



Gulkmaram ga Yätj Raki'mala ga Dhă-manapan ga Latjuny Raki'

Decolonising Child Protection: Severing Unhealthy Ties and Restoring Secure Attachments.

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We pay respect to the wäṇa-waṭaṇu (traditional owners) of the township of **Gapuwiyak** – the **Gupapuyṇu clan**.

We give particular thanks to the gurruṭumirr (kin) from across the whole Western Miyarrka region who participated in the project, and especially the **Dhalwaṇu**, **Djambarrpuyṇu**, **Wangurri**, **Wägilak** and **Marraṇu clan nations** who actively worked together with us in leading the project.

The title of this report, the final findings, and the calls to action were chosen by the Western Miyarrka leaders during a series of meetings held in June 2024. The title comes from a larger quote which has been included for context, overleaf.



Bili rom ñunhi gapmangu marrtjin balayi wapthurr bala dälthinan, ga gulk'gulkthunha raki' ga gurrkurr.

Government law has come in like a hard force and cut the veins of gurruṯu (Yolŋu kinship) – our life blood – but Yolŋu are strategic thinkers and skilful caretakers of law. We are taking it back – the legal right, the political right, the power, the authority to protect our children. We are tirelessly repairing the wounds to our kinship relationships. We are cutting the destructive, unhealthy ties that bind our families, all the strings that are attached to government support. We are restoring, reconnecting, rejoining the healthy and secure attachments of gurruṯu.

Gulkmaram ga yätj raki'mala ga dhä-manapan ga latjuny raki'.

Western Miyarrka Clan Leader.

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Ŋunha Wäŋa Diltjiŋur Artwork © Kylie Gatjarrowarrawuy Munuŋgurr Djapu clan

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Foreword

Dhuwal ṇanapurrr djourra djäma märr ga dhu Balanda ga Yolṇu dharanṇamirr bala-räli'yunmirr (we have written this report to promote better understanding between Balanda and Yolṇu, and better ways of working together).

We want the government to come and sit with Yolṇu at the grass-roots level. So that they can see from their own eyes, what is there, how it is, what is needed. They need to see and hear from a group of people, because in this modern world, the expectation is always of the 'individual'. Individuality. One person has all the power, or all the knowledge. There is no individualism for Yolṇu. We are working as räḷ-manapanmirr rrambanṇi (respectfully joining together without denying differences) – as a group of people to make it happen. Things become reality by doing it with a group of people. Not one or two.

There are some areas of good with individualism. I have that respect and understanding towards the Balanda system that is in place, but government needs to show that same respect and understanding toward us. During the period of time before the mission and governments came, there was something in place, a child protection system was in practice. Yolṇu people were using it. When it comes to caring for the children, it was part of our life, our heritage. It was in place – every family member close to that child has a role and that responsibility towards caring for that child. Gurruṭu is very important. Right in the middle. The child protection system of gurruṭu just needs to be awakened.

Colonising was one path that meant that area went to sleep. The big force of 'The Intervention' came and left that area, left us as Yolṇu people powerless. Without power – towards our own children!

Government don't see the problem, but the Yolṇu leaders see the problem. We are trying, we are willing for the government, for the opposite, to come and work with us so that both sides could be djägamirr (caregivers – caring for and protecting) the child.

Some people think that colonisation is finished and over, but really it's just growing and getting worse and worse. From so many areas now, where a long time ago it was only from one, but we've got so many Departments now. The government has got wana, wana, wana, wana (many arms). We are in this world. We are not on our own now, we are in this world that came, and we are living with it. We need government to have respect and understanding of the Yolṇu system.

Yolṇu are holistic, because of gurruṭu, because of ceremonial connections. Yirritja and Dhuwa people. It includes everyone, from right up to Miwatj, Miyarrka, Gatjirrik, Rawarraṇ – Yolṇu boundaries. We are all connected with gurruṭu. We are holistic.

Yolṇu want to move towards what was in place ever since the beginning of time. If government wants to build trust, they need to be working with the leaders. **Märrmirr, gurrupanamirr, buthuru-bitjunamirr, wetjmirr – we always need to be trustworthy, caring, good-listeners, and generous.**

Gawura Wanambi

Chairperson – ARDS Aboriginal Corporation
Marranṇu Clan Leader

Context

Yolŋu¹ leaders and families of the Western Miyarrka region (Western Miyarrka) of East Arnhem Land (often referred to as the community of Gapuwiyak and surrounding tribal homelands) have nurtured and cared for children for countless generations. In the past few decades, there have been many specific attempts by Yolŋu leaders to improve the delivery of government programs designed to support child and family wellbeing.

This report summarises a project that occurred in Western Miyarrka from 2022-2024.² Leaders and families sought to engage in two-way learning processes to: 1) help non-Yolŋu (especially child protection practitioners) understand the strengths already in existence through Yolŋu parenting styles and childhood development approaches, and 2) demystify the application of child protection practices under Balanda³ law (law) for Yolŋu families. Leaders from Western Miyarrka requested additional support and expertise from ARDS Aboriginal Corporation to facilitate this work.

Leaders and parents knew, based on consistent lived experience in Western Miyarrka, that government programs, practices and assumptions were often at cross-purposes or not aligned to community priorities and practices. This work was an attempt to better understand that gap and create ways of bringing community and government understanding and practice closer together. Whilst child protection practices were not necessarily the primary focus of the work, much of the discussion led to problems and desired improvements with practices connected with the (Balanda) statutory child protection system. This is due to child protection interventions often representing the most acutely felt divergence between community and government approaches to children and parenting.

As a form of participatory action learning, key research questions were frequently updated and refined, as participants adapted and changed the direction of the research. Because our engagements were participant-led and predominantly in first languages (Yolŋu Matha), not every semi-structured interview included all questions, and we (ARDS) did not assume that our research 'questions' were final.

Participant questions provided the following frame for the project, which resonated strongly across families we spoke to:

- What does 'Strong Yolŋu Parenting' look like, both traditionally and in the modern world?
- How does this correlate with the role of ṇāṇḍi and bāpa in the gurruṯu (kinship) system?
- What do Yolŋu-led child protection interventions look like?
- How can better communication, local decision-making and collaboration be achieved between government services and Yolŋu families?
- What system changes are needed so that Yolŋu families will be supported to grow up strong children in Western Miyarrka?

¹ First Nations person or people of Northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia.

² We acknowledge that during the period this project was taking place, other Yolŋu-led initiatives to support Yolŋu to grow up strong djamarrkuḷi were also in their early phases, including Guṅga'yunga Djamarrkuḷiny (East Arnhem Land Youth Model) and co-design for a Child and Family Centre.

³ Non Yolŋu people. Often used to refer to the dominant Western Culture in Australia.

Through discussions that leaders were having in every area of this project work, a collective aspiration emerged for greater recognition of the strengths of Yolŋu parenting and increased Yolŋu control over the functions of the statutory child protection system for Yolŋu children. Leaders then prepared a letter in Yolŋu Matha and English for the relevant Northern Territory (NT) Government Minister to commence negotiations for a Local Decision Making agreement focused on these matters ([Appendix 1](#)).

Western Miyarrka leaders asked ARDS to prepare this report to document the findings and calls for action from this project as an input to their negotiations with governments for genuine change – whether that is primarily through a Local Decision Making agreement, or other pathways with one or both of the Australian or NT Governments. To honour this purpose, this report includes only essential details about the specific methodologies and practices used by the ARDS team to give context to the findings and calls for action set out.⁴

The funding for this project came from the Child and Family Community Fund, which is a pool of funds for local decision making in communities establishing or operating a Child and Family Centre. In early 2021, the leadership group in Gapuwiyak (where the NT Government had offered to establish a Child and Family Centre) told the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet that it wished to use part of the Child and Family Community Fund for the objectives that have since formed the basis of this project.

Importantly, the scope and purposes of the funding prioritised the Yolŋu controlled aspect of this work. This provided sufficient flexibility that the work could be done in an iterative or cyclical manner, with assumptions and findings constantly being refined as new voices and perspectives were brought into the conversation.

⁴ ARDS appreciates that some audiences might find methodology and process details valuable, and intends to release a separate report for this purpose.

Findings

Before we attempt to summarise the findings from this project it is important to acknowledge that they are not new – nor did the Yolŋu leaders who commissioned this work expect them to be. Their decision to prioritise funds for this work was seen as a step that had become necessary to bring about change for their children, families and community, and the continuation of their culture for generations to come. The very request by leaders for ARDS to produce this report in a written form, in English, is a testament to their commitment to find a path to meaningful and sustained change. This report does not do justice to the depth of Yolŋu-led work that is occurring in Western Miyarrka; however, we have attempted to classify key components in a way that can be more easily understood by decision-makers in the dominant culture system.

Less than 30 years ago, the community of Gapuwiyak had articulated a strategy for moving toward – perhaps returning to – *gurruṯu* as the critical framework for child protection practices applied in the community.⁵ Later in this report, we touch briefly on both the impact of policies that actively disempowered community members in taking forward that strategy, worsening their lived experience, and subsequent attempts at reforms to law and practice surrounding the care and protection of children to mitigate further harm from those policies. In short, this project has found that the aspiration of leaders in Western Miyarrka has not weakened throughout this period, but neither have the well-meaning intentions of reform been felt by families on the ground.

It is a mark of the spirit of the participants in this project, on whose stories these findings are based (see [Appendix 2](#)), that we did not hear a want for blame for their experiences to be laid at the feet of individuals or teams within organisations or bureaucracy. Rather, participants identified the root of the problem as the child protection system itself, and other dominant culture systems connected to it, which seem so unfit for the purpose of supporting children and families in Western Miyarrka to thrive. The iterative process of this project was such that the prevailing message was not of individual cases, but of an understanding that the experience of these systems was shared by so many people.

These are the high level findings that emerged from the project:

1. *Gurruṯu* (the Yolŋu kinship system) is widely regarded as more effective in supporting and protecting children than dominant culture programs, because it prioritises things that are most important to a child's holistic wellbeing, including their cultural connection to land, songlines, language, kinship, Dhuwa Yirritja (moieties) and clan alliances (as seen in [Participant Stories](#) 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19, 21, 23, 24, and 26).
2. Yolŋu families in Western Miyarrka aspire to:
 - a. decolonise their way of life,
 - b. greater autonomy in parenting support and child protection decisions,
 - c. local control and clan leadership of programs and systems to support Yolŋu families to thrive (including the child protection system), rather than externally driven interventions,
 - d. service provision in Yolŋu languages, and,
 - e. a shared approach amongst service providers, organisations, government bodies and clan groups.
3. There is widespread concern about the cultural appropriateness and effectiveness of mainstream child protection systems (as seen in [Participant Stories](#) 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 16, 17, 20 and 22).

⁵ Smith, D. & Wunungmurra, P. (2004). Community action to promote child growth in Gapuwiyak: Final report on a participatory action research project, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin.

4. Confusion about Balanda laws leads to a type of parenting paralysis and powerlessness because parents are fearful their actions will trigger involvement by police or child protection workers. This confusion creates fear and mistrust. Yolŋu are generally reluctant to engage with non-Indigenous service providers, because Yolŋu perceive that doing so often leads to loss of control and more negative outcomes for Yolŋu families (as seen in [Participant Stories](#) 2, 4, 20 and 22).
5. Many existing child and family programs frequently ignore the child's (and other family members') first language(s), and rarely align with or affirm Yolŋu cultural knowledge. This was expressed regularly during two-way learning sessions.
6. There is mistrust about how information given to child protection workers (directly by Yolŋu families and indirectly through mandatory reporting) is used. Many participants held the view that it is usually used to the detriment rather than benefit of Yolŋu children and families, and Yolŋu have no control over how their information is interpreted, recorded or used.
7. Once a Yolŋu child is removed from a family it is very difficult for families to navigate bureaucracy and advocate for reunification ([Participant Stories](#) 3 and 4 involved this experience).
8. Cultural competency is an essential foundation for workers involved in the care and protection of children in Western Miyarrka. Leaders feel they have no levers to ensure this foundation is in place.
9. Mainstream services often create additional confusion and stress for Yolŋu families, which hinders rather than helps their ability to raise strong children and address potential issues of neglect (as seen in [Participant Stories](#) 1, 2, 18 and 20)
10. Locally created resources, using Yolŋu-led approaches and Yolŋu language, metaphors and art, foster more meaningful conversations and planning about parenting than existing government resources, which were not developed for a Yolŋu specific audience.
11. Methods of reporting data about child protection engagements and cases are at odds with how Yolŋu understand who those stories belong to, where those stories belong, and who can know those stories.
12. Other mainstream policies (apart from the child protection system) also create problems and undermine outcomes for Yolŋu families and children. For example, housing being concentrated in communities and not homelands disrupts Yolŋu parenting, which is strongly connected to homelands, and reduces the ability of families to manage influences on their children.
13. Western Miyarrka leaders are ready to engage, and have invited government to talk, about changes to improve outcomes for their families. Capacity constraints seem to prevent those invitations from being taken up.
14. Change is urgently needed while Yolŋu knowledge holders – Yolŋu who know the country – are still alive to share it with future generations.

Calls for action from Western Miyarrka leaders

The following calls for action have emerged from both the [Participant Stories](#), and key observations and findings of the project team overall. These calls are aligned with the aspirations of clan leaders, and the community vision for enhancing the well-being of children and families in Western Miyarrka.

1. Western Miyarrka leaders call for:
 - a. recognition of the role of clan leaders within Yolŋu rom (law) and gurruṯu (kinship) in respect of the care and protection of their children. This is a role they have fulfilled with pride for thousands of years;
 - b. to share decision-making about the care and protection of Yolŋu children and families from Western Miyarrka with government delegates, as a pathway to transitioning these decisions to the control of Western Miyarrka leaders.
2. The framework for shared decision-making should centre Yolŋu leadership, knowledge and ways of working through:
 - a. developing a contextual safeguarding model encompassing changes to child protection practices and processes, based on the strengths of connection to wāṇa (place-based land stewardship and connection to country), songlines, gurruṯu, dhäruk (Yolŋu languages), moieties (Dhuwa and Yirritja) and clan alliances;
 - b. involving leaders in the development of cultural care plans, safety planning and reunification planning for Yolŋu children from Western Miyarrka;
 - c. developing and embedding assessment tools that centre Yolŋu priorities for holistic child development;
 - d. allowing space to review and adapt processes related to 'mandatory reporting' and court processes to be more culturally appropriate and responsive;
 - e. ensuring that Yolŋu languages are the primary language for service delivery;
 - f. reviewing tools and resources used in service delivery for children and families in Western Miyarrka to assess their appropriateness or compatibility with Yolŋu worldview, then redesigning, adapting or excluding existing resources from use;
 - g. providing a 'stop' function that allows community representatives to pause processes that do not align with the shared decision-making framework, and to set the pace for sensitive and complex work.
3. Western Miyarrka leaders call for review of existing child protection decisions that have been made regarding children from clans in the Western Miyarrka region in line with the shared decision-making framework.
4. Western Miyarrka leaders call for a stronger role in shaping the workforce involved in working with children and families in Western Miyarrka, including:
 - a. involvement in mentoring emerging Yolŋu leaders to support intergenerational learning opportunities, strengthen cross-cultural communication skills, build confidence and participate as equals in shared decision-making;
 - b. ensuring mandatory place-based cultural competency training for non-Yolŋu working with children and families;
 - c. allowing Western Miyarrka leaders to test and build cultural competency of people working with children and families, and creating accountability mechanisms for workers who do not demonstrate commitment to building their competency.

5. Western Miyarrka leaders seek access to relevant data to inform their participation in shared decision-making processes.
6. Western Miyarrka leaders seek appropriate resourcing to enable them to direct their focus towards the aims set out above and participate as equals in shared decision-making processes, including but not limited to:
 - a. remuneration for bringing their time and expertise to this process;
 - b. establishing robust monitoring evaluation systems that are culturally grounded;
 - c. sourcing advice and supports that leaders identify as necessary and appropriate;
 - d. assurances that relevant areas of government will be appropriately resourced to be responsive and committed to this process of change.

Research and policy background

It was crucial that the facilitation team be aware of, and actively recognise, the previous efforts made by Western Miyarrka leaders and parents to improve parenting and early childhood support activities. Yolŋu have shared their perspectives over and over with many researchers, practitioners, service providers and governments.

Building on an existing story

Facilitators were not starting a new conversation but were stepping into a long-running and deeply held conversation – not only in Western Miyarrka, but also in First Nations communities around the world.⁶

For at least 30 years, Miyarrka clan leaders, as articulated through various local leadership groups,⁷ have consistently emphasised the need for collaborative efforts between Yolŋu and Balanda systems to ensure the safety of children. In 1998, a group of Yolŋu women from Gapuwiyak who were worried about poor child growth in their community took action to deal with the issue.⁸ In 2004, research found that the women “collectively applied their extensive knowledge of children’s development” in a strategy that had unique and strong foundations on “Indigenous understandings of poor child development, which are significantly different from those of health professionals; and ... [took] into account Indigenous social and cultural values and processes”.⁹

At that time, a senior Yolŋu man of the Dhaŋwaŋu clan in Miyarrka stated: ¹⁰

Let Yolŋu do their own sort of affair, you know what I mean?

Instead of someone walking on top of it, because it's been too long. This is the time that Yolŋu have to stand and talk for their own concerns, their own rights; that's how I see it. Decision-making, decision-making and saying things, that's something Yolŋu have to do from here, locally from here.

And it won't suit those visitors that are here for a little while, it's going to suit mostly Yolŋu who are here for a long time, who live in this land and die in this land.

⁶ O'Donnell, M., Taplin, S., Marriott, R., Lima, F., & Stanley, F.J. (2019). Infant removals: The need to address the over-representation of Aboriginal infants and community concerns of another 'stolen generation'. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Volume 90, 2019, Pages 88-98, ISSN 0145-2134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.01.017>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213419300377>) Tilbury, C., & Thoburn, J. Using racial disproportionality and disparity indicators to measure child welfare outcomes, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(10), 1101-1106. ISSN 0190-7409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.07.004>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740909001856>)

⁷ Liya-dhukarrmirr Mala Strategic Thinking Group, Gunga'yunga Djamarrkuŋiny East Arnhem Land Youth Model (EALYM), Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture, Goŋ-Däl Aboriginal Corporation, and Milindji Development Trust, among others.

⁸ Smith, D., Mununggurr, L., Bamundurruwuy, D., Edmond, K., Wunungmurra, P., & Nyomba, H. (2003). *How Children Grow: Indigenous and Health Professional Perceptions*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Darwin.

⁹ Smith, D & Wunungmurra, P. (2004). *Community action to promote child growth in Gapuwiyak: Final report on a participatory action research project*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin.

¹⁰ Smith, D., & Wunungmurra, P. (2004). *Community action to promote child growth in Gapuwiyak: final report on a participatory action research project*. Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Casuarina, N.T.

Continuing impacts of policies that disempowered Yolŋu

Instead of seeing the vision they had articulated in 1998 and advocated for across almost a decade bear fruit, Miyarrka experienced 'The Intervention' ¹¹ and subsequent policies from 2007 to 2012.

The monitoring, reporting, programming and decision-making overwhelmingly came from outside the community.¹² This was the opposite of everything they had been advocating for and working towards.

'The Intervention' was repeatedly raised by Yolŋu participants as a turning point in community control and confidence in the parenting arena. It brought a greater sense of powerlessness from what the community members had previously experienced. This was due to a strong public discourse that Yolŋu were not 'good' parents and could not be trusted with their children. 'The Intervention' directly implemented measures that took away community control.¹³ Parents became fearful that engaging in ordinary parenting actions would lead to involvements with police or child protection services.

