriginal community controlled organisations and not for profit organisations were engaged in the activities, as well as the planning and delivery work.



Safety Planning

When engaging vulnerable young people, it is important that safety plans are put in place to identify risks and strategies to ensure their safety. Safety planning needs to commence during the ‘finding and engaging’ phase and continue throughout the project. In our project, QATSICPP:

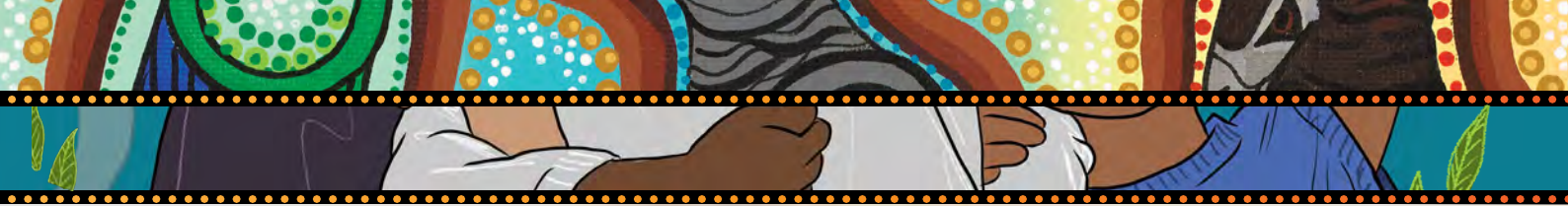
- developed an overall safety and support plan for the project
- trained project staff in trauma informed responses
- used existing networks to identify and assist in engaging young people who may be interested in being involved
- informed young people about the project, why we wanted their involvement, and that it may raise some issues for them

- discussed any potential safety concerns and identifying support responses with young people
- checked in with young people before and after discussions.

Other strategies that could be considered include engaging youth leaders in developing and delivering projects, having access to community members, staff of support organisations, and having access to people trained in responding to trauma.

Keep in mind that efforts to engage vulnerable people need to be genuine, multiple and persistent.





Maurice's story

Hi, my name's Maurice - I grew up mostly on Thursday Island, where I still live. I graduated high school here in 2020... Growing up I had a thing for acting, making music and playing basketball, I wanted to play basketball – my brother was the one who really got me into music. I sing and make music here with my brother - sometimes I perform with my brothers crew, we recently performed in Mackay which was so much fun.

The moment I heard about Solid Voices was at my old work at the radio station, they told me 'hey there is this thing going on' - Saliman from Mura Kosker sent me a message about it and came out and talked to me about it. I thought – why not ? I thought it would be a good chance to say some stuff about up here about make sure the Torres Strait is represented. I also wanted to do it for self development, I just wanted to do new things, it gives me more experience, gives me knowledge and I can gain wisdom from that.

I hadn't really done stuff like this before, at the start of the project , I was worried that I wouldn't speak up much, but it worked out really well, - I don't know, probably because –mainly the people on the project that gave me the confidence to speak up - to actually see the other young people speak up, it made me want to speak up. Having the group catch up at first on video call was an icebreaker , to get to know everyone, so it was more easy to talk to each other when we met up in person – it was just about starting to bond with each other and have that quick connection.

When we had the adults there from the services at the Knowledge Circle, we felt respected that they were listening to what we had to say, we, as young people were listening to each other – we were just having a big yarn all together.

I think the project helped me to not over think stuff, just to roll with it – that everyone has things to say and what I have to say means something too - I think Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people always feel comfortable when speaking up in groups, well mostly, yeah I think groups and pairs is best to talk to bounce off each other and get the messages from the youth out there.

Yeah doing this has inspired me and gives me confidence, gives me a voice to speak up loud you know?



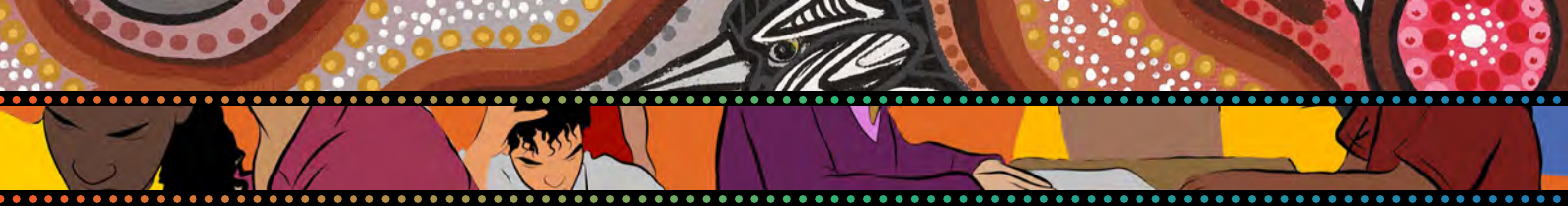
4. SUPPORTING AND RESOURCING INVOLVEMENT

Trust, relationships and connection are the foundation of supporting and resourcing young people's involvement. Our young consultants stressed the importance of taking time, continuing to build trust and developing relationships to create safe and comfortable spaces for young people to express their views:

- *taking it slow*
- *having fun*
- *participating in activities to get to know them so they feel comfortable – before seeking their views*
- *you can't talk with someone you don't know – it is important to watch young people's body language*
- *having a yarn*
- *build up a relationship through face-to-face meetings – not going straight at the young person with questions – take the time and follow up with the young person along the way*
- *build up trust with young people – it takes more than one session to share their feelings*
- *there needs to be a connection – relationship built with the young person – build communication*
- *if there isn't that connection, it will be stressful for the young person and a barrier to their involvement*



Solid Voices crew with Tanya Robinson from Wuchopperen Health Service and QFCC Commissioner Natalie Lewis



Assisting young people to speak up

Our young consultants provided the following advice for adults as to what they should and shouldn't do in assisting young people to speak up.

