Keeping Kids Connected to Culture

The C4 Model for Reflective Multicultural Practice



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Upholding the right to cultural connection for children in care: investigating current strategies and impactful practices

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Acknowledgement of Country

Artwork: Change through voices
Artist: Bradley Burns - Kamilaroi mob

Why is it important to support the cultural connections of multicultural children?

1 Cultural connection is a right for every child

The UNCRC is clear in articulating the right of all children to be raised within their own traditions and cultural values. No one right trumps another.



2 Cultural connection is critical to child wellbeing

Maintaining cultural connections helps preserve the cultural foundations that offer safety, care continuity, and conditions that support identity and wellbeing.

3 Culture helps children stay connected to their birth families

Culture gives children a living link to their family stories, relationships and sense of belonging, helping them hold on to who they are and where they come from.

A four-year, three-stage national collaboration

Upholding the right to cultural connection for children in care: investigating current strategies and impactful practices

The project asked

What is the current practice and policy landscape across Australia?

What are the lived experiences of children, carers, birth families and caseworkers?

What are stakeholders' experiences of promising practices such as cultural care planning, cultural mentoring and Life Story Work?

Do our findings suggest a model of exemplary cultural care?



Stakeholders' perspectives

65

Sector stakeholders

Phase 1 – Policy and Practice Landscape Review

Across every jurisdiction, the study mapped the legislative and policy architecture, the promising practice elements, the training that prepares caseworkers, and the facilitators and barriers that determine whether cultural connection is sustained in practice.

Phase 2 – Lived experience (n = 153)

34

Children and young people

Creative methods, including the Label Selection Activity

33

Carers

Individual interviews with foster and kinship carers

10

Birth family members

Individual interviews

76

Practitioners

Focus groups across jurisdictions



What children and young people told us

“Culture is my lifeline… without it I suffocate.”

Young person, aged 5–18 cohort (n=34)



- They valued trust, truthfulness and honesty, and wanted genuine relationships with workers rather than to feel like a project.
- Cultural identity often becomes more important as they grow older — there is no stage at which culture stops mattering.
- Culture lives in daily routines: shared meals, prayer, language at home, weekend traditions.
- They trusted the workers who were real with them and who made an effort to understand where they came from.

What families, carers and practitioners told us

Birth parents

Culture lives in language, food, stories and family connection — seeing that lost for their children was deeply painful.

They wanted to be included in creating and receiving information, including Life Story Work.

Many felt judged. They felt respected where workers listened and treated them as partners.

Carers

Many were unsure whose role it was to lead cultural connection, most sharply where they did not share the child's culture.

They described cultural activities as threads that together weave a cultural fabric.

They wanted practical guidance: where to start, how to involve birth parents, where to find reliable information.



Practitioners

Cultural knowledge is built through relationships, not through generic information or online searches.

The quality of a cultural plan reflected the quality of family engagement.

Organisational systems decide whether cultural knowledge becomes everyday practice.

The S.E.L.F. Cultural Framework: supporting conversations

What we learned from practitioners, cultural knowledge holders and policy

Cultural knowledge is built through relationships.

The quality of cultural plans reflected the quality of family engagement.

Organisational systems and policies shape whether cultural knowledge is translated into everyday practice.

Cultural matching, mentors and life-story work supported identity and belonging.

Structured conversations can help build a richer understanding of children's identities and connections.




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The C4 Multicultural Practice Model

Four foundational and interconnected elements that support children's cultural engagement.

Child

The child is central. What is explored and pursued is shaped by the child's own interest and developmental stage. The door to cultural experience stays open; the child chooses when to step through it.

Care

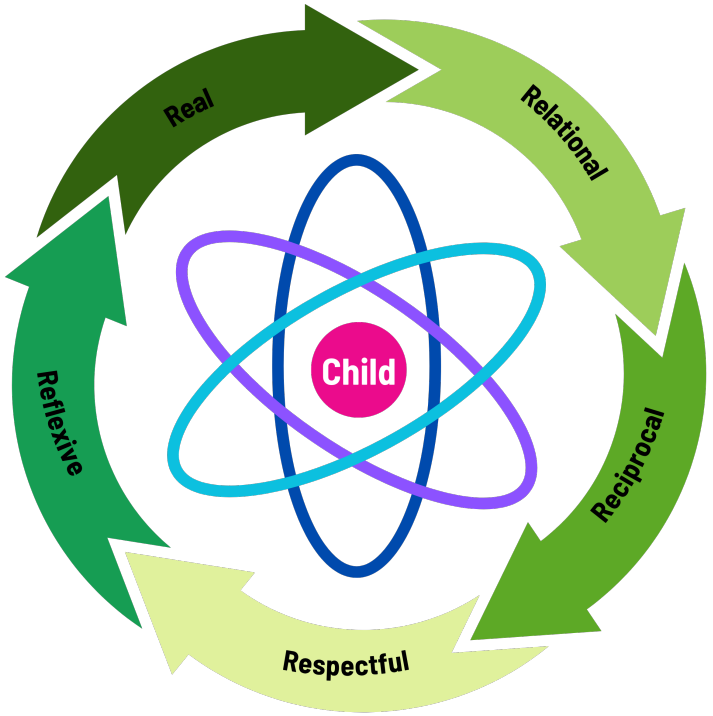
Strong caring relationships characterised by nurturance, safety and trust. Cultural learning depends on relationships that have been built patiently and held over time.

Community

Connections with birth family, kin, and cultural communities — including carers and caseworkers who do not share the child's culture but who make participation possible.

