Engaging Indigenous Families in Preparing Children for School

This topical paper has been developed for the Communities for Children Facilitating Partners.

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For the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth  September 2008
**CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Issues</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences on School Readiness</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging Indigenous Families in</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation of Evidence</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful Resources</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ABOUT ARACY**

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ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia’s future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people

To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

Developed for the Facilitating Partners of the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative, this paper is now being made available to a wider audience via the ARACY website: www.aracy.org.au

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**Funded by the Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

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**ISBN: 978-1-921352-29-4**

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Engaging Indigenous Families in Preparing Children for School


Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people:

Peta Gooda for her assistance in searching the literature and examining the program and intervention evidence-base.

Felicity Dear – Principal, Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School (Bunbury, WA); Joyce Drummond – Coordinator, Wakathuni Aboriginal Community (Pilbara, WA); Chris Hanrahan – Director, Parents and Learning program (PaL) (Napranum, Qld.); Jessica Mouthaan – Red Cross NT Division (Palmerston/Tiwi Islands, NT); Lee Mesumeci – Principal, Challis Early Education Centre (Armadale, WA); Anne Shinkfield (Author, Playgroup – Playing to Get Ready for School); Jacqui Hunt-Smith and Shaha Bin Sulaiman – Yorganup Child Care Aboriginal Corporation (Perth, WA); Raelene Beecher – State Manager, WA Parents and Learning (Perth, WA); Professor Sven Silburn – Director, Curtin University Centre for Developmental Health (Perth, WA); and Sue Ferguson-Hill and Clair Scrine – Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (Perth, WA), for sharing their experiences and providing valuable insights on this topic. These have been drawn upon in forming this paper.

We would also like to acknowledge the many Communities for Children Community Partners around Australia, who provided input via the ARACY Webinar of 11 June 2008.

Note: The term ‘Indigenous’ is used throughout this paper and refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
SUMMARY

Many Indigenous children are not ready to make the transition to school. There is strong evidence showing high levels of vulnerability in the Indigenous population across a range of areas of development – this is evident from the early years of life and span physical, social and cognitive areas of development. For many of these Indigenous children this early vulnerability will impact on their ability to do well at school; most will find learning extremely difficult, and their general health, social and emotional wellbeing and education outcomes are likely to limit their opportunities later in life.

At the same time, several studies confirm that many of the strengths of Indigenous children, parents, extended families and communities are often overlooked and diminished by inappropriate interventions, unintended outcomes of policy decisions and inexperienced (albeit well intentioned) practitioners. There is widespread system failure underpinned by dominant paradigms and bureaucratic inertia that results in a lack of access to resources and services, unrealistic funding cycles, short program implementation timeframes, and inappropriate performance measures to evaluate program effectiveness. System-wide racism and misunderstanding foster feelings of mistrust and betrayal among Indigenous communities and fuel the effects of transgenerational loss and dysfunction experienced by thousands of Indigenous families.

Despite this complex and challenging backdrop there are programs that are working, families that are healing, children that are doing well and communities that are determined to provide a future for their children. Further, there are practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders throughout Australia that are passionately—and at times desperately and despairingly—committed to making a difference to the lives of Indigenous children and their families and communities.

The paper examines the research and practice evidence relating to engaging parents and families in early development and the process of school readiness, and draws on the knowledge, wisdom and practice experience of Indigenous people. A number of themes consistently emerge from these information sources and should serve as guiding principles to implementation of effective programs, services and policies:
• Ensure Indigenous participation and consultation in all stages of a program or intervention
• Build the capacity of parents and families wherever possible
• Acknowledge and respect different learning styles
• Recognise and respect Indigenous peoples and cultures.

In addition, practitioners need to systematically record the outcomes and process to identify what program elements are working and why.

The practice wisdom identifies that some of the key elements of strategies to engage Indigenous families include:

– Building relationships
– Strengths-based approaches as opposed to focusing on needs or problems
– Building in time for evaluation, to measure how effective programs have been in achieving outcomes
– Producing high quality programs requires staff with training and qualifications in Early Child Development and cross cultural competence
– Incorporating early learning and literacy programs that simultaneously target both parents and children (facilitating dual or trans-generational and community learning)
– Providing a culturally inclusive space, where possible.
INTRODUCTION

This Topical Paper is another in the Evidence into Action series commissioned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to support Communities for Children (CfC) and other practitioners in improving services that cater for the wellbeing of children and young people.

The paper is designed to build on related papers in this series – particularly those with a focus on the role of families and communities in school readiness and early child development. As such, this paper should be read in conjunction with the Topical Papers on School Readiness, Building a Solid Foundation for School – A Communities Approach, Indigenous Early Learning and Care, and Community Learning for Parenthood [1-4].

These papers collectively highlight the importance of early development and its association with issues of school readiness. This paper considers how to engage with Indigenous parents and families around these topics. The disparities in readiness for school between Indigenous and other children would suggest that many of the approaches being used have not worked for Indigenous children and their families.

Most importantly, while this paper acknowledges that Indigenous families play a pivotal role in shaping their children’s sense of identity and culture, it also recognises that for a range of reasons many are unable to carry out the equally crucial role of preparing children for school. This paper examines the factors that enable (and prevent) a positive transition to school and outlines some of the issues and challenges faced by Indigenous families which can prevent them from engaging with early years practitioners in various service sectors. Strategies and interventions that have helped to engage Indigenous families are discussed, drawing on the knowledge, wisdom and practical experience of Indigenous community members and practitioners in a variety of sectors and locations.

While this paper has a national focus and draws on a range of studies of what works from around Australia, much of the quantitative information used in the paper focuses on the Western Australian Indigenous population. The main source of this quantitative information is the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) – a large,
A representative sample survey, and its findings may be relevant to the wider Indigenous population in Australia [5-7].

The paper is also supported by evidence of what works in other countries, particularly in the Canadian Indigenous context.

Importantly, this Topical Paper incorporates Indigenous views and focuses on case studies of programs and initiatives that have involved Indigenous community members in development, implementation, evaluation or review phases.

**Influences on early child development**

This Topical Paper is situated within an ecological framework and uses these constructs to frame the lines of enquiry and the structure of the paper. This framework recognises that children have a number of spheres of influence on their development (see Figure 1). And while children interact with their environment, their immediate family and the household environment have the most direct impact on their development. The framework also illustrates the various factors—community environments, extended family networks and formal services—that in turn impact on a family’s ability to provide the necessary support to a child’s development. The presence or absence of these factors contributes to the risk and protective factors that are known to influence child development. For example, research has revealed that persistent high levels of exposure to violence, trauma and chronic stress can alter the developing brain, affecting function and creating vulnerability to future stressors [8].

The framework combines aspects of sociology and developmental psychology and represents the relationship between individuals and their environment as mutually interacting.
FIGURE 1: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ECOLOGY

Source: Based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development, 1979 [9].

METHODOLOGY
The methodology for producing this paper incorporated several components. A major part involved discussions with key informants. We interviewed practitioners in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory and conducted an ARACY webinar with CfC sites around Australia. This ensured strong Indigenous input into the paper and enabled us to assess existing initiatives and showcase successes.

