

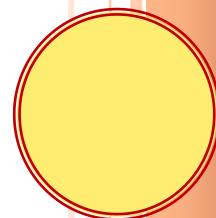
# YOUNG KOORI PARENTS FORUM

## *GIVING ABORIGINAL YOUNG PARENTS A VOICE*

This project was undertaken by the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) and was funded by the Office for Youth as part of the Victorian Government's 'National Youth Week' initiative for 2010.



This report was written by Clarisse Slater – VIYAC Project Officer. 2010



# YOUNG KOORI PARENTS FORUM

*“Opportunities like this increase the empowerment and confidence of young parents. It’s about being able to speak up about your experiences and help others”*

*Young Koori Parent – Melbourne*

This forum provided the unique opportunity for young Koori parents to gather together and voice their opinions on issues that are of importance to them and their families.



Above: Young Koori Parents at the Melbourne Forum 2010

This report draws upon the opinions and shared experiences of the young Koori parents who attended the forum in Melbourne. It is intended to contribute ideas on effective methods of improving the engagement and accessibility of young Koori parents into service providers and improving the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of young aboriginal parents and their families.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

VIYAC would like to thank the *Department of Planning and Community Development* and the *Office for Youth* for funding this event for National Youth Week 2010.

VIYAC would also like to acknowledge the *Youth Affairs Council (YACVic)* for their assistance in providing advice, information and feedback on content in the development of this report. VIYAC is currently auspiced by YACVic, which is the peak body and leading advocate for young people's issues in Victoria. Many thanks go to the YACVic team for their ongoing support that they provide to the VIYAC membership and its initiatives.

A particular acknowledgement goes to *Belinda Duarte* for doing a fantastic job at facilitating the event and ensuring a safe and comfortable discussion environment was established.

VIYAC would like to thank the time and effort provided by *Helena Gonebale*, and for providing inspiring story of her own life journey as a young single mother. The participants kindly welcomed her into the discussion circles and respected her active participation in the forum.

Thanks to the Preston Town Hall for allowing us to use their space for our forum. Preston is in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne and is documented to have a large number of Koori youth, in particular young Koori parents.

VIYAC would like to acknowledge the service providers and individuals who attended the event to provide advice and to share active dialogue with the young parents. The service representatives demonstrated respect and esteem as they listened to the stories shared by the young Koori parents. We acknowledge the following services for attending the event and/or contributing to the development of the forum:

- *Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)*
- *Yappera Children's Services*
- *Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL)*
- *Bert Williams Youth Hostel*
- *Marie Stopes Australia*
- *Northern Metropolitan Institute of Tafe (NMIT)*
- *Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)*
- *VAHS Family Counseling*
- *Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)*
- *Centrelink*
- *Australian Nurse Family Partnerships*
- *Indigenous Careers and Employment*
- *Mercy Hospital*
- *Office of Youth*
- *Youth Affairs Council Victoria*

VIYAC would particularly like to acknowledge the well demonstrated leadership skills and courage of the young Koori parents who attended the forum. VIYAC appreciates the time and effort they contributed to ensure the successful conduction of the forum. Their contribution will positively affect the lives of all Koori parents around the state as the information they provided will work to increase the understanding of Government and Service to ensure effective supportive structures for all young Koori parents.

## **VIYAC'S ROLE**

The Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) is a voluntary network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who live in Victoria and work together to provide a voice to government and community organisations on issues that are important to them.

Since 2004, VIYAC has been an auspice of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), the peak body and leading advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. As an organisation, VIYAC works independently with its volunteer membership to make effective decisions that positively impact on the lives of the young Indigenous people in Victoria.

At this current point, VIYAC has 30 young Indigenous people on its membership, who actively participate in decision making that provide advice of the direction of VIYAC's objectives.



Above: VIYAC Members at Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve 2010

***“VIYAC is a good resource and a great opportunity for me because I get to meet other youth that have the same focus and drive that I do”***

*“It's important because it gives young Aboriginal people a voice and a channel through which to express their feelings and concerns.”*

***“VIYAC is a unity that is well represented as members come from different places and have difference stories to tell, but all have common goals”***

- Words of the VIYAC Young members

## A MESSAGE FROM THE VIYAC STATE COORDINATOR



It is with great pleasure that the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) present you with the Young Koori Parents Forum Report. This report captures information arising from a forum that VIYAC hosted as part of National Youth Week 2010. This forum had a primary focus on the role of young Koori parents in the community and the everyday challenges they experience.

