

# "Nhätha ñali dhu wapthun wängalil Gäwalñalilnydja?"

## Moving to a Place of Plenty

### Phase Two: Yolñu Capability Workshops



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**Prepared for:**

Department of the Chief Minister,  
Northern Territory Government

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The title of this report, *Nhät̪ha ŋali dhu wap̪thun wäŋalil Gäwalŋalilnydja?* relates to an allegory about PLACE that one Galiwin'ku resident told us during consultations for this report. For thousands of years, Yolŋu<sup>1</sup> economy has been ordered by the seasons. Yolŋu have a rich vocabulary to describe these places and resources – whether bountiful or barren. In the allegory, the storyteller describes how a group of Yolŋu leave a once plentiful place. Times change, their confusion grows and the people find themselves in a desolate place where there is barely any food and little water. People doubt themselves and each other, their once strong teams are languishing. Foreign people circulate through the lands. Yolŋu ask, “when will we arrive in a flourishing place of plenty?” Then the time comes to move to *Gäwalŋa*, that place of restoration and abundance. People find hope and resolve. They start listening to each other and they work together again.

This story is a metaphor for the confusion Yolŋu feel in the present day, and of the desire to overcome this situation and achieve stability and harmony.

**Cover Photo** Dylan Milpiri Gonḍarra and toddler Willy perform traditional Gälp̪u bungul for visitors. Wirrawuy, Nhulunbuy, Northern Territory.

<sup>1</sup> Indigenous people of northeast Arnhem Land identify as ‘Yolŋu’, so we adopt this terminology throughout this paper. Non-Indigenous people (especially of European origin) are often referred to as ‘Balanda’.

## 1. Executive Summary

### 1.1 Project Aims

The NT Government has developed the *East Arnhem Volatile Substance Abuse Reduction Action Plan*. The NT Government contracted ARDS to conduct a two-phase project in connection with VSA or AvGas sniffing in some East Arnhem Land communities.

The purpose of Phase One of the project was to consult with a range of community stakeholders about appropriate ways to communicate with or engage the community on the issue of VSA and recommend an effective communication and education strategy. In August 2017, ARDS presented the interim report 'Hearing the Yolŋu Voice: Yolŋu Perspectives on VSA and AvGas Inhalation and Community Engagement Recommendations.'

The aims of Phase Two are to:

- Identify preferred Yolŋu approaches to child-rearing;
- Discuss the challenges that Yolŋu see for children and the effective parenting and the care of children and teenagers;
- Identify the barriers that disrupt Yolŋu ways of raising children with specific case studies and examples showing how the role of Yolŋu parents has been impacted;
- For each of the barriers identified, discuss and detail practical steps that could be taken by Yolŋu parents and community members to remove or reduce the impact of the barrier;
- Identify specific assistance or actions that could be taken, and by whom, to immediately support families with a member who is involved in VSA.

### 1.2 Key Findings

To date, many actions in response to VSA have focussed on the supply or availability of volatile substances. Feedback from Yolŋu focuses mainly on the demand for substance and the social situation of substance abuse. Yolŋu residents and leaders groups are implementing a range of practices to combat VSA in a holistic way. There is a role for government and others to play in supporting these initiatives and reducing some of the barriers.

**External responses to VSA must take into account the widespread lack of understanding and trust between Yolŋu community members and mainstream Australian systems of law and government.** There is a diversity of Yolŋu experiences in child-rearing. Governments and outside agencies must exercise caution when making decisions that impact whole Aboriginal communities. Our team hopes that understanding and trust can be built in a number of ways.

**Yolŋu elders hold strong visions for the future of Yolŋu communities.** In the course of these workshops, elders despaired that children and youth are not listening well to instruction. However, many elders hold hope and visions for the future: local leadership, strong intergenerational family relationships, good Yolŋu role-models for children.

**Yolŋu identify traditional knowledge as a protective factor for youth engaged in VSA.** Yolŋu participants believe that assimilating traditional knowledge into contemporary life in large Yolŋu communities has an important role to play in preventing VSA. Some Yolŋu participants identified this struggle and expressed their desire for time and resources to work in these areas: language maintenance, story-telling, translation and resource production.

### 1.3 Recommendations

From the key findings of this report, this principle should guide any assistance or actions:

**Responses to Volatile Substance Abuse in Yolŋu communities must prioritise Yolŋu strengths, knowledge and language and promote Yolŋu social cohesion.**

We make the following recommendations to the Northern Territory Government and the VSA Stakeholder Working Group to support Yolŋu families with a member involved in VSA. These recommendations are listed in order of appearance in this report, and indexed against the barriers /challenges (Chapter 5) and actions (Chapters 6 and 7):

Barriers	Actions	Recommendations
5.3	6.1	<b>1.</b> Support local leadership groups through the Local Decision Making initiative.
5.1	6.2	<b>2.</b> Fund Aboriginal organisations to run regular <i>Raypirri'</i> camps and to provide follow-up support for attendees in home communities.
5.3	6.2	<b>3.</b> Fund Aboriginal organisations and ranger groups to continue homeland services.
5.2, 5.4	6.3, 7.5	<b>4.</b> VSA Stakeholder Working Group to improve access and distribution of existing resources to support Yolŋu carers and staff in early childhood, schools, clinics and other roles.
5.4	6.3	<b>5.</b> Support Yolŋu staff to incorporate Yolŋu-led educational programs and ceremonies (e.g. <i>gunapipi</i> , etc.) into school and work schedules.
5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.6, 5.8, 5.9	6.3, 6.4, 6.6, 7.5, 7.6	<b>6.</b> Fund radio and multimedia campaigns in Aboriginal languages in the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrate Yolŋu role-models</li> <li>• Traditional stories and positive parenting</li> <li>• Trauma and Response</li> <li>• Discipline and the Australian Law</li> <li>• Peer Group Parenting and Peer Group Pressure</li> <li>• Children's media and ratings</li> <li>• <i>Djäl</i> and <i>Rom</i>: demand, addictions, responses</li> <li>• Demystifying Responsibility, intervention and harm minimisation</li> </ul>
5.1	6.5	<b>7.</b> Provide appropriate venues for local Yolŋu parent/carer support groups.
5.1, 5.2	6.6, 7.1	<b>8.</b> Grow and develop mental health, trauma and counselling services, also involving Yolŋu health professionals and experienced Yolŋu carers.
5.1, 5.2	7.1	<b>9.</b> Fund cultural competency workshops for all non-Indigenous staff.
5.6	7.2	<b>10.</b> Support local leadership groups to provide immediate support for families with a member involved with VSA.
5.3	7.2	<b>11.</b> Fund training in Aboriginal languages to assist leaders in Aboriginal-controlled organisations towards greater independence in governance and management.
5.5	7.3	<b>12.</b> Initiate a community campaign in Yolŋu languages to provide information, pathways and advice about child protection and Territory Families. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory Recommendation 32.12  
 NT Government VSA – Yolŋu Capability Workshops, ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, July 2018

5.5, 5.8	7.3	<b>13.</b> Develop a multi-agency program in Yolŋu languages to foster understanding between Yolŋu families and mainstream systems of law especially relating to families: Courts, Territory Families, Police, NAAJA. <sup>3</sup>
5.7	7.4	<b>14.</b> Review the access and availability of literacy and numeracy courses in Aboriginal languages. <sup>4 5</sup>
5.7	7.4	<b>15.</b> Increase access and funding to institutions delivering foundational courses in ESL, Literacy and Numeracy.
5.10	7.5	<b>16.</b> VSA Stakeholder Working Group to create a resource directory or repository which is compatible with education programs and community responses to VSA.
5.9	7.6	<b>17.</b> Assess the barriers to free-to-air television in remote communities and propose solutions.
5.10	7.7	<b>18.</b> East Arnhem Regional Council / Local Authority Groups / GECs to manage public calendars of visiting agencies or programs.

