



September 2024

embrace exclusive

the science of storytelling

sharing culture and improving
wellbeing starts with a story

PLUS

NEW RESEARCH UNVEILED /
IMPROVING CULTURAL SAFETY /
SUNSET IN WARMUN

Foreword



Embrace

Embrace is supported by principal partner, Rio Tinto.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people has rarely been in the spotlight so much as we've seen in 2024.

Campaigning by Australia's dominant media organisation, News Corp, has placed attention squarely on the impact social media has on the wellbeing of kids.

A recent survey from Monash University drew attention to the difficulties faced by young Australians, with 86 per cent of respondents reporting they experienced financial difficulties within the last 12 months and 21 per cent rating their mental health as poor or very poor.

Amid increased mental health funding from state and federal governments, we've also witnessed a steady stream of reporting on youth crime and the age of criminal responsibility.

Then there is the news that is glaring by its absence. This time last year, the news cycle was dominated by the looming referendum on a Voice to Parliament. Now, little is said about the impact the referendum had on the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Any time you pick up a newspaper or scroll your preferred news site, it can be easy to fall into a state of media fatigue or feel a sense of hopelessness. By its nature, the news cycle is required to be both cynical and sensationalist. Good news stories rarely sell papers.

But it's not all doom and gloom.

Embrace Edition was created to share some of those good news stories. Steps being taken to ensure mental health services are accessible for all. Efforts being made at the Kids Research Institute Australia and further afield in the interests of our young people's mental health. And evidence-backed techniques that anyone can use to take care of themselves and the people they care about.

We are Embrace @ The Kids, and these are some of our good news stories.

Embrace Co-Directors



Professor Helen Milroy

Professor Jeneva Ohan

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Kids Research Institute Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Australia. We also acknowledge the Nyoongar Wadjuk, Yawuru, Kariyarra and Kurna Elders, their people and their land upon which the Institute is located and seek their wisdom in our work to improve the health and development of all children.

Cover artwork by Professor Helen Milroy AM

As the sun sets on another dry season day in the Kimberley, the colours in the sky begin to change.

I look around me, the outlines and silhouettes of the rugged Boab Trees in the distance - against the pink and purple skies - paint a beautiful picture. I shut my eyes and take in a big, deep breath – the dusty breeze is starting to settle and I can hear the peaceful sounds of the birds, the leaves rustling in the trees and the laughter of children as they run, skip and dance freely, bare feet planted on the red dirt.

I smell the small fire that is being lit up at camp to keep us warm for the night ahead. Not only is this fire keeping us warm, but later on in the night, we fill our bellies with food and sit around the fire sharing stories and telling yarns.

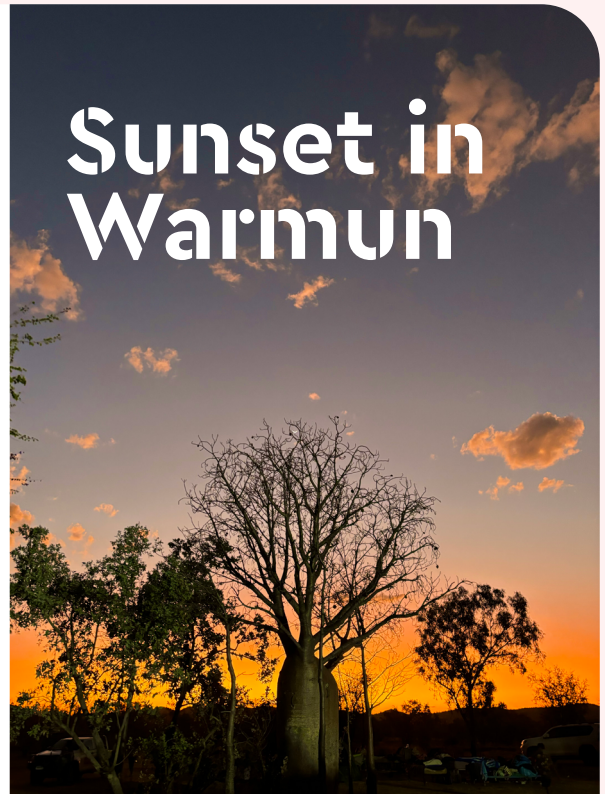
I think just how lucky I am to be given this amazing opportunity to attend a women's camp on Gija country in Warmun, located in the East Kimberley region. A women's cultural camp designed to bring together two worlds and two ways of health and healing in a special location over a week.

