

ABORIGINAL CARERS

Growing up Aboriginal Children

Finding stable, loving homes that are culturally-connected
for Aboriginal children in care



**NORTHERN
TERRITORY**
GOVERNMENT

Introduction: Aboriginal people caring for Aboriginal children

Every child deserves to be safe and connected to their culture and identity, and supported to be healthy, to learn and grow, and to have the best life possible.

At Territory Families, our top priority is to support families and children when they need our help so that we can stop children entering the child protection system. We want children to stay at home with their families and communities.

When children do need to be removed from their parents to keep them safe, Aboriginal Carers (including grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other community members) play a very important role in looking after these children.

In the Northern Territory, almost 90% of children in care are Aboriginal but only 30% are cared for by an Aboriginal person. Territory Families wants to change this situation. We want more Aboriginal children to be placed with Aboriginal Carers so they are connected to their culture, family, and country.

Aboriginal families and communities are not the same as other foster carers. In most cases, they already know the child and want to help keep them safe, and also help them to stay with their brothers and sisters, in stable, loving homes.

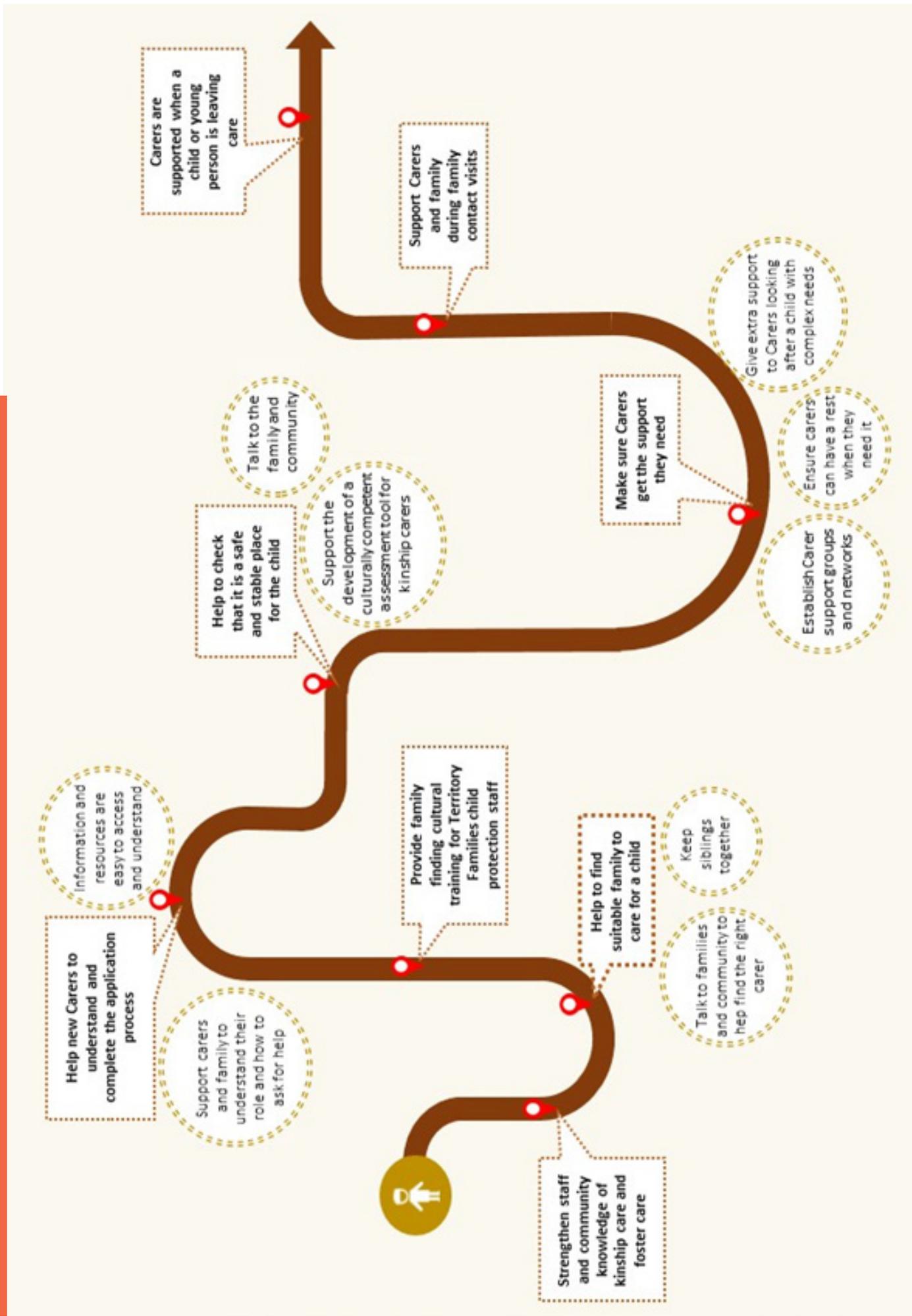
Sometimes Aboriginal people are asked to become a Carer very quickly and do not have much time to prepare. The child protection system can be confusing and hard to understand. In addition, sometimes a child has complex or special needs, and sometimes there is a difficult relationship with other family members that can be very stressful for everyone.

