



## Childcare choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in NSW

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### Introduction

This Research to Practice Note presents the findings of a study into the child care choices of Aboriginal families in NSW.

A consortium of researchers from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University was commissioned by the Department to look at the early care, education and schooling experiences of Aboriginal children in urban, regional and remote New South Wales.

The study commenced in 2004. A final report was submitted to the Department in August 2010.

A copy of the full report is available from Macquarie University at [http://www.iec.mq.edu.au/research/cfrc/research\\_approaches/education\\_giftedness\\_disadvantage/child\\_care\\_choices\\_of\\_indigenous\\_families/](http://www.iec.mq.edu.au/research/cfrc/research_approaches/education_giftedness_disadvantage/child_care_choices_of_indigenous_families/)

### Use of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this paper, the terminology used to identify Australia's original peoples will alternate between the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander'.

The term 'Indigenous' is used when referring to the two First Nations' people of Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Indigenous' is generally used by the Commonwealth Government which has a charter of providing services and programs to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at a national level.

The term 'Aboriginal' refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia's other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islanders.

### Background

The early years of life are very important for setting children's life trajectories. While families have the major influence on children, early childhood educational settings also have a powerful impact on

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<sup>1</sup> Munro, H. (2007). Use of appropriate language when working with Aboriginal communities in NSW. [http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/assets/main/documents/researchnotes\\_aboriginal\\_language.pdf](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/assets/main/documents/researchnotes_aboriginal_language.pdf)

children's learning and development, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. A clear picture of under-representation of Indigenous children in early childhood services in the years prior to school has emerged although figures differ for preschool and day care sectors and are not yet collected in a uniform way across Australia (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2010). Barriers to participation have been found in previous research to include lack of accessibility and awareness of services, mistrust based on recent history, racism in services, lack of inclusion of Indigenous families and lack of cultural awareness among non-Indigenous staff (Department of Education, Science and Training 2005; De Gioia, Hayden & Hadley 2003).

Attracting and retaining Indigenous early childhood teachers is a key component to strengthening national outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2010). Participation of Indigenous families in services has been linked to Indigenous early childhood staff, Indigenous family and community participation, involvement at the local level, cultural awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture and child-rearing practices by non-Indigenous staff, linking services for children and families to a "hub" of services and flexibility of provision (see Kitson & Bowes 2010 for a review). Features of services that support Indigenous participation include the fostering of relationships, embracing and building on children's learning, teaching language and culture, engaging families, providing an inclusive and meaningful environment and including local elders and the community (Kitson & Bowes 2010).

Literature suggests that it is important that everyone working in children's services has knowledge and an understanding of Australian Indigenous history, current issues for Indigenous people and Aboriginal culture so as to understand local culture, racism and how Indigenous children are raised (D'Souza, 1999; Harrison 2008; Prochner, 2004). This knowledge forms the basis for providing culturally relevant programs for Indigenous children and families for the future.

While there is some information about children's care and learning experiences within their families, communities and in children's services, much of the focus has been on the providers' experiences and on statistics concerning the numbers of Indigenous children using services (see literature review in full report, Bowes, Kitson, Simpson, Reid, Smith, Downey & Pearce 2011). There has been little research on the community and family patterns of child care for young Indigenous children, attitudes of the parents and their expectations concerning children's learning in their early years or their feelings towards children's services and school. There is a need to hear and respond to the voices of the Indigenous families themselves. Families have a lot to tell us about their young children's care and education and the experiences of their older children in the transition to school.

Therefore in 2004, Community Services commissioned the *Child Care Choices* research team from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University to undertake a study to look at the early care, education and schooling experiences of Aboriginal children in urban, regional and remote area of New South Wales. The study was designed to build on *Child Care Choices*, a longitudinal study of over 600 young children and their families in urban and rural areas of NSW (Bowes, Harrison, Taylor, Sweller & Neilsen-Hewett 2009).

