**Before Viewing Rabbit-Proof Fence**

*Instructions: Read the attached articles to prepare for viewing the film. Highlight the key ideas in each section.*

**Introduction**

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a powerful film based on the true story and experiences of three young Aboriginal girls, Molly, Gracie and Daisy, who were forcibly taken from their families in Jigalong, Western Australia in 1931. The film puts a human face on the ‘Stolen Generation’, a phenomenon which characterized relations between the government and Aborigines in Australia for much of the 20th century. The girls were taken away to be trained as domestic servants at the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth. This was consistent with official government assimilations policy of the time decreeing that ‘half caste’ children should be taken from their kin and their land, in order to be ‘made white’. Focusing on the escape of the three girls from Moore River in the 1930s, the film highlights the despair experienced by mothers whose children were taken, and the terror and confusion of those children, snatched from familiar surroundings and forced to adapt to European ways. Led by fourteen year old Molly, the girls defy all odds to travel 1500 miles through unfamiliar territory to return to their land, their homes and families in North-Western Australia, with the authorities chasing them all the way.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a true story, based on the book, *Follow the* *Rabbit-Proof Fence* written by Doris Pilkington Garimara, Molly’s daughter. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation argues that the truth about past experiences must be spoken about and acknowledged by all Australians before reconciliation can occur. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* will show viewers truths that many have not seen or heard about before. The Council tells us that: “*It was standard practice … Children* *were taken from their homes …Whole communities were shifted* *from their home to another part of the country. Aboriginal life has been regulated and supervised at almost every turn. There was no choice.”*

**Historical Context**

When white settlers arrived in Australia, the interaction of two vastly different cultures, with such different attitudes to the land, made conflict inevitable. In the 19th century, the white man’s guns were more powerful than Aboriginal spears. By the mid-19th century, European pastoralists and settlers had moved into Aboriginal lands, interrupted traditional hunting and gathering routines, depleted natural sources and grasslands, polluted waterways and damaged sacred sites. European diseases such as smallpox and even the common cold decimated the Indigenous population. Alcohol and money further undermined traditional ways. In many areas, Europeans challenged the whole structure of Aboriginal traditional society and the authority of tribal elders was broken down. They had always controlled decision-making structures such as marriage, education, and rituals such as clan gatherings, but more and more young Aboriginal people began to be attracted to white society and began to live on the fringe of both worlds. By the 1930s, when the story of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is set, many communities had become reliant on government handouts for food, clothing and other necessities, since their traditional ways of life had been eroded over time.

**Why were Aboriginal children taken from their families?**

From the earliest years of European settlement in Australia, there is evidence of Aboriginal children being taken from their families as the authorities believed it was ‘for their own good’. During the first half of the 20th century, it was official policy in most states to remove half or quarter caste Aboriginal children.

The practice continued until the early 1970s, and was only fully brought to public attention with the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997. Since the report’s release, there has been much public discussion of the issue of the Stolen Generations.

Some have argued that it wasn’t a whole generation; others have said that the children were not ‘stolen’ but removed in order to give them a better life. Nevertheless, certain facts are undisputed:

• Thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their families or their families were ‘tricked’ into giving them up.

• The policy was definitely aimed at ‘breeding out’ Aboriginality, because only half and quarter caste children were taken. Fully Aboriginal half brothers or sisters in the same families were left with their parents, while their lighter siblings were removed. If the policy was really about giving Aboriginal children a better life, then all children of an allegedly ‘bad mother’ would have been taken.

• Whilst some gained opportunities, education and a materially better life, the vast majority went to missions, orphanages or children’s homes where they were poorly treated and suffered identity crises and mental anguish.

• Many of the Aboriginal people who today are alcoholics, drug addicts, psychologically damaged or imprisoned were ‘stolen’ children, and continue to suffer the effects of the destruction of their identity, family life and culture.

**A.O. Neville and the Moore River Settlement**

In 1905, Western Australia became the first state to pass an Aborigines Act which made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and part Aboriginal child under sixteen years in the state. The Chief Protector was appointed not elected and he answered only to the Premier. From 1915 until 1936, Mr A.O. Neville was Chief Protector. He believed very strongly in the removal of part Aboriginal children as a means of benefiting the whole community: “*the chief hope … of doing our* *human duty by the outcast is* *to take the children young and* *bring them up in a way that* *will establish their self-respect,* *make them useful units in the* *community and fit to live in* *it, according to its standards”(*A.O. Neville, *The West Australian,* 1938.)

