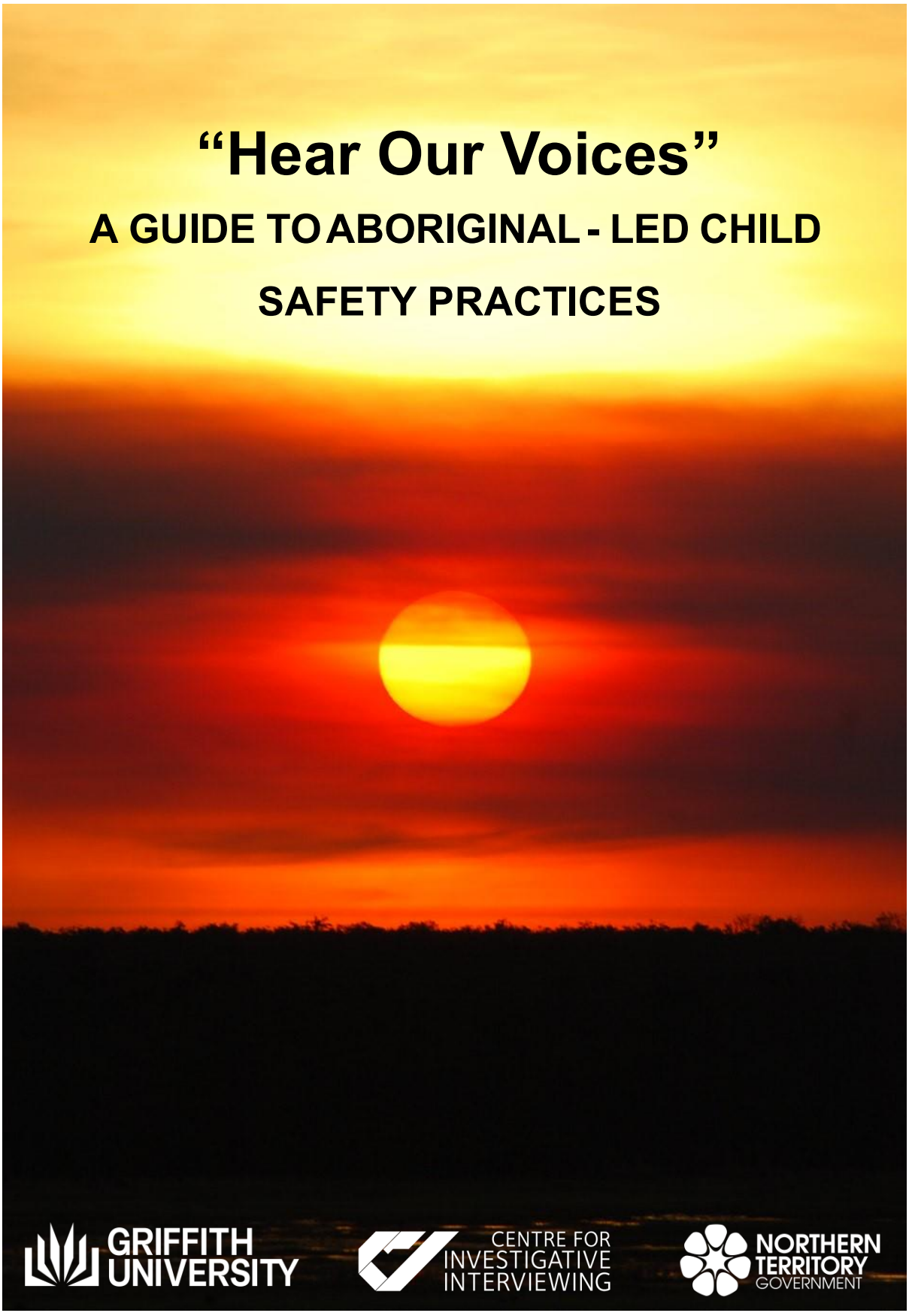
“Hear Our Voices”

A GUIDE TO ABORIGINAL - LED CHILD SAFETY PRACTICES



GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWING

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A GUIDE TO ABORIGINAL-LED CHILD SAFETY PRACTICES

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WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following guide may contain words of deceased persons.

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An Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP200200976) collaboration between Griffith University and Territory Families Housing and Communities.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations 5
Regional identifications 5
Documenting Aboriginal practice in child safety 6
About the PAIR Project 7
How we identified Aboriginal practice in child safety 7
Interviewing and engaging with children 8
Aboriginal child safety practices 10
Aboriginal child safety knowledges 10
Connection and trust are foundational 12
Connection and trust with families 14
Connection and trust with children 15
What's different or unique about Aboriginal practices? 15
Aboriginal practice skills/strategies when engaging with children 17
Reflections and challenges: Aboriginal practices in supporting each other 36
Conclusion 38
Selected references 39

Abbreviations

ACSC	Aboriginal Cultural Security Committee
ACW	Aboriginal Community Worker
APA	Aboriginal Practice Advisor
ARC	Australian Research Council
ARW	Aboriginal Remote Worker
NT	Northern Territory
PAIR	Practitioners Adapting Interviews Research (this project)
TFHC	Territory Families Housing & Communities (now the Territory Department of Children & Families)

Regional identifications

BAR	Barkly Region
BR	Big Rivers Region
CR	Central Region
DR	Darwin Region
TE	Top End Region

Documenting Aboriginal practice in child safety

This document describes Aboriginal practice[1] within the Northern Territory (NT) in engaging children to promote their safety. It builds on the expertise and experiences of Aboriginal staff[2] employed by Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC)[3] as child protection practitioners, community workers and remote workers. This expertise was identified in a collaborative project between these Aboriginal staff and researchers from Griffith University (Queensland). The project evolved from the TFHC commitment to "Aboriginal staff being at the centre of the Signs of Safety implementation"; that is, a commitment to the participative leadership of Aboriginal staff.[4]

The learning about Aboriginal-led practices is shared for the partnership of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff in TFHC working to help grow strong, proud and safe children in the Territory. All quotations in this document are provided anonymously as per the research ethics protocol (Griffith Reference No. 2022/289 and Menzies Reference No. 2022-4318). Quotes from the group discussions give a regional designation. Co-producers and the TFHC Aboriginal Cultural Security Committee all agreed that this was important. Many co-producers observed the regional differences in practices as well as the similarities.

[1] We use the terms Aboriginal practice and Aboriginal-led practice. Either can be used depending on the context.

[2] Aboriginal staff in TFHC describe themselves collectively as *Aboriginal*. The collective name is also used throughout TFHC policy and procedures. Aboriginal staff working in the regions additionally refer to themselves using their respective language names.

[3] Now the Territory (NT) Department of Children and Families.