We conducted a targeted literature review, focusing on both national and international research and program evaluations that had a specific reference to Indigenous early learning issues. Two systematic literature reviews have been particularly influential and are worthy of note: firstly, the review by Penman to inform *Footprints in Time – The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (LSIC) [10]. This landmark study commenced in 2004 and is tracking the long-term development of 2,200 Indigenous children from 0-18 years from communities across Australia [11]; and secondly, McTurk et al’s review of *The School Readiness of Australian Indigenous Children*, which explores the definitions, assessment methods, risk and protective factors and interventions related to the school readiness of the Australian Indigenous population and Indigenous populations of New Zealand and North America [12].

We also drew on our own research experiences, which include the conduct and dissemination of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS), partnership work with the West Pilbara CfC initiative (involving the Pilbara Area Consultative Committee and community partners), measuring school readiness among children in the Pilbara region (via the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)), and the ongoing development of an Indigenous version of the AEDI.

**THE ISSUES (WHY THIS TOPIC IS IMPORTANT)**

All children enter school with a range of knowledge and skills acquired at home and through their experiences in other settings. However, they differ from one another in their readiness to access what the formal school environment can offer their onward learning. The transition to school can be especially difficult for Indigenous children,
especially if English is not their first language, or if their ways of learning and knowledge are not acknowledged or adequately valued in the classroom setting. For example, some Indigenous children will have acquired knowledge and skills through ‘bush’ learning or storytelling within their families and communities, which may not be recognised or used as a building block for learning by school teachers.

Cultural-specific knowledge and Indigenous ways of learning are a clear contrast to the knowledge and ways of learning expected, and catered for, within the Australian school system [3]. This may mean, in some contexts, that the school’s readiness for an Indigenous child is as much of an issue as the child’s readiness for school [5]. Being ready for an Indigenous child is about having the skills and commitment to meet the child ‘where they’re at’. This means that schools must have a holistic understanding of the needs of Indigenous children, create a flexible timetable and a culturally inclusive school environment to support this, and engage families in the transition to school [13]. The benefit of incorporating these types of approaches is highlighted in some of the case studies in the *What Works* section of this paper.

The transition points in early childhood are critical in the developmental pathways of all children, and will have a marked impact on school and learning readiness [14-15]. The evidence highlights that a far greater proportion of Indigenous children (than non-Indigenous children) are exposed to factors that risk healthy early development, with many experiencing difficulties at the point of entry into school [4-6, 16]. It is also clear that not making a successful transition to school can disrupt onward participation in the education system [17]. This, in turn, can limit post-school options and life choices – with impacts extending not only to labour market experiences and socioeconomic wellbeing but to health outcomes as well [5, 18-20].

The data provided below pertaining to school readiness provide a snapshot of the disparities in development between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children – disparities that exist from the early years of life. These gaps continue to widen in preschool years and as children enter the formal school environment. The indicators that report on access to school education, participation, retention and academic performance and success make it clear that Indigenous children and young people are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia [21-22]. There is a range of reasons for this, including
(but not limited to) culturally inappropriate programs, limited access to and/or availability of services, and poor levels of Indigenous family engagement, capacity and skills.

What do we mean by the term ‘school readiness’?

Generally, the concept of school readiness focuses on how well children are able to deal with entry into primary school. As such, it is associated with a fixed standard – of physical, intellectual, social and language development that enables children to meet the requirements of school [23-24]. This paper considers school readiness within the four key elements of the ecological definition of school readiness (ready services, ready schools, ready communities and ready families) specific to Indigenous populations [12].

There are many pathways children can take on the road to school entry, reflecting that there are many facets to child development. At any age, the capacity of a child to undertake learning tasks can be described as their readiness to learn. This is a dynamic concept and recognises that children can bring different understandings to new learning opportunities – which is particularly pertinent to Indigenous children [25].

The concepts of both school readiness and learning readiness go beyond language development and cognitive abilities. They extend to social and emotional wellbeing, physical health, motor skills, communication skills, approaches toward learning, and general knowledge [23]. Moreover, these concepts are culturally constructed and hence far more complex and dynamic than the terminology and definitions suggest.

Preschool literacy and numeracy

National data provided via the reporting mechanisms of the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) indicate that Indigenous preschool children across Australia are less likely to be ready for primary school than non-Indigenous preschool children (preschool refers to two years prior to Year 1). The disparity in outcomes is evident for tests of both literacy and numeracy readiness, and across government and non-government preschools. These disparities can be over 20 percentage points in size and are partly driven by the poor results for Indigenous preschool children from non-English speaking backgrounds [26].
**Academic performance at Year One**

Given the relatively poor national figures for preschool literacy and numeracy readiness, it is perhaps not surprising to find that only 40% of Indigenous children in Western Australia had average or above average academic performance at Year 1. This compares with 80% of non-Indigenous children. These data come from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS), the largest and most comprehensive survey ever conducted in Australia of the health and development of Indigenous children, their families and communities [5].

**FIGURE 2: THE GAP IN OVERALL ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE (PROPORTION OF INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE), BY SCHOOL YEAR, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 2002**

![Graph showing the gap in academic performance](source: Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2002.)

Figure 2 highlights that the disparity in academic performance is maintained throughout the high school years. This is consistent with studies showing that students who start school with poor reading abilities tend not to catch up [27-28]. While some of the reasons for this may reside with individual students with ‘learning deficits’, the literature and several key informants suggest that the school system does not have sufficient programs and staff to provide the level of support to address the issues associated with ‘student catch up’ [29]. One principal in a recent discussion stated that:

*Currently we have to wait until year 3 WALNA [literacy and numeracy test] results to get a program for Year 4 but by then it is usually too little*
too late. It makes everyone’s lives more difficult, especially for these kids who are struggling with so much more than literacy problems; we need to do so much more much earlier.” [29]

The WAACHS data also demonstrate that the academic performance of Indigenous students is much lower in more isolated areas [5]. These results highlight the challenges and opportunities facing practitioners working with children and families in discrete, isolated communities where English is often the second or third language spoken, school attendance reflects the mobility of lifestyle, and the rationale for achieving good academic outcomes at school can appear irrelevant to their expected futures.

**Developmental vulnerability and school readiness**

While the data provided earlier highlight gaps (and potential strengths) in some aspects of school readiness for Indigenous children, there is a more comprehensive measure of this concept. The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is a community-level measure of young children’s development across five domains at the point of entry to school.

The AEDI is important because it can highlight vulnerabilities in a range of developmental areas (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge). Overall, the AEDI results can help communities to reorient services and systems for young children and families. They highlight where early years interventions and resources are needed so that communities and stakeholders can come together and develop forward planning and action.

While the AEDI is not an Indigenous-specific tool, it has been conducted in some remote Indigenous communities. Data for the Indigenous communities of Punmu, Parngurr and Jigalong (in the Pilbara region of Western Australia) show that there are far higher proportions of children who are developmentally vulnerable than in surrounding areas,
particularly in the areas of ‘language and cognitive development’ and ‘communication skills and general knowledge’ (see Figure 3). Overall, more than 70% of children in these communities are considered not ready for the transition to school, based on AEDI results (see Figure 4) [16].

