

# The Bouverie Centre

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## Aboriginal Family Therapy Training Program

Evidence Brief August 2015





## What is the Aboriginal Family Therapy Program?

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The Bouverie Centre developed the Aboriginal Family Therapy Program in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

This is a three-year Program that supports alternative pathways and entry points for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to return to study and develop a professional career pathway to become Family Therapists, and includes:

- A one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Family Therapy that comprises four units, (26 days of face to face training), delivered over a 12-18 month period.

- A two-year Group Critical Reflective Practice component, which follows completion of the Postgraduate Certificate, and involves supervision to support graduates' reflection and integration of family therapy skills into practice.

The Program, offered since 2008, is designed to introduce students to family therapy theories and practice, with an emphasis on maintaining sensitivity to families' needs and experiences. It is delivered within the community and is largely available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, family and health workers; with provision for the community to invite non-Aboriginal workers.

## What does the Program involve?

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Family therapy resonates with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing beliefs and practices, due to its focus on relationships, context and patterns, rather than a focus on the individual. The Program's inclusion of the 'Yarning up on Trauma' component (developed in collaboration with Take Two Berry Street and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency), along with narrative approaches and circular questioning, build student's awareness and skills to support families in a holistic way, particularly in relation to trauma and its interrelated and continuing effect in people's lives.

The cornerstone of the Aboriginal Family Therapy Program is a strength-based 'Two-way learning' model. An Aboriginal Cultural Consultant and a non-Aboriginal family therapy lecturer facilitate a respectful and culturally safe learning environment, which empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal students and trainers to exchange and develop new knowledge together.

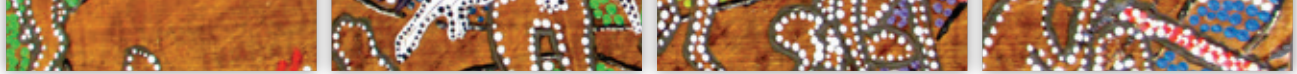
*Family therapy is how we actually support our families. It's holistic... here's the opportunity to get a qualification that's going to be a practice model that's very similar to how we traditionally would have done [it], sorting out problems within a community, within a family. (Graduate)*

## Does the Program have a positive impact?

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In 2012, the Program was highlighted in a national review as a quality example of a community-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with a high student retention rate (87%) on par with all students studying a similar course. This retention rate has increased to 89 per cent. Since the

program's inception, 80 students have graduated, 74 percent being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Of graduates, two have gone on to successfully complete a Master of Clinical Family Therapy and another is currently completing his final year in 2015.



***The best practice model is this course. It is simply a holistic, inclusive, Aboriginal sensitive program that has a culturally safe delivery model that is designed to capacity build the workforce and upskill their qualifications simultaneously. (Graduate, Ballarat Cohort)***

An internal evaluation<sup>3</sup> of the Program was conducted in 2014, with the aim of improving its effectiveness in meeting the needs of students and increasing their capacity to meet the needs of the families they work with. This review found that the Program has led to substantial gains in the specialised knowledge, skills and motivation required to support effective family therapy practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It also found that the Program supports students to become positive role models, which contributes to client outcomes and to the student's own social and emotional wellbeing.

Graduates reported that the program is a positive, challenging and transformational educational and personally healing experience. Graduates particularly noted the importance of cultural safety, course content and delivery, the learning of trauma-informed practice, and reflective practice.

- **Cultural safety**

Each training group established a shared meaning of cultural safety, which gave a sound understanding of what it meant to the group and how they could talk about it and raise personal experiences. Cultural safety was enabled by a safe physical environment and venue; also by an emotional environment where students were not rushed, where they felt heard and comfortable. An Indigenous co-trainer also brought knowledge and understanding of how learning is influenced by history and each student's current community context.

- **Course content and delivery**

Delivery of the Postgraduate Certificate course in a local setting, and the pacing of the course over a 12 month period, helped make education accessible and addressed past learning obstacles. The program's 'two-way learning' approach, known as the 'Black and White Model', enabled students to redefine mainstream jargon into meaningful context-specific ways of working. The use of training tools such as role play and student presentations of family genograms were also significant learning experiences.

- **Trauma-informed practice and skills**

The 'Yarning Up on Trauma' component of the program led to a deeper understanding of the effect of trauma, particularly the ongoing effects of colonisation, on individuals and families, including on the workers themselves. Being informed about trauma and developing deep listening and other family sensitive skills increased graduates' capacity to work with clients in a non-judgmental and compassionate way, and identify the needs of the whole family.

- **Reflective practice**

Taking the time to discuss and reflect on what works in different contexts, and to see things differently, increased graduates' confidence to work with families with complex needs and with mainstream agencies. The Program validated students' experiences and skills, increased self awareness and understanding of the importance of self-care practices when working in often stressful roles.

***This course showed me that there is a ripple effect of trauma – not just the effect on the child, but on their own family, their foster family, and the whole community.***

***I have been able to help carers understand that a child's behaviour is the result of trauma, and offer them a more strength-based way to help that child and their family.***

***My skills to promote change in families has increased, as has my understanding of why self-care is so important and why sometimes it's hard to do! The course has also given me more confidence to stand up for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.***

***- Trudie, Shepparton Graduate and Out of Home Care worker***



# Current challenges

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Evaluation findings confirmed the effectiveness of the Program in building workers' professional competence and confidence to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in a culturally and trauma-informed way. In addition, the evaluation identified current challenges and areas for improvement, such as the need for continuing personal and professional development for graduates, and the ongoing challenge of securing sustainable funding.

Several graduates reported a lack of recognition and support in the workplace after completing the Program, and low levels of awareness in agencies and government about the value of continuing relevant professional learning. The difficulty of obtaining ongoing

professional supervision highlights the importance of the two-year supervision component of the Program.

The Program has one of the highest tertiary retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, yet currently relies on piecemeal student sponsorship to fund training. There is a pressing need to secure a funding base to continue improving the program and to better establish it within the work-based professional development landscape. Without a secure funding base, this Program is kept in an emerging phase rather than building on achievements that enhance the capacity of the workforce to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

## What are the main elements of the Program?

Cultural safety

Connectedness

Family in Community

Black and white learning

Privileging Indigenous knowledges

## What do students gain from the Program?

Insight

Reflection

Confidence

Capacity building

Inclusive of context

## For further information contact:

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- 1 The Bouverie Centre is a statewide centre that provides tertiary and professional development courses in family therapy, and clinical services to families with complex issues. The Bouverie Centre is based in Melbourne and is currently part of La Trobe University, Melbourne.
- 2 Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R. & Kelly, P. (Chair) Professor Steven Larkin, *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Final Report July 2012*, pp. 190–91, Department of Education and Training, Canberra. Available at: <https://education.gov.au/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>
- 3 Elliott, A., McIlwaine, F., Stone, N., & Proctor, K. 2015, *The Bouverie Centre Aboriginal Family Therapy Training Program, Impact Analysis Report*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. Available at: <https://www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-publishing/L041>.