



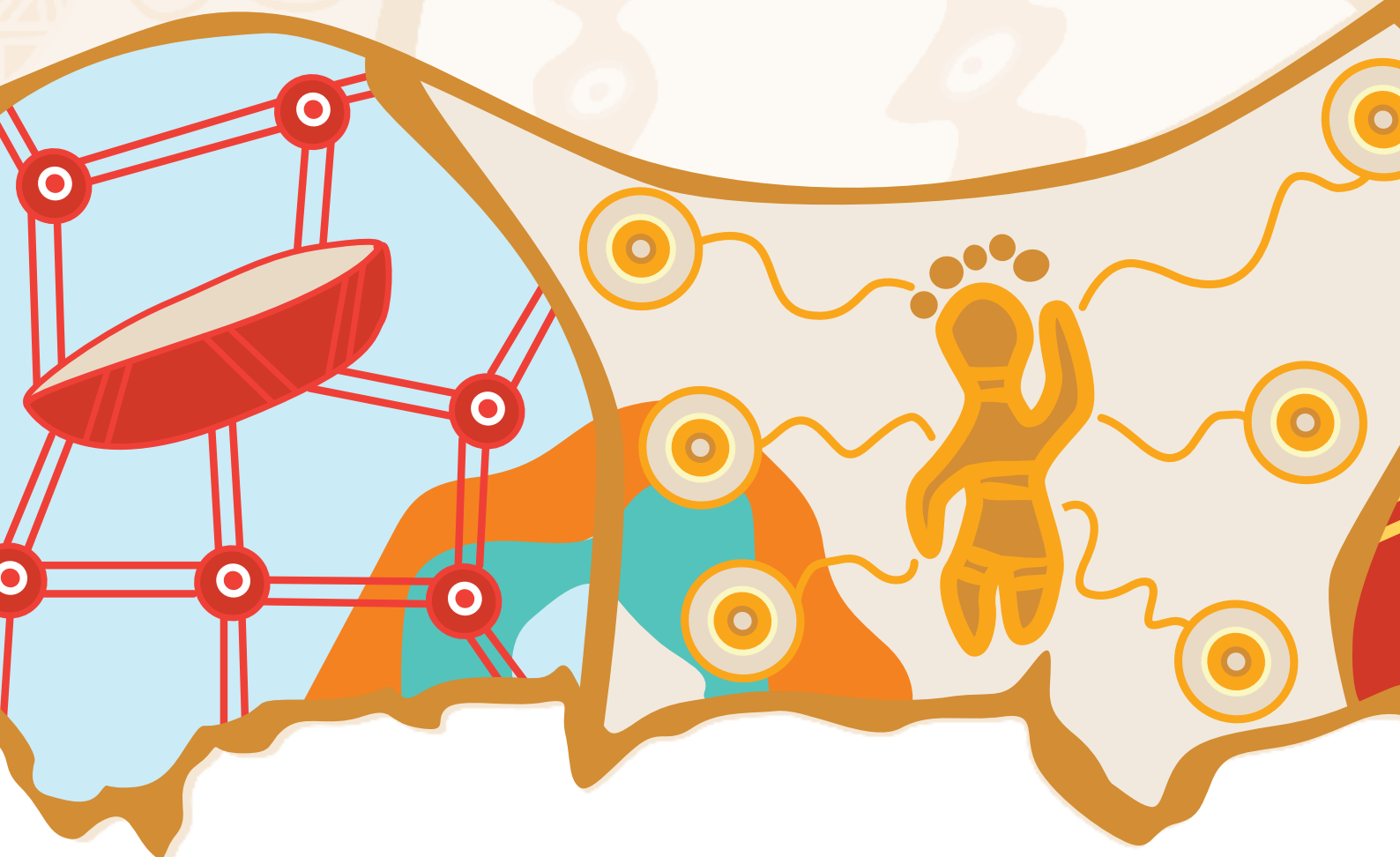
Connected by culture

VACCA

VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD AND COMMUNITY AGENCY

Knowledge foundations of Cultural Therapeutic Ways

A summary of the literature that informs
VACCA's Cultural Therapeutic Ways – a unique
approach guiding our work across the organisation