[4] This commitment also rests on a strategy to grow and develop the Aboriginal workforce (for example, see Bamblett, Bath & Rose, 2010, Chapter 12).

About the PAIR Project

The research collaboration was part of a larger 3-year TFHC partnership with Griffith University funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Called *Practitioners Adapting Interviews Research (PAIR)*, the project sought to:

- Contribute to practitioner-led evolution of child protection and support that is responsive to the needs of Territory children, families and communities;
- Create a practitioner-led framework for adapting engagement with and interviewing of children that draws on the experience, skills and knowledge of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners;
- Contribute to staff capabilities in asking good questions of children to improve the quality of information-gathering upon which to make good decisions; and
- Contribute to the strengthening of staff mentoring and capacity-building within TFHC.[5]

How we identified Aboriginal practice in child safety

This project worked under the guidance of the (then) TFHC Elder-in-Residence, Dr Christine Fejo-King, the Senior Aboriginal Practice Advisor, Denella Detourbet, the TFHC Aboriginal Cultural Security Committee (ACSC), and the regional Aboriginal Practice Advisors (APA).

We used a practice-led and Aboriginal-guided approach where the Aboriginal staff were co-producers of knowledge (Bessarab & Crawford, 2010; Oates & Malthouse, 2021).[6] In a first step, one-to-one interviews were conducted with 23 Aboriginal staff located in five of the six administrative regions in the NT. Staff were Child Protection Practitioners, Aboriginal Practice Advisors (APA), Aboriginal Community Workers (ACW), and Aboriginal Remote Workers (ARW). Each person volunteered their expertise and received their interview transcript to review and change. In the second step, an analysis of all interviews together was brought back to mostly the same staff

[5] This document only uses the work contributed by Aboriginal co-producers within the PAIR Project.

[6] In the final stages of producing this document, preferences for a term to describe their contributions and knowledges were specifically discussed with participating staff. Co-producers was the chosen term.

to check if it was ‘right’ and for people to add or remove anything. Discussions about the analysis were conducted in a small group format (one per region with 2 in one region and one combining two regions, N=5 groups). Both these steps also rested on reflective practice, an approach that is central to all human service work (Australian Association of Social Work, 2010). In a third step, this document was provided to each of the co-producers for further clarification, change and agreement. Lastly, the draft document was discussed and finalized with contributing Aboriginal Practice Advisors.

Overall, this iterative process aligns with principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. In particular, it aligns with principles stipulating that data (knowledge, expertise and information) be accessible; relevant for sustainable self-determination and effective self-governance, accountability, respect for individual and collective interests; and that it empowers Indigenous decision-making in ways that meet their needs and aspirations (Prehn & Walters, 2023: 372-373).

Interviewing and engaging with children

The overall research project was conceived as an inquiry into how child protection staff in TFHC adapted the guidelines for good practice interviewing of children. Interviewing is a method of gathering information with an emphasis on asking ‘good’ questions, specifically open-ended questions with fewer specific ones (Brubacher et al., 2024). The structure of the interview comprises (broadly) an introductory greeting, conversational rules, narrative practice, the topic of concern, eliciting narrative, follow-up questions, and closure (Powell & Brubacher, 2020).

Interviewing is commonly conceived as a time-specific and formal encounter conducted with a child in a specific closed location under some prescribed conditions. The purpose and conditions of the interview are set within a legislative and procedural framework prescribed by the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* (NT). Within the NT and at the time of this project, this investigative interviewing is conducted by a Child Abuse Taskforce comprising both police and child protection practitioners. The interviewing is police-led.

However, as many of the Aboriginal co-producers pointed out, they were more likely to *engage* with children rather than formally interview them, although some did interviews with children, and all certainly gathered (and shared) information. They did so by asking questions, observing, being present, and doing activities. In the one-to-one interviews with Aboriginal staff conducted for this project, they primarily described having or building a *relationship* with a child such that the child might (presently and/or in future) talk with them about a concern or problem. As said by one discussion group (BR), "this [building connection] is different work to doing a [formal] interview".[7] A focus on the child's safety creates a larger frame around the narrower focus on child protection.

From a safety perspective, TFHC commenced the implementation of the Signs of Safety Framework in 2019 (Turnell & Edwards, 1997). This framework "aims to empower parents, families and communities to focus on increasing children's safety through engagement and decision-making with parents and their networks." It is,

> "a strength-based perspective and appreciation that families are the experts in their lives rather than the professionals. It is an approach that recognizes the importance of building collaborative partnerships, listening deeply to children and families, and establishing shared goals to work towards." (TFHC, February 2022).

Situating Aboriginal staff practice within these approaches for this project also assumed a strength-based, relational and appreciative perspective with a keen commitment to "listening deeply to children and families". The involvement of Aboriginal staff with the project showed they were more comfortable with the idea of *engaging with* children. Therefore, what follows is a description of Aboriginal practices of engaging with children by and for Aboriginal staff. It is not a description of Aboriginal parenting or child-rearing practice. It is not about child protection per se. This document is about Aboriginal professional practice.

[7] All quotes come from interviews or focus group discussions. Some have been slightly edited for clarity.

Aboriginal child safety practices

At its simplest level, 'practice' comprises things done in specific situations. Within social service systems such as child protection, practice is underpinned by multiple legislative, policy and practice imperatives. As such,

> Practice is configured through formal guidance, legislation, documentation conventions, practice protocols, norms and cultures enforce and reinforce how organisations respond to service users and other organisations.

For TFHC, both adaption of practice to local contexts and development of Aboriginal practice are extremely pertinent to its current and future work (for Queensland see Morgan et al., 2023; for Victoria see Long & Sephton, 2011).

The Aboriginal co-producers who contributed their practice to this guide were each very connected to place and people; that is, to *their* place and *their* people. This document attempts to highlight some ways in which the Aboriginal staff drew on their place and people in their practices as professionals. These influences bring a deeper understanding to the idea of *practices*. This understanding is highly contextualized. For example, the writing of Gudanji / Wakaja author, Deborah Dank, expands Aboriginal *practice* as non-linear ways of understanding time and space in narrative and living.[8] Individually and in the discussion groups, people did emphasize how families were different, communities were different, and language groups were different. This document primarily describes what Aboriginal workers share of their practices and approaches amongst each other across the Northern Territory.

Aboriginal child safety knowledges

For the Aboriginal co-producers, their *practices* with children and families drew on several influences and knowledge sources. These included their lived experience as Aboriginal people, their cultural and social knowledge and experiences, community expectation and protocols, their knowledge and experience of past 'welfare' practices and the contemporary impact of these, the institutional frameworks in place in TFHC

[8] See https://www.sbs.com.au/audio/podcast-episode/debra-danks-stories-of-outback-aboriginal-life-are-an-ode-to-country/d20vsy0oi [retrieved 4 July 2024]

and associated training, their learned disciplinary knowledge (as social workers or community workers for example), and institutional knowledges gained from other workplaces (for example, in education, health and youth work).