Culture

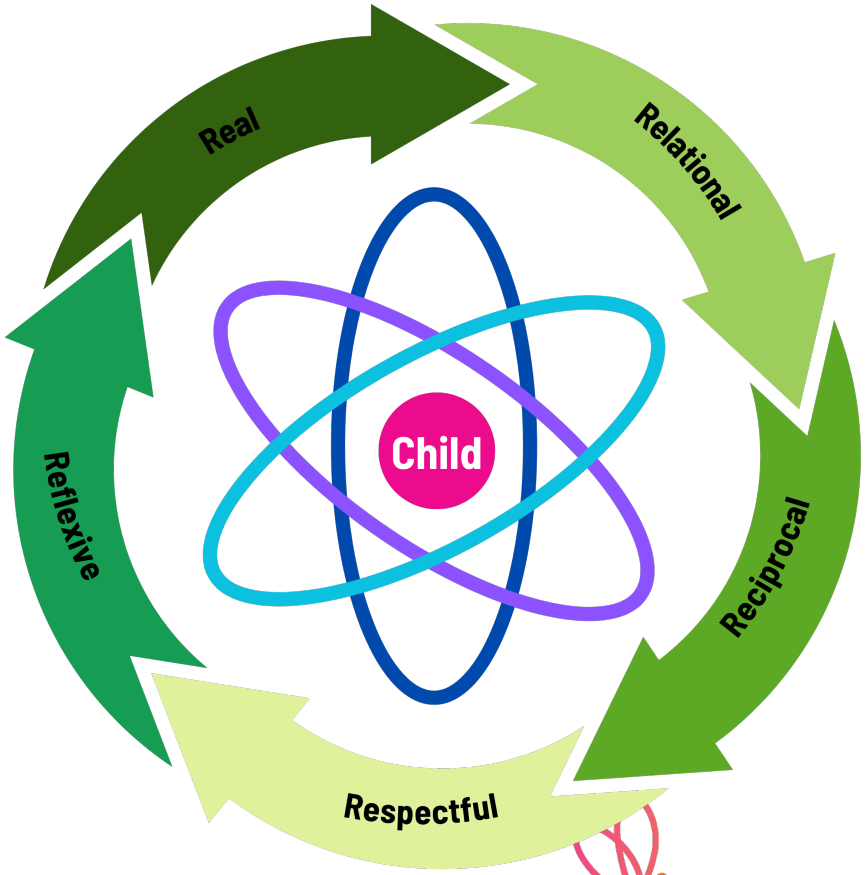
Culture is unique to each child and rarely a single heritage. Understanding the particular, rather than the label, is central to belonging and wellbeing.



Five practice principles

Weaving culture into everyday care rather than treating it as an add-on.

Reflexive	Reflecting on our own assumptions, biases and perspectives
Respectful	Valuing cultural knowledge and lived experience, and naming power
Relational	Building strong, trusting relationships with continuity over time
Reciprocal	Learning together — families and children have much to teach us
Real	Cultural engagement that is authentic, without judgement or agenda



Six key stakeholders

Each with responsibilities to support meaningful cultural connections

Infants, children and young people

Front-line practitioners

Birth parents and family members

Cultural community members

Foster and kinship carers

Monitoring and oversight bodies



Strengthening cultural care in practice

Improving cultural care does not require doing more work — it requires approaching work differently

The implementation approach encourages organisations to:

1. **Reflect on current policies and practices** – an organisational readiness self-reflection
2. **Create opportunities for cultural learning** – training workshops and reflective thinking
3. **Build partnerships with communities** – carers, families, cultural groups and leaders
4. **Embed cultural discussions within practice forums** – add cultural care conversations to team discussions
5. **Monitor children's cultural information and care** – strengthening governance and oversight



Curiosity questions: the model in conversation (1 of 2)

REFLEXIVE

- What are my expectations around what I want my/our child to experience culturally? (Parent)
- Do I hold assumptions or stereotypes, good or bad, about this child's cultural background? Where did they come from? Am I placing them inside the child? (Carer)
- What are my preconceived ideas about children in care and their families? Have I had experiences in my own life that have shaped these ideas? Is this impacting my feelings about the other people involved? (Community member)

REAL

- If you are not interested in culture right now, is it OK if I check with you again down the track? What do birth family members see as most important in the cultural learning of the child at this stage of their development? How can we all support that? (Child)
- How does this child feel about their cultural identity? Have I made room for them to say so — and what does their behaviour tell me when words are hard? (Practitioner)
- How does the child I care for feel about their cultural identity? Have I provided opportunities for them to express this? (Carer)

Curiosity questions: the model in conversation (2 of 2)

RELATIONAL

- Who are the people you (the child or young person) love most? What makes them special? (Child)
- What support do I need to understand and adapt to my changing role within the life of my/our child? (Parent)
- Do I think I could play a role in mentoring practitioners and carers to deepen their understanding of the child's culture? (Community member)

RECIPROCAL

- How do you create safe spaces for conversations with a child or young person? What approaches do you take to support the child to feel comfortable talking to you? (Practitioner)
- What do I think the carer expects of me? Is this OK with me? What do I expect of them? (Parent)

RESPECTFUL

- How does the regulatory commissioning statutory agency collect nuanced data in relation to children's cultural diversity? (Monitoring and oversight)
- How does the accreditation agency facilitate information sharing with agencies to reinforce the standards' importance? (Monitoring and oversight)

Implementation: phased capability transfer

1

Share

Knowledge exchange and an organisational readiness self-reflection

2

Train

Workshops and reflective practice sessions with teams

3

Establish

Communities of Practice and cultural care on standing team agendas

4

Sustain

Implementation Champions supported, then stepping back

The C4 Multicultural Practice Guide offers an opportunity to shift the dial on how organisations support children's cultural care and wellbeing. The goal is for organisations to independently embed culturally responsive practice over time, with confidence and capability.

Papers published



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