

# CULTURAL SAFETY

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## Introduction

Across Australia, one in every four people were born overseas, and 46% had at least one parent born overseas<sup>1</sup>. This leads to an incredibly diverse population, unlike almost any other country in the world.

In the context of cultural safety Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often also considered culturally diverse, with traditions and languages that are not found in mainstream Australian culture.

Scouts provides a perfect platform for bringing all Australians, regardless of their place of birth, the passport they hold, or the traditions they follow, together for a common purpose – developing the next generation of young Australians.

However, to do this, we need to make sure our Scouting environments are culturally safe, as well as physically and emotionally safe. This isn't as difficult as it may sound, so long as you start with an open mind and a willingness to work together. Scouting exists in almost every country around the world, and flourishes, so most of the time there'll be a way to make the programme suit.

## What is Cultural Safety?

Cultural safety is about providing “an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are [and] what they need”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, [4102.0-Australian Social Trends](#), 2013

<sup>2</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, *Creating a Child Safe Organisation*, 2016, pp. 12

So what does this look like in the Scout hall? It's about recognising that some people come from a different cultural or religious background, and so may approach some situations differently or have different needs. It's about ensuring they feel comfortable being who they are in your Scout Group. It's about making sure they feel comfortable about talking to you if they have a problem or don't understand something. It's also about not belittling or diminishing their needs. We'll explain a few common situations in this fact sheet, but the best thing that you can always do is talk to the people in your group and the wider community, to find out what you and your group can do to make Scouting more welcoming to them.

## Cultural diversity and child abuse

One key thing to always remember is that, while we expect our Scout groups to be accommodating towards different cultures and religions, we will not tolerate any behaviour that doesn't follow our Codes of Conduct and Ethics, or our policies. While what constitutes child abuse varies between cultures, religions and countries, we will not make exceptions in Scouts Australia for what is considered abusive behaviour within our organisation's policies on the basis of cultural diversity.

## Racism and bullying

The most common behaviour that would make an environment culturally unsafe is racism or bullying on the basis of someone's culture or religion. Name-calling, putting on accents, pulling faces, and making jokes about someone's culture or religion, or aspects relating to that culture or religion, are not acceptable.



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## Dietary requirements

Many cultures or religions have particular dietary requirements, and these should be taken into account when catering for events. There are many resources available online, and you can also use our *Cultural and Religious Dietary Requirements* for more information. The best resource though is always to ask the person you're catering for.

If someone has dietary requirements for cultural or religious reasons, it is important to follow them. Some people are stricter about their requirements than others, which is why it's worth talking to them first. It can be incredibly detrimental to someone's wellbeing if they believe that they have eaten something in opposition to their beliefs – and the same problems arise if someone is told that they have eaten something they shouldn't have, even if they have not. Remember, we wouldn't expect any of our Scouts to eat horse on a Scout camp – a meat that's perfectly normal to eat in some cultures, but not in mainstream Australian society. If a child has been brought up to not eat pork or beef, the same courtesy should be applied to them. This doesn't have to mean that no one on a Scout camp can eat bacon, but it does mean that alternatives should be provided for those that can't eat it.

Some cultural or religious dietary requirements can also develop over time into intolerances towards particular foods, putting at risk someone's physical as well as mental wellbeing.

## The physical environment

Scout Halls, especially the older ones, are great at collecting *stuff*. All sorts of stuff, which, in some cases, today mightn't be considered appropriate, but twenty or thirty or eighty years ago was normal or 'just a joke'. Old murals on walls with awkward pictures of Indigenous Australians, the use of a swastika as a good luck symbol (commonly found on

pre-WWII Scout memorabilia), or scantily-dressed pictures of women in the Rover den can all serve to make people feel uncomfortable or even unsafe in your Scout Hall – and therefore, not a particularly inclusive place.

Many of these things may hold historical value; if so, though they should be removed from display in your hall, they are still worth holding onto and can make great starting points for talks with youth members about inclusivity, the history of your group, or how society's values change.

There are also plenty of other things you can do to make people more comfortable. Consider displaying an acknowledgement of country sign at the entrance of your hall, to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which your hall stands. Make sure, if your group is culturally diverse (and if you live in a culturally diverse area, your group should reflect that) that the photos on your walls represent the diversity of the members of your group. Perhaps you can even display a world map which shows where everyone comes from, or have everyone write 'hello' in their ancestral languages on a poster for the hall.

## Cultural or religious holidays or traditions

Every culture has its own set of holidays or traditions. Some people won't travel or do activities on certain days of the week or year, which could mean that certain members of your group may always miss out on activities held on those days. If members of your group have such restrictions, you should try to find a way to work around them. For instance, just like Scout groups would usually avoid running events on Christmas Day, a group with Muslim Scouts would be best to avoid running events that coincide with Eid al-Adha, the final day of Ramadan which is traditionally spent with families and enjoying a feast.