Since 'The Intervention', the mainstream child protection system in the NT has been the focus of significant consideration.

The NT's Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in 2016¹⁴ included findings about a lack of cultural competence and understanding within child protection agencies, insufficient support services and resources available to families to address underlying issues and prevent child removal, lack of Indigenous representation and decision-making power in care arrangements for Indigenous children. Its recommendations included a focus on community-led approaches and the preservation of Indigenous cultures and kinship systems.

In 2020, SNAICC ¹⁵ reviewed the NT's implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (Principle). The Principle aims to:

- promote policy and practice that will reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and out-of-home care systems; and
- keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children connected to their family, community, culture and country.¹⁶

The Principle is reflected in NT law through the Care and Protection of Children Act 2007, which emphasises the importance of Aboriginal children's cultural identity and sense of belonging.¹⁷ It states that the preferred placement for a child removed from their parents' care is within the wider family or community.¹⁸ However, SNAICC's review of the Principle's implementation emphasised the need for urgent work to improve cultural safety, and overall outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.¹⁹ The review stressed the importance of empowering Aboriginal communities and involving them in decision-making processes in accordance with the legislation (Section 12).

¹¹ Parliamentary Library, 'Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill', 13 August 2007, Bills Digest, no.28, 2007-2008, p20.

¹² Watson, N. (2011). The Northern territory emergency response: The more things change, the more they stay the same. *Alberta Law Review*, 48(4), 905-918. <https://doi.org/10.29173/alr139>

¹³ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2007). Social justice report 2007: Chapter 3 - Northern Territory emergency response. Australian Human Rights Commission. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/social-justice-report-2007-chapter-3-northern-territory-emergency-response>

¹⁴ Australian Government Royal Commissions. The Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/child-detention>

¹⁵ The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care.

¹⁶ Ban, P. (2005). Aboriginal child placement principle and family group conferences. *Australian Social Work*, 58(4), 384-394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1447-0748.2005.00234.x>

¹⁷ Section 10, 2(ha). Care and Protection of Children Act 2007 (NT). <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/CARE-AND-PROTECTION-OF-CHILDREN-ACT-2007>

¹⁸ Section 12, (2D). Care and Protection of Children Act 2007 (NT). <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/CARE-AND-PROTECTION-OF-CHILDREN-ACT-2007>

¹⁹ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2021). Review of the ATSI CPP implementation efforts over the reporting period 1 May 2019–30 April 2020. https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Reviewing-Implementation-of-the-ATSI-CPP_2020_NT.pdf

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CTG) includes specific outcomes and targets in respect to the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system, and specifically out of home care.²⁰

In 2023, reporting against the CTG target showed Aboriginal children have made up close to 90% of out of home care placements the NT since at least 2019.²¹ The then Acting NT Children's Commissioner expressed concern that 61% of those children were not placed in accordance with the Principle.²²

As we discuss later in this report, where there has been well-meaning policy and practice direction in the years since The Intervention, this project found that the intended beneficial outcomes are not being felt on the ground by families in Western Miyarrka. In the case of the Principle – which predates 'The Intervention' – participants in this project were shocked to hear that it existed based on their contrary experiences.

During our engagements and attempted engagements with the NT Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) during this project, we observed genuinely constrained resources for child protection areas. This might be one explanation for the disconnect between high level reforms and the lived experiences we heard about.

Data for decision-making

It is outside the scope of this project to extensively analyse data from TFHC itself. However, we are aware that the internal classification of out of home care placements is based on the location of the TFHC office that case manages the placement.²³ This means that Yolŋu children from Western Miyarrka are regularly captured in aggregate figures beyond the 'Arnhem' office of TFHC. That approach is not fit for the purposes of families and community members trying to understand what is happening to children removed from their care, let alone for shared decision-making.

Pathways for partnership and change

Leaders in Western Miyarrka did not ask ARDS to provide advice about frameworks within the Australian and NT Government policy landscapes that could support them to finally take forward their objectives. However, as this specific project concludes, leaders have increasingly discussed their want to invite governments to engage with them about these pathways. Just as policies about child protection have evolved in recent years, so have those directed to self-determination and Indigenous Affairs more broadly. Leaders have been clear that they wish to explore complementary approaches with both levels of government. This could be through exploring agreement making through Local Decision Making, CTG mechanisms or actively partnering to learn together under models like the NT's Generational Strategy.

²⁰ Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2023). Socio-economic outcome area 12. Closing the Gap Information Repository. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area12/out-of-home-care>

²¹ Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2023). Socio-economic outcome area 12. Closing the Gap Information Repository. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area12/out-of-home-care>

²² Bardon, J. (2023, October 20). Indigenous family support program working to reduce NT's high rates of kids in child protection. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-20/nt-child-protection-rate-indigenous-family-support-program/102995826>

²³ See: Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. (2022). Answer to Written Question No. 348, Mr Guyula to the Minister for Territory Families: Out of Home Care. https://parliament.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/1160320/Answer-to-Written-Question-348.pdf

Yolŋu bāpurru-based approach to engagement

Ninety-four Yolŋu adults from Western Miyarrka actively participated in this work (35 male and 59 female participants).²⁴ These participants come from 13 bāpurru (clans).²⁵ Local leaders from each clan were engaged in the process, to ensure that appropriate authorisation and support was given for the sharing of deeply held and sensitive knowledge and experiences. Following these engagements, participants actively supported the facilitation team to share the stories and analyse the findings with members of a further 8 clan groups and their leaders.

During the process, members of these 8 clans also contributed additional stories, however, there was insufficient time to accurately process their data via the same team-interpreting process. The facilitation team has attempted to include key statements and feedback from these contributors wherever possible, via short quotes in the Discussion section.

The ARDS project team

The ARDS facilitation team was led by Melody Dale and Wuṯpurru Sharon Wunurmurra (Dhaḷwaŋu clan). As co-leads facilitating the project, Melody and Wuṯpurru sought insight, advice and participation from 12 other Yolŋu staff within ARDS. These 12 staff assisted with the planning, analysing and refining findings processes, on the ground in Western Miyarrka, as well as from Nhulunbuy and Darwin. Three senior staff provided cultural supervision throughout the project.

In total the team consisted of 16 Yolŋu staff and 1 Balanda staff member. Key participants from the Gupapuyŋu, Dhaḷwaŋu, Djambarrpuyŋu, Wangurri, Wagilak and Marrarŋu clan nations in Western Miyarrka volunteered their time as part of the project team on the ground.

Yolŋu ways of knowing and being, and participatory action learning

Participatory action learning is a way of working together, where researchers and community members jointly engage in learning and reflection for the purpose of bringing about positive change.

²⁴ The ratio of male to female participants was uneven and may have been reflective of underrepresentation of male ARDS staff involvement in field work (5 male to 13 female ARDS staff). The team found that when the co-facilitators were both female, primarily female community members participated in the process. When the co-facilitators were male and female, many more men came forward to share their thoughts.

²⁵ For completeness, participants were from the following clans and homelands connected to Western Miyarrka: Djambarrpuyŋu Bandawuŋu from Bunhaŋura, Dhaḷwaŋu from Yaḷakun and Gurumuru, Gumatj from Biranybirany, Gupapuyŋu from Burrum, Djambarrpuyŋu Liyadhalinyirr from Garraṯa and Dhāmiyaka, Marrarŋu from Raymangirr, and Wagilak from Njilipitji and Dhuwalkitj. Once we had captured valuable insights from this subset of clans, we sought to extend the invitation to further participation by reflecting the story back to the remaining clan groups. The clan groups that we shared the stories with, after the primary data-collecting had finished, were: Ritharrŋu from Donydji, Mangalili from Djarrakpi, Munyuku from Rurraŋala, Gālu from Naypinya and Garrimaḷa, Warramiri from Doltji and Maṯa Mata, and Djāpu from Wandawuy and Bukudal. Additional clan group representatives from Datiwuy ga Naymil from Rorruwuy and Yaŋunbi, Djarrwark from Bālma, Ganalbīŋu from Bariŋura, Gadiwiŋa and Njalyindi, Guyamirili from Māpuru, Golumala from Barrkira and Naḍayun, Liya-Galawumirr from Garriyak, Wangurri from Dhaḷinybuy, Maḍarrpa from Yilpara and Baygurrji.

A key component of ARDS' approach to participatory action learning is to always start with Yolŋu stories first. We prioritise creating the time and space for Yolŋu participants to share stories and thoughts in ways that are culturally safe. This means that the majority of conversations must happen in Yolŋu languages, and participants choose when conversations happen and where they take place (often outside, on country or at a person's home). There are almost always multiple rounds of discussions as deeper layers of experience and knowledge are discussed and shared. It is a cyclical process, of building shared trust and understanding, rather than a linear process of collecting data.

Whilst participatory action learning is the closest non-Yolŋu framework that we can use to describe this work, it risks over-simplification to use this label. Yolŋu ways of knowing and being involve processes of observation, reflection and action that are cyclical and holistic. For the purposes of this work, the team entered into the existing journey with Yolŋu in Western Miyarrka, to build on the past cycles of being, knowing and doing, with transformative, positive intent.

The iterative and flexible Yolŋu-led process of building shared understanding through this work has proven effective. By regularly seeking authorisation from clan leaders and confirming key research questions and findings with the participants, we built consensus and control amongst participants over the process, findings and actions. Engaging participants in interpreting data and shaping action plans fostered collaboration among diverse community members including senior leaders, emerging leaders and young parents.

The importance of adapting research methodologies that respect and integrate the cultural context of First Nations communities "is not only appropriate, but perhaps essential", because it recognises that data need not be limited by external interpretation, and can allow "communities to self-identify themes, self-generate data, and self-analyse that data speaks to a larger conceptual argument for community-led data sovereignty – processes by which communities can self-organize to produce and control the knowledge generated to support their goals".²⁶

Gurruṯu-centred approach

The Yolŋu kinship system known as gurruṯu serves as the social fabric of Yolŋu culture. It is comprised of reciprocal kinship pairs and extends beyond blood relationships to the connections between humans, animals, land and sea.²⁷ As Blakeman notes:

*Yolŋu foreground the value and significance of kinship as an attribute or quality of persons and relations, which is created and sustained as a process— as a state of relations among and between people.*²⁸

²⁶ Scheib, H. (2019). Community Development Workshop: Native Lands, Native People, Native Rights. Practice Insights, Issue 16, World Community Development Conference 2019. International Association for Community Development. IACD-Practice-Insights-Issue-16-WCDC2019-website-friendly.pdf (iacdglobal.org)

²⁷ Blakeman, B. (2012). Yolŋu kinship and the case for extensionism: a reply to Warren Shapiro. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 18(3), 681–683. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01784.x>

²⁸ Blakeman, B. (2012). Yolŋu kinship and the case for extensionism: a reply to Warren Shapiro. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 18(3), 681–683. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01784.x>

The gurrutu system is one of the most fundamental components of the Yolŋu system of law.²⁹ Gurrutu describes relationships that are taught from birth, which connect the two moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, in a yothu-yindi (mother-child) relationship that interconnects Yolŋu clan groups across Northeast Arnhem Land. Beyond connections between people and the land, “[o]ne may have as one’s mother, for example, or one’s daughter, a particular wind, star, rock, current, body of water, bird, cloud, or even ceremonial practice”.³⁰ Gurrutu relationships are pre-ordained for every Yolŋu child from birth and connect that person with their clan and clans’ ancestors. Through yarraṯa (the paternal line), authority and land stewardship are conferred, while through the maternal line a person relates to their ṇāṇḍipulu (mother’s clan), māripulu (grandmother’s clan) and wakupulu (great grandmother’s clan), as caretakers. It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a more nuanced explanation of this complex system.

The inherent strength of the gurrutu system lies in its inclusive, flexible and diverse decentralised network. It operates as a woven fabric of relationships that extends beyond immediate family ties, embracing the entire community. Collective decision-making processes give space for the valuing of multiple perspectives to reach yoram (agreement by consensus).

ARDS’ community development methodology is based on gurrutu-centred approaches.³¹ This can be summarised in foundational principles and phases built into project approaches, as shown below.

The principles of a Gurrutu-Centred Approach:

1. Recognise, respect and align with the gurrutu system of relatedness and cultural protocols.
2. Promote Yolŋu-led conversations, solutions and processes in Yolŋu Matha languages.
3. Work through gurrutu to find restorative pathways and enact shared solutions.

The Phases of a Gurrutu-Centred Approach

1. Build strong intercultural working relationships with Yolŋu within the agency.
2. Build strong intercultural working relationships with Yolŋu from partner agencies.³²
3. Work and learn together with Yolŋu community members using Both Ways approaches (bringing together Yolŋu and Western knowledges to enable learning with and from one another and to develop additional perspective).³³

This approach actively subverts the social dominance of Western cultural systems that disadvantage First Nations peoples. Fundamentally, this approach requires a commitment to prioritise Yolŋu frameworks over Balanda frameworks whenever there is a perceived clash or tension between the two. Whilst we built on and incorporated non-Indigenous knowledge into materials and activities at times, we primarily used a gurrutu-centred approach to practice.³⁴

²⁹ See: Christie, M., & Greateorex, J. (2004). “Social Capital in the Contexts of Yolngu Life.” *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 2, 38-51.

³⁰ Christie, M., & Greateorex, J. (2004). “Social Capital in the Contexts of Yolngu Life.” *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 2, 38-51.

³¹ For further reading on the subject please see: Wunḍanarr Yolŋu Gurrutu – Strong Yolŋu Families: A Gurrutu-Centred Approach <https://www.ards.com.au/resources-2/p/strong-yolu-families-digital-download-free>

³² Note that phases A & B refer to the active building of relationships via paid work. At ARDS these involve Lived Experience Experts as well as Cross-Cultural Facilitators, other agency positions may incorporate Aboriginal Community Workers, Aboriginal Health Workers, Teaching Assistants, Drivers, Interpreters, Council Members, Board Members etc. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01784.x>

³³ The first conceptualisation of this process referred to these phases in the following steps 1. Employ a Yolŋu Cultural Facilitator. 2. Find a Yolŋu Bāmara. 3. Work and learn together – both-ways.

³⁴ ARDS will publish detailed information about the application of a gurrutu-centred approach in the context of this project subsequent to this summary report.

Developing and adapting appropriate resources

During the first phase of the project, we analysed a large range of potential materials about child protection and parenting and found some to be unsuitable while others had potential for adaptation and refinement with Yolŋu colleagues. This was an iterative process of both-ways learning. Resources were utilised in draft form during discussions with participants. Rather than spending our time and energy on finalising and polishing the resources, we held them lightly and were therefore able to accept advice, make changes and adapt them regularly. The resources continued to be refined and modified by participants themselves throughout the project.

We began our conversations with senior clan leaders to ensure that we did not unintentionally put parents or younger participants in a compromised position, by asking them to share stories and knowledge without the wrap around support, the guidance and understanding of their clan leaders. The leadership support provided essential mentoring and safety for younger participants when they were ready to engage, which could not have been achieved by the project team in isolation.

Appendix 3 summarises the various resources reviewed, adapted or developed through this project. Two are worth noting here for their relevance in the subsequent Discussion:

- Nŋnha Wāŋa Ɓiltjŋur – a storybook using a common Yolŋu nursery rhyme that parents sing to their babies, which began as a ‘words and pictures’ activity to facilitate engagement with the Signs of Safety framework used by current child protection services. This resource included access to an audio recording of questions in Yolŋu languages related to child wellbeing, adapted from typical questions that might be used in a child protection investigation.
- Yolŋu Child Development Assessment Tool – the tool uses an holistic assessment approach, considering cognitive, language, motor, social-emotional and adaptive skills of Yolŋu children while prioritising their cultural context and values. The tool was intended to be used in an entirely Yolŋu-led context, in Yolŋu languages, and completed orally with minimal recording of information.³⁵

Engaging with organisational stakeholders

Our team also collaborated with stakeholders from various child and family focussed organisations in Gapuwiyak (Appendix 4). Initial efforts to establish working relationships were impacted by the turnover of many non-Yolŋu staff. In some ways, the difficulty we faced in building working relationships with organisational stakeholders is reflective of the deeper difficulties Yolŋu families identified around building meaningful relationship and trust with service providers.

Through gurruṯu relationships with the Yolŋu staff in stakeholder organisations we were eventually able to establish working relationships with a range of people in relevant services. It is worth noting that it was Yolŋu staff in other organisations who offered the most meaningful point of inter-organisational collaboration.³⁶ Yolŋu staff were also more focused on holistic and community priorities rather than short-term organisational priorities.

³⁵ Westerman, T.G. (2010). Keynote Presentation. Aboriginal Parenting Differences and how to recognise the value in terms of effective intervention and prevention. QEC Early Parenting Program 6th Annual Conference. Melbourne.

³⁶ A matter that arose in this project, and warrants further and separate research, is the way in which Yolŋu staff in many formal child focused programs offer significant leadership and value to the community, and yet this value and leadership is often not recognised from an organisational perspective.

Primary data set and collection summary

The primary data collection method employed in this project was via handwritten notes on pre-prepared visual materials. In this approach, facilitators formulated a set of questions and visual resources before the interview, but did not rigidly adhere to a fixed script, allowing flexibility in both the wording of questions and the sequence in which they are posed. This story sharing method is particularly well-suited to exploring experience-oriented topics. The story sharing employed a qualitative approach, with a primary focus on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the behaviours and motivations of the individual participants, rather than extrapolating broad generalisations to a larger population. We did not assume that only one correct description of reality or pool of knowledge exists, or that everyone in Western Miyarrka necessarily shared the same views and priorities. Participants, through their interaction with the facilitators, actively contributed to the generation of knowledge.³⁷ By involving participants as active learners with us, we were able to amplify their stories and share stories back to the clan group.

During the project we compiled 26 **participant stories** and 3 case studies as a primary data source (**Appendix 2**). These stories were provided with explicit permission to be fed-back to community leaders, organisations, and government bodies. The stories have been de-identified wherever possible but may be re-identifiable by community members familiar with the family. The stories communicated with the team were predominantly told in Yolŋu languages, using very minimal English, during sessions approximately 1 hour in length. The translated stories are published here with permission from participants on the basis that their key identifying information has been removed. The decision not to include any Yolŋu language transcripts was deliberate. When told in Yolŋu languages, the identifying information of kinship relationship is woven through every sentence. Publishing these stories in English only is another means of protecting the privacy of participants.

We found that some stories were re-told by numerous participants, regardless of age, clan, or gender, as clear examples of their own personal lived experiences. That these stories were widely known and were experienced similarly by multiple people gave the participants confidence to share their specific story for the purpose of giving voice to the wider community in general and the members of their clan specifically.

