

THE GUNGA SPIRAL

A framework for working alongside Yolŋu participants using the NDIS

ARDS ABORIGINAL CORPORATION
LANGUAGE CENTRE - YOLŊU RADIO - COMMUNITY CONTROL

NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission

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ABOUT ARDS

For 50 years, ARDS' Yolŋu and Balanda staff have worked together to build relationships of trust and two-way learning. We use these relationships, knowledge, and skills to bridge the gap that exists between Yolŋu communities and mainstream services.

ARDS is:

- Home to the language team for Yolŋu languages
- Yolŋu Radio and a creative media arm, and
- a provider of services that strengthen cross-cultural communication, cultural competency training, and Yolŋu-led community development in areas such as health education, law and justice, families and healing, and social wellbeing.

Our approach is built on genuine two-way learning between Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu worldviews. We begin with Yolŋu languages, Yolŋu stories, and Yolŋu knowledge, then build bridges into the dominant cultural systems.

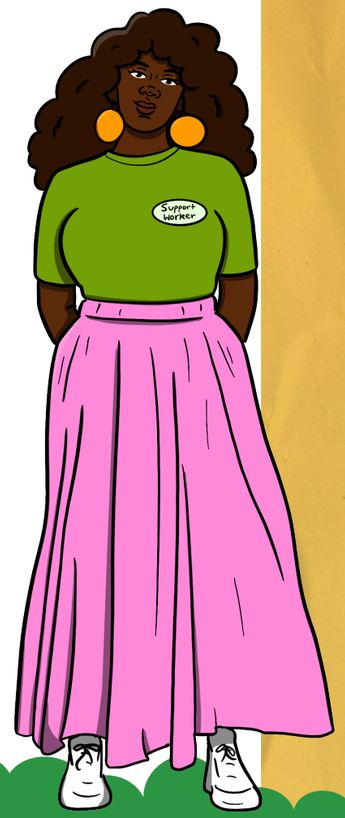
We call this approach bala-räli guŋga'yunmirr – "walking in the two worlds." We work in reciprocal ways where everyone benefits and becomes strong. This includes both-ways learning – we are always learning from each other. A key part of our role is to advocate for non-Indigenous systems to listen, adapt, and do a better job of meeting Yolŋu needs.

Acknowledgement:

The ideas and frameworks within this workbook are grounded in Yolŋu knowledge. They were developed in collaboration with Yolŋu workers, their families, Remote Community Connectors, and Yolŋu language workers. These frameworks and stories remain theirs, generously shared as a foundation for future collaborative work between Yolŋu and Balanda.

GLOSSARY

DJAMBARRPUYŊU	ENGLISH
Balanda	Non-Indigenous person
Bämara	Guide or helper
Bäpurru	Clan (also funeral ceremony)
Barapuy	Respected person
Bulu	More
Dharpa	Tree
Dhäruk	Language
Djäma	Work
Gunga	Pandanus
Guŋga'yunhamirr mala	Support workers
Gurruṭu	Family/kinship
Mälk	Skin name
Rom	Law/culture
Wäŋa	Home/house/country
Yäku	Name
Yolŋu	A Yolŋu person







CONTEXT OF THIS RESOURCE

In 2023, ARDS received funding from the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission to undertake a collaborative resource development project to support Yolŋu who are on the NDIS to self advocate and make complaints about their service.

Why this workbook exists

Through extensive conversations with Yolŋu NDIS participants, their families, and service providers in Northeast Arnhem Land, we heard a consistent message: the tools currently available to support meaningful and culturally safe communication within the participant–provider relationship are not working.

At ARDS, we believe Yolŋu people bring deep strength and knowledge to these conversations, and we see our role as helping create spaces where Yolŋu and Balanda can come together to learn from one another. This builds on decades of ARDS' experience supporting strong relationships in the region.

This workbook was created to help Balanda NDIS providers engage in clear, compassionate, and culturally aware conversations with Yolŋu participants. It is designed to support the development of trusting relationships and to encourage a culture of feedback, dialogue, and help-seeking.

