Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families

Research Report to the NSW Department of Human Services

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Prepared by

Jennifer Bowes and Rosalind Kitson
Children and Families Research Centre, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University

Tracey Simpson, Jo-Anne Reid, Melissa Smith, Belinda Downey and Sophia Pearce
School of Teacher Education, Charles Sturt University

On behalf of the research team that also included:
Natalie Burns, Chantelle Davis, Michelle Dickson, Michelle Doolan, Darryl French, Rebecca Holzigal, Lindy Moffatt, Kerry Mundine and Shirley Wyver from Macquarie University and Alicia Artery, Jean Brain, Laurie Crawford, Cathy Davies, Christine Fernando, Melinda Fox, Servena McIntyre, Iris Reid, Letitia Smith, Loretta Stanley, Debra Walford and Julie Wilson from Charles Sturt University.
We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we yarnd and worked with Aboriginal families to gain greater knowledge and understanding of what is needed for improved present experiences and futures for Aboriginal children and families.

We wish to acknowledge and thank many people and organisations who contributed to the Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families Study. First we are greatly indebted to the communities who listened to us, gave their permission and actively assisted in carrying out this research. We are very grateful to the families who participated, spending many hours yarning and telling us about their children, their experiences with school and children’s services, and their experiences of bringing up little children. The relationships built between researchers and communities and between field researchers and families over the period of the study formed a strong basis for families sharing with us important insights and experiences about the raising of Aboriginal children in New South Wales.

The project involved a considerable team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University. Everyone contributed a great deal to the project whether they were part of the original team involved in the research design (Jennifer Bowes and Darryl French from Macquarie University; Tracey Simpson, Jo-Anne Reid and Laurie Crawford from Charles Sturt University), the researchers who joined and contributed to the project design, analysis and report writing (Michelle Dickson, Ros Kitson and Shirley Wyver from Macquarie University; Belinda Downey Servena McIntyre, Sophia Pearce, Melissa Smith and Julie Wilson from Charles Sturt University); the field researchers who recruited families in communities for the project and were involved in yarning sessions (Natalie Burns, Chantelle Davis, Michelle Doolan, Rebecca Holzigal, Lindy Moffatt and Kerry Mundine, from Macquarie University; Cathy Davies, Christine Fernando, Servena McIntyre, Sophia Pearce, Iris Reid, Letitia Smith, Loretta Stanley and Debra Walford, from Charles Sturt University) or administrative assistants who helped organise the project (Natalie Burns, Lindy Moffatt and Kerry Mundine from Macquarie University; Alicia Artery, Jean Brain and Melinda Fox from Charles Sturt University).

It should be noted that insights from the field researchers formed the basis for our understanding and interpretation of what the families were saying. In addition, field researchers co-wrote and presented at conferences alongside other research team members. They made a significant contribution to the research team.

The study has been supported by funding and advice from the NSW Department of Community Services. This support continued through the ups and downs of the project enabling us to achieve what we had originally hoped to accomplish: a rich account of the early childhood education experiences of Indigenous children across NSW from the viewpoint of their families that could be used as a source of information for policy development. We also appreciated the encouragement of the Department of Community Services to communicate the project and its emerging findings to interested groups within and outside the department. A list of presentations is attached to the
The Department of Community Services Research Steering Committee for this project provided understanding, support and encouragement to the research team. They understood that projects like this need adequate funding and need additional time. They also appreciated the importance of involvement of Indigenous people at all stages of the research, in the design, data collection, interpretation and presentation of results as well as in the Research Steering Committee. This project could not have been completed without this support and understanding.

When this research began, the team was committed to help redress the generally negative social research on Indigenous families and communities. We wanted to talk with families in a positive way about their ideas and experiences about bringing up young children in the years prior to school and in the period of school transition. The report reflects this perspective and to a large extent presents the words of the families, letting their voices be heard about current experiences of Indigenous families and their suggestions for better ways to provide children’s services made available to inform policy makers.

During the course of the project, debate has continued on the desirability of non-Indigenous researchers being involved in research involving Indigenous families and communities. We felt that the involvement of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers in this project worked well, enriching the project through both-ways learning. Respecting and sharing the knowledge and skills that were brought to the project led to considerable learning for all involved, and we hope this is reflected in our report.

Many of the field researchers during the project continue to be engaged in research and further study. As non-Indigenous researchers, we feel privileged to have worked with the communities involved in the project as well as with such a dedicated team. Our cultural understandings have been developed by the relationships formed and by working together so closely. We are pleased to present this final report to the Department of Human Services.

Jennifer Bowes and Tracey Simpson
Research Team Leaders,
Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families Project

Note: The terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ are both used in this report. Participants expressed their wish to be referred to as ‘Aboriginal’ and we have respected that wish as far as possible. The term ‘Indigenous’ was part of the original title of the project and has also been used when we are including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (as for the urban families) or quoting literature that used this term.
All photographs in this report are reproduced with permission. Families from across the urban, regional and remote sites are included in the collages.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of the Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families Project, a study of the early care, education and schooling experiences of Indigenous children in urban, regional and remote New South Wales. The study was commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services in 2004. It is essential for policy makers and practitioners to understand why early childhood care and education facilities run by government and non-government agencies fail so dramatically to attract and engage members of Indigenous communities. This is particularly important in view of the belief that effective pre-school learning experiences will enhance educational and life outcomes for Indigenous children. Accordingly, this project began with three broad research questions:

1. What is the experience of Indigenous families in NSW raising children under school age?
2. What knowledge and skills do Indigenous children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school?
3. What are the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how can children’s and family services be more effective for Indigenous families?

While these questions remained important, the study worked in a more holistic manner to answer the general question:

**What is it like to bring up little children in Aboriginal communities in the early 21st century?**

As an overall guiding question, we thought that this would allow a more open-ended approach to the design and conduct of the study and the question framed our work in developing an appropriate methodology.

This research has attempted, in its design and conduct, to be mindful of the effects and legacy of inappropriate methodological approaches. The design of the Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families project has attempted to share power in the development of the study by seeking the assistance of the communities that we have studied.

The methodology recognises the plurality of Indigenous society and refuses to essentialise the idea of either ‘an Indigenous family’, or ‘an Indigenous community’. A key factor in this has been the importance of the social geography of the study.

Yarning was used in this research as it has been identified as an appropriate and respectful way of engaging with Indigenous participants. ‘Yarning’ is seen as a culturally appropriate form of accessing and privileging Indigenous Knowledge.
Following an extensive period of community consultation and relationship development, 107 families were recruited for the study from women’s groups, community groups, playgroups, children’s services and through recommendations from community Elders and agencies. Three areas with a high Indigenous population were included in the Sydney urban site: one from the inner city (9 families), one from the inner western suburbs (10 families) and one from the outer western suburbs (8 families). Five western NSW communities of varying size were included in the regional part of the study with 44 families participating. Four remote far north western NSW communities involving 36 participants were included in the remote site. Overall, families represented a wide range of circumstances in family make-up, use of services, financial situations and specific beliefs about child rearing.

Parents and family members took part in yarning sessions with one or two Indigenous field researchers and, in one location, an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal researcher who had either previous or developed links with the community worked together. The yarning sessions were different in different locations and contexts respecting the suggestions of local people, Aboriginal organisations and the participants. The yarns included a focus on the early childhood years and experiences with child and family services. Families were given a disposable camera to take photographs, if they wished, of their family and activities involving their preschool aged children. In some follow-up sessions the photos formed a focus for the yarns, along with a focus on transition to school experiences.

Yarning sessions were transcribed and themes identified. The results reflect stories of:

1. **Valued learning at home**, which included:
   - Learning respect for elders, values, morals and kinship knowledge
   - Embracing Aboriginal culture, language and identity
   - Families’ educational aspirations for their children
   - Valuing children’s learning in the early years
   - All family members being involved in bringing up children

2. **Children’s services experiences**, which included:
   - Families seeing themselves as consumers in children’s services but often feeling that they don’t belong
   - Some feeling misunderstood and not respected by staff in children’s services
   - Some feeling uncomfortable and judged in children’s services
   - Feeling of cultural safety when Aboriginal staff and family members attend the service
   - Experiencing a distance between families and services resulting from a lack of communication and consultation about children, the management of the service and curriculum
3. Appreciating features of **culturally safe early childhood settings** such as:
   - Welcoming human and physical environments.
   - Indigenous staff.
   - Community members who are paid for participation.
   - Non-Indigenous staff who are educated about cultural knowledge and are developing cultural competence in working with Indigenous children, their families and communities.
   - Programs that welcome families and community at any time.
   - Teachers who use Indigenous ways of knowing and learning to influence their approach to teaching and learning with all children.
   - Culture and Aboriginal language in the curriculum (with content based on advice from the local community).
   - Mechanisms for two-way communication with families.

4. **Transition to school**:
   - Some families reported successful transitions and attributed this to attending children’s services in the years before school.
   - Other families reported difficulty in school transition and expressed a wish for greater cultural understanding in schools. Some suggested that a playgroup or other transition program at the school would have helped their child.
   - Families who had not yet engaged in school transition said that they were preparing their child at home through teaching them their numbers, how to write their name and other academic skills.

Some families expressed concerns about schools not being culturally safe places and concerns about bullying, especially if their child had a disability.
Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

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

- Families valued the early years of children’s lives and understood the importance of this period. Families want some control over what happens for their children. Some families reported managing better than others. Some families are more greatly affected by poverty, location and family disruption.

- Parents, grandparents and aunties were responsible for much of the care and home education of the children. Aboriginal people in this study wanted their children to be around family not strangers. They accessed other services for early childhood care and education if they could and as they needed it or saw it as important.

- The home learning environment for Aboriginal families is rich in ways that are not traditionally valued from a non-Aboriginal perspective. Young children are taught about kinship, cultural practices, respect for elders and Aboriginal language when those close to them have that knowledge. Children are surrounded by loving adults and relationships with siblings and cousins and other extended-family are strong. Books, games and toys are part of the environment as well as the physical environment and community activities and events. Many families read with their children, taught them academic skills, and exposed them to art and music.

- Parents and grandparents told us of their wish for their children to learn about their culture so that they could develop a strong Aboriginal identity. They saw this identity as helping to support the children to thrive and achieve. A number of families wanted their children to learn about other cultures as well as Aboriginal culture.

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

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

- According to their families, Aboriginal children bring the same skills to school as non-Aboriginal children do as well as their experience in socialising and connecting in an extended family and community context. The children when they start school are also growing with knowledge of culture and country. However, those who do not attend preschool and other early learning programs miss out on some skills that make it easier for them to settle into school and know what school is about. Preparing for school requires local knowledge as well as confidence and self-esteem.
3. Why are the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how can children’s services be more effective for Aboriginal families?

- Access issues are important to families. Fees, transport, waiting lists, family responsibilities, and personal choice not to attend were all named. Addressing issues of transport and cost needs and access to places must be a priority. This requires some local solutions but also some commitment to considering new models of support for addressing these issues in specific locations.

- There was considerable distrust expressed by families. Families often felt judged and misunderstood by staff in all types of services. Children’s services did not always offer the quality of service that they wanted for their children. As staff talked down to them, families felt intimidated and disempowered. They either persevered because they wanted their children to “survive” in the education system or avoided using services, especially when a parent was at home and could teach their children themselves.

- What families said to us about their preferences suggests that we need to consider how to make services more “natural” (mixed age grouping, more adults present, including parents), more welcoming and involving of parents and local community and to educate and employ more Aboriginal staff.

We have summarized below the key areas of “Focus for change” with some suggested major strategies which require policy attention.

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<th>Focus for change</th>
<th>Some suggested strategies</th>
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| Planning for results | • Community Early Childhood Education and Development Plans  
• New models of service provision - flexible to respond to the community and location |
| Workforce | • Strategic Plan with specific goals |
| Cultural interface | • Intensive identity education program in all services  
• Intensive cultural education in all services and in pre-service training programs using local registered courses |
| Cultural interface - Teaching and learning | • Introduce 8ways (http://8ways.wikispaces.com) or similar  
• Intensive in-service training |
| Management | • Introduce leadership programs using opportunities for connectedness model  
• Review policies and procedures in children’s services |
| Community connectedness | • Introduce new expectations of consultation and inclusiveness in licensing and quality assessment. |
| Access | • Address local issues of cost and transport |
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 2004, the Department of Community Services commissioned the Child Care Choices research team to undertake a project on Indigenous families that addressed some of the same questions about experiences with child care and early childhood education that were being asked in Child Care Choices, a longitudinal study of over 600 young children and their families begun in 2002 in urban and rural areas of NSW. It was recognised that the research methods used in the Child Care Choices study were not suitable for a study of Indigenous families with their reliance on surveys, phone interviews and child assessments.

The challenge for this project was to develop research methods that were appropriate and that would engage families so that their voices could be heard authentically. This challenge has been a central concern of the project. We have devoted a chapter of the report to discussion of these issues and the rationale for the research methods we used.

We began this study with the knowledge that only 1.5% of Indigenous children use child care under the NSW children’s services program, despite representing 4.2% of the under-12 population (ABS, 2001). We began with the challenge of providing an evidence basis on which NSW DOCS can move to improve this situation. Our task was to gather and analyse trustworthy information from Indigenous families. Our aim was to identify policy directions and guidelines that will assist government to make the best fiscal and social decisions for the provision of forms of early care and education that will be trusted by Indigenous families and communities across the state, and that will be used and that will be effective for them. The need for this study has been amply demonstrated by increasingly strident calls for government to invest in more productive education strategies for the early years that will significantly address the issue of Indigenous underachievement in schooling demonstrated in the figure below, compiled by DEEWR in 2008.

Figure 1.1 Percentage of students achieving Reading Benchmarks in 2006 (DEEWR, 2008) Note: LBOTE means Language Background Other than English
This figure also indicates that Indigenous children in Australia, as a group, perform less well than any other demographic group on standardised tests of reading at Years 3, 5 and 7 including children who have a language background other than English. More complex analyses of these test results indicate that location plays a significant role in the achievement of basic schooling outcomes for Indigenous children around Australia, with those in small rural and remote areas achieving consistently lower outcomes than those located in metropolitan centres (Rennie, 2006; Tripcony, 2002).

It is clear from the research reported in the literature review below that the importance of children having access to, and being engaged in, social practices that involve pleasurable and meaningful use of literacy from the early years is well established as a marker of school success in formal education settings. Family and community child rearing and child care practices are very much part of the early literacy environment for individual children, and for these reasons there is general systematic acceptance of the need for pre-school experiences that will effectively serve the needs of Indigenous families in this regard.

1.2 Literature Review

Introduction

Australia’s future depends on the welfare and education of all children including the growing proportion of Indigenous children. Education, and in particular early childhood education, is seen to be a key element in improving the future for Indigenous children (Cassady, Fleet, Hughes & Kitson, 2005). While increasing attention has been given to the historical context and importance of early childhood education, less attention has been given to Indigenous early childhood programs (Prochner, 2004). This is changing with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Reform Agenda and the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) giving increased attention to early childhood education.

In recognition of the significance of early childhood education for all children COAG (2006) clearly states an outcome of the Human Capital reform agenda will be that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children will be closed (p. 6). Prime Minister Rudd clearly expressed the government’s intent:

Let us resolve over the next five years to have every Indigenous four-year-old enrolled in and attending a proper early childhood education centre (Rudd, 2008).

Notably, there is a specific commitment that all Indigenous four-year-old children who reside in remote communities have access to a quality early childhood program by 2013 (DEEWR 2008). It can be argued however that all children should have access to quality early childhood education regardless of their geographical location.

The priority for equity and equality of access to pre-school services for Indigenous children is clear in The National Goals for Indigenous Education (DEEWR, 2008). The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC, 2007) briefing paper states that the Australian Government has a responsibility for leading a strong
national response to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's welfare and development (p. 3).

Many government reports recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are the most educationally disadvantaged group in the country (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; Cassady et al., 2005; Press & Hayes, 2000; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000). The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Department of Education and Training (AECG/DET, 2004) report concluded "Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia, with consistently lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of absenteeism and suspensions than non-Aboriginal students" (NSW AECG/DET, 2004, p. 12). Similarly, Gordon (2006) asserts that Indigenous children are 'the most vulnerable group of children in Australia’ and identifies the early childhood stage as particularly vulnerable because both the parent and child are less visible, especially in remote communities where the child may not have access to early childhood facilities (p. 77). Howey (2005) makes the point that Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies have a responsibility to address issues of equity and equality for Indigenous children.

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEEYTA) Taskforce on Indigenous Early Childhood Education paper (2001) acknowledged that while some progress has been made towards making early childhood programs inclusive and supportive of diversity and Indigenous ways, much remains to be done. Inclusive practice is a matter of social justice and equity and many early childhood services do not reflect ‘the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian society' (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 4). The provision of “culturally appropriate, accessible and affordable” early childhood education and care is a serious issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Brennan, 1998, p. 5). It is widely recognised that programs for Indigenous children should be based on local knowledge and culture while including relevant ideas and supporting learning from mainstream programs (Biddle, 2007; Cassady et al., 2005; De Gioia, Hayden & Hadley, 2003; Prochner, 2004; Sims, Saggers, Hutchins, Guilfoyle, Targowska & Jackiewicz, 2008; Windisch, Jenvey & Drysdale, 2003).

History of early childhood services for Indigenous children

The participation of Indigenous children in early childhood settings emerged as an area that required specific consideration during the 1980s when it was recognised that schooling outcomes constantly failed to deliver desired results. This was around the period when Australia was experiencing some major social and political shifts in terms of its relationship with Indigenous Australians. Most notably, the 1967 Referendum provided the Commonwealth Government with powers to pass laws for Indigenous Australians (Martin 2007). One key implication stemming from the 1967 Referendum is explained in further detail by Martin (2007):

... and thus caused a disruption to the paternalistic relationships of State and Territory Governments. These different structural relationships enabled
Aboriginal peoples to voice and enact their expectations for the early childhood education of their young children (p. 16).

Initial early childhood programs that were specifically introduced to cater to the needs of Indigenous Australian children mirrored those designed for minority groups in America, and tended to center on compensatory education models (Martin, 2007). Indigenous voices grew stronger during the 1980s and 1990s, leading the way for new socio-political changes to occur. Most notably, Indigenous community-controlled early childhood services began to emerge around this time, predominantly in New South Wales and Queensland. Martin (2007) stated:

> With the tight regimes of paternalism loosening, Aboriginal people mobilised for the inclusion of cultural programmes and activities in schools and early childhood services. These programmes were seen as the vehicles for both cultural reclamation and achieving more positive schooling outcomes for Aboriginal students. The discourse of invisibility, as it has once reigned, had significantly been altered (p. 16).

Such history is particularly relevant to this inquiry as it is important to recognise that early childhood settings designed to specifically cater to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are a relatively new phenomenon that have existed for only two to three decades.

In New Zealand, early childhood is framed by a socio-cultural curriculum document *Te Whariki*, which requires early childhood educators to “honour the cultural heritage of both Maori and western people” (Colbung, Glover, Rau & Ritchie, 2007, p. 152). In Australia, the importance of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum is adopted by some state government curriculum frameworks (Colbung et al., 2007). Globally, however, Australia has fallen significantly behind other countries in making certain that children have access to quality education and care. Kronemann (2008) explains that Australia has been spending only 0.1% of GDP on pre-primary education, compared to the 0.4% average of OECD and an EU average of 0.5%.

**A National Early Childhood Agenda in Australia**

There is evidence that early childhood frameworks in Australia are changing. The recent national curriculum *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF, 2009) supports the Council of Australian Government’s commitment to an inclusive vision that ensures “all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (EYLF, 2009, p. 5). This document has a focus on “ways of working fairly and justly” (p. 11). The Principles that underpin the framework reflect this:

**Principle 1.** Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships  
**Principle 2.** Partnerships  
**Principle 3.** High expectations and equity  
**Principle 4.** Respect for diversity  
**Principle 5.** Ongoing learning and reflective practice (EYLF, 2009, pp. 12-13)
Of particular relevance to this inquiry is the commitment from COAG to closing the gap for Indigenous children and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The Melbourne Declaration (cited in EYLF, p. 6) also advocates “promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being” (EYLF, 2009, p. 13).

The National Reform Agenda framework (COAG, 2006) shows a commitment to a national agenda for early childhood education in Australia. The Howard Government had limited change in early childhood education by restricting responsibility to the state level. In contrast, the current Australian Government has presented a “commitment to the development of a coordinated national framework for early childhood education and care, including federal funding to ensure universal access to at least one year of early childhood education” (Kronemann, 2008, p. 1). Such a commitment is necessary if Australia intends to present itself in a similar manner to other leading countries in terms of the early childhood education it provides. There are, however, many challenges to overcome in regard to developing a more integrated early childhood system. Kronemann (2008) explains that Australia’s early childhood system is “characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality, inequitable access and inconsistency” (p. 1).

**Indigenous children’s participation in early childhood settings**

The benefits of early childhood education are more available to some children than to others. Indigenous children are under-represented in early childhood settings in urban centres as well as regional and remote areas (Frigo & Adams, as cited in Perry et al., 2007, p. 21; Kronemann, 2007). While figures cited often vary depending on collection methods, in a report to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), Cassady et al. (2005) estimated that there were 72,610 Indigenous children aged birth to five years. The analysis of this data from the National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (DEST, 2005) suggests that only 23.5% of Indigenous children are currently using early childhood settings. This is in contrast to the estimated 52.9% attendance rate of all children in Australia.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) indicate that of the Indigenous children in Australian Government-supported services, 51% were in long day care, 16% in before and after school hours care, and 9% in family day care. These statistics do not cover all Indigenous children in early childhood services. It should be noted that Australian Government-funded services do not include preschools and provision of children’s services is fragmented. However, this is changing as the present government has plans for the provision of pre-school education for all four-year-old children (Rudd, Roxon, Macklin & Smith 2007).

According to the MCEETYA discussion paper (2001), enrolment and attendance rates of Aboriginal children in early childhood services are decreasing and the trend does not seem to be changing (NSW AECG/DET, 2004; De Gioia et al., 2003). In 2005, Indigenous children represented 4.4% of total preschool enrolments (ABS Year Book, 2006). This proportion does not correspond with the increasing proportion of young Indigenous children in the Australian population. Rather, it indicates a failure by government to provide more pre-school places. As Kronemann (2007) noted, there is a
higher enrolment of Indigenous children in government preschools than in non-government preschools.

In an analysis, specific to preschools only, an Australian Education Union Briefing Paper indicated that an estimated 56.4% of 4- to 5-year-old Indigenous children attend preschool, compared to the general preschool participation rate of 83.4% (Kronemann, 2007). Linking the data provided by DEST (2005) and Kronemann (2007), it is evident that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children increase their attendance of early childhood settings in the year prior to attending primary school. However, the significant difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains. This must be overcome to redress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and provide for equality of opportunity.

The three main issues that influence participation in early education for Indigenous children are history, culture and socio-economic status. D’Souza (1999) argues for an approach that acknowledges and addresses these elements. Current provisions of early childhood education for Indigenous children are showing poor results. An approach that reflects the culture of the child’s community is an essential component of an equitable program that will facilitate learning. Welch (1996) cited in Kitson-Charleston (2005, p. 106) indicates that culture in educational settings is used selectively to “maintain prevailing power relations in society.” In this way cultures that are “othered” by the dominant colonial discourse are not acknowledged or respected (MacNaughton, Cruz & Hughes, 2003; Sarra, 2007).

Culture, identity and education

Culture and identity are inextricably connected. Children’s ways of knowing are shaped by culture and in diverse cultures children express themselves in varying ways (Kitson-Charleston, 2005). Education is about searching for meaning, understanding and identity, and it needs to be set in the cultural context of the learner. In Indigenous culture, education is a life-long process, based on sharing stories as a part of everyday life (Bamblett, 2007; Townsend-Cross, 2004). Core principles of Indigenous educational philosophies are “the Dreaming (Law), life skills, relationships and notions of community informed by physical and spiritual realities” (Townsend-Cross, 2004, p. 3; Hutchins, Martin, Saggars & Simms, 2007). Land, identity and culture are connected and interrelated (D’Souza, 1999). For children growing up in Indigenous communities, the process of learning identity is nurtured through relatedness to family, community and land. Gordon (2006) explains that Indigenous children are usually the concern of their entire community, not just their parents. Indigenous children present with different experiences. However, their “learning becomes significant in the context of the community in which they live” (Harrison, 2008, p. 10). Halse and Robinson (1999) add to the discussion:

*Like children from other cultures and backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a cultural identity that is perpetuated through contemporary child-rearing practices, common historical experiences, kinship, value systems and community affiliation* (p. 200).
Ball & Pence (2000) argue that “children reproduce the culture of their primary caregivers, peers and the media with which they interact from their earliest years” (p. 21) and a child’s culture affects the way it enters an early childhood setting. They further suggest that teachers reproduce and perpetuate their own cultures through their own values, beliefs, interactions and teaching style. The majority of early childhood teachers remain “predominately female middle-class and Anglo-Australian” (MacNaughton et al., 2003, p.3), hence the values of “white cultures and worldviews” reflecting “white views on racial diversity are viewed as ‘normal and natural” (p. 2).

Press and Hayes (2000) argue that current provision is not inclusive of Indigenous cultural values and beliefs and that more attention needs to be given to the significance of culture in learning “how and why children learn through their culture and the cultures of others, and how participation in those cultures shapes their identity” (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 3). Harrison (2008) explains that non-Indigenous teachers need to recognise that Indigenous children have a different way of learning from their non-Indigenous counterparts but emphasises the need for caution so that “insurmountable gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” are not created (p. 9).

One aspect that is sometimes overlooked in discussions of culture is the right that Indigenous children have to maintain their cultural identity within an early childhood setting. They “have the right to be Indigenous and demand recognition of their identity” (Craven, 1999, p. 24). Colbung et al. (2007) explain:

> Indigenous children have the right to teachers who understand the importance of children becoming and remaining competent members of their own culture and to services which seek to keep children’s identity attached to their family (p. 153).

It is essential that these rights be recognised if Indigenous children are to be provided with a positive early childhood experience that acknowledges, accepts and nurtures their Indigeneity.

**Indigenous families and education**

Families and the community are central to the lives of Indigenous children. The history of children being removed from their families has had enduring impact on Indigenous families, with lasting effects across generations (Bamblett, 2007; D’Souza, 1999; HREOC, 1997) leading to “suspicion and distrust of authorities” (Brennan, 1998, p. 6). One common reason for Indigenous children’s low levels of attainment at school is their parents’ own negative experience of school (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; NSW AECG/DET, 2004). Power (2004) stated that:

> Many Indigenous people have expressed resistance to colonial education by school refusal. Frustration at indifference to the benefits of a ‘superior civilisation’ is a theme throughout Indigenous education from earliest days to the present day (p.5).
SNAICC (cited in Brennan, 1998, p. 6) argues that suggestions advocated by Indigenous communities are either not accepted or they are made to conform to “white” structures or categories.