**Image:** Joanne Garrgulkpuy Dhurrkay, (*Gäwalŋa* storyteller), at home in Galiwin'ku.



<sup>3</sup> Possibly engaging a number of Recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. e.g. 2.1, 25.16, 25.34

<sup>4</sup> For example, the former Certificate I & II in Own Language Work, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

<sup>5</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory Recommendation 16.8

## 2. Introduction

Over the last two years, there have been increasing incidents of theft of AvGas and tampering with aircraft in order to obtain AvGas in a number of East Arnhem Aboriginal communities. AvGas has been stolen by people intending to sniff the fuel. The inhalation of AvGas poses serious health risks. Tampering with aircraft raises safety and commercial risks for operators and has impacted flight services to remote communities.

The NT Government has developed the East Arnhem Volatile Substance Abuse (VSA) Reduction Action Plan. This table summarises the ARDS response in 2017-18:

Action	Staff
Community Service Announcements	Sylvia Nulpinditj, Gaia Osborne
Phase One Community Consultations Interim Report from Phase One	Bryan Macdonald, Howard Amery
Subject matter preparation – The Lead Story	Dr Jenny Shields
Radio Production – The Lead Story	Biritjalawuy Gonḍarra, Hannah Harper, Gawura Wanambi, Joy Bulkanhawuy
Social media posts – The Lead Story	Hannah Harper, Gawura Wanambi
Radio Production – Raypirri’ Rom Series	Maratja Dhamarrandji, Gäyalḡa Gurruwiwi, various interviewees, Gaia Osborne
Radio Interview – Mark Yinjiya Guyula MLA	Gawura Wanambi, Andrew Pascoe
<i>Phase Two Yolḡu Capability Workshops Final Report including Phase Two</i>	<i>Dr Jamie Mapleson, Joy Bulkanhawuy, Hannah Harper</i>

The original purpose of Phase Two was to develop a range of communication tools to support the strategy. Two key findings of the Phase One Interim Report (2017) were:

1. Communication tools developed by ARDS and others are generally effective at “helping people understand the health risks of AvGas inhalation”; and
2. In Yolḡu communities, “There is a general lack of knowledge about AvGas, its lead content and the health effects of inhalation”.

Phase Two of this project was revised in response to other key findings of Phase One consultations:

3. Communication about health risks are of limited value as “Yolḡu do not believe that VSA is caused by a lack of knowledge, [therefore] VSA will not be corrected by providing information.”
4. Underlying Causes of VSA are identified as “damaged family structures, lack of discipline and a wider social breakdown,” specifically,
5. Parenting and loss of control. In this view, an underlying cause of substance abuse was “a disconnect between parents and children linked to an overall loss of control of family and community life.”

*The Lead Story* programs on Yolḡu Radio continue to provide Yolḡu audiences with careful and effective communication about health risks of volatile substance abuse. Consequently, other Yolḡu Radio productions and Phase Two of this project focus more on the “issues identified by Yolḡu as causative.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout this response, ARDS Staff and project participants have been able to discuss a wide range of issues in everyday life. Our team acknowledges that these are difficult conversations. We thank the families for their trust and we honour them for sharing their thoughts, feelings and ideas. We encourage Yolḡu families to keep talking together and with us about these complex stories. We always want to hear feedback from Yolḡu families.

<sup>6</sup> Hearing the ‘Yolḡu Voice’ Interim Report, ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, p4-5.

### 3. Method

Early in Phase Two, the team was appointed: Dr Jamie Mapleson (cross-cultural facilitator), Joy Bulkanhawuy (cross-cultural facilitator) and Hannah Harper (linguist). Our team spent time planning visits in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi, reviewing a range of reports and research and preparing to discuss sensitive topics in safe and constructive ways. We contacted other VSA Action Group Stakeholders with information about the upcoming workshops and we addressed Local Authority groups (East Arnhem Regional Council).

We visited Galiwin'ku in May and Milingimbi in June. In each community, our team spent four days sitting with different Yolŋu family groups. Djambarrpuyŋu was the main language used. In each sitting, we shared the origin and intent of this project, stating that our main objective was to facilitate discussion about Yolŋu strengths, challenges and responses in raising children. We explained that we would write a report for the Department of Chief Minister and other stakeholders. Our team decided against large or extended workshop sessions, instead organising small opt-in sessions or waiting for invitations to visit different families or groups. Over the eight days, our team consulted with 38 Yolŋu adults.

Workshop participants shared feelings, experiences and ideas without too many questions from our facilitators. When participants were dwelling mainly on the negative or difficult aspects of family life, our team did prompt people to consider what strengths or capacities exist in these situations. Sometimes we used examples or anecdotes to stimulate thought or reflection. Occasionally, we shared information that was relevant to a particular discussion (e.g. hormones in teenage years).

Our team recorded responses in a variety of ways. Sometimes, we used butcher's paper so that our notes were visible to participants. At least twice, we recorded audio at the end of the session to summarise the points raised in earlier discussions. Jamie and Hannah also took some notes in smaller notebooks. All three team members debriefed and consolidated findings at the end of most days.

This report contains only a few quotes from participants. Otherwise, we use indirect speech or paraphrase to summarise lengthy anecdotes or to gather similar responses from a number of different participants. We concede that this report does not contain quantifiable research or analysis. This report contains interpretations that are not easy to test. We are aware of our own cultural bias and interpretations in writing this report in English. These challenges face all academic research or government consultation and we regret that at this stage in history the Yolŋu voice is so often filtered through non-Indigenous reporting. Wherever possible, our cross-cultural team has checked and double-checked that our information and interpretations are fair and reasonable.

**Image:** Dr Jamie Mapleson and Joy Bulkanhawuy (right) consulting with residents in Milingimbi.



## 4. Yolŋu Approaches and Strengths in Raising Children

Participants really appreciated the opportunity to discuss preferred Yolŋu approaches and strengths in child-rearing. Unfortunately, this section is not a definitive list of approaches and strengths that exist in diverse Yolŋu families. Our Yolŋu and Balanda staff team have also contributed some analysis and explanation and we hope it is helpful.

### 4.1 *Gurruŋu* Kinship

Yolŋu participants unanimously identify kinship as the main lesson for children to learn. Every person born into a Yolŋu family has a known place in Yolŋu society through the complex *gurruŋu* kinship system. *Gurruŋu* tells individuals how to call the members of their own family tree and ancestry from conception to end of life. It also connects each individual as a representative of one clan into relationships with people of other clans. Yolŋu society is founded on intergenerational relationships, for example, Yothu-Yindi (mother-child) and Märi-Gutharra (grandmother-grandchild). Yolŋu children and adults are generally proud of their identity as Yolŋu also through this *gurruŋu* kinship. Kinship situates each person in the Yolŋu cosmos relating to both the distant past and the modern world.

Most Yolŋu families know their own family ancestry in great detail, stretching back four and occasionally five generations, and even including ancestors' siblings. Yolŋu children commonly identify themselves by their close relations. If they are talking with a Yolŋu adult it is usually quite easy for that adult to work out how they are related and to recall a common ancestor.

Some Yolŋu participants are primary carers of children who have left their own parents. In some situations, the carer is a close relative (e.g. mother's sister). In other situations, the carer is a more distant relative and the carer usually continues to address the child by the original kinship terms. In this way the identity of the child, the carers and the connection to his or her own family of origin are not confused. Our team has observed the strength of these networks to make alternative care arrangements within the existing kinship system.

A number of participants identified certain kinship roles in correcting children who are *raypirri'-badatj* – acting rebelliously: *ŋäŋdi* (mothers and maternal aunts), *bäpa* (fathers and paternal uncles) and older siblings (including close cousins) give words of discipline; *ŋathi* and *märi* (maternal grandparents) and *ŋapipi* (maternal uncle) are the kin who give really strong discipline. Young men in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi shared how it was tough to receive that correction as youth but now, as grown-ups, they can appreciate the value of that discipline.

### 4.2 Spending Time on Homelands and *Raypirri'* Camps

Yolŋu people have connections to certain territories, 'homelands', that are shared by whole families. When participants discuss their homeland visits, they also refer to a set of relationships and how the time in those places renews and refreshes relationships. These connections to the country, usually outside of the major communities, are also expressed in traditional knowledge (see below). Some participants said that spending time on traditional lands has healing power or gives people the rest they need from volatile substance abuse. For many years, Yolŋu leaders have sent petrol sniffers away from major communities to spend some months with elders in the homelands. Yolŋu often describe these as '*Raypirri'* camps', where *raypirri'* means discipline, instruction or correction. Many older participants recalled receiving this support as young men, as a consequence for rebellious behaviour, and they said that the experience helped them to stop sniffing petrol.