Who this resource is for

This workbook is written for Balanda NDIS providers working with Yolŋu participants in Northeast Arnhem Land. It is intended as a shared tool – something to use together with Yolŋu, not a set of instructions to use alone.

We encourage you to treat this workbook as:

- an icebreaker to begin deeper conversations,
- a guide for exploring identity, needs, goals, and aspirations, and
- a living resource that can be adapted to your context and used throughout the different stages of the NDIS journey.

THE FRAMEWORK

All Yolŋu are like a thriving dharpa — a living tree that stands strong, deeply rooted, and connected to the world around it. In this framework, we draw on the gunga (pandanus tree) as our guiding metaphor. The gunga grows in a spiral, always expanding outward while remaining anchored in the earth. It is a tree that holds deep meaning for Yolŋu people and grows bountifully across Northeast Arnhem Land.

Like the gunga, every Yolŋu has roots that reach deep into the ground, held by rich, nourishing soil. This soil represents gurruṯumirr — family and kinship — which sustains and connects Yolŋu throughout life. From this foundation, the trunk grows tall, reaching toward the sun and sky. For some Yolŋu living with disabilities, the NDIS provides extra sunlight and water — supports that help the gunga continue to grow strong, resilient, and healthy. But for this growth to be meaningful, the supports must respect and nurture Yolŋu cultural identity.

When the gunga is harvested through the right process it can be used to make a mat. The gunga's strength is at the centre, and has strands that are used in different ways to keep the gunga mat strong. The weaving of this mat brings each gunga plant harvested into relationship with other gunga plants, woven together into a framework of gurruṯu, kinship. Gurruṯu is the framework that keeps all the plants woven together tightly and safely to keep each other strong. Our framework is based on the gunga mat, representing the connections between each of the gunga plants, their supports and how they are woven together. Our framework guides NDIS providers to walk a safe, clear path in building genuine, trusting relationships with Yolŋu clients — relationships that strengthen identity, respect existing support networks, and centre the person's story within their cultural world.

The gunga framework is not a checklist — it's a collaborative journey. By following the spiral, providers learn to work with Yolŋu ways of knowing, being, and doing. Each turn of the spiral deepens understanding and strengthens the roots of trust. Together, you help the dharpa — the Yolŋu person — grow tall, grounded, and thriving.

While the framework is designed to enable providers to better work with Yolŋu frameworks, it does not replace cross-cultural competency training and hiring a bämara (Yolŋu cultural advisor) — it should be used alongside these forms of learning and support, as an additional tool to strengthen communication and relationships.

Work through this together gradually. This framework has been designed to be revisited over multiple sessions, not completed in one go.

These steps are presented as prompts to follow at a time that is right for the participant. Activate them gently and only when it doesn't feel forced. Welcome family members to join these conversations, as guided by the participant. Sometimes you (a service provider) may not understand everything at once, but that's OK. Layers of understanding can and will form over time.



STEP 1

Meeting at the centre, with the participant



START HERE!

Use this first step to get to know the participant. This is not a checklist to rush through – it's a chance to begin a relationship conversation.

- The participant is at the centre of this journey. They are in control of their own NDIS funding and supports.
- In Yolŋu Rom (law, culture), people are not identified by their disability. Instead, they are recognised through their gurruṯu (kinship) and through their roles, responsibilities, skills, strengths, and knowledge.
- This first step is about grounding your engagement in identity. Take time to learn who the participant is, not only as an NDIS participant but as a Yolŋu person connected to family, clan, and country. This knowledge will help you understand how to communicate, how to show respect, and how to support them in ways that feel safe and meaningful.

Purpose

This step centres the participant as the foundation of all work. Before talking about supports or funding, begin by learning who they are — their story, their language, their identity, their strengths. This relationship-building stage helps you understand what matters most in their world.

Your role

Approach with curiosity, patience, and respect. You are not collecting data — you are building a relationship. Let the participant lead. Use Plain English, or use an interpreter.