SHOULD DO

- Welcome them and make them comfortable so they are confident to talk and yarn
- Break the ice - take young people out to other forums and events so that they gain knowledge and experience of speaking up
- Actually listening to what they say
- Treat them politely and respectfully
- Show you care
- Provide encouragement to speak up
- Start off with yes and no questions so people don't have to talk too much, after a while build a relationship, ask about their background and where are they from and how they act as a person so you can understand their answers and then you can have a better discussion
- Build understanding of where young people are coming from
- Prompting young people's responses
- Give them time to come to a conclusion themselves – don't speak for them
- If they see other young people interested in what happens, it will encourage them
- Make it interesting – include ice-breakers and games
- Support story sharing from young people
- Share a bit of themselves as adults and workers
- Follow up with them afterwards
- Clothing – some young people are very poor and don't have nice clothes and feel a lot of shame about this so they aren't going to turn up to something with others without some nicer clothes

SHOULDN'T DO

- Expect them to speak up straight away
- Not communicate clearly and provide support
- Judge young people and what they say
- Being distrustful
- Not showing they care
- Talk over them – not let them talk
- Treat young people as dumb – don't dumb it down
- Pressure young people
- Be pushy with young people
- Aggressively chase answers
- Say you know how they feel when you haven't had that experience
- Talk about inappropriate stuff, like too personal stuff to kids that might put them in awkward situations and cause stress
- Don't use issues they raise against them
- Death by PowerPoint



Informal and formal approaches

There are both informal and formal approaches to involving young people.

Informal approaches are less structured and based around young people's activities and interests (hobbies, sports, music, games) and community events (celebrations, festivals, cultural). They can be used to assist in finding and engaging young people, yarning with young people about their experiences and views, and as a bridge to more formal involvement.





Case Study

An example of an informal approach used to seek young people's views was provided by the Deadly Inspiring Youth Doing Good (DIYDG) youth-led organisation in Cairns. DIYDG holds monthly barbeques with young people. They used these get-togethers to seek young people's views on naming their office. The involvement of young people in cultural events and celebrations is particularly important in building their connection to culture and identity, and empowering them.

Formal approaches include consultations (individual or group), large scale forums, co-designing services, stakeholder groups, advisory or reference groups or committees, and research. They can be used for a specific purpose or as part of an ongoing process of involvement.

Case Study

AbSec Youth Ambassador Program is an example of a formal approach. The program brings together a group of Aboriginal young people aged-16-25 years from around New South Wales to discuss issues facing them, and to provide advice to the child and family sector regarding policies and programs that affect Aboriginal children and young people. The governance arrangements include:

- Membership over a 2-year period
- Regular commitments to meetings
- Code of conduct for YAP participants, in agreement with those selected
- Support and facilitation provided by AbSec.

Youth Ambassadors develop a yearly report on their view on the current system and speak on issues publicly and provide AbSec with information to influence public positions.

In a study of young participation drawing on the views of policymakers and young people, Vromen and Collin^x found that both groups agree “existing forums of youth participation are too formal and ought to be more informal to attract young people from diverse backgrounds.” They reported young people “see the greatest potential in everyday issue-based, localised and youth-led processes that are culturally relevant and integrated into young people's lives.”^x

Our young consultants also indicated a preference for informal, fun, and flexible processes for involving them. These processes can be incorporated in more formal approaches once trust, relationships and connection have been built and young people are engaged in leading what approaches work best for them.





Yarning

A review of the literature on engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people highlights the importance of yarning as a cultural practice for connecting, sharing knowledge and exploring experiences and understandings of participation^{xi}. Shay^{xii} tells us yarning is about;

“... the establishment of our relational connections (kin, country, community) and our reading of each other: physically; spiritually; socially and in a work setting, professionally. Equally, yarning is about listening. It is about listening to each other, listening to ourselves and listening to our (gut) feelings. The connecting and reading happens for me with all who I engage in a yarn with ...”

There are different types of yarning. Besserarb & Ng’andu^{xiii} identify four types of yarning, when undertaking research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: social, research topic, collaborative and therapeutic. The following descriptions have been slightly modified to apply to other contexts of participation:

Social yarning is an informal yarn that helps develop trust and build relationship.

Topic yarning is a relaxed and interactive yarn with the purpose of obtaining information relating to the issue or question.

Collaborative yarning is a yarn between two or more people where they are sharing information and/or discussing ideas.

Therapeutic yarning is a yarn where the young person is telling their story which may include information that is personal and traumatic. The facilitator shifts from the topic to listening and supporting the young person in giving voice to and making meaning of their story.

It is important to recognise that ‘yarning’ is an English language word and, while well used, it may be understood and used differently within and across communities and Indigenous cultures^{xii}.

Yarning supports participation through:

- providing a relaxed and familiar communication process within a known and culturally safe environment
- embedding cultural security within the process and allowing for trust, honesty and openness to unfold through the relationships that are developed
- enabling young people to take the topic and respond as they see fit
- allowing for flexible discussion around the key areas/questions
- enabling young people to respond with their understandings of participation rather than imposing a predefined understanding
- shifting the power balance between young people and those enquiring to create an equal environment^{xiv}.