While it is common to talk about *two-way learning* in the NT,[9] the Aboriginal staff in this project drew on many knowledge sources including their lived experience, their professional and disciplinary knowledge, the experience and knowledge gained within TFHC and other workplaces, and their knowledge of kin, country and culture. The regional groups talked about how using this range of knowledge sources could be described. In group discussions, we considered the notion of *braiding* that is used by some Native American writers such as Robin Kimmerer from the Potawatomi Nation and a botanist in the western world. She writes that

> In braiding sweetgrass – so that it is smooth, glossy and worthy of the gift – a certain amount of tension is needed. … you have to pull a bit … it is not mine to give, nor yours to take … So I offer, in its place, a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. This braid is woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service of what matters most. (Kimmerer 2013)

Some of the groups liked the notion of braiding saying that it fitted with their experiences of "crossover cultural business" (BR). We did not settle on one way of describing. Some ways of talking about their knowledges included:

> All ways learning.
> Helping and having more of a say
> We do gathering: gathering in groups, in knowledge, our experiences
>
> *Kngarra* ("many, lots of" in Western Arrernte)[10]
>
> *Paru maja ku yimi* ("many knowledges" in Walpiri)
>
> The hair string is similar to North American 'braiding'. We roll it, make it long, make it stretch. It can be hair or sinews. This word is *witiji* (Walpiri)

[9] Much of the literature and research focuses on "two-way learning" in education. For example, see the edited collection by Purdie, Milgate & Bell (2012).

[10] All words in language were written down at the time of speaking and the spelling and meaning checked with the speaker.

Both ways
Connected, collective

Learning *jungu* (two ways) (Western Arrente)
It's never ending
Learn from mistakes
Learn by doing it
Looking, watching, gathering, speaking, drawing, dance & song, acting/copy, over and over

This Practice Guide brings together these many knowledges and the ways of describing them. It builds from Aboriginal practices identified by Aboriginal staff. The guide is designed to develop practice and to mentor future TFHC staff, especially Aboriginal workers in **Aboriginal-led Practice**. The guide also contributes to the work of non-Aboriginal staff. It is not everything and should be read alongside the following TFHC policies and resources:

- Aboriginal Practice Leadership Framework: Signs of Safety Principles (nd);
- Resource Guide: Implementing the Aboriginal Cultural Security Framework in Child Protection Practice (February 2022); and
- Practice Guide: Aboriginal Customs, Ceremonies and Community Protocols (2015).

Connection and trust are foundational

Central to all Aboriginal practice in engaging with children were ideas about connection and trust. These were overlapping ideas that formed the bedrock to the practice of all co-producers involved in this project and were reiterated in the discussion groups. Connection and trust pre-existed, almost by virtue of *being* Aboriginal in child protection work.

[Central Region, CR-1]: [Building connection is] being Aboriginal, seeing locals, being local.
[Barkly Region, BAR]: We know what's happening in communities. We know what's happening.
[Central Region, CR-2]: We are *one community,* and we have culture, and we are all different. We are connected by skin and culture and law (*nturlang*). Not only this one but [we have] connections all over.
[CR-2]: We are known to the community. We have family connection. *Being known is number* 1, living here.
[CR-1]: We live it, we breathe it. It's a bonus

> **[Darwin-Top End Regions, DR-TE]**: Identifying myself as Aboriginal – "my mob from xxx" – this breaks down the formality.

As such, Aboriginal staff emphasise that connection and trust need to be sustained and nurtured as essential to Aboriginal practice. It is "being steady" (CR-2), giving back (BAR) and "just say[ing] hi" (CR-1). It is also knowing "how to hold the space [between their TFHC role and being an Aboriginal community member]" (DR-TE).

> **BAR**: If you go out on a regular basis, that's building connection. People get to know you – "where have you been?!" Or you just stand at the shop and people come to you! This is different work to doing an interview and building connection.
> **[Big Rivers Region, BR]**: Find common ground [each time]
> **CR-2**: Have consistency of people. We have 10 years of being steady.
> **BAR**: We give back to the community. We give things they need. We never ask for anything in return. We help those who need it.
> **CR-1**: Take time and energy. Be consistent – the person, with follow-up, with backup.
> **BR**: we go out to all the families.

All the co-producers acknowledged that this capability needs to be maintained within a longer history of Aboriginal people with 'the Welfare' and the implications of that history.

> **DR-TE**: Urban kids who are disconnected from family and mob feel bad for not knowing [their connections]. We take care not to make them feel bad.
> **BR**: I say I come from Territory Families; or sometimes just Families. Sometimes I say I'm from Welfare because then they understand. They might [also] say "oh, you're Welfare, then f_ off". It depends how long we have been engaged with someone. There are many levels.
> **BAR**: We get down to their level. Never do notes. If you have to do notes, then be open and show what you are writing.

Given this context, the co-producers emphasised a range of ways to maintain connection. Part of this included managing "the space" (DR-TE) between their profession and a degree of informality with family and child engagements and preparation for these. Within this space, many workers also agreed they "don't talk with white man's jargon" (**BAR**).

CR-1: We're there for the job but you don't want to jump out of the 4WD as if you're doing a job … Show this family some respect. No gossip.
BAR: Ceremonies and sorry business are serious. We get into trouble if Child Protection Practitioners goes in when there is sorry business. Show respect. We get into trouble, and they [families] tell us we should know better.
BR: You are there to do a job. So sometimes you cannot make the family feel comfortable. Some people have just had enough. There have been 5 generations [of troubles] and they are just not going to be made 'comfortable' with you.
CR-1: It's important to prep before you go out. "What are we going out for?" We need information in advance. Everything can go pear-shaped very quickly. Some situations can go quickly to being unsafe for workers.

Given the depth of the connection, Aboriginal staff can carry multiple obligations: "we have lots of roles" (CR-2). Said one group, "we don't blame. It comes back on us if you [non-Aboriginal staff] speak rough" (CR-1).

Connection and trust with families

Having 'connection' is considered foundational to Aboriginal practice – connection to communities and to being Aboriginal and all these entails. In addition, co-producers grounded this in day-to-day practice with families as about knowing "everything".

BAR: We fight [for our mob] all the time – day in and day out.
CR-1: Know the family history. Everything and every little thing.
BR: Weigh up everything – communication, body language, the topic, the environment. It's huge.

