



# CHILD'S VOICE

**Our children have the right to be heard**  
(VACCA)



## A Child's Voice

Children can become invisible, their voice unheard, when our work is crises driven and our focus is on carers and parents. Hearing a child's voice relies on listening, understanding and acting wisely on what they say. Only this allows us to respond to each child's needs, understand their views and encourage them to ask for help when they need it.

For children to form their views and have a voice, we need to provide them with age appropriate and accurate information about things that affect them. Our practice needs to value their contribution to understanding their own experiences and determining the course of their own lives.

Giving Aboriginal children a voice relies on understanding Aboriginal culture – history, family, belonging and community. Aboriginal children are part of families and communities that have historically not had a voice and continue to be denied the right to self-determination. Aboriginal people have learned not to trust people in positions of authority. Aboriginal children might agree with plans or suggestions to please you, hiding their true feelings, views and concerns. Today, there are limited Aboriginal role models – in politics, education, health, and the media – for Aboriginal children to have courage to speak up and trust that they will be heard.

The experience Aboriginal children have with you – your ability to engage with them, build trust and act wisely on what they say – will directly impact on their self esteem, identity and capacity to develop a proud and loud Aboriginal voice.

The Child's Voice tools are based on the Kids Central Toolkit, developed by the Australian Catholic University. The Kids Central toolkit aims to help services place children in the centre of their work. It is a strengths based resource that talks about why working with kids is important, gives messages from kids about how they might best be supported and provides a series of activities, games and tools. VACCA redeveloped five **tools** from the Kids Central toolkit specially for Aboriginal children and provided **talking tips** and **guidance** for the tools specially for Aboriginal children.


There are lots of other great resources in the Kids Central toolkit – the Worryometer, the how am I feeling today card, a list of boredom busters to name a few – available on the Kids Central website.

[http://www.acu.edu.au/about\\_acu/faculties\\_institutes\\_and\\_centres/centres/institute\\_of\\_child\\_protection\\_studies/kids\\_central\\_toolkit](http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties_institutes_and_centres/centres/institute_of_child_protection_studies/kids_central_toolkit)

*We need to tell our Aboriginal kids that they are valued and loved and that their culture is valued and respected. The best protection we can offer any child is to give them a sense of belonging and a sense that they are active players in determining their future.*

(Bamblett, M. & Lewis, P. – Speaking Up Not Talking Down: Doing the Rights Thing by Strengthening Culture for Indigenous Children, 2006)

## 2 • Child's Voice



These Child's Voice tools aim to help workers engage with kids and get to know them, understand their worries and wishes and develop plans that are child centred and informed. They are based on the view that if you do not get to know kids, build trust and understand their family and culture, kids are unlikely to talk with you about the tough stuff. We hope these are a springboard to child centred practice.

*There have always been people who have listened, sometimes been people who have heard, and perhaps less often those who have acted wisely on what children have had to say.*

(Roberts 2008)

## Our Children have the RIGHT to be heard

Today, children are no longer 'seen but not heard'; they are seen as having a growing capacity to exercise their rights and determine their own interests.

The right of the child to be heard has been protected since 1989 under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 12 of this legally binding Convention says that:

***Children have the right to have a say in what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.***

(UNICEF: A simplified version of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

In Victoria, the child's right to be heard is included in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 in many places. For example  
*...In determining what decision to make or action to take in the best interests of the child, consideration must be given to...(d) the child's views and wishes, if they can be reasonably ascertained, and they should be given such weight as is appropriate in the circumstances (S.10(3)).*



## The Child's Voice Tools

**I'm deadly:** To find out a bit about the child and how they see themselves - their strengths & dreams

**All about me:** To find out a bit more about the child - their feelings and wishes

**People in my life:** To help kids identify who is important to them

**My journey:** To help kids remember things in their life

**Getting from here to there:** To find out about some of the things the child wants

**Blank Page:** For anything

The tools are for kids aged around 5 years and up. You'll need to decide on the appropriateness of using the tools depending on your assessment of the child.