³⁷ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

For the purposes of audiences of this report, we have identified some of the key themes present in each participant story in the table below:

Story	Strength of Gurruṯu as a Trusted Framework	Value of in-language services / resources (and harms of absence)	Harms caused by lack of cultural competency in practitioners	Uncertainty Leads to Fear, Mistrust, and Parenting Paralysis
	Defined by: Instances where participants discuss Gurruṯu positively, emphasising its role as a social, emotional, and organisational framework in their communities. Stories that discuss personal strength/resilience in facing challenges, community support mechanisms, and responses to adversity.	Defined by: Mentions of the importance of services and resources offered in the participants' languages, including the benefits of such services and the negative impacts when these are not available.	Defined by: Discussions on the inadequacies and misfit of 'welfare' practices administered by non-Indigenous workers, focusing on how these practices fail to align with Yolŋu cultural contexts.	Defined by: Narratives that link uncertainty (about policies, practitioner intentions, etc.) to feelings of fear, mistrust towards systems or authorities, and an inability to act confidently in parenting roles.
1	x			
2	x		x	x
3	x		x	x
4	x			x
5	x			
6	x	x	x	
7	x			
8	x			
9		x		
10		x		
11	x			
12	x			
13	x			x
14	x			x
15	x			
16			x	x
17			x	x
18	x			
19	x			
20			x	x
21	x			
22	x		x	
23			x	x
24	x			
25	x			
26	x			
total	20	3	8	9

Discussion

‘Welfare’

The term welfare is defined in English as "The state or condition of doing or being well; well-being, prosperity, success; the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or group."³⁸

We found that for Yolŋu the word has entirely opposite connotations. One Yolŋu leader put it this way:

When ‘welfare’ come, many Yolŋu feel shaken. They feel worried. They don’t know who to ask for help. Especially they don’t know how to get back what was snatched away. Most Yolŋu don’t know how to get children back from ‘welfare’.

The ‘welfare’ ordinances and acts from 1957³⁹ to the present resulted in the inclusion of a new word in Yolŋu languages – wilpiya or wilbiya. Despite this term being in less overt use by dominant culture systems in recent years, we observed that it is still the predominant language used by Yolŋu to refer to the child protection system and related obligations such as mandatory reporting.

When participating in two-way learning about the intentions behind the word ‘welfare’, leaders were clear in urging respect for Yolŋu knowledge by external partners and providers. During a leadership meeting in April 2023, several of the clan leaders made statements like this:

Miyarrka wants to be their own ‘welfare’ – Balanda should be respecting Yolŋu and learning from Yolŋu – let Yolŋu be ‘welfare’ for their own families.

‘Welfare’ itself perceived as a threat, not to be trusted

There was one resource found to be the most culturally appropriate as a gentle entry point to dialogues about child protection. This was the ‘Nunha Wāŋa Diltjijur’ storybook – using a metaphor of a frightened wallaby running from a hunter to represent a child running from danger. (The image shown below is one of the pictures in the book; the full storyboard for the book is shown at [Appendix 3](#).) Participants frequently used this picture as a fitting metaphor to describe their experience.

³⁸ Oxford University Press, 2024, ‘Welfare’, in Oxford English Dictionary [Online], available from <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=welfare>.

³⁹ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2008). To remove and protect: laws that changed Aboriginal lives. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect> Community Welfare Act 1983 [Document]; Law Research Service, Melbourne Law School, Law Library, The University of Melbourne. ‘Find and Connect Project - Northern Territory Legislation’, 1 February 2013, held in the project files at the University of Melbourne eScholarship Research Centre.



When we designed the storybook, we thought that the picture might be used to describe a variety of dangers. We expected that people would talk about the type of dangers that elders have been protecting children from for thousands of years. But when participants identified who was causing harm, and who was giving care, predominately they described it in this way:

In this picture, the wallaby represents the young Yolŋu parent (with the child in their pouch). The middle person represents the elders, the senior people, the kinship network. The person holding the gun is Welfare. That's how it feels when Welfare come to help.⁴⁰

Through this work, we repeatedly heard about the impact of institutionalised systems on Yolŋu parents themselves. Whilst much of our planning, legislation and policy making now attempts to reflect the learnings of these past decades, the experience of young parents in Western Miyarrka tells us that it has not reached them on the ground. Our team sometimes asked participants who gravitated to this picture: “what it might take to change the picture so that child protection services lay down arms?” At first, participants expressed a feeling of powerlessness to see that dynamic change, however with the support of the clan leaders, people began to discuss the possibility of Yolŋu-led child protection systems where Yolŋu and Balanda work in partnership. A Djambarrpuynju-Liyadhalinmirr man stated:

Yolŋu romkurr [Yolŋu-led decision making] means supporting instead of making separations. When Yolŋu kids are taken to Darwin they are separated from wāŋa [country] and gurruṯu [kin] but they still have that power and feeling from their family inside. They are crying inside with their hearts. Even me, on that court day, or talking on the phone. I'm crying inside.

As outlined above, the importance of maintaining strong connections to culture, community and family networks for children in out of home care (OOHC) have been emphasised by government in recent years. However, when we talked with Yolŋu children and young people with lived experiences of (see [Participant Stories 6 and 7](#)) OOHC it was difficult to identify that maintaining these connections was prioritised in practice. We also found that extended families were impacted by their relatives' lived experiences of OOHC. This reflects similar findings reported by young people themselves internationally.⁴¹

Another person with lived experience as a child in OOHC, and a parent of children in OOHC, explained the deep-seated mistrust in this way:

There is not enough trust. I know this myself. When I thought I was getting support, 'welfare' were just writing down bad things about me. When I told my story, it was used against me [in court].

⁴⁰ This quote uses the term 'welfare', but the translation and context referred to both welfare and other visitors from outside the community.

⁴¹ Smales, M., Savaglio, M., Morris, H., Bruce, L., Skouteris, H., & Green (nee Cox), R. (2020). "Surviving not thriving": experiences of health among young people with a lived experience in out-of-home care. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 809–823. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1752269>

The high levels of fear and mistrust towards child protection services identified here are supported by previous research, which has found that the “mistrust of services is pervasive among Indigenous peoples as a result of generations of harmful interactions with colonizing systems, and the need for ongoing responsiveness to the structural and practical issues negatively impacting Indigenous families and their children”.⁴² In contrast, the observations of healthy and functioning Yolŋu family dynamics during this project provided significant insights into the potential effectiveness of First Nations kinship as a social protection system.

We found that it was not possible to separate the experience of modern Yolŋu parenting from the concerns about ‘welfare’ (child protection services). We saw that often families who have seen poor outcomes for their children when they receive ‘help’ have decided that it is better to turn inwards and protect themselves from incomprehensible or ineffective outside interventions.

Uncertainty leads to fear, mistrust and parenting paralysis

At the outset of this project, leaders agreed that one starting premise for the work was a concept of powerlessness or paralysis.

Many Yolŋu parents had reported feeling helpless and deeply worried, that any type of discipline or restraint towards children would lead to interaction with police or child protection workers. In the Northern Territory, there are not clear guidelines from police or ‘welfare’ about what types of physical discipline (e.g. smacking) or physical restraint (e.g. preventing a child from leaving home late at night) are allowed according to the law. Many Yolŋu leaders and families had asked for clarification, so that parents can have a clear understanding of what is allowed under Balanda law. The lack of knowledge leads to fear, and in turn, a type of parenting paralysis, whereby parents lose agency and confidence to intervene when needed with children who may be engaging in criminal, anti-social or harmful behaviours.

Whilst this experience of parenting paralysis has apparently worsened in the years following ‘The Intervention’, the experience of fear and mistrust in relation to child protection services has been documented well prior. In one Gapuwiyak-based report, the authors outline an interaction where the research team, including one Balanda woman, was “visiting houses just to tell people about [their] project, [and] a woman screamed at the team as she thought [the Balanda woman] was from ‘Welfare’ and she was trying to take her grandchildren away”.⁴³

Elsewhere in the same report a Yolŋu father’s story is recorded:

*Sometimes I explain to my sisters, ... If you are shy it's hard to find that baby, you'll end up in court. I used to tell my sisters because they don't understand English very well. That's what I tell them can happen against kids. Because Welfare comes into the family, it's going to be a real hard day.*⁴⁴

⁴² Smales, M., Savaglio, M., Morris, H., Bruce, L., Skouteris, H., & Green (nee Cox), R. (2020). “Surviving not thriving”: experiences of health among young people with a lived experience in out-of-home care. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 809–823. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1752269>

⁴³ Smith, D., Mununggurr, L., Bamundurruwuy, D., Edmond, K., Wunungmurra, P., & Nyomba, H. (2003). *How Children Grow: Indigenous and Health Professional Perceptions*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Darwin.

⁴⁴ Smith, D., Mununggurr, L., Bamundurruwuy, D., Edmond, K., Wunungmurra, P., & Nyomba, H. (2003). *How Children Grow: Indigenous and Health Professional Perceptions*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Darwin, p 27.

This illustrates that the high levels of fear and mistrust towards child protection services have been evident among Yolŋu parents and community members for many years. This fear is exacerbated by a lack of inter-cultural understanding and communication about the processes and intentions of these services. A Marranŋu clan leader, Gawura Wanambi, explains it in this way:

Manarjaynanŋur djulkmarranhanŋur ga, djaw'yunanŋur djamarrkuliwal makarr-nhāma ga gapmannha Yolŋuy (our children have been stolen, overcome, snatched, taken, by government, so our Yolŋu have to guard them). It feels like Balanda want to take the children away from Yolŋu life. They want Yolŋu children for themselves.

For a very long time Yolŋu have felt the need to hide the children, away from those who want to take them. Because we were feeling powerless. Our power was taken away. There was a big force there, there was no safety for us during that period of time. The only thing we could do was to hide our children.

If the clan leaders' authority is recognised, families don't have to hide. We can put our children in the open, and be strong for them. First of all, in that area, where we can be doing that – is awakening the Yolŋu child protection system within gurruṯu.

Limitations of mainstream approaches to child protection

The pervasive sense of harm caused by the Balanda system, as seen in [Participant Stories](#) 2, 3, 4, 16, 20 and 22, is consistent with findings of similar issues in other First Nations communities in Australia.⁴⁵ The high levels of fear and mistrust towards child protection services identified in this project are supported by previous research,⁴⁶ which has found that lack of cultural understanding and communication barriers contribute significantly to the reluctance of Indigenous families to engage with these services. Our findings echo the sentiments expressed by other studies internationally, which have also found that mainstream child protection systems often fail to adequately consider the cultural and emotional needs of First Nations children.⁴⁷

Further, since the majority of child protection practitioners in the NT are non-Indigenous, we must consider how mainstream Australia understands and responds to child abuse, and ensure that practitioners are self-reflective and aware of their own biases.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Aitchison, R.G. (2014). Prepared for Difference? Exploring Child Protection Practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families in Rural Australia. [Doctoral thesis, Griffith University]. <https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/d3cf264d-2cd2-45a1-87ab-d17268764fd5/content>

⁴⁶ Paki Paki, N., King, P. T., Lewis, L., Walker, S., Mackay, H. T. U., Anderson, D., Amante, E., & Kemp, S. P. (2024). Identifying key dimensions of indigenous led child welfare services: A qualitative literature review. *Child & Family Social Work*, 29(2), 465–481. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13100>

⁴⁷ Krakouer, J., Nakata, S., Beaufils, J., Hunter, S. A., Corrales, T., Morris, H., & Skouteris, H. (2022). Resistance to Assimilation: Expanding Understandings of First Nations Cultural Connection in Child Protection and Out-of-home Care. *Australian Social Work*, 76(3), 343–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2022.2106443>
Leckey, R., Schmieder-Gropen, R., Nnebe, C., & Clouthier, M. (2022). Indigenous parents and child welfare: Mistrust, epistemic injustice, and training. *Social & Legal Studies*, 31(4), 559–579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639211041476>
Robertson, S. C., Sinclair, C., & Hatala, A. R. (2022). Indigenous mothers' experiences of power and control in child welfare: Families being heard. *Journal of Social Work*, 22(2), 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173211009187>

⁴⁸ Shirodkar, S. (2020). Bias against Indigenous Australians: Implicit Association Test results for Australia.

In other parts of the world, academics and practitioners are re-examining the role of child protection services and proposing a Social Model of Care or a framework for 'Contextual Safeguarding' for young people.⁴⁹ This rethinking of the role of child protection systems involves questioning whether the primary activities of child protection services – assessing, monitoring and reporting – are resulting in children being and feeling safer. Who do these processes help?

Gurruṭu is a system designed to protect all Yolṁu children from harm, regardless of the sources of the risks and dangers. In this context, it is inexplicable to have a system designed with powers that are exercised only in relation to children experiencing familial harm, but substantially ignore wider social harms.

Strengths inherent in Yolṁu approaches and systems

Participants within the project showed that gurruṭu has previously served as a robust 'child protection system' by functioning within the broader framework of social protection (See [Participant Stories](#) 7, 13, 19, 21, 24, 26). Social protection, in this context, refers to a comprehensive set of socially invested resources designed to safeguard the overall wellbeing of individuals, with a focus on preventing poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion across the lifespan.⁵⁰ Within gurruṭu, the concept of social protection extends beyond mere institutionalised practices to embody "an ethos of trust, norms of reciprocity, collective action, and participation" within an inclusive, flexible, and diverse network.⁵¹ The participants hypothesised that the system could be 'awakened' to fulfil its role in the community again, without being at odds with mainstream legislation.

A senior Marranṁu woman told us:

Lots of kids [are] missing. Missing from their homes. When they come back at 18 [years] they don't recognise their family. They don't know their language. They don't understand their law.

The emphasis on gurruṭu as the critical framework for child protection is corroborated by other studies that highlight the importance of kinship and cultural identity in First Nations child-rearing practices.⁵² These studies emphasise that respecting and incorporating First Nations kinship systems can lead to better outcomes for children.⁵³ Participants reported feeling goṁmirr or gurruṭumirr (valued and cared for by kin) when extended families became involved in supporting them through a difficult parenting or life experience. Gurruṭu, when used appropriately by skilled elders and clan leaders, can provide an holistic response to child protection issues in the face of significant challenges and difficulties.

⁴⁹ Firmin, C., & Lloyd, J. (2023). Contextual Safeguarding: The Next Chapter (1st ed.). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.4953553>

⁵⁰ UNICEF. (2019). Global Social Protection Programme Framework. <https://www.unicef.org/media/64601/file/Global-social-protection-programme-framework-2019.pdf>

⁵¹ Mignone, J., Elias, B., & Hall, M. (2011). Validation of a culturally appropriate social capital framework to explore health conditions in Canadian First Nations communities. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 2(1), 3-. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2011.2.1.3>

⁵² Hudson, P., & McKenzie, B. (2003). Extending Aboriginal Control Over Child Welfare Services: The Manitoba Child Welfare Initiative. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 51, 49-66. <http://www.yorku.ca/crsp/issue51/issue51-4.pdf>

⁵³ Ullrich, J. S. (2019). For the love of our children: an Indigenous connectedness framework. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 15(2), 121-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180119828114>

Importance of systems designed by Yolŋu for Yolŋu

Considering that the child protection procedures and processes used in the NT were not initially designed with the primary focus on the experiences of Yolŋu children, how would our child protection system appear if it were crafted with Yolŋu experiences as the central focus, treating non-Yolŋu experiences as the exception rather than the starting point?

Or to put it another way... in Western Miyarrka – what would the child protection system look like, if it mostly suits Yolŋu and does not suit the Visitors?

*In Yolŋu life, mulkurr (head) and jalkiri (foot) form behavioural norms; gurruṯu (kinship) defines social networks; and mǎrr (strength, power) is an indicator of trust. These components of Yolŋu social capital have sometimes been strengthened and sometimes weakened by post-contact social development.*⁵⁴

Mulkurr, jalkiri and mǎrr provide the theoretical underpinning for the use of gurruṯu as a social protection system. A senior Gupapuyŋu Liyalanmirri woman summed it up in this way:

This is our heart for children in Gapuwiyak. That they can be strong and healthy in their own culture. Our children don't need to be taken away by police, or by 'welfare'. They don't need to be locked up. We can care for our children. We can make them safe. We can help them learn their culture, and how to be strong.

We observed this in the application of the Yolŋu Child Development Assessment Tool. As outlined in case studies in [Appendix 2](#), we found that when it was used as intended, it affirmed to Yolŋu parents that their efforts and parenting strategies are resulting in the transfer of language, social skills and cultural understanding for their child. In other words, to validate and increase a sense of agency in Yolŋu parents towards positive child development.

Overlaps between Yolŋu gurruṯu-centred approach and Balanda Signs of Safety approach

Some concepts in social work practice align more easily with Yolŋu ways of knowing and being than others. These are approaches that recognise the importance of understanding the context and relationships in which individuals and communities exist, and promote empowerment and cultural sensitivity.

We found that the principles of the current child protection service framework in the NT – Signs of Safety – had these areas of compatibility with a gurruṯu-centred approach. The focus of Signs of Safety is on building a network of support around the child, involving people who care about their well-being, and ensuring their safety in the home and other environments they live in. 'Safety' refers to preventing or minimising events that may cause trauma or negatively impact a child's development and wellbeing. This includes safeguarding them from abusive situations, neglect, violence or any other experiences that could have long-term detrimental effects on their overall well-being. The aim is to create a nurturing and supportive environment that fosters resilience and enables children to thrive.

⁵⁴ Ullrich, J. S. (2019). For the love of our children: an Indigenous connectedness framework. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 15(2), 121-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180119828114>

The table below demonstrates the parallels we identified between the Signs of Safety framework and gurrutu-centred approaches.

Signs of safety	Gurrutu-centred approaches
Working relationships	• Relationality and gurrutu
Thinking Critically; Fostering a Stance of Inquiry	• Seeing participants as experts and facilitators as learners • Balanda challenge their own assumptions about the effectiveness of their work • Balanda prepared to consider that they may be part of the problem rather than solution
Landing Grand Aspirations in Everyday Practice	• Aspirational approach to resolving problems during the life-course according to māgayamirr rom (peace, no trouble, cessation of hostilities, ideal)

Signs of Safety assessment and planning is a process of creating a map that shows the situation surrounding a child who is at risk, with the goal to ensure consistent and lasting safety for the child. The level of risk to a child is assessed together with their family network, and planning for safety happens in partnership with the people the child belongs to – their family or kinship connections:

Child protection practice and culture tend toward paternalism. This occurs whenever professionals adopt the position that they believe they know what is wrong in the lives of service recipient families and they know what the solutions are to those problems. A culture of paternalism can be seen as the 'default' setting of child protection practice.

This is a culture that both disenfranchises the families that child protection agencies work with and exhausts the front-line professionals that staff them. The Signs of Safety approach seeks to create a more constructive culture around child protection organisation and practice. Central to this is the use of specific practice tools and processes where professionals and family members can engage with each other in partnership to address situations of child abuse and maltreatment.⁵⁵

A well-functioning gurrutu system can effectively achieve this without resorting to legal processes or government-led interventions.

⁵⁵ Turnell, A., & Murphy, T. (2018). Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper. 4th edition. <https://knowledgebank.signsofsafety.net/resources/introduction-to-signs-of-safety/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper-en/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper>

Resources in language and grounded in Yolŋu worldview

At the request of the leadership group, at the outset of this project ARDS collaborated with a team of researchers from Charles Darwin University to understand whether a resource developed by that team in another Yolŋu community (Galiwin'ku) was relevant for Western Miyarrka. The question was succinctly answered: yes.⁵⁶ Interestingly, it was identified that the resource was most valuable for non-Yolŋu working in the field, as a secondary monitoring tool. The data collected was unlikely to be useful as a primary monitoring tool (for Yolŋu) because those structures exist already and function effectively. In other words, the information described in the resource is accurate, however, the resource itself does not add to the process for Yolŋu because the 'data' is held in the collective memory of the senior and emerging leaders of clan nations and utilised daily.⁵⁷

During our engagements using the Yolŋu Child Development Assessment Tool we observed positive engagement with the tool. Further, participants frequently raised questions about the lack of culturally grounded practices (not merely retrospective 'integration' of some Yolŋu concepts) in existing mainstream early childhood services. They confirmed the importance of Yolŋu languages and cultural norms in the delivery of early childhood support services. In line with other similar findings, participants advised that many programs operating in Yolŋu communities frequently ignore the child's first language and rarely align with Yolŋu cultural knowledge.⁵⁸

The project team also heard about instances where appropriate resources and approaches are in place, but externally driven changes to the programs can see communities lose agency and control over those resources.⁵⁹ Loss of control over data sovereignty may often occur when Yolŋu knowledge is stored in ways that emphasise organisational branding or ownership.

