

Walk softly



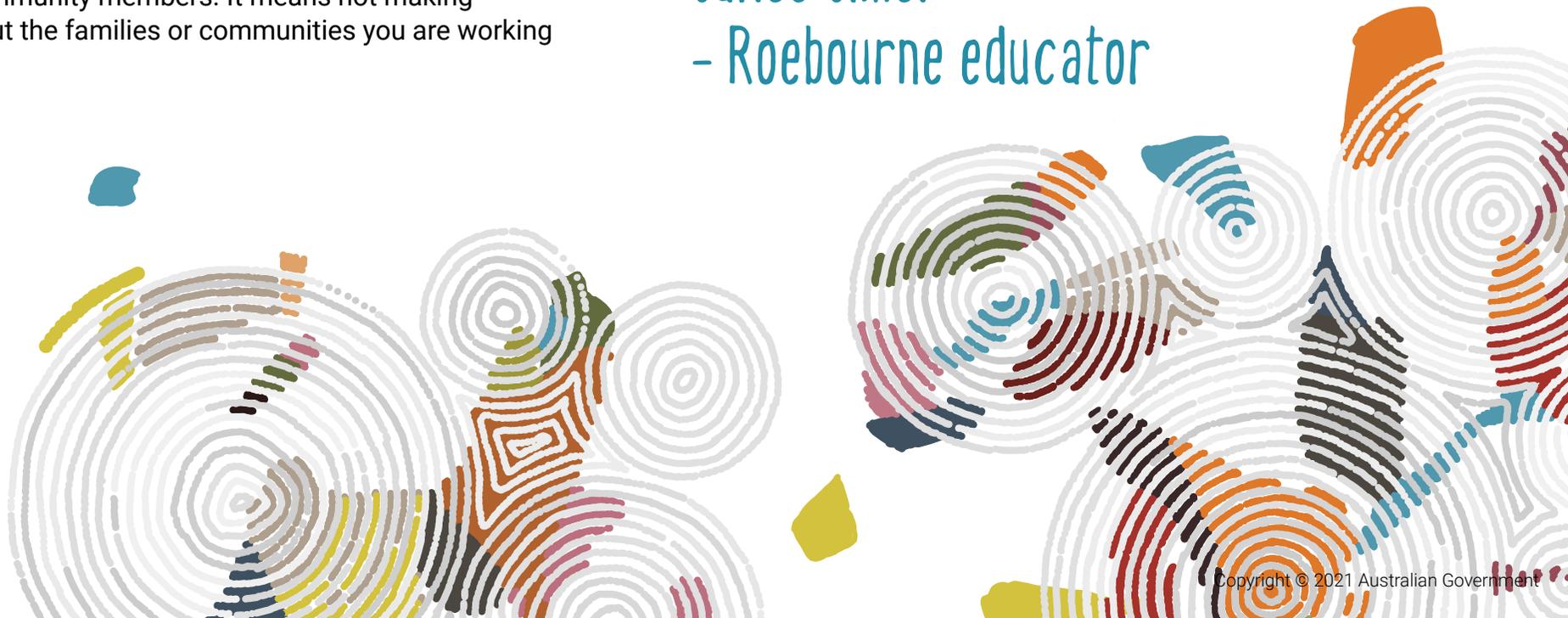
Walking softly is a way of acting and being. It's a form of two-way learning that respects and values each person's history, connections and shared attachment to a place. This practice also acknowledges the diversity of Aboriginal communities and Language Groups.

*“People come into community with differing levels of existing cultural connection – the ones who think they know (Aboriginal communities) usually make mistakes because they think we are all the same.”
- Karratha community member*

Walking softly is how you are seen to approach, engage and connect with community members. It means not making judgements about the families or communities you are working with.

It's often not recognised that Aboriginal cultures had social systems in place to keep the people strong. For example, established law, parenting styles (including discipline), education and training, health and wellbeing, child minding services, oral historians, musicians, artists, conservationists, astronomers, geologists and meteorologists. While times have changed, these components remain in Aboriginal cultures today. Walking softly means being open to learning about these social systems and respecting them.

*“For me, walking softly is a way of saying that to be respectful takes time.”
- Roebourne educator*



Exercise humility and seek an introduction when meeting someone new. Develop an understanding of the concept of sideways asking, the process of communicating through a third person known to both parties, or by asking non-direct questions. This actively seeks to avoid confrontation by enabling a person to say 'no' in a non-offensive manner. You may employ sideways asking to inquire someone's name – asking directly is against protocol in the Western Desert – or if they require help.

“Don't come running in full pelt and thinking you can change everything just like that – it's like gentle waves coming in.”
– Roebourne educator

Be prepared to invest time, sit with people, listen and remain open to community engagement opportunities outside your comfort zone. Through positive, meaningful engagement, you will be better positioned to identify your own strengths and the existing and potential strengths of the community.

To walk softly doesn't mean to be timid or abandon your values and beliefs. It's about having an awareness of your environment and placing yourself accordingly. You may be walking in a space where there are questions that can't be answered and information that is unable to be shared, due to cultural reasons. For example, in many communities it can be forbidden to say a deceased person's name – even if it's your name. Some Aboriginal customs don't allow a man to look at, or speak with, his mother-in-law.

“You need to be respectful of cultural protocols – positioning of the body, seeking permission to say your own name in a public space, seeking introduction rather than asking someone their name.”
– Newman community member



Walking softly doesn't mean you have to try and fit into the Aboriginal context in which you may find yourself – Aboriginal people recognise when non-Aboriginal people change the way they normally speak.

“When I was teaching, non-Aboriginal teachers would adopt Aboriginal English in an attempt to fit in and be one with Aboriginal students and community. Aboriginal people would prefer that you remain yourself while modifying how you interact with them.”

- Aboriginal medical service CEO

It is a seemingly simple practice but there is a depth and complexity that can take time to grasp, understand and practise effectively. It's always best to ask Cultural Advisors about what you can and can't do in the community, how to show respect and avoid being disrespectful.

You may have done some Aboriginal cultural awareness training while studying or as part of your professional development. If not, it's advised this is where you start. Your training should be specific to the region where you'll be working. If it's a rural setting, for example, Broome, Derby, Newman or Karratha, you may be able to access localised cultural awareness training through the school. If you're teaching on community, the best people to ask are the Cultural Advisors, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO), Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATA) or the Community council.

It's through learning cultural awareness, walking softly and building meaningful relationships that you can be a welcome and effective educator in the Kimberley and Pilbara. This will help you connect with children and young people – along with their caregivers and community – and therefore be better placed to support their social and emotional wellbeing.

“Come in with the expectation that you're going to learn something from being here as well as you learning the kids.”

- Roebourne AIEO