Completing each tool might take about 20 minutes. Some kids will take longer – be careful not to overdo it. The tools can all be completed over a few sessions at the child's pace and they can be used regularly and repeatedly.

Be prepared.

- Take Templates – take a few copies as kids might want to have more than one go; copy in A3 to give kids extra space.
- Take coloured textas or pencils, stickers and magazines - kids who aren't keen on writing or drawing can cut out words or pictures from magazines.
- Use VACCA's Yarnin' up Strong cards as an added strengths based resource

*To have voice strengthens resilience by encouraging self-reliance.  
To have voice strengthens resilience by empowering the disempowered.*

(Bamblett & Lewis, 2006)



## Talking Tips

We want to encourage kids to talk about their experiences and needs, their hopes for their future, their safety, their involvement in services and 'tough stuff', like their fears and worries, what makes them feel unsafe and what harm they have experienced.

For kids to have a voice with you, you will need to get to know each other and take the time to build trust. This is an important step for kids to trust you enough to talk about their worries and wishes.

## Think about the environment

*Kids are more likely to relax, engage with you and share their thoughts and feelings in child-friendly spaces.*

- Child friendly spaces are calm and not overcrowded. They allow you to sit at the same level as the child and side by side.
- Child friendly spaces include kid-friendly posters, bright colours and artwork, games that two can play and comfortable seats. They include coloured pencils, textas (or magazines and scissors) to allow kids to draw rather than tell or draw and tell
- Some kids are more relaxed outside, in a park or backyard, going for a walk.
- If you must see kids in unfriendly environments create child friendly pockets by taking coloured pencils and textas, VACCA's Yarnin' Up Strong cards, stamp or stickers.
- Remember to ask kids where they would like to see you; also remember that it is sometimes important to see older kids away from their regular environments of school and home.
- Sometimes, kids need a space that feels private before they feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings. This can be especially important when talking about people close to them, like their parents, siblings or carers.



Child friendly spaces are culturally safe and give clear messages that Aboriginal culture is valued and respected. Displaying Aboriginal flags and images, Aboriginal books and puzzles, using tools with Aboriginal art and design give immediate messages about Aboriginal culture.

Understand the memories an environment holds and where a child feels culturally safe– for example, do not assume that a child will feel culturally safe at school, allow the child to have a say in where you meet.

**Explain your role**

*Kids need information about the events and processes affecting their lives in a way that recognises their needs and wishes*

- Talk to kids about what they can expect from you and from VACCA, who you are and where you fit in their life.  
*Sometimes we will spend time together to help me understand what you like, what you need and what you want. We'll do things together, play games, do activities, talk a bit. I do this with you because you are important. How you feel and what you think is important to me.*
- **...and explain confidentiality** – *I will ask you who you want me to tell about the things we discuss. If I think you are not safe, I will take action to make sure you are safe. Your safety is most important to me.*

**Explain VACCA** – VACCA is **for** Aboriginal children  
- VACCA has been around for 40 years and has a proud history of helping out Aboriginal kids like them.






## Find out who kids are

*Kids say that they find it difficult to talk with adults they don't know or trust* – they are unlikely to talk about their plans for the future without first engaging with you. Likewise you are unlikely to be able to talk with kids meaningfully without getting to know them

- Kids need to relax, have fun and play –use games and ice breakers, use the tools
- Spend time with kids – build rapport, listen attentively, observe behaviour and interaction
- Understand each child's capacity. Don't have unrealistic expectations. For example, Sometimes adults ask kids about how they would feel if... little kids don't know
- Be honest, don't pretend to be something that you are not - kids spot frauds
- Remember simple things that help you get to know another person
  - *Quick clicks* – Even if you are visiting the adults in the child's life, take the opportunity to 'touch base'.
  - *Act of kindness* – small kind gestures, like bringing some food if you pick them up from school.
  - *Same same* – find things you have in common, like favourite colour or music etc.
  - *You're the expert* – ask kids questions about their area of interests and let them be the expert. For example – *What position do you play in netball, how is that different from centre, I have no idea...*