The low participation of Indigenous children in early childhood programs is not from a lack of interest but is connected with families’ discomfort with the existing opportunities (Perry et al., 2007). This is despite the fact that Indigenous people are believed to value early childhood education for similar reasons non-Indigenous people do (McRae et al. 2000). Indigenous families’ experiences of developmentally appropriate practice grounded in a white middle class cultural context and equated with colonial schooling which for many years was “the dominant discourse in early childhood education” (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2005, p. 261), may also be a reason for Indigenous families not participating in early childhood programs. The developmentalist perspective has been critiqued as focusing on a “needs-based” approach that reflects one “normal” pathway of learning and is not inclusive (Kitson-Charleston, 2005, p. 13). Ball and Pence (2000) express serious doubts that this perspective can ever be adapted to be inclusive of cultural diversity.

Teaching grounded in the “mono-cultural approach” of the “white dominant majority” privileges whiteness and accepts these practices as “normal,” excluding other cultures and races (Ball & Pence, 2000; Reid & Santoro, 2006a, p. 147). Reid and Santoro (2006a) discuss the view that child-care and education that denies recognition of Indigenous culture, lifestyle and language has been used to “subjugate Aboriginal peoples” (p. 21). In a study of “whiteness as the dominant discourse” in early childhood education, Davis (2005) discusses the need to acknowledge and address denial as a basis of constructing a pedagogy of practice that “ensures equitable inclusion of black and non-white cultures and people” (pp. 27-28).

The education of children in Indigenous communities is based on children being “nurtured … toward an increasing sense of relatedness to family, community and environmental resonance” (Townsend-Cross, 2004, p. 3). Purdie et al. (2000) reported that students indicated that their parents and their extended families were the most important people in their lives. They also said that the larger Indigenous community was also important to them. While this study focused on school age children, the information is also relevant for prior-to-school age settings.

Harrison’s work (2008) concentrates primarily on the education of Indigenous children in the primary school setting although much of this work is applicable to younger Indigenous children. For instance, Harrison (2008) explains that Indigenous children usually come to school with strong knowledge of history and the unequal power relationships that have developed as a consequence of colonialism. Because of such inequality, Indigenous children often view the teacher as someone to be wary of as well as someone to learn from. However, they will more frequently look for recognition from people they know, such as family, rather than trust a teacher whom they do not know. Harrison (2008) adds that interpretations of knowledge within the classroom are influenced by children’s experiences outside the classroom.
These differences illustrate some of the issues and problems that confront Indigenous children when they are in non-Indigenous early childhood settings based on Western pedagogical and cultural practices.

**Indigenous families and child rearing**

There are several features of child rearing practices in Indigenous families that differ from non-Indigenous families. Relationships, responsibility and independence are at the basis of Indigenous parenting (Hutchins et al., 2007). In a study of differences in child rearing practices between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families, Malin, Campbell and Agius (1996) found non-Indigenous people often viewed Indigenous child rearing practices in a negative light. However, Indigenous child rearing strategies are actually an “effective means for preparing Aboriginal children to deal with the conditions they will encounter as adults” (Malin, et al., 1996, p. 43). The study highlighted the fact that certain acts could be interpreted very differently from one person to the next with one’s ethnicity playing a key role in the interpretation process.

As suggested by Butterworth and Candy (1998), education programs for young Aboriginal children should reflect the reality of their lives. Wilson and Matthews (2001) and Kitson-Charleston (2005) discuss the importance and impact of educators valuing children’s life experiences and providing for continuity of experience between the home environment and the early childhood setting. Indigenous children are brought up to be self-sufficient (Butterworth & Candy 1998; Warrki Jarrinjaku ARCS Project Team, 2002; Wilson & Matthews, 2001), to share everything, to tolerate teasing, the major form of adult discipline, and to sleep when they are tired (Townsend-Cross, 2004), practices that may not fit with current structures in early childhood services such as sleep time or teachers’ interpretation of teasing other children as “mean”. Sharing is learned early and children may become confused when expected to ask permission before they use someone else’s things, as often occurs in early childhood settings and schools.

Indigenous children are expected to be autonomous and self-sufficient from an early age (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; Warrki Jarrinjaku ARCS Project Team, 2002; Wilson & Matthews, 2001). Martin (2005) explains that Indigenous children are viewed as “capable, autonomous and an active contributor”, and are not considered to be “helpless, useless or powerless” (p. 30). The following quote supports Martin’s theory:

> Aboriginal children come from a position of independence at home, to a situation where, if they are to succeed or even avoid punishment, they must constantly monitor and seek approval from the teacher. When they fail to do this they are often seen as disobedient and rude (West, 1994, cited in Harrison, 2008, p. 23).

**Community participation and the care and education of young children**

A considerable portion of Indigenous children grow up with a strong sense of community and extended family and Indigenous communities view children as a communal responsibility. This extends to “their kin or clan network” (D’Souza, 1999, p. 28). Responsibility for children is seen as a community rather than solely a parental role and children have multiple caretakers within the community (Yeo, 2003). NSW AECG/DET (2004) reported that at the community meetings they held, there was a strong
acknowledgement that Indigenous parents play a key role in providing the experiences for their children from birth and that members of the immediate and extended family are the children’s first teachers (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 12).

When children learn about Indigenous culture from their families and communities they may also have access to learning their language. Elders were reported as playing an important role in teaching children. D’Souza (1999) and Bamblett (2007) discuss the use of stories and songs to help children learn and form their identity. Older children often look after younger ones and adults are often less involved than in non-Indigenous families (Butterworth & Candy, 1998). A threat to this multiple support system is that Indigenous children are also highly mobile (D’Souza, 1999; Ross, 1999) which has implications for children’s connection to community and use of child-care on a regular, continuing basis.

Community involvement in Indigenous education is vital across all levels. Suitable arrangements that enable Indigenous parents and community members to participate in decision-making processes regarding planning, delivery and evaluation of services for their children are imperative (DEEWR, 2008). This conforms to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) which asserts that Indigenous people should be involved in decision-making processes and “emphasizes the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations” (p. 1).

**Importance of kinship relations**

Kinship relations and rules of social interaction are fundamental to children’s cultural learning (Wilson & Matthews, 2001). Townsend-Cross (2004, p. 2) discusses the difference between the non-Indigenous family structure based on “relatives and non-relatives” and Indigenous culture in which “kinship systems are boundless and inclusive of the whole universe.”

In some Indigenous families there is a strong feeling that children are better off staying at home with family before they are required by Australian constitutional law to attend school. This way, they will learn more about what is valued by their families and communities. As stated by Howey (2005):

*We as Indigenous people stress the importance of the holistic nature of our culture and intellectual property. For Indigenous peoples around Australia from diverse communities and languages any discussion about our rights, obligations and maintenance of our culture, the use of teaching of our knowledge is always intimately connected to the traditional lands and countries of each Indigenous peoples’* (p. 156).

Valued learning for children in Indigenous communities includes respect for elders, learning about kin, culture and language. This includes learning of independence, persistence, initiative, cooperation not competition, highly developed senses and
physical skills through observation, imitation and repetition (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; DEST, 2001).

**Early childhood settings for Indigenous children**

The National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (DEST, 2005) reported that Indigenous enrolments in preschools increased by 3.7% between 2002 and 2003. The proportion of Indigenous total enrolment in preschools nationally changed from 3.7% in 2001, 4% in 2002 and 4.3% in 2003 (DEST, 2005). However, the report indicated that the increase was in urban areas with decreases in rural and remote areas. In terms of attendance rate, it was noted that in 27% of Indigenous-controlled preschools, Indigenous attendance rates were higher than for non-Indigenous students (DEST, 2005). In 2003, 68% of Indigenous-controlled preschools reported attendance rates of 80% or higher. This indicates that Indigenous-controlled preschools were well regarded by Indigenous families. Nevertheless, while the number of Aboriginal children is increasing, the number of Indigenous-controlled preschool places is not growing in commensurate proportion (NSW AECG/DET, 2004, p. 55).

Beside the mainstream settings, such as long day care, preschool and playgroups there are early childhood settings that provide early childhood education and care for Indigenous children. These include Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS), Aboriginal Playgroups and Mobile Services.

**Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS)** are the preferred model for Indigenous families, “widely recognised by Indigenous communities as essential to their well-being” (Bamblett, 2007; Sims et al., 2008, p. 58). These services offer long day care and other services for Indigenous children and families including playgroups, occasional care, outside school hours care, school holiday care, family support and cultural programs (ABS: 2005; Brennan, 1998; D’Souza, 1999; FaCSIA, 2006a; Hutchins et al. 2007). Based on 2001 figures, 1,858 children attended MACS that year with two-thirds attending between 5 and 24 hours a week (i.e., part-time attendance) with 76% of attending children identified as Indigenous.

Only 37% of MACS staff had formal early childhood qualifications and 65% of staff were Indigenous (FaCSIA, 2006a). The current number of places available in MACS centres is limited and meets only a small percentage of the demand. SNAICC (2007) has called for an immediate increase in the number of supported places available and “recognition that this is the only appropriate form of childcare for many Indigenous families.” The SNAICC position is that this model of childcare needs to be expanded across the country. An increase in funding is required to enable an extension of the existing Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (Pocock, 2002).

**Mobile services** which operate in remote areas and some inner city areas provide a range of services for children and families: occasional care, school holiday care, playgroups, storytelling and games. In 1999 D’Souza stated that there were only three mobile services run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities specifically for their children. However, in 2001, it was estimated that of the 3,133 children attending mobile services, up to 24% were indigenous (FaCSIA, 2006b).
Aboriginal Playgroups, an unregulated form of early childhood service, are attended by parents and their young children. They offer an opportunity for children and parents to socialise and are usually organised by community groups or committees. Playgroups for Aboriginal children are often attached to other Indigenous settings (e.g., MACS). Only a small proportion of playgroups employ staff to run the program, very few of whom have any formal early childhood qualifications. As suggested by SNAICC (2007), playgroups facilitated by trained staff can offer some of the benefits of centre-based care. In 2001, an estimated 1,526 children attended an Aboriginal playgroup (FaCSIA, 2006c).

Barriers to participation
A number of barriers to participation in formal care have been identified. These include practical issues such as accessibility and lack of awareness of the availability of services as well as distrust of early childhood services and fear of racism (DEST, 2005; De Gioia et al., 2003). In a study of one rural child care service, De Gioia et al. (2003) found that a significant constraint to participating in early childhood services was a lack of knowledge within the Aboriginal community about the services available and what they had to offer. They suggest that face-to-face community meetings help raise awareness about the availability of services through informal discussions and are more effective for Indigenous people than written information. Encouraging an inclusive environment where parents feel welcome and accepted will contribute to parent involvement in the setting.

Other reasons included restrictions on children’s freedom and the availability of extended family care arrangements. Parents expressed concerns about lack of respect for their culture. A survey in South Australia conducted by DETE (1998) cited in MCEETYA (2001, p. 19) investigated reasons given by Indigenous families for not using early childhood services. The study highlighted the importance of personal relationships and cultural factors for Indigenous families. The most highly discussed reason for not participating was lack of recognition of Aboriginal culture and negative attitudes towards Indigenous families. Factors impeding participation are discussed further below.

Accessibility
Limited access to services is a major barrier to participation for Indigenous families. This can involve availability of services in the area, cost of the service, and a lack of transport or the prohibitive cost of transport to take children to and from services (Biddle, 2007; Cassady et al., 2005; De Gioia et al., 2003; Hutchins et al., 2007; Kronemann, 2007; NSW AECG/DET, 2004; Press & Hayes, 2000). This is magnified when families live in rural or remote areas. Burns (2005) noted that rural service provision, for all children is significantly impacted by isolation, lack of funds, difficulties attracting and keeping professional staff, and a high proportion of low income families with young children. Many Indigenous children are disadvantaged by this as they are more likely than non-Indigenous children to live in remote areas.
A Victorian study identified aspects that fail to support the strengths of the Indigenous community:

- **Services that are not respectful of Aboriginal people**
- **A poor understanding of the cultural history of Aboriginal people**
- **The inability of services to work with Aboriginal people in a way that strengthens their ability to participate in mainstream health and educational programs** (Early Childhood Australia, 2008, p.10).

### Mistrust based on history

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HEREOC, 1997) stated that Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families since the very first days of European occupation of Australia. All Indigenous families and communities have been affected by this history. HEREOC estimated that from 1910 to 1970, between one in three and one in ten children were removed from their families. Over the past 100 years Aboriginal people have fought to win back control over the welfare of their children. The struggle is ongoing and Aboriginal people still justifiably fear the removal of their children. Indigenous children are six times more likely to be removed from their families than other children and many continue to be placed in non-Indigenous foster families. In this context, Indigenous community-based and controlled services are seen as the most appropriate form of childcare for the Indigenous community (SNAICC, 2002).

The historical context is a major barrier to Indigenous participation in early childhood services (De Gioia, et al. 2003). As suggested by De Gioia and colleagues, many Aboriginal people believe that early childhood settings are “purveyors of the dominant macro-culture” (p. 11). In their study, Aboriginal families reported that they “wanted exposure to Aboriginal culture for their young children” (p. 5). Because of mistrust based on history, early childhood services are not regarded as safe or appropriate by many Indigenous families and are seen as “white fella” places (Bourke et al., 2000; Butterworth & Candy, 1998).

Many Indigenous parents have had negative experiences with formal schooling and wish to spare their child similar experiences. Despite this, they value education (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; Cassady et al., 2005; AECG/DET, 2004). However, families often prefer to keep children at home in the non-compulsory years to avoid them being labeled as having “problem behaviour” or being “under-achievers.” This arises from the shortage of Aboriginal teaching staff and a lack of awareness by non-Indigenous staff of Indigenous child rearing practices (Hutchins et al., 2007). Thus, Indigenous families often perceive programs and services as not being culturally relevant (Cassady et al., 2005; Pocock, 2003; SNAICC, 2003). Biddle’s study (2007) has shown that attendance is significantly increased when an Indigenous staff member is present at the centre.
In early childhood and school settings, children are often made to feel inadequate because of their use of Aboriginal English rather than Standard English (Cassady et al., 2005; Press & Hayes, 2000). Many Indigenous children speak Standard Australian English as a second language and other children are multilingual (MCEETYA, 2001). Purdie et al. (2000) recommend that teachers be educated to understand “the importance and use of Aboriginal English by Indigenous students” (p. 53). Children may be subjected to racism and discrimination from both their peers and the teachers because of the different styles of verbal and non-verbal communication used by Indigenous children, styles that are often not understood by non-Indigenous people.

Limited family involvement in service planning and delivery has been cited as another key barrier to Indigenous families accessing early childhood services (DEST, 2001; De Gioia et al., 2003). Research indicates that Indigenous families are more comfortable using services that include the language and cultural practices of their communities and that have Indigenous staff members with specific local knowledge (DEST, 2001; Hutchins et al., 2007; AECG/DET, 2004). Reid and Santoro (2006a) highlight the diversity and complexity of Indigenous cultures as they remind us of the many “different Aboriginal nations” existing in the country we know as Australia (p. 148). Non-Indigenous staff members are seen as not understanding the culture and language that Indigenous parents want their children to learn. When families are invited to participate in service planning and delivery, these issues can be addressed to the families’ satisfaction, making attendance by Indigenous children more likely.

**Facilitators for participation**

A survey in South Australia conducted by DETE (1998) and cited in MCEETYA (2001) investigated reasons given by Indigenous families as to why they used or did not use early childhood services. The majority of the families who accessed services indicated it was for educational advantage (75%), mixing with children outside of the family (33%), and providing children with the opportunity to interact with other children (10%), with parents reporting “they have fun there, are happy and confident” (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 19). The literature has suggested several factors that lead to an increase in the use of early childhood settings by Indigenous families:

**Indigenous control of settings**

Community-based Indigenous controlled settings are strongly favoured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Government-funded community-based not-for-profit settings provide the most appropriate options for Indigenous communities (Pocock, 2002, 2003). Indigenous people have had to fight to regain control over the welfare and care of their children and have a tendency to not trust the government with any kind of stewardship (Power, 1999). Indigenous families believe that Indigenous services, with Indigenous staff, are more responsive to the needs of their children and communities than mainstream services.
Teacher education programs

Many writers argue that all early childhood teachers should be prepared for a role in educating Aboriginal children (Bourke et al., 2000; Cassady et al., 2005; Kronemann, 2007; Sarra, 2007). They should learn to value the rich traditions of Indigenous children rather than imposing an Anglo-Australian approach and making assumptions about Indigenous “home circumstances” and “family values” (Reid & Santoro, 2006b, p. 295; Sarra, 2007). Currently, Indigenous issues are taught mainly by non-Indigenous people owing to the small number of Indigenous teachers in Australia (Reid & Santoro, 2006b). These numbers will increase as in 2004 there were 204 Indigenous people enrolled in early childhood teacher education programs Australia wide (Cassady et al., 2005).

Kronemann (2008) believes that an additional 500 Indigenous teachers and 500 Indigenous assistants would be required if all Indigenous children who are currently enrolled in preschool education were to have access to an Indigenous teacher and assistant. It is further estimated that an additional 1000 Indigenous teachers and 1000 other Indigenous staff would be required in order for all 3- and 4-year-old Indigenous children to be able to access early childhood education programs offered by degree-qualified teachers and other Indigenous staff (Kronemann, 2008). These figures illustrate the importance of supporting more Indigenous Australians to undertake studies in early childhood education.

Though not specifically referring to Indigenous childcare workers, the Australian Government has committed to better supporting the early childhood industry by:

- **supporting around 8000 child care workers in gaining a TAFE qualification by eliminating all fees for child care diplomas and advanced diplomas from 2009;**
- **creating more places for early childhood teachers in universities, beginning with an increase of 500 places in 2009, and rising to 1500 places in 2011; and**
- **halving the HECS-HELP debt of early childhood teachers who agree to work in regional and high-disadvantage areas (Kronemann, 2008).**

Indigenous teachers

The low participation levels of Indigenous teachers are not exclusive to the early childhood sector. In 2004, the Australian Education Union claimed that only 0.8% of public school teachers in Australia were Indigenous, while only 3.7% of teachers had undertaken in-service training on Indigenous Studies (Koori Mail, 2004).

A study of Indigenous early childhood teachers emphasised the importance of Indigenous staff in encouraging Indigenous participation and making Indigenous children feel welcome and valued (Cassady et al., 2005; Kronemann, 2007). School community partnerships are recommended to increase family and community participation (DeGioia et al., 2003; MCEETYA, 2006). Another key factor associated with increased Indigenous participation was the employment of at least one, preferably more, Indigenous staff members. Indigenous staff can teach culture, provide culturally desirable comfort to children, act as educated role models and communicate with
families (Kronemann, 2007). However, it is important to note there are generally factions within any Aboriginal community and Aboriginal workers need either to be seen as non-partisan or to represent each group in the community.

**Community partnerships**

Diane Roberts, a respected Aboriginal director of an early childhood service, has been successful through not attempting to separate Indigenous and non-Indigenous domains in her service (Power & Roberts, 1999). According to Roberts, the key is not to focus on changing attitudes of Indigenous children but to develop their ability to step in and out of the mainstream system and take advantage of the resources available there. Power and Roberts (1999) argue for a "double vision model" where Aboriginal people take every opportunity to open doors to the mainstream but still claim leadership and full membership of their Aboriginal culture (p. 13). In a discussion of ways in which culturally relevant practice can be developed through dialogue with communities, Ball and Pence (2000) refer to an example of a community partnership where “all children and caregivers [came] together in ‘talking circles’ when a child had been engaged in challenging behaviours in the centre” (p. 24).

It can be argued that early childhood programs are more successful when initiated and developed at a local community level in consultation with local Indigenous communities or by Indigenous communities themselves (De Gioia et al., 2003). It is essential to work at the local level and acknowledge the diversity of languages and belief systems amongst Aboriginal people and to understand that “Aboriginal people are the custodians of their knowledge” (DEST, 2001, p. 2). Working with the community allows programs to be based on local culture and social conditions including connections with local community experiences of childhood (Ball & Pence, 2000). Non-Aboriginal educators often falsely assume that all Aboriginal people have the same beliefs and customs, regardless of where they come from in Australia (Dingo et al., 1997; Fasoli & Ford, 2001; Reid & Santoro, 2006a). This disregards the complexity and diversity of Indigenous groups and nations. As a result, Aboriginal perspectives are often incorporated in programs in a superficial uniform way. There are no formulas, no learning experiences or programs that can be designed and slotted in to address the Aboriginal perspective. It is the understanding and establishment of relationships with members of the local community that is important. In this regard, (Power & Roberts, 1999) discuss the importance of knowing “kin talk and the genealogy of the local tribes.”

**Cultural awareness**

Meaningful compulsory cultural awareness induction programs for all staff and committee members in every early childhood service involving Indigenous children is acknowledged in the literature as important (Burns, 2005; Butterworth & Candy, 1998; De Gioia et al. 2003; Martin 2008). Parents, teachers and principals in the NSW AECG/DET report (2004) spoke of the importance for Aboriginal children of “the involvement of Aboriginal families and community for the provision of opportunities to learn about Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal history” (p. 62). De Gioia et al. (2003) recommend that services need to support Aboriginal culture in a meaningful way, such as displaying the Aboriginal flag, employing Aboriginal staff, and
incorporating Aboriginal culture into the daily program. While it is important to generate ideas about the kinds of provisions that might be culturally appropriate and inclusive, it is essential to avoid a superficial or tokenistic approach to culture. Heiss (1996) developed more appropriate resources for use with children in early childhood settings providing culturally relevant ideas for experiences that help children learn about Aboriginal culture. Similarly, the NSW Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit has produced cultural resources for use in MACS.

In a discussion of culture and the physical environment of services, Hamilton (2005) described a playground at a centre in the Northern Territory that has cultural meaning for the local children. It was designed to be a space for the children, representative of their home life, where children can be “free”. The playground features include a wading pool next to the sandpit and a fountain. Much of the natural bush has been kept so that the children can make their own tracks. Throughout the bush there are eight totem poles, some of them representing the local clans with their particular symbols and stories. Another example of a physical environment that has meaning for Indigenous children is at an inner-city Sydney long day care centre. All of the children who attend the setting create their handprint before they leave as a mark of their presence. As Mundine & Giuini (2006) have pointed out, “The use of handprints in some Aboriginal cultures is one way to show who you are and where you belong” (p. 7).

In terms of non-Indigenous understanding of Indigenous people and culture, there is some evidence that change has occurred with time, as cultural awareness training has become mandatory in some public employment sectors. For instance, the NSW Department of Education and Training has stipulated that mandatory cultural awareness training be applicable to all staff members, under a NSW State Government policy released on 18 November, 2008. In discussing the policy, Martin (2008) comments:

*It requires teachers to unlearn the negative preconceptions that are prevalent about Aboriginal people and to fully understand that it is not their job to replace or erase the Aboriginality of their students (Koori Mail, 2008, p. 60).*

The policy will apply to 93,000 people working in schools and TAFE colleges throughout NSW (Koori Mail, 2008). Positive outcomes of the policy will hopefully trickle down into the early childhood sector so that all Indigenous people are better understood so that they can reach their full potential in a positive environment.
Integrated services for children and families

Participation in children’s services is more likely when the child care setting is co-located with other children and family support services and is seen as integral to the community (De Gioia et al., 2003; Sims et al., 2008). The concept of a hub model, “joining up services” (Kronemann, 2007, p. 4), is a strategy for encouraging access. This model offers a range of childcare and family support strategies. When families regularly use a community service that is part of a hub, a sense of ownership is increased and suspicion is reduced, making use of associated services more likely. As Sims et al. (2008) report, COAG strongly supports the provision of integrated services as a part of the National Reform Agenda Policy Framework.

Pocock (2002, 2003) has argued that the best service model for Indigenous communities is the MACS model where emphasis is placed on supporting families in a multitude of ways, based on a “strong cultural philosophy and practice” (Sims et al., 2008, p. 58). At present there are only 37 MACS centres operating in Australia with 12 in NSW. SNAICC (2002) argues that the funding of this model needs to be increased to extend availability of these services, which support culturally desirable early education. This is beginning to happen with new Australian-government supported integrated Child and Family Centres for Indigenous families being developed across Australia in 2010.

Morda, Kapsalakis and Clyde (2000) argue that flexibility in rural service provision is of utmost importance. FACS (2001) state that they have been active and successful in setting up a diverse range of “flexible and relevant” child care services for families in rural and remote parts of Australia. However, Indigenous families may not see all of these services as accessible. Some services have been flexible in their service provision and have initiated programs that respond to their perception of community needs. For example at the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre they are training mentors for first-time parents of children birth to five years (SNAICC & CCCH, 2004). In La Perouse there is the HIPPY service (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) established because it was perceived that home visits would be more responsive to the needs of the parents rather than attendance at a centre (SNAICC & CCCH, 2004). The program is an example of a supportive and flexible response to the wishes of Indigenous families who want to keep their children with them in the years prior to school.

Culturally relevant care and learning

In a study of Indigenous child-care workers, Fasoli and Ford (2001) found that their emphasis was on relationships with children. When practitioners were asked to discuss particular interactions they had with the children, they would consistently bring the researchers back to talk about the relationships between the people involved. One teacher, for example, described herself as being “like a grandmother.” The cultural meanings that surround relationships are extremely important. An example given is when a mother hands over her child to a carer. Implicit in this gesture is the placing of great trust. The mother is showing that she places trust in that individual, and expects them to love and care for and protect her child in her absence.
By receiving the child, the worker is accepting this trust and agreeing to watch out for that child. This involves staying with the child when the child is distressed or allowing the child to just follow them around without a break until the child feels comfortable to play on their own. The child interprets the handing over in the same way as the mother does, so the child will look to and rely on the person they were handed to and assume they will help them because of their mother's trust.

Understanding an Indigenous child care educator’s role is important. For example, one teacher who spoke to Fasoli and Ford (2001) emphasised the need to talk calmly and gently to the children because only certain family members have the right to “growl” at them. The children understand the important roles they have in caring for their younger siblings or cousins and even very young children will offer protection and assistance and comfort to their younger siblings. It is important for early childhood teachers to recognise and respect these relationships. A centre is truly culturally appropriate and relevant when staff members understand the cultural expectations, the relationships among people and the subtleties of communication, particularly non-verbal communication. It may be that this kind of understanding is only possible for Indigenous teaching staff who are members of or accepted by the local communities (Mundine & Giuini, 2006).

It is important for early childhood teachers to embrace and build upon what children already know (Pender, 1998). Indigenous culture has a broad view of literacy which can be found not only in written words but also in songs, poems, Dreaming Stories, dance and music. Power (2004) argues for a broader concept of literacy that acknowledges the funds of knowledge and communication practices people bring from their own cultures. For example, visual modes of representation might be more powerful than English print in different contexts and with different people. When we standardise literacy we erase difference instead of embracing it. “Teaching multiliteracies, then, is not so much a case of passing on a set of rules and practices ... but a practice of co-constructing knowledge across cultural contact zones” (p. 10).