While these data are not representative of other Indigenous communities, they are consistent with the results from other data sources—including the WAACHS and national tests of literacy and numeracy—that highlight profound developmental and educational disparity among Indigenous populations living in remote and very remote regions [5, 30]. A more appropriate version of the AEDI for Indigenous children is currently being trialled – this will involve applying a cultural lens to the existing measure and examining whether any strengths-based elements have been overlooked [31].

**FIGURE 3: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE, PILBARA REGION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental domains</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional maturity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; cognitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication / general knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exmouth</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karratha/Dampier</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marble Bar &amp; Surrounds</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onslow/Pannawonica</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraburdoo</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Hedland</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punmu/Parngurr/Jigalong</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roebourne</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Hedland</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Price</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wickham</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AEDI Community Profile: Pilbara Communities WA, Final Report, 2007 [16].
FIGURE 4: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE ON TWO OR MORE DOMAINS (NOT READY FOR THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL), PILBARA REGION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 2007

Source: AEDI Community Profile: Pilbara Communities WA, Final Report, 2007 [16].
INFLUENCES ON SCHOOL READINESS DEVELOPMENT

The evidence-base highlights that there is a wide variety of factors that impact on school readiness – both risk and protective factors. These include factors that relate to the health of parents and extend to pre-conception – that is, school and learning readiness are pertinent issues well before birth [17].

The literature outlines that maternal substance use, otitis media, foetal alcohol syndrome, poor diet, low birthweight, age of mother and poor parenting skills are prevalent and harmful risk factors for Indigenous populations that impact on child development and school readiness [5, 20, 25, 32].

Conversely, positive early learning experiences have a positive impact on a child’s chances of progressing favourably through school. These experiences enable age-appropriate language development and basic pre-literacy skills (being able to count, having an interest in books, etc) [5, 33-34].

For Indigenous children who come from an oral-based (rather than print-based tradition), there are additional challenges in achieving school standard Australian English literacy-readiness. In these cases, the association between the written word and spoken language needs to be specifically taught. Many Indigenous children are unfamiliar with institutional routines and disoriented by a strange new context for learning and being and this places additional challenges on schools and early years practitioners to engage with children early so that they can make the adjustment more easily [25]. Later in this paper, Case Studies 1–5 provide examples of how this transition has been effectively implemented with positive, empowering outcomes for both Indigenous children and their families.

Families and school readiness development

There are many ways that families shape, and impact on, the early development of children. The home environment has been shown to have an important impact on a child’s relative skills and abilities on entry to school [35], while research also confirms that the social relationships that children form with their primary carers, and the
partnerships that parents and families form between teachers and communities, are central to the school readiness process [36].

Children need a stable, reliable caregiver(s) with whom they can form secure relationships and create a regular, dependable, secure and comfortable environment for play and learning. Consistent parenting styles and a predictable environment help to develop autonomy and independence in children [25]. And while factors such as poverty and nutritional deficiency can pose significant risks to children, competent parenting that is warm, responsive and which emphasises home learning can be protective [4]. As Sylva et al point out, “what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are” [37].

Early learning is assisted by a supportive and safe family environment, through the kinds of activities in which adults engage with children. These activities provide young children with the structure and interpretation of the culture’s rules. As the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education observes, Indigenous parenting styles tend to promote independence, curiosity, a willingness to explore and to learn by modelling [25].

The Taskforce go on to say that learning in Indigenous contexts tends to be informal, interactive, and free from adult-child hierarchy. Indigenous children respond to situations where they can see the usefulness of what they are learning. Children making sense of what they are trying to learn in an unfamiliar context is generally more the problem than failing to learn [25].

**The broader influences on school readiness development**

While families are pivotal in preparing children for school, communities, schools, early care and education settings, and other service providers also need to be ‘ready’ to assist children [1]. Sorin and Markotsis extend this theory to ‘ready children’, recognising that children are active participants in the process of preparing for learning and development in the school years [2].

Indigenous culture, social reality and living circumstances add a layer of complexity when considering the broader influences on children’s school readiness. Indigenous people in Australia live in a vast diversity of situations and settings. There are different core factors
having an impact at different points, which means that answers are often context-specific and therefore need consideration of the local situation. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the very remote and isolated Indigenous communities of Australia. As Sims points out, ‘developing emotional attachments, learning language and acquiring reasoning skills may be universal, but that doesn’t make these human activities any less cultural, in so far as they take place within culturally regulated social relationships, and are mediated by cultural practices’ [38]. These practices are in turn shaped by cultural norms and beliefs.

**ENGAGING INDIGENOUS FAMILIES IN EARLY DEVELOPMENT**

Indigenous communities that are functioning well are characterised by families who are engaged in their children’s early development, including the development of cultural identity and resilience. However, there is evidence to suggest that many Indigenous families are disengaged from their children’s educational progress. For many Indigenous families this may be the result of their own poor experiences at school – experiences marred by racism and a lack of respect for Indigenous people and culture. As a result, many Indigenous families do not have the capacity to support their children’s learning nor sufficient trust in, or understanding of, education systems [5].

Parental capacity is an important predictor of children’s academic success at school – as Zubrick et al [5] have shown, one of the three key factors associated with poor school performance is the lower level of academic achievement of the carers of Indigenous students. The evidence strongly suggests that poor school performance is occurring trans-generationally [5], highlighting the need for all health and children’s services with a stake in early child development to develop strategies and programs to engage with Indigenous parents at all stages of development.

More broadly, there is significant evidence to show that the ability of Indigenous parents, families and communities to raise children is compromised by the significantly greater
incidence of life stress and mental health problems in the Indigenous population [6-7, 39]. The effect of past policies of forced separation from family and relocation from traditional lands has had a devastating impact on the wherewithal of Indigenous parents specifically, and on the human, social and psychological capital of the overall Indigenous population [6].

There is evidence to show that when Indigenous parents and families have a sense of efficacy and control over their futures and have been able to maintain strong protective factors, they have been able to provide safe and positive environments that foster early learning and development [10]. Even so, because of the different world views regarding the importance of school, many of these parents and communities have not shared a sense of the importance of school for their children’s and community’s futures. Part of the challenge being taken up in many communities is how to encourage parents to understand how school has relevance and can provide an important key to their social, cultural and economic futures [40].

**A holistic approach to Indigenous parental engagement**

There is a critical need to engage Indigenous parents in all aspects of their children’s development, in order to prepare children to get the best out of learning opportunities. This includes the involvement of Indigenous parents (and extended families and community members) in the planning and decision-making processes of early development programs and, wherever possible, their delivery. Meaningful consultation from the earliest stages of development engenders a sense of community ownership and empowerment, and is more likely to lead to acceptance and program sustainability. And, ultimately, this approach can lead to community capacity building.

It can be incredibly difficult for Indigenous children and parents to make the connections between homes and school given the conflict between the demands and expectations of mainstream education with their language, cultural and social skills and experiences [41]. Further, education systems are generally framed by Western knowledge systems and principles and often fail to acknowledge Indigenous values [13]. In order to improve Indigenous outcomes there is a need for schools to acknowledge and base their
curriculum and practices on recognition of existing language, cultural and prior knowledge.

**Building relationships**

One of the most critical elements of successful and sustainable transition programs (from prior-to-school to school) is building relationships. This needs to occur not only between children and their families and early years educators, teachers and the school, but also between communities and schools, and with educators and other stakeholders across various settings [42].