We know all carers need plenty of support to take care of children. Aboriginal Carers sometimes need extra support from people and organisations that they trust and that understand them.

This booklet explains why Territory Families' thinks Aboriginal family members are the best carers for most Aboriginal children. It also explains what we are doing to get more Aboriginal Carers and better support them, in partnership with Aboriginal controlled organisations and communities.

Entry Points

Partnering with Aboriginal controlled organisations to support Aboriginal Carers



1: Finding Family

When a child is taken into care, the first important step is to talk to families and communities about what to do next. Sometimes in an emergency there is not much time to find a family member who is able to take care of a child, and child protection staff need to make a fast decision.

Territory Families wants to make every effort to find the right person to care for the child and to keep them safe, and we cannot do this alone. It is everyone's responsibility to keep children safe and well.

Aboriginal families and communities who provide care for children are not the same as other foster carers. In most cases, they already know the child and want to help keep them safe, and also help them to stay with their brothers and sisters, in stable, loving homes. It is important to meet with communities and Aboriginal controlled organisations, and we can work together to find family or another Aboriginal person close to the child and community to care for the child, and explain to the parents what is happening and why.

How is Territory Families helping to find family to care for children?

Territory Families is changing the way it finds family to care for children. We are funding Aboriginal controlled organisations with Aboriginal staff to help find the right Carer for Aboriginal children, including in remote communities.

We are making sure we meet with families and communities to help us to make a decision about where a child will be safe and can remain connected to culture, country and family.

We are training our child protection staff, with the help of Aboriginal controlled organisations, to learn how to find family and to make all efforts to place children with family as long as it is safe. This includes understanding kinship networks using 'genograms' and 'eco-mapping' to connect in kin and community support for children who are in care or entering care.

2: Carers understand their role and how to ask for help

Sometimes family or community members are asked to become a Carer very quickly and do not have much time to prepare. The child protection system can be confusing and hard to understand, including the carer application and assessment process. A lot of the information is provided in English and in written documents.

At the same time, Territory Families' staff may not understand all of the details and the history of a family, or the cultural issues in a community.

Both sides need to talk to each other and understand each other more so that they can provide the best support to a child and their family.

When a child is taken into care, the first step is to talk to families and communities in the right language. Information for Carers and community needs to be clear and easy to understand, and people need to be able to ask questions and learn more about the child protection system. It is only fair for people to understand what Territory Families' needs from them before they decide to be a Carer.

Aboriginal families and communities need the chance to participate in decisions affecting their children. It is important that all Carers know how to ask for help when they need it, not only when they start caring for a child but at any time in the future.

How is Territory Families helping to include and inform Carers?

Territory Families is exploring new ways to sit down and talk to families and communities - "Family Group Conferencing" - in a clear and simple way, in partnership with Aboriginal controlled organisation and elders.