Taking into account the informal feedback provided by the participants (outside the primary data set of **Participant Stories**), the project team considered it essential to emphasise the need for Yolŋu-led resource development as a finding. **Participant Stories** 6, 9 and 10 demonstrate the importance of language preservation and cultural continuity. There was also a strong emphasis on how crucial it is that non-Yolŋu come with an attitude of learning from Yolŋu, rather than imparting knowledge to Yolŋu. Gawura Wanambi summarised it like this:

Fly empty, and you'll go back full. Fly in, empty handed – don't bring your own resources and ideas – be a good listener. Then, only then, you'll go back full handed.

⁵⁶ Dharanjanamirr dhukarr gungayunaraw djamarrkuljiw' ga gurruṯumirriw marngikunharaw ḁalkunharaw galkalwun dhiyakun mārmmaw'nha romgun - Understanding pathways to support Yolŋu children and families to achieve strong learning in two systems: A Participatory Action Research Project. <http://www.growingup Yolngu.com.au/>

⁵⁷ Nuthanmaram djamarrkuljiny' maārma'kurr romgurr – Growing up children in two worlds. <http://www.growingup Yolngu.com.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=128&l=1&id=48> s to support Yolŋu children and families to achieve strong learning in two systems: A Participatory Action Research Project. <http://www.growingup Yolngu.com.au/>

⁵⁸ Maypilama, L., Lowell, A., Guyula, Y., Yunupingu, M., Farmer, R., Fasoli, L., & Gundjarranbuy, R. (2019). "We're still being dragged to be white": Learning from Yolŋu "growing up" their children in two worlds. In A. Pence & J. Harvell (Eds.), *Pedagogies for Diverse Contexts* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁵⁹ One early childhood service provider, Minay Wunurṁurra, shared the example of her decade-long effort within the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program as an effective bridging between Yolŋu and Balanda concepts of parenting. However, despite positive outcomes, the FAST program stopped in December 2023, and the community was left without access to many of the resources, data, records and information that they had collected and contributed into the program. For example, the aspirations of the young fathers in Gapuwiyak, whom Minay had consulted in 2022, had never been fulfilled or followed up in any Strong Fathers programs. At Minay's request, both the resources and records themselves, as well as insights about the risk of poor data sovereignty practices, will be captured through co-design processes for the Child and Family Centre for Gapuwiyak and the surrounding homelands, which is on foot at the time of finalising this report.

Cultural competency for non-Yolŋu practitioners

The need for improved cultural competency among non-Indigenous practitioners, as highlighted in our findings, is a well-documented issue.⁶⁰ Studies have shown that practitioners who undergo cultural competency training are better equipped to engage effectively with ethnic minority families.⁶¹ Over time, cultural competency frameworks have evolved to not only focus on understanding the culture of the community members, but also on understanding the practitioners' own cultural background. This shift broadens the scope, recognising the importance of self-reflexivity in effective communication.⁶²

Remote Indigenous Australia has been described as a place “where the power of family and country encompasses and transcends all other preoccupations” and the “crossed purposes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations are at their most extreme”.⁶³ Mahood's lived experience of the intersection between mismatched cultural expectations is still a powerful example of what the have team observed 10 years later:

It is mandatory for anyone wishing to work in Antarctica to undergo a physical and psychological assessment to establish whether they will stand up to the stresses of isolation, the extreme environment and the intense proximity to other people. All the same factors exist in remote Aboriginal communities, along with confronting cross-cultural conditions. Yet there don't appear to be any recognised training programs for people who aspire to work in a community, or screening criteria to weed out the mad, bad and incompetent who prowl the grey zone of Indigenous service delivery...

*The famous quip about mercenaries, missionaries and misfits has a lot of truth in it, and each type covers a spectrum, from highly functional through incompetent to downright destructive. Under pressure, both strengths and weaknesses become exaggerated, and what, in normal circumstances would be merely a character trait (stubborn, orderly, conscientious, volatile, flexible, timid) can become the quality that makes or breaks you.*⁶⁴

We were consistently shown that gurruṯu is as nuanced and effective as other systems of care and protection that are utilised in the dominant culture. However, when faced with the overwhelming challenges of the sector, many professionals approach their work without examining this. The need for improved cultural competency among non-Indigenous practitioners, as highlighted in our findings, is a well-documented issue.⁶⁵ Further to this, we found that Western Miyarrka leaders also seek some commitment from non-Yolŋu to consistently demonstrate culturally competent behaviours and practices.

⁶⁰ Bennett, B., Redfern, H., & Zubrzycki, J. (2018). Cultural Responsiveness in Action: Co-Constructing Social Work Curriculum Resources with Aboriginal Communities. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48(3), 808–825. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx053> De Zilva, S., Walker, T., Palermo, C., & Brimblecombe, J. (2022). Culturally safe health care practice for Indigenous Peoples in Australia: A systematic meta-ethnographic review. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*. 27(1), 74–84. doi:10.1177/13558196211041835

⁶¹ Sawrikar, P., & Katz, I. (2014). Recommendations for Improving Cultural Competency When Working with Ethnic Minority Families in Child Protection Systems in Australia. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 31, 393–417. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10560-014-0334-8>

⁶² Gopalkrishnan, N. (2019). Cultural Competence and Beyond: Working Across Cultures in Culturally Dynamic Partnerships. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 1(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516602619826712>

⁶³ Mahood, K. (2012). Kartiya are like Toyotas: white workers on Australia's cultural frontier. [Paper in: What is Australia For? Schultz, Julianne (ed.).]. *Griffith Review*, 36, 25–41.

⁶⁴ Mahood, K. (2012). Kartiya are like Toyotas: white workers on Australia's cultural frontier. [Paper in: What is Australia For? Schultz, Julianne (ed.).]. *Griffith Review*, 36, 25–41.

⁶⁵ Bennett, B., Redfern, H., & Zubrzycki, J. (2018). Cultural Responsiveness in Action: Co-Constructing Social Work Curriculum Resources with Aboriginal Communities. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48(3), 808–825. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx053> De Zilva, S., Walker, T., Palermo, C., & Brimblecombe, J. (2022). Culturally safe health care practice for Indigenous Peoples in Australia: A systematic meta-ethnographic review. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*. 27(1), 74–84. doi:10.1177/13558196211041835

One clan leader stated:

There's no way to understand the whole thing 100%. Only a little, but that could be enough, from both sides of the worldview. There's a lot there (Balanda worldview), there's a lot here (Yolŋu worldview), there's big there, there's big here. I need to be working from my own ground, from my own platform, across into that area, find a pathway that we can work together.

The need for trust and cooperation

Collective action is a fundamental aspect of gurrutu that encourages collaboration and cooperation among community members. This collaborative effort enhances the ability to address challenges and risks faced by children, providing an holistic approach to child protection. If one carer is not performing their duties, there are many others who have the responsibility to fill that gap. **Participant Stories** 2, 7 and 21 demonstrated this most clearly, however most sessions touched on the importance of an holistic approach to managing crises. All changes and interventions are designed around the assumption that kinship and connectedness will last forever, irrespective of what negative events may have occurred. Furthermore, the emphasis on participation ensures that community members actively contribute to decision-making processes related to child well-being. A Dhalwaŋu leader put it this way:

We've got our own way in Yolŋu rom. Decisions need to be made here where yuŋa [new] parents are close to the shelter of their families – galki gurrutumirr [beside kin], ga djalkiri – the foundations of their identity.

When functioning well, the system is rooted in a deep sense of trust, fostering a collective responsibility for the welfare of all community members, especially children. Norms of reciprocity encourage collaboration and cooperation among trusted adults who have duty of care for children. This collaborative effort can enhance the community's ability to address challenges and problems, providing an holistic approach to creating wellbeing across the life-course.

We are not saying that the gurrutu system always functions well. Like any system, it is possible for it to become unbalanced, ineffective and stunted. However, in contrast, the experiences shared through the project indicate that the mainstream child protection system rarely functions well in Yolŋu communities. It is not surprising that Yolŋu participants primarily described 'welfare' as a danger and a threat, especially when compared to the existing systems that Yolŋu families have in place. A Djambarrpuyŋu leader stated:

With 'welfare'... we want to say – stop making decisions by yourself secretly and then saying, "I'm sorry we can't help you out." Instead of getting dhäwu [story] from barrkunur [far away] – in Darwin, in Canberra – we want the story to be told here. The decisions must be made here. Not at court in Darwin, or in Katherine, or somewhere else.

It is difficult for Yolŋu families to cooperate with or appreciate a system which from their perspective is not grounded in an holistic worldview and is bringing more harm than good. Yolŋu cultural viewpoints allow for systematic observation and synthesis of information with an understanding that logic and reason are not dispassionate.⁶⁶ Community members also have a personal investment in pursuing equality, compassion and supportive action, because they and their families will be directly impacted by the decisions and judgements of the group.

⁶⁶ Reid, J. (1983). Sorcerers and healing spirits: continuity and change in an Aboriginal medical system. Australian National University Press. 112.

There is a clear disconnect between the mainstream child protection system and Yolŋu cultural practices. However, it need not remain this way. During the project, we explored many areas of commonality between Yolŋu cultural practices and the current practice framework underpinning child protection work in the NT.

In the course of this project, leaders identified the value of a 'stop' function for any Yolŋu-Balanda partnership work. This would allow Yolŋu to set the priorities for and the pace of any discussions. One local leader articulated:

It feels like 'welfare' come sneak up on people, tell secret stories in Darwin. Melŋu [spying] by people that want to take Yolŋu children. People who want to trade away Yolŋu children. Yolŋu families have been worrying about this for many years.

Towards the end of this project, leaders drew our attention to a Yolŋu concept: makarr-nhāma. This concept was seen to be central to Yolŋu and Balanda being able to look clearly together at the whole picture of what is happening for the care and protection of children in Western Miyarrka, including making assumptions that come from each worldview explicit. It is beyond the scope of this project to fully unpack this concept, but we record it here for leaders to take forward in their negotiations.

Conclusion

Many of the Yolŋu consulted during this project have made the 'care and protection of children' their life's work. The 'visitors' they have worked with have changed over and over, but the work remains the same. In a context of broader inequality and socio-economic disadvantage in Australia, a small-scale project like ours, in and of itself, is unlikely to sufficiently address any of the challenges being experienced by Yolŋu families. Many discriminatory outcomes are directly tied to, or compounded by, a lack of culturally appropriate services and negative government assumptions about local capacity, leadership and decision-making. This lack of appropriate services and the resulting socio-economic disadvantage is a key source of discrimination and negative outcomes.

Participants in this project shared clear stories about family-led decision-making regarding children who were at risk of harm. Leaders advocated for a community-controlled approach to child protection, expressing a desire for Western Miyarrka to 'be its own welfare' and urging respect for Yolŋu knowledge by external partners and providers. They envisioned a child protection system grounded in Yolŋu kinship values, fostering trust, reciprocity and collective action.

This report articulates the key themes or findings that were consistently expressed by the majority of Yolŋu participants in relation to local views about children and families, and child protection. We have also included several calls for action that were consistently raised by participants and leaders themselves as ways of improving the current situation.

Whilst we were reviewing the conclusions and calls for action from the project with key clan leaders, a senior man from the Marranŋu clan stated:

The children of 'The Intervention' are graduating to go nowhere. Government wants one side to be a winner. Yolŋu want everyone to be winners. If we use a system of winners and losers, we are not following Yolŋu Rom [cultural law]. We have no winners and losers. We want all to be stronger – together – all of us. Cultural knowledge can't be added to something to make it legitimate. We must start from wandal' [the ancestral lands], where we belong, then build our system up from that foundation with mǎrr [strength], mulka'-wāŋa [shelter/safety] ga māgaya rom [laws of peace].



Appendices to report from Western Miyarrka leaders

Decolonising Child Protection: Severing Unhealthy Ties and Restoring Secure Attachments.

Lead Author Melody Dale

Co-Author Wuṯpurru Sharon Wunuṁmurra of the Dhaḷwaṁu clan



Key Cultural Supervisors Gawura Wanambi of the Marraṁu clan, Bulkanhawuy Dhamarrandji of the Djambarrpuyṁu clan and Malṁumba Guyula of the Djambarrpuyṁu-Liyadhälinymirr clan.

Special Thanks

Djäwuṯ Goṁdarra of the **Golumala** clan, **Dipiliṁa Marika** of the **Warramiri** clan, **Maratja Dhamarrandji** of the **Djambarrpuyṁu** clan, **Mayalil Marika** of the **Gumatj** clan, **Nalpinya Dhurrkay** of the **Wangurri** clan, **Nulpinditj Gurruwiwi** of the **Gälpu** clan, **Rarriwuy** and **Wayalwaṁa Marika** of the **Rirratjiṁu** clan, **Warjira Gaykamaṁu** of the **Gupapuyṁu** clan, **Wäkaw Peters** of the **Wägilak** clan, **Yämbuma Gaykamaṁu** of the **Gupapuyṁu-Liyadhälinymirr** clan and **Yoku Pachos** of the **Djambarrpuyṁu** clan.

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Njunha Wäṁa Diltjiṁur Artwork © Kylie Gatjawarrawuy Munuṁgurr Djapu clan - Design and layout : Warren Handley

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Appendix 1: Letters about a Local Decision Making agreement

Call for a Local Decision-Making Agreement from Western Miyarrka Leaders

1. We want government to recognise Yolŋu Laws, especially about Care and Protection [systems] for children.	1. Napurr ga djälthirr nŋnhi gapman dhu mǎrr-dharaŋan Yolŋu Rom ga djamarrkuliwal romŋur bala rǎli guŋga'yunmirr.
2. We want government to respect Yolŋu skills and systems, and follow Yolŋu protocols.	2. Napurr ga djälthirr nŋnhi gapman dhu makmakthun Yolŋuw gakalku mayaliw ga romgu.
3. We can see a better pathway for government to help us, and vice versa, via Yolŋu systems and skills.	3. Nhǎma napurr ŋuli wiripuny latju dhukarr guŋga'yunamirr, bala rǎli, romkurr ga gakalkurr.
4. We have chosen our clan leaders to speak up for us, they have Yolŋu qualifications, and spiritual strength, the right attitude and intelligence, we want you to listen to them.	4. Napurr ga malŋ'maram wo djarr'yun ŋanapurrunway ŋalapałmirr ga liya-ŋǎrra'mirr mǎrrmirr yolŋu ga ŋayaŋumirr ga mulkurrmirr, romkurr galikurr, marr ga walal dhu waŋa napurru, ga nhuma dhu buthuru-witjun walalaŋ.
5. We want government to talk directly with our clan leaders, and meet regularly with them side by side.	5. Napurr ga djälthirr nŋnhi gapman dhu waŋanhamirr rrambaŋi ŋalapałmirr mala ga bukmak gurruŋumirr guŋga'yunmirr bala rǎli.
6. We want government to stop. a. Stop making decisions about our children. b. Stop taking advantage of or being unfair to our families. c. Stop discriminating or talking the wrong way to our families. d. Stop neglecting and leaving our families without help, without kin, without caregivers [in Out of Home Care]. e. Stop abusing and attacking our spirit.	6. Napurr ga djälthirr nŋnhi gapman dhu gul'maranhǎmirr. a. Ga yaka malŋ'maram wo maladjarr'yun dhukarr nhaltjan napurr dhu djǎka napurruŋ djamarrkuliw ga gurruŋumirriw. b. Ga yaka bawa'-gurrupan napurruny gurruŋumirriny. c. Ga yaka barrkuwatjkum ga wiripukum waŋa napurruŋ gurruŋumirriw. d. Ga yaka ganathul napurruny djamarrkuli gurruŋumiriwlii ga djǎkamiriwlii ganaŋulil [Out of Home Care]. e. Ga yaka buma wo mađakarritjthirr ga ŋayaŋu wutthunhamirr.

7. We want Balanda workers to a. learn Yolŋu protocols and who the leaders are. b. to talk gently, not roughly/rudely, with us and our families. c. let the work happen in Yolŋu languages. If you do not feel confident to speak to us in Yolŋu Matha, we can choose someone to interpret for you, you can listen to our Yolŋu worker or mala leaders. d. listen to us, watch how we do this sensitive work, and learn from us. e. work together and support us in a respectful and reciprocal way.	7. Napurr ga djälthirr ŋunhi Balanda djämamirr dhu a. ŋayanu-marram yolŋuwal romŋur ga bäpurruw napurr ga rom dhu napurruŋ, bala räli manyakkum dhäruk buku-luŋmaram ga waŋanhamirr. b. waŋa wo mayali'mirriyam ga yaka rerri'irri waŋa ga yaka buku-moma napurruŋ. c. guŋga'yun ga djäma Yolŋukurr dhärukkurr. Ŋunhi nhe yaka ŋayanumirriyirr waŋanharaw Yolŋu Mathaw wo gora nhuma ga, ma'. Lakaram marŋgikum napurruny, marr ga napurr dhu malŋ'maram Yolŋu nhuŋu guŋga'yunaraw, ga nheny dhu buthuru-witjun napurruŋ Yolŋu djämamirr wo ŋalapaŋ Yolŋuw. d. buthuru-witjun napurruŋ, nhäma napurruŋ ga djäma nhaltjan napurruŋ guŋga'yunamirr rom dhawaŋmaram ga ŋayatham, ga yaka rum'rumdhurr, ga nhuma dhu ŋäma ga marŋgithirra. e. djäma waŋganyŋur ga guŋga'yunmirr rrambaŋi ga makmakthunamirr bala räli'yunmirra.
8. We want to make agreements with government about many areas of life. We want to make these agreements here in Gapuwiyak. The first thing we want to make an agreement about are the ways that we will work together to make families and parents stronger, including how child protection workers do their work [for/with children from Gapuwiyak].	8. Napurr ga djälthirr ŋunhi djäma 'Agreements' wiripu wiripu mala, dhiyaŋ bala, Gapuwiyakŋur gapman dhu yuranhamirr. Ŋurruŋu napurr dhu yuranhamirr nhaltjan limurr dhu djäma waŋganyŋur ga guŋga'yunmirr rrambaŋi marr ga gurruŋumirr manyakkum, ga bäpa ga ŋändi mirithirr dälkum, ga nhaltjan Balanda Wilpiya djämamirr djäma ga.
9. We want child protection decisions about our children to be made here in Gapuwiyak, not in Darwin Children's Court. This is so we can talk about sensitive things, without being perceived to be asking for trouble, between relatives, elders, so that we speak to the point regarding child safety.	9. Napurr ga djälthirr ŋunhi [child protection decisions] buku-wäthun dhiyaŋ bala, Gapuwiyakŋur, yaka Darwinŋur Courtŋur. Yurr limurr dhu buku-wäthun romgu roŋanmaranhamirr gurruŋumirr ga ŋalapaŋmirr mala limuruŋ, marr ga limurr dhu dhäruk bakmaram gamurru wo ŋurru djamarrkuŋiwal romŋur märrkitj dhu nhina.
10. We will find and choose our own pathway about how we look after our children and families [community control of child protection services]. We want government to provide enough funding for local Yolŋu people to be paid properly for the time we spend working on care and protection issues.	10. Napurr dhu malŋ'marama wo djarr'yun napurruway dhukarr nhaltjan napurr dhu djäga napurruway djamarrkuŋiwal ga gurruŋumirr.
11. We want government to provide enough funding for local Yolŋu people to be paid properly for the time we spend working on care and protection issues.	11. Napurr ga djälthirr ŋunhi gapman dhu gutjpara rrupiya manyak marr ga napurr gurruŋumirr ga ganydjarmirr djäma dhiyaŋ bala.
12. We want government to come here to Gapuwiyak, and make an agreement with us about how we will do this work together.	12. Napurr ga djälthirr ŋunhi gapman dhu buna Gapuwiyakŋur, ga napurruŋ ŋalapaŋmirr ga yuranhamirr nhaltjan limurr dhu djäma rrambaŋi, wilpiya djäma ga balanya.