Practically, making and sustaining connection with families was about "finding commonality … sharing common ground" (DR-TE). It was "doing kind stuff" (BR), taking "little steps [and doing] a little extra" (CR-1), and "try to help, be working together" (CR-2). Making and sustaining connection can withstand that "they might give us a blast" (BAR). Trust was also about what not to do: "Don't go in cocky or speaking down. This happens too much" (CR-1).

Central to sustaining connection and trust with families is the Aboriginal staff knowledge of, and commitment to, kinship and family networks.

CR-2: Families have to be invited to have connection. We are sisters and brothers, but we have to find out how.
CR-2: Be special for our own families, to show them.

> **BAR**: We try to help re-unify kids with families, in kinship care… we look for similarity – "you're family too".
> **BR:** Culture is very significant. It brings in the ACW [Aboriginal Community Worker] and how are you going to address it.
> **CR-1**: Joining the dots of connections and family.

Workers in one region (**BR**) said this knowledge helps them to "see": "oh, that grandmother looks after all those kids, and then we see. It's a lot easier for kinship". Further, "It's important to gather this information before a crisis. It helps us know what and who is safe or unsafe".

On *trust* itself, the co-producers said it was about "being honest [and] following through with what you say" (CR-2). But also, trust was being "consistent – the person, with follow-up, with backup" (CR-1).

Connection and trust with children

For the Aboriginal co-producers that live and work in smaller communities, many reflected on kids knowing them "since they were babies [and] they know they can come to me" (BAR). Children come and talk, "they tell us some secrets. Then we say 'I've got to tell someone now. Is it ok that I tell someone your story?' They tell us because they know we have to tell someone else" (CR-2).

Some people saw the sustaining of connection with children as also creating safety: "we'll feed them, we'll care for them, their cousins and their friends. We are safe people … They know we are safe. They might give us a blast" (BAR).

What's different or unique about Aboriginal practices?

At the end of their individual interviews, the Aboriginal co-producers were asked if there was 'anything that you do or say as a practitioner who is Aboriginal that might be different to a non-Aboriginal practitioner?' Many comments revolved around bringing their additional lived experience and knowledge as an Aboriginal person to their work and how this deepened their insights and practices. Said one, "I just have an awareness and a deeper understanding … I am thinking about all these other elements" (19CP). And another commented that for "a lot of Aboriginal practitioners

or Aboriginal case managers, it's just a lived thing. You just know that it comes back to that spirituality as well. I find it a bit hard to explain but it's that thing inside" (05CP).

This sense of working with "my people" then brought ways of *positioning* themselves as workers alongside families where "it doesn't matter what tribe I am and skin" (23CP). This enabled staff to "work in both worlds, professional and cultural" (06CP). But working with "my people" also meant workers could draw on connections. Said one person, "[I] often say my name is ___. That's my skin name and so they'll identify and say you're my brother cultural ways or you're my sister cultural ways and so that's when we will sit down and talk about it. I think it's gaining trust" (08CP). Having connections then required respect. As one group commented, "It's more cultural-based the cultural sensitivity how you speak how you present yourself and how to get the message across … You respect - build that rapport with them first" (FGD). One person reinforced that "it's working at showing that respect because respect, I think, goes a long way and working with families because they suss you out straightaway" (20CP). More broadly, being connected and displaying respect meant "you don't need to push who you are and have that authority. That's police, it's not us. We've got to be nice to people" (04CP).

This positioning as Aboriginal with other Aboriginal people was also practical in terms of enhancing communication and understanding, which was two-way. A number of co-producers reflected that "we talk with our hands and talk with our body" (07CP). And "we just know the facial expressions, the eyes, the body language, and if they don't want to talk to you, they just shut down and they don't talk to you" (20CP). Another person agreed that "I can understand the people and the body language - what they're saying" (09CP).

People felt that their physicality and ways of doing things also added to their practice. A few people mentioned giving more time. Said one, "we like to take our time with the families that we work with" (08CP). One person also said that touching and informality was common for her mob: "this kid - they know me … it's just a natural thing. You just give them a bit of a hug around the shoulders. It doesn't have to be anything but, 'hey how are you going?'" (10CP).

Language was considered to be also important: “We communicate differently. We use a lot of slang words or we might use words from Kriol or something like that” (16CP). One group said, “When we’re speaking our language it’s not like how I’m talking in English” (FGD).

‘Doing extra’ as Aboriginal people in professional practice was also mentioned. In part this was a cultural obligation, in part it was simple kindness, in part it was being respectful, and in part it was just knowing the practical difficulties that many families lived with. One co-producer commented that “We’ll get the Elders to come to the door. ‘Do you want a lift?’ ‘Can you take us to the shop?’ We’ll chuck them in the car and drop them off and then we’ll see a parent who went shopping and then, ‘Can you give us a lift?’ Yes, chuck it in. So we do them little bits extra rather than just saying, ‘No, we only work when there’s an investigation’” (17CP + 12CP).

Reflecting on this question of what they may do differently as Aboriginal professionals, one person summed up that “having that knowledge, that community base, having got that connection already kinships spread right across, I think that’s the difference, being in that space”.

Aboriginal practice skills/strategies when engaging with children

Aboriginal child safety and community workers shared their expertise and experience. From the one-to-one interviews, we identified 28 micro-level behaviours, skills, or strategies mentioned by co-producers. We then talked about these in small group discussions within the 5 regions. We set out the combined expertise and knowledge firstly with the question that prompted the information. The left column is the skill or strategy, and the right column is an example given by the Aboriginal co-producers. Some of the strategies, like making connections (with community, family and children), we have already described. The skills and strategies have been divided into five sections:

1. Getting Ready
2. Beginning
3. Helping the Child
4. Getting to the Child's Concern/Problem
5. Reflections & Challenges

1. Getting Ready

Before you talk with the child or see the child, here are some of the things you might be doing or thinking to help you get ready.	
Obtain background about the child and family before the interview	Every situation is different, all children are different in their own rights. We have to look at the different environments that they're into, whether it's remote, rural, or an urban environment, and where the setting is too, in terms of whether it's at the school, at home, or in a park. We've got to take all those matters into account (02CP) I will look at the family tree and get an idea of whether I know the family or not. I regularly visit certain communities and there are times where I'm working with kids that have come from that community and I've got relationships with the family groups. I usually check to give me an idea of which family I'm working with (16CP) I do case mapping with the family and the network of the family, because with Indigenous people the family is not just mother and father. It [the family] is very extended, so we always try and get them all together (03CP) The young fellas, they go and be men starting from the age of 10. To Aboriginal people, they're men. Parents can't say anything because they're grown up, they've been through traditional law, they're men – But to us [in child safety] they're still only little kids so we have to treat them like little kids but then we have to give them the respect of the law and culture part (09CP) The [interview] location ... If kids are going to school, I try not to talk to them at the school cause, you don't wanna make it like they're remembering it because the people come to interview them. In some communities, the local police would go around and see them or bring them to the police station. We'll talk to them there so people didn't know we were talking to the family, because that impacts on the investigation, or sometimes it will just stop a family from talking (18CP)