Practitioner reflection questions

- **What surprised or moved you during this conversation?**
- **How does learning about your client's identity change the way you plan to support them?**

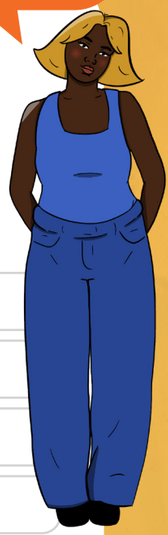
This is the beginning of your journey with the participant. Grounding yourself in their Yolŋu identity through gurruṯu is an essential step in creating trust and respect. When you start here, you are walking alongside the participant in their world, not pulling them into yours.



Notes

Your client may introduce themselves with their Yolŋu name, or their English name (maybe because it's their preferred name, or because they think it's easier for non-Yolŋu people to remember). Ask them which name they prefer you to use, and whether there are any other names they would like you to record.

Revisit this page over time and record new information – additional layers of identity may emerge as trust builds.



Activities

Ask open, story-based questions such as:

- **Can you tell me about yourself, your family and where you are from?**
- **Where did you grow up?**
- **What is your Bäpurru/clan?**
- **What languages do you speak?**

Record details with care:

Yäku (name)

Mälk (skin name)

Bäpurru (clan)

Wäŋa (country or homeland)

Djäma (work or activities)

Dhäruk (language/s)

Anything else they wish to share

Your client may use their English name (maybe because that's their preference or maybe because they think it's easier for non-Yolŋu workers to remember) or they may introduce themselves with their Yolŋu name. Try notice which one they use or ask them which name they prefer.

Ask your client how to pronounce these words and the other words in this resource. You don't have to say them perfectly and it may feel vulnerable to make mistakes, but showing a genuine interest in learning some words in Yolŋu Matha will help build a good rapport and can be a great ice-breaker.

Don't forget that you are expecting your client to interact with you in their second, third or fourth language (English). If English is not your own first language, you would have an idea of what that is like. Your client may speak another Yolŋu language to the one used in this book (Djambarrpuyŋu), so be aware that they may wish to teach you something different. Notice and acknowledge strengths and contributions.



Notes

STEP 2

Family: Gurruṯumirr mala



Purpose

For Yolŋu people, identity is never held alone — it lives within gurruṯu, the kinship system that connects every person to family, land, and ancestors.

Learning about someone's gurruṯu is like learning about the soil that helps the tree grow. Family relationships shape wellbeing, decision-making, and the way care is given and received.

Your role

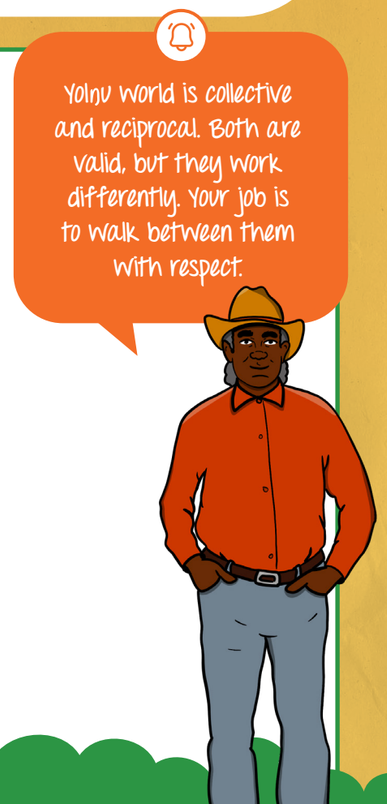
Approach this step as a learner. Gurruṯu systems are complex and detailed. It is important to know that you cannot "know" gurruṯu on your own — you can only be guided through it by the participant and their family as a learner. You can build on this knowledge each time you meet.

Show humility and patience. It is important to recognise that the NDIS system is based within Western worldviews that generally focus on individuals, while the Yolŋu world is collective and reciprocal. Both are valid, but they work differently. Your job is to walk between them with respect.

Practitioner reflection questions

- **How does understanding gurruṯu change the way you communicate or plan supports?**
- **Where do you see family strengths that could help the participant reach their goals?**
- **What have you learned by positioning yourself as a learner in this step?**

Notes



Activities

Use this page to build a picture of the family and support network. You might want to use the text box to record your conversation or print the document off and build a family tree with the participant.