Aboriginal kids can be shy and reluctant to talk about themselves. They watch how you listen to others like their parents, siblings and carers. Do an activity before you settle down to talk – kick a footy together, use art and play based methods to engage

- **I'm deadly** – use this tool to reinforce the child's strengths and achievements
- **My journey** – use this tool for kids to build memories



## Getting to know Aboriginal kids means getting to know family and community.

*Young people stressed the importance of family ... both biological relatives and other important adults in the community. They felt that family provided them with support, with belonging and often identified family as being the most important thing in their lives.*

*(They've Gotta Listen, 2007)*

Some Aboriginal children can tell you all about their family and community – they can be the experts. **People in my life** – use this tool for kids to talk about family and friends.

Sometimes, Aboriginal kids can feel uncomfortable talking about things they think are private to family or community. They can say there are no worries to avoid 'shaming' their family. Even when Aboriginal kids are reassured that it is OK to talk (by Elders or others in their community) they may still feel uncomfortable in doing so.


*these kids have been taught that it's not ok to talk about this stuff and it's hard for them, even when they've been told it's alright for them to do so. It's kinda like if you're raised not to have your elbows on the table and then on holidays you're told it's OK. Well, you're probably still not going to put your elbows on the table 'cos it doesn't feel right. You don't feel comfortable with it. It's the same with this kinda thing".*

*(They've Gotta Listen, 2007)*

## Build kids up to build confidence

- **Kids need lots of praise.** For every negative experience a child encounters and every negative message they receive about themselves, they need five positive experiences and affirmations to build them up.  
(Peace Foundation, New Zealand)
- Children need to be acknowledged for who they are and what they do
  - *You're a cool kid, I like you, I'm so happy to see you, How are you? –*
  - *I like the way you do that, You're drawing is deadly, That was helpful/kind of you...*
- Smile, meet their eyes, remember something they previously told you and ask about it





For Aboriginal children, the impact of racism directed at them or another family member or towards Aboriginal people in the community is likely to have had a major impact. Imagine applying the 5:1 rule - for each racist statement an Aboriginal child hears, they need to hear 5 statements that praise their culture, their community, the strength of Aboriginal people.

VACCA's **Yarnin' Up Strong** cards are a great way to do this. The prompts on the back of the cards provide examples to use in yarnin' with children to reinforce that they are strong and deadly and help them feel positive and proud Aboriginal children.

### Getting to know Aboriginal kids means getting to know Aboriginal culture

For many Aboriginal kids, culture represents the positive parts of their community, their sense of being connected to others and the joint ways they do things.

Some Aboriginal children who come into care may not know about their Aboriginal cultural identity. Reassure them and support them to start to understand their culture.

Some Aboriginal children who come into care may be apprehensive about their Aboriginal cultural identity. Take it slow and be lead by the child. If they are mad for footy, make sure you know the Aboriginal players in their team. If they are avid readers, share some books by Aboriginal authors.

- *culture holds you together, keeps you going*
- *it's like what helps you through*
- *culture is who you are, so if you don't know it you don't know who you are*
- *it's like your family, where you come from, something you've got in common, it's like everything*
- *culture's the thing that makes us different to other [young people]*

(Young people in They've Gotta Listen, 2007)



### Understand the impact of trauma

- Build safety and trust gently
- Understand that some children have been in unsafe situations and will take time to trust you
- Be aware of the impact of trauma – on a child’s capacity to build trust or even remember things like the last thing you said to them

Learning culture will help Aboriginal children build resilience. Being involved in VACCA cultural programs, using the **Yarnin’ Up Strong** cards and getting to know other Aboriginal kids and families are great ways to build resilience.



### Understand what kids want

Kids tell us that before they can be involved in decision-making, first they need information.

- Talk to kids about what they do and don’t want to know; decide on the level of detail you will tell them
- Give information about the events and processes that affect them in straightforward and concrete language
- Think about providing visual reminders
- **Getting from here to there** – use this tool to talk with kids about their views and wishes.