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<sup>7</sup> *Raypirri'* may be defined as 'discipline' in the broad sense of teaching, instruction or correction.

### 4.3 Yolŋu *Rom*, Culture and Law

Participants referred to Yolŋu law and culture, *rom*, as a strength in child-rearing. For example, the song traditions encode the family identities, relationships between clans and the connections with different lands. These unique fields of knowledge are owned and treated as valuable assets, and the transmission of traditional knowledge is one of the primary ways in which adults show love and care to children and youth. Ceremony, including for funerals, is one platform where children and youth have an opportunity to learn traditional knowledge. It is also forum for children to demonstrate their effort, enthusiasm and participation in Yolŋu society. It is beyond the scope of this report to describe in detail the culture and laws of Yolŋu society, or the many points of difference with Australia's predominantly Western Anglosaxon heritage. Here is a brief list of common Yolŋu customs and manners that Yolŋu children are learning:

- Songline and dance – *yidaki*, *bilma*, *milkarri*, *bungul* (didgeridoo, clapsticks, crying songs, dance)
- Initiation ceremonies – *dhapi* (traditionally *gunapipi* – extended course in Yolŋu culture and law)
- Funerals gathering all related clans for ceremony, children actively involved – *bäpurru*
- Yolŋu governance meetings – *ŋärra'*, *makarr-dhuni'*, etc.
- Smoking ceremonies for new babies and mothers, other treatments as the small child develops
- Traditional foods: hunting, fishing and harvesting through the Yolŋu seasonal calendar
- Production of spears, pandanus work and art
- Physical care: traditional medicine, family lice control, protecting children from snakes/crocodiles
- Fireside storytelling / discipline
- Malevolence / sorcery as an explanation for difficulties or unexpected events – *galka*
- Relationships of avoidance or deference – *rum'rum*
- Marriage rules and guidelines – moiety, *mälk* and *gurrutu*
- Avoidance of pictures or names of people who have passed away, or words that sound similar
- Situations where speech is restricted
- Situations where only certain speech is acceptable, for example, when a person has passed away or is critically ill
- Strict rules about stealing or meddling
- Other rules against gossip and teasing
- Duties of giving to people in particular relationships – *buku-yalŋgi*, *läy-gora*, *wetj*

In these ways, adults share important knowledge and express care in relationships with children and others. For example, when a family member has been away for a period of time and returns to a community, it is common for older women to receive that member back into community with tears and close hugs, sometimes accompanied by crying songs. This ritual welcome may also refer to mutual family members who have passed away recently.

In most areas of life, Yolŋu families have different expectations of male and female children including different knowledge, skills and traits to be learned. Similarly, men and women in the kinship network have different roles in raising or training boys and girls.

### 4.4 Risk Awareness

Some traditional Yolŋu stories have warned people away from danger. For example, certain places are restricted or proscribed for certain reasons. From our consultations, there are a range of responses to this method of teaching about the dangers of volatile substance abuse. Some participants have taught the children in their care about volatile substance abuse and explicitly warned them about how petrol damages the brain and body. Other participants are worried about frightening children who may already be feeling vulnerable, and possibly worsening their propensity to volatile substance abuse.

Yolŋu care-givers are reflecting on helpful responses to different children in different situations. We see this range of responses as a strength and we believe it would be worth exploring the nuances of these responses more in future.

## 4.5 Respecting Responsibility

Participants are very sensitive about sharing stories on behalf of other people. Clan and kinship structures dictate authority in Yolŋu communities. Elders and others respect the responsibility of closely related clans or family groups for the children in their care. In Milingimbi, our team visited local *Djungaya* – the stewards or caretakers of the land. They expressed serious concern for children in Milingimbi and a degree of responsibility for the wellbeing of all people living on that traditional estate. However, they are very wary of over-extending their authority.

Elderly family members can also assert their right to care. For example, an Aunt who brought up a child may expect that later on the young woman (and her children) would live with her because the Aunt is entitled to care and assistance from her grown niece. In this way, many Yolŋu families have built-in principles of childcare and aged care, taking up responsibility for dependents.

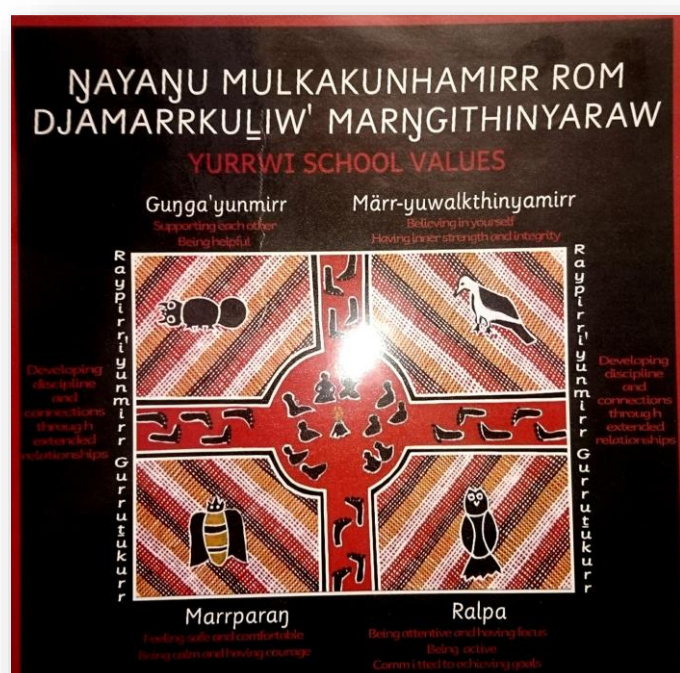
## 4.6 Role-modelling

Some Yolŋu participants identified that children follow the examples of parents or other ancestors. Elders can encourage younger people to invoke certain qualities from their cultural identity or ancestry, or they might identify that children and youth display those traits.

In these discussions, our Yolŋu facilitators distinguish between people who have followed in the footsteps of their strongest role models, and others who identify themselves with people who have made bad choices. Some Yolŋu have identified that they make conscious choices to follow the example of particular ancestors so that their own children can later follow their positive example. Some community members also mention role-models in the context of education and employment. When they were growing up, they looked up to people who were trained and employed in a range of careers.

## 4.7 Yolŋu Staff in Childcare Programs and Schools

Many children in the school have at least one close family member on staff, so these children and their families automatically have connection with the school. Milingimbi staff report that these staff members and their families have a higher level of engagement with the school and with the children's learning. The Milingimbi school leadership asserted the importance of these growing connections for curriculum development and broader community relationships.



**Image:** Milingimbi school values

## 4.8 Gross-motor and Sports

Over many years, researchers and others have noted how Aboriginal children excel in visual-spatial and motor skills<sup>8</sup> and sports. One participant shared how running has played a role in her own development as a young leader. Another family in Milingimbi is teaching children how to repair bicycles. They are planning a long-distance ride in the 2018 dry season as part of a church program. One young man said that the training and instruction he had received from sports coaches helped him to make good choices.

On a couple of occasions, we talked with participants about how a young person is happier and healthier when the growing body is active. Youth Sport and Recreation programs are a feature of many responses to VSA and other community issues.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Yolŋu participants did not offer evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs in kerbing VSA or other destructive behaviours. Some participants described how activities are a good way to keep children and youth active and away from negative peer pressure but those activities listed were usually engaging families across the generations: hunting, spear-making, *burgul* dance.

We agree with the findings of the Phase One Interim report<sup>10</sup> that certain interventions (eg: basketball courts, discos and recreation activities) should not target this strength to the exclusion of others (e.g. family connections, traditional culture).

## 4.9 Nurturing Children

Some participants spoke movingly of their love for the children and youth. Several participants in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi shared their Christian faith and how their Christian beliefs have shaped their practice and helped them to grow in love for their families.

This phenomenon is noted in other people's accounts of things that helped people to stop abusing substances, "Some people found becoming a Christian gave them new friends and helped them to stop drinking."<sup>11</sup> Yolŋu Christians access Bible stories, songs and other resources in English and Yolŋu languages to teach and encourage children. One young man received mentoring and help from the church in Galiwin'ku and further afield. He visited Sydney and later Africa to help out in a small community. Through these experiences he said that he was able to see and understand good pathways in life.