Use these questions as conversation starters:

- **Who are the key family members that support you?**
- **What gurruṯu relationship are they for you?**
- **Who usually makes decisions or gives permission?**
- **Who needs to be present at the meetings and activities?**
- **Are there any cultural things I need to know about?**
- **Are there other Yolŋu, like clan members, Elders, or community members who are important to your care?**

Encourage stories about how family helps the person stay strong. Note both formal and informal supports.

Notes



STEP 3

Identifying a Barapuy/Respected Person



Purpose

Many Yolŋu have a barapuy — a respected person who helps them navigate Balanda systems, understand complex information, or speak on their behalf when needed. Including a client's barapuy in NDIS planning increases safety and trust.

Your role

Work with humility. Acknowledge the barapuy's authority in cultural and relational matters. Their presence can bridge understanding between Yolŋu and NDIS systems.

Practitioner reflection questions

- **How can you recognise and include the barapuy's role in your practice?**
- **What might change if decisions are guided through this trusted relationship?**

The Yolŋu concept of barapuy should not be simply transferred or applied to Balanda concepts like legal guardian or power of attorney. They hold different meanings and there should be clear conversations about the differences with participants and their family.

Notes



Activities

1. ***Ask the participant:***
   - **Who helps you when you need to talk about services or supports?**
   - **Is there someone who helps you make decisions or explains things clearly?**
   - **Is it ok for them to help us work together?**
   - **Is there anything I should know about them?**
2. ***Record who the barapuy is, their role, and how they wish to be contacted.***
3. ***Seek permission from the participant before contacting or involving the barapuy in meetings.***
4. ***Discuss how you, the participant and the barapuy can work together to support the participant's goals.***

Use this text box to record your conversation and the important details.

Notes



STEP 4

Providers: Guŋga'yunhamirr Mala



Purpose

The participant may receive help from multiple providers — some funded by NDIS, others by health or community services. Understanding this network ensures coordination and prevents confusion or duplication.

Your role

Help the participant see the full picture of who supports them. Respect their choice and control. Coordinate respectfully — do not take over or make assumptions.

Reflect

- **How well do the participant's NDIS Support Workers connect and communicate with them?**
- **Are there overlaps or gaps in services?**
- **How can you help make important connections between service providers and the participant?**
- **What help can I offer within my role and what is outside scope? How can I clearly articulate this?**



Notes







Activities

1. ***Together, list the participant's current supports:***
   - **NDIS-funded providers (e.g., support workers, therapists).**
   - **Other providers (e.g., GP, clinic, community programs).**

   It is important to list names, gender and the organisation each individual is affiliated with.

2. ***Ask:***
   - **Who do you trust most from X service?**
   - **Is there anyone you would prefer not to work with?**
   - **Would you like a service provider of the same gender for certain supports?**

3. ***Clarify confidentiality and privacy:***
   - **What information can I share with other service providers or organisations?**
   - **What should stay private?**

4. ***If appropriate, use pictures, drawings, or objects to support discussion. Draw circles or connections between people and organisations.***



Notes

STEP 5

Providers: Activites & Capabilites Djäma



Purpose

Every Yolŋu contributes to their family and community in important and meaningful ways. This step focuses on identifying what the participant enjoys, what they do well, and what they want to work toward.

Your role

Shift from needs to strengths. Help the participant recognise what makes them feel strong and proud. Support goal-setting that aligns with their identity, relationships, and aspirations.

Reflect

- **Are the goals meaningful to the participant's world, not just the NDIS system?**
- **How can family or community play a role in supporting these goals?**

Notes





Activities

Together, identify:

Three activities the participant enjoys most. *Ask questions like "what do you like to do?"*	**Three skills they feel strong or confident in.** *Ask questions like "what are you good at?"*	**Three goals to work toward over the next six months.** *Ask questions like "what are some things you would like to be able to do or learn right now?"*

If appropriate, use pictures, drawings, or objects to support discussion.
Return to these goals over time — celebrate progress and adjust as needed.

CHECK IN – IS THE DHARPA THIVING?

