

VACCA Cultural Strengthening Evaluation Summary



VACCA
VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD
AND COMMUNITY AGENCY
Connected by culture

Return to Country

Insights from an evaluation of VACCA's Return to Country program – helping Aboriginal children and young people in care to reconnect with family, culture, and Country.

INTRODUCTION

What is Return to Country?

Return to Country is a program for Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. The program supports them to visit their Country – to connect with family and Elders, learn about history and culture, and build pride in who they are and where they come from. Return to Country trips are deeply personal and vary in length depending on each child's circumstances.

Why was this evaluation done?

This evaluation looked at nine Return to Country trips delivered from 2018 and 2022. It set out to understand what's working well, what impact the trips are having on young people, and how the program can be strengthened moving forward.



While every Return to Country trip is different, activities often include:

Reconnecting with family, including aunties, uncles and grandparents

Visiting sacred cultural sites

Spending time on traditional Country and in culturally significant places

Learning about history, stories, art, language, lore, land, and kinship systems

Guidance from Elders

Strengthening cultural identity through shared experiences and storytelling

WHAT DID THE EVALUATION FIND?



Children and young people deepened their Aboriginal identity

Participants developed stronger connections to family, culture and Country. Staff observed greater confidence, pride and understanding of identity.



The process was healing for families and community

Trips strengthened bonds with family and opened space for healing. For many participants this created moments of reconnection and pride.



Staff gained new insight of trauma and resilience

Staff gained a deeper understanding of intergenerational trauma, and the enduring strength and resilience of Aboriginal families.



Planning was intensive – but essential

Trip planning was logistically and culturally complex, but necessary. Outcomes were strongest when staff had time to build relationships on Country and support children's needs before and after the trip.



Flexible funding enabled culturally safe delivery

The flexible structure allowed staff to respond to emerging needs during planning and delivery while maintaining program quality.



Follow-up helped sustain connection

Ongoing contact with family and Country was key to sustaining the benefits. Where follow-up was built in, it reinforced cultural connection and a trip's impact.

“If you asked them who their mob was, they didn't know... And after those trips, they had that certainty. You could ask them that and they would proudly say ‘This is my mob. This is where we're from.’” — VACCA program staff

WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS?

For government and policymakers

- **Recognise** cultural connection and Return to Country as core to service delivery.
- **Sustainably fund** cultural aspects of services delivered by Aboriginal organisations.

For VACCA management and delivery teams

- **Strengthen** referral processes and co-design objectives with families and staff, prioritising early cultural planning and family identification.
- **Apply** a healing and trauma-informed approach throughout planning and delivery, with supports for families and staff, including structured staff debriefs.
- **Use** a team-based approach, ensuring staff have the right mix of logistical, relational and cultural skills to navigate complex dynamics.
- **Embed** follow-up within the program model to sustain young people's connection to family and Country.
- **Capture** outcomes and learnings through case studies, recordings, and stories.
- **Continue** strengthening monitoring and evaluation through a dedicated framework.

For the Gandel Foundation and other funding agencies

- **Continue** funding and supporting innovation and evaluations that enable Aboriginal organisations to build evidence and develop new programs.

Find out more 

Learn more about Return to Country:
[\[Read online\]](#)

For questions or more information,
contact us: redteam@vacca.org

About this Evaluation

The evaluation was commissioned by VACCA and conducted by Lirata Consulting. We gratefully acknowledge the Gandel Foundation for funding this work and its evaluation. Program staff helped shape the evaluation design and program logic through a participatory approach. Due to COVID-19, trip cancellations meant the evaluation focused on nine complete trips.

About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency is a statewide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation servicing children, young people, families, and community.