Educators have been able to achieve meaningful relationships where they offer experiences that actively and positively involve children and families and communities – focusing on developing positive, respectful relationships among everyone. This can engage children and families in ‘a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations; and, promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school; and the general wellbeing of children and families’ [42]. Often, the success of these approaches depends on the active involvement of Aboriginal staff, in school and prior-to-school settings [42].

Transition-to-school programs can provide time to build relationships and trust. This is particularly important where a family has had negative experiences with education systems. The study by Docket et al concludes:

“Connections between families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools can only be built in the context of respectful relationships, where the strengths of individuals and families are recognised, even when challenges and other difficulties may also be evident. Family and community members will avoid interactions where they expect to be blamed, shamed, judged negatively, or their expertise and knowledge ignored. They are much more likely to engage in interactions that acknowledge their strengths, respond to their challenges and respect their knowledge.” [42]

**Canadian Indigenous experience**
In the Canadian context, Greenwood & Shawana have referred to six concepts and components as crucial for a First Nations quality early development program [43]:

1. Provide safe, loving and nurturing care for children
2. Meet the needs of the children, families and communities
3. Facilitate the passing on of the culture and language from generation to generation
4. Provide children with opportunities to learn their culture and language so they are instilled with a sense of pride about who they are
5. Foster all aspects of children’s growth and development
6. Give children opportunities to learn and develop school readiness skills.

The Aboriginal Head Start program in Canada is an example of a program that features these components. The program (both On Reserve and Urban and Northern initiatives) is designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and their families and prepares young preschool aged Aboriginal children for their school years by meeting and addressing their social, emotional, spiritual, health, nutritional, and psychological needs [44].

A National Roundtable held in 2004 identified serious concerns regarding both the lack of knowledge about the research being undertaken into Aboriginal early childhood development in Canada and how it could be effectively linked to, and used by, the Aboriginal Head Start Program. The emergence of formal early childhood development and education programs in Canada has led to practice or process oriented research of programs and most driven from a ‘top down’ approach in all areas including: funding, policies, regulations, jurisdiction and so on. The Roundtable identified an urgent need for research that supports or that informs Aboriginal specific program design and care practices. However, as Palmantier points out, future research and evaluations need to be undertaken incorporating Indigenist research methodologies (such as those developed by Smith and Rigney [45-46]) to ensure that Indigenous worldviews and practices are reflected in the findings [47].

Other international evidence identifies that universality, sustainability and cultural relevance are key requirements of initiatives that aim to provide the best possible beginning for children (including Indigenous children) [48]. A key outcome of a forum of early childhood experts in Canada in 2003 concluded that:
“The future of early childhood development programs in British Columbia’s Aboriginal communities are rooted in the past. They lie in a past in which children are at the heart of Aboriginal culture, a sacred, communal responsibility and the key to the future well being of Aboriginal communities. They lie in a past in which children are treasured, a grave trust shared by parents, extended family and all members of the community.” [49]

TRANSLATION OF EVIDENCE

The research drawn upon in this paper shows that the factors influencing a positive transition to school for Indigenous children are complex, multifaceted and interrelated. Policy and systems interventions to improve this issue will require engagement by many outside the education sector. For example, the health sector is a key contributor to improving the determinants of school readiness because many determinants are understood to begin before conception, not at school entry.

Some have suggested there is a need for systems reform across sectors; that the education sector should “shift from a didactic to a ‘two way’ engagement paradigm”, with greater integration between policy, research and program implementation [13]. Changes of this nature will need to be informed by evidence of what works in the education and community development sectors, which may require much broader thinking and a more radical approach.

A growing body of International research suggests that early childhood programs should be contained in early primary education and linked with early primary components to make the transition to school more effective and sustained [50].

All sectors need to support school readiness through the medium of families by improving their awareness and by empowering families to provide “healthy, nurturing environments for children to thrive physically, emotionally and cognitively” [13].

There are still significant gaps in programs which support and enhance Indigenous antenatal parenting despite the evidence showing that Indigenous families have
relatively poor nutrition, higher health care needs and infant mortality, and young maternal age, when compared with the non-Indigenous population [51].

At a policy level, it has been acknowledged that child wellbeing is highly correlated with parental wellbeing. The development of the National Agenda for Early Childhood recognised that all parents require support to maintain their emotional and physical health and wellbeing to be effective in their family and community roles and responsibilities [52]. It follows that services providers need to acknowledge and understand different ways of parenting in order to engage and involve all families and young children. In particular, it is critical to recognise differential child rearing patterns. Further, SNAICC emphasise the need for service providers to provide programs that build on, recognise and strengthen Indigenous knowledge, experience and childrearing practices [51].

We acknowledged earlier that answers are often context-specific and need to consider the local context. While the research evidence is becoming clearer there are still many questions regarding how the evidence can be translated into effective systems of practice in any context. There is also debate around where the focus of investment should be, i.e. on agency service provision, family support, school capacity or community capacity? [5, 51]

The WAACHS standpoint is that programs should ensure there is a focus on capacity building. It recommends that delivering evidenced based parent, infant and childcare programs in the family and community development sector will “expand human capability generally and build human capital specifically in the child” [7].

**Transferability of ‘mainstream’ policies and programs**

There is a strong preference by government policymakers and service providers to use universal programs to address early child development because it is believed to be more effective in the long-term. Universal programs in early child development aim to normalise parenting education and encourage all families to participate [53]. However, the evidence suggests that it is not always possible to simply transpose strategies of what works in non-Indigenous contexts on to Indigenous contexts [53]. There is a range
of reasons for this. For example, services are often culturally inappropriate (lacking regard and respect for cultural differences) and inaccessible for people living in extremely disadvantaged, resource poor remote communities; and even where services are available they are not always accessible for Indigenous people.

Existing early childhood systems often fail to incorporate Indigenous parenting, child-rearing and learning styles for reasons ranging from a lack of resources and staff understandings, to an inability to appreciate alternative cultural values, worldviews, lifestyles and ways of being [13, 51, 39]. Mainstream programs are generally based on assumptions about particular roles, responsibilities, needs, aspirations and human capacity that fail to take into account the issues that impact on the most disadvantaged groups, including people from Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds [39].
WHAT WORKS

This section discusses approaches and case studies that have been effective in engaging Indigenous parents and families in preparing their children for school. There is a considerable body of work being undertaken in Indigenous communities that is having a positive impact. This work is not always formally evaluated or published but there is a clear need to draw on the significant expertise of Indigenous education and early childhood workers [13].

The information presented in this section is based on an examination of relevant literature and discussions with practitioners and Indigenous community stakeholders (including those in CfC sites) working with Indigenous families and communities to enhance their children’s early years development and education.

Figure 5 summarises the approaches and case studies discussed in this section, based on the developmental stages and geographic settings they are intended to target.

FIGURE 5: APPROACHES AND CASE STUDIES – BY AREA AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE
### Evidence into Action Topical Paper – Engaging Indigenous Parents in Preparing Children for School

**Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth** – September 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>LIFECOURSE PHASES</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Antenatal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td>Learning Together Project</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td>Napranum Parents and Learning (PaL) program</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Remote</strong></td>
<td>Let’s Start</td>
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Approaches and characteristics

The following are examples of approaches that have proven to be successful or elements of early interventions and strategies that have helped to engage Indigenous parents:

- The inclusion of a safe place in education settings, including the provision of a specific room or building designated for Indigenous families can help to promote positive engagement of parents. This can lead to improved academic outcomes for Indigenous children [54-56].