VIYAC is a platform for Indigenous young people to voice their ideas, passions and concerns on issues of importance to them. This forum provided an opportunity for young Koori parents to voice their ideas, passions and concerns regarding being a young parent. The information gathered will help assist VIYAC to advocate strongly for all young Koori parents in Victoria.

VIYAC members had recognised the challenges and barriers that currently exist for young Koori parents. Successfully balancing a healthy lifestyle with family commitments and accessing appropriate support services were acknowledged as key issues for young Koori parents that deserved community attention and influence.

The young members of our council decided that a forum for young Koori parents to express their concerns and share positive success stories needed to be conducted.

VIYAC would like to acknowledge and thank the young Koori parents who attended the forum. We thank them for their courage in sharing stories of their hardships, expressing their needs and helping each other by respectfully listening and providing advice.

VIYAC encourages you all to read this report with an open mind and heart, and listen exactly to what the young Koori parents are saying. We hope that the recommendations provided will assist you to provide better opportunities for Koori young parents.

My respect to all Elders past and present and to all Indigenous people in Victoria.

Thank you

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Kanoa', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Tim Kanoa  
VIYAC State Coordinator

## **NATIONAL YOUTH WEEK 2010: YOUNG KOORI PARENTS FORUM**

In 2009, recommendations were received from Aboriginal youth in Melbourne about the need for a forum exclusively based on the needs of young Aboriginal parents.

The lack of support structures experienced by young Aboriginal parents, in conjunction with the high prevalence rates of teenage pregnancy for Aboriginal youth, was recognised by the young members of the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) as a demand for immediate community attention

VIYAC made the decision to submit a proposal for funding to the Department of Planning and Community Development and the Office for Youth to participate in National Youth Week for 2010. The members established the idea to organise an inclusive youth forum providing the unique opportunity for young Aboriginal parents within Melbourne to share stories about their personal journeys or becoming a young parent and have their voices heard on the challenges they have faced.

The objective of the forum was to present the opinions, experiences and recommendations of young Koori parents from Melbourne for the purposes of understanding the social, cultural and wellbeing needs of young parents and the issues they face in accessing health and support services



Above: VIYAC State Coordinator, Tim Kanoa & Young Parent, Ronny McGuinness



Above: Chantelle McGuinness with son, Eli & Jainey-Lee Thorpe with daughter, Matilda

## **PAINTING A PICTURE: YOUNG KOORI PARENTS IN VICTORIA**

**Research indicates that teenage pregnancy rates are 5 times higher in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women than in non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.**

In 2007, the fertility rate for indigenous mothers aged 15-19 was 70 babies per 1 000 compared to 16 per 1 000 in those aged 15-19 in the general population<sup>i</sup>.

Data shows that of all the Indigenous women who gave birth in Victoria, the majority at 30.7% were aged 20 to 24 years<sup>ii</sup>

These statistics provide a strong indication that teenage pregnancy is highly common among the Victorian Aboriginal community.

Factors such as lack of contraception use and risky activities, such as consuming high levels of alcohol or drugs are known to be the main contributors to teenage pregnancy. However, these are not the only causes.

It is important to note that the young Koori parents who participated in the forum said they felt positive about their decision to become parents, with some making the conscious decision to create a family at a young age.

These positive perceptions were generated with much respect due to the great deal of support they received from their families and communities.

## THE EVENT

The event welcomed 12 young Koori parents under the age of 25 to Preston Town Hall to participate in a forum specifically structured to listen to the needs of them and their families.

The project was funded by the Office for Youth as part of the Victorian Government's '*National Youth Week*' initiative that provides an opportunity for government and community sectors to acknowledge the achievements of young people in Victoria.

Community and government representatives attended the forum to provide one-on-one consultations and advice around health, education and family support services. The representatives from community and government organisations also gained an insight into the lives of the young Koori parents, by being invited to listen to their in depth discussions.