## 4.10 Rewards and Incentives

Some Yolŋu caregivers talk about how they reward children for good choices and behaviour. For example, one grandmother saves her money to send a grandchild to the Darwin Show when he has received certificates of attendance or achievement at school. Family members also give treats to maintain positive relationships with children in the family, not linked to the child's behaviour.

<sup>8</sup> Lowell, et al., (2018), Building Yolŋu Skills, Knowledge, and Priorities into Early Childhood Assessment and Support: Protocol for a Qualitative Study JMIR Research Protocol, Volume 7 Issue 3, p2

<sup>9</sup> The Atlantic (2017) How Iceland Got Teens to Say No to Drugs.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/teens-drugs-iceland/513668/>

<sup>10</sup> Hearing the 'Yolŋu Voice' Interim Report, ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, p15.

<sup>11</sup> Brady, (1995), Giving away the grog: Aboriginal Accounts of drinking and not drinking. Page xvi and stories 1, 6, 8, 14, 18, 22, 24, 25, 41.

## 5. Challenges and Barriers

Less than 100 years ago, Yolŋu lived in small family groups in continuous connection with well-known clan lands. Children grew up in much more regulated communities than the diverse and fast-changing communities now populated by many hundreds of people. It is difficult to describe how these rapid changes challenge the child-rearing methods that suited life in small, conservative groups. It seems that the challenges and barriers that exist in Yolŋu child-rearing today emerge from these seismic paradigm shifts.

### 5.1 Challenges in Kinship

Over the last three generations, Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi have grown exponentially in size, and the median age of the population has grown younger. The size of children's peer group is much larger now and this poses serious challenges to the kinship system which relies on intergenerational relationships. One mother said that she often feels her children are steered in the wrong direction by their peers or even by close kin. This mother is not interested in fights between young men on the streets, but another relative would take her children along to see the fights. Experts on the topic identify peer pressure as a major force in youth substance abuse.<sup>12</sup>

Some participants shared candidly about times when kinship is awkward. One grandmother shared how her son's partner is not in the ideal kinship relation for marriage. The grandmother follows the convention of calling her son's children 'gaminyarr'. When the children grow up, they learn the kinship system and ask difficult questions about how they fit in the system and why the grandmother calls them 'gaminyarr' instead of another kinship term (following their mother's relationship to her mother-in-law). This awkwardness escalates when her son and his partner experience relationship difficulties and the grandmother does not feel comfortable to offer the support she otherwise would to the relationship.

In Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi, there may be four generations and several single parent families sharing one house. In that house, it seems the lines of childhood, adulthood and responsibility are blurred. In consultation, many participants seemed to be talking about children, but on further discussion we noted that they were talking about young adults. One grandmother states that her house is a drug-free house, but still the young parents have brought marijuana onto the premises. In that situation, the elders in the family are concerned for the children, but also for the middle generation who should be showing the most responsibility for the care of their children and elders.

Another challenge to kinship structures is the high rate of single parenthood and/or relationship breakdown. These situations are often caused by shame associated with "wrong way" relationships, mental illness, chronic illness, disability or the death of a parent. In some cases, a parent is absent because he or she is in the "long-grass" in Darwin or another major town. All of these challenges to established kinship structures are escalating as communities grow in number.

### 5.2 Childhood Trauma

In Galiwin'ku, members of the Local Authority decision-making group within the East Arnhem Regional Council reported that most of the children and youth involved in VSA come from dysfunctional families or have experienced some trauma. In Milingimbi, the school staff have done an informal audit of children who are sniffing petrol regularly and found that almost all of them had experienced significant trauma or distress. School staff also referred to the petrol sniffing habit alongside other self-harm (e.g. self-strangulation). People in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi see a strong correlation between children who are in difficult family situations (past or present) and volatile substance abuse. In one consultation, participants expressed concern about how trauma can be perpetuated down the generations, even when children are removed from traumatic family situations to be cared for by other Yolŋu kin or foster carers.

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<sup>12</sup> Brady (1995), Culture in Treatment, Culture as Treatment. Soc. Sci. Med. Volume 41 Number 11, p25  
*NT Government VSA – Yolŋu Capability Workshops, ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, July 2018*

We observed that it is very difficult for families in crisis to process the impact of their experiences on children and youth. There is an urgent need for counselling, but also for information about trauma and response in Yolŋu languages.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.3 Barriers to Local Leadership

As in many places around Australia, the gathering of many Aboriginal people groups into missions or communities has posed a great challenge to clan politics and connections to traditional estates. These complex relationships between clans can make Aboriginal leadership in remote communities very difficult. Though the East Arnhem Regional Council does classify the Wards according to Indigenous regions within eastern and northeastern Arnhem Land, the Council itself is not large enough to be representative of the many clan groups in the region. Similarly, the Local Authorities do not have seats allocated for representatives of the many clans. Some Yolŋu participants expressed scepticism that the East Arnhem Regional Council can truly represent Yolŋu governance within remote communities or at the regional level. Other Yolŋu see the EARC structure as a viable way of raising local Indigenous leadership regardless of clan affiliations.

Leaders of small Aboriginal organisations shared their frustration that they feel unqualified to lead when the expectations and obligations of the mainstream system are so great (communications, compliance, etc). Some leaders expressed a heartfelt desire to learn governance and management so that they could apply for funding and manage projects more independently. They point out that non-Indigenous managers and funding cycles are only temporary, whereas their own presence and commitment in the Aboriginal-led organisations is more permanent. As our consultations continued, we heard more and more Yolŋu

expressing a desire for more genuine Yolŋu leadership in community responses, organisations and mainstream service-providers.



In Galiwin'ku, our team discussed in more detail how it is a difficult but important process to work out how Yolŋu *rom* and mainstream expectations can possibly coexist in governance and management of Aboriginal organisations. These barriers to Aboriginal-led responses must be carefully and honestly sized up and addressed for leaders and aspiring leaders to demonstrate their capacity for positive change.

**Image:** Joy Bulkanhawuy (ARDS) interviews Joanne Djämirri II Baker (Miwatj, Nyäljka Aboriginal Corporation)

### 5.4 Negative Talk and Yolŋu *Rom*, Culture and Law

Our team worked hard to elicit some favourite stories and vocabularies to discuss techniques and values in child-rearing. We were concerned that community members did not offer many examples of Yolŋu stories or helpful words to teach and discipline children. This surprised us, given that our Yolŋu Radio team has found metaphor and traditional stories to be a helpful method of conveying important information. One example of this loss is a Yolŋu phrase to 'control or redirect oneself' used by one Yolŋu facilitator's grandparents. This phrase was not known to the young parents in the context of anger or behaviour management. In its place, participants had a strong focus on negative imperatives ("don't...", "stop...",

<sup>13</sup> An excellent example of one such resource was produced by Relationships Australia and NAPCAN, *It Takes a Forest...to Raise a Tree*, DVD Resource

“yaka...”), threats or physical discipline (see below). Some participants borrowed abstract English terminology like “resilience”, “responsibility” or “character” but it was very difficult to assess how well these terms were applied or understood by Yolŋu speakers of English as a second language.

Elders consistently report that children and youth have stopped listening, and we wonder if an imbalance of negative instruction is a factor in that communication break-down. Throughout the sessions, we listened to people’s concerns that current generations of parents are distracted by other things and are not committing time with elders to learning key values and vocabularies to instruct children and youth. People observed that children can learn the outward expressions of Yolŋu culture but miss the *djalkiri* or foundations, the principles and values underlying Yolŋu *rom*.

Our team speculates that over many years, interactions between Yolŋu of all ages with Balanda staff in many services have sadly been characterised by the negative imperatives “don’t...”, “stop...”, “yaka...”, often with threats or consequences. It is very sad that Yolŋu often know and expect this language when interacting with non-Indigenous people, and even sadder to consider that Yolŋu child-rearing may be influenced by a very limited, prohibitive vocabulary.

Some participants shared stories of how young people use gossip to attack others who are trying to make good choices, for example, some young parents slander other young parents on social media. There were also some accounts of children mocking elders who are on night patrol. We doubt that this phenomenon is new, but participants are concerned that these destructive behaviours are increasingly common.