Consideration also needs to be given to recording the yarn – what will be recorded, who will record it, how it will be recorded, who decides and how are the views of young people sought and considered, and how is the recorded information checked for accuracy with young people.



Yarning through activity

Some young people may prefer non-verbal ways of expressing their views and experiences. These could include cultural activities including painting, dance, music and crafts, and other activities including digital art, photography, storyboarding and writing as determined by young people. In addition to providing young people an alternative means of communication and conveying their meaning, the use of these activities can:

- make it a safe space and fun environment
- assist in building trust
- act as a bridge to yarning
- strengthen connection to community and culture.





Individual and group-based yarns

Yarning may be used with both individuals and groups. Our young consultants suggested that both have a place with the primary focus being on how young people want to be involved. They stressed the need for taking time, building trust and being flexible in providing different ways to express their voices and tell their stories.

For some young people, one on one may be safer and more personal which would help build a relationship and better support them to participate. For other young people, small groups may be safer as it takes the focus off the individual who may not have the confidence for one on one and they can draw on and learn from each other. One young consultant commented:

It's an ongoing problem the issue of why youth in our communities don't speak up, the shame factor, it needs to be a slow process, this process of speaking up, to be comfortable, it needs to be built to a place where they can talk freely without being judged – build the trusted relationship, (with) a trusted advisor

In both instances, care needs to be taken to not 'shame' young people. Shame refers to the experience of being singled out for any purpose, scolding or praise or simply attention^{xv}. Young people participating in Darumbal Community Youth Service's Forum^{xvi} 'talked about shame being the result of two factors, a cultural concept of not wanting to feel embarrassed or 'big note themselves', but most significantly a lack of respect for them, their actions and their voices.' Shame may also arise from young people's discomfort in talking about family or community issues^{xvii}. What shame means may vary between young people, families and communities.

We therefore need to be sensitive and alert to the issues affecting young people speaking up, and build trust to identify and respond to those issues.

Co-design

Co-design is a particular approach to supporting the active participation of those with lived experience and others impacted by services, policies or systems.

Co-design is a process for involving people, in this case young people, in developing solutions to issues and actions that affect them. It brings young people, service providers and decision makers together to share their experience and knowledge to develop a shared understanding of issues and collaborate on the design and delivery of services, policies or systems. The emphasis is on equal and reciprocal relationships and the sharing of decision-making power amongst all involved.

The processes and features of co-design are reflected in the values and principles underpinning QATSICCP's practice framework and practice standards for how we work with children and families at an individual level. Drawing on the concept of storylines, the standards are organised in the key phases of working with children and families:

- Engaging the child, family and community
- Identifying the storyline
- Changing the storyline
- Establishing a new storyline.

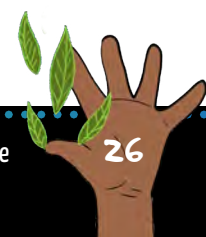
These phases of working with children and families at an individual level are also relevant for working with them as a group at a service, policy or systems levels. While the context changes from the individual to the group, the core practices remain the same.





The following table identifies the core practices for co-designing with young people at service, policy and systems levels.

QATSI CPP Practice Standards Service, Policy, Systems levels	
Engaging young people and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in the community and establishing respectful relationships with people, groups and organisations • Identifying and engaging young people impacted by the issue or action you are concerned about • Discussing what you are seeking the views of young people about and how their views will be used to influence change • Establishing trusting and respectful relationships with young people so they feel safe in telling their story • Identifying and engaging other people, groups, and organisations impacted by the issue or action or who have an interest in the issue or action and the outcome
Identifying the storyline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring young people’s and other stakeholders understanding of the issue or action • Identifying ideas for addressing the issue or action and agreeing to priorities • Choosing the improvements to be made and how to make them • Establishing goals and mapping out the steps to achieve these
Changing the storyline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing the ideas • Identifying and addressing any barriers to taking the steps and achieving the goals • Making any changes based on learning
Establishing a new storyline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing knowledge and learning to review progress • Keeping going until the goals are achieved • Acknowledging and celebrating achievements





The Rock Up Program developed by REFOCUS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Support Services illustrates the core features of co-design with young people, parents, Elders and other community members.

Case Study

Rock Up started in 2017 and is focused on providing young people in the community with a safe space to yarn, connect with each other and find out about the support available to them. It is open to all young people to attend regardless of whether they meet any eligibility criteria.

It was formed after yarning with young people, parents, Elders and other community members who identified a need for such a space. The program was designed with input from local young people and involves a wide range of regular events and activities for young people, from painting, to music, to discussions about mental health and what is going on in the community.

Over time, REFOCUS would regularly check in with the young people about their experiences of the different events and sessions, via group discussions, one on one discussions and via a feedback form used after each event. REFOCUS then used this knowledge from young people to determine what future events looked like, as well as the overall direction of the program. The need for engagement to be consistent was highlighted as youth culture is forever changing and new trends emerge quickly.

In reviewing what young people were saying about the program and their needs, REFOCUS identified there was a further need for the program to provide young people an opportunity to develop connection with their culture at their own pace; as a result, REFOCUS incorporated elements of another program, 'Culture for Life' into the Rock Up program.

Now, almost five years on from the start of the program, the program has a regular group of between 15 and 30 participants attend weekly. The program facilitator sees their role as 'facilitating safety' and letting the young people do the rest -" they know what they want do and what they want to explore".