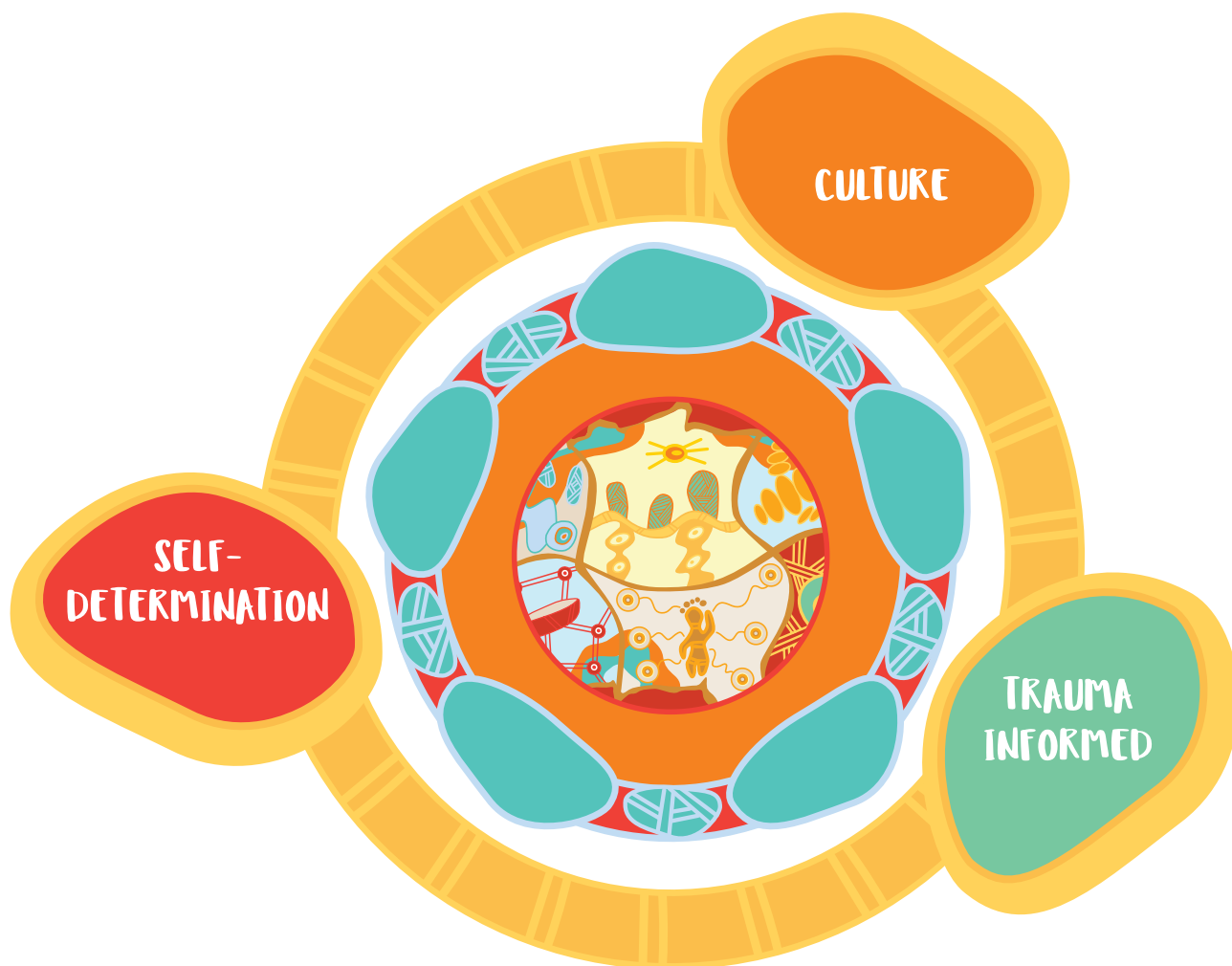


Image: VACCA's Cultural Therapeutic Ways Knowledge Pillars

About VACCA

VACCA is the largest Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in Victoria. We work alongside Aboriginal children, young people, families and adults across a wide range of areas – Care Services, Child and Family Services, Youth Services, Early Years, Housing and Homelessness, Foster Care, Reconnecting & Finding Family, Justice Services, Family Violence, Cultural Strengthening, and more.



Introduction

What is Cultural Therapeutic Ways?

Cultural Therapeutic Ways (CTW) guides the way we work at VACCA, providing an Aboriginal lens that links practice with outcomes. It brings together Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing to support healing and connection. CTW is grounded in the three pillars of culture, trauma-informed practice, and self-determination. It reflects how we walk alongside children, young people, families, and adults in ways that are relational, culturally responsive, and led by Aboriginal values.

Why this literature summary?