Language, oral and written, is powerful and critical literacy allows children to explore “lived experiences of power relations” that help them understand and “resist injustice” (Power, 2004, p. 3). Language gives identity, and language (verbal and non-verbal) is the medium through which values, beliefs and knowledge of a culture are transmitted (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2001; Kitson-Charleston, 2005). Power (2004) discusses how language forms the “curriculum” for Indigenous children before starting school. She argues that home “lingo” is important for children’s self-esteem and their developing sense of place. For Indigenous Australians there is a strong relationship with their “place”. This refers to a connectedness with the land, an identifiable local area and “knowing one’s place in the community/one’s place identity” (Power & Roberts, 1998, p. 2). For many, this forms the base for a strong sense of self and personal power (Bamblett, 2007; Hutchins et al., 2007; Townsend-Cross, 2004). “Growing up children strong” is used in some communities “to describe the importance of teaching children the law, rules about their relationship to the land, people, animals and plants” (Hutchins et al., 2007, p. 14) and building a strong sense of identity.
Learning is affected when the language of the early childhood setting and the language of home are not congruent. The learning of young children and their communicative relationships are framed in their home language. Complex relationships exist between “ways of talking, ways of learning and ways of knowing” (Kitson-Charleston, 2005, p. 76). For Indigenous children, language and literacy experiences in non-Indigenous settings are often framed in a “white middle-class context” which does not match experiences of Indigenous children (MCEETYA, 2001).

Purdie et al. (2000) argue that Aboriginal children need opportunities to learn what is left of their traditional languages as well as having Aboriginal English recognised in their learning environment. When children are expected to interact and learn in the language valued by the educational setting, usually “the language of the dominant culture” (Kitson-Charleston, 2005, p. 77), they may appear to struggle and be disinclined to learn. Many writers argue that Aboriginal children are more successful in the education system if they have a strong sense of identity and come from a place of pride rather than shame (De Gioia et al., 2005; DEST, 2001; Power, 2004; Power & Roberts, 1999). Services that provide an Aboriginal “culturally safe” environment, supportive of Aboriginal identity and focusing on the unique skills of the Aboriginal community, are more likely to attract and maintain Aboriginal participation (Kutenda, 1995, cited in De Gioia et al., 2003, p. 13).

Both-ways communication, and building relationships with families, is central to learning, particularly in Indigenous children’s services (DEST, 2001). When asked about support for families whose children were entering formal schooling for the first time, Indigenous families reported that they would benefit from opportunities to share their home life practices, clarify the expectations of the school and discuss issues regarding the technicalities of school attendance (Hayden & De Gioia, 2005). An example of staff going the extra mile (literally) to maintain relationships with families is provided by SNAICC (2002). The Kura Yerlo Children’s Centre (MACS), at Largs Bay SA, collect and return children in a bus, as happens in many Indigenous services due to lack of family transport. In the afternoons, a qualified early childhood teacher is present on the bus. This provides an opportunity for the parents and teacher to communicate. The teacher can use this opportunity to “yarn” with families, pass on notices and help parents fill out any forms that are required. Staff members also visit local shops to collect leftover bread and other provisions that they distribute to families and use at the centre.

An inclusive environment that welcomes diversity of cultures in the setting enhances children’s feelings of confidence and security and makes children and families feel valued. Mundine and Giuini (2006) discuss strategies for introducing equity and social justice into an early childhood setting in a meaningful way connecting with children’s understanding and knowledge. They reflect on ways to explore difference and give examples of ways to address difference and race through discussion of skin colour, for example, encouraging children to see that “black is beautiful” through the use of paint and handprints (although it should be noted that not all Indigenous Australian children have dark skin). Wilson and Matthews (2001) made the following suggestions for planning an inclusive environment for Indigenous children:
Several writers have considered the best ways to involve parents in services. Wilson and Matthews (2001) reflect on the necessity of being open and honest with families and communicating in a supportive way. To assist in achieving this they suggest that teachers reflect on their own “values, attitudes, biases and expectations” (p. 3). The inclusion of elders in the service can help to engage families and assist in providing a culturally relevant environment. Many settings invite elders and/or community members to talk to the children and share stories about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal history in the local context.

The following example provided by Wilson and Matthews (2001) highlights the importance of understanding local Aboriginal culture. One elder explained to a centre that artifacts such as the didgeridoo and cultural practices, for example dot painting were specific to particular Aboriginal communities. Dot painting was not a practice of that community. The local people used geometric designs and did lots of drawings of animals. For this elder dot painting represented a commercial approach and exploitation. It was seen as inappropriate and disrespectful to have the children engage in this kind of art in an attempt to teach local Aboriginal culture. This example highlights the importance of acknowledging that Indigenous cultures are bound by customs, lore and knowledge attributed to geographical positions. It is therefore critical that the local Indigenous community act as cultural consultants/guides, while still recognising that other Indigenous children may present with their own set of beliefs and customs.

**Transitions for Indigenous children: Starting school**

Growing recognition is being given to the significance of starting school for young children, it is a time when they establish their identity as learners and a child’s long term academic achievement can be affected by their initial experiences (Kitson-Charleston, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). Access to early childhood education in the early years has been shown to be beneficial in supporting children in the first years of school as it provides for continuity of experience (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Kitson-Charleston, 2005; NSW AECG/DET, 2004). The transition to school may be difficult for Indigenous children and supportive relationships between early childhood services, schools families and communities can play a role in easing this transition for Indigenous children (Perry et al., 2007).
During the early years, children may experience many transitions, including from home to preschool, long day care and also to school. A significant factor in successful transitions is the quality of the program provided to support children and families. Continuity of experience is greatly facilitated when all stakeholders work together to provide culturally relevant experiences that acknowledge the child’s family life and provide a program that builds on home and community culture thus reducing stress (Kitson-Charleston, 2005). Perry et al. (2007) argue that honouring culture is a critical factor in successful transitions as constructs of childhood are framed by the shared values of a culture.

The MCEETYA (2001) Taskforce Report suggests that many Indigenous children are having difficulties in the early years of school. The NSW AECG/DET (2004) report argues for the importance of strong links between preschool and primary school. It suggests that the transition is easier when the preschool is on the school site. This is further dependent on the way the preschool is situated in the broader context of the school and the provision of teachers with early childhood educational training. It goes beyond geographical location to the importance of links and connections that are established between the early childhood setting and the school. According to Perry et al. (2007), schools that support Indigenous culture and ways of learning and have “a strong Aboriginal presence” are schools where Indigenous children are achieving (p. 2).

A crucial factor in starting school is the quality of the transition program. Kitson-Charleston (2005) argues that a formal program based on academic skills is not appropriate as it presents a contrast to the learning program of early childhood settings and to the prior to school experiences of Indigenous children (p. 4). The advice from parents and teachers to the NSW AECG/DET team was that “there is still a serious need to develop strategies to support transitions for all Aboriginal children including children who attend Aboriginal preschools, DET preschools, other early childhood services and particularly children who do not access any prior-to-school services” (p. 65).

Starting school is often discussed in terms of a child’s readiness. The MCEETYA (2001) report discusses the continuing tension and difference that exists between early childhood services and school-based educational programs, exploring transition programs that focus on “school readiness” as opposed to the idea of schools being ready for children. “Readiness” is difficult to define and means different things in different contexts and there are many different interpretations of what is implied by readiness (Cuskelley & Detering, 2003; Perry et al., 2007; Woodhead & Oates, 2007). Readiness can be thought of as “the match between the child and the institutions that serve the child”, requiring family, school and community participation (p. 13). Perry et al. (2007) refer to the interactive nature of school transitions and suggest this should occur between all the stakeholders.
Woodhead & Oates (2007) caution that school transition is likely to be “affected by poverty which undermines parents’ capacity to support their children” (p. 13). Poverty characterizes the life circumstances of many Indigenous children. Many problems exist with “readiness” programs, one of which can be formal tests which place “an inappropriate emphasis on academic skills” (Kitson-Charleston, 2005, p. 4) as opposed to looking at a child’s cultural and life experiences for information about skills and knowledge at school entry.

Robinson, Nutton, McTurk, Lea and Carapetis (2007) explained that current understandings of school readiness highlight factors that are influential to children’s development and developmental potentials. This includes the need to “respond to the multiple influences on the individual child’s development to include parents, peers, family and community” (p. 9). Robinson et al. (2007) further point out that schools need the capacity to “respond to individuals, their potentials and differences through developmentally appropriate instruction and support and by means that engage not only the child but his or her family and community” (p. 9).

The NSW AECG/DET (2004) report raised concern about the mismatch between preschools and schools in their provision for Indigenous children. The community-controlled Aboriginal preschools through DEST and IESIP funding were seen as a successful model, characterised by:

- The high level of Aboriginal people involved: aunties, Elders, parents, childcare workers
- An advisory committee that recommends on the educational programs, operational processes and administrative functions
- A curriculum that is child-centred and culturally inclusive
- An understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal English
- Early identification, detection and strategies to address otitis media
- Strong links to interagency support and Aboriginal community knowledge (NSW AECG/DET, 2004, p. 66).

These suggestions are supported by the MCEETYA (2006) recommendation stipulating that:

*Ministers commit to make progress towards developing and fully implementing by 2012 educational programs for Indigenous children that respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts, explicitly teach standard Australian English and prepare children for schooling* (p. 20).

The NSW AECG/DET (2004) report cited anecdotal evidence that benefits of the children’s prior to school experiences were not recognised by teachers in schools and argued for better coordination and communication between families, children’s services and schools in planning transition programs. This requires closer links between prior to
school settings and schools. Nakata (2004) made the point that strategies for success in non-Indigenous contexts as well as cultural knowledge need to be included in school programs for Indigenous children or else “we fail our Aboriginal students … Classrooms and learning environments need to provide the conditions in which students learn the skills necessary to operate in different contexts” (cited in NSW AECG/DET 2004, p. 68).

Post-school transition has also been discussed in literature as an important aspect that requires specific attention. For instance, MCEETYA (2006) highlighted the importance of improving post-school transitions through supporting Indigenous students through pathways into training, employment and higher education. For this to occur, MCEETYA (2006) noted a commitment to “develop and implement mentoring, counseling and work readiness strategies” (p. 29). In turn, this could potentially break “intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage” (p. 29). An additional recommendation made by MCEETYA (2006) is for Indigenous education consultative bodies, the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee and other stakeholders to provide advice on “effective strategies and implementation arrangements to ensure that Indigenous communities and students are encouraged to engage successfully in higher education” (p. 29).

The engagement of Indigenous students must be fully supported. One key suggestion is to increase the number of Indigenous teachers. There are several ways this could be achieved including developing career paths, training programs and support for existing Indigenous staff in children’s services to move into teaching positions (especially in remote and rural areas) and to focus attention on attracting mature age former Commonwealth Development Employment Program participants into teaching (MCEETYA, 2006).

Summary
The early years of life are very important for setting children’s life trajectories. While families have the major influence on children, early childhood educational settings also have a powerful impact on children’s learning and development, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. A clear picture of under-representation of Indigenous children in early childhood services in the years prior to school has emerged. Barriers to participation were found to include lack of accessibility and awareness of services, mistrust based on recent history, racism in services, lack of inclusion of Indigenous families and lack of cultural awareness among non-Indigenous staff.

Attracting and retaining Indigenous early childhood teachers is a key component to strengthening national outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities. Participation of Indigenous families in services was linked to Indigenous early childhood staff, Indigenous family and community participation, involvement at the local level, cultural awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture and child-rearing practices by non-Indigenous staff, linking services for children and families to a “hub” of services and flexibility of provision. Features of services that support Indigenous participation include the fostering of relationships, embracing and building on children’s learning, teaching language and culture, engaging families, providing an inclusive and meaningful environment and including local elders and the community.
It is important that everyone working in children's services has knowledge and an understanding of Australian Indigenous history, current issues for Indigenous people and Aboriginal culture so as to understand local culture, racism and how Indigenous children are raised (D’Souza, 1999; Harrison 2008; Prochner, 2004). This knowledge forms the basis for providing culturally relevant programs for Indigenous children and families for the future.

While there is some information about children’s care and learning experiences within their families, communities and in children’s services, much of the focus has been on the providers’ experiences and on statistics concerning the numbers of Indigenous children using services. There has been little research on the community and family patterns of child care for young Indigenous children, attitudes of the parents and their expectations concerning children’s learning in their early years or their feelings towards children’s services and school. There is a need to hear and respond to the voices of the Indigenous families themselves. Families have a lot to tell us about their young children’s care and education and the experiences of their older children in the transition to school.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to improve access to early childhood care and experience that will enhance educational outcomes for Indigenous children, it is essential for policy makers and practitioners to understand why child care facilities run by government and private agencies fail so dramatically to attract members of Indigenous communities. This is particularly important in view of the belief that effective pre-school learning experiences will raise Indigenous children’s chances of later school success. Accordingly, this project began with three broad research questions:

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

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

3. What are the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how can children’s and family services be more effective for Indigenous families?
CHAPTER 2 - ETHICS AND METHODOLOGY

The term research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonisation. The word itself, research, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 1).

This chapter outlines the methods used in the study including recruitment of the families, family characteristics, procedures and measures. This is embedded in a literature review of research methodology and approaches to research within Indigenous communities.

The guiding question of this research was: What is it like to bring up little children in Indigenous communities in the early 21st century? We believed that this general question would allow a more open-ended approach to the design and conduct of the study, and it supported our work in developing an appropriate methodology for this. In the following section we describe this process and the ethical and methodological literature that was to inform this work.

2.1 Ethical and methodological issues in Indigenous research

When we began, we did not realise the full scale and complexity of the task of researching this issue in Indigenous communities nor the difficulties that the commissioned research team would face. We were a group of experienced white and Indigenous researchers, middle aged and middle class, people with our own children securely educated who knew from the beginning how important it is to abide by research rules and protocols when entering the field. Some five years later we are different, far less secure in our knowledge, somewhat frayed around the edges, and convinced that following generalised rules for research practice without regard for the specificities of place is neither effective nor efficient in the conduct of research with Indigenous communities, particularly at a point in history which has brought Indigenous people to actively distrust most, if not all, research and researchers. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 42) says:

From an indigenous perspective Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, difference and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialised forms of language, and structures of power.

Even for a research team with some experience working with Indigenous communities, the importance of these words cannot be under-estimated. The methodological framework that has informed the design, conduct and reporting of our investigations into the child care choices of Indigenous people in New South Wales compels us to acknowledge, respect and work with the sorts of differences that Tuhiwai Smith identifies here. It shapes and structures the research process in ways that are very
different from conventional understandings of research methods and processes with which most non-Indigenous researchers are familiar.

It is easy to understand Tuhiswai Smith’s critique in relation to what she calls the positivist research tradition. This is research (either qualitative or quantitative) that seeks to be able to find definitive evidence or facts about its object of study, and then use this knowledge to make truth claims on which policy can be developed. Positivist research can be used to help governments to predict the future behaviour of an object of inquiry (such as the choices about care that Indigenous people make for their children in this case) and then try to change it by making an intervention or change in its delivery or environment. Traditional positivist research assumes that knowledge is objective and that truth can be discovered about a particular research object on the basis of careful and systematic study. Once the truth has been discovered about any group of people, or object of study, it can be used to classify and predict its behaviour. In this case, our study of Indigenous Child Care Choices is designed to assist policymakers and field workers to set up early years care and education systems that will attract and satisfy more Indigenous people, and perhaps allow for an improved understanding of early childhood outcomes in Indigenous contexts.

This might appear to be an appropriate use of research and benign in its aim but although we are seeking to inform government in order to support predictive policy change, we understand the dangers of approaching the research task in a positivist frame. This is because the larger effects of this type of research have led Indigenous people, like others who have been the focus of positivist, predictive inquiry, to distrust its purpose and implementation. Early research measuring the size of Aboriginal skulls, for instance, produced truths about the evolution and intelligence of the local Indigenous people whose country had been appropriated and settled by European colonists. This made it easy for European policy makers to see factual evidence such as the comparatively smaller measurements of cranium size of Indigenous people as indicative of an intellectual deficit. It made it easy for government to recommend the need for only the most basic education for Indigenous children, where it was provided at all. The impact of policies dealing with Aboriginal populations that resulted in this limited education meant that Indigenous people were only educated to become domestic workers and station hands and therefore found it difficult to compete as workers in a society that had not recognised them as citizens.

Other research into genetics and the hereditary characteristics of human beings produced scientific truths that enabled governments to measure the degree of Aboriginality, or whiteness, of Indigenous children. Blake (2001) explores early policy around missions and their management programmes, including removal policies that resulted from such research. Government use of facts such as the colour of children’s skin, hair or eyes as the means to determine which of them should be taken away from full-blood Aboriginal mothers, has led to catastrophic results for these Stolen Generations and their families. Positivistic research has long had a bad press among Indigenous peoples and it is not difficult to share Tuhiswai Smith’s criticism of its assumption that such facts produced by Western researchers have always been
observed or discovered by human beings who are already unconsciously subject to cultural assumptions about how the world works.

However, Tuhiwai Smith goes further than this, challenging us to consider the argument that ALL research, not just positivistic research, is problematic. Even the interpretative, naturalistic, phenomenological studies that seek to understand the complexity of Indigenous culture and practice; even the critical, feminist, participatory research practice that seeks to emancipate Indigenous people from oppression and disadvantage; and even the post-modern and post-structural research practice that seeks to deconstruct dominant discursive regimes that structure the lives and social positioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. ALL of these are also problematic for Indigenous peoples. This is because they are also conducted by human beings who already have subjective cultural assumptions about knowledge and its use and who do not automatically recognise or account for Indigenous knowledge systems. These forms of research are still Western ways of knowing: they do not reflect or produce Indigenous knowledge. Further, Western knowledge systems find it very difficult even to recognise many Indigenous ways of knowing as knowledge.

This is a complex and difficult point. As Tuhiwai Smith says, the cultural orientation and values that allow one facet of a community’s life and practice to be isolated and studied (whether objectively in positivist traditions or reflexively in interpretive or emancipatory research) without attention to everything else it connects with, is a Western orientation. It fails to recognise how far out of step it is with the very thing it is trying to define, know, understand, emancipate or deconstruct. This is because it cannot understand the differences that different conceptualizations of such things as time, space and subjectivity make to everything we hear, do, see, say and feel.

When knowledge is something that is owned by researchers who put their names on it, to mark it as their own; or receive payment for their work as they hand it over to commissioning agencies; and who write and talk about it in highly specialised forms of language, then this is not Indigenous knowledge. Western knowledge systems attempt to represent experience, emotion and action in ways that will be recognisable to and knowable by people who are separated from it. And when research is categorised as official or approved within structures of power that set up rules and procedures for conduct in the field then it is, often despite itself, even more stringently imposing these Western traditions on the Indigenous peoples who are its object of inquiry. It is no wonder that research is a dirty word in Indigenous communities.

Research in partnership

The importance of Tuhiwai Smith’s argument that the imperialist and colonising effects of Western research are produced by research practices that extend far beyond positivism is crucial to the conduct of this study. As Deborah Bird Rose notes, the violence of colonisation has impacted on both colonised and coloniser (Rose 1996, cited in Cuthbert 2008) so that non-Indigenous researchers are often unaware of the meaning and power of differently racialised bodies with their different ways of speaking, thinking and interacting. This raises the question that many Indigenous researchers ask: Should white researchers be researching Indigenous communities at all?
We answer that in the affirmative. As researchers committed to early childhood education who accept the need for improved policies and practice in relation to Indigenous child care provision in NSW, we know that non-Indigenous people are crucial to the success of these systems and agencies. However, we approach the research task both mindful of the tensions and history of poor research practice that contextualises this study and prepared to work as respectfully as possible with Indigenous communities to suggest different, improved approaches to early childhood care and education that will benefit Indigenous children in terms of both Indigenous and Western cultures. As Nakata (2004) argues, Australian Indigenous people, including children, must always negotiate between Indigenous and Western culture. They are always positioned at the cultural interface and must always negotiate the tensions that this involves:

*the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives - where we make decisions - our lifeworld. For Indigenous peoples our context, remote or urban, is already circumscribed by the discursive space of the Cultural Interface. We don’t go to work or school, enter another domain, interact and leave it there when we come home again. The boundaries are simply not that clear* (Nakata 2004, p. 27).

Recognising this delicate and difficult tension in all facets of public and private life, we argue for the importance of bicultural or partner research, particularly when the object of study involves Indigenous people in relation with non-Indigenous. We see our own contribution to a methodological partnership as essential. Cuthbert (2008, p. 2) cites Hollingsworth’s (1995) argument that a research regime in which Aboriginal speech is only possible in the absence of white voices is problematic. Indigenous-only research in this field would support a racial separatism that does not reflect our society. But given the history and politics associated with researching Indigenous people that we have outlined above, a clear understanding of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests in this study is important for us as researchers seeking to engage Indigenous people as research subjects. Indeed, as Karen Martin (2002) writes:

*A research framework that is entirely Aboriginal is not possible. So Indigenist research occurs through centring Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing in alignment with aspects of western qualitative research frameworks. This alignment or harmonisation occurs in both the structure of the research and in the research procedures* (Martin 2002, accessed 07/07/09).

From a non-Indigenous perspective, it means that governments’ need for information about the early years experiences valued by Indigenous families must be addressed appropriately if it is to be of any value. Understanding of appropriate research behaviour in Indigenous communities has expanded over the last half century so that there are strict research protocols set up within institutions and government to ensure the sorts of crude racism informing studies such as those described above are no longer permitted. For instance, Adams (2002) notes that one of the strongest of these institutional ethical
statements is that of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2000).

This statement advocates that the process of consultation and negotiation between researchers and Indigenous communities should culminate in the development of a formal agreement (written) between the researcher and community representatives about the intentions, conduct and potential outcomes of a research project. In this study we have worked with a commitment to these ethical standards although, as we go on to explain, this has often caused difficulty and delay when they have not fitted into the social practices of particular communities as planned. As Adams (2002, p. 44) notes, ethical protocols are inclined to oversimplify the nature of power relationships, representing the community as a socially cohesive group of Indigenous people and homogenising intra-community power relations and interests. And as he continues, these misunderstandings are problematic.

Given that Aboriginal communities are historical products of non-Indigenous administration, it is unrealistic to expect these heterogenous aggregations and institutions shaped by European ideas of equity to supersede long-standing cultural and political affiliations and allegiances (Adams 2002, p. 57)

As we will explain later, the formal research protocols that are designed to protect and respect Indigenous research participants, while generally appropriate, are quite often found to be unrealistic and unworkable in specific situations. Having outlined here the methodological framework and issues that have guided our approach to this study, we now go on in the next section to outline the sorts of considerations that have informed our methodological approach and study design. The project has been designed, implemented, modified and re-developed as we have worked though the range of complexities and differences across the research sites. The project through design has responded to the range of issues that needed to be addressed if our study was to take a different approach to research with Indigenous people from all of those that Tuhawai Smith claims are both inappropriate and unhelpful in producing worthwhile knowledge for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

Treading carefully, designing a project that respects Indigenous cultures and practice

In the description that follows, we produce ourselves, inevitably, as Western researchers, selling our skills to do government research. We must be explicit about this from the outset, because if we are not, we run the risk of representing what we are producing here as either positivist truth or Indigenous Knowledge and we need to emphasise very strongly that it is not, and cannot be, either of these things. With the best will in the world, good people who simply take what we have written here as fact, and then turn it into policies that should work because they are designed with the substantive knowledge that this research has produced, may well be disappointed. We argue strongly, after five years of field work in a number of research settings, that policies produced in this way will fail, and money will be wasted unless the policy process itself subverts Western ways of thinking and looks not to the truths we have
produced about Indigenous child care choices but to the processes and relationships that we have developed as we went about finding out.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes four models by which culturally appropriate research can be undertaken by non-Indigenous researchers, citing Graham Smith’s (1992) account of research issues related to Maori education. Smith’s models are:

- a *tiaki* or mentoring model in which authoritative Indigenous people guide and sponsor the research;
- a *whangai* or adoption model where researchers are incorporated into the daily life of the Indigenous people and sustain a life-long relationship that far exceeds research;
- a model by which power is shared when researchers seek the assistance of the community to meaningfully support the development of a research enterprise;
- a model which addresses questions that Indigenous people themselves want to know, in order to solve problems that they isolate, thereby providing empowering outcomes (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p. 177).

While we do not claim that our research practice in this study has successfully managed to be free of either the intellectual arrogance or paternalist practices that Tuhiwai Smith claims are structured into Western research practice, it has attempted, in its design and conduct, to be mindful of the effects and legacy of inappropriate methodological approaches. It is the third of Smith’s models that most closely resembles the design of the Indigenous Child Care Choices project, where we have attempted to share power in the development of the study by seeking the assistance of the communities that we have studied.

**A methodology that recognises difference**

This single decision immediately makes this project different from any we have engaged in before, because it recognises the plurality of Indigenous society and refuses to essentialise the idea of either an Indigenous family or an Indigenous community. A key factor in this has been the importance of the social geography of the study. As Figure 2.1, below, indicates, generalised (positivist) accounts of the distribution of Indigenous population suggest that, unlike the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous Australians are almost evenly distributed between metropolitan and inner regional towns and cities, and smaller, outer regional, remote and very remote communities. The differences that are collapsed into these broad distinctions are enormous and have had important impacts on the selection of research sites, on the ways in which access to communities has been negotiated, on the collection of data for review and analysis, on the size and nature of the research team, as well as on the distribution of responsibilities across Indigenous and non-Indigenous team members.
While we have selected research sites that broadly parallel the rural/urban distinction, we have sought to acknowledge the complexity of these categories by focusing on the differences across a wider range of rural than urban communities in relation to their histories, social and economic diversity. This has meant that we have included a larger range of research sites in the category Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote as detailed in Figure 2.1, than in Urban and Inner Regional locations even though they house almost the same number of Indigenous people. Recognising the specificity of place in this way indicates both respect for difference within the category Indigenous and allows a more nuanced understanding of situated differences in child care choices across more, though smaller, sites. As Kowal and Paradies (2003) note, this important factor in conventional approaches to social research has too often been overlooked.

*We have not taken heed of the cultural differences of Aboriginal people in the provision of services to them. This prevents improvements in health outcomes, and risks inflicting additional damage on communities* (Kowal & Paradies 2003, p. 18).
The study planned to enlist up to 10 families with a child or children under school age, with approximately 35 families recruited across each of the three broad locations: urban, regional and remote (see Appendix B for details of sites). Parents, extended family members and children were invited to participate in each location. Whatever their connection to the care of the children in their families and communities, all were knowledgeable about the focus of the project and were able to talk about the level of interest in formal approaches to early childhood education in their communities and the nature of the children’s experiences in the transition to school.

Talking with these families, it was decided, would be the best way to understand our major question in this inquiry: *What is it like to bring up little children in Indigenous communities in the early 21st century?* We were keen to talk with Indigenous caregivers about the barriers they found to sending children to early childhood education; about the sorts of skills and interests in young children that are valued by families and developed in the prior to school years within families and communities (either in out of formal child care provision); and about alternative models of early childhood education that might appear to be more in tune with local community values and practices in each setting.