List of Bāpurru (clan nations) represented in the Gapuwiyak LDM process

Includes Traditional Owner (wāṇa wāṇu) clans and clans connected to nearby homelands and clans who are now living in Gapuwiyak

Bāpurru (Clan-nation)	Moiety Number of households	Number, male/female emerging/senior	Consensus provided for draft LDM agreement	Traditional Owner of.... (homeland)
Dātiwuy ga Ṇaymil 	Dhuwa	1 male - Emerging Leader	✓	Rorruwuy, Yaṇunbi
Dhaḷwaṇu	Yirritja 108 households	3 female – Senior Leaders 2 female – Emerging Leaders 2 male – Senior Leaders	✓	Gurumuru
Djambarrpuyṇu • Māri • Gutharra 	Dhuwa 80 māri gutharra households	2 male – Senior Leaders 1 female – Senior Leader	✓	Dhamiyaka, Bunhaṇura, Dhulmudany, Dhuwalkitj
Djāpu • Dhudi • Gupa 	Dhuwa 12 households	1 male – Senior Leader	✓	Dhurruputjpi, Wandawuy
Djarrwark 	Dhuwa 1 household	Clan leader not available this week	✓	Balma
Gālpu   	Dhuwa 12 households	1 male – Senior Leader	✓	Ṇaypinya, Garrimala
Ganalbiṇu ṇyaṇura	Yirritja 6 households	1 female – Emerging Leader	✓	Bariṇura, Gadiwiṇa, Ṇaliyindi
Gumatj	Yirritja 2 households	1 female – Emerging Leader	✓	Bariṇura
Gupapuyṇu • Liyaḷaṇmirr • Birrkili Wāṇa wāṇu	Yirritja 6 households	1 female – Senior Leader 1 female – Emerging Leader	✓	Gapuwiyak, Burruṁ, Yaḷakun

Guyamirrillil	Yirritja 5 households	1 female – Senior Leader	✓	Mäpuru
Liya-Galawumirr • Moḡuk • Raypiny	 Dhuwa Approx	1 female – Senior Leader	✓	Garriyak
Maḡarrpa	Yirritja –	1 male – Senior Leader	✓	Yilpara, Baygurr̄tji
Mangalili	Yirritja			Djarrakpi
Marraṇu • Dhudi • Gupa	 Dhuwa 11 households	2 female – Emerging Leaders 2 male – Senior Leaders	✓	Raymaṅgirr, Gurka'wuy
Munyuku	Yirritja Approx	Clan leader not available this week	•	Rurraṅala
Ritharrṇu	Yirritja Approx	1 male – Senior Leader	✓	Donydji, Gäliṇura
Wägilak larr	 Dhuwa 8 households	1 female – Senior Leader	✓	N̄lipitji
Wangurri	Yirritja Approx	Clan leader not available this week	•	Dhāl̄inybuy
Warramiri	Yirritja Approx. 2-3 households	Clan leader not available this week	•	Dholtji, Maṭa Maṭa
Total Households Represented:	267			

***Note about counting households. Households are counted by the number of households led by a mature adult, male and female and not the number of houses that they live in. That meant that many houses incorporate 5-6 households of different clan affiliations and the strongest clan in the house gives that house the name of that clan. This meant that, for example, from an initial count of 24 Dhalwaṇu houses, once the number of households within each house, and in other clan affiliated houses, were counted the number of households represented by that elder or Traditional Owner was 108. The māri-gutharra Djambarrpuyṇu clan households were initially counted at 18 houses, but when recounted using the preferred method it came to 80 households.



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Gapuwiyak Bāpurru Mala
ARDS Aboriginal Corporation

Dear Gapuwiyak Leaders,

Thank you for your correspondence on 4 March 2024, sharing the draft Gapuwiyak Local Decision Making (LDM) Agreement (draft Agreement) and inviting me to visit Gapuwiyak to meet with you to discuss your LDM Agreement aspirations. I was appreciative of your time and the opportunity to do this on 23 April 2024.

The draft Agreement presents a strong and compelling story that reflects Yolngu ways of caring for djamarrkuli. Presented in language, the draft Agreement is different to many other LDMs. By doing so, it speaks to the strength of Yolngu language and culture. It was also clear that by involving all relevant Clan groups in the draft Agreement there was a strong and united message around what the community intends to achieve.

Supporting and recognising Yolngu ways to strengthen parenting and families is essential to ensure djamarrkuli thrive and have strong foundations in both worlds. We know that if we are to improve outcomes in this area, then government must transition responsibility, power and control to Yolngu.

I thank you for being brave and forthright in presenting the draft Agreement in this way.

I have asked the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet to work with the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities to prepare a response. The partnership between the Territory Labor Government and Gapuwiyak leaders is vital and I propose that we aim to sign a Gapuwiyak LDM Agreement or Statement of Commitment in July this year.

Yours sincerely

SELENA UIBO

14 MAY 2024



Appendix 2: Participant stories and case studies

These are the stories that we can share for a general audience.

Participant Story 1:

Different clans can learn about each other. We need more partnerships. This is important for everyone. This is about our children. Some things need to be Yolŋu to Yolŋu. Sometimes Balanda and Yolŋu together. We need partnerships. Not people thinking only for themselves, or only for their organisation. It needs to be like this: [hand motions – two cupped hands, one on top of the other, with an empty space inside for something precious].

Participant Story 2:

Government law is cutting raki' [blood connections & kinship – lit. veins].

Woman and the kids are like sheep and cow in yard, locked in. Trapped. The man he is pushed outside [the circle]. He is wandering around and around. When 'welfare' took it [the children], then they want to hang themselves, kill themselves. What's going to happen, the husband suicide, who's got the problem?

This is the reality of life for Yolŋu people. Yaka nyal, dhuwal yuwalk – [This is not a made-up story].

When the child is taken away – everyone will worry – it is like mak nhamunha years... many many years [actions with hands – motions – wisps of worry coming from the head, spreading everywhere].

It's not helping. It's putting a trap.

'Welfare' [child protection services] have very little understanding of Yolŋu rom [cultural knowledge and laws]. I have experience in this area, I'm a carer for _____, the youngest, only likes to be at the homeland. In [homeland], there is no noise from traffic, there is only the bush, the sounds of the bush.

Everyone in the family help children to look out for danger – spiders, snakes, sorcery, crocodiles, drowning. Family members are not careless, they look after children the same way, they have the same skills, together they use those skills. I can say to the family – "here look after this boy" and I can trust that they will. For a few days, or a few weeks or even a month, I know that they will care for him. Because he is their gonmirr yothu [loved and valued family member/child]. 'Welfare' don't have that trust. They don't trust the other people. But that just shows ignorance about how Yolŋu families work.

Yolŋu have old law – raypirri rom – it is most important for Yolŋu and Balanda to respect each other. Balanda need to respect if they come to Yolŋu country. They should learn about the right way to do things. Come gently. Speak politely.

Participant Story 3:

'Welfare' [child protection services] come in and impose their law but they don't first respect Yolŋu law – gurruṯu system – this is the key, this is the law for Yolŋu.

If parents feel that 'welfare' will come around, especially young parents, they can too much worry and suicide themselves. This is no good. This happens not just in Gapuwiyak, in many communities. The young parents are very afraid of wilpiya.

We want the young generation to be strong, when wilpiya come, they can be confident and stand up. Right now, only the old people know how to talk to wilpiya and be strong to them. The old people want the younger ones to step up, but they need support.

When the bad things are happening in young parents' lives, they take chemicals, they try to hang themselves from a tree. I've seen this. This is the real story about how they feel. We want to support them in a way they can understand. Give to them from Yolŋu rom. Care for them with kindness, with care-ness. The problems will not get better by yelling at people, scaring them or speaking to them harshly. Hurting their feelings with lots of [direct] questions.

We want the young people, and the older parents, to have help to understand what wilpiya are saying. We want them to know, and understand Balanda law. So that they are prepared in the time that 'welfare' workers might come and see them.

Marr ga walal dhu ŋama'amayunmirr ŋathilmirr ŋunhi dhu wilpiya djāmamirr buna.

'Welfare' djāmamirr [child protection practitioners], need to consult beforehand with yolŋu mala leaders about the situation of yolŋu djamarr'kuḷi [children's] conflicts. [Practitioners] shouldn't visit the mother and father without showing respect to the elders first. Local people could assist in many ways – like a ŋapungawuy djāmamirr [mediation workers] so that problems can be addressed by Yolŋu protocols and culture.

People would like to understand the core of the rom [Care and Protection of Children laws] and also how would they both come together to assist and support each other for manyamak [good] life of djamarr'kuḷi [children] living in Gapuwiyak.

Participant Story 4:

Parents don't understand how 'welfare' works. Even parents who have had visits from 'welfare'. They don't know. It is confusing. After someone from 'welfare' visits, they will ring up their family and ask them for advice. Sometimes the family don't know very well either. They find the person who speaks English the best and talk to them.

When 'welfare' takes a child away, it feels like the family didn't have any choice.

Police should just be 'beside on us'. We want police or 'welfare' to stand beside us, not stand over us. To be 'beside on us' means understanding the right way to do things. Letting the Yolŋu leaders speak and make decisions.

Participant Story 5:

Sometimes when parents are having problems, they treat their children in the wrong way. This makes the child afraid. This isn't the right way to try and get the child to behave.

Here is the correct way: with love. We give love. We show that they are goŋmirr yothu. We show them where they belong. In the family with gurruṯu [kinship], with wāŋa [on country].

When there's fighting, the right way to helps someone is remind them about gurruṯu. Say "what do you call them?" or "how do you relate to them?" Because you must respect your mother, or your aunty, or your cousin. You must make peace with them, they are your family. Point out their gurruṯu. That is the right way to manage a problem.

Yolŋu children have Yolŋu identity, before they are born, and also from the first day. It goes from parent to child, when they come into their hands, there is a place for them, a tie – gurrurr. To understand this, [child protection services] need to take a makarr-nhāma approach. This is the strongest thing. It means taking a big picture view of all the good and bad. The bad things that cause or destroy, when it comes into the space. [The child protection services should] not just look at it from one place. Makarr nhāma means looking at it together from many angles.

Participant Story 6:

I will tell you a story. It is about _____. He was taken away by 'welfare' [child protection services]. He lived in Darwin. We had to work hard to show 'welfare' that he needed to come back to us. When he came back he only spoke English. All those years in Darwin we always spoke to him in Yolŋu Matha on the phone, and maybe he understood something, but he couldn't speak. He was ____ years old mak bay [approximately]. When he came home, all the family took turns looking after him, so that he could know all his family. So that he could feel that he is goŋmirr. We had to be a team. All the family. Mothers side, and father's side.

Now he is a grown young man. He speaks his mother's language. He is happy with his walŋa.

'Welfare' didn't understand how much he lost before. They didn't know what he needed.

We know. We are his family. We take him to his country. We teach him Yolŋu rom and make decisions.

Participant Story 7:

In the Balanda way, when people get old they might be looked after by strangers. Live with strangers. After they die, their family doesn't look after their spirit.

Yolŋu people are always with their family. After they marry, they are with one side of the family. After they die, the family keeps on caring for them. The family looks after their spirit.

When a baby is born, they come into the world attached to a clan based on Yirritja or Dhuwa [moieties] – a Yolŋu child always fits and becomes part of the whole [system]. It affects everyone, all clans, not just the parents if there are problems with a child, or if a child is taken away from their country and their clan. Some children who have been taken away by 'welfare' are the djungaya [caretakers] for their country. They are in line to inherit all of the maḏayin [sacred] knowledge, and to take care of the clan. But there they are. In Darwin, being cared for by Balanda. Many times they don't know their language any more. Not even children's language. Without them, the clan has an empty place, they are bereft.

For Yolŋu children, there isn't just a mother and father. The mother and father are something, but not everything. All these hand signs are about our family. The [maternal] uncle, the [paternal] aunt, the [paternal] grandparents and the maternal grandparents. Märi-gutharra, that is an important one. Goŋmirr, is well looked after within kin(ship) system of Yolŋu Gurruṯumirriw Rom.

Gurruṯu system, is one holistic view about caring each another and especially for Yolŋu children.

Participant Story 8:

In the Balanda way, when people get old they might be looked after by strangers. Live with strangers. After they die, One day, at [an Early Childhood Service] there was an incident. One of the young mums went out crying. I talked to her, and found out that one of the older people, one of the older mum's had called out to her and spoke harshly to her.

So I talked with that lady. I helped them talk to each other. They made peace with each other.

Sometimes older people don't realise how much they can hurt young people. When they speak rough to them. They hurt their feelings. It is better to use kindness and love. Even when they need correction, or discipline, we can do this kindly. We use soft voices, gentle voices. We talk to them about gurruṯu [kin]. This is the only way to approach someone who is hurting.

Participant Story 9:

When I come back to my wäŋa [ancestral land]. I have a tear in my eyes. I don't know where it comes from. I feel at home. I feel... freedom. I used to be here when I was 11 or 12 years old. Then I went away. I don't know why I live away from here, because when I come back I think – this is where I should be.

Here I can rest. I can hear the wind. Hear the sounds of nature.

When I hear them, I can hear the voices. The voices of my ancestors.

Participant Story 10:

When I speak my language – Wagilak – it makes me sad and makes me weep for my family that I lost. As I started to speak today, I saw a vision of my brother. He was sitting over there [motions with hands, off to the side, a respectful distance], he spoke and I knew he was asking “how are you?” and I couldn't answer him.

My brother was a strong leader, but he has died now too. All the people I grew up with have passed away, sometimes I feel alone and far from the Wagilak family.

I been teaching my daughter though, and my son. My daughter is strong in weaving. My son is strong too, he is a good ranger, and cares for the land. He spends a lot of time out bush, but when he comes back he brings things for me.

I used to work for the Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture programs. It doesn't matter what has happened, a Yolŋu child can always come back. With smoking ceremonies for babies, if they miss their ceremony when they are a baby, it is okay, you can always come back. Every time there is a funeral ceremony there is a chance for a smoking ceremony for children, young people, anyone who needs that help on their journey of growing up.

**identifying information used with permission.

Participant Story 11:

I'm an old man. My homeland is _____. There are some stories I can only tell there. I have to be there, sitting on the land, in the right place to tell the sacred stories, and other stories too. My family need to hear these stories. I have worked with my family to explain and teach raypirri'yun [self-discipline]. The best place to teach this is on our homelands.

Because of health problems, I'm living in here. But my heart is at my homeland. That's where I want to be. I want to camp there, and live there for my life. That's where I can teach the younger generation in a good way. If there was a health service there, then maybe I could do that. But there is nothing for me. Nothing to help me go home.

I can teach about all the land there. Which homeland is Dhuwa, which one is Yirritja. Who is the mother place or grandmother place, who is their child/grandchild. I have all this knowledge, and my children and their children want to learn from me. But I need to take them to that homeland_____ so it can happen in the right way.

Participant Story 12:

My [kinship relation] – she has a Balanda father. She nearly went with 'welfare' [child protection services]. Even though she is light-skin, the family recognise and accept her. She is beautiful. One day she was putting on make-up in the mirror and she saw her Njathi [maternal grandfather]. He spoke to her and said “you're not Balanda, you're Yolŋu, you don't need make up. I am your Njathi”.

He had died in 2002.

She came running to the family and told them about seeing Njathi. Ever since then she has been a proud Yolŋu woman, she knows she's full Yolŋu and doesn't need make-up.

Another time, one of the grandchildren, who had never met him, saw him and he told the child his full name – real name. Then one day the family were talking and the child spoke about Njathi. Everyone was amazed because the child couldn't have known this.

The spirits of our loved ones keep living with us. This is the visions we see.

Participant Story 13:

My [kinship relation] had 'welfare' talking to her for my [kinship relation]. The father was difficult. He hit the mother, argued with her. They are wrong-skin. They are māri-gutharra [grandmother-grandchild]. But they have a child together. This is very difficult. Once they went to a Safe House, and I phoned her up. The child told me things like "when I grow up I'll hit them, don't worry [kinship relation], when I grow up I can fix it". That made me sad. They needed help from the whole family.

Later on, the father one's family told him to come back to [ancestral homeland]. So the family went there. Living at the outstation, eating good food, seeing all the family. It calmed him down. The fighting got better.

I don't want them to come back to Gapuwiyak, because they are healthy at [homeland]. I can show you a photo of the child. Look at her, joining in the dancing. Without [problematic] shame. Showing honour to her family. Her face is round and healthy, her eyes are bright. Look at the happiness. Even though she is far away, I'm proud because she is growing well. I want them to stay there. Stay away from all the bad things.

Healing happens at wāŋa [on country – ancestral lands]. Sleeping on the ground helps to heal the body, because the munatha [dirt] is helping you. The old people (ancestors) give dreams and bring healing. When people passed away, they still living with us.

Participant Story 14:

Scary things happen to us, this makes us think about our health, about our family. Last week there was a bad incident for our community. A death. Very, very awful.

We worry that something so bad could not happen without a curse. Maybe someone has cursed the family, black magic and sorcery are what we are most worried about.

Participant Story 15:

I raised my gāthu [my brother's children], they are adults now. They have children of their own. My gaminyarr – my gāthu's child is back at school this year. Mother and child. The mother is in high school, the child is in preschool. She took time off from school when she had her baby. But now she is confident, I talked to her and said "you can go back to school, with your yothu in FaFT" but she was too shy, for a long time. Now she is going back and I'm proud of her.

Another brother, my younger brother, I'm helping to raise his children [as well]. My gāthu [nieces and nephews] like to stay with me at [homeland] they prefer it. But when they go home to their mother, they come back with attitudes – difficult – throw themselves on the floor crying, asking for food – sugary food.

I talked to the mother one about not hitting the children, that we don't beat children we talk to them.

**identifying information used with permission.

Participant Story 16:

There is not enough trust. I know this myself. When I thought I was getting support, 'welfare' [child protection services] were just writing down bad things about me. When I told my story, it was used against me [in court].

Participant Story 17:

Some things [are] outside [surface work]. It is easy to see, everyone knows about it. Then there are the more difficult things – like talking about violence, or 'welfare' [child protection services] or suicide.

They are the deep things. Some stories, people are not allowed to talk about in mixed company, they have to be talking quietly and carefully. Balanda sometimes intrude where they shouldn't. This [blunt incursion] makes things worse.

One reason for this is that Balanda don't understand galka [black magic or malicious sorcery] and Yolŋu must be careful when talking about black magic. Galka is a very real part of the reason for suicides, death, and other problems. This is even more sensitive and difficult than anything else.