We are giving Aboriginal Carers information in their own languages and giving them the opportunity to ask questions so that they understand what Territory Families' needs from them. We are training Territory Families child protection about using interpreters so that everyone can understand each other and knows how to ask for help.

We are also reviewing all of our policies and practices so that they make sense for Aboriginal Carers, and we are working to ensure that we are including Carers, family and community in care planning.

3: Check for safety and stability

The most important thing is to make sure a child is safe and can have the best life possible, whether they are living with their parents or another Carer.

In addition to being safe, Territory Families wants to make sure a child grows up in a stable way. We do not want children to grow up moving around from place to place all the time and with a lot of different Carers, as this can be confusing and upsetting for them. Most children are happy and healthy when they stay in the same family or community, with the same people around them, connected to culture, language and country.

At Territory Families, it is our job – together with families and communities - to make sure children are safe. We need to check for safety and stability when we are looking to find a Carer for children who are removed from their parents.

In the past, all Carers were given the same assessment to check for safety. We want to change this in the future to make sure we think about cultural differences, including different strengths, beliefs, values, behaviours and customs within Aboriginal care systems. We also need to think about the relationship with other people in the house, including for example if there is drug or alcohol misuse, mental health issues, or criminal histories, and work with Carers, families, and communities to decide on the safest place for children.

How is Territory Families changing our assessment of safety and stability?

Territory Families is planning to improve the way we assess Aboriginal Carers and their household to make sure we understand and think about cultural differences, so that foster carers and kinship/family carers are assessed appropriately and sensitively.

We are improving training for our child protection staff who do the assessments so that they understand the different lives and situation of Aboriginal foster carers and kinship/family carers. Territory Families is also looking at ways to partner more with Aboriginal controlled organisations to undertake Carer assessments.

We are focussing more on building better relationships with children, families and community representatives, and on using specific Aboriginal assessment and training tools.

4: Carers are supported

Caring for children can be joyful and rewarding, but it is also hard and exhausting sometimes. Some children in care have complex or special needs, including children living with disabilities. Sometimes there is a difficult relationship with other family members that can be very stressful for everyone.

We know all Carers need plenty of support to take care of children. Aboriginal Carers sometimes need extra support from people and organisations that they trust and that understand them best. Not all Carers need or want the same type of support. For example, grandparent Carers may not want training about how to be a good parent, but they may need a range of other types of support to help them to do a good job in caring for children, including:

- Help to understand the child protection system, and how to ask for help or to make a complaint
- Help to understand financial issues and the Carer Allowance
- Help to support children with challenging behaviours and special needs
- Support from other Aboriginal Carers (“peer support”) who are in the same situation and know what it is like to be a Carer
- Help to find the right support services (including health, housing, and education)
- Help to support older children (teenagers) to prepare to live independently as they become young adults.

How is Territory Families supporting Carers?

Territory Families is supporting regular information sessions with Carers that are culturally relevant. Carers can give feedback, ask questions, learn how to make a complaint, and where to get help if they need it.

We are working with Aboriginal controlled organisations to give training and support to Aboriginal Carers, including on caring for children with special needs and in remote communities. We are talking with Aboriginal controlled organisations to establish peer support groups and activities for Aboriginal Carers.

5: Provide help with family contact visits

Keeping in contact with a child's parents, siblings and other family members is important for a child's emotional and mental wellbeing and their sense of identity.

However many families can find the child protection and legal system hard to understand and they do not know how to be involved, to ask questions and to participate in making decisions about their children.

When a child is removed from their parents, they will often still need to have contact visits with their parents or other family members. This can be a stressful time for everyone – including the Carer, the child, and the parents – especially if there is a difficult relationship between family members.

Carers may want support before, during, and after parental contact visits. It can be comforting for Carers and children to receive support from Aboriginal controlled organisations and Aboriginal staff.

How is Territory Families helping Carers with contact visits with parents?

Territory Families will partner with Aboriginal controlled organisations to support carers and families with contact visits. At the same time, Territory Families aims to have more meetings with families and communities, called 'Family Group Conferencing', so that families can participate in making decisions about their children, and ask questions about the child protection system, including when parents may see their children, and what parents need to do for their children to be returned to parents.

