

“CLOSING THE GAP” AND DYSLEXIA

The Garma Festival

and what a joy to see Indigenous people celebrate their life and culture!

The Garma Festival is Australia’s largest Indigenous gathering, a celebration of Yolnu life and culture held in remote North East Arnhem Land each year. The Yolnu people have been living in Arnhem land for thousands of years. They have a unique worldview that connects people to land and sea. Everything in the Yolnu world has a place in a system of relationships. Detailed knowledge has been passed on from generation to generation through sacred clan names, songs, ceremony and designs.

Hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation, Garma showcases traditional art, song, dance and storytelling, and is an important meeting point for the clans and families of the region. The Festival’s over-riding cultural mission is to provide a contemporary environment for the expression and presentation of traditional Yolnu knowledge systems and customs, and to share these practices in an authentic Yolnu setting. Yolnu perceptions, priorities and preoccupations are different from those of mainstream Australia. You need to be patient and try to leave at home your expectations of how things are learnt and how events should run. Traditionally Yolnu learn by observation, by looking and listening....

Asking too many questions can be inappropriate and people’s personal space is respected.

Around the world First Nations people have been systematically dispossessed of their lands by European occupation. They have been slaughtered, had their children stolen, been sexually abused, been incarcerated, and they have experienced systemic racism and prejudice and many have lost their culture, having been forced to live under alien law and custom.

The nomadic migrations that were a central feature of Indigenous life were removed. And Indigenous Australians once a proud and self-sufficient people in an extremely harsh environment were, in the span of perhaps two generations transformed into a small, impoverished minority, lacking skills or resources to sell to the larger European economy, but increasingly dependent on it for survival.

Since 2005 Australia has been trying to “Close the Gap” with limited success.

“Closing the Gap” is a national strategy in Australia aimed at reducing the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s and non-Indigenous Australians in key areas like health, education and employment. It’s a commitment to improving the life outcomes of Indigenous Australians and ensuring that they have the same opportunity as other Australians. “Closing the Gap” focuses on addressing the significant gap in life expectancy, health outcomes, education levels, and economic opportunities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The strategy involves a partnership between governments and Indigenous communities to improve life outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called for a community-led, strengths-based approach which values their experiences and knowledge. The new agreement signifies a shift towards shared ownership, responsibility, and accountability between governments and Indigenous communities.

“CLOSING THE GAP” SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOME AREAS AND TARGETS

1. People enjoy long and healthy lives

Close the gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031

Gap currently - males 8.8 years and females 8.1 years

2. Children are born healthy and strong

By 2031 increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birth weight to 91%

In 2022 - 89.2% born with healthy birthweight

3. Children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years

By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Full-time Schooling early childhood education to 95%

In 2024 - 94.2% enrolled in early childhood education

4. Children thrive in their early years

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census to 55%

In 2024 33.9% developmentally on track

5. Students achieve their full learning potential

By 2031 increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20 to 24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%

In 2021 68.1% attained year 12 or equivalent

6. Students reach their full potential through further education pathways

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 24-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70%

In 2021 47% had completed qualifications

7. Youth are engaged in employment or education

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 15–24 years who are in employment, education or training to 67%

In 2021 58% were engaged

8. Strong economic participation and development of people and communities

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 years who are employed to 62%

In 2021 55.7% were employed

9. People secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88%

In 2021 81.4% living in appropriately sized housing

By 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households within discreet communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard

No data source currently available

10. Adults are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system

By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15%

In 2019 baseline prisoners – 1,906 per 100,000 adult population

In 2024 prisoners – 2,304 per 100,000 adult population

This represents a 21% increase in adult incarceration

11. Young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system

By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10 -17 years) in detention by at least 30%

In 2018-19 baseline detainees – 28.3 per 10,000 young people

In 2023-24 detainees – 26.1 per 10,000 young people

12. Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system

By 2031, reduce the rate of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0-17 years old) in out-of-home care by 45%

In 2019 baseline children in out-of-home care – 47.3 per 1,000 children

In 2024 children in out-of-home care – 50.3 per 1,000 children

13. Families and households are safe

By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero

In 2018-19 baseline - 8.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females aged 15 years and over experienced domestic physical or face-to-face threatened physical harm