Regular team sessions are held with the staff group where they reflect on 'trends in community' based off things they were hearing from young people, parents, Elders and other community members.

In addition, the process of engaging young people's voices also helped REFOCUS to identify some young leaders who are now supported to assist with the delivery of the program itself. They found it is these young leaders who can often be the most effective in encouraging young people in the community to freely speak their mind about what they need and what they experience with REFOCUS has been like.





When thinking about co-design, it is important that cultural ways of knowing, being and doing are drawn on in engaging and empowering our young people. Tyson Yunkaporta, with the knowledge of traditional owners of Western New South Wales, identified 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning to assist educators working with Aboriginal students in NSW. These ways are ‘Culture way, there are patterns and processes coming from land and place that impact on the way of doing things, the way we think, learn, feel, live and learn.’^{xviii}

The eight ways of learning are:

1. We connect through the stories we share – this is about teaching and learning through narrative
2. We picture our pathways of knowledge – this is about making learning pathways and processes explicit visually
3. We see, think, act, make and share without words – this is about hands-on learning, critical reflection and least-intrusive management strategies
4. We keep and share knowledge with art and objects – this is about exploring content through imagery and using visual cues and signals
5. We work with lessons from land and nature – this is about placed based learning, linking content to local land and environment
6. We put different ideas together and create new knowledge – this is about lateral thinking, comparing and synthesising diverse cultural viewpoints, innovating, adapting, working with cycles and working with holistic knowledge
7. We work from wholes to parts, watching and then doing – this is about modelling and scaffolding, balancing teacher instruction with independent learning and working from wholes to parts
8. We bring new knowledge home to help our mob – this is about grounding learning content and values in community knowledge, working on community projects and using knowledge products publicly for local benefit.

The 8 ways of learning provides cultural touchstones and ideas for co-designing with our young people and

others; strengthens their connection to culture; and keeps culture strong.

The Agency for Clinical Innovation (NSW Government) identified the natural synergies between the 8 ways of learning and co-design processes for working with Aboriginal people^{xix}. They have developed a toolkit that describes each way of learning, how it can be used in co-design, and relevant tools and templates that may assist with this work.



Keeping young people involved

Having engaged young people and started involving them, it is important to maintain their interest and keep momentum. Our young consultants had the following suggestions for keeping young people involved:

Create a welcoming feel and positive influence

Make sure it is a safe space that they want to come back to

Don't start with heavy stuff, start light

Not doing the same thing all of the time – mix it up

Check in with them individually after each session

Depending on the purpose and process, some initiatives may occur over a long period such as systemic change or be continuous, such as a youth council or reference group. Our young consultants suggested the following would help them to continue over time:

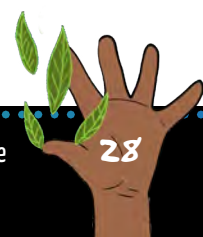
Finding the resources to support involvement

Keep pushing through and finding support stepping stones

Breaking it down into small steps so that young people can see progress


Little things can make a very big change to what is happening

Not going to change overnight, be prepared for negatives – set realistic steps and revisit the progress that has been made






Simeon's story



Hey I'm Simeon, I am Yidinjdji but I live on Muluridji Country. I like playing games, hanging out with friends, helping out community (it just feels right to help out community). When I first heard about Solid Voices last year, I heard that you'll get money if you do it so I just did it. I remember thinking at the first meeting – what have I got myself into? My initial feelings were that I was bit shocked. I was worried about what to expect. I felt better and more relaxed about Solid Voices when we went to Cairns and met up in person, after that I liked doing it, it seemed easy.

I think once I got what QATSICPP was trying to do with the project, I was more motivated to be involved because I could see where it was heading.

The project changed how I think about speaking up – I remember at one of the early on yarns, some of the other young people were talking about kids who were too shamed to speak up - and I remember realising – “I was one of those kids!” It made me wonder about what kids have been through, what I've been through. For me what helped me to speak up was this carer I had in NSW when I was between 14 and 16 years old. I felt less shame after this time. This old carer helped me to talk up.



Being a part of Solid Voices has helped me think about things more clearly, helped to look at my own issues and the issues in the community. I'm really proud that I put myself out there to meet other people and that I spoke up more than ever before.

I think for organisations wanting young people to speak up – they need to do the whole thing slowly and they need to make it fun.





5. TAKING ACTION

It is critically important that the voices of young people are honoured and acted on. Our young consultants stressed the need to:

- *Do the things we said*
- *Taking what we have to say and using it*
- *Build a solution – what it can look like – what will it produce*

Communicating results and celebrating achievements

Once a process has been completed and action has been taken, the results or what has changed as a result of their participation needs to be communicated to young people and celebrated. This acknowledges young people's contribution, demonstrates they can be successful and encourages their ongoing engagement and participation^{xx}.

Celebrating the results could involve an informal fun activity involving young people and staff or a bigger more formal community event involving family, community members and other stakeholders.

Involving young people in reporting on the results

Involving young people in reporting on the results acknowledges their contribution, builds their confidence and skills, and demonstrates participation in action. This could include involving young people in:

- developing a presentation of the results
- presenting and discussing the results with the intended audience such as other staff in your

organisation or decision makers in other sectors or government

- presenting and discussing the results at workshops or conferences.