Consult as a team (e.g., who should do the interview, what do we need to consider)	If the child is Aboriginal, ACW [Aboriginal Community Worker] should speak first (BR) Have a conversation before you go. Identify any risks. We get all types of families. We get aggressive people, we get abusive people, all of that, and we get really good people. Having that background before you go in gives the practitioner a bit of an idea about how to manage or how to deal with the family. (10CP) We've got to work with what we're worried about as well, and what needs to happen - next steps. We identify times that the family have stepped in and kept the children safe without any intervention from us or anybody else. We try and get a whole picture, not just about that one incident because sometimes it can be more, and identify the strengths [of the family] (10CP) I sit down with the case managers and we go through the intakes, just break it down and pull out the main stuff that we need to talk about because, I know with Aboriginal people, if you start talking about this, this, and this it will bring back, like, "No I don't want to talk about that" and they just want to leave that in the past. Even with kids that we talk to, you mention something to them [and] they shutdown really quick so that's why we sit and break it down: we ask ourselves, "Is this a good question to ask? Is that okay to ask them?, How can we change this sentence or this question so they can understand without saying any big words or anything like that?" (11CP)
Build a connection with community	You need to be aware of family all around you [when you are in a small community]. Don't go full force in. Some workers don't have filters. (BR) If you go out on a regular basis, that's building connection. People get to know you – "Where have you been?!" (BR) Or you just stand at the shop and people come to you! This is different work to doing an interview and building connection (BR)

	Yes, for my practice I try to always bring the case managers. I feel like it's more important that they also build a good rapport with them [kids and families] as well, especially in the sort of contacts when it's about community and culture and family they have to do face-to-face visits every so many weeks. It would help them as well with their relationship building (16CP) The majority of our remote teams are all onboard with the whole thing [of wanting to understand Aboriginal cultures]. It's like taking them under our wing. They ask us questions – What's right? What's wrong? Can we ask this person this question? Can we ask that person that question? Are we allowed to talk to this person? (06CP). There is a certain way you should behave in community: not dressing so fancy [or] wearing very loose clothing, understanding that as a woman you shouldn't appear in a certain way because it might be looked at differently by certain elders in the community or anyone really. Just having that respect when you're out there (16CP) Body language as well, cultural protocols: not directly giving eye contact to men or certain men in particular. I have that understanding. I try to teach that to some of the workers that I work with as well before going out. Just understanding certain practices that happen out there in community (16CP)
Build (or have existing) connection with family first	We look at the strengths within the family. We're trying to stick in the middle column [of Signs of Safety] to try and find out the things we can build on and develop and strengthen within the family (10CP) I will look at the family tree and get an idea of whether I know the family or not, because I regularly visit certain communities and there are times where I'm working with kids that have come from that community and I've got relationships within the family groups. So, I usually check to see if I have some sort of relationship with the family members. (16CP) It's about making engagement. Obviously, we talk to Mum Dad or grandparents or whoever the carers are first before actually going to talk to the child. For me, the first conversation is never,

	"Okay so we've received this referral and it's saying here whatever, whatever". It's always about making a connection first. (05CP) When it comes to a case, I always ask. "Is it okay if I sit in?" You give that option to family. If I am closely related, so if it was my brother or sister, no I wouldn't do it, but like a cousin, or someone you grew up with, or family member, you always get that consent first. You get that consent because they trust you already or they've got that connection already. (07CP) When you're dealing with kids that have nothing or come from a low socioeconomic background, what you don't want to do is behave as you're better than them. You have your flash phone - you put that in your pocket - you don't want to show that. You try to dress down to make them feel comfortable with you in that environment, to help them settle (02CP) When they see us sitting down with families and everything, that's when we get that bond and they'll open up and tell us what we need to know. We just build that trust all the time (11CP) We always let the parents know what our worries are so that they can know and also so that we can start to educate them a bit, because you're not going to change anything if you're just trying to work with the children [in isolation]. The parents need to be in this, and the network, so we try very much to have the whole family there – what's the saying - to bring up a child it needs family or a town, not just one person, and very much that's true with Indigenous people (03CP)

2. **Beginning**

When you first come to meet the child, here are some things to do or say. Sometimes the child might not know why you are talking with them. Here are some ways to help them understand.	
Explain your role	I say I come from Territory Families, or sometimes just Families. Sometimes I say I'm from Welfare because then they understand. They might say, "Oh, you're Welfare, then f_ off" (BR) You just explain who you are, what your job is, and why you're there. Our job is to make sure all children are safe and happy at home and things like that. And then you say we talk to children all the time and we ask children how things are at home (04CP) Just doing that formal introduction: tell them that we're from Territory Families and we're just here to talk to them about worries. (18CP) Sometimes we hide where we work. It's just for the safety of our clients… If they're working, we'll go to their workplace. If they're at home, we just say we're Housing or something like that. It's difficult (11CP)
Ask child permission to chat/to talk to the parents	We always see the parents first and let them know we're going to talk to the children. It's not a surprise and we always get their permission (03CP) So you're asking "Can I talk to you?" and nearly every kid will say yes. Every now and again you'll get one that just won't talk at all but that's very, very rare. Most kids will talk and it's just the way you ask I suppose. (04CP) "Is it okay if maybe we come back tomorrow and talk to you again?" And the kid might say like "Oh okay." Maybe you try to empower them a little bit in that (19CP) I would say "We're here to talk to you about this and this. I'm hoping maybe if you feel open and comfortable if you would like to talk to us about that". I guess I get their permission as well if they're comfortable sitting with me and whoever else is there (16CP)

Ask if child wants someone else in room (e.g., teacher, support person)	If the child preferred to speak only language, then we would get an interpreter to come and help us (06CP) Who would that be? It might be a special teacher they like. (BR)

3. Helping the child

Here are some things that can help the child better want to talk with you. *Notice that there are more skills in this section than any other.*	
Engage in non-directive shared play activity (e.g., colouring), not used as a tool to elicit information	Colouring is the best. They talk better if they are distracted. Keeps their mind off the other stuff. [BR] Sometimes I just sit on the ground and play in the dirt with the sticks and rocks or whatever is there. Basically, kids engage well with that. It's just getting down to their level in their space and thinking, "This is safe, this is good." That's what I do (07CP) I bring colouring-in books and colouring-in pencils so they can colour while they're talking to me so they don't feel so nervous (03CP) The amount of times you sit down the river, even when you're not fishing, you're just down the river, and you grab that stick and you start. It may not be doing a piece of art - you're maybe just doing circles and just moving things around [*It's meditative*?] Then you can use that as a way to talk about what are you drawing and they might say I'm just mucking around, or they write their names (11CP)
	A lot of the times we would do this sort of work with other practitioners, like allied health professionals. We would try to make a relationship before they [the other practitioners] come in - whether it's engaging through family, through sport, through their activities, if they're from a particular community. For example, if we're talking to a family at [location] we may engage with the river and just talk about fishing and just make that relationship (05CP)
Reduce formality-just have a chat	Look at the surroundings and see what's available (e.g., a football, a scooter). "Look at that puppy! What's his name?" (BAR)