## Research questions

The study had three broad research questions:

1. What is the experience of Aboriginal families in NSW raising children under school age?
2. What knowledge and skills do Aboriginal children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school?

3. What are the reasons for the low proportion of Aboriginal children in NSW children's services and how can children's and family services be more effective for Aboriginal families?

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample frame and sampling strategy***

Selection criteria for the sample were that participating families should have at least one Aboriginal parent and at least one child who had not yet entered school. The sampling strategy involved three stages. The first stage was stratification by region (urban, rural and remote). The second stage was selection of sites within the regions that would represent a wide range of circumstances in family make-up, use of services and financial situations (3 urban sites; 5 rural sites; and 4 remote sites). The third stage involved recruitment of families at each selected site through children's services, Aboriginal organisations or by word-of-mouth.

### ***Pre-project contact visit***

For each site, members of the research team travelled to the location and made personal contact with Indigenous leaders and groups, community services and early childhood professionals to find names of key local Indigenous people to discuss the project and to set-up further community meetings.

### ***Community consultation***

Community consultations were undertaken by the research team leaders (Bowes for urban, Simpson for regional and remote) along with an Aboriginal field researcher to address the project's key methodological concern: How can we do this study in this place? Visits were made to Community Working Parties, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Elders' groups, key Aboriginal organisations, and children's services in communities. Follow-up consultations to arrange recruitment of families was undertaken by field researchers. Community consultations took place over an extended period of up to 18 months to allow time for trust to develop about the study and the researchers. A range of community leaders in each site signed Community Information and Consent forms to give permission for the study to take place in their location.

### ***Yarning sessions with families***

Families took part either in one long yarn or in two yarning sessions held from three to six months apart. Before the first yarning session, participants were given an Information and Consent form and, after the study had been explained to them, were invited to sign their consent to participate. Families could also consent to have photos they had taken with disposable cameras used for the research in reports or presentations. Those who did not want their photos to be used were given the prints and negatives to keep.

The content of the yarning sessions was guided loosely by topic areas in the more formal research interviews and scales used in the larger Child Care Choices study (Bowes et al, 2009). Yarning sessions usually lasted from 30 minutes up to 5 hours and they were conducted by Aboriginal researchers. With participants' permission (given in all cases), the yarning sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis of themes.

When two yarning sessions were held, the first generally related to the early years before the child enters school, covering:

- who cares for the children (including details of who, type and frequency)

- if using formal services (family day care, long day care or preschool) what is the satisfaction with each service used and suggestions on ways to improve services
- if children's services were not being used, what would need to change in order for the families to consider or to use formal services

Each volunteer family was then provided with a single disposable camera containing 24 shots, and a reply-paid envelope for them to send the camera back to the research team once it was fully used.

The second yarning session generally focused on the child's experiences of attending school, in particular:

- details about the school, reasons for selecting the school, and family interactions with the school
- what experiences helped to prepare child for school and what experiences would have helped them if they had been available

When one long yarning session was held, all of the issues above were discussed without the benefit of reference to the photos. These families were, however, given a disposable camera and asked their consent for the photos to be used in the report and other presentations of the research.

If the camera was returned, the photographs were developed with two prints made of each. The photos and the negatives were taken back to the community by the research team member for the second yarning session or returned by mail if one long yarning session had been held. The photos were discussed at the second session, and more yarns about the activities and people they depicted were told and recorded.

In some remote communities, lessons in scrapbooking and art supplies were also provided by the research team for craft activities during the yarning sessions.

### ***Analysis***

Throughout the project, presentations, meetings and advisory group discussions required the researchers to gradually negotiate the field texts. The yarns were therefore analysed and coded on a number of occasions. Initially the transcriptions of yarns were sorted in terms of location, context and story line. In order to identify the themes, the field texts (transcription of yarns and field notes) were read and re-read several times by at least two researchers. Story lines in the yarns were analysed and coded for interconnectedness, patterns, tensions and gaps. Once the themes were identified, the voices of the participants were revisited in transcripts and recordings to ensure that the families and communities were at the centre of the narrative for each theme. This approach is reflected in the final report which includes the voices of participants. Photos were viewed as supporting documents in analysis as well as a trigger for yarning. The process for analysis was influenced by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Smith (1999).