Participant Story 18:

Gapuwiyak [is] becoming like [other townships]. We hear about places like that, where people use machetes and weapons and fight each other all the time. We're scared it will get that bad in Gapuwiyak too. [Other townships] have lots of programs and services, but it doesn't make things better. Sometimes it makes it even worse.

Participant Story 19:

I'm a single mum. When my ḡirramu [husband] first left me for another woman, I was angry. I was upset and yelling and making trouble. But my sister helped me, she showed me how to get peaceful again. She said "look at me, I'm a single mum, I have no man helping me, but I'm raising my daughter and my nieces and nephews".

So I looked at my sister and learned from her. She is a strong woman. She is strong in Yolŋu rom, she helps all the family. I decided I would do that too.

Now I am peaceful. I can help other people and not worry about my ex-partner.

Participant Story 20:

The police, teachers, doctors, nurses, housing [officers], the Centrelink workers... Especially wilpiya [child protection practitioners]. All these people: visiting, asking questions, telling stories. They all have their own plans, their own stories, their own decisions. More 'help' really means more strangers. More stress. More worries.

Participant Story 21:

Here is one way we fix problems through gurruṯu. This baby is my gaminyarr... He is my brother's child's son. He calls me Momu [paternal grandparent].

His Mum went to Darwin for rehab. The family talked to each other and agreed that I am the right person to take care of this baby. We talked with all the family. See that lady walking? She is this child's Märi-mirriṯu [maternal grandmother]. Märi is the first one to look after gutharra, but she agreed that this time Momu [paternal grandmother] can care for him.

When his Mum comes back we can keep helping her, and caring for them.

He has lived with us since he was 2 weeks old. Look at him now, learning to walk, learning to talk. You ask him – where is the wāk [black crow]? That is his totem. See he says it 'wāk' and he will point to them. If you ask him – where is your [kinship relationship] he will look at them. He is learning his gurruṯu. Already he knows who he is, and who is family is.

Participant Story 22:

I've been a carer for _____ for 10 years. I'm so sick and tired of 'welfare' [child protection services]. If they were any use I would keep trying. But all this time, they are no use to me. I only want help to get _____ away from 'welfare'. He's 15 years old now. He's grown enough to not be 'under' 'welfare' anymore. If they can stop being in charge of him that would make my life easier.

My husband and I raised him. We did all the work. He is a good young man. He is doing alright. But any time we needed help, 'welfare' wasn't there for us. I am worn out from all the different case managers. It always changes, one day to the next. Or there is no-one. Or they are so bad I have to make a complaint. Then they are gone, but no one takes that place.

So now I'm too sick and tired to keep being a carer. I don't care that there will be no money to help me or my husband with looking after that young man. I'd rather have no money and no stress, than to keep on talking to 'welfare'.

In 10 years I never could talk to them and have them understand or help, not really.

Participant Story 23:

Once, my [kinship relation], she is an alcoholic, was in Darwin with her yothu [child] on her hip, drunk. Police came. They took the yothu, but I rang them up and told them to bring her back to Gapuwiyak. She didn't end up in 'welfare'. They wanted to tell me I was too old to look after her. But I said, no! I'm strong.

Once the child was here again, with family. Then the mother and father could start to cry for her. They changed what they were doing. They came back to Gapuwiyak where they can stay away from alcohol more easily. After a while they showed me that they were ready to take over looking after their child again. We talked together. The yothu wanted to be with her parents. The parents were in a healthy place, so they could be together again. But Centrelink didn't believe us. Because the mother didn't have any of the paperwork. They wouldn't change the [Family Tax Benefit] payment back to the mother. We didn't know what to do. We had to ask someone who speaks English well to write a letter for us to take to Centrelink.

Only after that would the Centrelink workers believe the true story. The story that everyone in the clan, and everyone in the community knew about.

Participant Story 24:

This happened for me. I was the wrong-skin for my partner. But my partner's [maternal grandmother], she knew me. She knew I was a good person and a good parent. She accepted me as her grandchild's husband. That meant that we had the family agreement for us, even though we weren't promised wife-husband, in the traditional way. We were a love marriage. That might have made problems, but the problem could be fixed by the māri'mirriṅu [maternal grandparent].

The mother and father are something, but that grandmother can fix some things. Love marriages can be hard for people. They might not have respect [for their relationship]. For me, gurruṯu [the kinship system] helped me, they made me the right person even though I wasn't really.

Because I was accepted, and I had respect, I could be a good parent for my children.

Participant Story 25:

My daughter is ready to find her husband, she doesn't want to go back to school right now because this is a complicated time. It is a delicate time. Once she finds a husband and has a child, then it would be a better time to go back to school. Right now I understand that she doesn't want to be at school, but I keep encouraging her to finish year 12.

I hope she finds a husband who is the right-skin for her. It is her choice, I don't know who she will choose, but it can make life hard for someone when they marry the wrong way.

Participant Story 26:

We two, we sisters both, we have raised our gutharra [grandchild]. Her n̄andi-mirriṇu [mother] has left her with us. See, she's a teenager now, she speaks her language, she knows her country. She is strong in Yolŋu culture.

When she was maybe 5 or 6 years old, things were going badly for her mum. Her mum used to shout at her, worry for money only. She would take her places where there were yätjurr [dangerous] people were all around.

We sat here, at the homeland, we sisters two, and we cried for the child and her mother, we worried for her.
We called out for her.

The child could have been taken away by 'welfare'. But no, she has family! We raised her together. We hope the mother one will come back, one day, but it's okay because our gutharra [grandchild] is here with us.

Case study: Child One – Malamarr

We will call this child 'Malamarr' which means Firstborn in Djambarrpuynu.

MaJamarr was born to a young mother with a history of substance abuse and self-harm. The family had been supporting her for many years on her healing journey, however she continued to suffer setbacks. When her baby was born, she was in prison, and it was assessed that she wasn't able to care for the baby in this setting.

The baby's maternal and paternal grandparents came from different communities in Arnhem. They made contact with one another and began to discuss who was best placed to provide care for the child. Traditionally the maternal grandmother and her sisters are the most appropriate people from which to select a carer. However, there were circumstances that would make it difficult for any of the Māri (maternal grandmother & grandmother's brother) to care for the baby.

Using a gurruṭu-centred approach the family then approached the paternal grandmothers of the child. One of these kin relations was a woman in her middle years who had no children of her own, but worked with children aged 0-5. The clan groups agreed that she and her household were best placed to raise Maḷamarr until his mother was able to care for him.

Maḷamarr was 2 weeks old when an extended family member flew with him to Gapuwiyak and placed him in the arms of his Momu (paternal grandmother relation). Her household embraced the baby and cared for him in accordance with Yolŋu cultural norms. The project team heard their story when Maḷamarr first arrived in Gapuwiyak, and then again at intervals they met with the family and heard updates on how he was progressing. At 7 months of age the family did a cultural assessment for Maḷamarr using the draft version of the Child Development Tool. By the end of the assessment, they were marvelling at Maḷamarr's intelligence, curiosity, social and language development. They had countless examples to share regarding the ways in which he was reaching Yolŋu child development milestones.

Case study: **Child Two – Malpura**

We will call this child 'Malpura' which means Secondborn in Djambarrpuyŋu.

Malpura was removed from the biological parents as a small child. The kinship network felt that he had been snatched away from them, without explanation or logical reason. They wept for him, inwardly and outwardly.

Raised in Darwin with non-Indigenous foster carers, Malpura didn't maintain a connection to Yolŋu languages and culture. The family members met together and discussed various strategies for convincing child protection services that what Malpura had lost, his language, culture and knowledge of kinship connections, was precious. They found it hard to make themselves understood by child protection workers.

They would speak with Malpura on the phone in Djambarrpuyŋu but the child no longer seemed to understand. Eventually, after many years of working together to liaise with child protection services, Malpura was returned to the family as pre-teen who only spoke English and did not understand Yolŋu cultural norms.

The family realised they would need to fast-track cultural education for Malpura. Together they came to a shared understanding of what Malpura most needed to learn, and this was the kinship network. In order that the child would deeply understand the kinship connections, members of the paternal and maternal families, from four different clan groups, all took Malpura in to live with them for varying periods of time. Malpura was immersed in the family network as a loved and valued child of all those clans.

The project team met with family members who told Malpura's story, about how for Malpura the raki'⁶⁷ had been cut, however through persistence and teamwork the family were able to restore and reconnect those severed ties of blood, kinship, care and connection.

Case study: **Child Three - Dharrakay**

We will call this child 'Dharrakay' which means Thirdborn in Djambarrpuyŋu.

Dharrakay was born to parents who had married via a love match in opposition to their natural gurruṯu. According to their kinship relationships they should have been mother and child, not husband and wife.

The young parents found it hard to relate to one another in healthy ways. Rather than a reciprocal, sharing and giving relationship, theirs was characterised by arguments, viciousness and selfishness. Whilst they lived with Dharrakay's maternal grandmother in the township, the fighting and disputes became worse and worse.

When the Project Team first met with the family, they shared that one reason for this trouble was that as the mother-in-law, the maternal grandmother had no authority to correct or guide the father. Yet she was the head of the household he was living in. His violence towards his wife led to her finding safety in various Safe Houses. It was clear that the father was damaging his child's development by his use of violence, but in the maternal home there was no one who could stand up to him.

During subsequent visits we heard that the kinship network had rallied together to take the couple and their child out to his ancestral lands. There at a homeland where many of his strong family members lived, he was surrounded by men who had high expectations for him. Men who supported and mentored him in his role as a father, a husband and as a land owner. For the first time Dharrakay was witnessing her parents' relationship working in healthy ways.

⁶⁷ The word raki' can mean string, (thick) fishing line, or rope, but is frequently used to refer to the metaphorical connections between people – their kinship relationships, bloodlines, and ancestral ties. Some speakers use the term to refer to literal veins in the body.

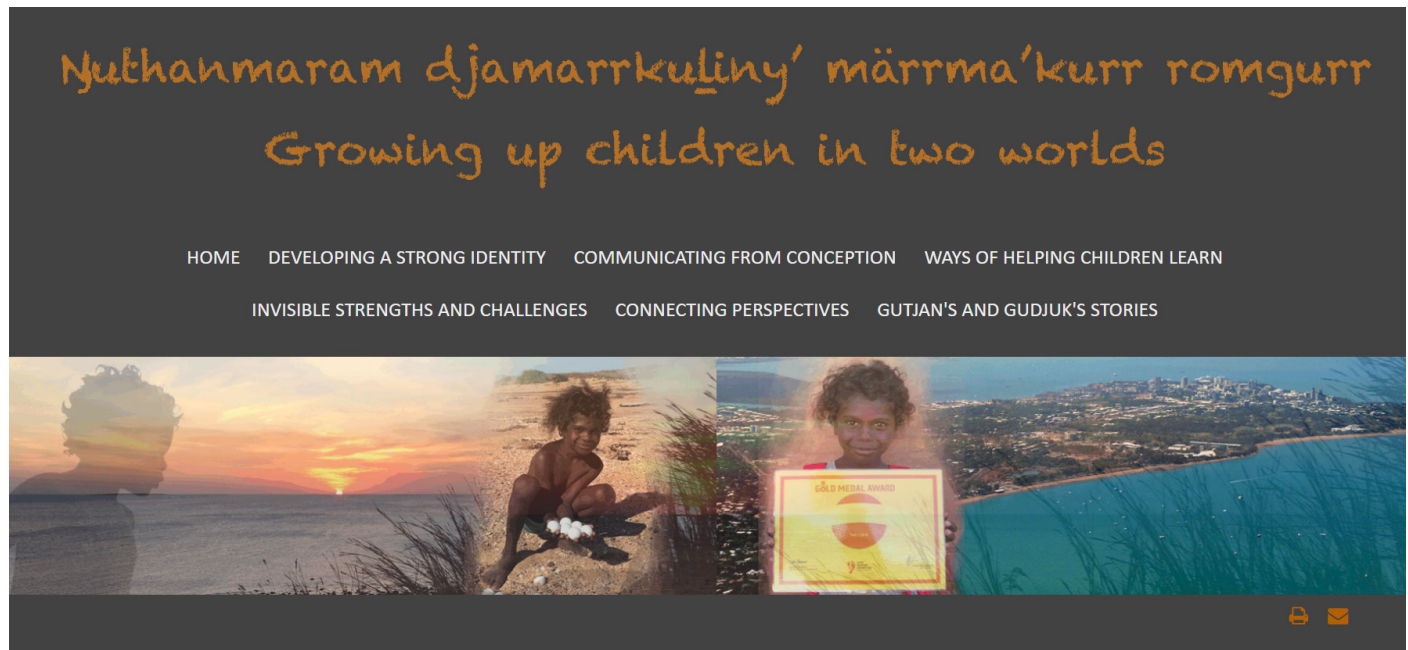
Her father was providing for them from the land of his ancestors. She was eating well, she was learning all the time. Her face changed from thin and pinched with worry, to round and open. She had the opportunity to observe her parents finding healthy norms for their relationship. The extended family unit were supporting and encouraging them.

Family members who recounted the story showed the Project Team pictures of the child and how much she was thriving through the support of the kinship network.

Appendix 3: Resources developed, adapted and utilised

Throughout the project, we developed visual resources as conversational tools, which were utilised and modified in an iterative process.

Nathanmaram djamarrkuliny' mǎrrma'kurr romgurr – Growing up children in two worlds ([Growing up Yolngu](#)) notes that ownership of cultural knowledge on the website remains with the Yolngu who have chosen to share this knowledge for the benefit of others.



Compilation Videos - [Dalkum Gurruṭumirriw](#)

We tested compilation videos that summarised the key points Yolngu leaders have been making on this topic over the past few decades.

The videos use Yolngu languages to describe how in traditional Yolngu society, self-discipline is highly regarded and instilled from childhood, continuing throughout adulthood. It encompasses the ability to regulate one's behaviour, thoughts and actions in alignment with cultural norms and values. By embodying self-discipline, individuals can effectively pass on knowledge, traditions and language to future generations, ensuring the preservation of their cultural identity.

The elders also highlight the role of traditional dance and singing in contributing to mental and personal strength. These not only strengthen the individual's connection to their culture but also contribute to their overall well-being and resilience. When clan members need assistance or support, the elders highlight the importance of approaching them with open hands and fostering trust through honest communication. They emphasise the significance of community members offering help and guidance to those in need, creating an environment of support and understanding.

Video Number 1

<https://www.tiktok.com/@gapuwiyak/video/7195409368026778881>

Naltjan limurr dhu ga gunḡa'yun young generation nha. Märr ga walal dhu grow ḡathan walal dhu ḡathan nhäkun ḡukitj yuṡa walal grow ga be strong. Cultural identity-ḡur cultural ability-ḡur walal dhu ga stand. Because culture dhuwal ḡayi essence limurrḡ ḡunha ḡjinawa' ḡadja-ḡadja ḡayi.

How can we help the new generation to grow, and new shoots to grow and be strong with cultural identity. Also to stand up with cultural ability. Because culture is the essence we are made up of inside.

Video Number 2

<https://www.tiktok.com/@gapuwiyak/video/7194956954987449601>

Nhe nhuḡu-wu buḡgawa. Bäyḡu dhu wiripuny yolḡuy lakaram nhältjan dhe dhu rom ḡjäma. Yäkan dhe dhu mel-gama wiripuny nhan yolḡuny. Waḡanyḡja yolḡu ḡulii ḡayi nḡaḡuwuy ḡayi gana dhukarr märram.

You are the boss of yourself. No other person can decide the way you will take. You can't blame other people. Each person has to choose their own path and work out what they want.

Video Number 3

https://www.tiktok.com/@gapuwiyak/video/7194956954987416833?is_from_webapp=1

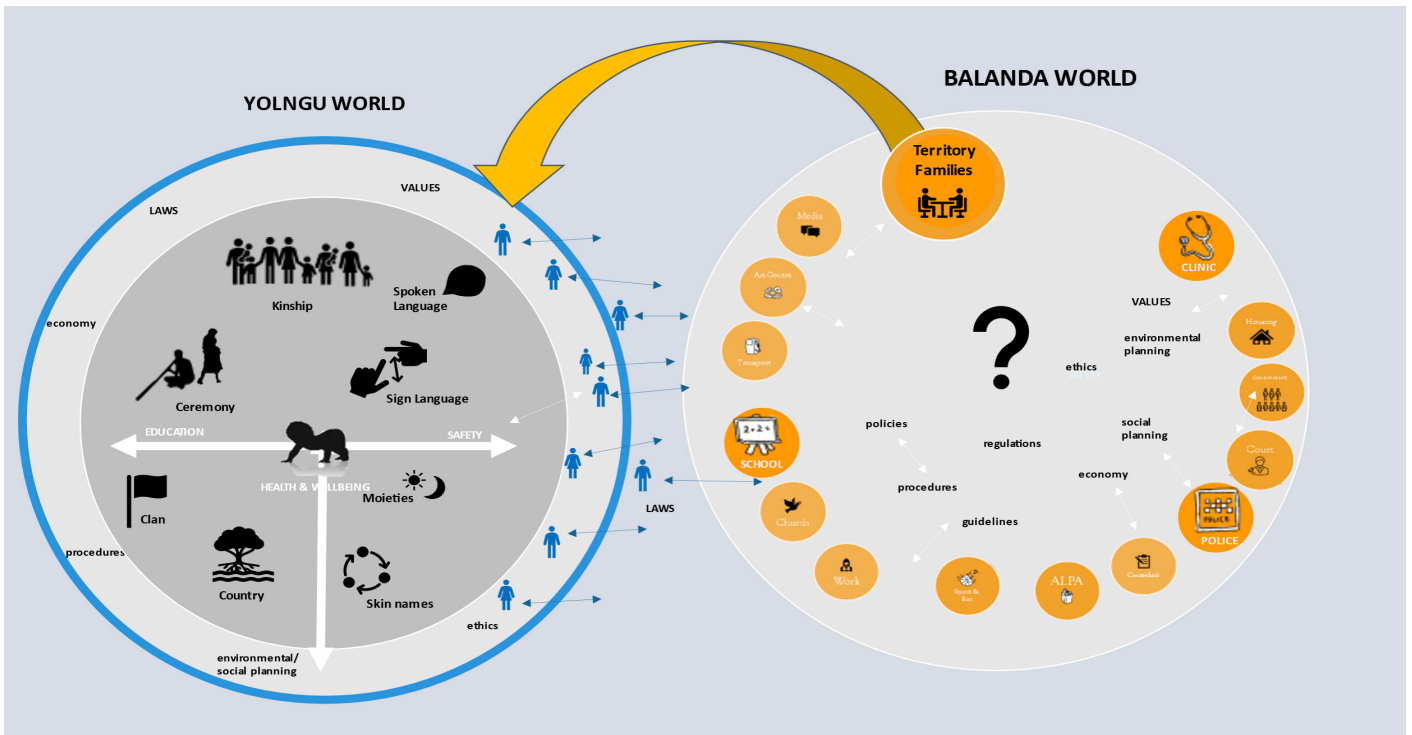
Wiripu ga ḡanapurṡ dhiyaḡu romthu nhina.

Yäka yana ḡunhi ḡapaki walal ḡjarrwurrmina bala wapthunmina ḡanapurru ḡurikiyi gaḡga ḡanapurru malthurruna. Ga roḡiyina ḡanapurṡ rom ḡurkiyi ḡädhili withiyanmirr. ḡulanhä dhapimirriw bāpurrumirriw. ḡulanhä business ḡanapurru yolḡuwu ḡanapurṡ'il withayinmirri dhiyaḡuyi romdhu ḡäthiliḡuyu.