*too often we make the mistake of shaping an agenda **for** children in out-of-home care, rather than **with them**.*  
(Megan Mitchell, Children’s Commissioner, Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies Conference, 17 August 2016)



## Kids in Care

For Aboriginal kids, family is vitally important. Aboriginal kids who are disconnected from their family and community are at significant risk, now and in the future.

Kids in care can struggle with the emotional effects of past abuse and neglect, as well as learning how to be part of a new 'care' family, while keeping their relationship with their family.

Some kids who are not living with their family may feel the need to please those who are caring for them; they might avoid sharing feelings that they think will disappoint or upset their carers. Reassure kids and support them to understand their family and carer relationships.

## Be prepared

As you play games, do activities and talk with kids, some kids will tell you about sad things in their life.

- Listen carefully, give the child the chance to talk freely
- Avoid questioning the child, beyond what they freely want to discuss - quizzing children can be interpreted as disbelief
- Control expressions of anger or shock
- Reassure the child - *I believe you; You did the right thing by talking to me*
- Reassure the child they are not to blame (If they indicate they believe they are to blame) *It is never OK for kids to get hurt*
- Acknowledge it can be hard to talk about such things
- Avoid making promises you cannot keep (like promising not to tell)
- Let the child ask you questions. If you do not know the answer to a child's question, say you don't know but will get back to them.
- Indicate what your next steps will be - *I will get back to you and tell you what will happen next.*

# I'm deadly!



## WHY?

To find out a bit about the child and how they see themselves - their strengths and dreams

## WHAT TO DO?

### Explain

- Everyone is different. These differences make you deadly.
- Talk about some of the things that you have noticed about them already – things that you admire or you've noticed they do
- Let's take a look at some of the things that are important to you

### Using the tool

- Work your way through the **I'm deadly** tool together
- Let the child know they can write words or draw pictures in each circle.
- Let them know if they don't want to fill a space in that's OK – you can leave it blank or come up with ideas together

### Be Careful

- Some kids can find it hard to talk about their strengths. Without taking over, gently give them some ideas or remind them about what others have told you - *Your mum told me you were deadly at ....You're great at making me laugh...*

### Finish

- Ask if you can take a copy so you don't forget
- Ask where they will display **I'm deadly** and who they would want to see it.



# I'm deadly!

Child's Voice • 13

© VACCA & Australian Catholic University  
© Australian Capital Territory 2009 All rights reserved

# People in my life

## WHY?

To help kids identify who is important to them and identify when kids have only a small number of supportive people in their lives

## WHAT TO DO?

### Explain

- There are different people in your life – family that lives with me; family that doesn't live with me; friends; people in your community; teachers; counsellors; classmates; sports coach; anyone else?
- Ask kids to think about people that are important to them
- You can also ask children about pets

### Using the tool

- Work your way through the **People in my life** tool together.
- List the people the child identifies, talking about who they are and what the child remembers about them
- Help kids to think about
  - Which people they are connected to
  - Which people they would like to connect better/more to
  - How you could help them connect with people they see as important in their life
- Think about how the people the child has identified can be helped to support the child (can you provide transport so kids can remain involved in sports teams, can the child have sleepovers with past friends, can kids keep seeing mates from school...)

### Be Careful

- This activity can highlight children's loss and can bring feelings of grief. Allowing kids to feel these emotions is important. Working with kids to form new relationships – with new friends and with supportive adults, is also important.

### Finish

- Ask if you can take a copy so you don't forget
- Talk about how great it is that there are people in the child's life who are important to them and can support them

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_



Where I live and who  
lives with me...



Who does not live with me  
but is important to me...



