Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project

Authors: Len Collard, Uncle Mick Adams, Dave Palmer, John McMullan

Information Sheet Six

Organisations involved in supporting Aboriginal fathers

Across the country there are a small number of organisations that have directly turned their support towards Aboriginal fathers. Some of these organisations have been designed to specifically to support Aboriginal fathers and other men involved in caring for the lives of young people and children. Other organisations are supporting men and fathers in conjunction with a broader emphasis on things such as young people’s mental health, land and sea management, education, sport and recreation and housing.

The Yiriman Project (Kimberley region)

Since 2000, the Yiriman Project has worked with young people, their elders and other generations across the southern Kimberley. The Project represents attempts by a community dealing with one of the nation’s most pressing social challenges: the future for Aboriginal young people living in remote Australia. Yiriman is governed by senior Karajarri, Nyigina, Mangala and Walmatjarri cultural advisers and is managed by the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), a non-profit Aboriginal organisation concerned with social and cultural wellbeing.

Yiriman started because senior people (many senior men) were ‘worrying for’ young people who were harming themselves with drugs and ‘grog’ and getting in trouble
with the law. Following long-established traditions, they set about organising ‘back to country’ trips. The practice of storytelling is the reason for being for Yiriman elders. It gives elders the chance to have their accounts listened to, young people the chance to learn, and Aboriginal culture the chance to rejuvenate. In this way, young people become an active part of the stories that feature their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents while allowing young people’s own stories to emerge. The Project’s first coordinator, describes it in this way:

Yiriman is simple. It gives young people opportunities to reconnect and redevelop relationships with their old people and with country and build something positive. The objective is building stories in young people by providing resources to old people to travel out to country and transfer knowledge.

Another described it in this way, ‘on country, young people are listening to the old people, discussing their concerns ... learning more from elders with each trip to the area’.

Yiriman also gives people new experiences. Young people and their families get to visit different places, work with land management experts, share time with researchers and scientists, health practitioners, filmmakers and artists. They use new technology, including digital cameras, video, sound devices and global positioning system (GPS) equipment. This helps build opportunities for self-development, cultural knowledge transmission, land management work, respect for elders, literacy work and creative production.

In this way the Yiriman Project supports ancient systems of Aboriginal parenting where older members of the community transmit knowledge, values and old skills to young people via the involvement of middle-aged community people. As one cultural adviser explains:

the young cultural advisers are mentored and trained to take on leadership roles ... senior cultural advisers direct trips on country and establish appropriate

---

3 Taylor (2010)
4 Taylor (2010)
One writer describes this process as supporting what neighbouring group Kukatja call Kanyirninpa. Kanyirninpa is made manifest in a number of ways. It includes nurturing the young with older people taking responsibility and offering protection. In this way, Kanyirninpa involves teaching and learning so that older people help young people grow up the right way.  

This business of Kanyirninpa (holding, or carrying) young people is an act of exercising ‘respect’ towards others, creating conditions to reinforce social bonds and social obligations. It is expected that when the young people get older they will adopt the same practice and attitude towards their children. As one person puts it, ‘if you hold that person, that person will return that respect to you.’

This program’s emphasis on back to country work, intergenerational exchange and transmission and the specific needs of men and women gives Yiriman a strong focus on men’s care of the young in a deep cultural way.

**Ranger Programmes (Pilbara and Kimberley region)**

The Aboriginal ranger movement is one of Australia’s most popular and successful initiatives that provides employment to more than 600 Aboriginal people. It is a mechanism that allows local Aboriginal people to manage country, and supports a rich and emerging ‘new tradition’ that encourages senior people to offer advice and share the value of Aboriginal knowledge systems to younger people who are receiving formal training in western systems of land management.

Much of the funding for this work has been made available by the Federal Government’s Working on Country Program and the Real Jobs Program (Indigenous Land Corporation) with support from resource industry bodies and other corporate groups.

---

6 McCoy (2008)
Aboriginal ranger positions are real jobs that offer accredited conservation and land management qualifications. Ranger work can include:

- Biodiversity monitoring and research
- Traditional knowledge transfer
- Fee-for-service contracts
- Fire management
- Cultural site management
- Feral animal and weed management
- Cultural awareness and immersion experiences
- Tourism management
- School education programs and mentoring

Aboriginal men taking cultural advice by elders and senior custodians have carried out a large focus of the work. In this way Aboriginal ranger teams are often critical in the development of the caring capacity and fathering of local men. There are currently 13 Aboriginal ranger teams in the Kimberley and three in the Pilbara regions.