## 5.5 Fear and Confusion about Responses

Some participants commented that caregivers are no longer able to use corporal punishment in discipline, though this has been a traditional disciplinary method. These participants expressed fear that “welfare” would take the children away if they smack their children. Several people in Milingimbi shared their understanding that caregivers could use an open hand to smack a child and this does not necessarily constitute child abuse. One participant expressed concern that some parents were using abusive language (Yolŋu Matha or English) with their children. He identified that this extreme language is not a good substitute for corporal punishment because it is still a form of child abuse. We were encouraged that in the midst of confusion in both communities, some participants were still able to discuss this complex topic.

Our team has observed that Yolŋu children grow up with this confusion and many of the most difficult misunderstandings are being actively taught and modelled to the next generation. For example: in 2017, a parent used the presence of a non-Indigenous facilitator as a threat, telling a child in Yolŋu Matha to comply with an instruction “or else the Balanda lady will call the police and they’ll take you away.” There are a number of ways to interpret situations like this: Yolŋu families do not understand what factors lead to children’s removal from families; Yolŋu families fear Balanda people and agencies; in the absence of corporal punishment Yolŋu caregivers resort to verbal threats; Yolŋu are adapting the traditional fear-mongering genre to contemporary cross-cultural history; Yolŋu caregivers can explicitly exclude the non-Indigenous observer from the in-group kinship system to protect the family structure from outsiders.

We cannot document the complex contact history in northeast Arnhem Land in this paper. We can say that the mission history in northeast Arnhem Land did not involve the removal of children. Yolŋu do remember how the police made arrests and removals very early in Yolŋu contact history. Yolŋu sometimes refer to the tragic stories of the Stolen Generations elsewhere in Australia. In any case, the account of the mother’s threat above highlights the prevailing confusion about current Australian laws, agencies, power and race relations, risks and consequences.

## 5.6 Demand, Addictions and Response

Throughout the workshops, we discussed the demand (*djäl*) for volatile and other harmful substances, and how *djäl* interacts with Yolŋu law or *rom*. The Yolŋu verb *djäl* means “want”, “like” and “need”. Yolŋu talked about substances and addictions in different ways to other population groups. For example, Yolŋu

talk about various addictive substances being “in my blood”, assimilated into one’s body and being. Addictive need is expressed as hunger, and in contemporary contexts Yolŋu are often associating celebration or major events with substance use or inebriation. We are concerned that many Yolŋu are not differentiating healthy desires / rewards with unhealthy habits / substances. Some children may find themselves in vulnerable situations when Yolŋu adults have access to dangerous substances that are handled like treats.

Even for Yolŋu families, caregivers have expressed some helplessness to know how to respond to substance abuse, whether it is an addictive behaviour or not. For example, one relative told how a child in his family had sniffed petrol, broken in to a facility, eaten some biscuits and fallen asleep. He took the child to the clinic to be checked. Beyond that, he did not really know what to do. There is a need for Yolŋu and other adults to work out the best responses to children in that context.

More careful research and discussion is needed so that education and treatments can properly respond to Yolŋu experiences of addiction and substance abuse.

### **5.7 Expectations and Employment Pathways**

Some participants expressed confusion about the Centrelink expectations to attend appointments or face payment cuts. One participant reported that a young man in her family told her that he is “not qualified to conduct my own business” with Centrelink. Those young people frequently call older members of their family to escort them to Centrelink to interpret or mediate the interaction. When young parents miss appointments, the consequences for children in the family can be severe. Some Yolŋu participants noted that it is much easier to interact with Yolŋu staff in Centrelink. They would like to see many more Yolŋu working in different positions in different agencies.

In Milingimbi, community members are positive about various CDP initiatives. However, some young men in that program in both communities have felt like there is no pathway into more meaningful work in their communities. Some Yolŋu identified that low literacy and numeracy rates are barriers for career progression in CDP and other areas. Some CDP participants want to show more leadership in the communities but at this early stage it seems their initiative is not matched by professional development or promotion in the CDP program.

One participant shared how in this current environment, it can be difficult for adults to set a strong example for children to aspire to further training and meaningful employment.

### **5.8 Appropriate Interventions and Policing**

As in any population group, there is a diverse range of responses to trouble or conflict. Some Yolŋu elders expressed a hesitance to interfere in other clans’ business. One elder saw a child being repeatedly punched and felt that this was not right. She felt like she could not intervene in that family’s business, she did not want to see it, so she chose to walk away. In contrast, one staff person at Milingimbi school is known as a protector of any child who is in trouble, for example, stepping in to remove babies from situations where adults are fighting.

At one community meeting in Milingimbi, several elders asserted that people should not immediately involve the Police in domestic fights. They instructed people to call appropriate clan elders first, and only call Police in serious cases.

Participants in these workshops did not talk much about the roles of Police, but we believe this area of appropriate interventions needs more work in future.

### **5.9 Bad Examples and Media Exposure**

Some Yolŋu participants shared that children are always learning from what they see around them. One mother reported that other parents and carers do not monitor or modify conversations to be child-appropriate and so children are exposed to adult conversations. One young mother shared how she finds it difficult to share a house with extended family members because her children are more likely to be exposed to bad habits or behaviours. Some of those habits listed include: card-playing (gambling), cigarettes and sniffing. Adults in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi reported that children as young as three or four are role-playing such behaviours.

Another participant also noted that since the switch to digital television, many families no longer receive free-to-air television. Children are now more likely to access media and entertainment via tablet or smartphone devices and this content is less likely to be censored. From our discussions, it seems that only some Yolŋu families know and use classifications when allowing media access for children.

### **5.10 Visitor Fatigue and Inefficiencies**

Some participants suggested that agencies should coordinate responses to VSA and other community concerns. In the week that our ARDS team consulted in Milingimbi, ALPA and Anglicare were also visiting Milingimbi on the topic of VSA. School staff have sometimes struggled to navigate the VSA referral system and interactions between clinic, Territory Families and Top End Health Services (VSA). It also emerged during the course of these workshops that carers and staff in various roles are not aware of existing and emerging resources that may be helpful for their work. We hope that the VSA Stakeholder Working Group and others can work together more effectively to coordinate services promote and distribute resources.

### **5.11 Dangers of Unfair Assessments**

Formal assessments of children's development in a range of areas often fail to accommodate Yolŋu perspectives. One young mother shared how the school had identified that her child had certain learning and behavioural difficulties, but the mother was very skeptical that the measures of her child's classroom engagement were fair. She decided against any clinical intervention and concentrated her efforts on parenting, especially looking after her child's general health and hearing. This mother reports that her child has been steadily improving at school.

The appropriateness and validity of childhood development assessments have not always been tested in the cross-cultural context in which they are used. The results of these assessments may register delay or deficit, when in fact the tools and measures may be at fault. Dr Anne Lowell has collaborated with a team of Yolŋu researchers to look at early childhood development using strengths-based assessment. It is important that research continues into this and other areas where 'difference' may be confused with 'deficit'. Lowell et al write that, "This 'deficit' discourse impacts negatively on their self-esteem and wellbeing. Culturally relevant assessment processes, of the sort this project seeks to facilitate, can more accurately identify their strengths as well as their support needs leading to optimal development and wellbeing."<sup>14</sup>

We believe that the findings of research like this are relevant to the experiences of Yolŋu families with members involved in Volatile Substance Abuse. The guiding principle for any assistance or actions to support Yolŋu families with a member involved with VSA must prioritise Yolŋu strengths, knowledge and language and promote Yolŋu social cohesion.

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<sup>14</sup> Lowell, et al., (2018), Building Yolŋu Skills, Knowledge, and Priorities into Early Childhood Assessment and Support: Protocol for a Qualitative Study. JMIR Research Protocol, Volume 7 Issue 3, p5

## 6. Practical Actions by Yolŋu Parents and Community

Sections 6 and 7 provide overviews of strategies in response to the strengths and challenges documented in Sections 4 and 5. The guiding principle for any assistance or actions to support Yolŋu families with a member involved with VSA must prioritise Yolŋu strengths, knowledge and language and promote Yolŋu social cohesion. Where appropriate, we have attached recommendations to these actions. In our analysis, the best immediate actions come from families and local Yolŋu initiatives. Support that external agencies can offer should be based on mid to long term solutions.