# People in my life

Child's Voice • 15

© VACCA & Australian Catholic University  
© Australian Capital Territory 2009 All rights reserved

# All about me



## WHY?

To find out a bit more about the child - their feelings and wishes

## WHAT TO DO?

### Explain

- Everyone is different. These differences make you deadly.
- Let's take a look at some more of the things that are important to you

### Using the tool

- Work your way through the **All About Me** tool together
- Let the child know they can write words or draw pictures in each circle.
- Let them know if they don't want to fill a space in that's OK – you can leave it blank or come up with ideas together

### Be Careful

- Try not to rush through questions; kids might need some time to think about them before answering
- You don't have to complete this in one sitting; take time to talk
- The number of questions could be overwhelming for some kids – explain that it is OK to leave some things blank for the time being (or forever)

### Finish

- Ask if you can take a copy so you don't forget
- Ask them where they will display **All About Me** and who they want to see it.
- Talk about how you might use the things they have told you in the way you support them, keeping them in the loop.





The thing I like doing most is...

The thing that's most special to me is...

Draw a picture of yourself

What I most want right now...

I worry when...

I feel sad when...

To feel safe I need...

When I'm feeling sad I...

My favourite song is...

I want adults to know that I don't like...

When I am worried I like to talk to...

# All about me

# My journey

## WHY?

To help kids remember the good things in life and identify things that kids would like to remember

## WHAT TO DO?

*Memories can be limited for children in care. There are sometimes limited memory prompts – like photos, school reports or art work - and limited people who carry these memories.*

### Explain

- It's important to remember some of the good things in life - something you did well, or enjoyed
- Let's take a look at some more of the things that are important to you to remember
- These can be big memories or little ones – they can be over the last week or month or your life

### Using the tool

- Work your way through the **My journey** tool together,
- Let the child know they can write words or draw pictures in each circle.
- Let them know if they don't know about something and want to know more, that's OK – For example, some kids might not know things like where they were born and how big they were at birth
- Record where the child would like to know more
- Talk about how you might fill in their memory gaps together

### Be Careful

- You don't have to complete it in one sitting; take time to talk
- This activity can remind kids about less happy times. Allowing children to talk about things that are sad is important.

### Finish

- Ask if you can take a copy so you don't forget
- Talk about how you might use the things they have told you in the way you support them,
- Create happy memories by encouraging children to spend a few minutes each night thinking about what has gone well during the day – things they've done or enjoyed, a joke someone told that made them laugh, something they did for someone else that helped...

Life is a journey.

What are the important things that have happened to you on your journey?

Are there things that you want to know about your life?



# My journey

Child's Voice • 19

© VACCA & Australian Catholic University  
© Australian Capital Territory 2009 All rights reserved

# Getting from here to there

## WHY?

To find out about the child's views and wishes and identify how they could occur.

## WHAT TO DO?

### Explain

- I want to understand how things are for you now and your hopes and wishes in the future

### Using the tool

- Take one area at a time - for example:
  - In my family
  - Where I'm living
  - At school
  - With my friends
- Under 'Right Now':
  - Ask the child to write or draw to describe how this area of their life is right now.
  - Encourage them to talk about good things and worries
- Under 'How I would like things to be..' have the child write/draw how they would like things to be in the future. This could be in 1 month, 3 months or a year.
- Along the footprints, talk together about ways that you could work together to get them to where they want to be. Plans should be clear and concrete and easy for kids to understand
- For older kids, identifying some of the challenges that they and you might encounter. You can do this along the footprints.