### ***Ethics approval***

The ethics and methodology of this project were based on the guidelines developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (2003) and influenced by the writings of Smith (1999), Nakata (2004) and Martin (2008). Please see the full report for a chapter on ethics and methodology. For each of the three broad sites (urban, regional and remote) separate ethics approvals were gained from the Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committees for each of the two phases in the research, community consultation and data collection.

## Results

### *Participants*

Overall 107 families were interviewed for the study. Twenty-seven families participated from the three urban sites, 44 families from the five rural sites and 36 families from the four remote sites. There was a good representation of children in the families participating in the study – a total of 309 children across all the sites. The average age of the preschool-aged child in the families was 3 years 0 months for the urban sample, 2 years and 8 months for the regional sample and 2 years and 5 months for the remote sample.

### *Yarning, photographs and artwork*

Yarning sessions with urban families took place in their homes or in another place families nominated such as a coffee shop or a playgroup. Yarning with Aboriginal families in regional and remote communities occurred in a range of community group settings which included women's group gatherings, community development and employment activities, mobile playgroup sessions in the park, playgroup sessions in family homes and community art activities. Indigenous field researchers conducted the yarning sessions.

Aboriginal families in different sites used the cameras differently, some giving them to the children to take photos of their activities and surroundings, others recording a day in the experience of the family and the range of people, forms of care and types of activities that their children would typically experience. This technique has been used successfully before to access family and community practices involving children (Clarke & Robbins, 2004).

Some of the photographs that were returned for the second yarning session were able to be incorporated into the local community's scrapbooks. One participant used her painting to represent the process and practice of child rearing for her in that community. In one remote community, elders at the initial meeting had been enthusiastic about the suggestion of the use of photographs to document the range and nature of early childhood experience in their place. They mooted the idea of a final, concluding exhibition that would be on display for the whole community to visit, enjoy and discuss. A photo book has been developed for families and communities involved as a thank you gift and also to celebrate Aboriginal children.

### *Themes from the yarning sessions*

Four themes emerged from the narrative analysis. They were "Valued learning at home"; "Children's services experiences"; "Cultural safety in early childhood settings"; and "Children's transition to school". Please see the full report for description of the themes and quotes from participants.

The theme **Valued learning at home** included: learning respect for elders, values, morals and kinship knowledge; embracing Aboriginal culture, language and identity; families' educational aspirations for their children; valuing children's learning in the early years; and all family members being involved in bringing up children.

The theme **Children's services experiences** included: families seeing themselves as consumers in children's services but often feeling that they don't belong; families feeling misunderstood and not respected by staff in children's services; families feeling uncomfortable and judged in children's services; families experiencing a distance between themselves and services through lack of communication about children, management of the services and curriculum; and feelings of cultural safety when Aboriginal staff and family members attend the service.

The theme **Culturally safe early childhood settings** included: welcoming human and physical environments; Aboriginal staff; payment of community members for all the roles they take in services; non-Aboriginal staff educated about cultural knowledge and about demonstrating cultural competence working with Aboriginal children, families and communities; programs that welcome families and community at any time; teachers who use Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning to influence their approach to teaching and learning with all children; curriculum that includes culture and Aboriginal language (with content based on advice from the local community); and mechanisms for two-way communication with families.

The theme **Children's transition to school** included: successful transitions from children's services in the years before school; difficulty in school transition because of a lack of cultural understanding in schools; need for a playgroup or other transition program at the school; importance of families preparing their child at home through teaching them their numbers; importance of child knowing how to write their name and other academic skills; concerns about schools not being culturally safe places and concerns about bullying, especially if their child had a disability.