Throughout the week, guests are invited to participated in a range of activities including ochre painting, learning about traditional bush medicines and local Gija language, hunting for bush tucker including sugar bag (bush honey) and understanding the kinship systems.

I reflect on the importance of immersing myself in my culture – this is different for everyone but to me – offering to help wherever I can but most importantly - listening, learning and loving.

And as the fire continues to burn and the stars start to appears – I remember how blessed I am to be Gija. How blessed I am to be Aboriginal. ■

Sunset in Warmun



**Guest column by Sarah
Cattermole, Kulunga
Aboriginal Unit Community
Engagement Coordinator**



Unpacking complex gender-affirmation experiences becomes a big idea



You've likely seen coverage of gender identity and gender affirmation on mainstream media channels. Unfortunately, terms like these become snared in reporting that seeks to outrage, rather than to understand.

But for young trans people who experience complex gender-affirmation, this very real reality is often misunderstood and under researched in Australia.

Gender-affirmation includes the social and legal practices, as well as the medical surgical interventions, which trans people may undergo if their gender-identity is different to the sex they were registered as at birth.

In addressing this incongruity, many trans

people describe the steps they take as not following a clear or straightforward path. In research, this is described as complex gender affirmation.

Accurately understanding and hearing these experiences is key to providing high quality support and care to young West Australians with complex gender-affirmation experiences

A two-year project aiming to understand and support the mental health of Australians with complex gender-affirmation experiences has been awarded the 2024 Embrace Big Idea Grant for 2024, with lead investigator Dr Blake Cavve receiving \$150,000 award to launch work.

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Run by an experienced and passionate research team, this project will lead back into clinical practice and guide a system of improved gender-affirming medical care.

The project will involve collaboration with clinicians across Australia to improve the support for young people whose gender identity or gender-affirmation needs changes, as well as interviewing young people, families, doctors and mental health professionals.

Young people who have complex gender-affirmation experiences will be surveyed, whilst informative resources will be created and shared with young people, their families, healthcare providers and peer-support groups.

When sharing the importance of the project, Dr Cavve says, “Currently, we do not have a lot of good, scientific information about people who identify as trans and then experience these changing needs.”

“This means we don’t have a good idea of their mental health, their family and support systems or their experiences trying to access mental health support. I believe we can do a much better job of helping and supporting these people, and the first step is to talk to them to understand their experiences.”

Once the project has been completed, clinical guidelines will be created by the research team with the aim of advising healthcare providers, media, peer-support

groups and families on how to best support young people ceasing gender-affirming medical treatment.

“This research is very important in terms of understanding and supporting people with complex gender-affirmation experiences. It is also very important that this research is approached in the right way, in order not to stigmatise or invalidate anyone regardless of their gender identity outcomes,” Dr Cavve says.

“This project takes the perspective that all gender identity, gender expression, and treatment wishes are equally acceptable and in a way that respects each individual’s drive for authenticity, self-determination, and autonomy.”

Embrace Youth Community Group member Catrin Davies, who sat on the independent judging panel for the Embrace Big Idea Grant, shares that it was “wonderful seeing the dedication and commitment all researchers had to their projects, and quite inspiring as well”.

Catrin added that it was important for judging panels to continue to have community representation.

“Opportunities like this are essential for ensuring research is conducted in the community’s best interest and has the greatest potential for long-term community-wide positive impacts,” Catrin said.



HELP GUIDE OUR RESEARCH

Scan the QR code or send us an email at the below address if you are interested in signing up to either the [Parent & Carer Community Group](#) or the [Youth Community Group](#).

On joining one of our Community Groups you will have access to regular newsletters featuring updates and opportunities to shape our work, participate in our research and attend our events.



Healing Kids, Healing Families

PROFESSOR Jeneva Ohan has always been curious.