**Marmun Pit Stop (Perth area)**

The Marmun Pit Stop Program aims to provide a culturally appropriate health check service to assist Aboriginal men in taking care of their health. The name Marmun Pit Stop is made up from the Noongar word for man (maaman) and the metaphor of men’s bodies as a vehicle that needs to be checked, serviced and given the occasional overhaul in the same way a car needs attention. Men are invited to travel through seven different health checkpoints (or ‘pits’) where their health is assessed and treated (or ‘a service’) is provided. The program sits as part of the Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service.

Marmun Pit Stop’s focus on culturally useful ways to encourage the involvement of Aboriginal men in their health makes this a useful example of fathering and care across the generational through Aboriginal men’s health servicing.

---

9 Kimberley Land Council (2016)
**Nyoongar Sports Association (Perth area)**

This organisation has a broad focus on sport and promoting Noongar success in sport. It provides support to Aboriginal groups who are establishing sporting groups or teams and assists with the development of clubs and individuals. It offers various sport and recreation programs, accredited training in umpiring, coaching and sports medicine and provides sporting equipment and uniforms for communities and teams. However, one of the key features of Noongar Sports is its strong focus on community and family. This is particularly important given the central role that sport often plays in the lives of Aboriginal fathers and the opportunities it provides for men to take on leadership in raising children and offering support to their families. While not directly understood as a ‘fathering project’ much of the mentoring, coaching and supporting activities carried out under the auspice of Noongar Sport is clearly important ‘fathering’ work. Its coverage of support to Aboriginal men is critical given that Noongar boodjar (country) is an area approximately 300,000 square kilometres in size and approximately half of West Australian Aboriginal men (15,000) reside in this area¹¹.

**Alive and Kicking Goals (Broome)**

The Alive and Kicking Goals program is first and foremost a youth suicide-prevention project based in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was set up when members of the Broome Saints Football Club began voicing their concerns about the high rates of suicide amongst young people, particularly Aboriginal young men, in and around Broome. Indeed most young men playing for the club had experienced first hand the loss of a friend or family member to suicide. Their response was to set up a series of football-based peer-education workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and counselling to identify the risk of suicide and develop prevention strategies that are culturally and socially appropriate. The project was initiated, managed, and led by Aboriginal people from Broome.

The project started with ‘fifteen blokes from the footy team volunteering their time to drive the project, and be the voice of Alive and Kicking Goals.’ The group met together after training, held workshops on how they could respond to their peers, shared stories about

how they were affected by suicide and worked out strategies for how to build an organisation that could respond to friends and family who were struggling.

Since 2010, the project has employed a team leader and three paid peer educators. It has since employed a female peer educator to work with young women. A mobile app for Aboriginal self-help suicide prevention (iBobbly) has been designed.

The main focus of the project is suicide prevention and peer support. However, it has been led by young men working in conjunction with members that could be described as key members of their ‘father generation’. For example, the Club President, a local Aboriginal man and health worker, has been instrumental in driving the work and enlisting the support of other men of his generation. In this way the project uses cultural systems of fathering, where uncles and other leading men of the same generation as one’s father take a central role in supporting young men and women in crisis. Also important here is the way that personal and peer support has been embedded into healthy community ‘parenting’ and the institution of football12.

**Nowanup (Great Southern region of WA)**

Nowanup has been designed to be a meeting place on country for healing, and a place of learning for Aboriginal people and others. It consists of a 750-hectare property at Nowanup in the Great Southern region between the Fitzgerald River and the Stirling Range National Park. A strong emphasis of the work is the importance of intergenerational transmission of culture, leadership development in young people and sharing of activities associated with land care and conservation. The work has been led by Noongar elder Eugene Eades. As a consequence there is a solid focus on Aboriginal men, good parenting, fathers and relationships between the older generations and young people13.

**Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Great Southern)**

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project was set up by family members descended from Noongar from the South West of Western Australia who wanted to publish and promote stories that have a strong Noongar language influence.

---

The group’s main goal is to reclaim Wirlomin (from the Great Southern region) ‘stories and dialect, support maintenance of Noongar language, and share with Noongar families and communities as part of a process to claim, control and enhance Wirlomin Noongar cultural heritage’\(^\text{14}\).

The work was first inspired by recent access and repatriation of creation stories told to the American linguist Gerhardt Laves at Albany, Western Australia, around 1931. Laves’ family returned the records to Noongar after his death in the 1980s. Since this time stories such as, *Mamang, Noongar Mambara Bakitj, Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy*, have been workshopped through a series of community meetings involving elders – some of whom had told stories to Laves in 1931. Local Noongar artists and linguists have also been central to the project.