There is no new data since baseline

14. People enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing

Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero

In 2018 baseline suicides – 23.6 per 100,000 people

In 2023 suicides – 30.8 per 100,000 people

This represents an increase of 25% in suicides

15. People maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters

By 2030, a 15% increase in Australia's land mass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests

In 2020 baseline data – 3,908,387 sq kms

In 2024 land mass – 4,314,744 sq kms

By 2030, a 15% increase in areas covered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests in the sea

In 2011 baseline data – 70,477 sq kms

In 2024 sea country – 113,517 sq kms

16. Cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing

By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken

In 2018-2019 baseline data – 123 languages being spoken (with 14 considered strong)

There is no new data

17. People have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives

By 2026 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion

In 2022-23 88.3% had used the internet in the last 3 months and 81.3% had used internet daily

There is no new data

We will never be able to “Close the Gap” unless we recognise the role dyslexia plays in keeping some Indigenous families living in -

- Intergenerational illiteracy
- Intergenerational unemployment
- Intergenerational poverty
- Intergenerational trauma
- Intergenerational incarceration
- Intergenerational suicide/Indigenous deaths in custody

Dyslexia was first proposed by Dr Rudolf Berlin in 1887 as a reading and language disorder, which is characterised by an impaired ability to understand written or printed words. As a Nation, we in Australia have not come very far in engaging with dyslexic students, as a priority. We do not routinely screen for dyslexia in schools, so we do not know who has dyslexia and how best we can serve them. In other English-speaking countries (USA, Canada, UK), where children are routinely screened for dyslexia at school, it has been found to be approximately 20% of the population. Unlike other countries, the term dyslexia is not used in Australia, unless you happen to be born into a dyslexic family, which has informed and critical knowledge of how to overcome the difficulties of dyslexia and succeed in life.

Dyslexia unfortunately disproportionately impacts people who are Indigenous and/or live in poverty, as they go undiagnosed and without help. In fact, being illiterate and not knowing why, causes trauma which exacerbates the disorder and increases poor life outcomes.

In Canada screening has found that 45% of the Indigenous Inuit population has dyslexia. In Australia figures are not available, but I suspect the number of Indigenous Australians with dyslexia would be similar.

- Their ancient languages were not written down and being dyslexic had no adverse consequences and the condition was simply inherited and multiplied.
- For over 200,000 years humans communicated only through speech and memory. They have only been using symbols and written language to communicate for the past five thousand years, and in Australia only the last 200 years.
- Traditionally, before European arrival, Aboriginal languages were passed down through oral traditions, including storytelling, songs and ceremonies.
- Dyslexia did not pose a real problem until written language was widely used. Increasingly people with dyslexia are being discriminated against in the modern world as the use of written communication is becoming ever-increasingly dominant.

“Closing the Gap” is a huge multifaceted issue and “truth telling” is fundamental to its resolution, but recognising dyslexia and its impact on Indigenous Australians today, is also critical. Dyslexia is not simply a concern for the education system, as studies indicate a strong connection between dyslexia, academic underachievement, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, incarceration and suicide. Countries from around the world following current research have been making good progress with dyslexia reforms in both schools and communities. I have not found the same in Australia. While some schools/institutions appear to be doing better than others, I have found that many dyslexia myths, scepticism and attached stigma, are still very prevalent.

The most common reason for illiteracy in Australia is dyslexia. And the most common cause of unemployment, poverty and incarceration is illiteracy.

- Dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties. In Canada, where students are screened for dyslexia, they found that 80-90% of children in learning support had dyslexia. It generally affects 10-20% of the population, although this differs within and between countries. Today dyslexia is estimated to affect approximately 1 billion people worldwide.
- Australia’s estimated population (2025) is 27 million, and we would therefore expect 20% of that number (5.4 million) people living in Australia, to have mild to severe dyslexia. This number is surprising, as in Australia there is often a general expectation that people can read and write without problem (perhaps not new migrants).
- Unfortunately in Australia, children with dyslexia who perform badly in written testing at school are categorised as having **SLD** (Specific/Significant Learning Difficulty/Disability) or **LD** (Learning Difficulty). This umbrella term is used for all students who experience literacy difficulties, despite the fact that dyslexic children have average or above average intelligence.
- **Dyslexia is an inherited neurobiological condition which makes learning to read and write very difficult. It is inherited via a dominant gene on the X chromosome** and multiple other genes. If one parent has dyslexia, then we would expect 50% of their children to inherit dyslexia.
- **The brain in dyslexic children is structured differently from birth, and thus functions differently from non-dyslexic children.** In most dyslexics the right side of the brain is used for language processing, unlike non-dyslexics who engage the left side of the brain.
- The left side of the brain is considered the dominant one for language processing and is usually responsible for reading, writing and maths.
- Whereas the right side of the brain plays a key role in visual-spatial processing, creativity and emotions. It’s often associated with intuition, imagination and interpreting non-verbal cues. The right brain helps you decode the meaning behind someone’s posture, facial expressions and other physical cues. It is also involved in recognising and appreciating musical rhythms and patterns.
- **This creates learning difficulties at school for children who are dyslexic, as they learn best in multi-sensory ways, not written.**
- Often with the aid of behavioural optometrists and multi-sensory tuition, children with dyslexia can be taught to read and write. But unfortunately it usually remains difficult for most.
- It is therefore no surprise that very few students with dyslexia manage to go to University, regardless of the fact that they are of average or above average intelligence and have lots of abilities including creativity. This may change with improvements in technology and AI helping people with neurodiversity.
- Many people with dyslexia, especially those from higher socioeconomic groups, go on to live very successful lives. 40% of all self-made millionaires are dyslexic.
- But usually dyslexia is associated with poor academic, economic, vocational, health and stress-behavioural problems and outcomes. Therefore dyslexia cannot simply be a concern for the education system. Studies show a very strong connection between dyslexia, academic under-achievement, trauma, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, incarceration and suicide.
- Often people who have **dyslexia** also have **dyscalcula** (40% of dyslexics can’t do maths and this affects their ability with money/finances) **dysgraphia** (a neurological learning disability that affects a person’s ability to write and express ideas on paper) and **dyspraxia** (affects motor skills and co-ordination-developmental coordination disorder DCD) These conditions can also coincide with ADHD, ODD and Autism etc.

- Understanding and supporting individuals with the 4D's is essential for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.
- Dyslexia is recognised in Australia under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and under the Human Rights Commission. (It is not covered by NDIS and need not be)
- We have noted that dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties as well as many behavioural difficulties, caused by the anxiety of not being able to read or write.
- Prisons in the UK have found approximately 70% of inmates could not read or write effectively and 65% struggle with basic numeracy skills. In Australia it is estimated that 60-80% of prison inmates are unable to read or write.
- Globally people with dyslexia are being underserved - educationally, socially, economically and politically. Dyslexia is associated with poor academic, economic, vocational and health outcomes.
- Many dyslexic children experience low self-esteem due to constant struggles with academic performance. They can also often experience stress and anxiety over their academic struggles, leading to social isolation and loneliness.
- Dyslexic children can also often suffer trauma at school, because they do not know why they can't read or write. This can lead to behavioural issues.
- **Dyslexia is not a developmental condition, although dyslexic children who suffer trauma in their early years will also usually have developmental issues, which will affect their learning outcomes.**
- Some countries have passed a series of legislation to promote better identification of people with dyslexia and to protect their rights in education, employment and access to public services
- Dyslexia is a social justice issue as it is connected to the human right of literacy and disproportionately impacts children who are indigenous and/or live in poverty as they go undiagnosed and untreated.

EARLY SCREENING AND IDENTIFICATION, AND SUBSEQUENT INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA MITIGATES POOR OUTCOMES AND DRAMATICALLY IMPROVES POSITIVE LIFE RESULTS