This summary provides an overview of the theory and evidence that underpin Cultural Therapeutic Ways. It draws on a wide range of literature—research, practice experience, and Aboriginal-led knowledge—shaped over many years by VACCA and other Aboriginal community organisations across the sector. Our goal is to contribute to the growing evidence base for Aboriginal-led practice in Australia and to make this knowledge more accessible across programs, policy, and community.

What the literature tells us

Much of what has traditionally been recognised as ‘evidence’ in the child and family services sector has been shaped by non-Indigenous worldviews. While this body of work has value, it often overlooks the strengths, systems and stories within Aboriginal communities. CTW responds to this gap by centring Aboriginal knowledge systems and placing equal value on lived experience, cultural practice, and community expertise.

About this literature review

The literature reviewed here draws on decades of Aboriginal knowledge, advocacy and program design, including a wide range of published literature, program documents, and practice wisdom. It builds on an earlier [international literature review](#) done by VACCA and the University of Melbourne, while focusing more closely on Australian sources that reflect Aboriginal experiences and local contexts.

The process was guided by Aboriginal researchers from VACCA’s CTW team to ensure the review was culturally grounded and relevant to our work. The evidence is presented through VACCA’s three knowledge pillars — *culture, trauma-informed practice, and self-determination* — which underpin the CTW approach across the organisation.

Together, these pillars offer a clear direction for the way we work— one that is centred in healing and grounded in cultural connection. The following sections explore each pillar in turn.

Evidence behind Cultural Therapeutic Ways: Our three Knowledge Pillars

Knowledge Pillar One:

Culture

Culture is defined by shared ideas, meanings, symbols, rituals, rules and language. It enables people to communicate, understand each other, and is central to identity. It shapes our beliefs and values, and influences our choices, attitudes and behaviours (Bamblett et al. 2012: 35). Importantly, culture “is the backdrop against which all circumstances and events affecting children occur” (Gough & Lynch 2002: 341).

As a values-based system of how to live within the world, culture shows our philosophies and purpose, shared and learnt behaviours, attitudes, ceremony and thoughts. It is held within tangible representations such as, through art, food, song, and dance.

Within Aboriginal communities, culture is transmitted through relational networks, including family structures, community bonds, and intergenerational teachings. These kinship systems are the organisational scaffolding for social roles and authority (Parker and Milroy 2014). They provide relationships that are the link to a sense of belonging, connection to land, and shared cultural values, contributing to the resilience and strength of Aboriginal families.

Relationships enable bonding that plays a critical role in wellbeing (Parker and Milroy 2014). They are the foundation of identity, highlighting the significance of kinship ties, community connections, and spiritual relationships in shaping individual and collective experiences. Western culture is often experienced as alienating, assimilative, or otherwise harmful by Aboriginal community members (Gone 2009). Therefore, it is vital to understand culture as protective.

Having a strong network of family including community Elders can have a powerful positive impact on an Aboriginal child who is experiencing a difficult situation with either parents or family (SNAICC 2021; Black, Bamblett and Frederico 2024). We know that Aboriginal children who are connected to culture and Community, and those that have strong role models are more likely to develop confidence and resilience (Gee et al. 2014; Bourke et al. 2018; Butler et al. 2019; Salmon et al. 2019).

Culture also revives valuable elements of traditional Aboriginal societies that form cultural connection and cultural identity that act as protective factors of wellbeing (Dudgeon, Cox, D’Anna, et al. 2012; Dudgeon, Bray, Blustein, Calma, McPhee, Ring & Clarke 2022; Dudgeon et al. 2014b; Tsey, Whiteside, Haswell-Elkins, Bainbridge, Cadet-James & Wilson 2010).

Traditional customs and practices can be used for healing and spiritual renewal (Echo-Hawk, 2011; Gone, 2022). Through this lens, cultural preservation and revitalisation are not symbolic gestures but essential components of health and wellbeing. Reclaiming and strengthening traditional values, customs, and practices provides a buffer to mitigate risks from the personal and social effects of colonisation. This is based on an understanding that healing, protecting and connecting is not achieved alone.

*“I’ve learnt that you can be proud
of the skin that you wear. I teach the younger
ones what we got taught, to act grown up,
to help out, and to making sure that
everyone is safe”*

Young person, 16 years,
Deadly Mentor @ Healesville Sanctuary.
Cultural Camp, April 2018.



