

Walking a slow path for long-term change

At the heart of Baringa Early Learning Centre in the Australian Capital Territory is a united and passionate team of educators. **Executive Officer PJ Aguilar** shares how the educators are integral in the centre developing its first Reconciliation Action Plan.

As early childhood professionals, we are in a unique position to play a vital role in influencing the next generation of leaders—our children. As a collective, we can contribute to a future where reconciliation is not something we do but something which is.

Reconciliation is the strengthening of 'relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians' (Reconciliation Australia, 2017). One way for early learning centres to move closer to reconciliation is to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). However, despite the abundance of resources available about reconciliation, it is not unusual to feel overwhelmed and not know where to start in paving a way for genuine long-term change.

At Baringa, when we started to think about reconciliation we had many questions, including: How can we strengthen relationships when we may not know where to begin? What can we do to remain respectful? What are the protocols? How do we avoid a flurry of activities in Reconciliation Week or NAIDOC Week and then forget for the other 50 weeks of the year?

In answering these questions, we have been—and are still going—on a journey to ensure we are not writing a RAP for the sake of writing a document, but to make an ongoing commitment to reconciliation. Our intention is to create a foundation for our children to celebrate and embrace the richness of our nation's Traditional Owners. While the path seemed uncertain in the beginning, we are learning that it is only by walking it that we build confidence in slowly creating a foundation for long-term change within our centre, community and beyond. As we build this knowledge, we are finding ways to incorporate new awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into our existing practices.







The key is doing this slowly and with care—to avoid a sudden burst of motivation that produces no more than a list of ‘tokenistic’ activities. To influence real and meaningful awareness takes time. For our continuing journey, we want each element to be done with understanding as we move towards discovery and change.

Starting at the beginning

Starting at the beginning meant setting aside assumptions and being willing to listen and learn. We needed a safe space to do this, which allowed us to reflect on our own understandings and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It also helped us acknowledge our information gaps and bias. From here, we started to formulate personal and professional questions and in asking these, we sought mentors to guide and shed light of the steps we needed to take.

Seeking guidance

We reached out to Aunty Kerrie Hogan—Wonnarua woman and grandmother of three beautiful children at our centre—and sought her advice on a respectful way forward in developing our RAP.

We had an insightful conversation about embedding culture into our education programming by introducing experiences slowly. We learnt from Aunty Kerrie to be aware of where we were and how to explore ways to introduce the unfamiliar to the familiar.

After talking with her, our questions developed into: How can we incorporate



Indigenous language within morning routines? How do we expand the children’s love of the outdoors and link with an appreciation of Country? Can we build on sustainable practices with Aboriginal conservation? What resources do we have and what are the gaps?

Then we asked ourselves, how do we begin? And the answer was simple—with the educators.

Learning through experience

We are big believers in learning outside of the classroom. Culture cannot be absorbed by reading textbooks or sitting in a training room. We reached out to Tyronne Bell, Ngunawal man, and strong advocate for local Aboriginal culture and language.

On a beautiful crisp morning in the heart of Canberra’s winter, Tyronne took us (centre management and educators) on a Dharwa



Aboriginal Cultural Tour bushwalk across the tracks of Black Mountain. He guided us and introduced us to local plants and bush foods along the trails. He talked about the sites we passed and the conservation projects happening in Canberra.

The bushwalk gave each of us an appreciation of the beautiful Country we are privileged to share, the incredible views across Australia’s capital city and how fortunate we are to live close to bushland that has been cared for by generations of people before us.

After the walk, we had a yarning circle during a bush tucker lunch. Then we reflected on our current education programs. We thought about what we knew