	I talk about fishing or hunting. So, making it just a little general conversation with the kid, just trying to open them up saying, “What did you do on the weekend? Did you go fishing? Did you go swimming?” (17CP) I treat it as a normal conversation still. Not to be too serious and too demanding like telling the kid “You have to tell me this. You have to [tell me that].” (12CP)
Talk about what the child likes	Talk about their lives, “What’s your favourite subject at school?” (BR) If they’re not talking, we’ll talk about other stuff just to make them feel a little bit more comfortable - favourite TV programs, sports, things that they like to do (01CP) Yeah, it could be about ...if they're interested in sport, that sort of thing, start making that connection. (18CP) A lot of our young kids are into rap music and pop music and all of that, and you get a lot out of that. You get to know what their favourite song is and [ask], “Why do you like the song? You know them words, what they’re saying?” “Yeah I know what them words are, I know the lyrics, I know what they’re talking about.” You can get a bit of insight. I find that quite interesting. (05CP) Everyone - it doesn’t matter who you are - love talking about themselves. So, don’t ask the hard questions [first]. Do you have a dog? Yes. Brothers and sisters? Where do you live? Who lives with you? Just things that make them feel comfortable (12CP)
Ensure or provide physical comforts (water, food, etc.)	The oldest one, it took a bit of convincing the day before -and that day- to get her in the car and doing her over I suppose I did a bit of bribery by saying I’ll take her to McDonald’s and we’ll get a meal. You can’t go wrong with Macca’s meals, especially with our kids nowadays ..... and she goes, “Well I need some shoes before I get on the plane.” I said, “That’s right,” so we went to Kmart and bought some thongs and a couple of t-shirts (20CP)

Provide emotional comforts: attention/respect/listen/reassure	I definitely let them know they're not in trouble. A stranger coming to them is still a very much a, what am I doing, are you going to take me, sort of thing. I very much try and tell them that they're not in trouble (03CP) We don't want to take you away from Mum and Dad. We're here to help you, we can help you, and then we'll go and talk to Mum and Dad, we'll talk to everybody. Aboriginal kids these days can do anything. They just need someone to show them. Parents sometimes are going through their own trauma, they can't do that, and with a little bit of push and guidance the child might get to do something that they want to do. They can be anything and everything. Try to talk to the parents in a positive way rather than coming to them as welfare (09CP) We always ask [if its ok to talk]. It makes them feel safe. No matter how many times you say, "You're not in trouble", they still think they are. (BR) I think it's just a simple: "No one is in trouble. You're not in trouble, Mum's not in trouble, and it's okay to talk about it" (08CP)
Get on their level (age appropriate/casual dress/language dialect/ physically on their level - sit on the ground)	Talk quieter/softer with little ones Small smile, not big. Sometimes kids are ok with straight out talking, especially the older kids. (BR) What I often do as well, especially if we're at their home and they're non-engagement or they're fiddling on the ground or they're playing with their toys, I will get to their level and I will sit down and do what they're doing. I'll say, "Can I play with you as well? Can I help with your Legos?" (08CP) If they're a bit younger you could just get them to scribble or colour in and draw while you're talking to them. I find that helps with conversation sometimes because they're not focused on what they're saying so much they're not getting stressed about what the answer or what they

	should say they're just colouring in and then they're like "oh yeah this happens at home and sometimes my mum does this or my dad does this" and they're slightly distracted so that they're able to have those conversations (19CP) I try to get down to their level because in Indigenous [society] standing up means power. I don't need that power so we all sit down (03CP) Even just body language and then not locking eye contact with them, just let them do their thing, or maybe I might sit next to them rather than opposite them, on the floor with them. For me, that kind of approach I don't have to think about it, it just happens; whereas, I've seen with some non-Indigenous or non-Aboriginal staff, [when] they've got to interact with kids they might be standing over them or in too close to them and you can see that they're not comfortable (19CP)
Be patient, tolerate silence, give child time to respond or connect.	You need to read the body language and the quietness. [It could signal] not understanding (BR) There was a young girl that came into the office, she didn't want to engage with anybody, so I basically got some colouring pencils and colouring paper. We went into a little office similar to this but the door was open. It was inviting. She was sitting in there, she just did not want to engage with anybody. I just talked her through and said "I'm just going to setup a little colouring and we'll wait till you're ready." I think she would have been about 12, roughly, so trying to get her to engage was quite challenging. I just sat there with her and did my colouring in, and then 10 or 15 minutes after, she came over and [asked], "Can I colour in?" She started colouring in and then the conversation started. We didn't talk. I just coloured in and talked about our pictures and got that calmness, got that trust, I guess. It was just any pictures that we printed off, just a couple of animals and stuff like that. (07CP) I think it's just having that awareness of also not needing to fill gaps. Just letting that young person think, or giving them a bit of space. Ask a question and then maybe come back to it later, or not even say anything at all. Sometimes and just sit there and just chill for a little bit (19CP)

Use “soft language” (avoid taboo, ask simple questions, avoid jargon, age-appropriate language)	The only thing that changes is our speech to them. There are lots of Aboriginal words that come out. Aboriginal workers are uncomfortable with some words and families also. Aboriginal workers take the lead to help families understand. (BR) The case worker will speak in English, and I’ll try and break it down a bit with language words and Kriol so then the kid understands this is what it’s about. (17CP) We don’t use the flash words or big words that a lot of our case workers and case managers use. [There's] a lot of jargon and we’ve always been told [to] keep it simple if you’re talking with the families. Just keep it simple (06CP) Language is very important. Take out the government jargon talk. Simple, basic language – very, very slow with children. But what I said here can also be handed over - you can do to parents as well, to families at all levels, community level, whether they live in town here, whether they live out in the bush. You can do it exactly the same as well. (02CP)
Establish common ground	We’ll look at the trees. We’ll say, the trees, there’s an [*unger*] and I’ll just talk back to our culture, and I’ll say, “What do you call it? My mummy called it this and so what do you call it?” It’s that engaging, just trying to make it not so intense for the child, so often go for walks. [*It’s a good way to connect?]* Yes, and often because there are a lot of language groups here in [location] I deal with a lot of different languages so I’m just curious what do you call bread or what do you call because I call it X my mummy and my nana called Y. It’s just little stuff like that just to break the ice (08CP) I was one of those kids that was walking the streets, not breaking and entering or doing all that, but it’s fun - believe me - on the streets at night you see and hear everything, and it’s fun. You have to move on and grow out of that stuff. I try and tell the families and the kids, “I was that kid. You need to change. You want a better life, you need to change it for yourself.” Saying that to the parents and the kids, “I had that hard life, I didn’t finish all of my schooling, I only went to Year 10 and I’ve come worked this far” (09CP)