### 6.1 Local Initiatives, Leadership and Makarr-Dhuni'

Several participants communicated very clearly about the need for Yolŋu to bring ideas into action. Yolŋu are expressing concern that the united voice of traditional elders has been lost in the different agendas that have been introduced since mission days (e.g. ATSIC, NLC, NBC, MEP, YBE, reference groups, etc.). There is evidence that strong Yolŋu leaders are seeing and responding to a need for sustained and united action from Yolŋu family and clan groups.

Over many years, the Makarr-Dhuni' project has provided valuable mediation services in the Galiwin'ku community. This group originates in traditional governance structures and it is made up of representatives from all the clans. ARDS Aboriginal Corporation has recently begun supporting Makarr-Dhuni to continue and strengthen this vital work.

In Milingimbi, a non-Indigenous facilitator from ALPA spent one week working with people in each area of the township to discuss different community responses to trouble. During our visit in Milingimbi, they held one public meeting (pictured below) and a subsequent commissioning for some young leaders from each 'camp' in Milingimbi. Many Yolŋu were very encouraged to see young men and women identifying themselves as leaders in the community.

"Nunhi walal namanamayun dhäruk dhiyal Jesse Smith Park-nur ga narrapi nhakun, narra dhu nhumalanjal laranhamirr, narra nunhi namathirr nayanu raku warpam mulka'yirr nayi nhäma narra yolŋuny märr-gandarrpuynha mala walal dhärra wana-gänharaw bukmakku yolŋuw dhiyal community Yurrwi ga guŋga'yunaraw yuṭäw djamarrkuḷiw' limurrungalanaŋaw. Manymak mirithirr. Dhärrin walal dhiyalidhi bili dharapulŋur nunhili bili yan dharapulŋur nunhi nayi gan norra limurruŋ dhuwali dhukarr beŋur bili yan ga yuwalkkuŋ nayathul ga dälkuŋ ga guŋga'yun limurr dhu bukmak. Manymak mirithirr..."

*"I have to tell you, when I saw the way those middle-aged adults rose to the occasion, I was thrilled. I just felt so proud of the way they are standing to be appointed as leaders here in Milingimbi to help all of our children. It's amazing. They are stepping into those roles. Those positions have always been there for us to occupy with conviction and strength, to help each other. This is so good."*

Former Resident, Milingimbi

In Phase Two of this project, our team did not visit Gapuwiyak but we have talked with Yolŋu from Gapuwiyak. A group of clan leaders (men and women) have recently united as *Liya-dhukarrmirr mala*. Their agenda is still emerging, but they expect it will include cultural leadership, law, housing, employment, children and families. This initiative has received more urgency in light of the recent death of a young child in Gapuwiyak.

There is much work to be done on both sides to bring local initiatives and Local and Territory Governments into genuine dialogue and cooperation.

#### **Recommendation:**

1. Support local leadership groups through the Local Decision Making initiative.

## 6.2 *Raypirri'* Camps

In Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi, some elders have organised camps for children and families affected by VSA. In Galiwin'ku, Yalu' Marrgithinyaraw partnered with Shepherdson College. In Milingimbi, the Crocodile Island Rangers were the main organisers. Everyone involved expressed their desire for these programs to continue. Participants repeated that visits to homelands are helpful for families affected by substance abuse. However, when families return to Galiwin'ku or Milingimbi, they feel like there is no sustained follow-up to these *Raypirri'* camps, and that it would be valuable for these families to have some ongoing support when they return.

"Ga njuhiliyi 2017-yu, njaran bitjariyi (...) gänal. Nhumar walal gan dhiyal break-in walal gan ga nhumar walal gan, ga nanapurr gan djälthin yaka yätjkurr dhu ga dhiyal happening, njanjdja nhakun walal dhu ga marrgithirr education-gu, walal dhu ga marrgithirr ga yoljuw njalimurruj. Yo, marrgithirr walal dhu ga manymak mala balanya romgu, yo.

Ga njarra njuhni bitjariyi thinking, ga njarra walany budapmaraanjal 2017 ga support njarany clinic-thu, ga najyi clinic gan marrtjin balayi yan mang'u' märra-marranjäl, check-up njuhhal dhakaljur. Dhuwalnydjja barpurun 2017 check-up walal gan, ga dutj gan. 2017, Government-thu njarany support balayidhi. Yo, \$1,100 njarany gurrupar yan bush camp njuhna Röpuma, bili napurr gan nhinan. Napurr gan dhuwali mala thinking dälkunjäl napurr gan, ya bitjar? Manymakkunjäl.

Ga njarra li ga thinking, nhaltjan limurr dhu dhuwal? If dhu dhiyal ga rom djäma nhakun mala leaders dhiyanj bili walal marrtjin märra-marranhamin, walal dhu bitjan nhakun njarra, wanjanhamirr walal dhu. If walal ga yaka djälthi njarakal area-lil, walal dhu walalangal area-lil marrtji wänjalil mala, ya bitjan? Bili njarany warray manymak. Dhuwandja dhakal gan nhinan bukmak yolju dhiyali yolju gan ga latjuwarr'yurr walal. Njuruju napurr gan bitjariyi djäma. Ga limurr dhu nhakun wanjanhamirr yolju dälkum nhaltjan yoljuy gunga'yun yothuny future-wu generation-gu."

*"In 2017, I took youths out to the islands, in the same way (as my elders took me out there). Those kids had broken in and sniffed AvGas, and we elders did not want those harmful behaviours happening, instead we want them to receive real education and the best of Yolju law and culture. That's what I was thinking at that time, so I took those kids across the water to the islands. The clinic supported that initiative, they even did check-ups and blood samples while we were out there. The Government supported me to do that work with \$1100 to run the bush camp at Röpuma because we were there to strengthen and heal our children.*

*I am often thinking, "what should we do next? When clan leaders get together, we can think and talk together about this question. Some clan leaders may prefer to take Yolju youth to their own traditional estates. But I'm am very open to talking together, because these remote Crocodile Islands are for all Yolju. We have a strong precedent for this response. We need to talk more together about how to strengthen the future generation."*

Crocodile Island Ranger, Milingimbi

In Milingimbi school, one staff member explained how youth who have attended homeland camps or accessed residential detox programs elsewhere still have trouble when they return to Milingimbi because the people and places strongly associated with the substance addiction and abuse are still there. She reiterated the need for strong support and the formation of new habits.<sup>15</sup>

### **Recommendation:**

- 2.** Fund Aboriginal organisations to run regular *Raypirri'* camps and to provide follow-up support for attendees in home communities.

<sup>15</sup> Literature on the topic of Volatile Substance Abuse in Aboriginal communities is divided on the effectiveness of 'culture as treatment', see Brady (1995). We argue that there is strong grounds to support Yolju leaders to continue *Raypirri'* camps and promote Indigenous knowledges because these interventions strengthen peer group and intergenerational relationships - away from VSA.

### 3. Support Aboriginal organisations and ranger groups to continue homeland services.

#### 6.3 Story-telling

A metaphor and story-telling based method was very useful for Yolŋu Radio presenters in preparing the VSA radio programs. Certain information about pregnancy and the unborn child is taboo and very difficult content to broadcast. The presenters recorded a detailed anecdote about how women learn skills to weave baskets and gather good food. In this way, they conveyed information about how our bodies are sacred and how we can look after our bodies for our children. The presenters then connected the metaphor to the critical information about how lead can adversely affect the unborn baby. The metaphor originated in the Yolŋu knowledge and heart and it was told by the right people to the right audience. Young workshop participants were encouraged by this story when our team shared it in Galiwin'ku. They expressed keen interest in learning more language and stories to help their own children. Yolŋu staff in Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi schools especially want to incorporate their learning in this area into their work.

"Ŋarra ga dhuwal ŋayatham question: ŋula ŋayi ga ŋorra dhukarr ARDS-kal yuṭaw Yolŋuw marŋgithinyaraw? Ŋayi marrtji dhu dhäruk ŋunhi ḍäлку-ḍäلكum mäyaliv', djuṅunygu, gandaw' nhanjuw Yolŋuw yuṭaw? Yan ŋarra ga ŋäj'thun dhukarrgu mala ḷarrum, bili ŋarra li ga ŋäma Radio-ŋur bitjan bili ARDS dhäwu ga dhäruk mala ŋarra li märram ga."

