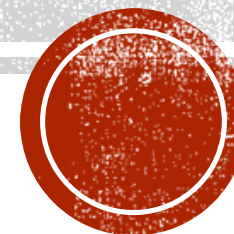


WAGS

**WHAT WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT
ENGAGING YOUNG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE
IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**





WAGS

THE DOG PROGRAM

- New England, NSW
- Youth Worker
- Youth Justice Conference Convenor
- Skills development for professionals



WAGS THEORY OF CHANGE

Population level outcome:

- Communities with resilient young people who are safe, valued, and have a strong sense of community connection.

Program level outcomes:

- Young people with a greater understanding of their importance to and place within their community
- Young people with a strong belief in their ability to control, negotiate and influence the general and specific trajectory of their lives
- Young people who are able to manage adversity and disadvantage.



WAGS SKILL DEVELOPMENT

- **Habits and Behaviours of Good Leaders**
 - Focusing on the positive
 - Giving others what they need in order to learn
 - Releasing pressure in order to allow learning
- **Understanding Others (Empathy)**
 - Reading personality cues
 - Non-verbal communication
 - Valuing difference
- **The Nature of Motivation**
 - Setting goals based on knowing what you need
 - Deciphering what motivates different personality types
 - The power of persuasion over force
- **Emotional Toolkit**
 - Self-regulation
 - Releasing pent-up feelings and dealing with grief
 - Creating safe spaces to express emotions
 - Untangling behaviours from feelings, in self and others ('Why do I act the way I do?')





THE WAGS TEAM

Emphasis on

- Attitude over Aptitude
- Strength of character
- Diversity of characters
- Stamina
- Bloody-Mindedness



THE EFFECT WE'RE HAVING

- **ENGAGEMENT WITH WAGS**

- 84% persistent / regular engagement of participants over periods longer than 6 months
- 92% engagement in participants in periods 2 – 5 months

- **ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL / LEARNING**

- 68% improvement in regular school attendance when compared to periods prior to referral to WAGS
- 73% improvement in school based behaviours (decrease in negative entries on student behaviour records)

- **SELF-CONCEPT & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING**

- Assistance and support for self-harm, suicidal ideation and 'bullying'
- Conspicuous improvements in general outlook and motivation



WHY DOGS WORK

- **‘Active’ Experiential learning**
 - Immediate feedback to social cues
 - Constant process of reflection, discussion, practice & evaluation
- **Flexible and non-confrontational learning spaces**
 - Participants have active control over their engagement with activities and are encouraged to interpret frameworks creatively
 - Sessions take place on school grounds to normalise and familiarise disengaged students with their learning environment
- **Unique and effective ‘engagement hook’**
 - Dogs can be included and utilised in a range of different activities and scenarios
 - Participants enter agreements rather than follow rules



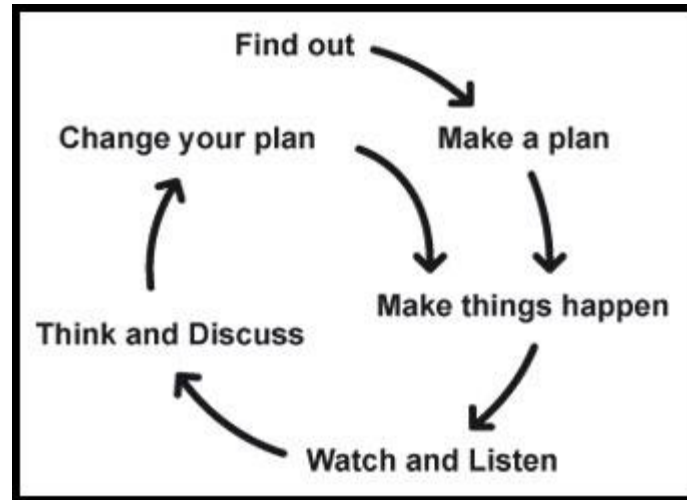
WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT WHAT WORKS

ACTIVE
RESEARCH
METHODOLOGY

ASSOCIATION
WITH
HISTORICAL
RELATIONSHIPS
IN
COMMUNITY



ACTIVE RESEARCH MODEL



ACTIVE RESEARCH

- Aims at continual evaluation and improvement of practice.
- Compatibility between action research methods and traditional Indigenous cultural practices and ways of working.
- A dynamic and cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

“One of the excellent incidental effects of conducting action research is that the people involved come to some disturbing conclusions regarding their tendencies to *GENERALISE* in the absence of *EVIDENCE* ”

Stephen Corey, 1949.



WAGS: ACTIVELY RESEARCHED

ASSUMPTION / GENERALISATION

- Young people don't understand or appreciate the importance of an education

EVIDENCE

- When appropriate interventions address the barriers to learning in a young person's life, school attendance and engagement rank highly in that individual's priorities
- A generalised malaise and medium to low level depression in young people is evident where the expectation of completing school is absent



WAGS: ACTIVELY RESEARCHED

ASSUMPTION / GENERALISATION

- Young people don't respect their parents or their community

EVIDENCE

- Early intervention models that focus on family functioning and include voluntary participation of whole families, show high rates of success in terms of outcomes for young people
- Young people engage significantly more with programs and activities designed to “give back” to their own communities, than with programs that focus on resolving “problems” for individuals.



WAGS: ACTIVELY RESEARCHED

ASSUMPTION / GENERALISATION

- Young people are bored, and they get into trouble because they have nothing to do

EVIDENCE

- Kids will sit in the middle of a skate park, with a top-of-the-line skateboard / scooter / bike and say they are bored!
- BOCSAR crime rates indicate that most juvenile crime is committed at times of the day that young people “should” be at school or in bed.
- Juvenile crime is a cry for help and attention from loved ones.



- Plants seeds of ideas from other contexts that may be relevant to the local context
- Serves as a sounding board which provides project staff with an opportunity to debrief (a particularly valued and necessary form of support in a stressful work environment)
- Shares information about what works and what does not

EVALUATING AN ACTIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

“The lived experience of projects is a valuable resource, but it is not one that will benefit other projects until there are mechanisms in place that allow for this knowledge of good practice to be shared.”



AUSPICE ORGANISATIONS

- Competent and well established organisations
- Benefit from existing relationships
- Access to personnel and existing professional expertise
- Enduring partnerships and networks
- Support for staff in a difficult social context for service delivery



REGIONAL FOCUS

- Likely to be economies of scale where several community sites are proposed/exist
- Opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas between sites
 - Greater learning about what works and what doesn't
- Lessens the influence of localised community power bases. This is important where local political control rests with certain men and, particularly where issues of family violence and child abuse may be involved, and perpetrators may occupy positions of power.



CAPACITY BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS CONTEXTS

- More effective in situations where people have an opportunity to directly apply what they have learnt.

(This is in contrast to situations where skills are developed in isolation in classroom and workshop settings.)

- No intervention succeeds in substantially building capacity through the provision of training alone



ALLOWING FOR EMOTIONS

- It would be difficult to underestimate the depth of hurt that many participants have previously experienced, and this is a major inhibiting factor.
- The creation of opportunities for participants to express their emotions and have them validated is therefore of highest priority.



WHAT DRIVES WAGS

“It is well documented that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have been traumatised, and communities divided, to the point where they are in need of healing before they can even begin to trust others.

This assumes a degree of hope and optimism about a better future, and a commitment to action, that simply may not be present in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.”

Lessons learnt about strengthening Indigenous families and communities – 2008

In one community, when asked what kind of future they thought their children would have, over 50 per cent of respondents gave a pessimistic response.

(Daly & Smith 2003)





**LET'S
TALK**