- While not focusing on families, many studies agree that the school readiness of Indigenous infants and children will be enhanced by initiatives that increase the educational content in early care settings and support language/cognitive enrichment at preschool [5, 33-34, 57].

- There is considerable evidence to show that antenatal screening, parent and home visiting programs, health promotion that focuses on nutrition, breastfeeding and substance use, can have a positive impact on early brain development and contribute to school readiness of children [14, 35]. Parenting programs that are combined with centre-based early childhood interventions have proven effective in some settings. The strength-based Learning Together Project is a good example of this [58].

- Maternal and child health interventions that are coupled with those that focus on parents and families have also been shown to have better outcomes in terms of school readiness [13].

Case studies

The following case studies highlight the range of solutions developed to address the complex and diverse issues, challenges and opportunities for practitioners in urban, rural, remote and very remote areas. They discuss various targeted early interventions or strategies to engage Indigenous parents where there is evidence of positive outcomes for children as well as parents, at one or more transition points in early development. While some of the case studies have documented ‘evidence’ of successes via formal...
evaluations, others have been included based on recognition by community stakeholders as being good or promising practice.

**Case Study 1: Napranum Parents and Learning (PaL) program**

According to Hanrahan, Indigenous parents in Napranum were critically aware of the need for schools to work with the community, and for communities to help schools find more appropriate ways of achieving this [59]. The parents were clear that parent participation in education needed to be home based. As Hanrahan states:

> “Finding ways to helping schools to recognise, understand and acknowledge the cultural practices of the home and the community should help to improve home school connections but initiatives involving families also need to be considered. Napranum parents recognised the need to do something about improving the transition to a structured school program: the PaL program grew out of this perceived need” [59]

**SUMMARY – Napranum Parents and Learning (PaL) Program**

*Background*

Napranum community is located near Weipa in northern Queensland. Their PaL program is a community owned and managed partnership, funded by Rio Tinto. It began in 2001 as a response to requests from parents of preschoolers for assistance with activities and strategies they could use at home with their young children to help prepare them for formal schooling.

It has since been established in Echuca (2004), Newcastle (2005), Hopevale (2006), Mapoon (2007) and Roebourne (2008).

The program is targeted to parents, most of whom speak Aboriginal English and Kriol but understand the importance of speaking standard Australian English.

*Main aims*

The aim of the program is to promote parents’ belief in themselves as effective contributors to the early education of their children.

PaL is a two year home-based program, which actively engages parents with their children in educational activities outside the school. PaL tutors deliver educational kits—which have early literacy and numeracy as their focus—to parents at home. Parents undertake to read the story
books and participate in games and activities that the whole family can play, such as bingo and snakes and ladders. Up to 15 families in each community participate in the program, which covers around 50–75% of kids of the target age group (4–6 year olds). Kindergarten age represents level 1 of program, with pre primary age being level 2. Parents are encouraged to form a committee as part of the conduct of the program.

The program operates from the Napranum Preschool and maintains collaboration between preschool staff, parents and external early childhood professionals.

**Key successes**

To date, over 6,000 stories and books have been circulated to children’s homes in communities. The Napranum program was evaluated in 2003 and 2005 and rated as highly successful. Rio Tinto is now evaluating the capacity building from the parent’s perspective.

The main elements of the program effectiveness include:

- It is a home-based program that supplements pre-school and formal schooling. Parents have stated that it would not work if parents had to come to the school to collect materials
- The materials and activities are simple, concrete, structured, with instructions and activity cards. Parents do not need to be literate
- Books are in English and are chosen by the community. They are good quality, glossy, fun, and have Indigenous content where possible
- The activities/cards are in plain English but not patronising
- Tutors are local people trained by PaL. It is planned for tutors to get a certificate for their training (accreditation) in the future
- Tutors explain why parents are doing various activities and how they link to school learning
- Tutors spend 15–20 minutes each visit sharing information about the kits and building relationships
- Tutors are paid casually (6–8 hours per week) – this is built into the funding.

**Main challenges**

There is a need for more sustainable funding in some PaL programs. Recently the Australian Government funded the program in Hopevale and Mapoon for the initial implementation phase of two years. In other communities, such as Newcastle, the initial implementation was funded by philanthropic organisations – these communities are then faced with the challenge of seeking other sources of funding to sustain the program. The program faces some familiar challenges in some communities—including issues of overcrowding, poor health and substance abuse—which can make it difficult for some families to participate. Some communities are not always well
equipped to deliver the PaL program in its ideal form, but this highlights the need to maintain a flexible approach and keep modifying the program to suit local needs.

Case Study 2: Wakathuni Aboriginal Community: Kids Maya

The early years interventions at Wakathuni highlight the importance of taking a holistic approach that is long-term and intensive, and the critical need for Indigenous leadership and participation.

SUMMARY – Wakathuni Aboriginal Community: Kids Maya

Background

Wakathuni is located about 30 kilometres out of Tom Price in the West Pilbara area of Western Australia. The Community Chairperson wanted to improve the education outcomes for young Aboriginal children in the community. There are no child care, school or health facilities available in the community. In 2007, the Community Chairperson and other community members met with the Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (RUCSN), a community partner of the West Pilbara CfC, to discuss how RUCSN could assist the community to support their children’s early years education and prepare them for school.

The RUCSN Mobile Children’s Service, coordinated by an Indigenous elder, worked with the community to provide quality playgroup experiences for the young preschool children aged 2–6 years, who had no prior experience with playgroup. The Community Chairperson, who is a qualified teacher and lecturer in Early Childhood Education encouraged parents to participate in the playgroup. During the fortnightly visits the RUCSN team focused on building a relationship with the families, and discussing the benefits of playgroup for both children and families. Over time the Community Chairperson identified several young mums who were interested in taking playgroup assistant roles within the planned onsite Wakathuni playgroup.

Key community members concerned about the school readiness and safety of young children in Wakathuni developed a concept of a ‘Kids Maya’ – a safe place for children and families to come together.

They enlisted RUCSN’s support for the establishment of the Wakathuni playgroup. The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and RUCSN conducted a workshop in the community on school readiness focusing on what parents and playgroups need to do to get children ready for
school. RUCSN has provided the community with a range of monitoring tools such as attendance records and programming materials to measure the effectiveness of the strategy.

The Film and Television Institute of WA made a short film on school readiness with the community – children dressed in school uniforms and caught the bus to school as part of the strategy to increase parental awareness of getting children ready for school. The community chairperson believes the film is an important and effective strategy to engage parents because of the familiarity of their own children. By early November 2007, the children were attending school one day a week as part of a transition to school.