Making sure you delivered

Making sure you delivered involves monitoring and evaluating the involvement of young people and whether it achieved the goals. This involves being clear about the goals at the beginning; asking young people, staff and other stakeholders for their views about the process and the outcome; identifying what has been learned that may inform future processes; and improving results for young people in the future.

Keep in mind that young people may identify issues and views about things that are not specific to the goals of the project and/or to matters that your organisation can change. However, you may be able to use them in other ways. For example, if they relate to unmet needs, you could use them in discussions with funding bodies. If they relate to how service systems impact young people, you could use them to seek systems reform at a local or statewide level.

Letting them know 'where to from here?'

Once you have completed a particular process it is important to let young people know 'where to from here?'

This involves thinking about what other opportunities are available or could be created for young people to participate within your organisation on an ongoing basis. This might involve



informal and formal ways of connecting with young people as previously outlined. You may have ideas yourself that you can test with young people and young people may have ideas they want to suggest to you.

Our young consultants identified two ways in which this could happen:

- holding an annual youth forum
- using an app so that young people can continue to express their views

Other ways include:

- having regular informal get togethers with young people that encourage connection and provide a two-way opportunity to identify and address ideas and issues
- developing a youth council or reference group.

The Youth Summit and Youth Health Network run by the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) is an example of a formal approach^{xxi}.



Jaylen and Grant Sarra facilitating Solid Voices Knowledge Circle

Case Study

QAIHC’s youth summit was held in 2019 to hear young people’s experiences of, and suggestions for, improving health care. Following the summit, QAIHC established a Youth Health Network which, drawing on young people’s suggestions from the summit, then guided the development and implementation of a youth health strategy.

The important thing here is that we continue our commitment to engaging and empowering young people in decisions and actions that affect their lives; build the capacity of our staff and organisations to work in this way; and share what we learn with each other so that together we can benefit our young people, families, communities and cultures.





Tanika's story

Hi my name is Tanika, I am a 16-year-old living in Townsville. I have grown up in north QLD and have spent my life between Cairns, Townsville, and Charters Towers. I am currently a Year 11 student who is also working a casual job to help me save for a car. I live with my Mum and my younger brother who is 11 and although we don't have a lot of other family members this has made us close.

My Mum first showed me information about the Solid Voices project as she received an email at work. I was nervous about the project, but my Mum was confident that this would help me learn more about my culture.

I had never really done stuff like this before, I did once get accepted into an Indigenous STEM Academy but unfortunately my school didn't support the program and I had to withdraw from it so I was hesitant to join this project at first. I was extremely nervous at the start of the project, although I feel confident in my own social groups this was something that I had never done before and being the youngest of the group was worrying at the start. I just wasn't sure what to expect at all.

It turned out OK - the whole process of doing the project made me feel more comfortable; being guided by the QATSICPP staff helped me to be able to voice my opinions and it gave me an opportunity to voice my story. The staff were extremely supportive throughout this journey. What also helped was our first face to face meet up in Cairns - this helped me to feel more

comfortable. Once I got to know everyone face to face it made it so much easier and I felt like I could open up more. I felt like we created a bond which helped me keep going with the project.

At the start of the project I didn't really know what they meant by 'speaking up' I honestly had no idea, I had never heard this sort of language before and was just confused by what I had even got myself into. As the project went on I understood it more - I now realise that I do have a voice, that youth can speak up and what I say matters. It makes me feel that people will actually listen.

I think the project has changed me by giving me more confidence, it has also helped me to learn that I can speak in front of people and has helped me gain a sense of identity.

My favourite part of the project was the trip to Brisbane! I loved hanging out with everyone and being part of the whole experience. I was extremely proud of myself for speaking at the Knowledge Circle and this whole day really highlighted the different sorts of opportunities there were for me.

What's next for me? I have just gone through the process of changing schools so I am currently figuring out what the next step is. Being involved in the project has given me an insight into who I am as a person and that a career pathway for me could be helping people, I am not sure what this looks like yet but I am eager to take some time and figure it all out.





End Notes

ⁱ Shay, M., Woods, A., & Sarra, G. (2019, August 14). The Imagination Declaration: young Indigenous Australians want to be heard – but will we listen? The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/the-imagination-declaration-young-indigenous-australians-want-to-be-heard-but-will-we-listen-121569>

ⁱⁱ Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) WA. (2018). Engaging with Aboriginal Children and Young People toolkit. Commissioner for Children and Young People WA: Perth, WA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lundy, L. (2007). ‘Voice’ Is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 33, No. 6.

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^v Crooks, C.V., Chiodo, D., Thomas, D., Burns, S. and Camillo, C. (2010) Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth: A Toolkit for Service Providers. Trafford Publishing.

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OVERVIEW OF THE SOLID VOICES OF TOMORROW PROJECT

The Project

In June 2021, QATSICPP started a project aimed at identifying how the voices of youth can be best heard and acted upon in the work we and our members do to promote and advocate for the rights, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families. To elevate the voices of our youth, we wanted to develop a resource to support our staff and our members in engaging and empowering young adults to participate meaningfully in service design, delivery and evaluation, including their voices being central to leading change.

QATSICPP established a steering group made up of QATSICPP staff to help us to co-create this resource with First Nations youth engaged through our 35 member organisations. The project leaders developed and distributed an Expression of Interest (EOI) form to our members to seek potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth within their community to be a part of the project.

Fourteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were recruited as young consultants to partner with the project team (QATSICPP staff) and co-create the resource guide. The 14 young consultants:

- ranged between the ages of 16 and 22 years
- included seven young men and seven young women
- six of the 14 young consultants were aged between 15-17 years
- eight were aged between 18-22 years.
- two of the young consultants lived in remote locations
- eight of the young consultants lived in regional locations

- four of the young consultants lived in metropolitan locations.
- three of the young people were either in out-of-home care or had a care experience, three of the young people had experience with the Youth Justice system, and one young person had supportive care needs.

As part of the EOI process, we offered each successful participant a fee to recognise the knowledge and time they shared as part of their involvement in the project. QATSICPP was also invested in developing and supporting young people towards their endeavours to become leaders of their families, friends, communities, their culture and most importantly themselves.

We were conscious that the project was a new endeavour to explore and model how a community controlled organisation might engage and support young people's voices in practice. To this end, what follows is the story of our learnings in this project from applying the approach outlined in this resource:

- Preparation
- Finding and engaging young people
- Supporting and resourcing young people
- Taking action.





Preparation

In January 2021 the QATSICPP Policy, Research and Evaluation team began to scope a project to create and share knowledge amongst QATSICPP and our members on supporting children and young people's voices to be heard at a systemic level (e.g. in research, evaluation, policy, service/ program design).

The concept was to develop a guide highlighting best practice approaches to facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's participation and input in:

- the co-design of services, policies and systems
- research and evaluation

The guide would be a foundational resource for the QATSICPP Centre of Excellence that we hoped would enable all future evidence developed to include the voice of children and young people meaningfully.

QATSICPP formed an internal steering group to guide the project. This group consisted of one young Torres Strait Islander man, one Aboriginal woman, one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man, one non-Indigenous man with over ten years of experience working on youth participation and one non-Indigenous project consultant (male) with over 20 years of experience working in youth participation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

The internal QATSICPP steering group clarified that the project was focused on the voices of children and young people and their involvement at an organisational and systemic level rather than an individual case level. QATSICPP had already developed the QATSICPP Practice Standards providing guidance for individual case work with children, young people and families.

The steering group then developed a Solid Voices of Tomorrow project plan which detailed key actions, phases of work and timeframes. We had yarns about what knowledge we would draw on to

produce the guide, and the ways we would draw on this knowledge, including the best approaches for engaging young people and supporting them to be active co-creators of the resource.

To inform this work the project consultant conducted a review of relevant published knowledge on the topic. Also, during this lead in time, an initial safety and support plan was developed for the project which identified safety risks for participants and staff in the Solid Voices of Tomorrow project. The safety and support plan outlines a strategy to mitigate risks and promote safety in the project, including a pathway for response to issues that had the potential to arise for young people. Key elements of this plan included:

- providing trauma informed training relevant to conducting groups and individual discussions with young people to QATSICPP project team to assist staff to identify and have positive and culturally sound responses to trauma based behaviours and experiences
- ensuring young people have access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff on the project team to raise worries/issues with
- developing a template for individual safety and support plans, which would be used to guide and record important conversations with young people about potential safety issues and responses as they were onboarded to the project group.





Finding and engaging young people

Considering the existing evidence and our own collective knowledge of what works, the steering group came up with the following approach to promoting the project to young people:

- using young people friendly language
- adopting a youthful and accessible layout in promotional material
- photos and bio of the QATSICPP project leaders the young people would be working with on this project, recognising the importance of visual messaging and relationship building to our young people
- clear messaging about the benefits of participating and what would be expected from the young people
- including a “Frequently Asked Questions” page to accompany the Expression of Interest (EOI) form.

We decided to use some of the project resources to ensure that the young people were paid for participating in the project. We decided on a total amount with instalments to be paid at different stages of the project. In addition to the financial incentive, we highlighted other benefits to young people from being involved, including the ability to participate in events and develop confidence and leadership skills.

The steering group decided that engaging between 10 and 15 young people in the project would be an ideal and manageable group size for relationship building, as well as fit within budget for remunerating young people for their participation.

An EOI process was developed to select young people based on:

- their interest and passion in the topic
- the potential impact or benefit the project could have on their lives
- our aim to engage a diverse range of young people from across Queensland.

QATSICPP promoted the opportunity to be involved in the project exclusively through QATSICPP member organisations, community controlled organisations across Queensland, which created an additional layer of safety and support for young people that chose to engage. QATSICPP distributed promotional material to members via email, website, phone and face to face contact. Young people were encouraged to apply through a brief online application form, or by completing the EOI over the phone with a QATSICPP staff member.

In shortlisting our applicants, we sought to engage a diverse range of young people in the project, representations from different country across Queensland, different ages, genders and experiences. At the same time, we sought to balance the need for diversity with the need to have a group small enough to build connections with and foster connections between each other.

Once the EOI process closed, the steering group selected 16 young people from a total of 19 EOIs. We then proceeded to onboard the young people to the project which included:

- having verbal or in person conversations with the young person and/or their parent/carer/ teacher to confirm their interest in being part of the project, to clarify the purpose of the project, their expectations and the support they might need to take part.
- having safety and support discussions with young people to guide QATSICPP in creating a safe and positive experience of the project for young people and determining any further training and resources that staff might need to support young people effectively.
- completing consent forms and obtaining important information about the young people such as allergies, medical conditions etc.

Of the 16 young people originally invited to be part of the project, two young people declined in the very early stages due to competing priorities and not having sufficient time and energy to devote to the project.