- 1. Increase public awareness and acceptance of dyslexia, disseminate current knowledge of dyslexia to educators, policymakers, and especially parents of children with dyslexia.**
 - Dyslexic students in Australia are generally not recognised as dyslexic in the education system and finding out your child may have dyslexia can be scary, but it's better to know when there's so much you can do about it.
 - School halls are a great place to get started and engage the local community.
 - Dyslexia brochures (these should also be in audio format for dyslexic parents).
 - Material on school website should also be in audio format.
- 2. Screen all students in all schools for dyslexia (typically Year 1)**
 - Early identification and treatment is key to helping individuals with dyslexia achieve in school and in life.
 - Dyslexia can easily be tested online for free on platforms like [lexercise.com](https://www.lexercise.com). It takes about 5-10 minutes on a computer and can easily be administered by a teacher's aide.
 - In Germany students are genetically tested for dyslexia
 - A more comprehensive/expensive educational psychologist report is usually not needed, as all dyslexic students can learn to read and write using a multi-sensory tutoring program. Some schools are already using these programs.
- 3. Provide interventions/support/accomodations for all dyslexic children**
This would include -
Behavioural optometrists
 - For students who are having vision problems. May be covered by medicare?
 - Some countries (Canada) offer tax deductions for dyslexia interventions/support and allowances for those on income support.

Psychologists for students who have experienced trauma

- Get mental health care plan from GP and use medicare system

Multisensory tutoring programs (Easyread, Orton-Gillingham, Betsy Sewell, Davis etc)

- Most people with dyslexia will need help from a teacher or tutor, trained in using a multisensory, structured language approach. It must include a systemic and explicit method that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, touching) at the same time. It is usually one on one, as students require immediate feedback and progress at their own pace. With early screening and intervention students can be on track with their classmates within 6 months.
- We already have literacy departments in schools who can facilitate this
- Easyread is a not-for-profit organisation and has an impressive 100% success rate in teaching literacy online. It can also diagnose some reading issues like tracking. It uses a new approach called trainertext visual phonic cues which helps the child progress in 15 minutes per day. It is a neurological view of reading and spelling and amazing results can usually be seen in weeks.

Access to technology, internet, mobile phones, AI etc

- Using accommodations to bypass the writing weaknesses so that students can produce written assignments etc using voice dictation software, reading pens etc
- Students living in poverty will need special access to technology, phones and internet etc

4. Provide mentors and vocational/employment pathways at end of schooling

- Schools already have careers advisers who could facilitate/implement this at the community level.

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE A SET OF PRINCIPLES CONCERNED WITH EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS

These include the right to life, the right to a fair trial, freedom from torture and inhuman treatment, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, **and the rights to health, education and an adequate standard of living.**

- Governments have a particular responsibility to ensure that all people are able to enjoy their rights. They are required to establish and maintain laws and services that enable all people to enjoy a life in which their rights are respected and protected.
- The right to education means that everyone is entitled to a good education. **Governments have an obligation/responsibility to provide good quality education facilities and services to all their people, including people who have dyslexia.**
- Not all education has to be taught using writing. Not one size fits all. Some students learn best when the information is provided in audio format. In the USA there are regional schools that specialise in teaching dyslexic students and centres for dyslexia. In India and Indonesia students with dyslexia are taught in separate classes for a term or two until they have caught up with their peers. Australia is already achieving some great results with learning on country/cultural appropriateness strategies etc
- **Literacy is the foundation in our modern western society for success in education, work, and daily life.** It encompasses the ability to read, write, listen, speak, and seek critical skills, that allow individuals to communicate, process information, and engage with the world around them. And employment ensures an adequate standard of living. We can make Australia a luckier and fairer country if we offer everybody who wants a job, suitable employment.
- The incarcerated should be offered a proven literacy/numeracy and skills program whilst imprisoned. It is most important that they have a relationship with a mentor or buddy.
- For students with dyslexia, acquiring literacy skills can be particularly challenging and this will probably greatly impact their learning in various subjects, depending on their individual strengths and needs. These challenges can affect their confidence, engagement, and academic progress. **Understanding the specific difficulties that students with dyslexia face in literacy and implementing effective instructional strategies and support is essential for helping them reach their full potential.** A Naplan result is not always the best method of measuring a student's success.
- **A commitment to recognising neurodiversity and supporting inclusive, accessible and equitable education and employment for all is essential to: Australia becoming the lucky country for all!**

TRAUMA AND DYSLEXIA

- Dyslexia is not a developmental condition, although dyslexic children who suffer trauma in their early years will usually also have developmental issues, which will affect their learning outcomes.
- Trauma especially during childhood, can significantly impact brain development, affecting a number of regions of the brain and their functions. Experiences of adversity can lead to changes in brain structure, such as reduced cortical thickness and volume of sub cortical structures like the amygdala and the hippocampus.
- These changes can affect emotional regulation, cognitive abilities, and social development. A child psychologist is usually recommended.
- Dyslexic children can also have developmental delays with vision, which will need to be addressed before they can learn to read. This will usually require a behavioural optometrist who can improve the student's tracking ability and vision.