**Key successes**

In March 2008, the principal at Tom Price primary school reported notable changes in the children’s readiness for school. The Wakathuni Kid’s Maya is still functioning and RUCSN are running storytelling workshops with children and with parents. A play leader and assistant have been appointed to support the running of the Playgroup. Parents participate on rosters at the Kid’s Maya to help prepare fruit for morning tea and the learning materials for the next few days. The community parents are more empowered to participate in their children’s learning. They get their children ready for school, and walk them down to the bus and wave them off to school. This is a very big step to address very complex issues – including lack of trust to take children to a ‘whitefella’ school. The support of the school principal (and wider school) has been critical to the success of these interventions. The school has initiated a community/school transition process to support community aspirations.

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**Case Study 3: Moulden Park Neighbourhood Centre and Primary School**

The initiatives at Moulden Park Primary School in Palmerston, Northern Territory, highlight the critical need for schools to embrace the wider school community and to take a holistic approach to improve the educational outcomes of young Indigenous children.

These types of approaches are consistent with international research by Mustard & McCain, which embrace an integrated service delivery model and advocate for a focus on problem-based learning. This research has lead to the development of Early Childhood and Parenting centres in a number of countries, which have been shown to be particularly beneficial in urban settings [15]. Variations on this model/approach are being explored for remote Indigenous communities, such as Jigalong in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.
SUMMARY – Moulden Park Neighbourhood Centre and Primary School

Background
Moulden Park Primary is a large urban school in the Northern Territory with an Indigenous enrolment greater than 50%. Four years ago the school actively chose, in partnership with the Health Department, to engage the whole school community.

Key aims
This project has worked with the Quality of Life Team to develop a model for the delivery of support services to families of young children in the area. The school believes that by building on community and family strengths and fostering the diversity and cross-cultural richness, community capacity will be strengthened.

Key successes
The project has evolved and gained strength over the last four years. It appears to be attracting Indigenous families from remote communities, who are moving into the area.

Successes include the establishment of a Before School, After School and Vacation Care program, establishment of a Childcare Centre, establishment of a school canteen, liaison with the Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers or Home Liaison Officers in home visiting, linking families with community based services, running a swap shop, organising coffee mornings and guest speakers and employment of a community worker. The project aims to support and strengthen the Moulden Park community through a focus on developmental prevention, early intervention, community partnerships and community capacity building. This is consistent with current research emphasising that early intervention programs are more likely to have significant outcomes when they are part of a partnership approach.

Case Study 4: Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School

The Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School in Bunbury, Western Australia, provides an excellent example of the benefits of genuine engagement of Indigenous families and communities in making the connection between home and school. A range of culturally inclusive strategies has resulted in significant and sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy results for Indigenous children.

SUMMARY – Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School

Evidence into Action Topical Paper – Engaging Indigenous Parents in Preparing Children for School
Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth – September 2008
**Background**

Djadi Djadi Aboriginal School was established in 1996 to better serve the needs of Noongar children in the South West city of Bunbury. Two important perspectives underpin the approach at Djadi Djadi:

- Children’s educational experiences enhance the preservation of culture
- Superior educational outcomes would be achieved for these children if their educational experiences are sensitive to their culture.

The rationale and design of the school was based on extensive community consultation and community support to address the poor performance, low attendance, participation and retention rates of Indigenous students at the time. The Noongar Community of Bunbury felt that an Early Childhood Centre (Kindergarten to Year 2) should be established to give Indigenous students a sound start to their education with strong involvement by Indigenous people. This was extended to Year 3 in 1999 and K–7 Primary School by 2006.

The school model was developed using Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff working together to: improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students; strengthen and affirm Indigenous culture; and encourage Indigenous participation and increased student attendance and retention.

**Key successes**

Djadi Djadi Aboriginal School is widely recognised as providing a caring, supportive environment for all children that caters for individual learning styles, sets high standards and has a strong belief that all children can learn. Just over half of the teaching staff is Indigenous and all staff have a strong ethos of tolerance, respect for diversity and working collaboratively to improve education for Indigenous people. The three key elements are respect, relationships and responsibility. The school is regarded by the Indigenous community as a welcoming place.

In 2006, the principal, Felicity Dear, was awarded the Outstanding Leadership in Aboriginal Education Award for her contribution to Indigenous education, recognising the achievements of the school. Dear attributes the success of the school to the “fantastic team effort by the staff, students, the school board and the whole community.” [60]

In 2002, the school reported attendance rates of 93 per cent, which were well above state averages for Indigenous students. Western Australia Literacy and Numeracy Assessments (WALNA) tests also confirm that students had similar rates of achievement to other students in Bunbury in 2001 – across spelling, reading and numeracy tests [54]. Since that time, students at Djadi Djadi have consistently achieved literacy and numeracy results that are above the WALNA benchmarks. In 2005 all Year 3 and Year 7 students at Djadi Djadi exceeded reading and...
Dear attributes this success to “the high level of parent support and their participation in their children’s education, culturally inclusive school programs and the staff’s commitment and passion for Aboriginal education.” Other key factors identified as contributing positively to these outcomes included: the existence of a School Board responsible for ensuring all aspects school policy and Indigenous culture; a strong committee; the presence of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers; Indigenous Teachers; a strong Noongar language program and resources; a distinctive contemporary cultural activity (i.e. Noyt Kobori Spirit Dancers – boys dance group); the integration of Noongar language across all learning areas; the integration of Aboriginal Studies across the curriculum; a sense of cultural recognition; and a high level of community engagement.

The principal believes that the language program has made a huge difference “because the children are taking the language back to their families. This is important because in the southwest a lot of the language has been lost. It instills a sense of pride in their culture when they can pick up their own language once again.” Children are now taking language home and teaching parents.

Successful engagement of children and families in the school is also supported by: the provision of transport; a visiting role model program; the provision of a culturally inclusive building with a cultural centre providing cultural resources for both the Indigenous and wider community; and, a visiting schools program – instilling a sense of school and community pride in their achievements.

This case study reinforces that strong leadership and commitment of the principal to implement school aims cannot be underestimated. It also adds weight to the argument that Indigenous children entering school need to maintain their own culture, identity and self-esteem, as well as being prepared for the ‘Western’ schooling system.

**Case Study 5: Let’s Start – Exploring Together Preschool Program**

The Let’s Start program aims to support children as they make their way through preschool and into primary school, and appears to be having considerable success in the Tiwi Islands and Darwin region. It is a school-based early intervention for Indigenous children and families.
children and families in North Australia who are attempting to deal with the effects of profound change.

**SUMMARY – Let’s Start: Exploring Together Preschool Program**

**Background**
Let’s Start is a targeted early intervention program for children from 3–6 years of age and their parents. It is designed for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and their parents to work in groups of six parent-child pairs over a school term. It is currently being implemented in about 40 schools on the Tiwi Islands and in the Darwin region (and being trialled in Roebourne), and while it is available for all children in has been specifically designed to assist Indigenous children.

**Aims**
To support parents, improve parenting practices, strengthen family units, reduce children’s problematic behaviour, develop children's social skills and boost their self-esteem. The program focuses on children at risk and their families, particularly where there are high rates of family conflict and frequent notifications for child neglect.

**Challenges**
The challenge for Let’s Start is to adapt the program to meet variations in parenting styles and understandings; in family functioning and influences on child development; in the perceived importance of literacy and non-verbal interaction in child development, and the social and cultural context specific understandings of participants.