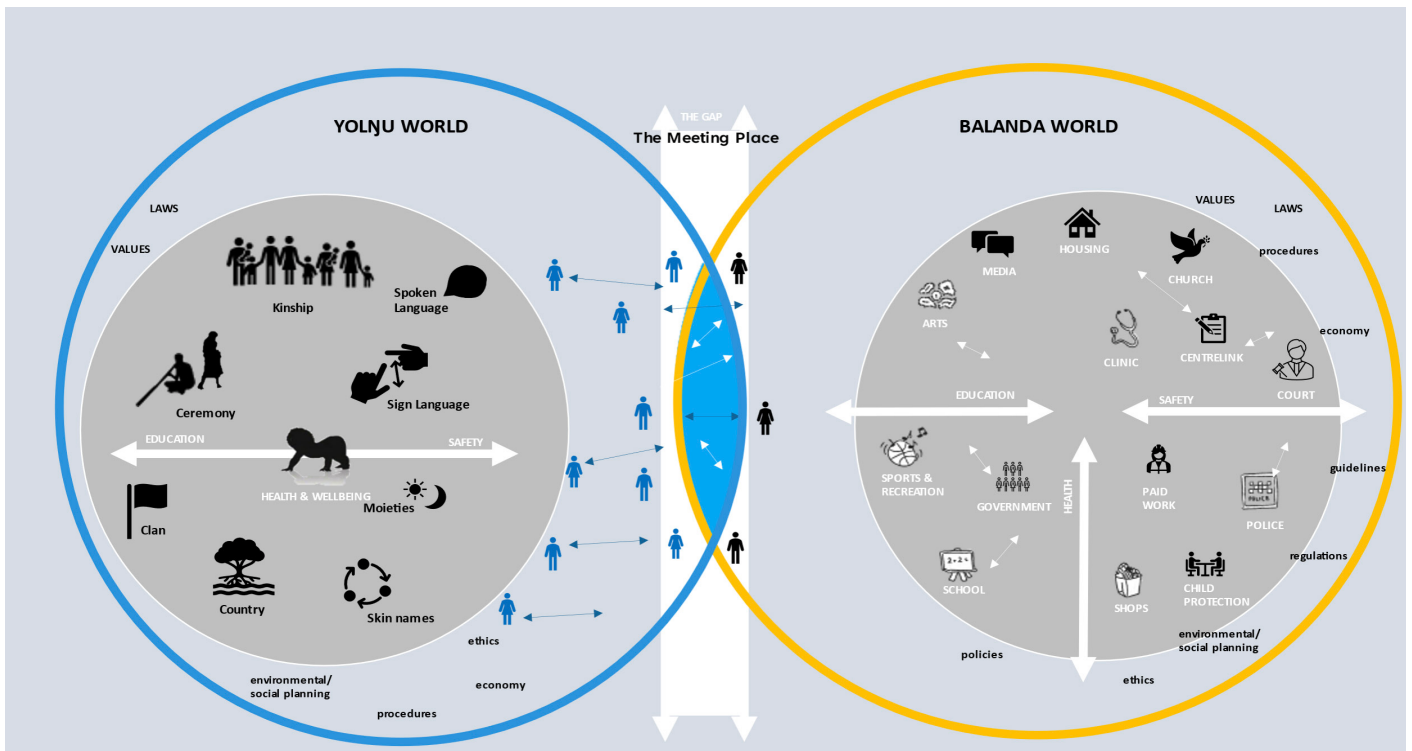
This is the ancient law that is still existing, not grabbing everything from Balanda ways, but only some things, returning to the Yolḡu law and visiting each other and communicating within our clans and with our initiation and funeral ceremonies, we are still following the one law.

Visual Set 1: Challenges of Living in Two Worlds

In order to raise the topic of the cultural and linguistic gaps between Balanda and Yolŋu, the team used the following visual tool. When discussing this, many participants described the fear of child protection services as something constant for Yolŋu families. Interventions by child protection services were viewed as top-down processes that for the most part did not consider Yolŋu perspectives and worldview.



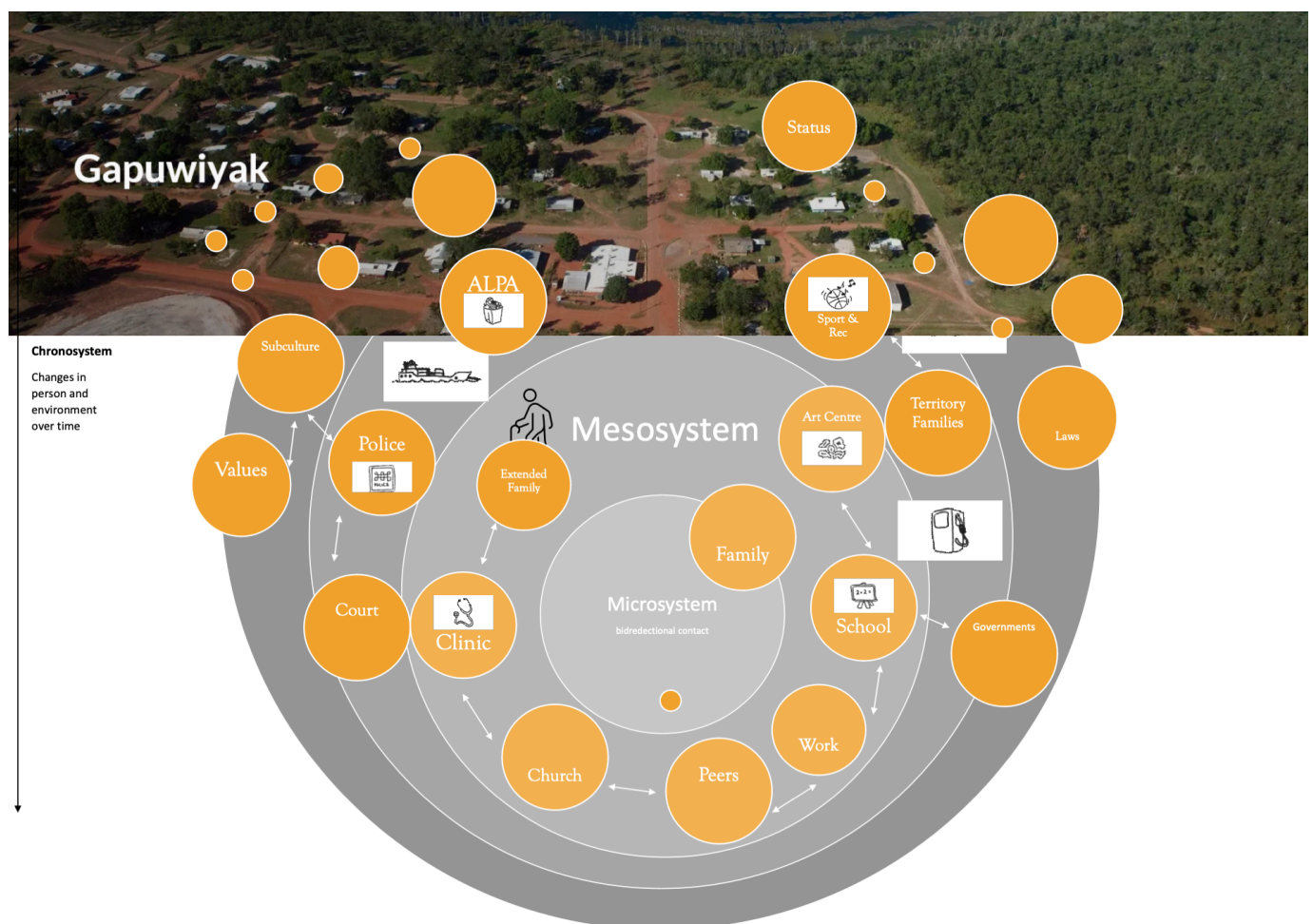
In the second iteration of the tool, participants discussed the possibility of a meeting place between the two worlds and how the gap could be narrowed. The participants were able to examine whether various stakeholder organisations were more a part of the Balanda world or the Yolŋu world.

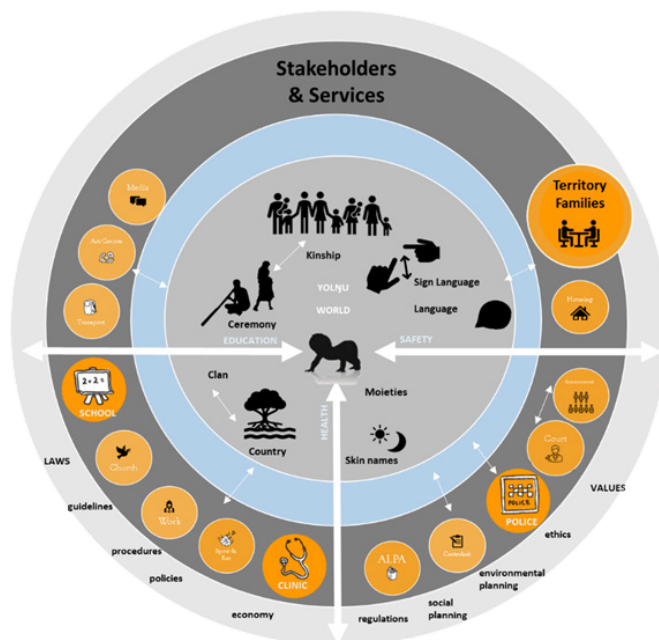




By using the logos of various organisations and allowing participants to place different organisations on different points of a scale, we were able to hear how Yolŋu families were experiencing the programs and activities that are offered through the various organisational stakeholder groups.

Through these discussions it became clear that for most participants, the '2 worlds' were not experienced as something that you could walk in and out of. This resulted in a new version of the tool, from an ecological systems perspective, where Yolŋu core business is at the centre, and the institutions and organisations representing the Balanda world are encircling the Yolŋu children and families.

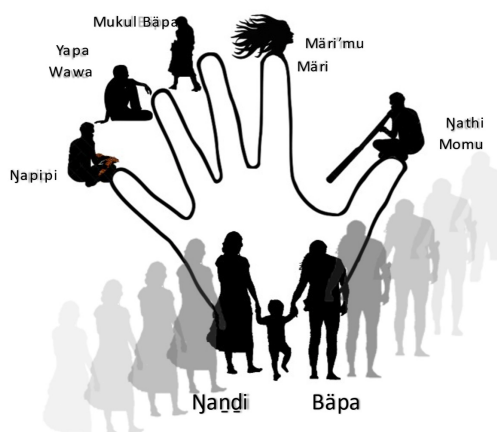




Visual Set 2: Kinship Connections

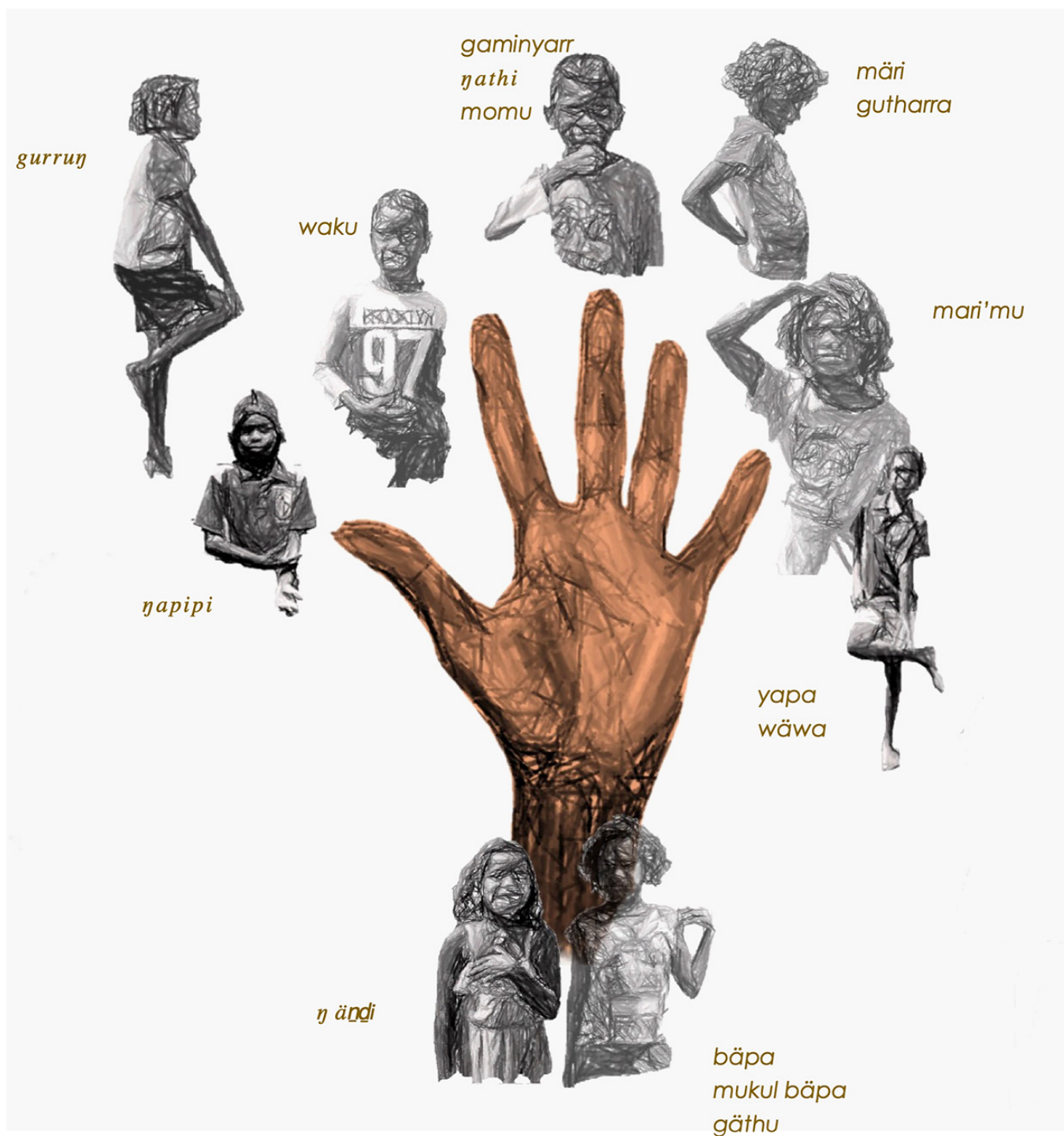
The first iteration of this tool demonstrated a way for Balanda to conceptualise how Yolŋu perceive the role of family across the life-course. On the left-hand side – the ‘dhukarr mokuy wāŋjalil’ depicts the key family members – experts in their field – who are required to safely carry a deceased person’s spirit to the resting place of their ancestral lands. If one of these experts in ringitj, manikay, buŋgul, milkarri or yidaki is absent from a funeral ceremony, the family will be worried that the spirit of their loved one may not reach its home.

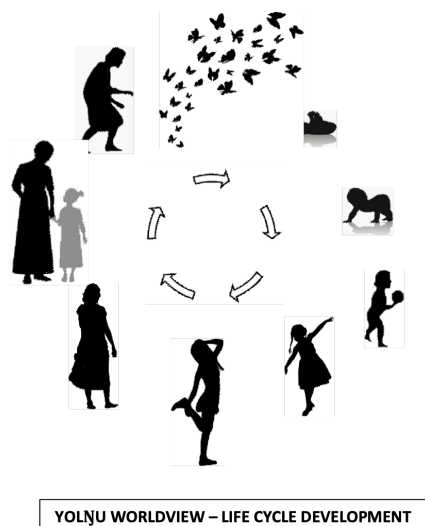
In a similar way, on the right-hand side – the dhukarr gurruṯu goṇmirr depicts some of the key family members who are required to successfully support a Yolṅu child across their life course. the most part did not consider Yolṅu perspectives and worldview.



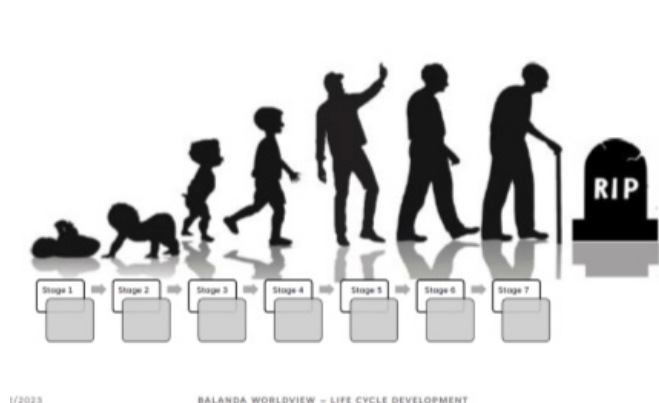
DHUKARR GURRII TUMIRR GO NMIRR – A CHILD'S LIFE JOURNEY

The next draft of the tool incorporated the hand-signs used in Yolŋu sign language for key members of the family.





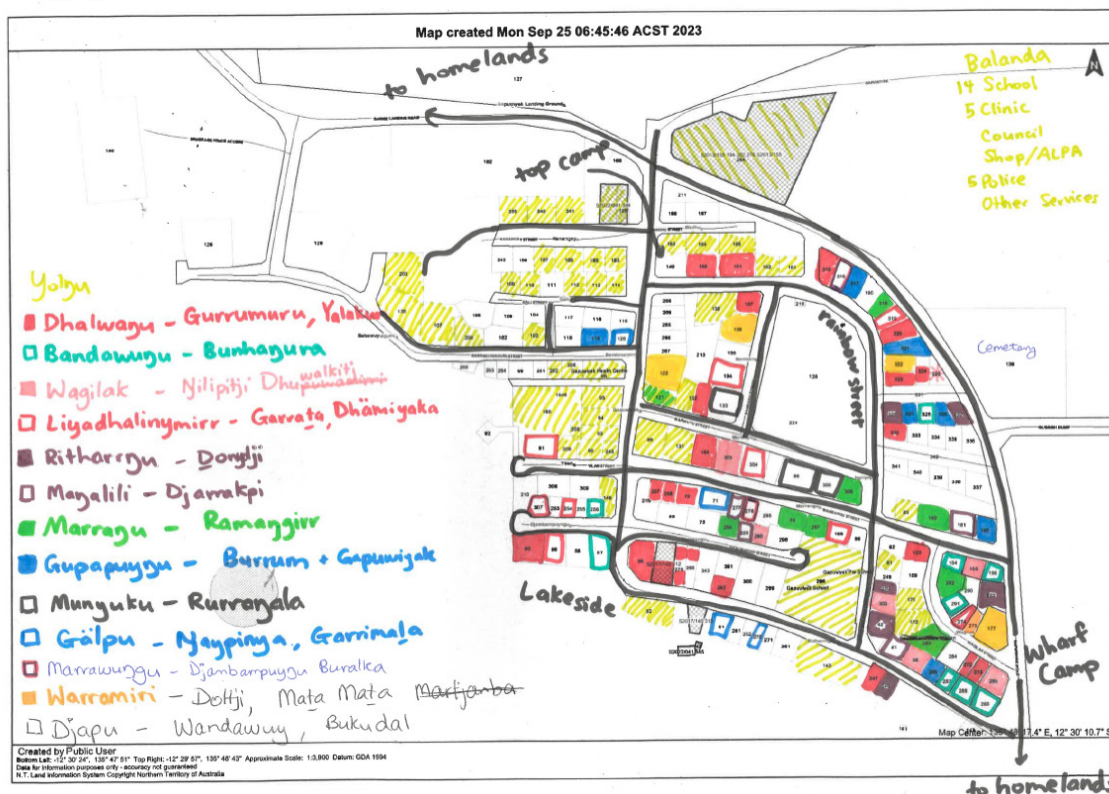
Another image was used to illustrate some of the experiences of difference, between Balanda and Yolŋu ways of viewing life cycle development, ‘the good life’ and the responsibilities of parents within society. The Yolŋu life cycle is conceptualised as cyclical. The responsibilities of their family members don’t cease after their death because their spirit needs to be sung to the right homeland.