In deciding how best to engage young people in the early stages of the project, the QATSICPP steering group reviewed what we had learned about the young people through the onboarding process and identified that:

- whilst interested in speaking up, the vast majority of the young people had not participated in a project like this before
- some young people indicated they felt much more comfortable speaking up in one-on-one conversations as opposed to groups
- none of the young people had prior experience, and little knowledge, of QATSICPP's work.

These insights shaped our initial engagement approach to the young people. It was decided that a mixture of consistent and regular individual and group discussions would be used to build rapport with the young people and ease them into the project and sharing their knowledge.

To allow for better relationship building and reduce nerves associated with speaking in a large group, it was decided to reduce the group size further by the splitting the original group of 14 into a North Queensland group with eight participants and a Central/South Queensland group with six participants.

The project did not have enough resources to bring the young people together face to face for every project meeting, so it was decided that regular catch ups on Zoom would be used to initially 'break the ice' with the young people and introduce them to each other, as well as to establish the purpose and nature of the Solid Voices guide we wanted to produce through the project.

These initial Zoom meetings, held in September and October 2021, featured numerous games, quizzes and other relationship building activities that helped lead in to the next phase of the project; coming together in-person for Knowledge Circles that would help build the Solid Voices of Tomorrow guide.

Supporting and resourcing young people

In November 2021, QATSICPP hosted two Solid Voices of Tomorrow Knowledge Circles with young people. The south/central Queensland group event was held in Brisbane at Jagera Arts Hall and the north Queensland group event was held in Cairns, hosted by Wuchopperen Health Service Ltd. The purpose of the event was to:

- increase connection between the project group
- gather young people's knowledge about speaking up and having a voice in a culturally safe and supportive space
- build the young people's advocacy and leadership skills and introduce them to organisations and individuals who could provide them opportunities beyond the life of the project.

For both events QATSICPP organised travel and accommodation for young people (and where young people were under 18, their parent or carer) to enable them to participate in the event.

The day began with a Welcome to Country from traditional owners, followed by some 'getting to know you' activities. The facilitator (an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander QATSICPP staff member) then guided young people through an activity asking them to think and speak about an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander leader they identify with and how they use their voice/have their voice heard – the young people could choose their own person or were supplied some options to choose from: a number of young people chose family members.

Following these activities, the group discussed a number of critical topics;

- How can organisations and staff best engage and support young people in speaking up and address barriers to them using their voice?
- Who is best to engage and support children and young people to have a voice?
- When do young people feel safest and strongest to participate?



- What do young people want 'having a say' to look like?
- What should and shouldn't workers at community controlled organisations do to help young people speak up?
- How organisations and workers could make sure that when young people are participating, that it is safe for them.
- How to make speaking up a positive experience that children and young people get something out of and want to continue to do.

Scenarios were also used as a way of exploring these questions and providing tangible examples of what some young people found to be quite an abstract concept. These scenarios were tailored to the location of the Knowledge Circle and some different scenarios were added to the agenda after the first Knowledge Circle in Brisbane to make sure they were examples young people could relate to.

The second half of the day was focused on developing young people's advocacy and leadership skills. Queensland Family and Child Commissioner (QFCC) Natalie Lewis joined the group and talked about her role, her own journey as an advocate and opportunities for young people to have their voice heard with the QFCC.

Young people talked to Commissioner Lewis about the important issues for young people in their community and how these could be addressed. Following, Jessie Williams from the Queensland Indigenous Youth Leadership program joined the group to talk about what the program involved, the positive impact it had and how the young people could apply.

All of the young people involved in both Knowledge Circles were positive about the experience, commenting on the casual atmosphere and the fact they had met on Zoom a couple of times before the day as helping with their nerves around meeting new people face to face. QATSICPP staff reflected that in instances where young people had to travel to attend the Knowledge Circles, the incidental

time spent together (airport pick-ups, dinner night before, breakfast etc) allowed stronger connections to develop between young people and staff.

Following the Knowledge Circles, QATSICPP wrote up summaries of what each group had told us and then held follow up Zoom catch ups with each group in December 2021 to check the accuracy of what we had recorded and ask if the young people had additional comments to make on what had been said. These Zoom catch ups continued to feature games and quizzes focused on the young people developing connections and having fun. After the accuracy of QATSICPP's notes from the Knowledge Circle were confirmed with the young people and additional comments gathered, the project consultant began the first draft of the Solid Voices of Tomorrow resource.

In January 2022 the project team decided to merge the North and South Queensland groups, confident that the young people had built strong enough connections in their original group to meet some new people. QATSICPP also recognised that it would be more effective for young people to make decisions about and have ownership over the Solid Voices project and guide as one large group.

During this time and moving forward, multiple meetings on the same topics were held to fit in with the different times different young people were available. In some instances where young people were unable to attend group catch ups, QATSICPP staff had one on one conversations with young people to get their input and feedback.

The unified Solid Voices project group then met on Zoom in February and March 2022 to:

- review and refine the Solid Voices of Tomorrow guide
- brainstorm and discuss how the guide should look and how young people could contribute to the creative process
- continue to introduce young people to leadership opportunities where they could use their voice and contribute to their community.



Alongside this engagement with the core project group of young people, QATSICPP also sought feedback from other young people on key topics explored in the guide. This included a yarn with members of the Townsville Transitions to Success group and one on one discussions with three young people with a care experience that project group members had existing connections with.