As noted above, our research team included Indigenous researchers from the very beginning and the team heeded their advice in determining to work in accordance with Graham Smith’s description of research that attempts to share power by seeking the assistance of the community to meaningfully support the development of a research enterprise (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This emergent approach to research design proved a challenge for the ethics committees considering the project but they responded positively and encouraged the research to continue in a culturally appropriate way. As Humphery notes:

> One response to the demands of both Indigenous health organisations and a growing number of non-Indigenous researchers for greater consultation, negotiation and collaboration with local Indigenous communities has been the formulation of codes of practices regulating the relationships between researchers and researched. While these ethical guidelines rightfully aim to protect Aboriginal people from exploitation and to safeguard their intellectual and cultural property, they tend to encourage the procedural observance of rules rather than fostering a more dynamic reconceptualisation of research practice (Humphery 2000, p. 19).

Humphery goes on to say that “[m]oreover, in their focus on the interactions between mostly non-Indigenous researchers and the Indigenous researched, ethical protocols are inclined to oversimplify the nature of power relationships, representing the community as a socially cohesive group of Indigenous people and homogenising intra-community power relations and interests” (2000, p. 44). This account directly mirrors the situation we experienced in and across the range of research sites in the study.
We knew, and could prepare for, the need to seek community assistance many times, because of the number of different research sites and we were able to draw on the research literature to learn from approaches taken by other researchers in these or similar areas. But it soon became clear that while other people’s experience was a help, our research was not situated in their communities, and nobody had actually been along this particular path, in this place, at this time, before. We were always starting over with each community, each participant, each and every time. Sometimes, in fact, we found that we needed to give up in a particular community for a time, and start again, to ensure that we were actually working with community members rather than on them.

*The process of obtaining informed consent should not be coercive in nature. The community finds itself in a position where it is unable to refuse to participate and, therefore, becomes a reluctant partner. For negotiation processes to be genuine the researcher needs to be sensitive to the sometimes subtle community responses to proposals. They should be prepared to withdraw from communities at any stage of the research process even, at times, at the expense of the research* (Mack & Gower 2001).

In the case of one community, we needed to negotiate with the community a graceful exit when it became clear that they were not keen to participate.

This has meant that, particularly for the research team working in the regional and remote sites, the relationships that were established extended beyond just the project. This meant that in terms of our defined research task, we needed also to develop an exit strategy that would allow continuing relationships to be maintained outside of the focus of the study. The importance of recognising the cultural differences that Tuhíwai Smith claims are so fundamental to human subjectivity as an Indigenous, or as a non-Indigenous person, means that the power of Western concepts of time, responsibility, authority, and so on, are brought into question. The slowness of this process, compared to research approaches that assume the power of the researcher over the participants, and of the needs of the state over the individual or community, were a difficult adjustment for many non-Indigenous researchers to accommodate.

Without this reconceptualisation of research power as residing in partnership rather than in institutional position, our study may very well have run the risk of obtaining the poor quality data and cynical participation that has dogged so many non-Indigenous researchers acting on behalf of the government in the past.
Research partnerships: Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers

As Burchill (2004) reminds us, the effects of the distrust that Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has identified mean that many “gubba” researchers remain positioned outside of Indigenous culture, getting little from, and giving little to, the people they are trying to study. For Burchill, research on Indigenous people often means that:

- Our knowledge and skills don’t get recognised
- Gubbas often have different agendas sometimes not the same as ours
- Funding organisations expect us to do things their way but sometimes this means we lose control of the work
- Gubbas come and go. They take our stories, end a project, and then we are left to deal with what is left
- Well-meaning people come to work with us but they do the work and we don’t learn how to do it
- Sometimes Gubbas feel guilty about the past, often they are scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. Guilt often stops them from being honest and speaking openly
- Some of our people are very good at fooling Gubbas (Burchill, 2004, p. 9)

As we noted above, while we argue that the presence of non-Indigenous researchers is important in some of the design and dissemination aspects of the research partnership, it was clear that however well-meaning and well-intentioned we knew ourselves to be, none of us could claim that our bodies and clothes and ways of being in the world do not mark us as a “gubba”. For this reason it was determined that our role in the research ought not to be that of doing the field work or data collection through yarning.

If we were to be able to access information that was both reliable and accurate from the point of view of local people, referencing local community needs and practices, it was essential that the researchers were actually positioned at Nakata’s (2004) cultural interface, rather than firmly positioned on one side or the other. We needed to employ and train Indigenous community members in each site for this work. This training occurred in both Sydney and Dubbo, with Indigenous team members inducting new associates into the team.

Thus, in planning for each research site, the guiding question was always: How can we do this study in this place? Key to this, of course, was the associated question of how we could gain access to the people who could best and most reliably inform the study. This access, although neatly described in the formal ethics application, needed to be negotiated and renegotiated over and over again, from site to site. The non-Indigenous members of the research team did not have the cultural knowledge and access to be able to complete the consultation and invitational process easily. As outsiders to each and every research site, they did not know about the everyday lives of the community, who had the knowledge about children and childcare, who would feel they had the responsibility to speak about it to the researchers, and who was most appropriate to ask
for permission. This insider knowledge is, of course, only available to insiders and in forming partnerships with communities, the research team needed to justify and explain this departure from typical Western research patterns.

Gill and Howard (2005) use the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) to explain the importance of this approach, and to shed light on why Burchill (above) is able to differentiate between the sorts of knowledge that Indigenous people might give to “gubbas”, and what they either do not want to give, or that non-Indigenous researchers are not able to ask about, or even see. Bourdieu developed the interrelated concepts of habitus and field to discuss human social interactions. Habitus is the embodied accumulation of attitudes, or dispositions and their effects, realized as our individual ways of being, speaking, acting and interacting with others. Some people call this “who we really are”. Our habitus is always formed in the social field of family and community, and it is therefore unconscious, so that who we really are cannot be hidden, even when we think we are being somebody different. Fields are structured contexts of social rules and relationships, where some ways of behaving have more currency than others (Bourdieu calls these capitals), so that we learn what works in the fields where we are most at home. Bourdieu described all human interaction as played on fields, like a game, with rules that are determined by the inter-relation of field and habitus:

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus offers one way to theorise the sense of belonging to the group, the place, the country. Habitus as formulated by Bourdieu is conceived of as an ensemble of practices and dispositions what you do and how you feel about it whereby one is at one with the environment or context in which one [researches]. It refers to the network of understanding that is acquired, often early in life, which predisposes members of a society to interact in ways consistent with the specific societal norms of their group and consequently to feel at ease and to belong. A bodily disposition is a habitus when it encodes a certain cultural understanding which is shared by a particular group. It therefore represents the physical and spatial knowledge displayed by group members in ways of which they may or may not be consciously aware (Gill & Howard, 2005, p. 7).

The habitus identifies and marks people as classed, gendered as well as racialised individuals, so that just being Indigenous means very little in terms of being granted insider status in any group. An Indigenous person, born and educated in a metropolitan location, working in a university and living in the inner city for instance, while perhaps feeling similar enough to that of a person living in a remote location to be able to recognise some strong cultural attitudes and dispositions, might nonetheless feel just as alien in that community as a non-Indigenous person. In this way, our habitus marks who we have become through our participation in society, not our cultural identity.

For this reason, the project employed a number of other research team members drawn from the communities we selected to study or from other Indigenous communities, and worked with them to identify the most appropriate and effective means by which they could gather information about the child care choices of the Indigenous people across the sites. As we go on to detail below, the methods used in this study have therefore been similarly emergent from the context and collaboration between the communities.
and the research team. While not all of the following approaches were used in each setting, as we explain below they have all emerged from the consultation and communication between Indigenous researchers and research assistants and the communities in which they were working. In this way, the study can be seen to have followed a strong research plan that was designed to ensure the information we obtained could be used both within the community sites themselves, and could contribute to the general summary information as presented in the remainder of this report.

**The study design: Emergent method and research strategies**

The process we outline below is both complex and recursive, involving considerable time in all sites, and a significantly higher cost of time and travel in the regional and remote sites. While these additional imposts on the ease of accessing other people, services and activities are a fact of life for people living in rural communities, they impact all areas of social interaction, and are often unremarked and only partially understood from a metro-centric perspective. In highlighting them here, we emphasise again the difference between places that must be factored in to all accounts of early childhood services.

**Pre-project contact visit**

For each site, members of the research team travelled to the location and made personal contact with early childhood professionals in the area. Contact visits were made by the senior members of the team, in order to ensure that communities were able to see the official nature of the study, and decide to participate or not on the basis of an informed consideration of the overall purpose of the study, and its responsibility to government. In the rural locations, it was important that the team members who made the initial contact were already known, personally or by reputation, to Indigenous people in the community.

During this initial visit, team members then re-visited towns to meet key DOCS and early childhood professionals in the towns and find names of key local Indigenous people, informing them what this project is about and setting up a community meeting as follow-up.

**Initial community meeting with Indigenous research team members**

Researchers then needed to return to the community for the community meeting, which in some places was scheduled months in advance. In each case, the meeting addressed the project’s key methodological concern: How can we do this study in this place? While members of the team needed to ensure that the appropriate people in each community signed an official letter of consent, this involved an extensive process of yarning with the people about the project and about what they wanted to see as a result of agreeing to participate in the study.

Those people who attended the initial meeting were invited to continue consultation and discuss with other family and community members the best ways of gaining information in the local context about Indigenous families child care choices and the implications
these had for the children’s social and educational interactions and growth as members of their own particular community. The groups that were involved across the sites included members of the local Community Working Party/Regional Assembly, local Land Councils and Elders groups that operated independently from DOCS and other agencies. This ensured both that we were talking to the right people in each community, and that the whole community was aware of the research so that everyone who might want to participate would have the opportunity. In addition to these groups, though, the team members met with representatives and staff of other government agencies who we believed would have both interest in, and information for, the project. In most communities these agencies included early childhood services, family services, and the local primary school and pre-school.

Consideration of the time involved in these sorts of consultations again highlights the impossibility of practice within a strict Western research time frame. These discussions across the community could not take place while research team members stood and waited. They needed to return at a later date, sometimes months after the planned timeframe had been passed. As Laurie Crawford, one of the Indigenous research team members, explained in a briefing on research methodology provided to the team:

*Non-Aboriginal researchers have a poor record of developing positive relationships with Aboriginal communities. There may be specific reasons for this but it boils down to lack of understanding that protocols exist within Aboriginal communities and that an honest effort must be made to observe them* (Crawford 2006).

The research team notes and acknowledges the willingness of the project’s Steering Committee from the Department of Community Services to support this form of honest effort at partnership research. The first of a number of requests for extension of time for the study was made at this point, and these have been consistently accommodated. Once signed support for the project was provided by the community leaders, however, the next stage could commence at that location.

**Follow-up community meeting for research team**

In Indigenous communities, as in most others, community leaders are not always the same people who look after the children. Once the official agreement to proceed with the study had been signed according to local protocols, the research team could then commence to gain feedback from those community members who were involved with the daily lives and care of children, and who indicated they would like to be involved. The slow and careful process of community consultation, though, where we had taken the time to yarn with locals about the project and about what they saw as important in taking part in it, meant that the follow-up meetings with those who wished to participate in the study were informed by this initial information.

In the community consultations, differing advice was given in each location. In the remote site, for example, recruitment needed to be conducted differently in each location. In one place, it was suggested that families identified by the school principal and the CDEP should be approached by researchers to participate. In another, parents identified their participation in a women’s group (part of the Families First project), the
preschool, and Child Care Centre, and other support services as suggested by the Community Working Party that had been approached to participate.

The research team was able to return to the site, having prepared a draft site agreement, particular to that community, which was to be adapted at the meeting in the light of community decisions and feedback about the most appropriate methods of data collection in each site. In several communities, a community gathering was held where the researchers could talk about the project and ask for families to volunteer to participate. Once a plan of action was settled for each community, the Indigenous team members commenced the process of collecting the information we were seeking.

In summary, then, the study design we attempted overall can be seen to have consisted of both planned and improvised research strategies which allowed all members of the team to believe that we were conducting the study in a way that was both respectful of and open to Indigenous partnerships and ways of knowing. The next section examines what took place in the collection of data for the study.

Data collection in research sites

As we have noted above, each community involved in the study was different, and in each community the data collection was approached in a slightly different manner, in response to the guidance of the community leaders and elders. In this section we discuss the collection of data for the study in two sub-sections. First, we outline the methods or strategies that were designed and used most commonly across the range of community sites. We then discuss what we see as some of the important aspects related to the process of data collection and the implications for that process of our partnership approach, working with each community rather than on them.

Methods of data collection

The key method used by members of the research team to gather information about our key question “What is it like to bring up little children in Indigenous communities in the early 21st century?” was the social activity of yarning.

Yarning

Recommended in the literature (Atkinson n.d.; Bessarab, 2008; Brown, Brands, White et al., 2002; Power, 2004) as an appropriate and respectful way of engaging with Indigenous participants in a research or consultation process, yarning is seen as a culturally appropriate form of accessing and privileges Indigenous Knowledge (IK).

IK is stored in people’s memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices, equipment, materials, plant species, and animal breeds. IK is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture. Indigenous forms of communication and organisation are vital to local-level decision-making processes and to the preservation, development, and spread of IK (Grenier 1998).
According to Bessarab, yarning has a number of strengths in Indigenous research. She notes that yarning facilitates in-depth discussions in a relaxed and open manner; provides a rich source of thick description; is a culturally safe process for Indigenous participants; allows the use of narrative in relaying information and is transferable across disciplines (Bessarab, 2008).

In most sites the Indigenous researchers sat down for two yarning sessions with each family, and during the first one they invited participants to consider other ways in which they too could gather information that they considered to be important about bringing up their children in their place. Our suggestion was the use of another mode of data collection that we had designed to enable the families to capture the details of their own experience, and provide a focus for the follow-up yarn. Taking photographs was considered and taken up in most locations.

**Collection and discussion of photos**

Each volunteer family was provided with a single disposable camera containing 24 shots, and a reply-paid envelope for them to send the camera back to the research team once it was fully used. People in different sites used the cameras differently, some giving them to the children to take photos of their activities and surroundings from a child’s perspective, others recording a day in the experience of the family and the range of people, forms of care and types of activities that their children would typically experience. This technique has been successfully used before (Clarke & Robbins, 2004) to access family and community practices involving children.

Once each camera was returned, the photographs were developed with two prints made of each, and all of them, and the negatives were taken back to the community by the research team member for the second yarning session. The photos were discussed at this session, and more yarns about the activities and people they depicted were told and recorded. Each family had a full set of photos to keep for themselves, and selected which photos, if any, they wished us to be able to use in our reports and presentations.

**Artwork and image-based approach**

In several of the remote communities, the nature of partnership research became very clear as the local women requested that the research team member provided them with lessons in scrapbooking when she visited for the first and second yarning sessions. The difficulties and costs of transport in these remote communities meant that the women in these communities had only heard about scrapbooking as a craft from their relations in larger towns. The yarning sessions therefore took place while the women learnt and completed the craft activity.

Some of the photographs that were returned for the second yarning session were able to be incorporated into the local community’s scrapbooks. In one remote location a non-Indigenous research team member joined in a community painting session that was being held at CDEP, and participated in that yarning session while they worked. One participant used her painting to represent the process and practice of child rearing for her in that community. As artefacts, these forms of data, while dealing directly with the subject of inquiry, need to be used appropriately, as whole objects and representations
that provide descriptive evidence and detail, rather than being subjected to formal data-analytic processes that reduce them just to facts about the community. Their meanings are holistic and complex, and their use in our report is aimed at enhancing the preservation, development, and spread of Indigenous ways of knowing as noted by Grenier (1998).

In one remote community, elders at the initial meeting had been enthusiastic about the suggestion of the use of photographs to document the range and nature of early childhood experience in their place. They mooted the idea of a final, concluding exhibition that would be on display for the whole community to visit, enjoy and discuss. Within the project team we discussed an extrapolation of this as a traveling exhibition of photographs and art work depicting what it is like for Indigenous families bringing up little children at the present time, and while this has not been costed into the project design, it remains an option for the funding body to consider as a potential response to the project’s report and work.

**Giving back to the communities**

The impact of the exploitative nature of Western research has been outlined above. Abuses of the trust given to researchers by Indigenous people offering participation in studies has too often resulted in either the imposition of discriminatory policies on the basis of the researcher’s interpretation and analysis, inappropriate distribution and misinterpretation of Indigenous Knowledge, and/or very often no follow-up or feedback, and little evidence of benefit to the people who trusted researcher claims that the study would produce change and improvement (Burchill, 2004). This has been a matter of serious concern for the researchers in this study, and we have been careful to ensure that our work, as in any real partnership, has been mutually beneficial to all participants.

Because we acknowledge and anticipate that official and policy responses may not be immediately visible, we have endeavoured to give back from our study to the participants either through the sharing of skills in the scrapbooking session and the research training for local people involved in the data collection, or in a more immediate sense by providing a barbecue lunch to those who assisted us in designing and implementing data collection strategies, and returning photographs to families who participated in this stage of the data collection. In some cases, research team members brought books for children in the families who offered to speak with us, and oral reports about the ongoing work of the project have been provided to all communities on each subsequent visit.

**The process of data collection**

While their official agreement to participate in the study, and the finalisation of the approach derived from community consultation meant that data collection in each site could commence, this was again by no means a simple and rational process, at least in the ways that Western research conventionally understands it. As Dave Ella, then President of the NSW AECG, said in relation to working with Indigenous communities in his own experience: “Someone has gotta do the hard yards knock on doors, keep going back.”
The hardest work in organising and carrying out the yarning sessions with the large number of families we sought as participants, was just setting them up to start. Once people began to talk, and the research team members who were participating in the yarning could actually begin to record what people had to say, the natural and relaxed nature of this approach meant that the data collection process was highly successful. As one of the Indigenous research team members noted:

**Yarning is the strength of the project as it is such a natural circular conversation … you feel privileged to share their stories… I gain a different relationship with participants as they shared highly personal parts of their story** (Servena McIntyre 2007).

Servena’s comment about the highly personal nature of the yarning process points to a range of important methodological issues that were prime considerations for the project. These included issues of the ethical processes related to access to communities and families, obtaining consent, and to definitions of adulthood where young parents may be conventionally defined as children. As we go on to discuss, these are sensitive and sometimes delicate issues that pertain in the realities of life in some Indigenous communities at the start of the 21st century, and we address them here as illustrative of important aspects of the process and practice of data collection for all research involving Indigenous communities.

**Ethical processes of obtaining consent**

As we noted at the start of this chapter, how families bring up their children is an issue that is increasingly seen as important for school success, an outcome that Indigenous people in general seek and need. As we have outlined throughout this discussion, too, we have worked hard to ensure that this study has operated within an ethic of respect for, and partnership with, Indigenous researchers and communities keen to include Indigenous Knowledge in the body of knowledge on which policy makers can draw.

But given the history of child removal and government intervention in the family lives of Indigenous people, how families bring up their children is also a highly emotionally charged topic. People who ask questions about it are often, and rightly, viewed with suspicion in some communities. These issues often remain unspoken outside of the formal ethics application. And for this reason, on the ground, the question of who does the hard yards connects with the importance of insider/outsider distinctions in ensuring ethical research practice is followed in gaining access to the field. Again we draw on Bourdieu’s theory of practice as resulting from the interrelation of a social field and individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Gill & Howard. 2005) as a means of explaining the importance of the insider knowledge of the field that the Indigenous research team members brought to the process of data collection.
It was their insider knowledge of Indigenous community relations, and their habitus as Indigenous people that served to ensure that the data produced in the setting was reliable and trustworthy. Our research method ensured that only already trusted members of the research team would be yarning with participants about their child care practices, and this meant that this form of Indigenous Knowledge became far more important than we had predicted.

Gaining access
This is an ethical issue because of the importance of getting the right voices in the yarning process. As Burchill warns:

Researchers have to be careful to not only listen to a few Aboriginal people with strong voices... The outcome can be that people don't own the research or its results. ... Yarning for outcomes has to be carefully done and involve those who are not always the strong voices (Burchill, 2004, p. 9).

What one of the Indigenous research team members has called the need for the “sly work” of gaining access to those who had indicated they had the knowledge we were seeking was again an aspect of their habitus. It was tacit knowledge, Indigenous knowledge that real yarning is seldom planned to a schedule, and that what Power (2004) and Barker (2008) called “deep hanging out” is often necessary to find the opportunity to talk in the realities of the day to day lives of even willing participants. It may well have been impossible for the non-Indigenous team members who would not have the knowledge of the community to be able to identify and recruit people whose voices were not always the first or strongest. In reflecting on this aspect of their work, and in the training sessions for new Indigenous research team members, laughing references to “hunting and gathering”, “stalking and snagging”, “snooping”, “lying in wait” and “just being patient” were regular descriptions of what the research work entailed:

I've just got to put myself in places you can't plan with Kooris, like I turned up one day for a yarning session and we were sitting in the kitchen having a cup of tea when the phone went and Aunty had to go on up to school, to see about a kid that was in trouble, said something to a teacher, and so that was that - but once you know their routines you can go with their routines, and when they turn up I'll be there (Chantelle Davis 2006).

This is insider knowledge in practice, and this example suggests that it may be too hard for non-Indigenous researchers to have legitimate positions on the field of Indigenous research in situations like this. It is clear here that it is not what you know that gains access to the field but who you are. Using the words of Burchill in this regard again, it seems clear that:

What bonds people is their Indigenous identity. Whether it is the inner city or the remote outback it is important to take the time to get to know the community, build relationships, and respect other people’s experience and what is important in their lives (Burchill, 2004, p. 7).
Respecting community protocols

But just being Aboriginal is not sufficient in these contexts. Using Indigenous Knowledge, or the cultural capital of insider knowledge, is also important in knowing who to approach in different communities, and how to approach them. It is these complexities that are involved in understanding and respecting the complexities of this issue. The Indigenous research team members provided several instances of how they were able to use their cultural knowledge to direct the methods we adopted in an emergent and responsive way. As a young Koori woman, for example, one of the Indigenous research team members, Chantelle Davis, ensured that the team respected correct protocols on several different occasions. Following her advice that leaders talk to leaders and “I am too young to talk to those elders”, for instance, she was not the person who did the initial contact work in a large metropolitan community where the Institutional and positional authority of the project leader was marshaled as a sign of respect.

Another Indigenous research team member, Sophia Pearce, working in a regional community, was able to use that knowledge to ensure that the project did not rely on the first and loudest voice in that community but instead took the more difficult, and more time-consuming path of waiting for the knowledge gate keeper to gain official approval, and thus ensure appropriate participation. Similarly, it was Sophia’s knowledge of another community that allowed her to challenge and change the approach taken in most other locations. Her information that in this place we go to Centrecare, not Families First again enabled the project to respect the differences and local politics of the community, rather than overriding or ignoring these.

Similarly, the project attempted from the outset to acknowledge the status of some Indigenous mothers by asking for their consent rather than their parents’. These were young women who were classified as minors by Institutional ethics approval bodies, and thus generally unable to consent to participation in their own right. This was another way in which the voices of those positioned as least powerful in Western terms, but who are in fact key and knowledgeable informants for any study of how they bring up their children, were afforded respect on the basis of their knowledge.

In outlining these methodological issues for the study, we have highlighted the manner in which we have attempted to work in a partnership mode (Smith, 2001) with our research participants. As Barker (2008) notes, there is little value in what she calls the “ivory tower approach” to research with Indigenous communities:

> The ivory tower effect is a metaphor I use to describe the process by which people from afar plan and make decisions about a proposed research project or policy, and do so with little or no consultation with the people whom it will affect and with limited understanding of how the chosen community functions (Barker, 2008).

The role of the Indigenous research team members has been central to our capacity to take account of how each different community functions, and to remind us, constantly, that things take longer outside the ivory tower. This has contributed greatly to what we see as the methodological contribution of the study to the field in general.
Conclusion

As we noted above, the full scale and complexity of the task of researching in Indigenous communities was not fully understood in our initial proposal and planning, and budget and time-line estimates. We have followed an emergent methodology that has developed from our initial understanding, reinforced throughout the study, of the importance of abiding by research rules and protocols that respect and acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing when entering the field of Indigenous research. The findings of the study, outlined in the Executive Summary and Discussion chapters of this report, have resulted from what can be likened to Ungunmerr’s (1993), Fredericks’ (2006), and Atkinson’s (nd) description of Dadirri, an Aboriginal concept which refers to a deep contemplative process of listening to one another in reciprocal relationships. The principles and functions of Dadirri are:

- A knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to the community;
- Ways of relating and acting within community;
- A non-intrusive observation, or quietly aware watching;
- A deep listening and hearing with more than the ears;
- A reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and heard (Atkinson, nd. pp. 3-4).

An additional principle, as Ungunmerr articulated it, is having learnt from the listening, develop a purposeful plan to act with actions informed by learning, wisdom, and the responsibility that comes with knowledge. In this study, we have attempted to work by these principles to ensure that what our partner-participants had to say could be heard. To take the listening seriously is our next responsibility.

2.2 Conducting the research across rural and urban locations

As noted above, there were necessary place-based differences between the methodological procedures in the rural and urban locations. Although the processes described above for regional and remote sites were consistently used to support our research process across the range of settings, there were variations required in some of the research procedure to meet the needs of the urban settings. These are detailed below.

Urban sites

Community Consultations

Initial community consultations were undertaken by the research team leader along with an Indigenous field researcher. Visits were made to elder’s groups, children’s services and key Indigenous organisations in communities, including Land Councils. Follow-up consultations to arrange recruitment of families were undertaken by field researchers. Community consultations took place over an extended period of up to 18 months to allow time for trust to develop about the project and researchers. A range of community
leaders in each site signed Community Information and Consent forms to give permission for the research to take place in their location (see Appendix D).

**Recruitment of Families**

On the advice of community organisations, families were recruited through children’s services (invitations distributed to parents via the services) or through word-of-mouth contacts in the community to recruit families who were not using playgroups, long day care centres or preschools.

**Participants**

Twenty-seven families from three areas of Sydney participated in the study. These included nine families from an inner city suburb, ten families from an inner western suburb and eight families from a suburb in the outer west of Sydney. All had at least one child who had not yet started school and in total represented 72 children. The average age of the preschool aged children was 3.0 years.

The families were selected to represent as wide a variety as possible. In each of the three city areas there were single and multiple child families, families that had had experience in formal child care and those that had not, single-parent families (headed by mothers, fathers and grandmothers), families in which the parents were employed and unemployed and families with one or two parents who were Aboriginal. For a full summary of participants, see Appendix A.

**Procedure**

Families took part in two yarning sessions held from three to six months apart. Yarning sessions took place in their homes or in another place families nominated such as a coffee shop or a playgroup. Indigenous field researchers conducted yarning sessions, which could last from half an hour to three hours.

Before the first yarning session, participants were given an Information and Consent form and, after the study had been explained to them, were invited to sign their consent to participate (see Appendix D for the Family Information and Consent form). Families could also consent to have photos they had taken with disposable cameras used for the research in reports or presentations (about half of the urban families gave their consent for this to happen. Those who did not want their photos to be used were given the prints and negatives to keep.

The content of the yarning sessions was guided loosely by topic areas that paralleled the more formal research interviews and scales used in the larger Child Care Choices study (Bowes, Harrison, Taylor, Sweller, & Neilsen-Hewett, 2009). See Appendix C for the yarning session protocols used to guide field researchers in the yarning sessions. With participants’ permission (given in all cases), yarning sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis of themes.
2.3 Summary

Participants
Five western NSW communities of varying size were included in the regional part of the study with 44 families participating. For the families in the remote site, the preschool-aged children had an average age of 2.8 years. The total number of children represented by the participating regional families was 124.