The Moore River Settlement, just north of Perth, was W.A.’s most significant institution forthe purpose of training ‘part’ Aboriginal children. In 1938, a visiting journalist wrote of Moore River that it was a *“crèche, orphanage, relief depot, old men’s home, home for discharged prisoners, home for expatriated savages, home for unmarried mothers, home for incurables, lost dogs’ home and school for boys and girls”.*

Anna Haebich, writing in the 1980s, said that in the 1930s,*“visits to Moore River were not encouraged and it was an offence to enter the reserve* *without official permission.* *This was rarely granted even* *to Aborigines wishing to visit* *close relatives. The Aborigines* *living on the settlement were* *virtually prisoners.”*

It was under the auspices of the W.A. Aborigines Act that A.O. Neville issued the order, in 1931, that the three girls, Molly, Gracie and Daisy, were to be removed from their homes and families at Jigalong and taken to the Moore River Settlement.

*Reference:* [*http://www.eniar.org/pdf/Rabbit-proofFence.pdf*](http://www.eniar.org/pdf/Rabbit-proofFence.pdf)

#### The Stolen Generations

Between 1910 and 1970 up to 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken forcibly or under duress from their families by police or welfare officers.

Most were under 5 years old. There was rarely any judicial process. To be Aboriginal was enough. They are known as the ‘Stolen Generations’.

#### What happened to them?

* Most were raised in Church or state institutions. Some were fostered or adopted by white parents.
* Many suffered physical and sexual abuse. Food and living conditions were poor.
* They received little education, and were expected to go into [low grade domestic and farming work](http://www.eniar.org/stolenwages.html).

#### Why were they taken?

They were taken because it was Federal and State Government policy that Aboriginal children - especially those of mixed Aboriginal and European descent - should be removed from their parents.

Between 10 and 30% of all Aboriginal children were removed, and in some places these policies continued into the 1970s.

* The main motive was to ‘assimilate’ Aboriginal children into European society over one or two generations by denying and destroying their Aboriginality.
* Speaking their languages and practising their ceremonies was forbidden
* They were taken miles from their country, some overseas
* Parents were not told where their children were and could not trace them
* Children were told that they were orphans
* Family visits were discouraged or forbidden; letters were destroyed.

#### What were the results?

The physical and emotional damage to those taken away was profound and lasting:

* Most grew up in a hostile environment without family ties or cultural identity.
* As adults, many suffered insecurity, lack of self esteem, feelings of worthlessness, depression, suicide, violence, delinquency, abuse of alcohol and drugs and inability to trust.
* Lacking a parental model, many had difficulty bringing up their own children.
* The scale of separation also had profound consequences for the whole Aboriginal community - anger, powerlessness and lack of purpose as well as an abiding distrust of Government, police and officials.

#### What is being done?

A National Inquiry was set up in 1995. Its 1997 Report ‘[Bringing them Home](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/)’ contained harrowing evidence.

It found that forcible removal of indigenous children was a gross violation of human rights which continued well after Australia had undertaken international human rights commitments.

* It was racially discriminatory, because it only applied to Aboriginal children on that scale, and
* It was an act of genocide contrary to the Convention on Genocide, (which forbids ‘forcibly transferring children of [a] group to another group’ with the intention of destroying the group.)

The Report made 54 recommendations, including opening of records, family tracing and reunion services and the need for reparations’ (including acknowledgement and apology by Governments and institutions concerned, restitution, rehabilitation and compensation).

*Reference:* [*http://www.eniar.org/stolengenerations.html*](http://www.eniar.org/stolengenerations.html)

**While Viewing Activity**

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| Plot Development- What happened? | **Acts of Courage by the Girls**   * They ran away from the camp—risk in that they could be caught. They had seen the punishment the other girl had received. They are running into desert climates, with no food, ill prepared. * They stuck together * Maintained hope they would get rescues (Molly & Daisy) * Courage and hope—each other |
| **Character Development- Molly how does she change?**   * She becomes the leader * She makes hard decisions * She only cries when Gracie is taken—for the most part she puts on a strong face for the girls…keeps up hope for the girls * She takes care of them * Hunting skills develop—uses these to outsmart the tracker * In the end she gets home, she has her own family and is taken, does the walk again—strong, hopeful, caring, stands by her convictions, courageous, persistent, preservers, * Smiles less. She less happy * More serious * Becomes an adult—she recognize the harsh realities of the world * Less trustful | **Obstacles faces by the Girls**   * Mr Neville * Tracker * Desert—heat * Man who manipulated them—appealed to their desire to see their Mothers * Travelled the wrong fence. Travelled a long way in the wrong direction (may have helped them stay hidden for a bit) * Barn with the lady (have to stay hidden, her employer came in and could have snitched on them) * Food, water, supplies * Who can they trust? Unsure * No weapon or means to defend themselves |
| Acts of courage by other characters?  The man who told them about the fence is helpful  The woman who gave them coats and blankets  The women hid them in the barn  Mother and Grandma for standing up to the police with the gun, waiting for them on the fence and not giving up hope- chanting is like praying. Offer support through the chanting  They go beyond what they have to do. They act selflessly |