Territory Families staff will work with the family, the community, and Aboriginal controlled organisations to make a plan, so that everyone knows what they need to do to keep a child safe. We will make sure an interpreter joins the meeting so that everyone understands what is happening.

The way that we have family meetings may be need to be different in each of the remote communities, so we will firstly talk to Aboriginal controlled organisations, children and families to decide on the best style of meetings for each location.

6: Give Carers a rest when they need it

All Carers should be supported to take a rest when they need it. Most Aboriginal Carers are women who have many other family and community responsibilities, in addition to looking after children.

Carers may not want to take a break, but sometimes they might need a short rest or some home help, or extra support to care for children with special needs, including children and young people with disabilities.

Sometimes Carers get a lot of support when they first start caring for a child but this does not continue.

How is Territory Families helping Carers to take a rest?

We are exploring flexible ways to give Carers a rest, including child care and family based care, and specialised care for short breaks. For example, we plan to find new ways to increase the number of Aboriginal Carers who are available to support a child and family for short breaks, including school holidays.

We want to have more relatives and friends who can provide care to a child for short breaks, or to provide in-home support for short periods to the main Carer.

We are also partnering with Aboriginal controlled organisations to increase our support to Carers to become aware of, and connected to, a wide range of support services. Lastly, we are working with Aboriginal controlled organisations to create Aboriginal Carer support groups so that people with the same experience can get together and talk to one another, ask questions, support each other, and get information.

Summary: The main changes we are making

ACTIONS

Finding Family

Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Help find family to care for children.
2. Meet with families and communities to help make decisions about where a child will be safe.
3. Train child protection staff to learn how to find family for Aboriginal children, including 'genograms' and 'eco-mapping'.
4. Find other suitable Aboriginal Carers when no suitable family member can be a Carer.

Helping Carers to understand their role and how to ask for help

Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Help Carers understand their role and how to ask for help.
2. Talk to families and communities in a clear and simple way, and talk to Aboriginal controlled organisations and elders about keeping children safe (child protection).
3. Give information to Aboriginal families and Carers in their own language and let them ask questions.
4. Train child protection staff about using interpreters so that everyone can understand what is happening and participate in decision-making.
5. Fix Territory Families' policies and practices so that they make sense for Aboriginal Carers.
6. Do a better job of including Carers, family, and community in care planning for the child.

Checking for safety and stability (carer assessments)

Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Improve the way we check or assess the safety and stability of Aboriginal Carers and their household. Make sure we think about cultural strengths and differences.
2. Increase our numbers of Aboriginal Carers for Aboriginal children, with a priority focus on family Carers.
3. Train child protection staff to understand the different lives and situation of Aboriginal Carers and to be sensitive and supportive.
4. Build better relationships with families and communities, and use specific Aboriginal assessment and training tools.

ACTIONS

Supporting Aboriginal Carers

Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Have regular information sessions with existing and potential Aboriginal Carers.
2. Encourage Carers to give feedback, ask questions, and learn how to make a complaint.
3. Support Carers to understand where they can get help if they need it.
4. Train and support Aboriginal Carers, especially those caring for children with trauma, difficult behaviour, and other complex or special needs.