Four remote far north western NSW communities involving 36 families representing 113 children were included in the group of families living in remote NSW. The preschool-aged children had an average age of 2.5 years.

Procedure
The procedure in regional and remote areas followed the same procedure as described above for the urban area although some families preferred one rather than two yarning sessions and as discussed earlier in the chapter, method of community consultation and recruitment of families differed for the different locations as decided in partnership with local communities.

Yarning with Aboriginal families in remote communities occurred in a range of community group opportunities which included women’s group gatherings, community development and employment activities, mobile playgroup sessions in the park, playgroup sessions in family homes and community art activities.

The results included in the following chapters come from the voices of 107 families and their experiences with growing up over 113 children. Included also are the voices of Elders and other community members. Discussion of how these stories, views and ideas might be interpreted for policy and practice is included in the final chapter.
CHAPTER 3 - HOME LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

The questions that guide the study relate to the experience of Indigenous families in NSW raising children under school age; the knowledge and skills that Indigenous children develop in the years prior to school and bring to the transition to school; and the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how children’s and family services can be more effective for Indigenous families.

In the course of the first yarning session, families were asked to talk about what their children were like in terms of their interests and strengths, their personality, language and social skills and their health (see Appendix E). Families described their children with great affection. The children were described as sociable and shy, talkative and quiet and interested in a range of things including playing with balls, painting and music. Almost all were portrayed as loving, “good” and successful children who had formed successful relationships with others in their families. The Children’s welfare was of concern and interest to a range of others in their home communities including siblings, aunts and uncles and other members of their extended families, which were richly varied in composition and character. Others were described as less sociable, and of concern to their care givers in relation to their development and potential for school success.

This chapter presents what families told us about their children’s learning at home in the early years. It is presented in three sections, reporting the accounts of urban, regional and remote families. Each section begins with several composite family stories, derived from what we had been told by many of the families from that area of NSW with names and details changed to protect the identities of families. This is to give readers a feel of the whole picture for families before we present the themes from what we were told by that group of families about learning in the home. The themes for each section (urban, regional and remote) are children’s development – pride and aspirations, kinship, health and wellbeing and contextual issues.

3.1 What urban families told us about their children

By way of introduction and to demonstrate the range of families and their different experiences in the children’s early years, the stories of three composite urban families are presented below. Many details have been changed and elements have been combined from several families to protect the identity of individuals.

Stories of Aboriginal families in urban NSW

Jaiden’s family

This family included a grandmother, Margaret, who was looking after a 3-year-old boy, Jaiden, who had been with her since he was born. She was also bringing up Jaiden’s 7-year-old sister. The children’s mother came in and out of her children’s lives but they had not seen her for the last year.
Margaret described Jaiden as very sociable. She said he liked to watch TV and use the computer but also that he wanted other children’s things when they weren’t his. She saw this as coming from him only just starting to be with groups of other children (he went to playgroup when we first saw him and then later started at an Indigenous preschool five days a week). His grandmother thought that Jaiden had learned a lot at preschool. He could count to 2 and his speech had improved since he started preschool. She reported that he really liked to paint and draw. Margaret told us that she thought education was very important and she was happy with the preschool.

Margaret said that both children had knowledge of kinship and where they had come from. They knew about cultural aspects such as when ceremonies are held and what they are for. She told us she took the children to events like Survival Day and NAIDOC Week to learn about culture. She also told us that Jaiden recognised the Aboriginal flag. His grandmother said she was looking forward to when the boy started school. “I will be celebrating”, she said. She said she was finding it hard work chasing him when she had bad knees. She wanted to send Jaiden to a school that celebrated cultural events and taught language and culture (Aboriginal and from other countries). She anticipated that going to school would be easier for her grandson with his sister already there and with a lot of other Aboriginal children attending.

**Darren’s family**

This family had four young children, a girl of 7, two boys of 4 and 2 and a girl 6 months old, living with their mother Judy and father Jim. Judy stayed home to look after the children and called on Jim’s family who lived locally to help with the children sometimes. Judy’s family lived in another part of NSW (as was the case with many of the city families we spoke to) and she missed them being part of the family’s life.

The 4-year-old boy, Darren, suffered from asthma and also had speech problems. Judy was worried that when he started school other children would not be able to understand him. The family was still waiting to see the speech therapist but Judy was using speech exercises with Darren, taught to her by another mother at playgroup who was a speech therapist herself. She also read to the children, mainly to the older ones.

The younger children in the family had been going to playgroup and Darren went to preschool but only for a few weeks before the preschool closed down. Judy told us that she saw the early years as very important because “it moulds them” although she said other members of her family did not see school as important and had not sent their children to any early childhood service. Judy explained that she had not sent him to another preschool after the first one closed down because she had no transport, the fees in other places were too high and all the other centres had waiting lists that were too long.

**Michelle’s family**

A third family comprised Yvonne, a young mother of 17, and her 2-year-old girl, Michelle. This young mother was bringing up her daughter with the help of her father (Michelle’s grandfather). Michelle’s parents had separated and Yvonne did not know where Michelle’s father lived although she did see his family who are from Samoa. The
little girl was exposed to Samoan language and culture but not so much to Aboriginal culture or language although Yvonne told us that they did have a book at home with Aboriginal paintings that Michelle liked to look at. Yvonne said she often read to her daughter. She told us that she thought the early childhood years were important because

\[ \ldots \text{that is when they learn most of their stuff. That is when they're interested in learning because once they get to school it depends on what crowd they hang out with.} \]

Yvonne did not send Michelle to daycare because “there are enough kids in the street to play with”. She also saw daycare as too expensive and her daughter as too shy to go to childcare. She told us her ideal childcare would be affordable and would have Aboriginal workers and a lot of Aboriginal culture and activities. She said she would like it to be welcoming and, importantly, non-judgmental. She had had a bad time the one time she took her older daughter to playgroup and talked about

\[ \ldots \text{the way that they all look at you. Because you're only young they think of us like we shouldn't be here, we shouldn't have kids. We were only there for about half an hour and we left.} \]

Yvonne told us she wanted to send her child to a good school so she can have a better education than she had been able to have herself.

**At home and in community**

Families yawned about the activities they were engaged in with their children at home and in the community and several themes emerged from the yarning sessions about what was important to them in their children’s early learning and experiences. These themes are outlined below.

**Children’s development – pride and aspirations**

Families talked about their children and their characteristics, interests and learning with great affection and pride. The personalities of the children ranged from shy to outgoing:

*She’s quiet, placid, but she’ll tell you what she wants when she wants it. She doesn’t hold back. Bossy boots, talks a lot. I suppose that’s the age.*

Children were seen as learning a lot through the family and from early childhood education. One boy, for example loved computers:

*They actually have, in the last year, they bought two computers for the daycare which was a new thing … His father, he works in computers, IT student …I don’t know if that’s the reason why but he just seen them and he just [took to them]. Even if he sees them on TV he’ll be glued to the TV if he sees a computer.*
When they were talking with parents about the importance of early childhood education for their child, seven of the 27 families expressed high educational aspirations for their child, saying they wanted their child to have a good education and go to TAFE or university, “to do something”, as one mother expressed it. As one mother said:

With my support hopefully nothing is too great for him.

Another said:

We all went all the way through school so all my children will get a good education and have a good life.

One other mother explained:

There’s a big thing with blackfellas and education you know. If you don’t get ‘em now when they’re young … For me, it’s just like setting him for his educational life so that it’ll be the norm for him, so it won’t be such a struggle. That’s why it’s important to me – not just to give me time but for him in the education system.

Aspirations were not restricted to education. One mother moved from the country to Sydney to get her children away from their cousins so that they didn’t fall in love with them. She had aspirations for a different future for her children.

**Kinship**

In terms of early learning and what families thought was important for children to learn, kinship and culture were significant factors that emerged in every yarning session. Family and friends were seen as having the responsibility for teaching children culture although the inclusion of cultural learning in child care was also seen as desirable by many families.

Culture was seen to include family and kinship knowledge and respect and family values as well as the music, art, ceremony, Dreamtime stories and Aboriginal languages. Teaching young children about culture was done in a variety of ways. These included teaching children about kinship, about showing respect to elders, about their cultural identity and special aspects of culture such as language and music.

Knowledge about the names and relationships of members of their extended family was an aspect of culture that many families mentioned when they talked about what their children were learning at home. One mother told us:

Kinship is very important for kids to know.

Another explained:

They know their family background. They know where they come from.
The families who had extended family also living in the city reported, for the most part, that the extended family was closely involved in the child’s life and supported the family with advice and counseling as well as through looking after the children. This was particularly appreciated by the two mothers who told us that they had suffered from postnatal depression.

A father told us that his three children saw a lot of their aunties and grandparents and often stayed at their homes. He shared the care of the children with their mother and the grandparents looked after the children in the afternoons (both parents were working). A mother reported: “They got a few nans and pops.”

Children did not always have a full knowledge of kinship. It was sometimes restricted to the family members who were part of their lives. One mother explained that her son knew his grandmother and aunty but did not know his extended family or other kinship relationships.

In some cases, extended family members were estranged from the family and did not enjoy this support:

*I really only see my cousins from my Dad’s side at Christmas. My family hates everyone. They’re very snotty. They’re very into themselves. That’s the English-Scottish side and none of them get along with my mum so they’ve all disowned me except for my nana and my uncle who have a lot to do with my son.*

Several families thought kinship knowledge was important even if many of the members of extended family lived outside the city so that the child did not know them in person. In one case, a mother taught her daughter about kinship by using photos. She placed photos of extended family at eye level on the wall beside the stairs. As she walked up the stairs with her child, she would point to the photos and teach her the names of the people in the photos. She would regularly change the location of the photos ensuring that her daughter had a thorough knowledge and could recognise and name all members of the extended family.

Teaching children to show respect, especially to elders, was mentioned by many families and was often seen as the primary aspect of cultural learning. As one mother explained:

*Culture we can teach at home. He is learning respect. They have to understand right from wrong. You can’t baby kids.*

Children were taught to refer to their parent’s friends as uncle and aunty.

Tied in with culture was a sense of Aboriginal identity. Many families in the city taught their preschool-aged children to be proud of their Aboriginal heritage and to identify as Aboriginal. One mother commented:

*I want her to be proud of who she is.*
Another said:

*I will say to them, “It don’t matter how much blood you’ve got in ya, you’re Aboriginal. That’s it”.*

In many of these city families, one parent was not Indigenous. In a few instances, the non-Indigenous parent mentioned that it was important for the children to know about both their Indigenous and other cultural heritage. One child, for example, was developing an identity based on his Arab, African and Aboriginal background. His father taught him his Arabic, African, Islamic culture while his mother taught him about Aboriginal culture and also took him with her to language classes where they were learning her language together. His mother told us that the boy knew that his name represented both cultures.

In one family, the non-Indigenous mother explained that she wanted her children to be proud of their white as well as their black heritage. In this family the issue of identity was a source of argument between the parents. In other families, the child’s other culture (e.g., Samoan, Arabic) was reinforced alongside the Indigenous identity by the relevant parent and extended family.

Children were taught about culture, kinship and identity at home by family and friends through:

- Music and dancing
- Dreamtime stories
- Attending events such as NAIDOC week, the Knockout, the Survivals
- Learning Aboriginal language and, in the case of one boy, his skin name: *He knows all about his skin name. It’s his two grandfathers’ names.*
- Taking children on family fishing trips
- Teaching children how to play Aboriginal musical instruments such as the didgeridoo
- Teaching children about ceremonies. In one family, for example, the grandmother ochred the children’s faces
- Teaching children to recognise the Aboriginal flag
- Traveling to the country of one of their parents (one boy was taken to the Northern Territory to learn about his father’s culture)

In three cases, the child had been taught culture at the Indigenous childcare service or school they attended through lots of Aboriginal paintings around the preschool, the English version of some words along with the Aboriginal version underneath it and through learning Aboriginal dances and music.
Two families reported that their child was not involved in learning about Aboriginal culture. One mother explained that they did not go to cultural celebrations because it is difficult to get involved. Another said that her child was learning Fijian Indian culture from a friend but had not had exposure to Aboriginal culture. She said that she would like him to learn more about his Aboriginal culture.

Another aspect of valued learning at home was teaching children values and morals. One mother said:

> You’ve got to teach them to be respectful of all people.

Another expressed a similar sentiment:

> I teach her to be polite and get along with other cultures. To respect elders, be polite.

Many told us that their young children had no trouble learning many things from them and their families. As one mother said:

> How can they not learn anything cause their brains ... ya know ... are goin’ a mile a minute.

Parents reported that children learned many things at home from family members. Some were related to school (reading was mentioned by seven families, using a computer by two, writing (their name) by two, learning the alphabet by three and counting by two families. Singing (1), dancing (1), music (1) and art and drawing (4) were also reported educational activities with the young children. Parents told us a range of other activities with children that led to their child’s learning at home: outings to the park or library (1), educational television programs (2), learning a language other than English (3), religion (1), cooking, swimming (1), using tools (to fix a bike) (1), playing games and doing puzzles (2) and playing sport (2). These activities emerged in general discussion about the children and their interests not in response to a specific question. As a result the list represents the rich variety of activities not the absolute number of families undertaking each activity.

**Health and wellbeing**

Urban families reported a range of health issues for their preschool-aged children. Six of the children had problems with their speech and several had ongoing health problems such as asthma (5), a heart murmur (1), global delay and dyslexia (1) or ear problems (1). Some children had had health problems that had now been overcome. These included meningitis (1), bronchitis (1) and asthma (1).
The families had access to medical care for their children and many indicated their awareness of public health messages. For example one mother told us:

> She has asthma … She was in hospital every six months until she was 18 months and that’s when they said she had asthma. And I never smoked through pregnancy and I breastfed for the first 13 months and I didn’t smoke then either.

**Contextual issues**

We talked to families about other services in their community that they used apart from child care. While three parents said they did not use any outside support services, either because they did not trust them or because the services were not there in their community, most responded that they did use services. The services mentioned were the doctor, the Aboriginal medical centre, the child clinic, the speech therapist, the Aboriginal playgroup, the church, the youth club and Centrelink. While church groups and youth clubs were appreciated, many families who mentioned services were not happy with them.

There were various reasons given for their dissatisfaction. These included a general belief that all government services would not provide a satisfactory response. For example:

> I have to abide by them to get where I need to get, you know. That’s why I do feel a bit controlled by the government.

> I don’t trust any services that the government runs now because it’s just crap. Not that I, you know, rang around 24/7 but I know I don’t even wanna hit that wall and be frustrated ‘cause I already know that the service out there is poor.

Others expressed specific issues with particular services. For example:

> I had a big row with them last time and I don’t go down there anymore. I just found when I went there with (my partner) they were nice to me and when I went there by myself I get looks like I wasn’t dark enough or Koori enough to be there and it just made me feel really uncomfortable (non-Indigenous mother about an Aboriginal Medical Service).

One mother voiced a clear need for more information about child development and what children need:

> It doesn’t bother me if he is not talking. As long as he’s clean, clothed, he’s not in rags and has shit all up his back, he’s right. He’s not whinging, he’s not crying, he’s just running around smiling and doing his own thing. Sometimes I feel I am doing things wrong because I don’t really have the information to help me.

There is no doubt that all families need the support of services in their community for health, education, care and parenting support. These comments by parents from the city indicate that there is a clear need for services to be proactive in communicating in a
positive way about what they can provide to overcome a widespread belief that services will be unsatisfactory and are not worth contacting.

3.2 What regional families told us about their children

Yarning sessions with Aboriginal families in the regional sites were held in community contexts and, in some cases, in a participant’s home. Family and community yarning sessions resulted in hours of extensive discussion about what it is like to raise young children in regional NSW. While there were questions which framed the researchers’ expectations, in most cases the yarning opportunities to talk about their lives and their children’s lives led to detailed stories. The major themes that emerged from these yarns which represent the experiences of 44 families and over 124 children are highlighted below.

Families happily discussed their children’s successes at childcare and school, their children’s interests and their aspirations. They also raised their concerns around culture and identity and the need for Indigenous culture to be acknowledged, respected and embedded within childcare services and schools. Families want their children to respect country and culture. The yarning around culture and identity continually brought up the importance of kinship and families’ needs to know that their children were safe and happy at childcare/preschool and that their children’s culture was being respected.

They should just have familiar faces from people in the same community to where they come. They know that person then. They know its fun. They’re not strangers to them.

Other themes that surfaced were the choices families were making around childcare and schooling and why; health with its related issues, such as access and transport to the specialists and doctors.

Stories of Aboriginal families in regional NSW

To demonstrate the range of families in the regional group and their different experiences in relation to raising children, the stories of three families are presented below. Details have been changed and combined from several families to protect the identity of individual families.

Cassie and Kevin's extended family

This family comprises grandmother (Cassie) and grandfather (Kevin), their six children and seven grandchildren. Three of Cassie and Kevin’s children are adults and not living in the family home. Their other three children, Matthew 12, Jasmine 4 and Rachel 2 live with them. Cassie and Kevin’s grandchildren, Anthony 11, Jack 10, Peter 8, Sam 6, Dylan 4, Stephen 3 and Natalie 2 live with them because their parents are experiencing difficulties. The children’s parents are often in and out of their lives and at times they also live with Cassie and Kevin.
Matthew attends high school and is a happy, sociable child. He enjoys going to school and spending time with his friends. Anthony, Jack, Peter and Sam attend primary school. Dylan attends preschool and Jasmine is enrolled to start preschool after the holidays. The two babies, Rachel and Natalie are at home. Kevin says:

_They’re good kids. They’re happy. They are doing what all other little kids do, running around and mucking up. They’re healthy and active so they keep you on your toes._

Dylan was born prematurely and spent several months in hospital. He has difficulty communicating and has a hearing impairment. Dylan gets frustrated easily particularly when trying to communicate with his siblings, aunts and uncles and with his peers at preschool. He requires further support in physical activities such as balancing, running and climbing. Dylan attends preschool for 2 days per week where he participates in early intervention, speech and occupational therapy programs.

Kevin said that they chose this particular preschool for Kevin as it provides transport, the fees are low and the children are provided with “their meals and stuff too, which makes it easier for the families and that cause some people can’t afford packed lunches and stuff”. He explained that there is a preschool across the road from them which is more convenient, however they could not afford the fees, there was no bus and meals were not provided. He thought preschool “helps a lot with their learning, with their maths and whatnot and their words and being confident when they go into primary school and kindergarten”.

Kevin said that it is important that the children learn about their culture:

_I teach them as much as I can about their Aboriginal Culture and what not, sort of sink it into them, tell them where they come from and everything. Their Grandmother was part of the Stolen Generation so I let them know all about that._

While Kevin says at times raising so many children is difficult and challenging, family is extremely important. Both Kevin and Cassie have extended family who support them by helping with cleaning, shopping and whenever needed, babysitting. The family had been offered respite from DoCS however Kevin says the children do not like strangers and “I don’t think we’d go for that because we don’t like the kids to go with anyone else”.

**Polly’s family**

This family has two children, Amber 3 and Polly 4, who live with their mother, Susie. Susie is separated from Amber’s father but says that Polly’s dad sees both girls regularly and accepts Amber as his own child. Polly’s dad does not live in the same house. Susie has lots of support from her family including her mother, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. She says she is not sure how she would cope without them.
Amber attends childcare two days per week. She is confident, talkative, energetic and “very cluey”. She has been diagnosed with asthma but Susie says she seems to be growing out of it. Polly attends a preschool program at the same childcare service for two days per week. She is a little shy and quiet but “once she knows you, she comes out of her shell”. Susie told us that Polly is very affectionate and loves cuddles.

Susie had enrolled Polly at another childcare centre in town the previous year but she withdrew her after a couple of weeks. Polly experienced separation anxiety which was very hard for Susie. She said she also felt uncomfortable at the service and that staff were very judgemental. Susie also thought the centre should have “more Aboriginal culture, more Aboriginal workers or more Aboriginal input”.

Susie said that the childcare centre the children currently attend celebrates NAIDOC week and often teaches the children Aboriginal dance, cooking and dreamtime stories. Familiar faces are part of the centre staff with the employment of Aboriginal staff members. The Aboriginal community is also involved in the service in a variety of ways.

Ricky’s family
This family includes a mum (Jen) and dad (Tony) and four children, Malik 7, Jaida 6, Ricky 4 and Tameka 1. Tony works full-time and Jen works part-time outside the home. Both Tony and Jen’s family help with the children in order for the parents to be able to work.

Malik and Jaida attend school. Jen described Malik and Jaida as outgoing children who love to interact and socialise with their peers. Ricky attends preschool for two days per week. He was described as a little more reserved around strangers however he had adapted well to preschool.

Jen and Tony felt that the early childhood years “are important for children to learn in the first 3 years ‘cause that is where they pick up a lot of their basic skills, and they learn what is right and wrong, opposites, language”.

Tameka was called a “daddy’s girl.” Jen said she is a happy-go-lucky baby who smiles a lot and is extremely active. Tameka does not attend formal care as Jen and Tony, as well as Jen’s mother decided that she is too little for strangers to be looking after her. Jen’s mother (the children’s grandmother) looks after Tameka when Jen and Tony are at work.

Jen told us that when Tameka is 3 years old she will attend preschool like the other children in preparation for school. In the meantime, Jen and her two children, Malik and Tameka, attend an Aboriginal play group session at a local organisation once a week. Jen said she enjoys this time with her children and looks forward to interacting with other mums without judgement from others. She says she tried another play group once but the mothers looked down at her.
At home and in community

Children’s development- pride and aspirations
Families yawned with pride about their children, sharing stories about the children’s personalities and skills. In every way they spoke, parents and extended family told others how much they love their children and how they like watching them grow:

I love it yeah. I’d be lost without my kids
Precious memories are good - watching them grow up
The funny things they say
Love going back looking at photos

Like all families, Aboriginal families in regional NSW have little children with a mix of personalities. Many parents are delighted to describe their offspring as being happy, easy going and strong.

He is very happy-go-lucky.
She is happy-go-lucky, strong and determined.

They also were honest about their children’s individuality in moods and behaviours:

She’s very cheeky, this girl is very cheeky, she knows too much.
He is a grump, he won’t talk to anyone. He would rather growl at people he would.

Families yawned at length about the development of each of their children and differences between their children. There are children who can placidly share:

He is very happy, very easy-going. When I take him and he is playing with other kids, if someone takes a toy off him he doesn’t sit there and cry for it. He is happy to go find another toy and sit there and play.

Then there are those who are social and into every opportunity that is on offer:

Dancing, music, socialising, playing with Bratz and swings, loves to read ... yep loves [pre] school and crafts, loves doing that kind of stuff.
I think he’s confident but shy as well. He is confident when he knows people but he’s shy when he doesn’t know them, like shy initially, yeah.

Parents described their child’s social development as individual and “normal”:

... quiet, shy, but once she gets used to you ... They’ve got to talk to her, they’ve got to be around for about a half hour for her to say something to them.
She’s the opposite ... She don’t care who she talks to.
No, he is alright at home. He doesn’t play with many kids outside of home. He would rather be by himself. He is a loner.

Reference to a likeness with family members was also used to explain a child’s social development and interests:

Yeah most of the time [I’m shy], with some people, with white people it’s a little bit different. I’m more relaxed with black people around me. Oh she stands back for a little while if there’s a group of kids and then she checks them out, and she’s in there then . . . Once she knows . . .

The caring nature of little children was highlighted and valued in a number of yarns.

. . . get growled at and they said she say, “You right?” “You right, sissy?” “You right, brother?” Or “Nan, you right Nan?”

Learning to communicate with others rated highly in describing children’s development:

Yeah she’s starting to ... trying to make sentences now ... Yeah she was talking to Layla on the phone this morning and she said ... Yeah um fall, bike yeah ... So yeah, learning, she told a story with three little words. That’s what she said, “Fall, bike, yeah”. So Taysha was riding the bike and she fell.

... expressing herself with bubba talk. She tries to get some sort of talk out. If you talk to her, she will do her thing. But Kylie, no problems communicating or interacting there. She will talk to anyone.

If he wants to sit down and have a yarn with somebody he’ll um definitely do it ... He’ll definitely tell them where to go too!

Recounting incidents where children begin to show interest in books and reading and writing was clearly enjoyed by parents and grandparents. There is also much credit given to siblings and cousins in influencing and teaching younger children even if there is little age difference:

He was four and reading a book and he taught [brother] to read when he was two. Every night they read the same book and within a month he was reading it himself.

He reads himself, perched himself up last night and was here reading them.

. . . I’ll get them a book, if she wants a book and I’m gonna read it to them . . . She picked a lot up from Shakira, she started school this year. . . So Shakira was sittin’ down doin’ her homework when she got home and . . . like she used to copy . . .
Motor skills are seen as important whether they be fine or gross motor skills. Children were described as being “sporty” and “active, very active”. “Riding bike[s] and kicking the footy” are activities enjoyed by children as well as “colouring in and painting” and other craft activities.

At the moment she likes paper mâché sort of things, sticking things on.

Connection with outdoor physical activities was mentioned by a few parents. Being outdoors and playing anywhere there is water is also a big part of some children’s daily activities, when possible:

He loves physical activities . . . he’d rather be outside. He’s an outdoors child. 
Little athletics. She likes that. Playing with her friends. 
Just out with the fishin’ rod.

Musical talent was mentioned by several parents also. Listening and dancing are activities for fun and skill building.

. . . if he hears music out in one room he will actually dance all the way from that room to that spot. Oh it’s so neat. 
. . . She does anything, she does modern day dancing . . . She’s a rapper . . . But she would, if I was to teach her now she would do it yeah, she copies . . . Yeah she wants to learn.

Skills related to cultural activity were also part of a child’s developmental story in many families:

I teach my kids as much as I can. I teach them how to dance. 
[The children learn culture] Only at home . . . Yeah he used to dance, he would, he done everything now, so much . . . Yeah when he was . . . two, 18 months, two he was dancing with us . . . Jason use’ to take him a lot and teach him things. Jason started talking language to him first. 
. . . he plays the didge, plays the didge well. Actually he was whinging the other day to buy him some straws because he’s got to practice his circular breathing. So yeah he plays the didge, he’s got clapping sticks, he’s got an emu caller. He’s a singer, he’s a dancer. Koori kids, that’s it. And he ah, he does like dancing, Aboriginal dancing. Dancing at home, you do shake a leg and all that.

Interests of children varied greatly wherever they lived. As for other populations of young children, trains and dinosaurs were of great interest as were favourite toys as a focus of talking:

Trains, heaps of trains, Thomas the Tank engine. 
Mad on dinosaurs. He tells me about, tells me stories about dinosaurs.
Role playing with dolls was also a favourite for some little girls:

She likes playin’ with babies and that, dolls and that.

[The little girls] get their babies and take them for a walk, and they role play.... They go over in that tree over there and climb that, or across the road and climb the tree.

[She] pushes her pram around, gives the baby [a feed].

