RELATIONAL LITERACY:

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACROSS GENERATIONS



Tara Skipp, Relationships Australia NT,
AIFS Conference 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

“I would like to acknowledge the First Nations custodians of the land we are gathering on today, of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples of the Kulin nation, as well as the traditional custodians of the land I live and work on - the Larrakia and Arrente peoples, recognising their ongoing cultural and spiritual connection to this country for over sixty thousand years and to acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

I pay my respects to Ancestors and Elders as well as First Nations peoples present today”

THE PROPOSAL

A NATIONAL RELATIONAL LITERACY FRAMEWORK

A strategic, national, lifespan approach to *relational literacy* : the capacity to understand, and to practise, healthy ways of relating.

Relational literacy

The capacity to understand, and to practise, healthy ways of relating (Joy, 2020).

Social literacy

The development of social skills to interact positively with others (Igbinakhase & Naidoo, 2019).

Emotional literacy

The ability to identify, understand and manage our own emotions (Steiner, 2003).

RELATIONAL LITERACY

THE CAPACITY TO UNDERSTAND, AND TO PRACTISE, HEALTHY WAYS OF RELATING (JOY, 2020)

Including:

- **Self regulation & active listening**
- **Communicating in ways that help people feel connected & understood**
- **Managing conflict without avoiding or escalating it**
- **Setting & holding boundaries**
- **Recognising unhealthy, abusive or coercive behaviour**



WHY THIS MATTERS

The scale of the problem:

- 1 in 5 women: have experienced family and domestic violence (ABS, 2021 -22)
- NT women: double the national rate; First Nations women significantly overrepresented (ABS, 2021 -22; AIHW, Closing the Gap)
- Exposure to family and domestic violence: among the most common forms of harm to children (Higgins and Hunt, 2023)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Almost 1 in 10 children: exposed to persistent, elevated conflict

(*Giallo et al., 2022)*

Relationship quality declining nationally. Feeling unsafe to disagree with your closest person is rising, linked to more loneliness & lower wellbeing.

(Relationships Australia, 2024)

Safe relationships a strong protective factor against suicidal distress

Even one trustworthy relationship carries meaningful protective value

(Relationships Australia and Suicide Prevention Australia, 2026)

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THE GOOD NEWS

- The many strong relational skill programs already operating demonstrate that relational literacy can be taught, and that teaching them changes outcomes.

- Relational literacy has potential to travel intergenerationally, changing outcomes for a person, their family and future generations

RELATIONAL SKILL CAN BE TAUGHT, TEACHING IT CHANGES OUTCOMES.

Respectful Relationships Education: over 84% of students reported increased relationship skills *(Australian Government Department of Education, 2022)*

Love Bites (NT): 16% increase in rejecting violence, almost 1 in 4 reported an actual life change *(NAPCAN and Huber Social, 2021)*

Triple P: a 50% reduction in clinically significant disruptive behaviour *(Turner, Richards and Sanders, 2007)*

THE INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECT

The same premise as Australia's financial literacy framework: equip even one person, potential to shift future generations.

Families with a history of childhood maltreatment often see harm recur, but also evidence that the pattern can be broken (Green et al., 2025)

A 15 year US trial: parents taught warmth and active listening saw their children grow into more positive parenting attitudes (Rhodes et al., 2023)

In practice: people who increase their relational literacy report sharing the skills with their family resulting in relational norm and attitude shifts within their family.

THE CURRENT GAP

Valuable work already exists in schools and communities, but it is uncoordinated and unevenly accessible.

THE PROPOSAL

A NATIONAL *RELATIONAL LITERACY* FRAMEWORK

A strategic, national, lifespan approach to *relational literacy* : the capacity to understand, and to practise, healthy ways of relating.

A RELATIONAL LITERACY FRAMEWORK WOULD PROVIDE:



- A developed **timeline** of which relational skills should be the benchmark at each stage of the lifespan
- A coordinated **strategy** to ensure relational literacy is promoted across the whole population

AN EXAMPLE DEVELOPMENTAL TIMELINE

Early childhood: naming emotions, taking turns, recognising others have an inner world

Primary school: expressing emotions**,** boundary setting, healthy friendships, early conflict resolution

High school: healthy vs unhealthy relationships, consent, recognising coercive control

Young adulthood: navigating conflict, sharing the mental load, regulation, boundary setting and effective communication in the workplace

Adulthood: relationship repair, relational parenting, long-term partnership, navigating caregiving relational challenges

RELATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

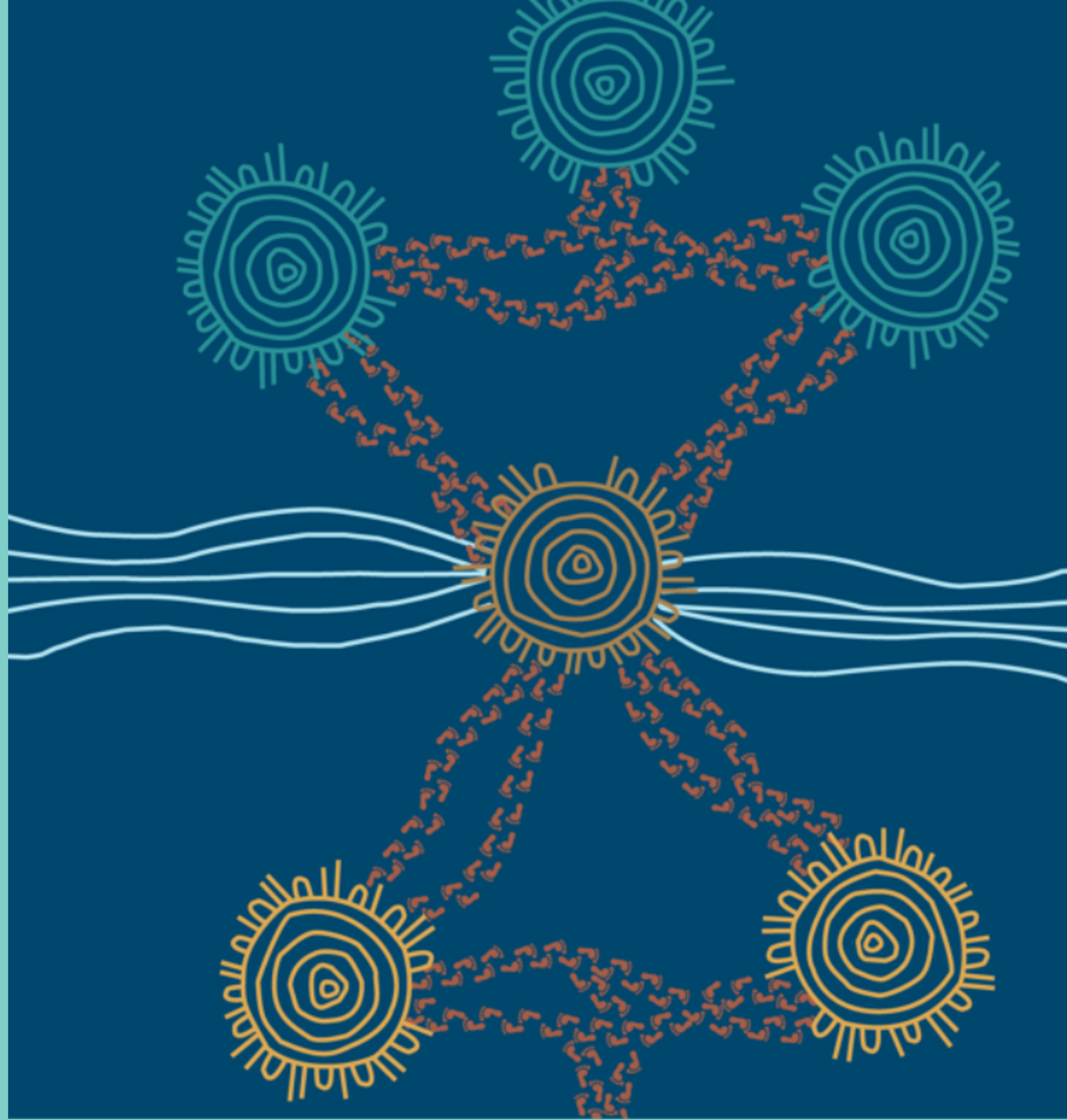
A coordinated strategy ensuring relational education reaches every stage of life through relevant channels. Including early education, primary and high school, programs for young adults, parenting supports, workplaces, service providers, community and cultural programs and resources for older adults.

LEARNING FROM FIRST NATIONS KNOWLEDGE

First Nations kinship systems are a much older, more complete knowledge system than Western concepts of relational literacy, governing connection and responsibility.

(AIATSIS, 2024; Kinship and Cultural Strengths, 2024)

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GENUINE PARTNERSHIP IS REQUIRED *FROM THE OUTSET*



With First Nations communities: must be built in genuine partnership from inception, not adpated afterwards.

With CALD communities:
strengths based, culturally safe.

With LGBTQIA+ communities:
no single template of family or relationship assumed.

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Relational skill is teachable.
It shapes wellbeing at every life stage.
Great resources exist, but they're not coordinated.
Relational Literacy has potential for intergenerational impact.
A National Relational Literacy Framework.



Let's start the conversation.

1300 458 600
nt.relationships.org.au

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THANK YOU