*"I have a question for you: is there any pathway for young people to learn through ARDS? That's one place where language still holds its sense, meaning and character for young Yolŋu people. I'm just asking to find ways. I'm already listening to the stories and language on Yolŋu Radio..."*

Young mother, Galiwin'ku

Some participants identified that the fireside is the main place for quality family time. Those family settings are the safest and best places for Yolŋu kin to talk more about all kinds of topics: funny stories, old stories, difficult stories. Another point that was frequently highlighted with regard to teaching and learning for children was during funerals (*bäpurru*) and other ceremonies such as *ŋärrä* and *gunapipi*. During these ceremonies, families enjoy weeks or months of quality time with children, with opportunities for active and passive teaching. The presence of children, where appropriate, at these ceremonies reinforces and strengthens kinship, traditional knowledge, and the broad facets of Yolŋu rom. There is also the physical exercise especially in dance and playing *yidaki*, didgeridoo. Ceremonies remain one of the strongest pathways to support positive learning, identity and connectedness.

#### Recommendation:

4. VSA Stakeholder Working Group to improve access and distribution of existing resources to support Yolŋu carers and staff in early childhood, schools, clinics and other roles.
5. Support Yolŋu carers and staff to incorporate Yolŋu-led educational programs and ceremonies (e.g. *gunapipi*, etc.) into school and work schedules.

#### 6.4 Responsibility and Harm Minimisation

One participant reported how another young mum came to her to talk about her child. The child had been uncooperative at school and the school had withheld the child's lunch as a consequence for the behaviour. At that time, the mums talked together about how the behaviour might be caused or exacerbated by hunger. They recalled how the mother of the misbehaving child had grown up with a mother who had packed lunch for her each day. Later, the mother of the misbehaving child chose to cancel Centrelink deductions for food at school and commit to packing lunch for her own child. This was an interesting example of a reflective conversation between Yolŋu parents, which resulted in one parent acting to take more responsibility for her child.

One grandfather said that two 18-19 year old great-nephews had been sniffing petrol. He said that their role in the household was to look after their elderly grandfather and his brothers. He told them that he

was worried that he would be singing at their funerals if they continued to abuse the substance. He reported that they have since stopped sniffing. This was one instance where the corrective talk referred to household roles and kinship responsibilities, and youth responded well.

Some Yolŋu participants shared how they have made rules or choices to minimise harm in their families. One father said that sometimes he leaves Milingimbi for parenting respite and to drink, but before he goes he makes appropriate arrangements for his children to stay with family. Another participant mentioned that in one family, the mother and father go out to play cards on alternate evenings so the other parent is at home to look after the child. Some families do not allow children to be present in adult card games, and in at least two camps in Milingimbi the leaders have banned young children from playing cards or mock card games.

These are just a few examples of Yolŋu families demonstrating responsibility and appropriate interventions. "Responsibility" and "intervention" are abstract nouns that do not translate easily into Yolŋu languages. In this context, these abstract concepts are closely linked but not well understood across Yolŋu and Balanda cultures. Still more work is needed in this area to unpack these concepts in English and Yolŋu languages.

**Recommendation:**

**6.** Fund radio and multimedia campaigns in Aboriginal languages to demystify the concepts of responsibility, intervention and harm minimisation.

## **6.5 Parent Support Groups**

Some young parents in both communities have received support from meeting together with other parents and they are keen for this to continue. Young parents and other householders expressed a need to talk amongst their peers about their care-giving journey. One participant suggested that a suitable neutral venue in Galiwin'ku would be helpful to gather other Yolŋu parents together.

**Recommendation:**

**7.** Provide appropriate venues for local Yolŋu parent/carer support groups.

## **6.6 Role-models**

One concrete example of a program that uses role-modelling in children's education is the Cathy Freeman Foundation program (Shepherdson College, Galiwin'ku). This program trains and employs young Yolŋu staff to conduct sessions in classrooms. The English resource booklets are written for Aboriginal students of different age groups and cover a range of material: identity, peer pressure, role-models, feelings, challenges, etc. At least one chapter has been translated into the Yolŋu context (kinship, etc.) Schools are a good hub for more resource development in Yolŋu languages (see below).

In both communities, participants identified individuals who are passionate and dedicated carers. Milingimbi school leadership speculated that it would be good to celebrate Yolŋu people who are working so hard to protect and nurture children. Many of these individuals are women and we hope that many of them are recognised for their spirit and capacity through the 2018 NAIDOC theme, "Because of her, we can". We heard from many carers that they also need a special kind of support in their roles.

**Recommendation:**

**6.** Fund radio and multimedia campaigns in Aboriginal languages to celebrate Yolŋu role models.

**8.** Grow and develop mental health, trauma and counselling services also involving Yolŋu health professionals and experienced Yolŋu carers.

## **6.7 Limit Volatile Substances**

During a recent spate of sniffing, elders in Galiwin'ku learned that youth were sniffing deodorants and other available aerosols. In Galiwin'ku, one Yolŋu store manager removed aerosols and deodorant from the open ALPA shelves. In Milingimbi, our team observed that these products were stored in the counter cabinet rather than the open shelves. This response mirrors the other favourite intervention – time out in homelands. In this way, Yolŋu and non-Indigenous regulators have a similar approach to dangerous substances – stop the supply and/or remove the abuser from the situation. While ARDS' consultations have focussed more on the demand side (or *djäl*) for volatile substances, we recognise that appropriate regulatory measures play a role in VSA harm minimisation.

## **6.8 East Arnhem Regional Council Local Authority**

The Galiwin'ku Local Authority group called a special meeting in early May to discuss volatile substance abuse and Yolŋu response. Kaye Thurlow and Melissa Campbell dedicated the following week to meet with all the agencies in Galiwin'ku to hear about the challenges and responses. On 17th May, our team met with Kaye and Melissa to share learnings. They were encouraged by the awareness and responses made by various community organisations. It seemed that the focus of the Local Authority response was to connect local organisations and to rally support for local responses to VSA.

## **7. Assistance and Actions to Support Yolŋu Families**

### **7.1 Mental Health Services, Trauma and Relationship Counselling services**

At this stage, mental health services and counselling services are scarce in Milingimbi. The Miwatj Mental Health team has been providing an excellent service, alongside visiting Indigenous psychologists. Unfortunately, resources are stretched over multiple communities.<sup>16</sup>

Given the high incidence of relationship breakdown, domestic violence and other trauma, counselling services should be more readily available. One participant shared how an employee of the school had accessed EASA counselling services over a period of time and learned anger management skills. This respondent said that the counselling sessions changed the lives of the staff person and his family.

From our consultations, we strongly believe that counselling and other services will be most effective if service-providers can understand and address the unique strengths and challenges of Yolŋu family dynamics, especially *gurrutu* kinship.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Recommendation:**

**8.** Grow and develop mental health, trauma and counselling services, also involving Yolŋu health professionals and experienced Yolŋu carers.

**9.** Fund cultural competency workshops for all non-Indigenous staff.

### **7.2 Support and training for Aboriginal Governance and Management**

Ever since the self-determination era, Governments and others have sought to include Aboriginal leaders in decision-making. Most recently, the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory recommended that “youth diversion programs in remote communities should be developed and operated in partnership with, or by, Aboriginal communities and/or Aboriginal controlled organisations.”<sup>18</sup> At this stage, the requirements for funding and compliance are still very difficult for many Yolŋu leaders to navigate. Yolŋu leaders in Aboriginal communities and organisations identified that they need strategic assistance to become more independent in management and governance.

#### **Recommendation:**

**10.** Support local leadership groups to provide immediate support for families with a member involved with VSA.

**11.** Fund training in Aboriginal languages to assist leaders in Aboriginal-controlled organisations towards greater independence in governance and management.