You also shouldn't make assumptions about someone's approach to holidays and how they should be reflected in your term programme – a non-Christian Scout may well celebrate Christmas at home, or may not but want to do so with Scouts.

You can find more information on holidays and traditions from around the world that may be worth taking into account when planning events and activities in the *Cultural and Religious Holidays and Traditions from around the World* factsheet.

### Language barriers

There are over 260 languages spoken in Australia, including Indigenous languages<sup>3</sup>. It's always worth thinking about how easy the information you provide about your group is to understand – and it's not only people who speak English as an additional language that will appreciate this. Avoiding jargon, abbreviations, metaphors and sayings – or explaining them if you do use them – can all make a big difference, along with laying out written text clearly and avoiding long sentences that run on. Dot points and careful use of bolding can help with this.

It's also important to ensure members of your group know that it's okay to ask questions if they don't understand – as you can't always anticipate the things that someone won't understand – and that if there is a misunderstanding, that it can be solved. If you tell families to 'bring a plate' to the Christmas breakup, and they bring a plate, but no food on it, rather than humiliating them in front of others, find a way to avoid drawing attention to it, and carefully explain, privately, the misunderstanding – and remember to not use a phrase like that again!

<sup>3</sup> Cultural Diversity in Australia – Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2071.0>

### Clothing and dress standards

Some cultures and religions expect particular standards of dress, such as for certain body parts to be covered or for shoes to not be worn inside. Some standards are stricter than others – in Australia today, you would certainly find plenty of people uncomfortable about wearing a hat inside, but fewer people would be actively offended by it. On the other hand, a lot more people would be uncomfortable about anyone walking around in only their underwear in public.

In many Nordic countries, taking all your clothes off without using a towel for discretion in the main room of a changeroom to get changed, or using saunas completely naked, is quite normal.

On the other hand, depending on how closely you follow the expectations of the religion, Muslim women are expected to cover up most or all of their body at all times after a certain age.

Both of these standards are quite different to that expected in mainstream Australian society, and can offer challenges to Scout Groups catering to people from these cultures and religions. You should, however, be able to find a way to manage them. Perhaps Muslim girls wear long sleeve shirts under their Scout uniform, the same colour as the sleeves of the shirt they're wearing? And if a Scandinavian getting completely undressed while changing on camp in front of others is making others feel uncomfortable, perhaps it's worth discussing with the relevant youth members how they can change their practices so that everyone feels comfortable. In both cases, depending on their age, it would be a great opportunity to discuss the approach of different cultures and religions to the human body and having a healthy approach to it.

### Effect of past experiences

For some children, particularly those who have come to Australia as refugees, there

can be aspects of Scouting that are difficult to perceive as a positive. For instance, they may associate the wearing of uniforms with military or other authorities, or associate camping with refugee camps, where toilets may be dangerous places and water unsafe for drinking. Some families may also be uncomfortable about spending time apart from each other for fear of being permanently split up. If any member of your group is hesitant about something, you should always talk to them about it, and with children (or adults) from culturally diverse backgrounds, it becomes even more important to be open minded to the experiences that could have had an effect on their life. It may be necessary to seek external support from community groups or counsellors to overcome these hurdles and to help the children in your group to feel safe in these situations.

### **Empowerment**

If you only take one message away from this factsheet, make it this one. Are you confident that everyone in your group, if they felt unsafe, taken advantage of, uncomfortable, or bullied, would be able to identify a person that they could tell, and then be able to speak to them?

If you answer no, then it's time to find a way to fix this: are Pack, Troop, Unit and/ or Crew Councils operating, to allow members to speak up about things going wrong? Are leaders approachable and willing to sit and listen? Have you asked your members

recently if there's anything that can be done better, or why they're not involved in something that you think they should be?

And if you answer yes, that's great – it's now important to keep on making sure that youth members (and adults) in your group feel comfortable, by asking questions and involving them in making decisions, whether it's planning a menu, choosing dates for events, or picking a game to play at the start of the night.

### **Further information**

We provide a number of factsheets relating to diversity and inclusion in Scouting, as well as Child Safety. These can be found in the Diversity and Inclusion, and Child Safe Scouting, sections of our webpage.

### **Conclusion**

This may seem like a lot to take in, but it shouldn't be seen as scary or overwhelming – talk to the people in your group, and others in your community, to work out what you need to do to make your group more welcoming and ensure everyone feels safe. If people feel included and welcomed in your Scout Group, they will be far more likely to speak up if something's wrong, and as such, far less likely to be the victim of child abuse.

Scouting is for all young people – and all young people must feel safe in Scouting.