### **1. What is the experience of Aboriginal families in NSW raising children under school age?**

- Families valued the early years of children's lives and understood the importance of this period. Families wanted some control over what happens for their children. Some families reported managing better than others. Some families are more greatly affected by poverty, location and family disruption.
- Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunties were responsible for much of the care and home education of the children. Aboriginal people in this study wanted their children to be around family not strangers. They accessed other services for early childhood care and education if they could and as they needed it or saw it as important.
- The home learning environment for Aboriginal families was found to be rich in ways that are not traditionally valued from a non-Aboriginal perspective. Young children were taught about kinship, cultural practices, respect for Elders and Aboriginal language when those close to them had that knowledge. Children were surrounded by loving adults and relationships with siblings and cousins and other extended-family were strong. Books, games and toys were part of the environment as well as the physical environment and community activities and events. Many families read with their children, taught them academic skills, and exposed them to art and music.
- Parents and grandparents told of their wish for their children to learn about their culture so that they could develop a strong Aboriginal identity. They saw this identity as helping to support the children to thrive and achieve. A number of families wanted their children to learn about other cultures as well as Aboriginal culture.

### **2. What knowledge and skills do Aboriginal children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school?**

- The knowledge and skills that Aboriginal children were found to develop in the years prior to school to bring to their transition to school is not remarkable in its content. They included self-help skills, independence, talking, reading books, playing games and sports, writing their names, colouring in, painting, drawing, cutting out, reciting nursery rhymes, knowing people and places, knowing the alphabet, colours, shapes, numbers and animals.

- According to their families, Aboriginal children bring the same skills to school as non-Aboriginal children do as well as their experience in socialising and connecting in an extended family and community context. When they start school, the children were also growing in their knowledge of culture and country. However, those who did not attend preschool and other early learning programs missed out on some skills that would make it easier for them to settle into school and know what school is about.

### **3. What are the reasons for the low proportion of Aboriginal children in NSW children's services and how can children's services be more effective for Aboriginal families?**

- Access issues were important to families. Fees, transport, waiting lists, family responsibilities, and personal choice not to attend were all named as barriers to enrolment and attendance. Addressing issues of transport, cost and access requires some local solutions but also some commitment to considering new models of support for addressing these issues in specific locations.
- There was considerable distrust of children's services expressed by families. Families often felt judged and misunderstood by staff in all types of services. Children's services did not always offer the quality of service that families wanted for their children. As staff talked down to them, families felt intimidated and disempowered. Families reported that they either persevered because they wanted their children to "survive" in the education system or they avoided using services, especially when a parent was at home and could teach the children themselves.
- Families informed the research team about their preferences within children's services. Their responses suggest that there is a need to consider how to make services more "natural" (mixed age grouping, more adults present, including parents), more welcoming and involving of parents and local community and that there is a need to educate and employ more Aboriginal staff.

## **Discussion**

The study highlights the diversity and complexity of the nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in NSW today and demonstrates that 'place matters' in terms of how children's services are made available to these families in urban, regional and remote settings, as well as to how and why services are taken up. Differences were found between both individual locations within sites and between the urban, rural and regional sites in general. Broad areas of difference between the three large sites were higher educational aspirations expressed by urban and regional than by remote families and greater problems of access to children's services for remote families. In their views about the curriculum, staff and the degree of negative judgment experienced in children's services, there was more similarity of experience than difference.

The extensive learning reported to be taking place at home during the early years suggests that children's learning, particularly about kinship and culture, could be used as a basis for further learning in early childhood and school settings. In these areas, Aboriginal children would have a head-start over non-Aboriginal children. Families are already preparing their children for school with a range of academic skills. More information for parents about effective ways to teach children academic skills and knowledge before they start school could build on an interest that is already there in the families.