When she was younger, she asked a lot of questions. And she grew to love the feeling of answering these questions for herself, and felt gratification in the autonomy of self-education. A career in research beckoned.

“But over time, my motivations have changed a bit,” the Embrace Co-Director says. “I now see research as a way to inform the policies we make and the actions we take to support kids to grow up to feel strong and well.”

That sense of purpose is evident in Professor Ohan’s newly formed Healing Kids, Healing Families (HKHF) team at The Kids.

With aims to promote recovery pathways for children and families and transform our healthcare services to be trauma-informed and culturally responsive, there’s no shortage of work to be done.

But Professor Ohan is not one to shy away from a challenge.

Following a recent academic promotion at UWA’s School of Psychological Science, where she remains director of the clinical psychology programs, Professor Ohan announced her plans to expand Embrace’s childhood trauma research team to encompass childhood and family wellbeing.

Consequently, HKHF will “increase the scope and capacity of the excellent research already underway at The Kids,” she says.

The Kids’ Brain and Behaviour research theme head Professor Ben Jackson, who previously served as acting Co-Director, said earlier this year he was “thrilled” to pass the baton to Professor Ohan and was eager to see HKHF flourish.

“I’m such a big believer in Helen and Jeneva’s work and will continue to support them and the Embrace unit,” Professor Jackson said at the time.

“By giving HKHF formal status as a team, we’re bringing attention to the mental wellbeing of children and families as an area of importance to the Institute going forward.”

For Professor Ohan, it’s no longer just a case of sating her curiosity. It means an opportunity to transform the way we talk about mental health and wellbeing and to build better outcomes for our kids.

“We’re shifting the narrative away from a focus on problems or disorders, to include the variety of ways that children and families might be affected and how we might intervene where wellbeing is challenged, and support recovery for those who have been seriously affected,” she says.

“That’s what we should be reaching for in our team, and in mental healthcare systems more broadly.” ■



Improving cultural safety in healthcare

Early findings released from a project seeking to improve the cultural safety of mental healthcare

“THERE is no quick fix here.”

Palyku woman and Embrace Co-Director, Professor Helen Milroy AM is reflecting on the early findings of a project which seeks to improve cultural safety for Aboriginal young people accessing mental health services.

And so far, the findings make for difficult reading.

Concerns of entrenched racism and historical fears relating to the stolen generation are still preventing Aboriginal young people from seeking mental health support.

Feelings of shame and stigma have also created barriers to accessibility in these settings.

Professor Milroy, who leads the cultural safety project undertaken by Embrace @ The Kids, knows there is plenty of work to

be done, but also points to the positives.

“There are simple ways that we can address this immediately – things like having an Aboriginal staff presence in your workforce and added visual cues like artwork and the Aboriginal flag,” she says.

“But there is no quick fix here – fostering a relationship over time requires attentive listening and connecting over the young person’s interests, such as sport or music. “

“There should also be an expectation for non-Indigenous staff in mental health settings to have an awareness of culture and to consult with their Aboriginal staff.”

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The project's initial stages involved Aboriginal Community Researchers Lisa Kickett and Thomas Betts yarning with young people, carers, and organisations including Langford Aboriginal Association, Wadjak Northside, Champion Centre and the Statewide Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Workers at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

"We want to be accountable," Thomas says. "It's important we maintain those relationships and keep the people we are working with in the loop on our work. If we aren't doing that, we'll lose trust and have to start from scratch."

Young people participating in the study said that cultural safety meant providing a sense of belonging, a sense of connection and a sense of trust. They recognised the importance of nurturing the relationship with a mental health professional to overcome obstacles like distrust of clinical spaces.

Aboriginal mental health staff also suggested that cultural safety needed to be better entrenched into their workplaces.

Other early recommendations to emerge include the embedding of Cultural factors like kinship and Country into assessments, greater flexibility around engagement in locations young people are more

comfortable, such as community centres, sports clubs and creative facilities, and recognition of the value of dadirri, or 'deep listening'.

These recommendations are a great start but are by no means an exhaustive list. In the second stages of the research project, due to wrap up by the end of 2024, young people and families who have been through mental health services in Western Australia will be consulted further about their experiences.