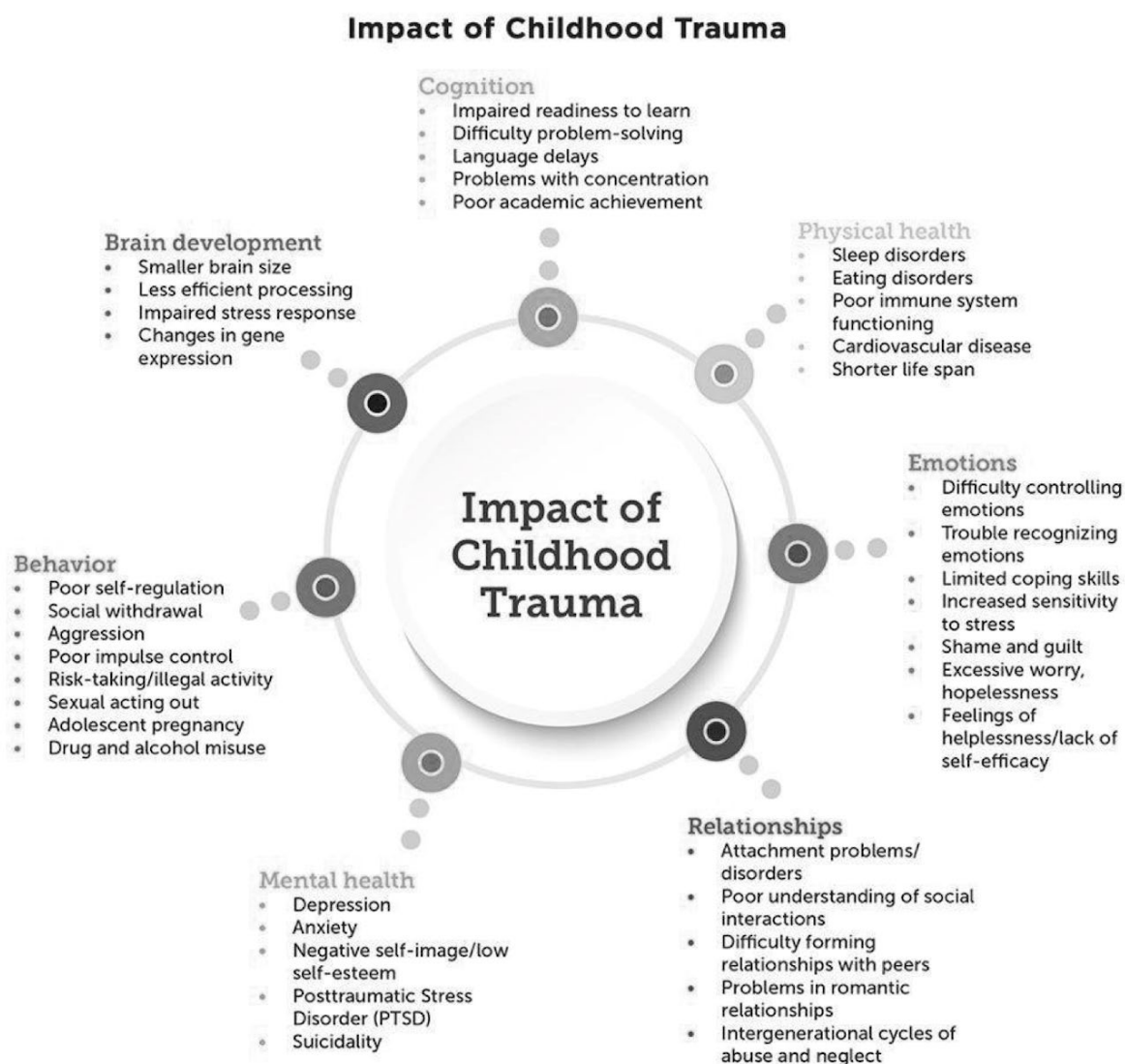


Figure 3. Impact of Childhood Trauma; **Source:** (Child Trend)