

# Innovative Solutions Support

## Project Guide - Cultural Mentoring

### What is Cultural Mentoring?

Cultural Mentoring supports early childhood services to better understand and work with specific cultural groups in their community. It aims to increase the cultural responsiveness of educators and other staff and thereby facilitate greater inclusion for children, their families and communities. Cultural Mentoring can also support services to increase enrolments from specific cultural groups. Cultural Mentoring can focus on any culture, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

### What does a cultural mentor do?

A cultural mentor works with a service (or services) to develop their understanding of the specific cultural group that they are seeking to work with. This usually involves providing information, advice and guidance to educators as well as working alongside educators to support them to implement this knowledge into everyday practice.

The cultural mentor may support educators to plan and implement culturally appropriate learning experiences for children as well as supporting them to establish and develop stronger relationships with families and the local community.

Building a service's capacity to create connections with the local community is important to ensure the outcomes of the cultural mentoring project continue after the mentor leaves.

### Who can be a cultural mentor?

Cultural Mentoring is provided by a mentor who understands, and has a connection to, the specific cultural group that the service is seeking to work with. The cultural mentor may be a member of the local community or someone else with the knowledge, skills and experience to undertake the role who is acceptable to the local community.

Mentors do not require formal qualifications, but applications for Cultural Mentoring support need to provide evidence that the proposed mentor is an appropriate person to undertake the role.

For projects that provide cultural mentoring in relation to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures the mentor must be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

### When is Cultural Mentoring needed?

Cultural Mentoring is needed when a service identifies that a lack of cultural understanding amongst educators is creating a barrier to inclusion. This may be in relation to a child or children who are already enrolled at the service, or children and families in the community who are not engaging with the service because of the identified lack of cultural understanding.

In order to demonstrate a need for Cultural Mentoring, services must show that the barriers identified are having an impact on the inclusion of children from the specific cultural group and that the proposed mentoring project will address these barriers.

Solutions should be specific (rather than general) and demonstrate a high likelihood of success in achieving the intended outcomes.

For example, if a service aims to increase enrolments from a specific community or cultural group, their project will need to demonstrate how they will reach out to and connect with this community in order to achieve this. Building educator knowledge and understanding of the particular cultural group will be an important part of such a project but on its own increased cultural awareness will not necessarily lead to an increase in enrolments. The service will need to show how they will use their increased awareness, and the mentor's support, to build concrete connections with the target community.

If a service aims to improve inclusion outcomes for a child or children who are already enrolled then they will need to show how the proposed project elements will do this.

### Cultural Mentoring and the Strategic Inclusion Plan

In order to access Innovative Solutions Support it is expected that a service will have an up to date Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP), with current Barriers to inclusion identified and Strategies and Actions developed to address the Barriers.

Where a service is applying for Cultural Mentoring Support the SIP should clearly identify Barriers related to cultural inclusion and there should be a clear alignment between the barriers and strategies identified in the SIP and the proposed project.

### What specific support can Cultural Mentoring provide?

Cultural mentoring support varies from project to project, and most projects include a combination of different support strategies.

The kinds of support that may be provided through cultural mentoring include:

- Cultural awareness training
- Support to create a culturally safe and respectful environment
- Support to incorporate specific cultural perspectives or elements into a service's program
- Coaching and modelling to support educators to implement new practices
- Support to establish connections with the target community
- Support to strengthen existing connections with the target community

What is important is that the proposed supports clearly address the identified barriers and will lead to increased educator capacity in working with the target cohort.

### What support cannot be provided by Cultural Mentoring?

Cultural Mentoring support is intended to address specific barriers to inclusion and build educator capacity to be inclusive.

Applications that seek to provide generic "cultural awareness" training unrelated to identified barriers, or that do not show how a project will actively support changes in educator practice, will not be approved.

Similarly, applications that primarily focus on support provider-led “incursions” for children or support provider delivery of experiences for children are not able to be funded under Innovative Solutions Support.

Where a project includes delivery of particular experiences for children this must be done in such a way that it develops the educator’s ability to present such experiences independently.

Support providers should focus on how they can upskill educators in this regard, rather than on presenting such experiences themselves.

Projects involving support provider delivered experiences for children will only be considered where such experiences form a limited part of a project, and it can be clearly seen that they are part of a sequence of learning that will enable educators to observe an experience before implementing it themselves.