Continuing the Spiral – Understanding NDIS Participants



Purpose

This is the last step before checking in and continuing the spiral. It's a time to pause, reflect, and check whether the participant and their family feel strong and supported. A healthy dharpa grows when its roots, trunk, and leaves are cared for — this step is about tending to the relationship, celebrating growth, and acting early if something isn't right.

Your role

Create a safe, calm space for honest conversation.
Be patient and use Yolŋu Matha with an interpreter or language worker where possible.
Listen first — the goal is understanding, not blame.

Activities

These activities can be used anytime - before, during or after meetings - to check how the dharpa is growing.

ARDS has developed a set of Emotion Cards that can be used as visual guides to faciliate this activity. Contact **admin@ards.com.au** for more information or to order a set.

1. ***Talk about feelings:*** *Ask the participant to identify one or more emotions that show how they feel about their supports. Write them down or lay out the cards if you are using them.*

2. ***Gently prompt for more details:***
   - **"How are you feeling about your supports right now?"**
   - **"Which of these emotions tells us how you felt when things were going well?"**
   - **"Was there a time you felt different to this?"**

3. ***Explore the story behind the emotion:***
   - **What was happening? Who was there? What would you like to be different?**

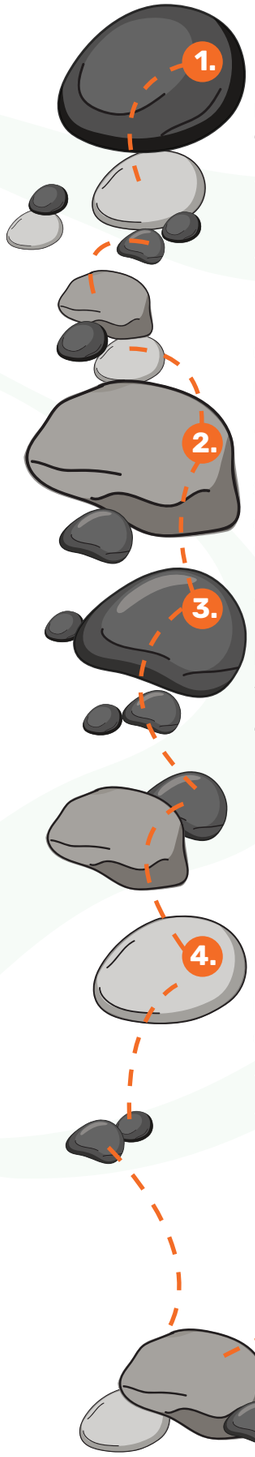
4. ***Acknowledge strengths and successes:*** *Ask if feedback can be shared with other (relevant) people (i.e. specific service providers).*

5. ***If concerns arise, ask:***
   - **Who should know about this?**
   - **Would you like help talking to them?**
   - **What do you hope will happen after we have this talk?**

Notes

RAISING A CONCERN OR COMPLAINT

If the participant wants to take action, follow this clear path by demonstrating to the participant the seven steps you can take together.



Identify the problem

Help the participant describe what doesn't feel right.

This might be about:

- **An NDIS support or provider,**
- **The way they are being treated,**
- **A lack of access to services, or**
- **Unsafe or poor-quality care.**

Create a calm, private space. Use the emotion cards or storytelling to help the participant express what's worrying them.

Talk to someone they trust

Support the participant to identify a safe, trusted person to talk to — this may be a family member, Elder, Yolŋu worker, advocate, or another provider they already know well.

Tell the story and decide what's wanted

Encourage the participant (with their trusted person present if they wish) to share what happened and how it made them feel.