**The strength of culture**
Both the Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School and the Napranum PaL program are practical examples that confirm that culture is a powerful medium for active engagement between schools, teachers, parents and children that should be explicitly developed and not ignored [13]. As the Djidi Djidi example shows, the incorporation of culture into the curriculum and the recognition of the importance of providing a welcoming and culturally inclusive school have generated a strong sense of community and family pride. In turn, as the reports by Day (2006) and Potter et al (2002) show, these elements have resulted in
significantly enhanced academic outcomes for students that appear to be sustained as they progress through their schooling [54, 60].

Involving community members and elders in the development of the curriculum has been a unique feature of some Canadian First Nations initiatives. This process values and actively seeks Indigenous ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge [39, 63-65].

**Parental involvement in education system processes**

The Napranum PaL case study also confirms the importance of programs that support parents and families to understand the processes and requirements of the education system so that they can be actively involved in preparing their children for school. Several CfC participants and other stakeholders interviewed have stressed the necessity for those involved in Indigenous early childhood development and education to understand and develop strategies to address issues of mistrust and lack of understanding by parents of school protocols and requirements. While many parents know that school is important they are unsure how to translate that importance in practical ways within the home environment. As Hanrahan points out, “by providing practical, structured support and concrete, fun activities, the PaL program has begun to unlock some of the mystery of schooling for parents and children in Napranum” [59]. Two evaluations of the program suggest that there are some positive benefits for parents, including an increased sense of empowerment and responsibility [59, 66].

**Community development approaches**

Several early childhood programs (both national and international) emphasise the importance of community development approaches that work with and empower the whole community to achieve long term success [67]. Community development approaches require building local capacity through the provision of training, ongoing support and mentoring of local people [68]. These approaches focus on a strength-based approach to overcoming the broader social problems that can plague communities. These are some of the features of the Integrated Early Childhood Project, which was implemented in three Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory between 2004 and 2006. It identified community ownership of programs as a key element of success in
achieving school readiness through early childhood intervention, along with building relationships and the recognition of Indigenous culture by non-Indigenous early childhood professionals [69].

**A dual generational model for engaging parents**

The Smith Family have adopted a Dual Generational Learning (DGL) model which is designed to address the developmental and learning needs across generations as well as across the child developmental stages. This approach acknowledges the importance of addressing social inequalities experienced by children, parents and carers, families and communities in a simultaneous and holistic manner. It is based on international evidence that inequality of family opportunities requires building the capacity of disadvantaged children and their parents in a holistic manner [14, 70]. According to Simons, there are a number of potential benefits to a DGL approach to address issues such as Indigenous school readiness including [71]:

- Strengthening of the family unit by improving the quality of relationships and the skill development of its members
- Developing opportunities for adults to support and strengthen their capacity as parents, potential employees, citizens and community participants
- Engaging of stakeholders beyond parents and children to ensure DGL outcomes are supported and sustained across the wider community and at key transition points
- Linking DGL initiatives, wherever possible, to programs that support financially disadvantaged students.

The Schools at the Centre (SAC) program is one particular innovation to promote DGL and improve social outcomes. SACs are primarily developed to facilitate the preparedness of Indigenous children to meet the challenges of school across the five developmental domains identified in the AEDI [71].

SAC programs have been developed to optimise partnerships between schools and other community resources to facilitate parent involvement with their children [72]. They are based upon national and international evidence and are designed to:
• Provide a focus for people coming together for many purposes
• Provide community meeting places where: families come initially with and for their kids; trust is built between parents and school staff; and parents and carers can access programs for themselves
• Facilitate better outcomes for children and families through the school
• Strengthen family functioning and wellbeing
• Enhance the capacity of schools and communities by: supporting the school with resources from the community; and facilitating pathways from the school to the community and from the community to the school.

They do this by providing access to environments and facilitating relationships and programs for children’s early years development and readiness to transition into school, as well as for the learning opportunities of parents and other family members.

Some of the programs that are offered through SACs to address DGL outcomes include: parent-child early learning and literacy programs (such as Support at Home for Early Language and LiteracieS (SHELLS), Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), and Let’s Read) and parenting programs (such as Families And Schools Together (FAST) and Let’s Start). For more details on these programs see the Useful Resources section.

CONCLUSION

This Topical Paper broadly discussed the importance of early development and its association with issues of school readiness. More specifically, it acknowledged that families play a crucial role in preparing their children for school and considered how to engage them in improving school readiness outcomes for children. We have examined the research and practice evidence, drawing on the knowledge, wisdom and practical experience of Indigenous community members and practitioners in Australia and internationally.

Guiding principles for engaging parents and families
In reviewing the research and practice evidence in this field, a number of themes consistently emerged as being important for effective implementation of programs, services and policies. These should serve as guiding principles:

- Ensure Indigenous participation and consultation in all stages of a program or intervention
- Build the capacity of parents and families wherever possible
- Acknowledge and respect different learning styles
- Recognise and respect Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Further, there are some core logistical imperatives to observe when designing and planning programs and interventions:

- Understand the size and distribution of the Indigenous population, especially in remote areas
- Account for the cultural diversity of the Indigenous population.

These guiding principles reinforce the importance of accounting for context. Differences in culture, language, level of remoteness and living circumstances matter, so that what works in one setting may not necessarily work in another. Interviews with practitioners and other stakeholders consistently revealed that the challenges are different depending on the level of remoteness of a location and the proportion of the population that is Indigenous. This was also reflected in the AEDI results in the Pilbara [16]. At the same time, some of the greatest challenges are faced in urban areas where there are few families in schools. In acknowledging this, the case studies cover a range of settings and contexts.

More broadly, communities and services need to be supported to have a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention initiatives for children and families and parents. Silburn and Walker state that these should include administrative and legislative initiatives, such as the establishment of a national Indigenous children’s services workforce development strategy; an Indigenous child welfare and development council; reform to foster and kinship legislation; a family and child abuse healing strategy; and other state and territory based child protection reforms [4].
Key elements of the practice-wisdom

At a finer level, the practice-wisdom presented in case studies and feedback from key informants also identified some of the key elements of strategies to address the critical challenges. These include:

– Building relationships
– Strengths-based approaches as opposed to focusing on needs or problems
– Building in time for evaluation, to measure how effective programs have been in achieving outcomes
– Producing high quality programs requires staff with training and qualifications in Early Child Development and cross cultural competence
– Incorporating early learning and literacy programs that simultaneously target both parents and children (facilitating dual or trans-generational and community learning)
– Providing a culturally inclusive space, where possible

Given the historical legacies of forced separation from family and removal from country, there are also situations where strategies and interventions need to encompass broader elements including:

– Enabling or facilitating healing
– Parenting and homemaker programs [4, 6].

In conclusion, the programs considered in the Topical Paper are designed to assist Indigenous families in preparing their children for school and schools to prepare for Indigenous children. The programs reflect the importance of employing comprehensive, holistic, often multilevel strategies and early interventions that involve working with the child, family and community, and are consistent with the ecological model of child development that frames the paper. This theoretical framework considers and addresses a child’s developmental needs within the context of the family, the families’ needs within context of the community, and the needs of the community in the context of the wider society – thus highlighting the critical importance of acknowledging and having regard for context and culture in engaging Indigenous families in preparing their children for school.
USEFUL RESOURCES

The following is a list of useful websites and resources. These highlight specific programs, services, links and contacts which have a particular focus on issues of parenting and school readiness.