In contrast, Yolŋu felt that Balanda tended to view life as a linear process. There are distinct ages/stages/milestones that are expected at specific times in a Balanda calendar. The obligations and responsibilities of family members in these two separate views are also quite specific. For Balanda – the parenting responsibility most often falls almost solely on the mother and/or father. Whilst other family members may play a role, the legal responsibility is held by the biological parents or designated caregivers only, and the role is only expected to function from 0-18 years. This is not the case for Yolŋu families. Mothers and fathers have a valuable and specific role supported by a wider network of caregivers.

Visual Set 3: Gurrutu Map

As seen on their website: <https://igld.cdu.edu.au/gurru%e1%b9%afu-map/> researchers and facilitators from The Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University have found ways to map some of the family and clan connections to country of the Miyarrka region. This mapping exercise was initiated by our Chairperson Gawura Wanambi, who then provided cultural supervision for the project team.



Our team carried on with this work via participatory mapping exercises with community members where we delineated the connections that various households and clan groups maintain with their ancestral lands. This process enabled the co-facilitators to construct a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics within Gapuwiyak at a point in time. It is important to note that the map is of most benefit to non-Yolŋu or very young Yolŋu community members. The knowledge and historical connections to the land are already well-established and preserved within the collective memory of senior Yolŋu clan leaders.

Another tool we used was the land itself. We spent time at two homelands where participants were able to tell their story in the place they felt most comfortable. Here are some images from these trips. We were then able to use imagery and photographs from these trips to bring the story back with the family to Western Miyarrka.



Storybook for Talking about Safety - **Nunha Wāṇa Ǫiltjiṇur**

As we explored the Signs of Safety resources used by current child protection services we attempted to demonstrate a 'Words and Pictures' process using a common Yolṛu nursery rhyme that parents sing to their babies – 'Nunha Wāṇa Ǫiltjiṇur'.

We intended the metaphor of a frightened wallaby running from a hunter to represent a child running from danger. Using this as a gentle entry point, we developed the following story board and general themes for each part of the story.



There is a shack in the bush. Talking points: Safe Place	One man standing. Safe Person	He watches a kangaroo skipping by Vulnerable/scared Person
"Knock! knock!" on the door. Finding a Safety Network	Help! Help! help me! Help-seeking	Before the hunter gets me! Danger
Come, come with me... Where do you go? Who do you go with?	Because the hunter is looking for you How do we recognise danger?	He will try to get you. What happens if he does 'get you'? Trauma, unhealthy mind, unhealthy body, hurt, sadness, fear, harm
So you will stay with me. Talking about a Safety Plan	My shack is far away. Far from danger	So he wont find you again. Stopping Danger
And I will feed you. Looking after, providing care Nurturance	And come, come with me.	And we will stay and be friendly. Feeling safe, providing stability

Of all the visual tools we had attempted so far, this one appeared to resonate the most with the specific topic of strong Yolŋu parenting. Together with a skilled artist, and young mother, Kylie Gatjawarrawuy Mununggurr, from Gapuwiyak, and Darwin-based language worker Angela Warrŋira Gaykamaŋu, we were able to draft a full children's story book along with a suite of resources intended to assist young families talking with their children about safety, trauma and healing.

Artwork © Kylie Gatjawarrawuy Mununggurr

Nunha Wänja Diltjinur



As we designed the story and trialled it with parents, we were surprised to find that adults were equally drawn to this resource, and able to use it to describe some of their own experiences.

Key Assessment Domains of the tool:

- Dhuwa Yirritja (moieties)
- Gurruṯu ga Mälk (kinship, subsection, and skin names – how we treat each other)
- Warrakan Mala ga Darpa Mala (animals, plants, and trees)
- Băpurru ga Yäku (clan and names)
- Dharuk ga Dharuk-miriw Dharuk (spoken language and Yolŋu Sign Language)
- Wäŋa (countries and land)
- Waŋarr (totems)
- Raypirri ga Ŋayaŋu (how to behave, how to handle emotions)
- Buŋgul ga manikay ga milkarri (ceremony, dance, and songlines)
- Dhäwu (stories)

The discussions initiated by the co-facilitators with parents and families regarding these areas of assessing their child's rate of development could be further developed and contribute to overcoming the limitations of traditional English assessment tools. By conducting discussions in Djambarrpuyŋu, the co-facilitators were utilising Yolŋu languages to address the language barrier that Yolŋu children may face when interacting with English-based assessment tools. This approach would ensure that assessment tools can become linguistically accessible and can effectively capture the child's abilities and development.⁶⁸

Parents and workers who are able to assess the development of their children according to domains relevant to their context are more likely to accurately reflect, track and highlight the child's development. Current early childhood development tools are largely based around topics and skills that are not viewed as priorities or central to Yolŋu identity, such as school readiness. Using a school readiness specific assessment tool with a child who has been developing complex relational and language based skills may highlight deficiencies, whereas this assessment can bring out the often invisible (to Balanda) strengths of Yolŋu parenting and child development. Every time that we trialled the draft resource, we found that parents and other family members were able to provide articulate and nuanced assessments of a child's development in relation to milestones that are valued by the family, rather than benchmarked against what are perceived as arbitrary or irrelevant milestones.

⁶⁸ D'Aprano, A. (2013) Improving developmental monitoring practices of remote Australian Aboriginal health workers: the TRAK study.



Yolŋu Yothu

Makarr Nhäma

Nhatha walu?

Naltjan ŋarraku yothu ga ŋathan yalalanjimirr:

Yaka Manyamak ŋayi Ga

Ganga Manyama ŋayi Ga

Manyamak ŋayi Ga Marritjin

Narra djäli gunga'yunamirr _____ gunga'yuna ŋarra/ŋarraku yothu.

- doctor
- teacher
- Yolŋu elder
- Other

Yaka **Ganga** **Manyamak**

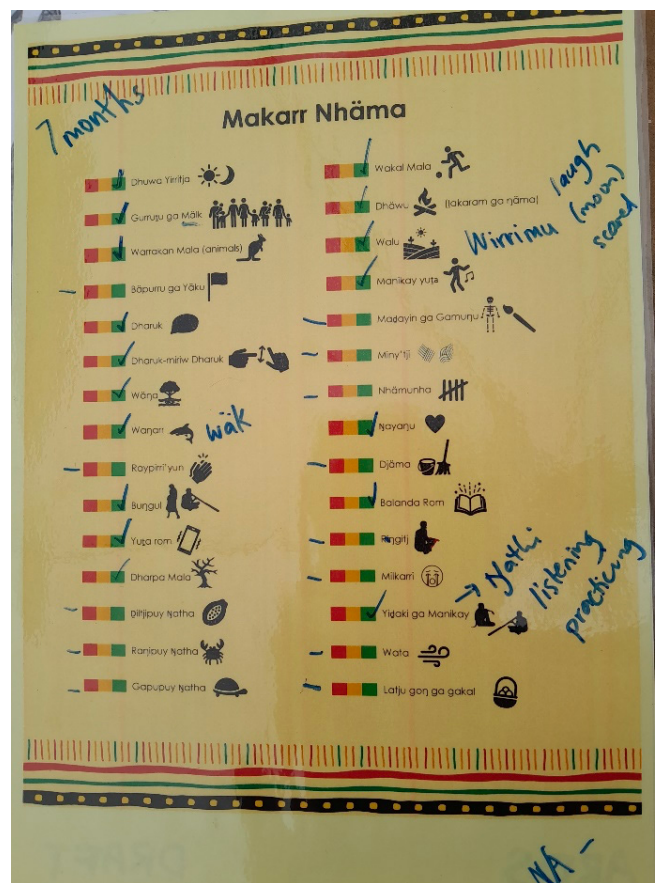
☐ ŋaṅgi	☐ ŋapiṗi
☐ Bäpa	☐ Mukul
☐ Märi	☐ Marl'mu
☐ Momu	☐ ŋathi
☐ Yapa	☐ Wawa

The first iterations of the tool used various symbols to represent important key domains and used a colour coding scale to indicate the family's assessment of the child's progress. This tool was developed whilst the team was confirming the findings of Charles Darwin University researchers from Galiwin'ku. They had stated ⁶⁹:

In Australia, there is evidence and community concern that commonly used assessment processes and tools have failed to recognise First Nations Australian children's differences and strengths and have instead foregrounded needs and deficits [5, 25–28]. When non-Indigenous early childhood practitioners work through their own lenses, many “appear unable to see the strengths that Aboriginal children bring” [25, p90].

Research and systemic change are required to 1) respect, recognise, learn from and support the strengths of the ways Indigenous peoples raise children [22, 33]; and 2) challenge assumptions embedded in existing culturally mismatched paradigms for assessment of Indigenous children's development [4, 30]. Such changes have the potential to impact positively upon the identity, health and wellbeing of children, families and communities [38]

⁶⁹ Armstrong, E., Maypilama, L., Fasoli, L., Guyula, A., Yunupingu, M., Garrutju, J., et al. (2022). How do Yolŋu recognise and understand their children's learning? Nhaltjan ŋuli ga Yolŋuy nhäma ga märr-dharanjan djamarrrukuljw marngithinyawuy? PLoS ONE 17(8): e0272455. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272455>

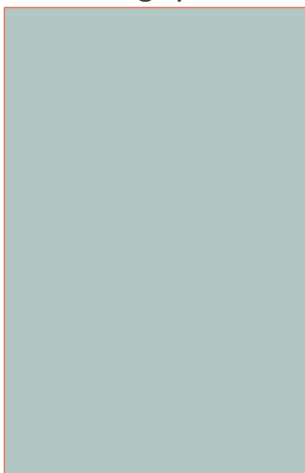


SIGNS OF Safety Assessment and Planning Mapping Tools (DRAFTS)

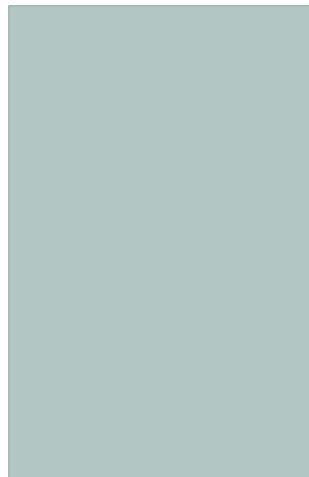
- Mapping

Nhä dhukarr manymak nalitjalar gurrutimirriw?

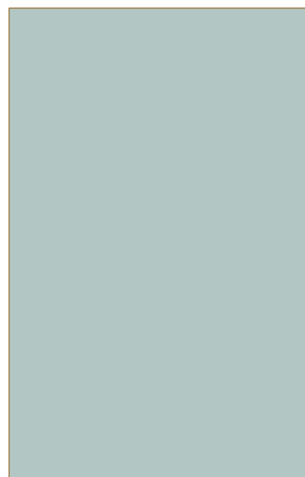
Nhäku limurr ga
warguyun?



Nhä nayi manymak?



Nhälil limurr dhu
marrtjin?



Nhä dhuwal wäṇa yätjkurr?

What is your house of worries like?



Nhä dhuwal wäṇa manymakdja?

What is the good home like?

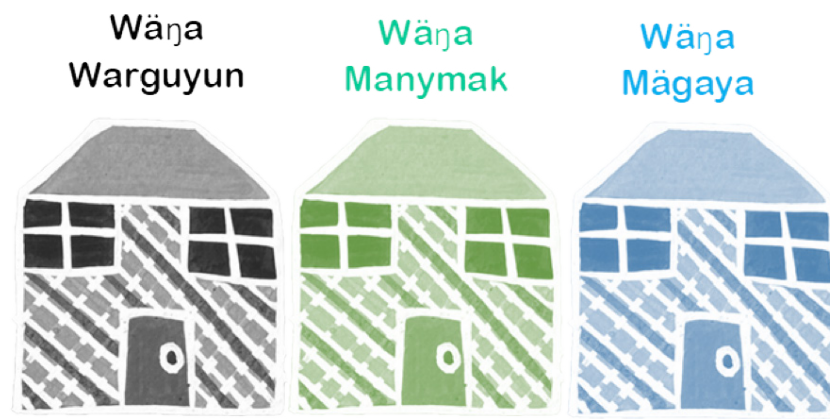


Nhä dhuwal wäṇa mägaya?

What is the best home like?



Yolṇu Matha	English
1. Wäṇa Warguyun, Wäṇa Manyamak, Wäṇa Magaya.	House of Worries, House of Good Things, House of Dreams.
2. Dhipalnydja wäṇalil limurr dhu wukirri, nhaliy limurruny ṇuli ga nhina ṇayaṇu manyamak.	In the middle house we'll put in the things you like in your life, that's the house of good things.
3. Lakaraṇ, nhaltjan nhe ga dhiyaṇuny bala dhakay-ṇama nhukal wäṇaṇur?	Can you tell me about what home feels like for you?
4. Nhä nhukal ṇuli dhuwanydja wäṇa manymakthirr?	What is good about where you are living at the moment?
5. Ṇurrulildja wäṇali nhirrpul nhaku nhe ga warguyun.	In the first house we will write your worries, so that's the house of worries.
5. Dhuwanydja wäṇa ṇunhi nhe dhu manymakthirr, nheny dhu marrtji wukirrin nhunuwuy nhe gyaṇanhawuy, nhaltjan nhe ṇuli gyaṇa.	Now we will have a house of dreams where we can write and draw how you would like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved.



Lurrikun Wäŋa

Scaling Question

The Signs of Safety scaling question was the one that was best received of any of the Signs of Safety tools we attempted. Using this scale we asked: Nhaltjan dhuwal djämarrkuŋi Gapuwiyaknŋur dhiyan bala? (How are things going for children in Gapuwiyak right now?)



Yatjkurr
ŋayanu ga?

Yaka
manymak?

Märr gaŋga
manymak?

Manymak?

Manymak
mirithirr?

Mägayamirr?

0

1

2

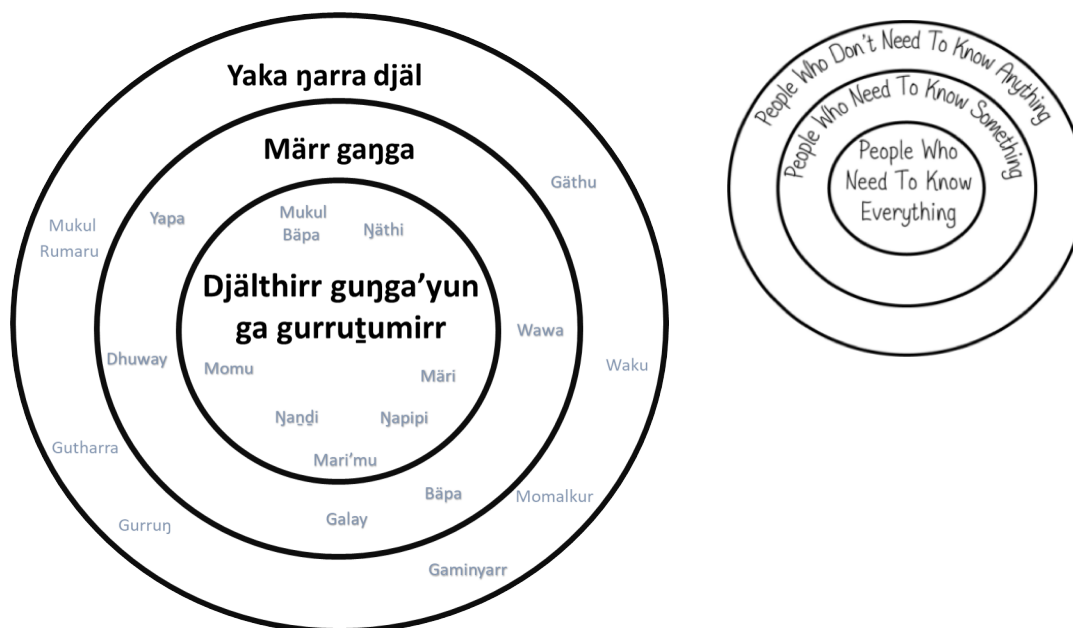
3

4

5

It is not expected that anyone would rate the current experience of children at a 5 – as the term *mägayamirr* refers to total peace and complete well-being (an ideal state). Including ‘*mägaya*’ is an important reference point to contextualise the spectrum. If things are going well, and people feel culturally, physically, spiritually and socially strong, generally it would be expected that some people would give a score of 3 or 4. Instead, every person who participated wrote a score on their whiteboard between 0 and 2. Loosely translated: 0 represents – things are terrible in your being/soul/heart; 1 represents – things are not good; 2 represents – things are a little bit good, maybe, okay; 3 represents – things are good; 4 represents – things are very good.

Family Safety Circles



Appendix 4: Organisational stakeholders engaged through the project

Please note that the views reflected in this report are the views of the facilitation team and Western Miyarrka participants, endorsed and supported by ARDS. Nothing in this report should be read as expressing the views of stakeholders or other organisations.

- Goṇ-Ḍäl Aboriginal Corporation: Board members, General Manager
- Gapuwiyak Culture and Arts: Art Centre Manager
- Milindji Aboriginal Corporation: Board members (including wāṇa wataru or Traditional Owners for Gapuwiyak), Consultant to corporation
- Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation: Midwives, child health nurses and staff of the NT Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home-visiting program (MECSH)
- East Arnhem Regional Council: Presentation to Gapuwiyak Local Authority meeting [24 August 2023] staff of Night Patrol, Youth Sport and Recreation, Nutrition, Wellbeing and Family Support/Baby FasT, Council Operations areas and Community Liaison.
- Gapuwiyak School: Principal and staff engaged in the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program
- Yalu Aboriginal Corporation: Staff in Operations and Family Support roles
- Miyalkku Mulka Wāṇa Gapuwiyak (Gapuwiyak Women's Space): Staff in Operations, Business and Governance and Family Support roles
- Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation: Staff in roles focused on trauma-informed care, and Risk Assessment and Management Framework for Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence
- Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) – Staff of Gunga'yunga Djamarrkuḷiny (East Arnhem Land Youth Model), Community Development Programme and Remote School Attendance Strategy
- Northern Territory Police, Fire & Emergency Services
- Department of Education – Staff in roles focused on Australian Early Development Census, Bilingual and Culturally Responsive Learning, Child Development Program and FAFT
- ARDS also liaised with members of the following stakeholder organisations located outside Gapuwiyak but interacting with Yolṇu families from the Western Miyarrka region: Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance NT, Strong Women for Healthy Country – Message Sticks Network, North Australian Aboriginal Family Violence Legal Unit, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, Darwin Aboriginal and Islander Women's Shelter, Darwin Indigenous Men's Service, Bush Mob, Our Watch, Shepherdson College

Despite multiple attempts, ARDS was unable to substantively progress conversations with the Arnhem office, Regional Services Darwin, or Clinical Practice and Professional Services at TFHC.