Parents talked about how children play and grow with siblings and cousins supporting and protecting each other:

Kyle is very shy with strangers, unless there are kids about. He needs Rosie to go first and meet the kids and if they’re alright he will go play with them.

Parents acknowledged that their children watch all the adults around them and model some of these behaviours that they observe:

She will watch what you are doing and observes everything

Children also spend time with adults from their extended family growing and learning:

Yeah, well she goes with him. If he goes fishing she’ll wanna go with him.

Well, see it was only a couple of weeks ago there we went out yabbying and then we went some part of the creek out further there and . . . [they] took us out to where they use to sharpen the spears and all of that . . . Out there on the rocks and that . . . [and the child] sat there and had a good sticky.

Yeah, I teach her Aboriginal things ... I teach her the kids’ language...well I want her to learn. Him and [Uncle] . . . they know more about dancing so I was gonna teach them language.

Some families saw self help skills as being an important part of their children’s development:

He knows to brush his teeth and shower every day, self care. He’s good like that

He is really good with food. He knows at dinner time he has to sit down and eat his food ‘cause I had difficulty with the other [children] in that way.

Some aspects of self help relate to culture as well. Parents told us of little children’s skills and links to culture with the greatest of pride:

. . . that’s all culture and the traditional food she eats all that . . . We go down and puts the pots in and she comes and get ‘em.

She carried a dead lizard in the house the other day going “blaa”! To mum, “blaa”? It was dead and it was only about that big. “Hey mum” and she was going “blaa, blaa”? . . . And it was dead . . . like that. . . carried it in Nanny’s house.
Kinship

Yarning about Aboriginal children growing up in regional NSW was all about family and kinship. Children know from an early age about the strong bonds of kinship and family. This connectedness includes non-Aboriginal lines of the family as well. Most families spoke about culture being embedded in family and kinship:

Culture starts at home.

Culture is a good thing I can give my kids that costs nothing.

We have no family [here] but in Sydney she is close to her great grandparents there. Only grandparents and Aunties here, great grandparents and uncle lives in Port Macquarie and all the rest live in Sydney. But even Kaleb’s family she interacts well with them....yeah well she has just learnt to look at the photos. . . yep and she knows whose parents they are and how she is related to them . . . yeah Dad especially [teaches] cause he is a Pom he comes from England so he tells them what it is like over there. Kaleb’s brother talks about Aboriginality to [her].

We talk about Aboriginal culture . . . yep and we talk about British, different cultures and different foods

She knows. . . She knows about them . . . Yeah the family that she’s been around now she knows, and her father’s family she knows who’s [his] sister that’s all . . . She only knows [her] . . . Yeah, that’s dad’s sister and she goes Oh . . . She knows that or I say, that’s Nan’s sister there, Oh and when she sees her next time she says Aunty . . . Yeah Nan and Pop’s good . . . They teach her little you know things that she doesn’t know.

The important bond between sisters and cousins in each of the regional locations was emphasised from a child and adult perspective. One mother spoke about her sister being her link to social and community contact as they did everything together with their children.

We [my sister and I] talk about pregnancy and the birth and everything like that.
If Deb goes [I’ll go]. I won’t go to things by myself. I don’t like it. I’m too shy.
Yes [he knows] who his cousins are and all of that sorta stuff.  Yep . . . He knows everyone.

Knowing Aboriginal members of the family and feeling most comfortable with them was identified as part of a deep family and cultural connection by participants in regional communities:

With my kids when I have got them, the whole three, and I take them to my aunty’s house. She has got five kids. They run in the house. They have got no fear of going in there where if I take them to a day care centre, they are apprehensive about going in there, they are very stand-offish and even when they have been there before they are like that, where we might go to my aunty’s
once a month and they just run in, they seem to have the gut feeling that I know this place and these are my relations. The father of my kids is white and he is around white people but as soon as they get to my family they just know they got that in-built sense.

All our mob get together so my kids know where they come from. Mum still speaks it [language] so kids speak a bit. They go real blackfella.

[They] do get round with Koori people but I’m not teaching him culture yet. . .

Some mothers emphasised that the children’s relationships with their fathers are also strong. Fathers have input to the daily care of children when they are living with the children or close by. Some fathers are the cooks in the family. The need for some fathers to work away from their home community means that children are learning to cope with separation on a weekly/monthly basis.

No he [dad] works away, leaves Sunday afternoon and comes home Wednesday afternoon . . . The first day [he leaves to go to work] she cries like when he is leaving . . . Yeah, cries for the whole time, all that night. Once she goes to sleep she is right but she is all “Daddy” Then she goes to play group on Mondays so she is alright then.

Yeah, I think so because he still calls her his little baby girl, and I tell her is not a baby any more she is a big girl she is three, so she just likes to hang off him and go everywhere with him, and she has to sleep with him at night.

When young children are part of a large family group, parents told us they sometimes find it difficult to be alone.

With this one here if there is nobody in the car next to him, he will whinge all the way . . . No he doesn’t like being alone I think. I have got to wait until the afternoon before the other kids get home from school before I can do something, like just duck down town quick. He’ll have to have someone in the car to look after him.

Mothers yawned about the support they have from other family members in raising their children. For most there was a sense of them being in control and being the main caregiver with others there to be a support and also provide suitable childcare. The network of important adults is recognised in all their stories. The number of adults in the network depends mainly on where their mob is living. Mothers, aunties and grandmothers support their daughters and sons in bringing up children but so do fathers, uncles, grandfathers and other significant adults.

I was very stressed. If I didn’t have my Mum I would have been stuffed.

Yep I feel in control that way because … You did that with your child, this is how I do it with my child. And I know there is still things I need to learn but if I make a mistake I can ring them [Aunty or Nan] up and say, “Now what was that you said I needed to do?” and I don’t play on it, I just say “OK then I tried to do it my way it
didn't work. What was it that you said?” I’m not stupid. I’ll ask for the help if it’s going to make my life easier and I don’t feel embarrassed to do that either.

At this stage just Nan and Pop [provide support and care].

The boy’s father is always around and he treats her as his own.
[I know your Mum comes out here a bit] Yeah she was there for us and helped us, but she had Grandma to look after at the time.

There is a great deal of trust in family also for child care. No matter what the age of the children, mothers told us that family was their first choice for care:

[When I’m at work] his grandmother [watches him].

Just Mum [helps look after the kids]. Me, Mum and mostly me.

When she is not at home, she is either with [Aunties], me, Mum or other sister.

Caring for extended family members’ children has an impact on all the children. Adults told us stories of how these experiences made them who they are today and that it taught them about sharing. Those caring for a lot of children also recognise the support they get from others in their daily lives in order to keep everyone together. There is a sense of two-way sharing.

It’s just me and Cassie and then sometimes the Aunties come down and give us a hand with the cleaning and whatnot. They help sorta help bath the younger ones, just to take a bit of the stress and strain on us, with the work we got to do . . . and Cassie’s got a sister that sometimes comes up and gives her a hand, you know, takes a couple of the kids . . . there is respite there if we needed it. I don’t think we’d go for that because we don’t like the kids to go with anyone else.

Decision making around children was also shared by family and friends.

. . . talking about [child] and sending [him to school] um yeah, I listened to the community really . . . my friends more than family.

I’ve always spoken about anything to do with the kids with mum and dad… and we ask the kids, the whole family. . . Yeah, it’s not just mine; it’s all about decision together.
Health and wellbeing

Support for mothers through pregnancy and the earliest days and months of a new baby usually comes from family but also includes contact with community health services. The availability of services varies as does the connection families make with services. Some access all they can, others pick and choose, some feel that the providers are not appropriate or do not advertise well enough and then some choose not to access services at all.

Going into labour with Dom was really scary. I went to anti natal classes but I didn’t know what to expect and they didn’t tell you everything. And when the placenta was coming I thought I was having twins. I thought another baby was coming.

Well we have our midwives but she only comes to your house for your first couple of weeks then you have to go to the clinic, but more I guess they would be classed as a social worker.

I haven’t been to mothers’ group. I don’t have any information I think Community Health is a bit slack actually.

. . . especially here in the country cause when I was at . . . in Sydney they sent you stuff about post-natal depression and if you are, they send out a counsellor and they come every week for the first few years of your child, and here you got no support whatsoever. And when I was in Sydney they tell you straight away about the folic acid and other things but here there is nothing about anything like that. There are no services.

Even with breast feeding, there is no breast feeding support group. Oh well there is a national one, not anything I know of here, and that might help if they prepared people for breast feeding, they might have more mothers that breast feed . . . ‘Cause they just tell you to breast feed not how to do it or anything and I was bed ridden.

The only thing I am really aware of is the baby clinic where you take your baby there to get immunised and weighed ... Yeah, but other than that, I don’t get involved with anything . . . yeah I’ll ring them if I want help if there is really wrong.

Families provide a continuing source of support with baby and child health issues. They understand what is natural and culturally important. There were many stories of using bush medicine and relying on cultural knowledge and wise family members:

I get very spiritual especially when I’m pregnant ‘cause I hear voices and stuff.

Nine times out of ten I ring Nan and she says, “Have you got this? Did they do that?”, “OK I think it’s whatever” then you go to the doctor and they say it is what Nan said it was, you know they got the chicken pox or it’s a 24-hour bug, keep the fluids up, they don’t need … that’s alright … And when you go to the doctor he will say, “Why did you come to me if you already know?”
[I] ring one of my Aunties ‘cause they are always home cause they got their kids to look after, the ones that are not at school . . . yeah but Nan is usually the one that you ring first. Nan knows everything. Can’t keep no secrets from Nan.

He had the air treatment and they still lived like traditionally, his brothers do it, do all the medicines . . . Sting from a bee you cover in cold mud . . . It’s their natural calling.

They used a cobweb around a bleed cut…And the cobweb would stop it, yeah, it’d stop it from bleeding . . . Yeah or a rolling paper they’d put that there. Well the old traditional people used to put a cobweb, a cobweb see?

His skin, he’s got bad eczema . . . he’s had that since he was a baby. I took him to Sydney and everything to the specialists down there and they still couldn’t [fix it] . . . Mmm and then I took him down there and they couldn’t do anything about it . . . [gave me] Sorbelene cream but that doesn’t work . . . Nah . . . Yep and then Aunty she had this ointment um … ointment. I’ve got that off her and then I started usin’ that there on him and it started clearing up and that.

When it comes to doctors, no [I listen to Mum] because I know Mum knows what she’s talkin’ about . . . But with other stuff I would have to . . . listen to what she’s got to say and then [talk to doctor].

Children were reported to have a variety of conditions which impact on their development including autism, ADHD, enlarged bladder, ear, nose and throat problems, and speech and hearing problems which have been diagnosed.

[She] doesn’t understand much. I think that’s because she is a bit deaf at the moment. She has to go to the doctor’s on Friday and get her ears checked again … It does [affect her communication] when she has got a cold and she is stuffy. She mustn’t be able to hear herself ‘cause you couldn’t understand a word she is saying. She was clearer before, when she first turned two to what she is now, and always whispering. She will whisper to you and you can’t hear her.

[He] has now been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder and now that we know and he has been diagnosed we can get him the help that he needs ‘cause he is going to go into a unit class next year in Dubbo.

Many families yarned about the difficulties in accessing health services. Waiting lists are a part of everyday experience. Specialist services such as dental, physiotherapy, speech therapy, paediatric and gynaecology services are short in supply and big in demand for children and adults:

He was on the waiting list for like a year and a half, nearly two years, for a bloody speech therapist.
Lack of access to services in smaller regional towns presents as a problem from conception:

_\textbf{I think they should have somebody come out here, you know, once a month or whatever … Do ultrasounds for women that are pregnant, so they don’t have to go to Dubbo, you know what I mean?}_

Depending on services available in their town, families also needed to travel to other centres to access specialist medical services. The difficulties associated with travel presented barriers for many families. Transport availability, cost, support for all the family, organising care for other children make this a stressful part of parenting.

. . . Oh they’re, they’re meant to [follow up] but um that took, when I went down to see the specialist he said Oh he’ll have to stay in hospital down here for 3-4 days and then we want you in Dubbo for up to 10 days in case he starts bleedin’ . . . I thought oh . . . that’s two weeks! . . . Like I’ve got to muck around findin’ somewhere for the kids. . . If it’s in through school I’ve still got to muck around with [other child] for school and everything . . . Mm. Yep. It’s alright Mum said you know she’ll help out where she can … But that’s a lot of muckin’; if I’ve got to go backwards and forwards and droppin’ [child] here and then gettin’ back in there for Uni and . . . Yeah. Like as it is now I’ve got to find someone to take them to school and pick ‘em up every mornin’ and afternoon ‘cause I have to leave here at 8 o’clock every day.

Knowing which services are available and how to access them is a difficulty that quite a few families struggle with in all locations.

. . . I go to mother’s group, once a fortnight and none of the mother’s there knew about a lot of the facilities we have here. Like there’s a community bus that takes people to Orange shopping and takes people to appointments for the doctors. A lot of them didn’t know if they had to go over to an appointment for whatever, dentist or whatever that you could ring the Aboriginal health and they’ll organise transport as well; so none of them knew about all these different things that were on offer. I dunno because maybe those people would have used it, you know what I mean?

_\textbf{I mean unless you sort of look in the book or go up [to the community health centre], you don’t know what’s, what’s even available.}_

_\textbf{They should be doing letter drops and advertise in the [newspaper] that specialists are coming. I wouldn’t have known that the eye doctor was coming if I didn’t go over there last week. If we don’t go there we don’t know, and no one finds out.}_

. . . See young mothers aren’t being told that there’s a doctor available.

_\textbf{Well this . . . This sorta thing, this is this thing to do with interagency now, DOCS is making every town have an interagency, they’re funding it . . . as part of this interagency we need to know what services visit Gilgandra, when … You know?}_
You don’t know, we need a list of who visits, specialist who visit that sort of stuff, where I found everyone must think oh well everyone knows, but me being new to [town] I had no idea. And I think it’s, you’ll probably find a lot of people don’t know cos they’ve never used it. Yeah so I think that’ll be a good idea.

While family members try to help each other access services there is little understanding of the scope of some health and community services and it appears that the rules or the practice change regularly.

It’s alright sometimes say, I dunno, they help some people you know what I mean? ... Sometimes it’s who your name is and … Yeah and where you can get help from. But [an NGO] is alright now. It’s a bit better than what it was . . . Come to [the NGO] at the start and I was told that I was too old to get help even for my kids and that was what about two years ago, three years ago . . . They even turned me away. Even though my [child] would’ve been about 4 or 5 and they turned me away. And said that I was too old to get help and I said, “Well what about my children?” and they said, “They’re also too old”. But now it’s changed a little bit I think it was that one worker. Yes, it was only the worker, when I moved to [another town] and they helped me with everything and that was for the baby, transport, anything I needed like um if I needed food they’d help ya . . . And they said, “Your kids ain’t too old”. I said, “Even though my son’s seven?” and they said, “No! He’s not too old” . . . To get help . . . well see that’s where a lot of young mums don’t realise that they can go over the top of people in the office … But now it’s changed, so much. Yeah it’s changed a great deal . . . Yes . . . I don’t know what was happening. Yeah well when you see the ads on TV, it’s family support, no matter what your race is.

Most parents said that they accessed medical and dental health services but would like to know more about where and when services are available. Information and coordination appear to be a problem for quite a few people who suggested that an aboriginal health [and community] centre would be good when this type of centre is already available in some towns in the regional site.

. . . if there is a dentist visiting or an eye person or you know. Fay’s running an ear, nose, ear testing and stuff like that, I didn’t know any of that. I do through work, now I’m working but when I first moved here, no there was nothing, I didn’t know anything. Oh yeah, miss out big time. Yeah miss out big time and I don’t know if it’s harder for Aboriginal health. You know I think the community needs to be aware of what’s available. For you to go and say, “Well my child needs this, you know some, you know education on asthma”. You know, all that sort of stuff.

Mothers yarned about the range of difficulties in parenting. They acknowledged their stress and thought that it might be alleviated through access to additional mothers’ support groups for Aboriginal women.

Yeah, super stressed. I think motherhood’s the hardest job … So yeah and I think that if there was more mothers groups…
I just get stressed that some days things just really pile up and you don't know what you're doing and mainly in the holidays it gets like that when they are all yelling at you at the same time.

You get a bit stressed yeah, everybody gets a bit stressed, but it’s alright. When you go to sleep at night you’re alright cause you go to sleep, ready to get up the next day and do it all again.

Yep, more Mums groups and activities for children to do, from newborn to school age and support groups as there is not many in [this town].

... more support for mothers ... through maybe the preschools and day care and child care some parenting programs ... You know, that sort of stuff I would think, yeah. It’s the hardest job [being a mum].

Contextual issues

Transport remains an issue for many families with children in regional NSW.

It’s hard to get around with kids even if you have your own car plus the added expenses of running a car.

The cost of living and making ends meet financially is of concern to all families. Whether it is better for mothers to work or not is a consideration for single parent families as well as two-parent families. Some families decide it is best to have the mother at home rather than working for pay that is all used for childcare or preschool fees.

Other issues in Aboriginal communities also impact on children’s early years experiences. These issues can have negative and positive tones. One mother highlighted the impact that police service relationships have on some Aboriginal families. She spoke of her children and those in the extended family being scared because a police officer “exercised his authority” over a minor incident with her dog not being on a lead when she was crossing the street from her home. Another woman told us about the fight to maintain access to an area of historic Aboriginal land and how that was giving children an opportunity to connect with the past. “Old people are telling little kids about what it was like”.

3.3 What remote families told us about their children

Yarning with Aboriginal families in remote communities occurred in a range of community group opportunities which included women’s group gatherings, community development and employment activities, mobile playgroup sessions in the park, playgroup sessions in family homes and community art activities. As in the other sites, people enjoyed the opportunity to tell their stories and reflect on what it is that happens for their children and their aspirations for them. Honest talk flowed in yarn ups where relationships existed or had been built with the research team members. The many hours of yarning tell of their commitment to their children now and into the future. The yarns also reflected the frustrations they experience with human service provision and remoteness.
The remoteness of communities shapes the service provision and accessibility of services in these locations more than others. However, the context is important for these families and they talk loudly about their proud connection with this place and land. The communities are small compared to those in other sites but the themes of the yarns have common threads. Families still seek cultural safety for their children and themselves:

I know she is safe, I know she is secure, she is being looked after.

The results included in this section come from the voices of 36 families and their experiences with “growing up” over 113 children. Included also is the voice of Elders and other community members. Discussion of how these stories, views and ideas might be interpreted for policy and practice is included in a later chapter.

Stories of Aboriginal families in Remote NSW
To demonstrate the range of families and their different experiences in relation to child rearing, the stories of three families are presented below. Details have been changed and combined from several families to protect the identity of individual families.

Grace’s family
This family includes a young mother (Bronwyn), who is the main caregiver for her five children - Ella 2 and a half months, Mia 3 years, Grace 4 years, Sally 5 years and Missy 6 years. Bronwyn’s mother Joan lives with them after her husband (Bronwyn’s father) passed away. The children’s father comes in and out of their lives. However, Bronwyn’s mother, brothers, sisters and cousins are a constant support for her and her children.

Bronwyn described her children as very normal, happy and active. Ella was reported as “growing into her personality”. Mia and Grace were said to be very sociable and good communicators. Sally was described as a good leader and more dominant than the other children and Missy as very mature and fussing over her siblings. Bronwyn said that her children know they are Aboriginal and are taught at an early age about family structures. Two of the children had asthma but otherwise their general health was reported as good.

Bronwyn told us she believes that education starts at home and that parents should only send their children to childcare if they are working. Bronwyn said she often sits down with her children and teaches songs to them, shows them how to play games, and introduces the alphabet and numbers. Bronwyn also said she believes that children aged between 3 and 4 years should go to preschool to prepare them for school and that this is important for successful transition to “big school”. Mia and Grace did not attend preschool as there is a long waiting list at the preschool and it is too expensive. However, they were ready to attend and would have loved to go.
Annie’s family
There are four children in this family, two girls aged 2 (Dana) and 4 (Annie) and two older boys aged 13 and 14. The two younger girls live with their mother (Samantha) and father (Darren). The two older boys received a scholarship and are attending a boarding school in Sydney. This separation is difficult for all of them. Samantha and Darren’s extended family are close by and often care for the children. Both the mother and father think education is extremely important and that:

*Education is the most important thing, you know for kids these days. I mean the younger they learn the better for them. Education gives them a good foundation.*

Dana, the younger daughter, was born prematurely and although she experienced medical issues early on, Samantha said she is developing quickly. Although Dana’s language development was delayed due to her prematurity, her mother said she was very intelligent for her age. Dana had also been diagnosed with asthma. Dana and her sister, Annie, were described as very close and having a strong bond. Annie attended preschool four days per week from 9am-3pm although Samantha said she picks Annie up at 2pm as she gets tired and the girls miss each other.

Samantha said although she is happy with the preschool Annie attends, she thinks parents should be allowed to be more involved:

*’Cause I mean you are taking your kid and dropping them off and you don’t really know what goes on in there.*

She also said there needs to be more interaction between:

*Parents and the preschool I think and the kids as well. Yeah that’s right you’re learning things about your child you know, what you didn’t know before. So you’re learning both ways really the parent and the child.*

Nick’s family
Nick’s family comprises Mum (Tracey), Dad (David) and three children, Nick 5 years, Jemma 3 and Elle 2. Tracey is Aboriginal and David is of Portuguese origin. The family has recently moved from Tracey’s hometown to David’s hometown for employment purposes. Tracey said she found it difficult moving away from her family and often felt lonely and isolated. However, she says they go back to her hometown to visit regularly.

Tracey described Nick (5) as a feisty, stubborn, and energetic child who loves to know how things work. “*He is robust and gets into everything just like his uncle*”. Nick requires assistance with his speech and has a slight hearing impairment. For this reason, Tracey and David decided not to send him to school until the following year. Tracey said her family did not agree with this decision as his cousins of the same age went to school this year.
Nick did attend preschool. The bus picks him up and drops him off and his meals are provided at the preschool each day. Tracey also said it was difficult to get Nick support for his speech and hearing difficulties as services are limited in her community and other services are 3 to 4 hours away.

Tracey described Jemma as a shy, quiet, good girl who loves to draw and paint while she says Elle is very busy and inquisitive. Jemma and Elle do not attend day-care because Tracey said the fees are too high and the service does not provide transport. The family has one car which David takes to work each day. Tracey and the children attend a mobile playgroup session once per fortnight. She said her children love to interact with other children and will sit and play all day. The play session also enabled Tracey to meet and interact with other parents.

Tracey and David thought it was important for the children to learn about their cultural heritage and “that other cultures should mix with other cultures”. Tracey said it was important for children to go to a service and school that celebrated lots of different cultures. Tracey also said:

> When we go back home we teach the children about our Aboriginal culture. We go fishing, they play with their cousins and make Johnny cakes.

**At home and in community**

**Children’s development - pride and aspirations**

Families spoke openly about their children and their children’s interests. What the children enjoyed doing varied as much as their personalities. The personalities the children showed to those outside the family and some children’s willingness to engage with others was built on a foundation of trusting those around them.

> She’ll talk our ears off, but if she don’t know them she won’t talk.

Families saw early years experiences as important not just for “here and now” but also for their future. Yarning revolved around what children had already learned socially, emotionally and cognitively prior to school. Learning and teaching with and from siblings and cousins was valued and expected. In addition, interactions with parents and other adult family members were identified as part of the learning process.

Fine and gross motor development, patterning, role playing, empathy and observation were all skills that were offered as proof of children’s appropriate or advanced development.

A wide range of creative, cognitive and physical activities were enjoyed by the children. They liked colouring and reading books:

> . . . reading books and that, they learnt that from their brothers. . . writing, playing.
Heaps of songs. He knows how to sing his alphabet. He is starting to learn how to spell his own name now and he knows his numbers 1 to 10. He is starting to learn his colours.

Yeah, wherever he sees a ‘Q’ somewhere he’ll say, “Oh mum that’s my name”.

Some parents talked about what they did to get their children ready for school. They were proud of what they “know” about preparing children for school.

We sit down and play a little game and say “I Spy” and that little game and that there, with the shapes and colours, animals and all that.

Children’s knowledge about their surrounding environment was a point of pride in discussion for the families. The learning which includes life skills was seen as being just as important by many families:

. . . go fishin’ . . . she cook em, she cleans up.

When speaking of support for children and aspirations for them in early learning, some made the link between home environment, extended family and goals of education and social interaction with peers.

. . . in the family, support from the family, they’ve had a good stable home environment. With a Mum and Dad and grandparents and extended family if they needed, support and encouragement from friends as well . . . felt good because they were going to learn and get an education and also interact with other kids their age.

Kinship

Discussion around kinship and its importance to families, as well as the incredible support network it provides, was a recurrent theme throughout the yarns. Children were taught and experience from an early age the importance of family and kinship.

But culture is family too you know.

. . . they know that they’re black, they know they’re Aboriginal. Yeah they know all their family and who own ‘em.

Teaching of kinship happened in a variety of ways depending on who was involved in the children’s lives. Some parents had very deliberate approaches to teaching and learning about connectedness and relationships and for others it was through everyday experience:

With the photos I sit down and tell them who their family are and how they related to us and that . . .

For those who are living away from their extended family, social activities were different and impacted on how children experienced family.
If we’re bored and got nothing to do of a weekend we might just go for a drive.
This is the first time I have ever lived away from all of my family.

A number of parents spoke of the strong connection between children and family members that others don’t seem to understand:

Yeah um if one, if the sister cry the brother cry, if the brother cry the sister cry.
But my uncle is down at the moment so she is with him now. She wanted to stay home with Uncle Joe.

This strong connection changed how children responded to others in the community and how they mixed with others.

They’re very good. It’s just that they’re good kids when I’m not around but when I’m around they real shy, get very shy to people and get real nervous and just wanna be with me and don’t wanna blend in with anyone.

Support for children and family seemed to dictate much of the experience of the early years in a child’s life. Having family close at key points in this stage set the context for stability and development. Although some were silent about the need for support in parenting, others told stories which reflected not only how grateful they were for support from family but also acknowledged the stresses of parenting. The support of grandparents came in many forms. For example:

I lived with my Dad. He would sit up and listen for her and everything. My father helped me buy the pram for her . . . having all my family around for support.

I was pregnant and nothing was going to stop it, [the pregnancy] so I moved back in with Mum and broke up with the father. Mum helped a lot. She was there when I had her. I lived with my Mum a few months after I had her.

Child-rearing was seen as the responsibility of the extended family but it depended on who was around and parents, aunts and grandparents spoke of being the main caregiver.

Grandparents, Aunties, Uncles, cousins everybody, it’s extended. I’m the main caregiver but everybody.

Oh it’s pretty hard in [this town]. It’s not very hard [for me] ‘cause I got my mother and father there to help me. So I got a lot of help with that my sister, my brothers, my mother, my father. And their father. Sometimes he helps him, takes them for a couple of days.