While participant families acknowledged that parenting was a difficult task, the study found that they were less aware, especially in regional and remote areas, of what formal services and supports were available for them when they were raising young children. Issues of access to services for remote families was particularly acute and the travel and distance involved in accessing health and education support services had large financial and family support implications for parents. Parents' concern for

their children and their future was a common factor in all areas. Parents in city and regional areas in particular expressed educational aspirations for their children.

The issues that have come through include the deeply held respect and value of families for education and their understanding of its importance in the early years. Throughout the yarning sessions, families articulated the importance of culturally safe programs that honour diversity and respect Aboriginal culture and ways of knowing and being. Their desire was strongly stated for early childhood settings that provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families staffed by Aboriginal staff and non-Aboriginal staff with cultural understanding. They identified barriers to participation and suggestions for ways that early learning programs could be structured to be more culturally responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, including a consistent call for services to be open for parents to stay with the children and for stronger ties between children's services and communities.

From the families' viewpoint, they were clear about the educational and social benefits of schooling for their children. The study found substantial support for the belief that children's services can serve a useful purpose preparing children for school entry across the education and social domain. Many families saw that they also played a role in the preparation of their children for school, and appeared to take this very seriously. The need for children's services to acknowledge and build on what the home culture provides is a clear recommendation from the findings.

### ***Limitations of the research***

This study relied on a relatively small sample of families in each site recruited via a range of local organisations. While this has provided an indication of the variation among families in their views and experiences and some strong messages for policy makers, a representative sample of NSW Aboriginal families would allow more confident generalisations from the findings.

### ***Future research***

Future research needs to employ similar research approaches to this study in order to allow the voices of Aboriginal families to be heard in a way that shows respect to participant families. Prior community consultation is essential and sufficient time and funding needs to be allowed to make authentic consultation possible. For future research on Aboriginal families, there is a need to train more Aboriginal researchers. In this study, we were fortunate to have many Aboriginal researchers as part of the team but for some of the field researchers, this was their first research experience. Just as the study has shown the importance of Aboriginal staff in children's services, Aboriginal researchers are needed to develop the research questions and methods that will best gather and convey the views and experiences of Aboriginal families.

## **Conclusions**

The researchers identified several focuses for change based on the findings from the research. These were in the areas of service provision, access, costs, learning environment and workforce strategies.

### ***Service provision***

- Aboriginal families and community should be included in every aspect of service provision, development and management in authentic partnerships.
- A whole-of-government approach is needed to foster a change in practice that pays attention to health, poverty, and community development as well as education.

### **Access**

- Geographic location must be considered in relation to additional costs and travel time. A deeper understanding of context is needed for individual locations as well as individual families living in urban, regional and remote locations.
- Create opportunities where family members are welcome to observe, interact and participate in the early childhood setting.

### **Costs**

- Inequities between the costs of services depending on how they are funded and where they are offered need to be addressed. The fees charged when children are sick or absent because of Sorry Business cause much angst and have been a wedge that disconnects families from early childhood services.

### **Learning environment**

- Approaches to teaching and learning that include Aboriginal perspectives but are effective for all children need to be introduced. It is recommended that the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) could be connected with a pedagogical framework such as 8Ways which “allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives by using Aboriginal teaching and learning techniques” (RAET, 2010).
- Services must acknowledge and value the learning that occurs outside formal settings that children bring with them to the formal educational setting. This acknowledgment will extend the learning possibilities for Aboriginal children if teachers build on these strengths.

### **Workforce strategies**

- New ways of “doing business” in early childhood education can only happen when those involved respect different cultural perspectives. Developing a workforce plan that employs Aboriginal people at every level in early childhood education and care and sets targets for numbers of Aboriginal staff needs to happen at both State and national levels.
- A workforce capacity strategy should ensure that Aboriginal community members are not required to be volunteers to bring an Aboriginal perspective. There should be budgetary planning for employing community members to carry out this important work in a paid capacity.

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