

doi.org/10.61605/cha_3121

Volume 48 Suppl.1

Article type: Conference Report

Reimagining residential care: Using developmental evaluation to refine Gamadji Balit, an Aboriginal model of residential care

Krystal Navez d'Aubremont¹

Lillian Arnold-Rendell¹ (Dharug and Kamilaroi)

Affiliations

¹ Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA), Melbourne (Naarm), Vic. 3072, Australia

CITATION: Navez d'Aubremont, K., & Arnold-Rendell, L. (2026). Reimagining residential care: Using developmental evaluation to refine Gamadji Balit, an Aboriginal model of residential care. *Children Australia*, 48(Suppl.1), 3121. doi.org/10.61605/cha_3121

© 2026 Navez d'Aubremont, K., & Arnold-Rendell, L. This work is licensed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence

Background/Issue

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) is a leading Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation that has supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities since 1977. Within its out-of-home care services, VACCA has provided residential care since the 1980s, beginning with the Family Group Home model (VACCA, 2025a).

Children and young people are referred to VACCA's residential care program by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, typically following a Child Protection decision, or when the broader system is under strain and there are no other available options. VACCA's broader aims are to prevent Aboriginal children from entering care, and to reduce time in care, through family finding, strong case planning and cultural connection.

Residential care remains a deeply complex space, shaped by historical trauma and systemic interventions with intergenerational impacts (SNAICC, 2024). Many Aboriginal families continue to experience harm from systems intended to support them – reinforcing barriers to reducing over-representation of Aboriginal children in care.

In response, VACCA has redesigned its residential care program to develop an Aboriginal-led model where culture is foundational to practice. This Report shares part of that journey: a developmental evaluation conducted to trial and adapt the model and trial culturally appropriate data collection tools during early implementation.

Action/Response

Gamadji Balit, meaning 'Emerge Strong' in Wurundjeri–Woiwurrung language, is VACCA's culturally grounded model of residential care, designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and their families. Developed through community consultation and a literature review, the model centres culture as a source of healing and wellbeing, and the design process prioritised the voices of those with lived experience.

A Governance Group of senior Aboriginal leaders and a Yarning Group of Aboriginal technical specialists guided the design and evaluation, drawing on expertise from related programs such as Nugel and Lakidjeka (VACCA, 2025b, 2025c). Their ongoing involvement ensured cultural safety, practical relevance and Aboriginal leadership throughout the evaluation.

VACCA's new model aligns with broader reforms, including the legislative reform under Section 18 of the *Child, Youth & Families Act 2005 (Vic)*, which transfers child protection responsibilities related to Aboriginal children to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (Department of Human Services, 2005). This alignment supports the delivery of an Aboriginal model of care and challenges negative perceptions of residential care – critical for attracting and retaining passionate, especially Aboriginal, practitioners. Staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention were key considerations in the model's development, recognising the potential for residential care to be a space of transformative impact.

VACCA adopted a developmental evaluation approach to support adaptability and responsiveness. Embedding the Yarning and Governance Groups into feedback loops ensured continuous refinement and upheld cultural integrity.

Evaluation methods

- *Yarning circles* with residential care staff across Victoria (three one-hour sessions per home, 6–12 participants each).
- *Surveys* with staff and young people.
- *Cultural Coolamons* in each house to document cultural engagement opportunities, supporting healing and connection.
- *Education Journey documentation*, completed by education specialists, tracked attendance, supports and barriers, and informed advocacy to address systemic challenges.

Key deliverables

- *Gamadji Balit Program Logic* – a two-page summary and eight visual graphics to support communication and engagement.
- *Gamadji Balit Data Plan* – a framework to build an Aboriginal evidence base using culturally appropriate tools to measure program outcomes.
- *Developmental Evaluation Report* – addressing four key evaluation questions and guiding future implementation and advocacy.

Lessons learned

Aboriginal-led evaluation

A key lesson from the Gamadji Balit design, implementation and evaluation has been the importance of engaging Aboriginal staff from the outset. To embed Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, VACCA continued to involve a Yarning Group and a Governance Group, both predominantly including Aboriginal VACCA staff. These groups shaped data collection, guided interpretation and ensured cultural relevance and integrity throughout the evaluation.

Their involvement went beyond oversight – they reviewed project materials, identified barriers and helped translate findings into actionable strategies. This approach aligned with the AIATSIS Code of Ethics and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, ensuring Aboriginal communities shaped the design principles, priorities and methods (AIATSIS, 2020; United Nations, 2007). The relational nature of these meetings reflected ‘the Mob way of doing business’, where change is fostered through connection and collective decision making.

Rather than a transactional process, data were interpreted collaboratively, maintaining cultural integrity and disrupting colonial patterns of disempowerment.

References

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). (2020). *Code of ethics*. Canberra (Ngunnawal), Australia: AIATSIS. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/code-ethics>

Department of Human Services. (2005). *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*. Melbourne (Naarm), Australia: Victorian Government. [## Culturally safe data design](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

All data collection was conducted alongside Aboriginal senior staff, creating culturally safe environments and modelling leadership. Tools were reviewed to ensure respectful language and relevance, affirming that Aboriginal voices must lead key processes.

Strengths-based and relational evaluation approach

The evaluation was conducted with a strengths-based lens, focusing on resilience and cultural strengths. The developmental evaluation model supported flexibility and responsiveness to diverse voices – from leadership to frontline staff and young people.

Yarning methods were central, prioritising deep listening and relationship building over Western, quantitative-only approaches. Three 1-hour yarning circles were held at each home (6–12 participants), engaging therapeutic care workers closest to young people. This approach avoided over-burdening young people while still capturing their perspectives through trusted relationships.

A collaborative yarning style, co-facilitated by an Aboriginal senior leader, enabled:

- Regular communication with frontline staff;
- A platform for staff to influence the model’s development; and
- A sense of ownership, reducing perceptions of external imposition.

Policy and practice implications

The evaluation highlights the value of embedding Aboriginal leadership, relational methods and culturally grounded tools in residential care reform, program design, implementation and evaluation. Key implications include:

- Continued investment in Aboriginal-led design and evaluation;
- Practical guidance to support implementation;
- Resourcing aligned with recommendations; and
- Ongoing reflection to keep the model dynamic and responsive.

Next steps

The next phase involves further implementation of Gamadji Balit, supported by refined data tools embedded in practice. Aligning the Program Manual with the revised model and shifting resources to support recommendations will be critical. Without practical guidance, resourcing and ongoing reflection, the model risks remaining theoretical. The goal is to ensure Gamadji Balit continues to grow as a living, culturally grounded model of care.

[force/children-youth-and-families-act-2005](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/children-youth-and-families-act-2005)

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2024). *Family Matters report 2024*. Melbourne (Naarm), Australia: SNAICC. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/250207-Family-Matters-Report-2024.pdf>

United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. New York, USA: United Nations.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA). (2025a). *Our history*. Melbourne (Naarm), Australia: VACCA.
<https://www.vacca.org/page/about/our-history>

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA). (2025b). *Nugel*. Melbourne (Naarm), Australia: VACCA.
[https://www.vacca.org/content/Document/Nugel%20Information%20for%20Professionals%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.vacca.org/content/Document/Nugel%20Information%20for%20Professionals%20(1).pdf)

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA). (2025c). *Lakidjeka ACSASS*. Melbourne (Naarm), Australia: VACCA. <https://www.vacca.org/page/careers/tabbed-content/what-we-do/programs-at-vacca/lakidjeka-acsass>

This PDF has been produced for your convenience. Always refer to the live site <https://childreनाustralia.org.au/journal/article/3121> for the Version of Record.