Helping with family contact visits

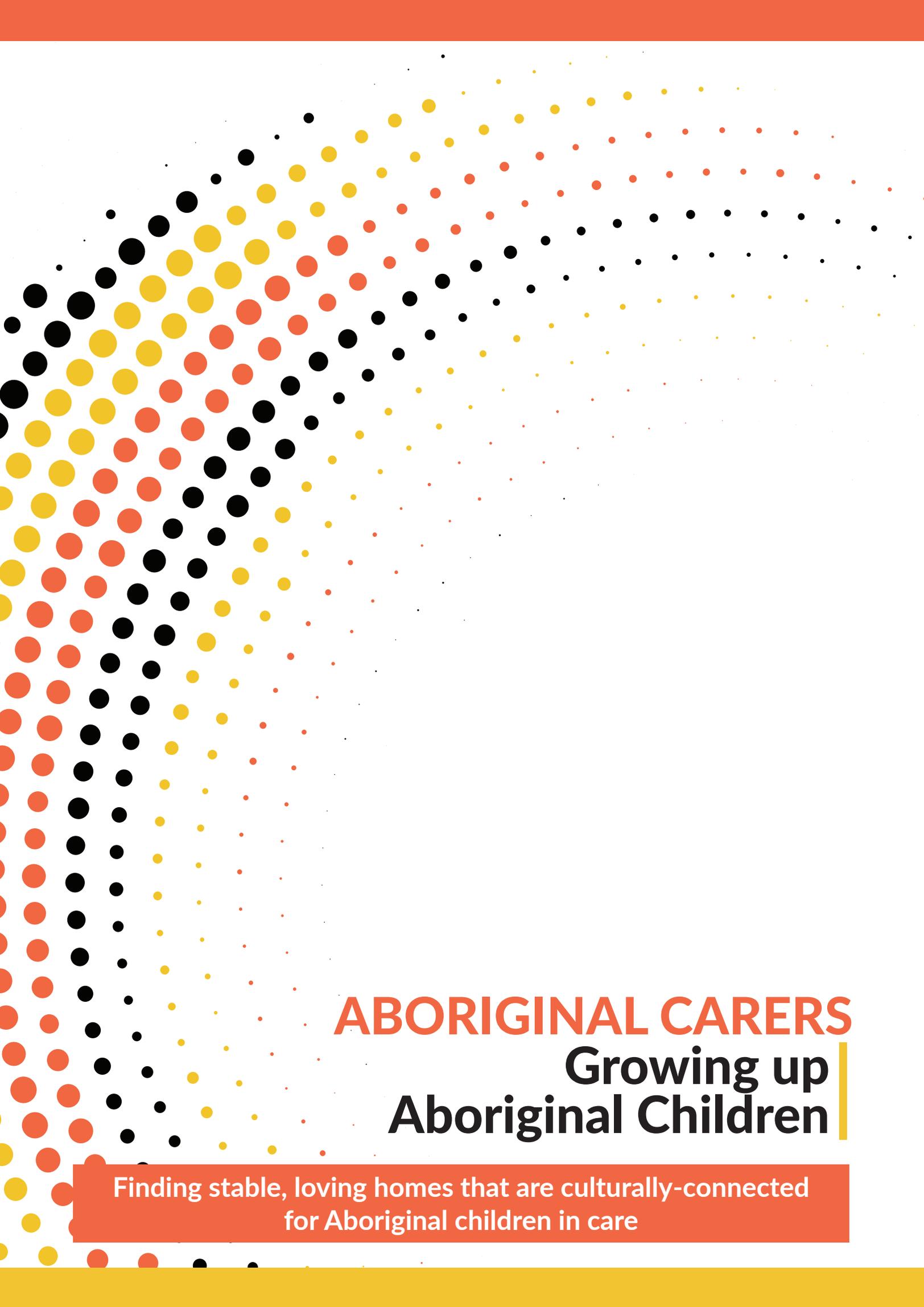
Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Have more meetings with families and communities, so that families can help to make decisions about their children. Encourage parents to ask questions about when they may see their children, and help Carers and parents understand what needs to happen for children to be returned to their parents.
2. Make a plan so that everyone knows what they need to do to keep a child safe.
3. Support children, Carers, and parents to have safe and culturally appropriate contact visits that are the least stressful as possible for everyone.

Giving Carers a rest when they need it

Work with Aboriginal-Controlled organisations to:

1. Think about the best ways to give Aboriginal Carers a rest or a short break.
2. Increase the number of Aboriginal carers who can support a child and family for short breaks, for example during school holidays.
3. Increase the number of family and friends who can care for a child for short breaks, or provide in-home support to give the Carer a rest.
4. Help Carers to understand all of the different support services available to help them.
5. Create Carer Support Groups.



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