Indigenous early learning and care

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ARACY Capacity Building Support for Communities for Children Facilitating Partners
Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004 -2008
An Australian Government Initiative
Acknowledgement

We would like to pay our respect to the Noongar people of the Southwest of Western Australia and acknowledge their ownership of the land here in Perth.

We are sorry for the injustice that has been served and continues to be served upon Indigenous communities throughout Australia and strive to work with you to build a better future.
Authors

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Conducted through the Centre for Social Research, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
Introduction

• International evidence shows the impact of the child’s environment on the developing brain and subsequent life chances

• Indigenous children and families face disadvantage from past government policy, practice and racism that crosses the generations
Literacy – Early Vocabulary Growth

Cumulative Vocabulary

Age - Months

High SES
Middle SES
Low SES

1200
600
0

0 12 16 20 24 28 32 36

WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey

• 1 in 4 children are living in households where carers or grandparents were forcibly separated from an area that was their traditional country or homeland

• Carers who were forcibly separated are
  – More likely to live in households where there were problems with alcohol or gambling
  – 2x more likely to have been arrested or charged at some time in their lives
  – Less than half as likely to have someone with whom they could discuss problems
  – 1.5x more likely to have contact with Mental Health services in WA prior to the survey
Children of carers who had been separated are
   – 2.3 x more likely to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural problems

   – More likely to be at high risk for clinically significant emotional symptoms, conduct problems and hyperactivity

   – Had levels of alcohol and other drug use 2 x higher than Aboriginal children whose carers were not separated
The good news!

• Quality early learning and care can contribute towards levelling the acknowledged disadvantages facing many Indigenous children and families

• The earlier the better (see Heckman graph)

• Wide range of existing government strategies, including the Communities for Children initiative, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, & the National Agenda for Early Childhood
Figure 7
Rates of return to human capital investment initially setting investment to be equal across all ages

Rate of return to investment in human capital

Preschool programs

Schooling

Opportunity cost of funds

Job training

Rates of return to human capital investment initially setting investment to be equal across all ages
What works?

• International Indigenous interventions
  – *Te Kohunga Reo*, New Zealand
  – Community controlled child and family services, Canada
  – First Nations Early Learning & Care Action Plan, Canada
What works?

• Australian research evidence still quite limited
  – but this paper/presentation draws upon the growing body of literature that can inform our practice

• Indigenous communities characterised by diversity but some important common beliefs about raising children
  – centrality of the Dreaming and the Law
  – importance of extended family
  – more prominent in remote and traditional communities but also exist in important ways in urban and rural settings
What works?

• Key debate - Indigenous specific or mainstream services?
• Inclusive early learning & care reflects the needs of all children - however this is not the experience of many Indigenous families
  – Culturally safe
    • The ability to express your identity, practice your culture, and have your values honoured without fear of ridicule, chastisement or prejudice.
  – Culturally strong
    • Having a firm understanding of your community’s history, standards, beliefs, values and practices together with the ability to incorporate these into your daily life.
Quality - meeting or exceeding customer/consumer expectations

- Indigenous communities have very high expectations regarding
  - their involvement and ownership of programs provided to improve and support their wellbeing
  - opportunities for close involvement in the day to day routines affecting their children - services or programs that attempt to separate children from other family members will be avoided
  - close attention to children’s wellbeing. Services or programs that are perceived to compromise children’s happiness or well being in any way will be avoided
Cultural safety - the key to participation

• Culturally safe programs & services require:
  – Flexible, responsible employment practices that support Indigenous staff
    • some examples include, banks of workers, a mix of ages, acknowledgement of the role of senior women in child care, inclusion of men, employment of family members and the financial acknowledgement of the importance of family and cultural business. Financial support, mentoring, time, technology and space for training.
  – Reflexive non-Indigenous practitioners
    • personal attributes, those that are willing to learn and re-learn what they already think they know
    • case study The Turtle Hunt by Lyn Fasoli.
Cultural safety - the key to participation

– Relationships and relatedness are fundamental ways of being in the world - successful programs are relationship focused and relationship driven
  • based upon clear roles and responsibilities, shared and agreed outcomes
  • being comfortable with different communication styles - importance of non-verbal
  • understanding and willingness to acknowledge that tensions exist and having strategies for mediation

– Incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world
  • differ from non-Indigenous reliance on western science
Culturally safety - the key to participation

- Support for shared care
  - many Indigenous children have more than one home and have multiple attachments - this is a community strength

- Provision of transport - ‘umbilical cord of the service’

- Acknowledgment of the past and the legacy for indigenous children
  - 3 x more likely to suffer abuse or neglect
  - 5 x more likely to be subject to a care and protection order
  - 6 x more likely to be placed in out of home care

- Working and learning together - importance of community healing - restoration of self esteem

- Holistic ‘joined up’ programs - health, education, wellbeing
  - arbitrary western divisions
Culturally strong, appropriate early learning & care

Indigenous conceptions of childhood

– Childhood a time in the life course where children’s competencies are acknowledged as being different rather than inferior to adults.
– Children have the right and ability to act independently and make their own decisions (reflected in birth stories).
– Children let adults know what they need and adults respond.
Culturally strong, appropriate early learning & care

- Holistic approach to child development which includes health, education, and an understanding of past, present and future
- Importance of strong identity (connected to people and the natural environment)
- Importance of exposure to mainstream values and learning but these should not undermine the child’s sense of who they are
- Importance of elders in helping children learn to regulate their behaviour and develop a strong cultural identity
Culturally relevant learning environments

– Children’s happiness is the key to participation
– Quality of a program is measured by children’s responses
– Environment must reflect Indigenous identities, beliefs and values
– Development of the child’s ‘spirit’ dependent upon relationship to the physical world - land, water, air, bush, sky, rocks, weather patterns
– Opportunities for fishing, hunting, swimming, sport and gathering food, water and bush medicines and taking part in community events
Culturally relevant learning environments

- Acknowledge differences in children’s play styles and scripts
  - risk taking, humour, play fighting, caring for babies
- Understand the ‘right time’ for routines and the importance of responsive caregiving
- Acknowledge, support and build upon the multiple literacies of Indigenous children by ensuring competence in Standard Australian English and familiarity with school culture and environment
- Make provision for children’s food choices while promoting healthy eating and good nutrition
Conclusion

• Programs in Canada and New Zealand demonstrate that early learning and care makes a difference to Indigenous disadvantage

• There are examples of successful early learning and care programs and services here in Australia

• These programs and services have some common features
Common features of successful programs and services

• attend to cultural safety, are culturally strong, build upon community strengths and acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and ways of being

• are holistic and attend to children’s happiness, health, education and nutrition. Foster family and community relationships and the cultural, social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive and physical development of children and their families

• Actively involve family and community elders in services and programs, pay attention to identity formation, support competency in home languages as well as Standard Australian English and comfort with the culture and environment of schooling