This work represents another example of a project that has brought together members of different generations to re-activate language and culture in a way that helps maintain distinctly Aboriginal ways of keeping family healthy and strong. In this way there is a great deal of fathering work that has been carried out\(^\text{15}\).

**Murru Band (Roebourne)**

Murru is a unique music collaboration that has evolved from a four-year prison and community program run by arts and social change organisation Big hART. The Murru Band and its self-titled album is the flagship product of the ongoing prison/community music program. The work started in 2010 and has been based in Roebourne, in the West Pilbara region of Western Australia\(^\text{16}\).

Big hART was initially funded specifically to work with local Aboriginal groups in the area to create content that transmits local heritage associated with the Dampier Archipelago (often referred to as the Burrup) with its rich concentration of rock engravings, ceremonial standing stones, stone pits and circular stone arrangements. The ‘living’ heritage of this place has long been transmitted via story, ceremony, intergenerational exchange, song and

---


\(^{15}\) see http://uwap.uwa.edu.au/collections/wirlomin-noongar-language-and-stories-project

dance. From the earliest stages of the work it was designed to help tell the story of the incredible cultural heritage of ‘the Burrup’, they also had to change the negative story of alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, poor educational performance, high levels of incarceration and a high profile death in custody that media loves to tell.

Through this project music, relationships across the generations and important prison work have been combined to help prepare Aboriginal men to be more involved in the important cultural and social business of caring for their families both inside and outside the prison system 17.

**Woolkabunning Kiaka Inc (Roelands)**

Woolkabunning Kiaka Inc is an Aboriginal organisation established in 1974 by Mr Allan Kickett, a former Roelands Mission resident. The organisation was created to represent those who as children had been placed at Roelands Mission between the 1940s and the early 1970s. Children had been removed from families throughout the state and placed in the care of Churches of Christ missionaries who ran the Roelands Mission establishment. Today, people refer to the former Mission as Roelands Village. It is now run by Woolkabunning Kiaka after being purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation in 2004. Roelands Village is located on the Collie River, east of Bunbury on Seven Hills Road, Roelands. Woolkabunning Kiaka means ‘We’ve been there, left and returned to Seven Hills.’

Today, Woolkabunning Kiaka has created the Roelands Village as a place of healing and development for the children of the mission and their families. It provides a village atmosphere with accommodation in a rural setting for a range of Aboriginal groups keen to support healthy parenting, work with children and young people and cultural healing.

Through the organisation, a range of Aboriginal men have been instrumental in rebuilding the place and reconfiguring its role in parenting. Initially implicated in the separation of children from their fathers, mothers and families, the place is now used to help raise their and other’s families; a place where ‘culture can be rediscovered and opportunities can begin to grow.’ 18

---

17 see http://yijalayala.bighart.org/muru/
Law and Culture (northwest and desert)
Some of the most profound fathering work occurs in the realm of law and culture ceremony. Although not practiced in all parts of the state, the practice of law ceremony has and remains central to process of supporting young people through the life process of becoming adults. Indeed in many parts of the state, law is the central institution through which relationships are maintained across the generations, education and personal support is exercised and men take on the role of parenting members of their community in a deep and complex way. Law ceremonies tend to occur around the end of each year and into the new year and involve large numbers of men and women travelling vast distances from law ground to law ground to participate in the initiation, education and re-education of song, rules for living and cultural protocols. These are not open to the public so attendance is by limited invitation or family affiliation.

Importantly, the maintenance of law provides 1) a venue for men and their children to come together for deep cultural and social induction, and 2) a set of rules of living and structures that set out how good fathering occurs. In some regions law events have enjoyed resurgence in participation and attendance. Most critical is that men have a major role in the organisation, coordination and management of law ceremony.19

Moorditj Koort Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre (Kwinana)
This is a community controlled, not-for-profit organisation that supports the health and wellness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the Kwinana and Rockingham Community. Founded in 2010, the organisation has always had a solid focus on men’s health and wellbeing and a strong presence of Noongar maaman in the organisation. The Centre aims to be a professional, independent, all-inclusive organisation that offers culturally secure health and wellbeing services to the local Aboriginal community. Centre staff and associates have strong working relationships with other local health services, agencies and the community. Their work with schools, particularly in offering health checks for children, invites a close working relationship with local Noongar families.