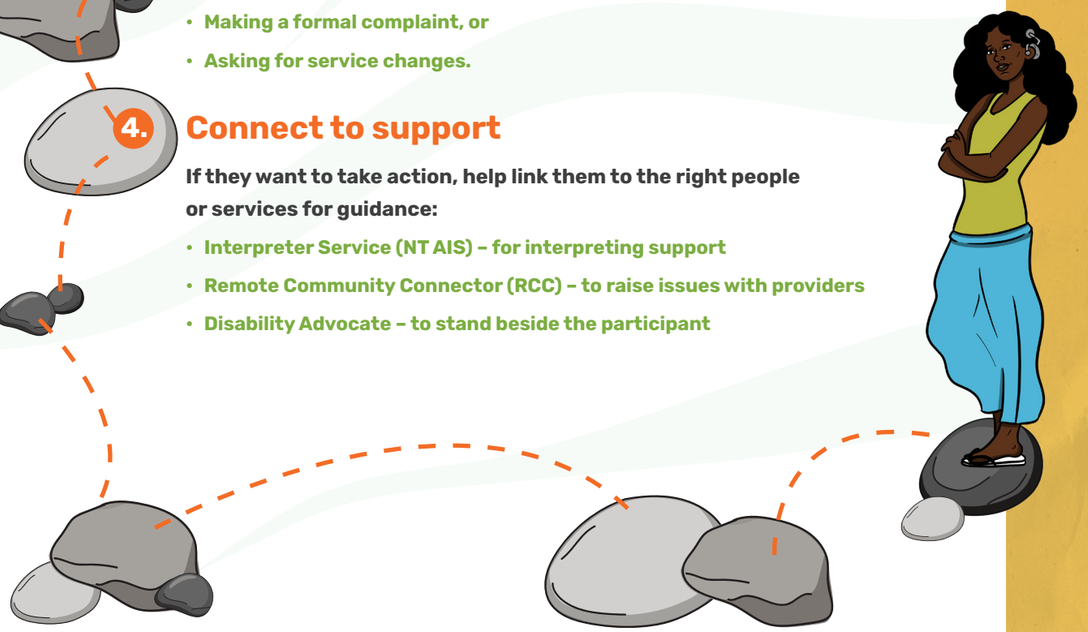
Together, explore what outcome they would like — for example:

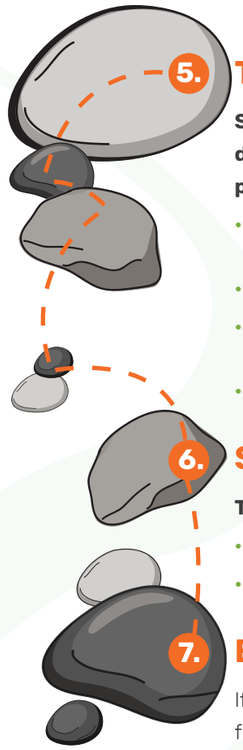
- **Fixing the issue quietly,**
- **Receiving an apology,**
- **Making a formal complaint, or**
- **Asking for service changes.**

Connect to support

If they want to take action, help link them to the right people or services for guidance:

- **Interpreter Service (NT AIS) – for interpreting support**
- **Remote Community Connector (RCC) – to raise issues with providers**
- **Disability Advocate – to stand beside the participant**





Take action together

Support the participant and their trusted person to raise the issue directly or make a formal complaint if needed. Possible complaint pathways include:

- **NDIS Quality & Safeguards Commission – for unsafe or poor-quality NDIS services**
- **NDIA – for plan or funding issues**
- **NT Health Complaints Commission (HCSCC) – for health staff or care issues**
- **Australian Human Rights Commission – for discrimination matters**

Stay safe and respected

Throughout the process, ensure the participant:

- **Is kept informed about progress, and**
- **Has access to an interpreter at every stage.**

Escalate if not resolved

If the issue remains unresolved or the participant feels unsafe, help them access further support. An advocate or family member can follow up with complaint bodies, seek legal advice, or request a review.

Your role

Help document what has been done so far and connect them to appropriate legal or advocacy services.

Provider practice tips

- **Always check what outcome the participant hopes for — many complaints are about change or understanding, not punishment.**
- **Move slowly and explain each option clearly.**
- **Use visual tools whenever possible.**
- **Document what was agreed and follow up.**
- **End by acknowledging the participant's courage in speaking up**

Reflect

- **How has this check in deepened your relationship?**
- **What can you do differently to keep the dharpa thriving?**
- **How will you keep feedback flowing in safe, regular ways?**
- **What are some key lessons you will take on board in your work moving forward?**



NOTES



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