Knowledge Pillar Two:

Trauma Informed

Theories of trauma are based on the connections between neurobiology, attachment and resilience. Evidence shows that “people are healthiest and most productive when we are born, grow, live, work, and raise our families in social groups” (Perry 2006).

Colonisation in Australia has caused (and continues to cause) trauma for Aboriginal people, resulting in the transmission of emotional and psychological injury across generations, via parent-child attachment relationships, parenting, family functioning and disconnection from extended family, culture, and society (Atkinson 2007). This traces a direct correlation between the impacts of colonisation, and ongoing experiences of individual and collective trauma (Gatwiri et al 2021), and often includes experiencing ongoing racism, violence, and disadvantage (Gatwiri et al 2021).

Layers of complex trauma also helps to explain the over representation of Aboriginal children in out of home care (Atkinson 2013). Many Aboriginal children in out of home care have kin from the Stolen Generations (Bamblett & Lewis 2007).

When attachment is severed and caregiving systems break down, or lapse, neural systems can be altered which can result in long term social and emotional difficulties that effect children through to adulthood (Perry 2006). Aboriginal people experiencing complex trauma have often been misdiagnosed, and re-traumatised by inappropriate programs or service delivery and have become understandably mistrustful and fearful of contact with such services (Atkinson, Nelson, Brooks, Atkinson & Ryan 2014). When it has been acknowledged, trauma has often been

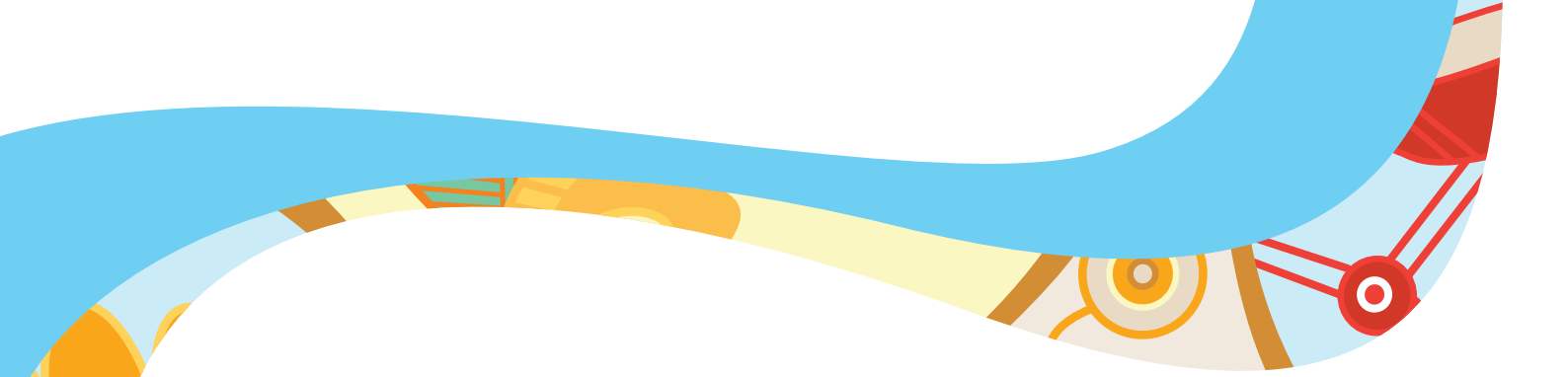
viewed with a deficit lens (Tuck 2009).

Theories of trauma underpin VACCA’s work because they facilitate understanding culturally appropriate responses to trauma while also building upon the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people.

There are a range of models for incorporating trauma informed theories into service delivery – most acknowledge current and historical impact on individuals, families and communal groups, create environments that are physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe, support relationship building with service providers, and support people to regain a sense of control over their daily lives and social and emotional wellbeing care (Cubillo 2021; Huang, Flatow, Biggs et al. 2014; Atkinson 2013; Castellano 2006). They centralise the relationship between intergenerational trauma and attachment in the context of the specific challenges faced by Aboriginal families. Practice pivots on healthy attachment relationships that allow children to safely explore new experiences and to develop regulation and resilience to heal, connect and protect.

“Trauma informed is not just using western ideas, this can be harmful for us and our communities, trauma informed needs to be done always with a cultural lens”

VACCA staff member



Knowledge Pillar Three:

Self-Determination

Self-determination is widely understood as the capacity to have control over one's own life. It sits in harmony with the universal, basic human right to live free from discrimination, for people to enjoy their own culture, profess and practice their religion (Australian Human Rights Commission 2024).