Note, this is not designed to be an exhaustive list of resources on this topic, rather it is a starting point for exploration and information.

Parent and practitioner information and resources

Aboriginal Head Start Program (Canada)
An early childhood development program for Canadian First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families.

Aboriginal Resource Development Services (NT)
A capacity building organisation involved in community education and development with the Yolngu people in north-east Arnhem Land.
www.ards.com.au

Best Start for Aboriginal Families (WA)
Service for Indigenous children from birth to 5 years (located in rural, remote and metropolitan areas), aiming to improve their health, education, social and cultural development.
http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Resources/Parenting/BestStartforAboriginalFamilies/

Best Start, Broadmeadows (Victoria)
A formal partnership of 15 agencies – including parent representation – working locally with children and families (0-8 yrs), with the mission of optimising the health, development, learning and wellbeing of children living or participating in the Broadmeadows Community.

Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes CfC (NSW)
A CfC site aiming to improve outcomes for children aged 0-5 years in Dubbo, Wellington and Narromine in the central-west of NSW.

Children Services Support Unit (WA)
CSSU supports local communities in managing sustainable and quality child care.
www.cssu.org.au

Families And Schools Together (FAST) (NT)
FAST is a multifamily group intervention designed to build protective factors for children, and to empower parents as the primary prevention agents for their children.
Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) (NSW, Victoria & Tasmania)
A home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment program targeting disadvantaged families. HIPPY fosters parent involvement in school and community life to maximise the chances of a successful early school experience. It can also offer a supported pathway to employment and local community leadership for parents.

Hume Moreland Integrated Family Services (HMIFS) (Victoria)
A partnership committed to developing and delivering creative and collaborative family services for vulnerable children, young people and their families that live in the Cities of Hume and Moreland, in outer metropolitan Melbourne.

Let’s Read (National)
An initiative that promotes reading with children from birth to 5 years. It is designed to support and empower parents to read with their young children and aims to give children the skills they will need to learn to read when they start school.

Let’s Start (NT)
A program designed to help parents support children as they negotiate their way through preschool into primary school. It focuses on children aged 3-6 years and their parents.
http://www.cdu.edu.au/letsstart/

Ngala (WA)
An Early Parenting Centre with a passion for supporting and guiding families and young children through the journey of early parenting.
www.ngala.com.au

Parenting and Child Health (SA)
A resource for parents and caregivers on everything related to the health and development of children.

Parenting sites (National)
Provides links to parenting sites across Australia.

Parents and Children Learning Together (WA)
A resource for parents and practitioners, provided by the WA Department for Communities

Parents Resources Online (WA)
Provides links to parenting tips/information and services to parents.
http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Communities/Parents/

Pilbara Parents (WA)
A website designed for the parents in the Pilbara to meet, share information and connect.
www.pilbaraparents.com

Playgroup Australia (National)
Representative body for playgroups throughout Australia.
www.playgroupwa.com.au

Playgroup – Playing to Get Ready for School (WA)
A guide for parents and practitioners looking to begin a playgroup for Aboriginal children. This resource draws on the authors’ experiences in organising and running playgroups in Ngaanyatjarra communities and is particularly useful for designing playgroups in remote Aboriginal contexts.

Raising Children Network (National)
The Australian parenting website, which has a wealth of practical, expert, child health and parenting information and activities, covering children aged 0-8 years.
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (RUCSN) (WA)
An organisation that aims to facilitate the inclusion of children with additional needs in child care in Western Australia.
www.rucsn.org.au

Secretariat National Aboriginal Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (National)
Peak body which represents Indigenous children's services and promotes the rights, needs and aspirations of Indigenous children and families. This site has a resource collection with practical information for the day-to-day running of Indigenous families.
http://www.snaicc.asn.au/

Strong Beginnings: An Explicit Guide to Quality Practice in the Early Years (NT)
A resource for educators to guide quality practice that is accessible to staff working in diverse contexts and with a range of qualifications and experiences. It provides links to the childcare and children’s services sectors’ quality improvement and accreditation requirements to support the early learning programs in these services for over three year olds.

Support at Home for Early Language and Literacies (SHELLS) program
SHELLS is a program designed for families with children from birth to three years of age. Its aims are to enhance children’s potential for successful literacy through supporting families as the first literacy educators of their children. For a program summary see: http://omep.docuserve.com.au/papers/Makin,%20Laurie.pdf

The Smith Family (National)
A national, independent, social enterprise that supports disadvantaged Australian children to create a better future through education.
www.thesmithfamily.com.au

Together for Our Children Initiative (ACT)
A CfC initiative aiming to mobilise community capacity to deliver positive early
intervention outcomes for children 0-5 years. It does this by building on existing services and facilities to improve outcomes for children (improving community capacity, improving integration of service delivery and developing sustainable activities).

http://www.northside.asn.au/c4c.html

**Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi (NT)**
A community-based organisation, working with Indigenous families in remote Central Australia.

http://www.waltja.org.au

**Primary School Programs and Resources**

**Challis Early Childhood Education Centre (WA)**
Kartajin Danjoo (Learning Together) is a school-based initiative to address attendance issues among Indigenous students. The strategy is to keep siblings and cousins together so that smaller children are encouraged to come to school and feel safe in their environment.


**Dare to Lead (Queensland)**
A program at Kuranda District State College that aims to connect with the Indigenous community to improve school readiness.


**Same Kids Same Goals (National)**
A project conducted in partnership with ‘Dare To Lead’ and aimed at addressing the importance of an effective working relationship between school Principals and Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs).


**Early Years Research**

**Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) (National)**
A community-level measure that provides communities with baseline data on developmental vulnerability and school readiness.


**Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet (National)**
An innovative web resource that makes knowledge and information on Indigenous health easily accessible to inform practice and policy.


**Australian Institute of Family Studies (National)**
An Australian government statutory authority that was established to promote the identification and understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia.

www.aifs.gov.au
Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (National)
A national collaboration of researchers, policy makers and practitioners devoted to building a better future for Australia's children and young people.
www.aracy.org.au

Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) (National)
Conducts research into early childhood development and behaviour, including many conditions and common problems faced by children, such as obesity, language and literacy delay, and behavioural concerns, that are either preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early.
www.rch.org.au/ccch

Kulunga Research Network (National)
The Indigenous research arm of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.
www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/kulunga

Parenting Research Centre (Victoria)
An organisation that engages in a range of research activities to help parents raise children well.

School readiness in Indigenous children – Bringing together the health and education research agenda (NT)
A collaboration aiming to apply rigorous research methods to determining the most effective service models/interventions to improve school readiness for young Indigenous children in the Northern Territory.

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (National)
Research organisation aiming to improve and to promote the health and wellbeing of all children through the unique application of multidisciplinary research.
www.ichr.uwa.edu.au

Australian Government

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) – Indigenous statistics theme (National)
Provides links to statistical information on Indigenous people.

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (National)
Responsible for social policies and support affecting Australian society and the living standards of Australian families.
www.facsia.gov.au

The Indigenous Portal (National)
Provides links to resources, contacts, information, and government programs and services for Indigenous people.
www.indigenous.gov.au
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