	Trying to find a way like, “Where are you from?” and then saying, “You know so-and-so?”; trying to make that connection. “I went to school with someone from that community,” “Oh yeah, I’m related to that person,” so just trying to break it down (17CP)
Normalize the experience	We talk to children all the time and we ask children how things are at home. You make it really simple like that (04CP) We know how to put it into words. You need to get the family comfortable first, then you can ask carefully (BR) I just reassure them and say…”We just do a lot of work with a lot of families and sometimes family go through some problems at times and sometimes kids get scared” (19CP)
Visit/drop in multiple times	They know that they can call us because we’ve done a lot of work to hang out with them and get to know them as people not as a victim (01CP) I’ll usually say, “I’ll come back tomorrow, and we can have a talk, now that you know me, now that you know my name, and I can come back tomorrow.” We’ll usually go back the next day, and I’ll sit down and say, “Do you remember me?” and he’ll say “Yes.” “Okay, do you want to talk about anything today? How are you feeling today? Do you feel better than yesterday?” and they’ll often say, “Yeah I feel better today.” (08CP) Every time we go out, even though we’re not going to see them, we will go past and wave to them and say “Hello! How are you going?” and everything like that, see how they’re going, if they need help or assistance with anything. Sometimes we just jump out laughing and just, “Hello” and they see us smiling and everything, and singing out to them, “Hello!” - that changes the whole atmosphere I reckon. [*What’s the response*?] The family, when we do that the first time, they’re looking at us like these mob are weird, but it’s going there most of the time just doing that and then they just wander out, “hello,” start laughing, we start yarning away about anything, ask them

	how their day is going and everything like that, but it's just that struggle of that first couple of visits that you've got to break that ice (11CP)
Use messages/text to keep in contact	Teenagers are the hardest ones. They clam up. They just see the case workers as baddies. I tell them in Kriol, "If you don't want to talk to them today, you can ring me either me as a friend on Facebook or you can just message me if you want to talk." I'll get messages on Facebook at midnight saying, "I'm depressed and rah-rah." [But] I respond and talk to them. This messaging on Facebook, I think they've started to trust [me] knowing that, yes, there is someone in community that can talk and be private and not talk to every[one] about your problems. But then linking in with "Okay, how about I put you in contact with so-and-so," or "Here's a number or come to the office." I think it's that shame of coming to the office, so they use social media to engage. They're reaching out for help so it's private so then no one see them reaching out for help, talking about things, whereas if you tell them to come to the office, everyone's looking and thinking she's got mental problems or they're going to take her away (17CP) I make sure to tell them they can communicate with me whenever they want to and they can call – when I'm working they can call, or text message me if I don't answer. I'll respond to a text. I noticed, doing things like this where I take the time out of my day to spend some quality time with the kids, I notice more communication. They will want to text message me how they're going (16CP)

4. Getting to the child's concern or problem

Ok, now it is time in your talk with the child to get information you need from them. Here are some ideas about what to say and do, and what can help the child to tell.	
Directly introducing the topic of concern (rather than let child raise it). *Note that it is better for the child to raise the topic if possible or appropriate.*	I may say something like, "Oh, we were told that Mum and Dad keep fighting in front of you, does that scare you, and we're just here to see how you feel about it, and does it scare the dog" - because sometimes it can't be them, it has to be that the dog's scared (03CP) I might say to them, "We got a report," - we're never allowed to say who – "that Mum and Dad were drinking on Friday, and they started yelling at each other, is that true?" (03CP) *Note that when directly introducing the topic, the co-producer asks the child if the information is true. This gives the child greater opportunity to have a voice, and control over the information sharing.* I don't really do that [a formal greeting] because they know who I am. For example, there are kids that – there was three siblings, in a way they call me sister, so I'll go there and the girl - like sister – "We're going to talk to you about this, and if Mum and Dad was all right on the weekend, and if there was drinking. Was you with Aunty or was you with them?" or things like that. I guess them knowing me it just makes my job a lot easier (12CP)
Indirect approach (try to provide a cue so the child can raise the topic)	The main question was how he feels about particular family members, but I led in through asking about how he liked travelling on the planes. So, he enjoys the planes, and he spoke about all of that. That got him into drawing and writing and then I asked, "What do you like the most about when we go on the planes?" and then he drew all the stuff and I was like, "Where do we visit when we usually go on those planes?" and he said, "We visit

	this place and this place." I was like, "Which one do you enjoy the most?" It got to the point where we needed it, but it takes a while to get there (16CP) Sit down and talk to them, see if they open up and talk about other things first and then maybe chuck a little question in there about "how is Mum and Dad going" and "Do you enjoy Mum". Depending on the situation I might ask, "What does Mum and Dad do for you?" It's easing them in gently without [directly saying] "Why did Dad punch Mum in the head?" [Instead], "What did Dad do to Mum? He hit her, okay, and how was it? Was you scared?" "Yeah, we were scared." "Okay, then does he do that all the time? What fun things—" and then you change it – "What fun things do you do with Dad?" "He might take us to the park or buy us ice cream or things." It's jumping in and then easing back out again, that's a good thing (09CP) Tell me about a time when things are really good at home. Tell me about a time when things are really bad at home. Tell me a bit more about that (01CP)
Use the Three Houses [Indirect way to elicit the topic of concern]	The House of Worries [in Signs of Safety]: [The child] says, "The dog stole my pie" and that was a genuine worry for him because he was really hungry, he said. But you give them the option - do you want to do this [the Three Houses]. My preference, if they run with it and we just talk around what our worries are, and then hopefully they disclose through that process about the incident, how it made them feel, --that it kept me up all night that I couldn't sleep and that I was crying -- hopefully through that process we get a little bit of an insight how the incident impacted on the child. (10CP) Three Houses [in Signs of Safety] is good for getting a kid to talk and especially if you explain what three houses are and then you let them make up what their three houses are. It can be a house, or I've had unicorns and clouds. We've had campfires, we've had tents, they're all things like that. Let them decide – one kid had a volcano and that ended up being the bad house (04CP)