As Lisa says, the young participants involved in the yarning circles are only just getting started. With the help of cultural strength cards, which Lisa opens each session with, they are finding their voice.

"It's important for us to draw on the strength we have inside, and we want the services to match that energy," Lisa said. "The cultural strength cards remind us we have that strength."



MEET THE HKHF TEAM

Scan the QR code to read about the members of the Healing Kids Healing Families team, led by Professors Helen Milroy and Jeneva Ohan.



Surrounded by stories

As clinical psychiatrist and celebrated children's author Professor Helen Milroy AM explains, there's science in telling a story

Storytelling is an integral part of life and learning.

It has been used in Aboriginal cultures for many thousands of years as a way of passing down knowledge and building healthy brains.

Storytelling is also more than child's play. It is an effective form of lifelong learning including in our older years and helps protect us from the effects of aging on our memory systems.

Storytelling can also take on many forms from simple language or illustrated stories, to dramatic theatre or music. It promotes imagination and makes anything possible. It can instil hope in a way that makes it real.

Storytelling can help us see things from a different perspective. Acting out stories helps us to see through the eyes of others while paying a part but best of all, it can be a lot of fun! This is the magic of stories.

Indigenous storytelling locates the reader in an ecological framework where everything is alive, has spirit and is interconnected. Past, present, and future

are fluid and connected through the dreaming. It is a way to instil resilience, early autonomy, life lessons and insight. It can also teach culture, kinship, ancestry, navigation, problem solving and identity.

This is a much gentler form of learning as it creates the opportunity for the child or person to think for themselves about what they are learning rather than being instructed on what to do.

Being embedded in an ecological framework builds a greater sense of connection to the natural world which promotes wellbeing across the lifespan.

Stories using anthropomorphic approaches – in which an animal or inanimate object comes to life like a human – are often described as fables to teach morals and values. These types of stories can also transcend time and culture to speak to a diverse audience and provide emotional distancing to assist in telling powerful and traumatic stories. They can also assist the storyteller in developing fantastical characters and worlds full of possibility.

...

Storytelling can also provide a platform for basic developmental tasks in early childhood such as reading and vocabulary, learning about colours, numbers, and shapes, recall and memory when retelling a story, imagery and imagination, communication and listening skills to name a few. In addition, it can assist in creating empathy, understanding emotion, respecting cultural differences, and overcoming challenges.

Stories teach and explore values and life lessons. Best of all, it can help children to learn about themselves, strengthen their identity and place in the world as well as how they connect to others around them.

Stories can assist children in building confidence and knowledge, being cooperative and collaborative. Therefore, it is important for children to be able to identify themselves within stories and why we need a diversity of stories to ensure all children are represented.

Storytelling early in life helps with attachment and building strong family relationships. We feel better connected when we share stories. We also repeat stories to reinforce our personal and family narratives.

These early stages are then built upon through early education and schooling. Over time, we develop extensive memory systems which help us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

As we experience many different challenges throughout life, we also make sense of and develop meaning through stories. This builds our resilience and mastery and contributes to a sense of personal competence.

We develop our own narrative that can sit alongside those of our families, communities, and countries. We build our stories over time, we remember our lives, experiences, and relationships through stories; and we remember the past, and present and dream of the future through stories.

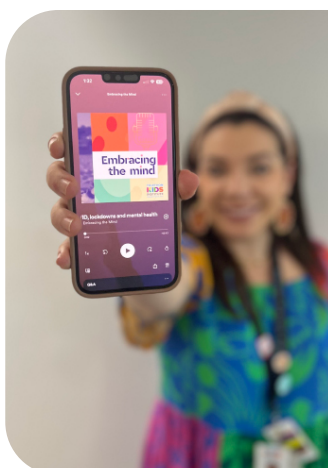
We also heal through stories. We can share sadness and joy through stories that can assist us in our healing journey.

There are therapies based on storytelling and many group processes in healing are based on sharing stories, either personal or otherwise.

Learning from others about their journey, stories of strength and survival from adversity and knowing we are not alone in our experiences are powerful therapeutic tools. Authenticity, honesty, and truthfulness can all be found in stories. Indeed, bearing witness to others and having others bear witness to our lives are healing experiences in themselves.

