CASE STUDY

# Cooking on Country

## *Community and allied health partnerships enhancing cultural knowledge, literacy, numeracy and child health and development*

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| SERVICE | Indi Kindi |
| SERVICE TYPE | Blended – occasional care, mobile |
| MEAL PROVISION MODEL | All meals provided on-site |
| BUSINESS MODEL | Not-for-profit, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation |
| AGE RANGE | Birth to 5 years |
| NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES | Ad hoc, average of 5–6 children per day |
| NUMBER OF STAFF | 5-6 educators |
| REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION | Very remote |

**LOCATION**

Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, Mungkarta, NT



## Background

Indi Kindi is an on Country, early education program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to five years of age. Established in 2012 by Moriarty Foundation, an ACCO, the program is currently delivered in the Northern Territory communities of Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, and Mungkarta.

Indi Kindi incorporates on Country cultural and educational experiences with best-practice, evidence-informed pedagogical approaches, in a unique curriculum called Walking Learning®. This curriculum aligns with the EYLF while also prioritising culturally rich and safe learning for children and families.

Indi Kindi runs three to four times per week, with local Aboriginal educators leading all sessions outdoors on Country, passing down their culture and providing culturally appropriate education. Families are welcome to join any session, and often extended family join the children as well.

Indi Kindi provides transport from the community where educators deliver sessions so that children and families can go together on Country for the day. Learning occurs in 'classrooms without walls', where local Aboriginal educators lead outdoor sessions on Country that foster a deep sense of belonging and cultural connection.

Indi Kindi has evolved from an early literacy initiative into a holistic service that integrates education, health, nutrition, and hygiene.

To improve developmental outcomes, the program embeds critical touchpoints – such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) developmental assessments and referrals to health professionals – directly into the daily learning flow. Programs are developed and led by community members to ensure cultural safety and relevance.

To ensure equitable and culturally secure access, the program features several key design elements:

- **Community-led governance:** The program is guided by local Community Advisory Groups in Borroloola and Tennant Creek.
- **Local leadership:** Sessions are led by local Aboriginal female educators who act as a bridge between formal curriculum and traditional cultural knowledge, passing down culture to the next generation.
- **Family inclusion:** The service is completely free and provides a bus for pick-ups and drop-offs, encouraging parents, caregivers, and extended family to attend sessions together on Country.

By placing the child at the centre of family and culture, Indi Kindi has achieved transformational impacts, including a significant reduction in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school.

As part of Indi Kindi's Walking Learning® sessions, they provide Cooking on Country experiences so that children and families can learn about traditional food and cooking techniques.

## What did you want to do?

Staff at Indi Kindi wanted to:

- Teach children and families about traditional bush foods available in their local area, and how to cook them.
- Teach children and families about bush medicine.
- Bring bush tucker into the program.
- Create early learning practices that are centred in culture.

## What did you do?

To get started with Cooking on Country, staff:

- Identified bush foods to bring into the program.
  - Bush foods are incorporated as well as foods purchased locally.
- Worked with nutritionists to plan the menu.
- Introduced new foods slowly to children:
  - Learned skills to introduce foods to children from nutritionists.
  - There is no pressure for children to eat, and the slow introduction of foods helps children to become used to different foods.
- Found fun ways to connect children to the food they eat.
  - For example, decorating crackers using nutritious toppings to make faces and fruit creations for Halloween instead of lollies.

### Cooking on Country

Cooking on Country gives children the opportunity to build a deep connection to culture and Country:

- Using bush foods and traditional cooking methods happens organically throughout the day as part of the program:
  - Educators start up the fire and make Johnny Cakes/ damper and prepare the bush tucker with the children.
  - Children go fishing with the educators and learn how to catch, prepare and cook the fish:
    - > Educators are role models and teach children in traditional cultural ways, like calling out to ancestors when they go fishing, as part of their cultural development.
    - > Educators take children to collect shellfish for bait and show them how to prepare it to put it on the hook.
    - > This is inquiry-based learning that is also sensory, relational and place-based – a rich learning experience.
- Elder women come to share language and explain the 'why' of cooking on Country.

### What about handwashing, food preparation and cleaning up?

Educators take all handwashing equipment with them when they go on Country, and this includes:

- Hand soap.
- Portable basin.
- Hand towels.
- Baby wipes.
- Sanitiser.

For food preparation educators take:

- Gloves.
- Utensils.
- Surface to prepare food.

For clean-up educators take everything they need to rinse dishes, and take them back to the hub for a proper wash after the session:

- Rinsing bucket.
- Rubbish bag.
- Care box – tissues, wipes, first aid, nappies, etc.

Indi Kindi teaches the children that they leave the location as they found it. This teaches them about caring for Country, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

## The difference it has made

- Improved developmental and health outcomes for children.
- Educators have become advocates for their community and culture.
- The program helps develop the capacity of children and families to use traditional foods and cooking methods.
- Cultural food and cooking knowledge that may have been lost is being passed on to the next generation.

## Top tips

- Work with your local community advisory group before you do anything.
  - They have the knowledge to ensure your program will be culturally appropriate.
- Make connections and build relationships first, before expecting people to come into the service.
  - This takes time and patience, and trust needs to be built.
  - Showing an interest in the stories and language of the area is a great start for this work.
- Cooking on Country has to be responsive to the area in which you are working:
  - For example, desert vs coastal communities will have different cultural foods and cooking methods.
- Build a team from the area.
  - Local women are often the knowledge holders of what to cook on Country and can give guidance on protocols.