Use open questions/elicit a free narrative	I lead into it. I might not directly say the question of what it is, but I would lead to that question. I don't know how to explain that: I try to use as much questioning with just open-ended stuff. I wouldn't ask a yes or no question (16CP)
Embed probing questions related to the allegations in an activity or in rapport	I think you have to talk about other things and come back. You really do. You have to talk about, like I said, I will talk about hunting and magpie geese to get back to the food. I will talk about, "Do they go and see their aunty and uncle, does everyone come around the house, do you have a great time, who's there?" And to tell you the honest truth. For a lot of people, they'll tell you themselves that Mum and Dad were drinking and fought or something like that (03CP) In the middle of the coffee table, there was a bowl, like those little Japanese garden-type things, they've got the sand in it and the case manager started playing with that, with the sand. Making a little dragon, making little designs and all that type of stuff and then the child was getting curious and then started doing the same thing too, started playing with the sand. That broke the barrier a little bit and he asked the child about where do you feel safe and the kid said at school (06CP)
Don't make any assumptions	But I think it's really important: what we know from a community point of view is fine, because sometimes that may have some truth to it, but it may not always be 100 per cent the story of what is happening for that child and that family. So, [you] always have to remind yourself you don't know everything just because you know these people and go in with that open mind as well (05CP) They [young children] tell you everything whereas the teenagers, all they do is just nod and say yes and no. I don't know [*Why they don't tell*?] they're not frightened but there is that fear of that reprimand of either Mum or Dad knowing that they've spoken to TF [Territory Families] or the police that they're going to belt them or something, have a fight. The little ones are easier (17CP) I think in my space where I work, because we work a lot with police, there are times when we're very limited as to what we can ask a child because that will impact on their police

	investigation, which is why we allow them to do the child forensic interview (CFI). If a child doesn't want to do a CFI, then we can go in and talk to them about those concerns because they already know why we're there. So we have two avenues that we can take - follow police and let them do what they need to do, [or] if the child doesn't want to talk then we can go and have that conversation. So, if we are following police, it is more around that safety planning and networking with the family and the child after the interview with police. (01CP)

5. Coming to an end

Ok, now it is time to finish your talk with the child. Here are some ideas about what to say and do, and what can help.	
Finishing off the conversation with the child	Sometimes the child is the one to end the conversation. But use the same skills to end the conversation: "thank you for your time" (DR-TE) Be consistent: "see you again next week" but make them aware of the purpose. And be available: give your mobile number. Texting can work better. (DR-TE) Reassure, reiterate, support: "Our job is to help families. We are not police" (DR-TE) Summarise what you have talked about. Make sure they know who to talk with if worried about anything. Remind them of their safe people (BAR) Say if you might need to talk with them again. Or if you need to now talk with Mum and Dad. Be open (BAR) Be honest. It is about keeping trust (DR-TE)

Reflections and challenges: Aboriginal practices in supporting each other

Thinking about our work and looking after ourselves and each other	
Working in a complex environment	I don't think people realise but [for] our people out here, English is sixth or seventh language, and not only is it sixth or seventh language, they might be able to listen to it and speak it but it doesn't mean they can read it, and it's got to remember that all our forms are English so you've really got to work on it. A safety plan that you want them to sign, it's very much more efficient in words and pictures than it is in writing (03CP) We work in both worlds, both professional and cultural as well. At the moment, there is one of our remote communities where there is going to be ceremony taking place, so our staff that go out, they're aware of it, and because of our remote staff that live out there, they would let them know that this is when you can actually go out and do your work, and this is the other time where you need to go back to your accommodation and stay there and be safe. (06CP) The negatives would be that I know everything that goes on in community. The adults, they know that I know more than what I let on, and the majority of the time they think that I'm the one who's feeding everything. (11CP) Here's that opposite effect that, sometimes the families have the trust with the Aboriginal people, but then they don't have that trust - you know, because they worry about gossiping and stuff like that. And this happened recently when I was working with a family. I haven't met the mum because I only spoke over the phone to her and she said to me, she goes, "I don't want the Aboriginal workers in this community to work with me from child protection because they don't need to know my business" (18CP) Here are a number of things going on. They're a little bit stressed and time, "Oh I've got to catch a plane at three, I better get through this interview" - he wouldn't say that, but they can tell that you're in a rush. It's tricky because we work in this remote office, and we're

	often fly in/fly out so sometimes we're out in community for a day or a few days and then we might have that interview and then might not see that child again on that trip and we're not back again for a few weeks (19CP) We're working closely especially on the cultural [awareness] to make sure that they're culturally aware and the surrounds that they're dealing with. I'm working with practitioners who have come from overseas and haven't really dealt with Indigenous people before and it's a bit of a culture shock. (20CP) A lot of the times they'll make the family connection, and that can go both ways too. I've had people that have seen me like, "No, not talking to you, because I know that's your family over at house 8 and it's too close" (05CP) If I promise something, that's my word and I can't go back on it. Most times I won't promise. I'll say to them, "I'll try really hard to do that but I'm not going to promise, because I've only got my word and if I lie to you, you're never going to believe me again." Some kids - you might think that it's only parents - but if you tell the kid something they later come back and say "You promised me that", that they won't forget – they won't forget. (03CP)
Learning from each other	We each use different ideas but will adopt someone else's practice idea if it works next time (BR) We are de-briefing. It's important for non-Aboriginal staff to learn more about how Aboriginal workers communicate (BR)
Supporting each other	We have a Monday morning catch-up: how was the weekend? What's coming up? Then we have a Friday debrief: are there any worries or concerns? (BAR) Group supervision is good. We just gather and have food (BAR)

	Supporting remote staff is really important, especially with leave and understanding why they need it. There are lots of pressures on them living in these circumstances. (DR-TE) I debrief with my colleagues, share responsibility. Signs of Safety mapping is a good way of gathering people in for discussions (DR-TE) I go home. I exercise. We have access to counselling (19CP)

Conclusion

In the PAIR Project, through conversations between TFHC co-producers and academic researchers, we brought to the surface Aboriginal knowledges about how best to engage with and support children in the Northern Territory to share important information about their experiences. This Practice Guide documents these knowledges for shared learning and information exchange as what 'works best' for TFHC staff, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. This can then inform the existing research on 'best practice interviewing'. In particular, we learned that a formal 'interview protocol' can serve as a skeletal structure for engagement between workers and children, but it must be flexible enough to allow workers to adapt it to the communities and contexts in which they are embedded. The highly relational nature of Aboriginal life clearly permeated every aspect of the co-producers' interactions with children and their families. Going forward, we hope this guide will be used to mentor future TFHC staff, especially (but not only) Aboriginal workers, in Aboriginal-led Practice, and continue to support conversations about integrating diverse knowledge sources into practices.

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