If I had my mob around, my kids wouldn’t be in care.
One mother emphasised that while other family provided support, the day-to-day routine at home was shared with her husband:

6:00am start. The kids start getting up then. Tyrone might get up about half hour before then. He gets the lunches and breakfast then it’s to me up that end of the house and I put them in the shower and iron their clothes and dress them and make sure they are right, then come back down here and Tyrone got all their lunches and by 8:00 they are on the bus. After they are gone then the baby has a bath, then me and him get ready for 9:00am work. Take two little ones to our Mum’s then I work till 12:30.

The absence of fathers who spent varying lengths of time away for work or in gaol was highlighted as an influence on mother-child relationships. In addition, some told family stories of stepping in to help children whose parents were unable to care for them. The impact on the rest of the family sometimes becomes secondary to the responsibility and family relationship.

Three extras . . . their mother was found neglectful through DoCS and unfortunately my brother-in-law, their father, is in gaol. Basically at the end of the day they were going to ship them off out of town, possibly separate them and send them to people they didn’t know so we really couldn’t see that happen ‘cause we love them, so we decided, even as an extra burden on us, we decided to bring them into our home.

Despite family support, some mothers talked about hard decisions they would need to make in their children’s best interests as they grow up:

[This town] has its ups and downs. I’m planning on moving with my girls. You know it’s not a place to bring little girls up. When we was growing up here was completely different.

Health and wellbeing

Health issues were a major topic in yarns. Health started as an issue for these families while they were still pregnant and continued as the children grew. Many families had children who needed to see specialists who weren’t available locally. This meant that families had to travel, causing financial hardship and family stress.

Mothers talked about a need for support and compassion, especially for those who didn’t have family living close by when their child was born or when they were accessing services away from home.

I never took none of my girls to get needles. My mother or Eddy always took them. I couldn’t do it. I took Tanika once and she cried and I cried and never again. I couldn’t do it.

When I was hospital with Kisha, you know when they do the prick in the heel the night before you leave, when they took her away I bawled my eyes out ‘cause I knew that they were taking her up there to get a needle.
Families yarned around the variety of health issues and conditions their children had. Health complaints such as ear infections, allergies and asthma were common. In one particular community, most children suffered from all these conditions.

Poor information about what health services were available and when specialists were coming to visit was highlighted as an issue. In fact, in one yarn-up, there was a lengthy debate about when services were actually available in that community.

Lack of access to general and specialist health services increased levels of stress for families. In the most remote location, there is no ongoing health service available in town or any access to medical supplies. The closest service was one hour away by road. Not all families had registered cars and there was no petrol supply in town. For families caring for very young children there was a fear that they cannot always act quickly enough when needed. In other locations, while the situation was not so difficult, access to services was still limited.

The issue of access to health services becomes increasingly complex as travel and accommodation costs for families are prohibitive and organisation for being away is difficult when attending appointments in larger regional centres. The emotional stress was reported as great when getting children to services and when organising to be away from other children and family members. In addition, this travel to services also meant being further away from support networks.

Services were available but access was problematic. This meant that families and children with debilitating health issues were disadvantaged from the outset unless they moved to larger regional communities. Moving in turn creates other issues. For some children, diagnoses of disabilities may be delayed until later in their lives, usually when they commenced formal schooling. At this stage the support, treatment and health care plans that need to be implemented may be not be as successful and this certainly impacts on school experiences later.

Difficulty in getting transport and the cost of transport when accessing specialists and health appointments was raised by families on many occasions. Transport was a difficulty that prevented families from getting their children to appointments either because they could not get to the appointments or they could not get home from the appointments.

*Flying doctors had them going to Adelaide but they don’t like to go because you have to find your own way home.*

The situation became even more difficult when mothers needed to be with their children when they were receiving treatment away from home.

*[You have to] find the money for you to stay there with your children, and you know with black mothers they like to stay there. And usually when you go to them things you need to find your own food.*
All the aspects of organisation to access medical services for children placed family members in a situation of feeling “out of control”:

*Usually you’re only jumpin’ in and going, you know last minute because you scraping up borrowed money from this one or that one so you can get away … there’s no one that’s got no money. You know, go and borrow money off this one but you don’t know if they’ve got that money.* . . .

Bush medicine was another aspect of the wellness and wellbeing part of yarns. In some sites, people spoke about using bush medicine and having learned about this from their family Elders. One young woman told the story of how her grandmother told her all about bush medicine when she was growing up. The older women reminded us that bush medicine is a real science and not everyone understands what you should use and how. “Different areas have different nuts and berries etc”. The knowledge is passed down through the family - “Nan told us”. Now, some Elders are not sure who to give the stories/knowledge to as the mob moves around more and some younger ones need to understand about “ways of knowing”. Elders would use bush medicine but others now fear poisoning as they are unsure of quantities and other limitations. They “got to live it, know it”- living the experience is different these days.

**Contextual issues**

Living and bringing up a family in remote communities was yarnd about in the usual cyclic fashion and included the balance of positives and negatives.

Remoteness meant additional expenses to include in the household budget:

*It’s really expensive here. We don’t have to go down to [regional centre] to do it much, but when we do it’s a big shop - get everything they need till next time we go down, which is once or twice a year, maybe three times a year. It screws me mate, having to pay for petrol. I mean fuel-wise it’s ridiculous.*

Transport arose as an issue in many aspects of life.

*We got the buses come, comes Monday and Thursday. They not fit for a dog to sit in.*

*With a community bus, we [could] sort of go back to our own traditional ways too you know on the weekend, and even if you could you take them camping down the river, you know set up camp and all those sort of things that you could even do.*

Even getting to “Paint and Play” playgroup in the park had it difficulties.

*Yeah we like the staff, Aboriginal staff, they’re good. It would be good if we had a courtesy bus thing ‘cause like I live right up the other side of town and it’s a long walk, but they have a community bus here now but it’s sometimes packed and stuff.*

Yeah and sometimes you get on it and there are a lot of people and drunks.
3.4 Summary

In this chapter we have aimed to address the first of our research questions, and to detail our understanding of the experience of Indigenous families in NSW raising children under school age. In so doing we have been mindful of our third research question’s aim of understanding the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how children’s and family services can be more effective for Indigenous families.

We have highlighted the diversity and complexity of the nature of Indigenous families in NSW today and indicated our concern that ‘place matters’ in terms of how and what children’s services are made available to Aboriginal families in the range of settings we have studied, and how and why they are taken up.

The rich descriptions of learning taking place at home during the early years indicate that children’s learning particularly about kinship and their culture could be used as a basis for further learning in early childhood and school settings. Children are growing up with strong ties to extended family and to their communities with families accessing a range of informal family and community supports. While families all acknowledged that parenting was a difficult task, they were less aware, especially in regional and remote areas, of what formal services and supports were available for them when they were raising young children. Issues of access to services for remote families were particularly acute and the travel and distance involved in accessing services had large financial and family support implications for parents. A concern for their children and their future was a common factor in all areas and parents in city and regional areas in particular were expressing educational aspirations for their children. Families’ experiences and views of early childhood services in relation to these aspirations are the focus of the next chapter.
Major themes emerged in relation to education in the early years. Families clearly articulated that they valued learning and expressed understanding of the importance of the early years in children’s learning and development. This chapter will explore and discuss the attitudes of families towards child care. Comments from the families are included throughout this chapter to allow the voices of families to be heard clearly. The chapter has three sections, presenting the thoughts on child care and early childhood education of urban, regional and remote families. Within each section there are two main issues reported: what families value and want in early childhood education and barriers to accessing early childhood education.

4.1 What urban families told us about early childhood education

What families value and want in early childhood education

Child care services were used by many families and a total of 23 of the families accessed some form of provision. This ranged from attending playgroup or preschool through to attending a long day care service. Eleven of the families were accessing preschool or long day care and the number of days children attended varied from one to five days, depending on family circumstances. Ten families had children participating in playgroups and two families were accessing family day care.

With the exception of two parents in the urban group who were studying or had studied early childhood, the families did not distinguish clearly between structural types of early childhood education. For example, the difference between preschool and long day care was not clear to most parents and the terms “preschool” or “day care” were used generically to refer to any formal early childhood service. Family Day Care and Playgroups were the two models that were labeled as different from preschool or long day care. Unless otherwise specified by families, this chapter will use the generic term “early childhood setting” as used in the Early Years Learning Framework (2009, p. 8).

Families yawned about their experiences with early childhood services. In their discussions, families also identified factors that would make child care more attractive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and factors that had constrained or limited their participation.

Reasons given by families for the importance of their child attending early childhood education settings included social interaction, development, language development, preparation for school, independence, understanding routines and as support for working parents. Two mothers who had studied early childhood education had organised a separate group to provide support for children and to help them with their speech and learning.
Learning about culture in early childhood settings was a recurring theme for the urban families. It was discussed in the context of home culture and of learning to be with others outside the family and in the context of interacting with other cultures in childcare and school. One mother commented about cultural learning as a cross-cultural both-ways concept:

*It’s good, she can learn about everyone else’s culture and in return they can learn about hers.*

One father stated that early years learning is important for development and said that he would like to see a lot more culture and Koori language taught in kindergarten:

*Development is important. More Indigenous people would use services if culture was taught. It is about your heritage and your language.*

Another parent stressed the importance of early years learning for the development of identity:

*It’s essential. For their learning and how they grow to be a person, teaches them to become the person they are later on. Then by the time that they hit school they’ve got an identity, they know their feelings, they know right from wrong, yes and no. That’s very essential that they learn those things straight up.*

One mother who expressed her views on early education and supported the importance of early years learning said:

*That’s when they learn everything. They learn the basics and it’s the best time to teach respect, knowledge, anything. They’re willing to learn anything at that age because they’re absorbing it.*

A parent who viewed early education as being significant for development and maturity as well as for preparation for school commented on strategies being used at home to assist learning and gave her reasons for enrolling her daughter in preschool as: *She’s got to grow up.* One parent who differentiated between child care and preschool believed that preschool was important for education but said that child care should only be used when necessary.

In their yarning sessions, families provided some details of their experiences with early childhood settings. Some were positive about the care their children had received and one grandmother suggested her grandchild was more grown up and confident after having started preschool. She also said there was an improvement in the child’s language skills.

One mother commented on her child’s developing sense of social justice and fairness:

*If there’s someone picking on someone she’ll go and stand up for them. That’s one of her favourite sayings now: “It’s not fair”.*
One mother identified the importance of early childhood settings in children’s learning before the peer group gains influence:

*That’s where they learn most of their stuff. That’s when they’re interested in learning because once they get to school, it depends on what crowd they hang out with, depends on which way they go.*

*It’s not just to give me a break. For her to learn, she has to share things and talk to other kids.*

Another identified skills her child learned at day care that she was not able to teach her:

*She learnt things that I didn’t get time to teach her because I’m working. It was like, “Wash your hands after you go to the toilet”. And toilet training takes the pressure off me as a mother. Other kids are around her using the toilet so she switched on. She was like, “Oh, that’s what I have to do”. And it took the pressure off me stressing how to teach her those things.*

In contrast, two parents argued against sending children to early childhood settings for learning:

*What she learns at day care, I could teach her. She has enough education in her life to… for the rest of her life she’s gotta go to school, primary school, high school, whatever year she wants to go to high, the higher school.*

Similarly, another parent said that her partner’s family believed that children should be home with the family because childcare was a waste of money. Yet, this mother’s perspective differed. She felt it was important because *that’s when they learn the most.*

Approachability of management and a friendly staff were identified as important for making families feel welcome in early childhood settings. Families’ experiences of feeling unwelcome and judged reflected a different practice from that recommended in the two significant curriculum documents which provide a framework for contemporary practice, *The NSW Curriculum Framework for Children’s Services: the Practice of Relationships* (NSW Department of Community Services, 2001) and *The Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) both of which support honouring diversity and the importance of respecting families and culture. Many families expressed a desire for greater understanding and said that they often felt misunderstood and not respected in both early childhood settings and schools.

One parent identified the need for increased understanding of staff, *just to understand Aboriginal people and the way we are.* Another mother said:

*Get some Indigenous workers with backgrounds that understand the way Koori kids are.*
Families stressed the importance of cultural awareness programs for non-Indigenous early childhood staff. Because of the lack of cultural knowledge in early childhood settings, families did not think that their children were in a culturally safe environment when they attended an early childhood setting:

*She doesn’t learn about the culture or language at the day care.*

Parents identified a lack of cultural awareness of non-Indigenous staff as being connected to staff not being inclusive of their families and not taking advantage of what Indigenous families and communities could contribute to assist their understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being in the world as has been suggested by Martin (2007) and by the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009). Three families discussed the importance of a welcoming environment and suggested that it is important to ensure that the centre looks inviting to families and children:

*It’d have to look like it was somewhere you’d like your kid to be. I reckon you’ve gotta walk in there and think, “Yep, I’m comfortable leaving my child here”.*

Another parent commented on a sense of belonging and pride connected to the wearing of Aboriginal colours:

*It was absolutely fabulous at the preschool. The uniform was red, yellow and black.*

Families made many suggestions for ways in which early childhood settings could be improved and made more attractive for Indigenous families. More places for children and more affordable care were identified as essential to improving the situation. Other strategies included more Indigenous involvement, the inclusion of cultural programs, provision of transport, increased approachability of the setting and staff, providing meals for children and encouraging family involvement. Another suggestion by a parent well informed about early childhood education was for more teachers and smaller group sizes:

*It should be a ratio of 1:3 not 1:5. More staff are needed to give attention to children.*

One parent raised the issue of lack of understanding of Aboriginal family culture and commitments and of feeling alienated by regulatory requirements. She described how she was questioned over her child’s absences:

*The lady said to me, “Oh [she] has had one, two, three she’s had 24 days off this financial year. She has only got six left. I said, “Look, just stop there. I’ll probably use them six up by the end of the year” but just that whole counting how many days she’s had off. It’s just like things go on in the family where if she doesn’t have to be in school, she doesn’t have to be there. I’m still paying my half of it and they’re like, well we have to inform Centrelink and your benefits could be capped, and I was like, “Yeah, well I’ll deal with that when it comes to that, but don’t tell me what to do with my child”.*
This incident highlights the need expressed by many families for more Indigenous staff with an understanding of Indigenous family commitments and parenting practices. One parent told us that her child had stopped attending day care because she had had too many days absent, resulting partly from a family trip to Canberra for family business. As a consequence of the absences, the family lost their child care subsidy, making continued attendance unaffordable. Another parent suggested that staff in early childhood settings should be aware of and understand the responsibilities and commitments to family, community and culture of Indigenous families and stated a need for understanding workers who acknowledge that Aboriginal people may not send their child to care from time to time for family or cultural reasons.

Eleven urban families made specific reference to the need for more Indigenous early childhood staff and Indigenous engagement at management level in early childhood settings. Five families stated that more Aboriginal-operated early childhood settings should be established, giving reasons such as, ‘I’d rather put my kids into a Koori centre ‘cause I know they would get looked after. One father commented that he would like more Indigenous specific services and staff because they look after the kids well like family friends.

Trust and a sense of feeling welcome were major considerations for the families. Participants in the study saw this as best achieved by having Indigenous staff to make families feel welcome in the centre. As one mother said:

Get some Indigenous workers with backgrounds that understand the way Koori kids are.

Some parents described how they had attempted to send their child to childcare but did not feel welcomed or wanted themselves. Feeling needed and appreciated is an important part of feeling welcome at a centre. One mother said:

Just their attitudes, like I didn’t feel like I was welcome. I just got the feeling that I wasn’t wanted there or (they) didn’t need us.

Another parent said that her children didn’t go to day care when they were young because she does not like other people changing their nappies:

If they’re out of nappies, that’s fine. It’s a matter of trust

A parent who was using non-Indigenous family day care suggested that Indigenous family day care would be popular with communities. This parent said she knew Koori women who would like to run family day care but couldn’t because they were finding it hard to establish:

. . . ‘cause of the regulations of DoCS and all the paperwork and all that stuff. They can’t handle it.
Throughout the yarning sessions, the voices of families highlighted the importance of family and community connections:

*If it were an Indigenous run centre, I’d feel like it was a family thing ya know. Like they care about me and my family, not just my kids.*

Families suggested some strategies to identify early childhood settings that actively encourage Indigenous enrolment and participation:

*Maybe put a sign up saying it’s Aboriginal and have hands around it or something so you can recognise it when you go past.*

Some parents said they had chosen a specific early childhood setting for their children because other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families used that setting

*It is better if there are other Aboriginal people. The centre where she started, they don’t know about Aboriginal connection to family. Now my aunty has started working two days at a centre she may be more comfortable there.*

A father whose three children attended an early childhood setting acknowledged a strong family connection to the setting. It had been central to the family over the years and he had attended it as a young child and both he and the children’s mother now worked there.

One parent said she would like to see more Aboriginal families at her child’s setting as her daughter was the only Aboriginal child. Another parent, who worked in early childhood health care, indicated that early childhood settings did not always identify and connect with Indigenous children and many children go unnoticed and unsupported. She suggested staff should endeavour to find out if there are Indigenous children attending their setting so they can provide culturally relevant programs. She explained:

*There’s a lot of kids in the preschool but you’d think they’d know which ones were [Aboriginal] so they could give them the support they needed if any. ‘Cause when I did the hearing screening and I took the results down it was like, “Oh I didn’t know that child was Aboriginal” ya know and many times I have given them a list of the kids that are there. Only because if there’s an issue then they need to know how to handle it ya know culturally. Yeah the background of the kids ya know. It doesn’t matter what culture you’re talking ‘bout, from what background, you’ve gotta be aware of what you’re talking about and where they come from.*

One parent referred to two Aboriginal early childhood settings, one in NSW and one in Victoria, with smaller group sizes and more personal interaction with children and three or four teachers and said this would be desirable. In the context of discussions concerning staffing and provision of services, two other parents indicated that it would be helpful to have a support member of staff in the setting to work with children who needed assistance with their speech.
Parents and families from urban areas stressed they would like more active involvement in early childhood settings and suggested it would be helpful to provide them with information about the availability of settings in their area and their children’s progress. It is evident from the data that families want the management of early childhood settings to consult with parents and other staff members in decision-making processes. For example, one mother said:

_They tend to make the decisions and not know what the kids need. They don’t ask. It seems to me they don’t ask the carers what the children need. So they make a management decision which affects the kids because they haven’t gone to the teachers._

One parent suggested that offering parents some morning tea would encourage communication and two parents said that providing lunch for children at the centre would be a supportive way to encourage participation.

One mother suggested that early learning settings should give parents more information about the child’s individual growth and have more focus on education including the provision of someone to work with children on their speech. The following suggestion from a parent highlights the need for more communication with families:

_Individual growth and maybe a book that sorta illustrates that through the years you know. Like you could take it home once a month, the book, but it shows everything that they’ve sorta gone through and you could have parent input and things like that._

Some families indicated that they believed that their child was not well looked after in child care and mentioned that this was particularly so if they had found their child was crying or had been crying when they picked them up. Others said that their children did not want to attend the early childhood setting. One parent kept her child at home because she thought it made them grow up too quickly. Another parent discussed the possibility of children being spoiled in child care:

_Sometimes they spoil kids to get ‘em away from their parents and yeah when they come back ya know, I’ve gotta put up with it._

One mother said her child just did not want to walk in the door and she had to take a whole term off work to stay at home with her before she could settle her into day care:

_When she was two I took her to day care but only for about two weeks because she wasn’t comfortable there . . . I kept her at home. When I just left her there, it didn’t work._

Her two cousins started at the same day care and this mother thought she would now be comfortable but she cried when her mother left, so the mother removed her. Now the child goes to playgroup and she is getting used to being with other children:

_ . . . not being left, I’m there, but she knows there are other kids around._
This mother saw playgroup as preparation for an early childhood setting where her child could do things like art and painting. Another carer who recounted negative experiences in an early childhood setting was a grandmother who said that she had not been happy with the family day care experience of her granddaughter. She said that her grandchild had learnt very little at family day care.

In another example, a young mother discussed a negative experience of attending a playgroup where she and a friend felt they were being judged by the other mothers:

Well I went with one of my friends. She’s got a young one. We went in there and just the way that they all look at you! Because we’re only young they think of us like we shouldn’t be here, we shouldn’t have kids. Yeah, they were [in their] 30s. They were just sitting there judging us. Just the way they stare at you and then they go back to one of theirs and whisper. We were only there for about half an hour then we left. Just wasn’t a very comfortable situation.

This issue of not being understood and not having a sense of belonging, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was clearly articulated in many of the sessions with the participants. In the words of one young mother:

I feel like I’m a young mum and they’re constantly watching me. I don’t know if it’s just because I’m black or they do it to everybody.

Families clearly expressed a desire for early childhood programs to be more culturally friendly. Ten urban families specifically mentioned the importance of incorporating culture and identified strategies to teach children about Aboriginal culture. They named the teaching of language, music, dancing, singing, art and dreamtime stories as being important. One way of incorporating Indigenous culture into the curriculum was described by a parent whose child was learning about culture by attending a playgroup with her grandmother, an elder who coordinates the playgroup and teaches cultural arts such as beadwork. Another parent suggested that Aboriginal perspectives should be incorporated in structured play in child care settings. A third parent who conducted Indigenous cultural awareness workshops in schools and taught dance commented about her daughter’s embracing of Aboriginal dance at her day care:

Yeah, she gets up eager to go to school every day . . . they all dance. All the kids dance.

A fourth parent referred to the complexity of Aboriginal culture and admitted that she would like childcare to teach culture so her child could learn more about what Aboriginal is ‘cause I don’t know enough to teach him. When discussing the teaching of Indigenous culture, a fifth parent made this comment that showed the significance of including cultural programs in educational settings:

It creates awareness and helps overcome name-calling and racist comments. It needs to start with the little kids.
Learning cultural respect, such as calling elders “Aunty” and “Uncle”, regardless of whether they are related to the children was perceived as important. The provision of cultural awareness training for staff was mentioned by several of the families in the context of understanding Indigenous ways. One mother said:

*Just knowing how blackfellas are. We’re independent, have our own minds and Koori time. Blackfellas understand one another and the way we talk.*

This discussion of lack of understanding of Indigenous ways and the ensuing cultural conflict over parenting practices was reinforced by another parent who said:

*When you don’t wanna do something, they [Aboriginal people] will say, “Don’t worry, leave him. Let him walk away. Let him do what he has to do”. It’s just the Koori way.*

This parent went on to discuss her negative observations of staff in early childhood settings:

*They try and manipulate your kids to grow a different way. And when you’re trying to educate your kids about their culture and the way they are, they don’t understand. They can’t put two and two together.*

Throughout the discussions with families, there was emphasis on the need for more understanding from staff in early childhood settings. Many families had felt misunderstood in the past and expressed the desire for an early learning environment where they feel a sense of belonging. There are several ways this could be addressed. Two suggestions from study participants were for cultural awareness training for early childhood staff and for encouraging more Aboriginal staff into the profession. This would create opportunities for dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and families and encourage understanding of diversity. It would also contribute to feelings of cultural safety for Indigenous children and their families.

**Barriers to accessing early childhood education**

Families were aware of and clearly identified issues that prevented or limited their use of early childhood settings. There was agreement concerning the issues that prevented families from participating. These included insufficient Indigenous involvement in the settings, cultural issues, and access problems. Access problems included too high a cost, lack of vacancies and lack of transport to the centre. Nine families said it was too expensive, five families indicated a lack of available places had prevented them from enrolling their child, four families referred to having no transport available and four families referred to cultural issues, saying that early childhood settings did not teach Indigenous cultures. As one parent commented, transport is crucial:

*Even if there was a really beautiful centre set up somewhere in Sydney, unless we’re able to get our kids there, the big chance is it’s gunna be empty.*
Other problems discussed included a lack of Aboriginal childcare settings and of Aboriginal staff. Families wanted a welcoming environment where their child is valued and well cared for and they said they were not comfortable leaving their children in an unfamiliar environment. The following statement from one parent encapsulates the feelings of families concerning early childhood settings, the need for Aboriginal staff and the importance feeling welcome and respected:

_We need more Aboriginal faces there when you first walk in. They’ve gotta be comfortable, it doesn’t matter what school it is, preschool, day care, or whatever, you’ve got to be comfortable to be able to walk in, say whatever’s on your mind ya know, ask questions. How many parents go to preschool, pick their kids up, sign them in, sign them out, their teachers don’t say a word? How would they know what’s going on?_

The financial costs of childcare varied amongst the families and not all participants indicated how much they spent per week on child care. Parents who discussed the cost identified that they were receiving government subsidies and were paying a minimum of $5.00 a day for a subsidised local community preschool. One mother described this as low cost and said another setting would have cost her $2 a day including the subsidy. The maximum amount mentioned was $96 for five days of child care.

One mother used family day care rather than day care because day care was too expensive. She said that because family daycare providers only have five children at a time, her daughter would get more attention than in a setting with a large number of children. Her ideal early childhood setting would be family daycare setting run by a Koori person in her local neighbourhood but there were no such places available.

Health problems, separation anxiety and disability were identified as major concerns by three families and one parent clearly stated that she preferred her child to be with her at all times:

_Children should be with their parents as much as possible in first five years._

In the same vein, another mother said:

_There are enough kids in the street for him to play with._

Yet the same parent also made the following statement, while claiming that child care is too expensive:

_I want to put him in to get him used to the kids, because he’s not very kid friendly._
4.2 What regional families told us about early childhood education

What families value and want in early childhood education

Yarning about early childhood education reflected a commitment to making the early years count in the most positive way for children. What that looks like for each family is different. Families told us stories of decisions they make about their children accessing early childhood education services, what they think is important for young Aboriginal children and how they expect to be treated in children’s services.

They learn the most in those [early] years; their brains are like a little sponge. They want know everything.

I see it’s important for them to learn in the first 3 years ‘cause that is where they pick up a lot.

I want the best for my child.

Especially when you’ve got young kids, you don’t have the time, all the time to sit down and teach ‘em stuff, so when you’ve got the option of sending to preschool or day care or whatever and learn their stuff, it makes it heaps better.

At the same time they also want children to enjoy their childhood:

You know they’re only in day care. I like the kids to be kids until you know, they go to preschool, where it’s a preschool.

And some have difficulty in letting go of their children:

I didn’t wanna let go of him. Didn’t wanna send him to school, like I won’t wanna send her to school . . . Sad . . . Yes, Mum done it for [other child].

Oh yeah! Like I said there every day [at preschool] I left him for the first week in tears . . . and you know stuff. I felt, you know, terrible. But you know after that first week . . . But I mean that was the first one, like but with the others . . . Yeah, the other two weren’t as bad.

Cultural safety is the single most important determinant of what families judge as being best for their children. Cultural safety includes trusting the people who care for and teach children. It is also about what is taught and how it is taught. The overarching concept of respect for culture and Aboriginal people runs through the yarns about what parents want for themselves and their children.

These families want their children to learn respect for all people but most of all respect for Elders. Academically they want their children to learn some things before school so that they can do well at school: writing their name, knowing numbers, colours, developing their attention span, listening skills, reading and being able to follow instructions.
Some parents have high expectations about learning experiences from a very young age. For example, one mother withdrew her child from a centre because she could not see that there was a program for learning:

Yep and he went up here to [childcare centre] for a few months. Then he went there [preschool]. I pulled him out of the [childcare centre] 'cause he didn’t like it. They don’t learn anything until they go at [preschool age]. They do have a like a school aged thing, gettin’ ‘em ready for school age up there but a lot of them go down to this preschool.