### **7.3 Support and Training for Education about Australian Laws and Agencies**

Yolŋu participants have expressed a lack of trust in Australian law and a high level of confusion about Australian Government. Elsewhere in Australia, multi-agency programs have supported refugee families to learn about the roles of police, Government Departments, Courts and Legal Aid. For instance, the Parramatta strategy engaged bilingual community representatives to spend some months learning about each agency. This was followed up with community workshops to facilitate “knowledge, awareness, trust and acceptance of family law in Australia among new and emerging refugee communities...”<sup>19</sup>

In response to participants’ widespread confusion surrounding child welfare policy, our team echoes the finding of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory,

<sup>16</sup> ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, (2017), Pathways in Mental Health, DVD resource.

<sup>17</sup> See also ARDS Aboriginal Corporation, (2017), Pathways in Mental Health, DVD resource.

<sup>18</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (25.14, see also 25.22).

<sup>19</sup> Families and the Law in Australia, Family Court of Australia, p123.

[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11\\_2013/23-families-and-the-law-australia.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2013/23-families-and-the-law-australia.pdf)

where Territory Families should “ensure that any family where a child is to be removed is given all appropriate information about the reason for the removal, the steps the family must take to have the child returned, and legal advisors the family may contact in a form and language suitable for the family.”<sup>20</sup>

**Recommendation:**

**12.** Initiate a community campaign in Yolŋu languages to provide information, pathways and advice about child protection and Territory Families.

**13.** Develop a multi-agency program in Yolŋu languages to foster understanding between Yolŋu families and mainstream systems of law especially relating to families: Courts, Territory Families, Police, NAAJA.<sup>21</sup>

#### 7.4 Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Some workshop participants expressed their desire for better literacy and numeracy to navigate everyday life with work expectations, Centrelink and other interactions. One participant articulated a vision for clearer Yolŋu voices to Australian Government through improved education and literacy.

“Napurr djäl napurr dhu djäma dhukarr djamarrkuŋiw' napurrurŋ... Bili dhiyaŋ bala dhukarr dälŋha. Ga dhuwal yuŋa leader mala walal dhu yalala djäma romgurr dälkurr through Australian Government, yol mala ŋäpaki mala, beŋur wanhanŋur wäŋanŋur balanda dhu marrtji, ga dhiyaŋurrurŋ walal dhu guŋga'yundja. Dhukarr däl ŋunhi walal dhu dhiyaŋurrurŋ yolŋuy mala leader-y mala nhäwi napurrurŋ yalŋgikum marrtji, bili dhiyaŋ bala ga dhukarr däl dhärra ga walal dhu marrtji djiyaŋurrurŋ yuŋay leader-y mala yalŋgikum, waŋa walal dhu marrtji balandaw mala lakaram "dhuwal", "dhuwal", "dhuwal", balanya. Ga path-nha ŋunhi walal dhu djäma napurrurŋ djamarrkuŋiw' future-lil path. Balanya.”

*“We Yolŋu want to make pathways for our children... Right now, the road is tough. In future, young Yolŋu leaders may work with the difficult laws through the Australian Government, alongside non-Indigenous people from all over, helping in that context. Our young leaders have an opportunity to smooth this pathway for everyone. They should be our voice to the wider world to say, “this,” “here,” and so on. They must find ways forward for our children in future.”*

Yolŋu grandfather, Milingimbi

One young man received help from Department of Corrections in work readiness, including setting up a bank account and finding work. We endorse the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory to “recruit tutors to deliver literacy programs in Aboriginal languages” and to “teach English as a second language in detention”.<sup>22</sup>

**Recommendation:**

**14.** Review the access and availability of literacy and numeracy courses in Aboriginal languages.<sup>23 24</sup>

**15.** Increase access and funding to institutions delivering foundational courses in ESL, Literacy and Numeracy.

<sup>20</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory Recommendation 32.12

<sup>21</sup> Possibly engaging a number of Recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. e.g. 2.1, 25.16, 25.34

<sup>22</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory Recommendations 16.8, 16.1, etc.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the former Certificate I & II in Own Language Work, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

<sup>24</sup> Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory Recommendation 16.8

## 7.5 VSA Resource Consolidation, Development, Response

Many informational and educational resources about VSA have been created by non-Indigenous experts and these could be collected into a repository. That repository should include information about who created the resource, age-appropriateness and other audience information (e.g. languages). This resource list would assist schools and other agencies to be proactive about volatile substance abuse. The Government Engagement Coordinator (GEC) in Milngimbi is keen to implement a community-wide response whenever VSA incidences are reported.

### **Recommendation:**

**16.** VSA Stakeholder Working Group to create a resource directory or repository which is compatible with education programs and community responses to VSA.

**4.** VSA Stakeholder Working Group to improve access and distribution of existing resources to support Yolŋu carers and staff in early childhood, schools, clinics and other roles.

**6.** Fund radio and multimedia campaigns in Aboriginal languages in the following areas:

- Celebrate Yolŋu role-models
- Traditional stories and positive parenting
- Trauma and Response
- Discipline and the Australian Law
- Peer Group Parenting and Peer Group Pressure
- Children's media and ratings
- *Djäl* and *Rom*: managing kinship and household expectations
- Demystifying Responsibility, intervention and harm minimisation

## 7.6 Media Access and Awareness

Yolŋu families who do not currently have access to free-to-air television could benefit from help to access it again. On a similar theme, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) or another agency (Centre for Appropriate Technology, CfAT) could initiate a targeted campaign about why the Classification Board rates media and how classifications can help families to choose media for children. These resources would also be useful for parent / carer groups and agencies working with parents and families.

### **Recommendation:**

**17.** Assess the barriers to free-to-air television in remote communities and propose solutions.

**6.** Fund radio and multimedia campaigns in Aboriginal languages about children's media and ratings.

## 7.7 Service Coordination

Yolŋu participants acknowledged the good intentions and help from non-Indigenous visitors, but the stream of consultants and service providers often drains the time and energy of community members who are already exhausted. Many visiting agencies and service providers are contacting the relevant Local Authority groups before their visits, so the EARC or LAs could possibly manage public calendars so that Yolŋu community residents and outside agencies can see and direct traffic.

### **Recommendation:**

**18.** East Arnhem Regional Council / Local Authority Groups / GECs to manage public calendars of visiting agencies or programs.

## 8. Conclusion

This report has highlighted many areas for further discussion and research. We encourage Yolŋu leaders and external agencies to work to understand the complex issues raised here and to continue these important dialogues.

During the course of the Yolŋu Capability Workshops, we have heard from Yolŋu families about the preferred approaches to child-rearing and a range of constructive responses to Volatile Substance Abuse. We have also reported fragility within Yolŋu families in the context of VSA and the tenuous relationships between Yolŋu and Australian systems of law and government. In this context, we conclude that immediate responses to support Yolŋu with family members involved with VSA should come from local Yolŋu leaders. The best way that governments and others can support those Yolŋu families is to support medium to long term strategies that acknowledge Indigenous knowledges, empower local leaders, minimise confusion and build trust.

"...nhä limurr dhu maŋŋ'maram Gäwalŋany? Manymak? Ne, wäŋa ŋunha manymak. Ga nhaltjan dhu guŋga'yunmirr dhiyaŋun bala? Nhältjan limurr dhu märr-ŋamathinyamirr? Nhältjan limurr dhu goŋmirriyirr nhina? Buku-gawaw'yunmirr limurr dhu ga, yolŋu walal dhiyaŋuny bala. Guŋga'yunmirr rur'yuna limurr dhu djäma limurr dhu bukmakthun, ga guŋga'yunmirra limurr dhu yuwalkkunhamirra. Yakan dhiyaŋ mulkurryu ga nhina ŋanydja rumbalyu bukmakthu doŋurkthun, märr ga ŋayi dhu limurr yuwalknha ŋayi dhu dhawatthun limurrunguŋ ... limurrunguŋ yurr wanganykurr limurr dhu djämany yan 'to make this a better place' ya bilanya?"

*"How will we get to Gäwalŋa, that place of plenty? Will it be worth it? Yes, that's the place to be. How do we support each other? How can we love each other? How will we live in joy? We are calling Yolŋu together. We must all rise up to help each other, our service and cooperation must be absolutely authentic. Don't just imagine what is possible, instead we must pour our whole body and heart into it. It must come from us. United we must work to make this a better place."*

Yolŋu grandmother, Galiwin'ku