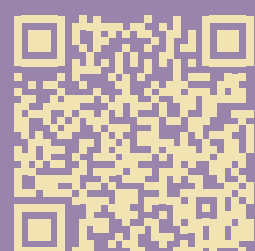
This is why having creative elements such as storytelling in whatever form it takes, in mental health research is important. Life stories are complex and healing journeys can take different directions in life. Stories are one of the ways we can develop a coherent narrative across the many paths we take, the many events we experience and the many opportunities for healing we have along the way.

We make sense of ourselves, others and the world through stories.



LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

Join host and **senior childhood trauma researcher Dr Alix Woolard** to hear about the latest research in mental health.



Celebrating our Voice: Supporting social and emotional wellbeing after the referendum

Join us for a free Healing Tree Event in early December with a focus on connection.

Centred around a theme of *connection*, the event will feature painting, yarning circles, and classes on traditional uses of the fauna indigenous to Boorloo (Perth).

Scan the QR code to request an invitation closer to the event.

Early December 2024

Morning

Noongar Wadjuk Boodjar



Artwork by Professor Helen Milroy AM

The
KIDS
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
AUSTRALIA

| Embrace



IN BRIEF

Embracing the Mind season 2

Hosted by Embrace @ The Kids senior researcher Dr Alix Woolard, our podcast features interviews with researchers and people with lived experience across facets of mental health.

In the series' second season, we talk to a refugee who fled Ukraine following the Russian invasion, a teenager who survived a serious car crash and now embodies growth through adversity, and we launch a special investigation into the trauma parents often go through in the birthing suite. We also learn more about what goes on in the mind of an autistic child, what it's like to receive a diagnosis of ADHD and how to cope with and overcome burnout.

"We are so privileged to be trusted with the personal stories of resilience and hope offered by people from all walks of life, and these are such important tales to tell," Alix said.

You're invited! Celebrate Aboriginal culture with us

Join us for a morning of connecting to Country, culture, community, knowledge and nature at Kaarta Koomba (Kings Park) this Thursday 5 December.

Painting, yarning circles and classes on traditional uses of the fauna indigenous to Boorloo (Perth) will all be on offer at this free event.

See the invitation on page 13 for a QR code to send an email to the Embrace team. We will then provide more details about the event, including a registration link, closer to the date.

Embrace Research Awards: five winners announced

Specialised training for clinical psychologists and service providers will be delivered using funds from the Embrace Research Awards 2024, announced in August. Among the five winners of up to \$5,000 each were three applicants using the funding to run training programs.

Dr Helen Morgan will train clinical psychologists at interstate gender-affirming clinics to deliver a group-based parenting program which will better equip caregivers of trans young people to support their child's mental health.

Jacinta Freeman will enable members of the Telethon Kids Institute's Youth Mental Health team to receive training in co-design principles and methodologies, while Oliver Keane will provide training on LGBTQA+ youth suicide prevention guidelines to service providers.

These awards were funded by Embrace's principle partner, Rio Tinto.