The forum began with a panel discussion of young parents/community leaders who spoke about their experiences of being young parents. Their voices set the scene for the forum and allowed key themes and challenges to be determined.

Group discussions allowed an opportunity for the young Koori parents to share ideas, concerns and advice, while also networking and building relationships with each other.

Key themes were generated within these discussions, outlining the negatives and positives of their parental lifestyles.

A safe space was established to ensure the comfort of the young parents when discussing their personal stories. The young Koori parents felt very comfortable to share their personal reflections, giving an opportunity for community and government representatives, including VIYAC, to further understand the levels of support needed for young Koori parents.



Above: Young Koori Parent's Forum 2010 – Discussion Groups

## MAIN CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG KOORI PARENTS:

### ➤ ACCESS TO SERVICES:

Young Koori people, in particular young Koori parents, experience a limited knowledge of available support services within both metropolitan and rural Victoria. Easily accessible culturally appropriate services need to be established to ensure the accessibility of young Koori parents. The participants indicated that effective promotion of available services and greater awareness is highly needed within the community.



Above: Andrew Bamblett – Young Koori Parent Panelist

### ➤ HOUSING:

Young Koori parents experience great difficulties in accessing and securing suitable housing. A large majority of young parents live in inappropriate living situations (e.g. with their parents) due to the stress of securing their own home and financially maintaining it. Greater support is needed for young Koori parents to obtain sufficient housing for them and their families.

### ➤ FINANCE:

Every participant identified financial matters as a contributing factor to high levels of experienced stress. Weak supportive structures limit young parent's ability to secure a lifestyle free from financial concerns. As young Koori parents, it is extremely difficult to find work and successfully maintain it. Each participant believed that the current funding provided to young parents (i.e. the pension) does not allow for a comfortable living situation.

### ➤ CAREER SUPPORT:

Young Koori parents are aware of the importance of education and employment. However their roles as parents limit their ability to undertake personal commitments of work and study. Each participant had an aspiration to establish a strong career pathway, with many identifying the wellbeing of their child's future as their determination. More support structures to enable access to employment and study options would benefit them.

### ➤ CULTURAL SUPPORT:

Each young Koori parent identified a feeling of pride in being able to teach their child about their culture, family history and heritage. They believed it provided an avenue for generating a deeper connection between parent and child. Majority of the participants expressed a desire to learn more about their culture and participate in cultural and community activities, as they see a responsibility within themselves to pass this knowledge onto their children.

## KEY THEMES ARISING FROM FORUM DISCUSSIONS

As the forum began, a series of themes quickly emerged. Each of these themes were explored within open discussions, allowing the young parents to share their personal experiences and opinions while exploring effective methods of reaching positive solutions. These key themes are details below:

### BENEFITS AND POSITIVES OF BEING A YOUNG KOORI PARENT:

- Young Koori parents often experience a closer connection to their children due to being closer in age.
- By becoming a parent, young people are required to revalue their priorities in life
  - This is not necessarily a bad thing, as this pressure enables personal growth and the development of personal maturity and responsibility.
- The ability to share personal feelings with their child and experience unconditional love was highlighted as a major benefit.
- Generating an understanding to what their own parents before them have been through.
- Young Koori parents felt a positive obligation to teach your children about their Aboriginal culture and cultural lineage. This was a point that many felt pride and honour to commit to.



Above: Nikayla Bamblett  
– Young Koori Parent Panelist & VIYAC Member



Above: Lowell Hunter  
– Young Koori Parent Panelist & VIYAC Member

### SUPPORT SERVICES

Lack of culturally appropriate services as well as inadequate or inconsistent support from organisations can cause discouragement for young parents when seeking specific information or assistance. It can deter their likeliness to seek out support in the future.

The young Koori parents expressed the following needs for support services:

- More youth specific programs
- More Aboriginal staff in mainstream organisations
- Cultural sensitivity delivered to every support worker to enable more cultural inclusivity and generate more “safe spaces”
- Workers that are friendly, non-judgmental and willing to listen

## KEY THEMES ARISING FROM FORUM DISCUSSION

### CAREER/FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

The future aspirations and career goals of young Koori parents are often discovered to be hindered due to the responsibilities of parenthood and the limitations of financial and employment stress. However, the young Koori parent participants still maintained dreams and personal aspirations that they felt, in time, would be achievable with the assistance of supportive families, communities and services.