Moorditj Koort also maintains strong involvement of the elders of the Kwinana and Rockingham community, and is guided by Muriperdup Aboriginal Health Action Group.\textsuperscript{20}

**Brothers Inside (NSW)**

Brothers Inside was a pilot program working with Indigenous fathers who were inmates in the Cessnock Correctional Centre. The program involved a series of workshops with fathers exploring topics such as: the importance of dads; men’s strengths as dads, men’s experiences of being fathered, communication, keeping kids safe and resilience. The philosophical values that shaped the work included the belief that: all have strengths as dads, dads are very important in the lives of their kids, sometimes dads need to be like a rock (be able to stand firm) and sometimes to be like water (be able to go with the flow).

The workshops included a variety of activities such as: eating together to build a sense of community, physical activities such as rock climbing and swimming, group discussion, art work, poetry and writing and videoing a message to their kids.

In preparation for the workshop series each participant was interviewed and asked:

- What they wanted from the course
- Some background on their families
- Their relationship with their family and elders
- What contact they had with their families while ‘inside’
- How being in prison had affected their relationship with their children
- What they would like for their children.

Because of the high turnover of inmates, holding the workshop over a short period of time allowed participants to complete the workshop series. The workings of the prison meant that workshops needed to be flexible and responsive\textsuperscript{21}.


Aboriginal Dads Program by Males in Black Inc. (Port Augusta, SA)

The Males in Black program was established in 1996 in the mid-north of South Australia by a group of Aboriginal men who were keen on supporting men and their families to ‘respect themselves and their culture and become contributing community members’. It since grew and became an incorporated organisation in July 2003. The Males in Black program is strongly supported by UnitingCare Wesley, Port Pirie.

The organisation is overseen by a group of seven men (many of whom work in various government roles) who act as a management group. It has a membership of approximately 40. The organisation started when the original group of men identified the need to support men in and around Port Augusta. As one of the men involved says, it functions like ‘early feminist groups where women chose to act for themselves, and like a service club where respected community members give back to their community’. A key feature of their work is the focus upon the Aboriginal Dads Program which is designed to help ‘young men be better fathers and break/intercept cycles of unemployment, offending, incarceration, and addiction’ through receiving mentoring from elders.

The objectives of the Aboriginal Dads Program include:

- developing culturally appropriate ways of working with new and young Aboriginal fathers
- establishing positive partnerships with Aboriginal leaders and organisations
- establishing partnerships with mainstream child and family services
- recruiting and training Aboriginal male mentors
- increasing father involvement in the lives of their children (0–5 years)
- demonstrating the effect of father involvement on the wellbeing of children.

The model adopted has been described as ‘underpinned by the strengths-based mentor support approach’ and includes: the employment of a peer (project) worker, offering mentoring support to young dads, a focus on capacity building and leadership development, adopting ‘community development’ activities, getting young men out bush to chat, family-focused activities, teaching culture and creating strong partnerships with other local organisations22.

---

The Moorditj Marmun Book and App (WA)
This resource booklet and app has been produced by the organisation MAN and is designed to both celebrate the work of leading Noongar men and offer practical information and support to Aboriginal men. The booklet was designed and written in conjunction with Noongar men and cites their wisdom and experience in being men who provide support to others. It promotes the idea that Aboriginal men have an obligation to their families and themselves to take care of their health and maintain strong connections to their family and culture. While this work is not a fathering project as such it provides a very powerful example of Aboriginal men coming together to produce a valuable resource for other Aboriginal men. The production of the book also represents an excellent example of men coming together to work on the production of something practical and useful for fathers and other men (MAN 2013)23.

Koori Fathering Program (NSW)
This project emerged after research had established that Aboriginal fathers did not seem to participate in programs designed to support improved parenting. Consultations with Aboriginal men suggested that this was because Aboriginal fathers found that many existing programs were too female-centric, not culturally relevant, difficult to access and insensitive to the specific needs of Aboriginal men with multiple family or community obligations. This shaped the design of the Koori Fathering Program, a 15-week course that offered Aboriginal men and their partners and children support to: develop positive relationships with children, develop positive relationships with partners or ex-partners, improve understanding of children’s development and needs, understand and accept the responsibilities of fatherhood, improve communication skills, understand the importance of showing affection, and learn and practice positive parenting.

Participants were invited to undertake pre- and post-video interviews to assist in their development as fathers. These helped establish that there was considerable change in men’s knowledge about fathering. In the post-video interviews, most participants also discussed various ways in which they felt attending the Koori Fathering Program helped with their understanding of a broad range of parenting challenges. The review of the program also set

out a number of recommendations and lessons learned from the work. These included: the importance of training and preparation of Aboriginal facilitators, the usefulness of facilitators being ‘genuine’ participants, the usefulness of free transport and childcare for men\textsuperscript{24}.