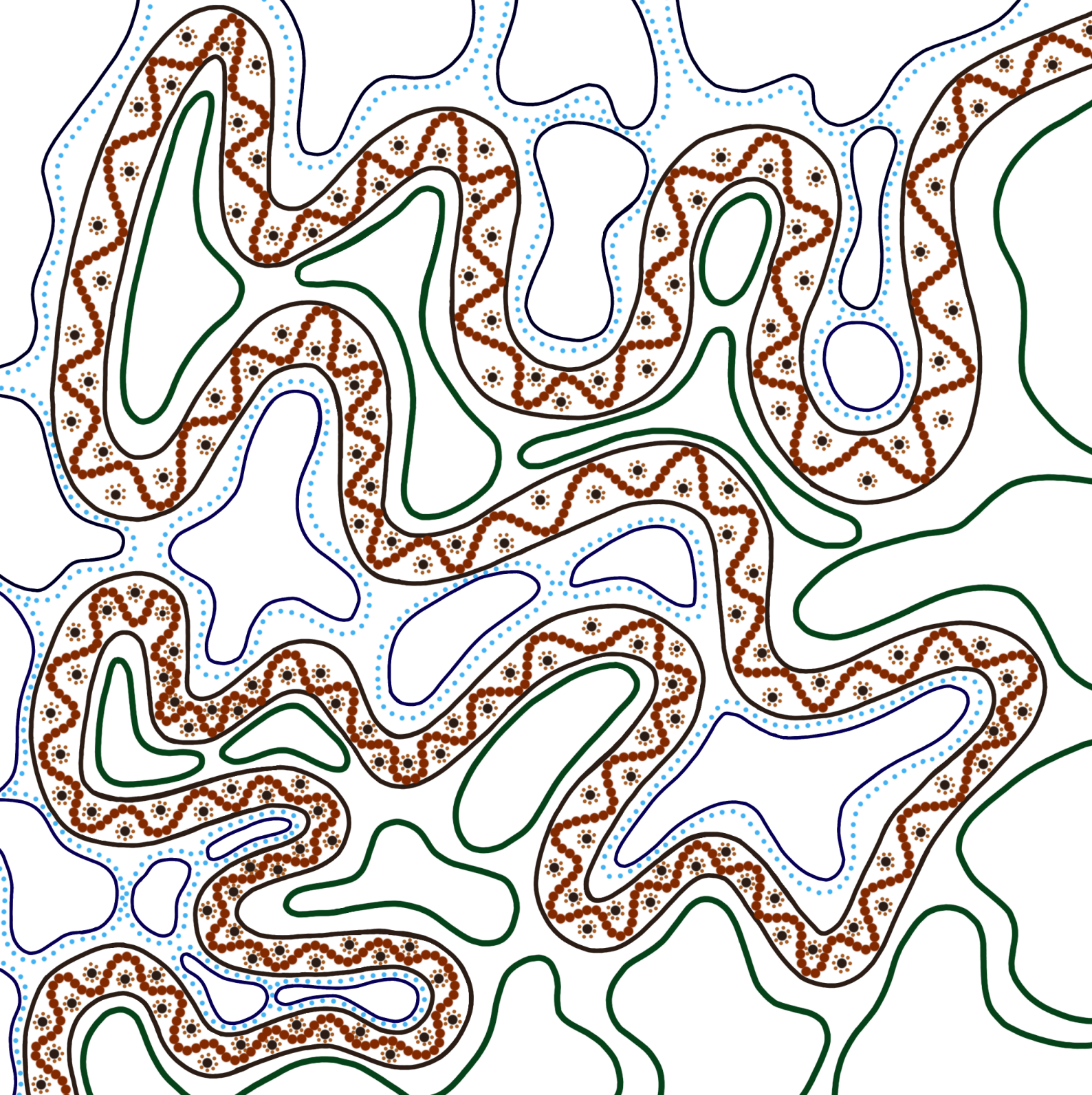
"Telethon Kids" becomes "The Kids"

From the forest to the desert, across rivers and oceans, we have pioneered groundbreaking research to improve the health and happiness of kids everywhere.

A lot has changed over the decades, but our commitment to kids is stronger than ever.

We are changing our name and logo as we launch our strategic plan for the next decade to achieve our vision of happy, healthy kids. We will no longer have "Telethon" in our name but will continue our strong relationship.

As The Kids Research Institute Australia, we will continue our groundbreaking work to find solutions for the challenges facing children and families.



Mindfulness colouring

Journeys, the artwork gracing the front and rear cover of this embrace edition, was provided by Professor Helen Milroy.

This artwork is about the many twists and turns we take as we navigate the landscape of life. We never know what is around the next bend and sometimes feel like we are going backwards, or life is repeating itself. Yet we always find our way through, continuing into the future to celebrate and enjoy the abundance life has to offer. Life is never straightforward but healing is always possible. When we are strong and connected in culture and country, we will be guided by our ancestors, we will be nurtured by nature and we will be connected to others so we will never have to journey alone.

Helen's removed some of the colour from her artwork above. Why don't you have a go at recreating the art, or even try adding your own touches?