In February 2022, QATSICPP began reaching out to its member organisations for examples of their work in this area to potentially include in the guide. The project group decided we were at a stage of being able to yarn with QATSICPP Members and come together to share knowledge about this important issue. We saw the guidance and input of QATSICPP Members from around the state as crucial to helping us make a resource that will be useful, inspire new approaches and lead to positive change.

The objectives of the Knowledge Circle were to:

- allow young people, who participated in the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Project, an opportunity to present and discuss their collective voice and opinions with QATSICPP Members.
- allow QATSICPP members an opportunity to reflect on key findings from the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Project and discuss ways their organisations can improve in areas of youth engagement, and the development and delivery of policy, programs and activities for young people in locations where they operate.
- strengthen the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Guide through the sharing of wisdom, knowledge and lived experiences of young people and QATSICPP member organisations.

QATSICPP engaged Grant Sarra, a well-respected Elder and facilitator with considerable previous experience of similar events, to facilitate the Knowledge Circle and assist to prepare young people for their participation.

Preparation included discussions with young people about what the day should look like, how they wanted to be involved and how to prepare themselves to make sure they had a positive experience. Young people travelled from around

Queensland to Brisbane to participate in the Knowledge Circle and took part in various social activities including a dinner with Grant the night before the event.

In late April 2022, QATSICPP was delighted to have eight of our member organisations from a diverse range of locations across Queensland represented at the Knowledge Circle, as well as nine of the young people who are part of our Solid Voices of Tomorrow project group.

The day started with a heartfelt Welcome to Country from Yuggera Elder Aunty Debbie Sandy who stayed with us throughout the day contributing powerful knowledge and advice to our conversations. Next, we had an inspiring presentation from the young people who participated in the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Project over the past seven months. The young people talked about:

- what motivates them to speak up, barriers and how to overcome them
- their advice on the various avenues organisations can provide for young people to have a voice in service development, and how youth can be engaged in meaningful and ongoing ways
- their expectations of how their voices and ideas would be utilised, and the importance of keeping them informed about how their ideas have inspired innovation and improvements to service provision and policy.

Following the young people's presentation QATSICPP members and staff reflected on key findings from the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Project and considered and discussed ways their organisations can improve in areas of youth engagement. Each of the 32 people who participated on the day did so with great warmth and mutual support, creating a memorable event that showcased the powerful and exciting things that can happen when young adults come together and share knowledge with staff. In the second half of the day, one of the young people took on a co-facilitation role after an invitation from Grant and the feedback on this was resoundingly positive.





At the end of the day, QATSICPP yarned to the young people about their experiences. The young people all agreed it was a good experience, with many commenting that being able to share knowledge with Elders, leaders and other adults in particular made them feel strong and motivated to continue to speak up about important issues.

Following the event, outcomes from the day were documented and provided to participants, as well as used to further inform the Solid Voices of Tomorrow Guide.



Taking Action

The next task for QATSICPP is to promote this resource and apply its knowledge to our work. Moving forward, guided by advice from young people, we will focus on:

- promoting this resource at various sector events, including upcoming QATSICPP conferences featuring discussions led by young people involved with the project.
- working with QATSICPP Members in implementing the guide— seeking young people’s indirect/direct involvement in this process.
- using the guide to inform future QATSICPP projects and initiatives.

In the final stages of the project QATSICPP has been focusing on providing practical support to the young people and linking them with future leadership opportunities. All young people involved in the project have been provided employment reference letters and a certificate recognising their involvement. Some of the young people were supported to apply for and were accepted for the 2022 Indigenous Youth Leadership program. A number have been linked with the Queensland Family and Child Commission’s Youth Advocate and Youth Advisory Council programs, and some will contribute to the co-design of the Breaking Cycles Action Plan 2023-25 being led by QATSICPP, Family Matters Queensland and Queensland Government.

QATSICPP gives our heartfelt thanks to the young people and staff who shared part of themselves to contribute to the project. We want to acknowledge the 14 young people who participated with such positivity, mutual respect and care for each other and who were brave enough to share their important insights without which the guide you are now reading would not have been possible.





Solid Voices of Tomorrow

Artwork by Dyan Mooney

The Indigenous and LGBTQI+ communities are resilient peoples that are thriving and growing. Through so much adversity, we have overcome all the obstacles that have been thrown at us, and we will keep empowering each other and grow in strength for a better future for us.

I'm interested in the ways in which we can reframe the conversation around some of the voices that have been left out. The digital portrait I've made for Solid Voices echoes the work of the organisation, and illustrates my personal experience as a proud queer Indigenous man. Identity and representation are brought together, and subjects stand proudly and defiantly, gazing out at the viewer.



Voices of Nature

Artwork by Anne-Marie Keating

Nature provides great examples of solid voices which I have depicted through birds, as follows:

The piercing cry of the wedgetail eagle which alarms and is mighty,
The emanating laughter of the family orientated kookaburra who chats with those nearby,

The melodic songs of the magpie ever enchanting,

The decorative bower bird whose cleverness can mimic many sounds,

The chatter of the rainbow lorikeet which overwhelm when in large groups,

The echoing cry of the black cockatoo that carry on the wind,

The willie wagtail who dances and chirps happily and whose friend is the mud lark with piercing peeps but together will chase off any unwelcomed visitors large or small.

The colours behind the birds speak to the different types of ways to speak: yellow – timid, purple – bold, light pink – nicely, grey – sad, brown – calmly, violet – cheeky, orange – funny, light orange – shy.

The lines surrounding the birds are from light to dark symbolizing the strengthening of one's voice and the dots surrounding the birds symbolize finding and using our voice.





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