Applications that aim to increase enrolments from a particular cultural group need to demonstrate that the target cohort is present in the local community and that the project has a realistic chance of engaging with them in order to be approved.

**Example:**

Smith St Early Learning Centre identifies a lack of cultural understanding as a key barrier that is hindering the inclusion of Aboriginal children from the local community. While some Aboriginal children are enrolled in the service they are underrepresented in comparison to the number of Aboriginal children in the wider community. The service further identifies that they are not able to adequately cater to the needs of those children who are enrolled leading to a lack of meaningful participation in the program. They are also unable to attract further enrolments because of their lack of cultural understanding.

In an effort to more effectively include those Aboriginal children who are currently enrolled the service seeks to engage a local support provider to implement a series of cultural “incursions” to introduce aspects of the local Aboriginal culture into the program.

While such incursions may be valuable and have a positive short-term impact on the children’s sense of inclusion, they are, on their own, unlikely to lead to a longer term or ongoing sense of inclusion or significantly enhance the inclusion capacity of educators. An application that is focused only on incursions or activities run by the support provider would not be funded under Innovative Solutions Support. Such a project design does not provide long term benefits or increase educator’s capacity to be inclusive.

Such a project would be more likely to be funded if the cultural experiences were included as part of a program to support educators to develop and implement such elements into the program themselves.

To increase enrolments from the local Aboriginal community the service also asks the support provider to undertake a series of cultural awareness sessions with educators in the hope that increased cultural understanding will lead to the creation of a more culturally safe environment that would then lead to increased enrolments.

**Example continued...**

Increased cultural awareness is an important outcome and one that services should be aiming to achieve. However, without concrete strategies to help the service to engage with the local community and start to build a trusting relationship, increased awareness is unlikely, on its own, to lead to increased enrolments.

A project focused solely on increased awareness would not be funded under Innovative Solutions Support. Increased awareness with a concrete plan to engage with the local community (via a support provider who can act as a cultural broker to support such engagement) would be much more likely to be approved.

**What level of support is needed?**

Mentoring support is generally most successful when it occurs over time. This allows the service and mentor to develop a relationship and for the mentor to support changes to practice so that they become embedded. A series of mentoring sessions should be planned to provide information to educators and to support the incorporation of this information into daily practice. Cultural Mentoring projects typically last between 3-9 months.

The exact nature and level of support needed will depend on the specific circumstances of each service and the identified barriers to inclusion.

In developing a Cultural Mentoring project consideration should be given to the following:

- The level of change required
- The current capacity of educators
- Whether the project aims to support greater inclusion for children who are already enrolled at the service, or to increase enrolments from the local community (or both)
- Whether the project will also include Bilingual Support (see below for more information about this)
- Whether the proposed program of support is realistic in terms of its demands on educator time and participation
- Whether there is sufficient time between proposed mentoring sessions to allow educators to implement changes
- Whether there is a sufficient number of mentoring sessions to support educators to effectively incorporate new practices
- How the proposed project will help the service to form connections with the local community

**How can the benefits of Cultural Mentoring be sustained?**

The purpose of Cultural Mentoring support is to increase educator capacity to include children and families from a specific cultural group. While the mentor's support in achieving this is essential it is equally important that educators can sustain the project outcomes after the project has finished.

Projects should therefore be designed to be sustainable in the long term. Services should consider specific strategies to achieve this. These could include:

- Providing greater support in the initial stages of the project and tapering it off as educators become more confident in implementing new practices
- Planning implementation strategies to occur between mentoring sessions
- Appointing a specific person (or people) to be a “champion” for the project
- Collecting information from Cultural Mentoring sessions to share with new educators in future
- Including the project on meeting agendas to ensure that it is revisited on a regular basis
- Facilitating connections to key community members to enable the service to build a relationship that can continue after the project is completed

### How does Cultural Mentoring link to Bilingual Support?

In some cases, services may need Bilingual Support and Cultural Mentoring at the same time. This may occur where barriers to inclusion include language barriers as well as a lack of cultural awareness. Bilingual Facilitators often provide cultural mentoring support informally through their work alongside other educators. Where this is the case, the support is still classified as Bilingual Support.

When such support is provided in a more formal or planned way (e.g.: through organised team meetings or professional development sessions) and/or where it is provided by a separate cultural mentor in addition to the Bilingual Facilitator, then the project is considered to be Cultural Mentoring.

For Cultural Mentoring projects that include Bilingual Support, services should use the Cultural Mentoring including Bilingual Support application form.