As something that is embodied, self-determination is a mix of skills and knowledge that can enable individuals and communities to understand their choices and make decisions based on their own interests and needs (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer 1998). This can include monitoring and regulating behaviours, setting goals and directing actions (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer 1998).

Self-determination and community governance consistent with traditional cultural practices and values is a cornerstone of the Indigenous Rights framework grounded in the idea that Indigenous peoples are entitled to control over their lives and destinies (UN General Assembly, 2007).

In Australia, Aboriginal people's right to self-determination have been disrupted by the devastation of colonisation (Griffiths, Coleman, Lee, Madden 2016; Dudgeon et al 2022; Watson 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2007). Therefore, like colonisation, self-determination is an ongoing unfurling of legal and socio-cultural processes to reinstate Indigenous sovereignty, and ensure that communities can meet their social, cultural and economic needs (Atkinson 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2007). Self-determination is central for Aboriginal individuals and communities to overcome previous and continuing structural disadvantage and disempowerment.

For Individuals, self-determination is an appropriate and effective strategy for promoting healing and wellbeing among Aboriginal people (Dudgeon et al 2022; Tsey et al. 2009).

For families, self-determination can mean facilitating experiences of informed decision making and exercising choices (Chamberlain C, Gray P, Bennet D, Elliott A, Jackomos M, Krakouer J, Langton M et. al. 2022).

At a community level, self-determination sees Aboriginal people as not are fully involved in their activities, with the skills, decision making power and resources to achieve their own goals for their own community (Dudgeon, Rickwood, Garvey and Gridley 2014a).

Evidence tells us that Aboriginal controlled systems are linked to a community's capacity to retain their cultural values, principles, practices, and traditions and improved outcomes for Indigenous communities (Behrendt, Jorgensen & Vivian 2017). This means self-determining communities have access to culturally relevant resources that might incorporate traditional healing practices, cultural ceremonies, and community gatherings to strengthen family bonds and reinforce cultural identity.

Self-determination therefore is strongly aligned with learning and passing on of cultural knowledge, passing down traditional practices, language, storytelling, and spiritual beliefs from one generation. It stems from opportunities that support families leading and advocating for their own needs and aspirations. This means that spaces need to be made that provide opportunities to be involved in the delivery and evaluation of the services that they engage with to heal, protect and connect.

"In our community, we see strength in knowing what you're good at, what you struggle with, and making choices that matter to us. It's about taking charge of our own actions and staying focused on what we want to achieve. When we do this, we not only guide our own life but also we build a better future for all us mob"

VACCA staff member



Guiding our practice at VACCA

Much of what is currently recognised as 'evidence' is still shaped by Western perspectives, which can overlook Aboriginal strengths, knowledges, and ways of working. By continuing to grow the Aboriginal evidence base, and by drawing on Cultural Therapeutic Ways across our programs, VACCA is helping shape systems that support Aboriginal children, families and communities to thrive.

VACCA's work in documenting and sharing CTW contributes to filling these gaps. By building evidence grounded in Aboriginal voices and cultural practices, VACCA is helping ensure that future policy and practice are shaped by approaches that truly reflect and benefit our communities.



International research behind CTW

This summary mainly focuses on Australian sources. For insights into the international literature underpinning CTW, see:

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Find out more

Visit our website: www.vacca.org

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

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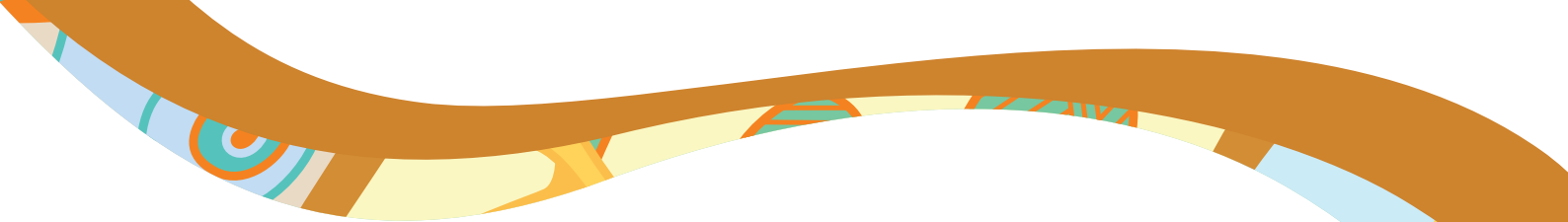
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VACCA's CTW Practice Framework



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