Popular goals and aspirations shared by young Koori parents:

- Ability to demonstrate leadership skills to whole of community
- Home ownership
- Completion of University/Tafe Degree
- Business Ownership



Above: Janalli Brown – Young Koori Parent Panelist



Above: Ronny McGuinness – Young Koori Parent Panelist

### HOUSING AND FINANCE

Financial and accommodation difficulties limit a young Koori parents hopes for material belongings in the future and hinders their ability to secure stability in their current situations.

- Every young Koori parent within the discussion groups were experiencing (or have experienced in the past) financial stress and difficulties.
- Many young Koori parents are living in unstable housing situations and experiencing
- A difficult time in securing stable accommodation.
- The struggle to find a stable balance between work and family life was a major complication in securing financial stability – One young mum quit her full time job to spend more time with her son, however then found it very difficult to financially provide on the pension.
- All young Koori parents within the discussions said that they would feel happier if they did not have to deal with financial stress every day.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Many government bodies and community services are in a position to generate positive changes that will allow young Koori parents to receive the support they require. This support has the potential to increase young Koori parents' ability to guarantee the success of their future aspirations and develop strong cultural identity for themselves and for their families.

Below is a list of recommendations for consideration by government and community organisations:

1. There is a persistent need to establish a Koori specific 'youth hub' as a space for young Koori's to visit and obtain information regarding health, housing, employment and education. This could be very beneficial in decreasing the level of Koori youth on the streets and increasing their engagement and access to support services. A space such as this has the potential to host cultural gatherings, provide health care and employment services and hold youth justice/advocacy meetings. It will also provide a space for young Koori youth to establish a sense of cultural identity and belonging.
2. The issues faced by young Koori parents in Victoria require more consideration in policy and program development. Advocacy on the challenges faced by Koori young parents must be provided to government and community organisations. This will increase the awareness on non-Indigenous organisations and older Indigenous community representatives of the concerns that young Koori parents face. Specific projects targeting the needs of young Koori parents also need to be established throughout every region of Victoria that target family support, mental and physical health and career opportunities.
3. Engage Indigenous school students in events such as these to provide a clear understanding of the consequences of personal decision making. Invite younger Koori's to listen to the stories of the young parents, as a means of educating them about sexual and reproductive health and healthy life choices.
4. Increased support for young Koori parents to secure suitable housing and manage healthy finances. Training activities that provided advice to new parents and teach them methods of managing their money situations and budgeting effectively.
5. Programs that target the mental and physical health of young Koori parents. Teaching young Koori parents effective methods to cope with stress and cultural activities to connect with their community and their families.
6. Increased level of cultural competency in non-Indigenous organisations that offer support to young Koori Parents. Ensuring that every worker that provides support to young Koori parents has sufficient knowledge of the Aboriginal community and cultural dynamics. An increased number of Koori staff in mainstream organisations to ensure safe and sensitive spaces for Koori youth are established and made available.

**WORDS OF THE YOUNG PARENTS:**

**BEING PROUD TO BE A YOUNG KOORI PARENT IN VICTORIA:**



***"I love being able to share unconditional love with someone who is a part of who I am"***

*"Becoming a young parent makes you re-evaluate your priorities in life, as you to develop responsibility and maturity"*

***"Sharing my culture with my child is important to me. I teach them to be proud of who they are and where they come from"***

*"I have enjoyed not only teaching my son, but learning from him as well – it makes me grow into a better person"*

**FUTURE COMMUNITY ASPIRATIONS FOR YOUNG KOORI PARENTS**

***"I'd like to see young Koori parents being confident enough to voice what they need"***

*"They shouldn't have to feel scared or isolated - Should not feel judged or alienated"*

***"Young parents need to be praised for their efforts, because they deserve recognition"***

*"I'd like my child to know that it's not the end of your life if you get pregnant and that there is plenty of support out there if they do"*



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<sup>i</sup> Statistic found in the State of Victoria's Children Report – Aboriginal Children and Young People in Victoria, Chapter 8.6: Teenage Lifestyle, page 236. (Source: Births, Australia, ABS 2007, 2008)

<sup>ii</sup> Same as above