



Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future:

Perinatal support for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander* parents who have experienced complex childhood trauma

Why is this project needed?

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and other potentially traumatic events contribute to a wide range of long-lasting physical, social and emotional health issues,¹⁻⁷ including Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (complex trauma). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal^{1*}) people are particularly affected by complex trauma, following a legacy of historical trauma⁸ which included state-sanctioned systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families and ongoing discrimination.⁹

The transition to parenting during the perinatal period (pregnancy to two years after birth) is a critical time for parents experiencing complex trauma.¹⁰ Trauma responses may be triggered during pregnancy and the transition to parenting, due to the intimate nature of some perinatal experiences associated with pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding;¹¹ and the attachment needs of the infant.¹² The long-lasting relational effects can also impede the capacity of parents to nurture and care for their children, and may contribute to ‘intergenerational cycles’ of trauma.^{13 14 15}

Conversely, the transition to parenthood offers a unique life-course opportunity for emotional healing and development for people who have experienced complex trauma.^{16 17} A positive strengths-based focus during this often-optimistic period has the potential to disrupt the ‘vicious cycle’ of intergenerational trauma into a ‘virtuous cycle’ that contains positively reinforcing elements and nurturing that promote healing.¹⁸ Literally, ‘*healing the past by nurturing the future*’. Nurturing care is also critical for optimal development of the infant.^{19 20} Additionally, frequent scheduled contacts with perinatal care providers both before and after childbirth, and across the first two years offer a time-limited opportunity for providing a comprehensive system-based strategy to support people experiencing complex trauma during this critical period. This is particularly important because it may be the first time many of this predominantly young and healthy childbearing population have had contact with a population-based health care system since leaving the education system.

However, despite these clear risks and opportunities, to our knowledge there are currently limited interventions available for parents with specific histories of abuse,^{11 21 22} and no systematic, culturally informed processes or evidence of effective strategies to identify and support Aboriginal parents who have experienced complex trauma.^{23 24}

* We use the term ‘Aboriginal’ to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ in Australia, and the term ‘indigenous’ to collectively refer to Indigenous people’s internationally. We respectfully acknowledge the diversity and autonomy of Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous peoples encompassed within these inclusive terms.

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