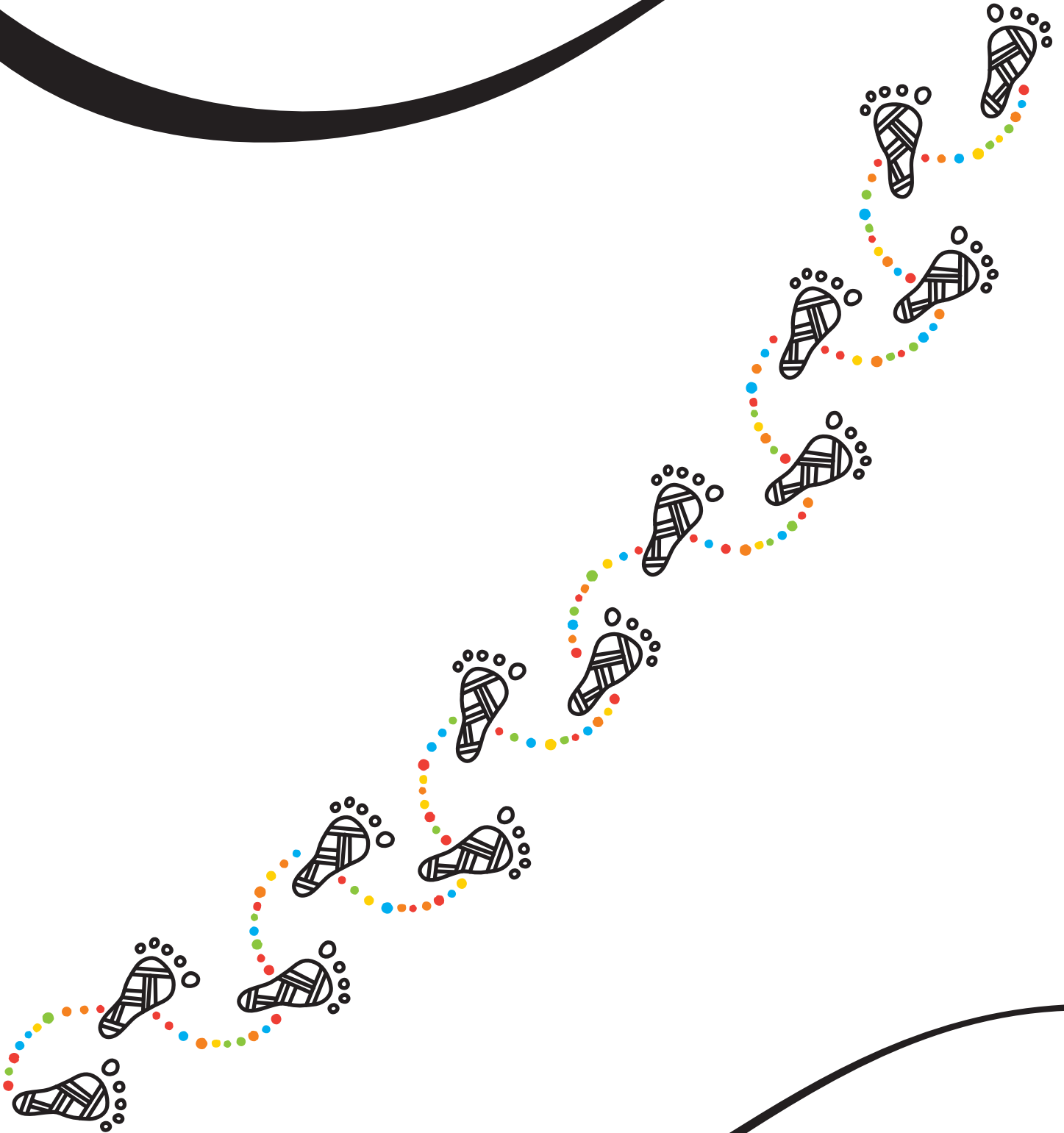
### Be Careful

- Avoid leaving kids with worries that you have not talked about by completing each area in their life before going on to the next.
- Be aware of how the child is managing the discussions – different kids will be able to participate for different lengths of time.
- Do not go for more than 30 minutes. If you have not finished, put away for next time. But make sure you finish on a positive note.
- Sometimes kids will identify things they wish were different but they don't believe are resolvable. This is OK - work together on solutions, take a strengths based approach and give kids opportunity to be hopeful
- Sometimes kids will identify things that are not possible – this is OK. Acknowledge the child's wishes and talk about what is and is not possible; do not promise what you know you cannot deliver.

### Finish

- Ask if you can take a copy so you don't forget
- Ask them who they want to see **Getting from here to there**

How I would like things to be...



Right Now

Getting from here to there