Parents explained that they wanted people to care for and teach their children who understand them and what their life is like:

… they understand the culture of my child, you know. I had to go to a family funeral this weekend and it’s been so hectic. Like understand the culture that way. Whereas I have to pull my kid out of school to go to a funeral wherever, they would understand that, where non indigenous wouldn’t. And you can say, “Well as a child I grew up and lived on Weetbix for two weeks” and they would understand.

It makes me more comfortable that there are Aboriginal workers.

Whoever cares for children outside the home needs to have an understanding of concepts that are important to the parents and family. Again families expect respect. Sorry business has a huge impact on Aboriginal people. Those working in early childhood education settings need to respect that and act appropriately.

Loss and grief stuff is something that affects Aboriginal families big time.

No nobody talks about it. It’s all hushed up. [husband] doesn’t like talking about it much. He doesn’t like talking about his mother or anything. He won’t go to the cemetery or anything on Mother’s Day or birthdays or that.

We only get home for funerals now.

Like any parents, the parents we yarned with want to trust that all precautions are taken for the basic care and safety of their children:

I didn’t like it, where it’s situated, it’s right across the road from the pub and the fence is full open, you can see what the kids are doin’ and you know I don’t like that. It should be all closed in private. So I just, that just threw me off from the word go, so I didn’t even bother goin’ near it, you know?

I’m concerned if they are being bullied at [pre]school, anything like that; I don’t like that sort of thing.

In addition, the trust is about how the adults care about children:

Three little toddlers took off from like the family day care lady and went wandering down the road. I think there’s not enough supervision going on.
Just make sure it’s all safe. I know you got stuff at home but when you take them outside the home to another person’s house or to a centre, it’s different. Yeah … cause you have not only the carer, they might have friends who come and visit in that time and talk to the friends instead of paying attention to the kids. Have you get any poisons around the house, medicines, how things are kept and if they are locked up and make sure they are not screaming at the kids or belting them.

And if the teacher’s nice, if they’re happy, that sort of thing.

Some parents spoke about the need for the best qualified people looking after their children:

I just think that these preschool centres and these day care centres the workers should be there cause they want to be there not just because, you know it’s just more money. They have to have a feel for the kids. And they shouldn’t pass judgment on the child, whether they are slow or this one is better than that one. You have to be non-judgmental to be in a place like that. And you have got to do it for the love of it. That’s one of those jobs you have got to do not for the money. To have to do proper degrees there to do it.

[teachers and carers should know] that children learn differently and develop at different ages, individual children.

The relationship between families and those who work with their children must also be built on trust: trust about what happens when the family members are not there and the trust that children have in these adults. This applies to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal carers and teachers:

Well my sister was going to put her kid into day care, but she said “Na” cause she doesn’t like to do that there cause you don’t know what they do to the kids, when they are there by themselves every day.

Some of the teachers are pushing you out the door, “Nice to know you”. You feel welcome when you’re encouraged to stay and read with your child.

And you leave them there with people. You want them to sort of trust ‘em, you know like and feel comfortable.

Yeah she’s good. Yeah. And actually the day that he goes, there are, out of those five, three of them are Koori kids. They tend to flock to her, all of them, because she’s really good.

Families expect confidentiality to be maintained and their children to be respected and valued:

I thought it was a breach of confidentiality and passing judgment on my child. I thought, “How dare you? What gives you the right to do that?” Being a small community of course, it’s going to go around quick. That’s basically my biggest thing. They [staff] have to be there ‘cause they want to be there . . . ‘cause they have got to realise I am paying for these people to look after my kids. Basically be non judgmental, be aware of what your restrictions are as a carer and don’t
Some parents talked about doing additional checks to make sure that a place and people were safe for their children. Relying on other parents’ stories of their experiences is a common way of checking about trust and safety:

If I do enrol him in a child care centre it gives Nan a break. She can have him two days a week and the other two days she has got free. I would enrol my child in a day care centre but I would have to look into the day care centre to see how their record has been, you know what I mean? I don’t want to send him where he is going to get picked on or they’re bullies- the teachers or anything like that. Just to make his transition easier. And [I’d] speak to other parents and see what their feeling is on it.

Families also trust how their children react as an indicator of what is right for them.

[I’d like to check the service out], just see how my kids would benefit if I did send them to that place, ‘cause it is no good sending them to the place if they are just going to sit there in the corner and not mix and not play. They have got to offer something for the child.

When he got in there, in the preschool room up there, he didn’t like goin’ anymore so that’s when I took him out of there and put him down here at the preschool. Every time I use to drop him off up there he use to cry like he didn’t want to stay there. I think it might have been one of the workers up there. They made him sit in the corner, and yeah he didn’t like it.

[The children] relate to black people more than white. They are more relaxed with them.

[Three children] never went to preschool. Oh well they did, they went to [childcare centre] for about four weeks, hated it, so I didn’t send them back.

It doesn’t bother me if there is an Indigenous teacher there or not as long as [they] adjusted normally. I mean I got really black aunts and uncles and I got really fair aunts and uncles and the kids just take to them. Yeah it’s just Aunty or that’s just Uncle. So to me, I would base it on the child not on if I can see any benefit because I’m not the one going to school.

Many told stories of relief and excitement when their child was happy:

I was also so relieved to think she loved them that much to want to stay there.
There are a number of perspectives on how culture might be taught or included in early childhood education settings. Firstly, a warning about whose responsibility it is to teach “culture” and learn “culture”:

White fella teaching blackfellas how to be black is a problem. 
It’s good, it’s good to know, learn other cultures. But you should learn your own [culture] more than anything. 
But [she’s] not really equipped to [teach culture] do that, she’s not Aboriginal.

I think [respect for culture and teaching of culture by Aboriginals, is important to Aboriginal families because] it is that they know who they are and what their ancestors done and that. But a lot of people don’t explain it properly. A lot of them that they get, they are white for a start.

Also, a thought about inclusive practice for all mobs:

But like if there was kids from other tribes I’d see about getting . . . I’d teach all different if they weren’t from that area. I’d get someone from that area to teach ‘em all so they have some sort of knowledge about their own instead of being like us and having to adopt it.

Secondly, it’s about the environment created and opportunities with resources. Some parents have a clear understanding of what a high quality service looks like and they want something like that for their children:

[The] preschool does a lot of cultural awareness stuff. They’ve got all the gear there for the kids to play with, clapping sticks and didges and all that. So they do um they do a lot of the Aboriginal culture.

The best childcare centre I’ve ever seen, is when I was younger. I did Child Care and I went down to Sydney for a training course and we went to a place called Lady Gowrie childcare centre, the best childcare centre I’ve ever seen. And because it was situated in the middle of Sydney they had workers, one could speak like Vietnamese, and other one could speak you know Greek and another one could speak you know? And all these kids come from different backgrounds. They spoke English in the centre but for any kids that came in that had trouble, they had someone there at work that could communicate with them. And it was the best for them, and they did all of that. They had different cultural weeks. They had a whole week where they worked on one culture, and then they’d do another one and there was no racism whatsoever, in that place.

Need it, [culture] need it there and the schools, everywhere. Yeah there’s nothing there now. Like I’ve worked over at the school all this year and I can’t even see a little Koori book where the kids can read. There’s nothing there for them.

I’d have a lot of Aboriginal culture and the history and the artwork all that sort of stuff. The foods . . .
Next, there is a view that specific culturally related activities with an outcome, like learning a song, are appropriate to be taught in children’s services.

You know, I said I didn’t even hear that song until . . . [he’s] been going there for two years at [the childcare centre]. I didn’t hear that you know, “Black, red and yellow”. He started singing that and I said, “Oh where’d you learn that song?” They learnt it at the [local] preschool.

And that some activities alone are not enough:

At [the childcare centre], not until I put in a complaint and say, “I wanna see more of it”, and then they done NAIDOC day, the kids done a flag or something that’s about it but they never get any dancers in or talkers in and I made suggestions of who she could contact and get the dancers in [someone] to come and play the didge even. No books or nothing. But they shouldn’t [get to choose to include culture or not], they shouldn’t. They have to supply sort of . . . . . to actually be a registered childcare place, you’d have to follow some sort of protocol. And that would be cultural awareness.

Inclusion of language is valued highly even if it is just learning a nursery rhyme in Aboriginal language.

Lastly, the inclusion of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal community members and Elders in teaching and learning is valued in developing culture in an early childhood service and teaching about culture. Connecting with Aboriginal community might also include taking the children out of the centre to special events or special places:

They need that cultural awareness. When I start [her] in [preschool in another town] . . . There’s a Koori worker there, you know, and, I can’t think of her name now, but I said, “Aunty” and the white women said, “Are youse related?” I said, “No.” I said, “That’s just respect.” I said, “That’s how we work it, you know?” And this white woman didn’t even know! And this Koori worker she said, “No, that’s respect. That’s just what we do. That’s just how we do it . . . . . Makes kids more feel comfortable, you know”.

The [child care centre] has none [no culture] until I make a complaint but they don’t have much at all and the teacher said, “Oh well,” this was her excuse, “Well you know [town] preschool has the advantage because they have the Aboriginal worker there.”

Besides NAIDOC week, like that’s just about it. Well this year, NAIDOC Week, they didn’t really invite the community up, did they? Sometimes if they’re doing a topic that they might get someone in to talk to them about something. Poppy went up there to the preschool and talked to the little kids. They used to be really into NAIDOC Week and all that. We used to have it all the time.

A mixture [of workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal] you know, everybody gets along with everybody . . . cultural activities.
I think [Aboriginal workers] they are more up front with you than other teachers are. They won’t say, “Your child is this” whereas an Indigenous teacher will say, “Your child was having trouble with this today I tried to help them with this and it didn’t work”.

More Aboriginal workers needed in every day care, every school. [It] shouldn’t just stop and start at day care. It should go through and into the schooling as well.

More cultural awareness, more, yeah. Family day care would be much better with Aboriginal carers.

One group of women yarned at length about this issue of trying to get the right number and best suited Aboriginal people working with children. They considered training and employment rather than expecting Aboriginal people to volunteer all the time and argued for some regulation:

. . . like say how one people to ten kids, they should do the same for Koori kids. If you got ten Koori kids you should have a Koori worker there for them, every ten you know.

In order to improve the cultural understanding and attitudes of non-Aboriginal early childhood teachers and workers, families made suggestions about cultural training:

Yes and more cultural awareness, even if they can’t get an Aboriginal worker. Get someone educated [to] go in and do some courses for cultural awareness basically.

I think they might need a bit of cultural awareness up there, training. No Koori workers up there. I think they need a bit of cultural awareness, as they’re not aware of our kids you know, their needs and that.

I think it should be, like in general Aboriginal culture to a certain point, but I think where they get placed or where they choose to live and [to] be a child care person they should get to know the background within that community.

Also for the workers that aren’t Koori, have like a Koori information day so they can at least have a knowledge of how the Koori people are.

If they don’t want to know your culture, then don’t work here.

Some families told stories of unfairness and racism that they experience in accessing services for their children:

[They’re not accessing pre-school] ‘cause they don’t feel welcome.

Yeah, I don’t like the preschool. I don’t like it at all. Yeah, they favour kids and they openly, the teachers, they openly talk about parents and their kids in front of other kids and other parents, you know what I mean?

She was just very rude. You would go in there and she wouldn’t say hello until a cocky [farmer] walked in and she was ‘How are you?’ and speak to all the kids and that.
Teachers and that discriminated [against] everybody and they pushed Aboriginals back you know and that’s why they won’t step forward again now ‘cause they’ll be pushed back by them again, and that’s why they won’t step up now. They're too scared. They're too scared to work there now.

One group of young mothers also reminded us that:

Respect of difference, it’s gotta go both ways.

One mother explained the good and bad experiences and how teachers’ and carers’ behaviours are discussed in the community:

That’s the difference I found in the two preschools. You walk into [the] preschool and everyone, “Oh Hi [calls by name]. Hi!” Acknowledge you as soon as you walk in that door. I can walk into three rooms in [childcare centre] before someone would say hello to him even. That’s a big difference, “Yeah how you going?” And stop what you’re doing and pay attention, yeah. Yeah, and word of mouth in the indigenous community is a big thing, you know? They will say, “Oh you know she’s a bitch”, “I saw ‘em pull one of the kids” or “She’s horrible” or “She’s miserable” or “She’s racist”. It makes a big difference you know.

Whether families accessed preschool education services for their children or not there was a general agreement that preschool is important as a transition to school. Many believe that children attending preschool know what to do when they go to school and it gets them into a routine so they cope with school:

If they stay at home, they will always want to stay at home.
I reckon it’s really important that the kids get to know what school [is like] and like day care and stuff is all about before they get there.
I say preschool gets them ready for school.
He was prepared [for school]. Yeah ‘cause he’d learnt it all at the preschool.
But, I mean, I reckon if, if they don’t get a chance to go, it hurts them more when they’re going into school, into Kindy.

Parents also believe that children who attend preschool have social skills that others don’t have and are able to listen and take instructions and share more easily with others. Some parents referred to having siblings and cousins at preschool and school as also having a major impact on transition experiences:

Social skills and to learn to share and everything. Learn with their fine motor skills.
[Preschool] builds their confidence and self esteem up too.
They’re only like 11 months apart. They was always with, with each other so he didn’t have no trouble goin’ to school because he knew she was there.
Yeah, like get ‘em use to the other kids like they were goin’ to school with them. Like get ‘em in interacting with the other kids. ‘Cause it bought ‘em out of their shell more because they weren’t just lookin’ for that one, yeah. They weren’t lookin’ for like their cousin but they knew friends from preschool.

Parents had varying views on when preschool education should start but they still agreed on this being a transition phase:

But I send ‘em all to day care, one day a week to just interact with other kids and . . . Yep once they turned one that was it. I sent them to preschool, like day care, once a week and I think it made a huge improvement.

Parents and other family and community members encouraged others to get involved in preschool and school so that they know what is going on and whether they can trust other people educating their children:

You’ve got to be involved in the school to know what’s happenin’.

Many talked about early childhood settings being like the shops where Aboriginal people do not feel welcome and where you get followed around “in case you flog somethin’” They would like to “stay and see what our kids do” or ‘wouldn’t like to stay all day but would like to see what they do at preschool, so maybe be able to come and go”. On the other hand there were some who spoke about being so grateful because they were made welcome. All they want is:

. . . to feel accepted and welcomed and [know] that your kids are being looked after.

They made you feel welcome when they knew kids behave a certain way and accept that too.

Several people yarned around the importance of being able to be involved in the early childhood education settings as an opportunity to learn about “teaching and learning” and how to be a “better mum”. Older women think that this would be particularly good for young mums:

I didn’t read much or anything like that but since she has been at [pre]school she is bringing home books to read and that, and she can point to every single word and say the words. I think they’ve taught me how to do that.

Everyone talked about how they would “do” a children’s service:

I would have it fun and educational not just “You are here to learn”, “Sit in the corner”, “Do this” and if they were having a bad day, just leave them till they want to come to you sort of thing. Don’t push the issue with them ‘cause it will only get up their nose more. Get them involved, used to everything I suppose. Like textures, hot/cold, different colours but make it fun to learn. I think everyone bring
their own food just so you know allergies or can’t have certain things like preservatives.

They should be made to sleep, especially the little ones. They come home, they get cranky, they get irritable, ... Yeah if they don’t have that sleep mate, especially when they’re not use to it, maybe after a while, you know, they get use to it, then say, “Oh well if you don’t wanna sleep, you can have your, just sit down and read a book, quiet time, but they should be made to do it for the first couple of months because then we’ve all got to put up with them, aye?

I’d have it like a multicultural one. I would have drop off, pick up. Lunch would be supplied, because that way there’s no, “This one’s got this, and this one’s got that.” Morning tea and lunch would be supplied, fruit and then afternoon tea, cooked lunch or sandwiches or whatever the day had. And then I’d have different people come in to do different things. Like have someone come in and do Aboriginal painting with the kids, then have someone else come and do, I know little kids can’t do it but, have a go at it, have a go at all different cultural things. And then you’d go onto your sounds. That’s what the preschool did in [another town]. They were really good. They had the kids’ names hanging on the walls and whenever they did a painting, they went and picked their name off the wall and copied it onto their painting until they got the gist of writing their name by themselves. And then their name was taken off the wall so it was a good thing if the name was off the wall.

There were a number of suggestions about an Aboriginal centre for children and families with services coordinated for families and by families:

I think they really need something here from 0 to 5 or 6. I’d love to see something like [that].

[Services would be more attractive if there were Aboriginal] activities [such as] painting and maybe where the mums, us mums get together.

**Barriers to accessing early childhood education**

Limited access to appropriate early childhood services that parents consider to suit their needs and their expectations is a considerable barrier for families in the regional areas of this project. Availability of hours and days that match working parents’ needs often results in a parent enrolling children in a service which is not their first choice. Waiting lists are also a reality even when parents feel they have been sufficiently informed to make a choice:

Yeah, this [childcare centre], it’s the only one we’ve got here for working parents. See, the preschool’s 9 ‘til 3. See, you have to have someone to look after your kids from 9 to 3, after 3, before 9. Say you’re driving to [regional centre], you’ve got to be there at 8:30 and that’s what I mean, that’s what they need here.

Well they had it [care] up here for the lot, and it here at the preschool. Yeah I am happy with [the] preschool. They [are] good. They liked it there but it wasn’t enough care. They only allowed two days a week whereas three days should been allowed.
[He] was going to [pre]school two days a week down here and there was too much in-house fighting in the preschool so we pulled him out.

One parent identified a lack of other types of services and opportunities for the children in her town. It’s not all about playgroups, care and education:

It would be good to have some sort of, you know, one of those little indoor play area things, you know like the Kids’ Zoo in [regional centre] but not as big. ‘Cause there’s nothing and like, when it’s raining, who wants kids running round the house making a mess an’ if there was something like that, just bring ‘em down and let ‘em run wild.

Access is also limited by knowledge of opportunities and information:

I looked for it [information]. I needed it when I moved here because I had no idea, you know, and if you’re a person that stays at home and doesn’t mix . . . Yeah I’ve never been invited [to playgroups]. Yeah well they don’t really give you any [warning]. Yeah, if they’re coming that day then, yeah, just more or less they come on that day and see if you want to go and you’re not ready. Just like that community Christmas thing they had. No one really knew about that until they handed the fliers out two or three days before.

Like I don’t know a lot of people in the community or a lot of what is out there, so even if they could have a community information night and really advertise, not just word of mouth stuff, even a poster at the shop at the local takeaway or down at Bi Lo or in the local paper. Just so they can say we can offer this or we have things for children with special need, if you’re keen to send your child to the places, just can we go in and have a look so we can assess it ourselves.

In each locality there were suggestions for overcoming the lack of communication, information and knowledge sharing:

No I’ve found, there’s not enough in town to say what’s going on as far as children’s, children’s services go. And there needs to be more . . . Yeah I think it needs to be more, maybe in a new Indigenous newsletter, as in not too big, but you know a flyer and say for January and what’s happening in January. And that can be done through the preschools and childcare.

You know just an Indigenous calendar basically, you know. NAIDOC week you know for example. It’d be good, you know, to know what’s going on around town to celebrate NAIDOC week. Not by word of mouth ‘cause [if] I didn’t have a child at the school, I didn’t know basically that sort of stuff.

For new mums and people that is new to the town and just for the mothers to get out and communicate, which should be more advertised.
Cost of early childhood education and care presents a barrier in accessing services and adds a burden when parents make the decision to access services anyway. Several people also commented on the complexity of what you “need to have and do” in order to play by the rules of children’s services. For some the complexity and mystery of it all plus the stories that others tell put up enough barriers for them not to consider enrolling their children in early childhood education programs:

I don’t know how much they would cost either, you see, and like I wanna work but it’s no good working if I can’t afford to put my child in care.

[I] would prefer to send him [to preschool] a couple of times a week ‘cause I don’t know what the fees and things are. I’m not [on] a great pay. I work but it’s only permanent part-time. It would come down to the almighty dollar, whereas [when he is with] Nan, you know, she can stay at home with him and everything is at her disposal at the house. Like at a day care centre, you have to have a bag, you have to pack their lunch, you have to pack separate clothes if they go on excursions, you have to have the notes and give them permission to take photos of the child, and you have to buy clothes to wear to [pre]school.

Well you don’t want your kid going to school looking daggy so you buy them nice clothes to go to school in … and it all adds up by the time you pay your fees and then do the extras. It all adds up, make sure they got what the other kids have so the other kids won’t pick on them.

I drop her off at about 9:30 and pick her up at about 4.30. Oh it’s about $11 a day. I had her in more days but I couldn’t afford it!

It is difficult for parents to understand all the policies and procedures related to fees and different systems of child care and preschool funding:

With the preschool because he’s Aboriginal, it’s only cost me $2 a day. At the preschool, $2 per day. Yeah, and for [the childcare centre] it was about $63 a day Yeah, that’s how much it is a day. They are so dear. Because I’ve only started working full time since February ‘cause before I could only get something like 20 hours. They give you how many hours you can claim and only ‘cause I’ve been working full time, five days since February it’s still only went down only $13 or something. It’s still 50 odd bucks. See I got subsidy but it still was a lot, like two days a week, that’s a lot of money. Yeah, I was always behind. I’m still behind now and he finished and I’ve still got to pay it. Yeah that’s a lot of money. That’s nearly $200 for three days. Even if he’s only there from 9 to 12, you get charged the whole 8 hours. You pay for public holidays. That’s why he’s a millionaire, that’s why this [childcare organisation] guy’s a billionaire. He gives you nothing, nothing for nothing, mate. You know the preschool, community preschool, gives them their t-shirt and their hat.

The cost? I reckon it should be cheaper.

They were gunna make me pay a term for the two days I took him. They said I didn’t tell ‘em I pulled him out but I did. I said, “Yes I did”. I told Cathy down the
street. I didn’t go up to the preschool and tell ‘em or nothing but I told Cathy when I saw her down the street. I didn’t pay anything so I’m not paying it.

I reckon for the price you pay to send your kids to preschool they should have some, something.

Say if we pay a fee, the preschool should provide say meals, even morning tea, but sometimes you know it’s not easy. It’s hard to say sometimes you struggle to even get ‘em all their lunch out. At least morning tea when they’ve got so much to learn.

I put [her] in pre-school cause it was just too expensive at [childcare centre]. Well this term will cost me $150 at preschool only because the term was a week longer, so if I took the kids to [childcare centre], it would have cost me about $80 a week.

Transport for children and parents to access early childhood services is a problem in each of the communities. There were many discussions about the need for buses. Some children already had access to bus services:

He wants to go to Alex’s school. He wants to catch the bus everyday. So, you know. And then you sit there and he can’t wait until Thursdays comes when he gets to catch the bus down to the preschool.

4.3 What remote families told us about early childhood education

What families value and want in early childhood education

Families in remote areas spoke of early education being important. Throughout the yarns, the term “education” was used to refer to learning that is essential for children to do well. They also emphasised that at this time in history it is more important than at other times for their children to have access to the same education as “white” children.

Education is the most important thing, you know, for kids these days, I mean the younger they learn the better for them, I think.

They just need an education these days.

Yes, it would’ve been better if there were more preschools and things like that going for little kids.

I couldn’t wait for them to get home, ask them what they done, what they learnt.

Access to early childhood education was also seen as a socialising opportunity for children, progressing from only adult-child interaction.

If anything if it’s not about what they are learning, it’s about socialising with other little people. I mean if you think as a parent my sister used to go nutty she would say to me, “I just want to have a conversation with an adult that can talk back to me” and I think kids can feel the same way.

[At the Paint and Play at the school] the kids play together and the parents sit down and have a yarn.
Mothers also identified a time when they think children are ready for education beyond home and family. Apart from the expected preschool ages, mothers and grandmothers were keen to consider the individual needs of particular children for when they should go to formal early childhood education settings. Some families also found it confusing about what services offered an educational program unless it was a traditional preschool.

*I felt that they were at the right age and also felt that they needed to interact with other students the same age.*

*It's really up to them when they take her. I'm keen on keeping her home for another year or so, just until she develop a bit more, like toilet trained and things like that. She use the toilet now but I just don't trust the other mums in the [pre]school.*

*I think it would be too much for him 'cause he is still only my baby so too much [pre]school might turn him off it when he has to go five days a week when he is only a baby himself anyway.*

*Yeah 'cause the younger they learn, the younger they go in, it's good for them to learn at a young age. I mean she's very intelligent now for a two and a half year old. She'll be three next month. It would be good for her to interact with other kids and start early but you know, she's right into books now and it's a good opportunity for her to start.*

Other mothers found it difficult to leave their children at this treasured time as they felt that it was their job to be with their child if they did not work.

*I was just sitting around the house doing nothing anyway, so why send her to preschool or child care and pay for something when I can do it myself? I didn’t work. I had no reason to send her to child care.*

*I mean child care for little ones, I want ‘em to go to preschool and everything but I don’t believe in sending them to childcare, just while I work and that.*

*Day care is something you don't really need for your children. You can provide the day to day care. Unless you’re working.*

*I wouldn’t put my kids in child care. I think they are a good thing for people that need it, like who work and that.*

However, parents felt strongly about who is appropriate to care for their children. Introducing children to a formal childcare setting or preschool also presented parents with concerns about caring, trusting and sharing. Connections to family are at the core of what many of the mothers were particular about when allowing others to care for their children:

*The only person I’ll have take them is my brother.*

*S有时候 if I haven’t made my hours up through the week, I will just bring her in with me or Jason, my partner. His little brothers watch her.*
My second eldest daughter looks after Rebeka when I go to work. I’m a working mum. She looks after her from 8.30 in the morning till 5 in the afternoon but I’ll go back during my lunch and look after Rebeka while she has a little break and go do what she has got to do.

This theme of trusting family to care for children continued through yarns about starting preschool or formal childcare.

She went to preschool when she was three, only because there is only a year’s difference between her and my little brother. My brother is seven, she is six and because she would see him going to school she wanted to. So I thought I would enrol her and they got her on the same days as her uncle and she was a big woman.

Separation anxiety for mothers is real because they don’t always know what goes on at early childhood services nor do they know the staff. Parents take the lead from how their children react:

‘Cause the mums, they don’t, you know, like parting with their babies and letting other people look after ‘em.

It was hard you know ‘cause when you get used to your kids being home with you then you got to send them off to [pre]school it’s pretty hard and sad because then you worry about them and what they’re doing and if they’re getting looked after and things like that. It was hard at first but you know she enjoyed it so it was good for her and I had my little 2-year-old with me too so it didn’t sort of worry me that much. But it’s just the thought of sending them . . . Bit teary-eyed I tell ya. I’ll be that nervous I’ll probably stay with her ‘til that day finish.

He actually told me to go home on his first day of preschool. I was happy with that.

Culturally safe places for children are what families and communities value. While the characteristics of culturally safe early childhood settings are complex, families in the remote sites yarned about who was in these settings, how children and adults are treated, and how and what is taught as being most important.

Yarning explored notions of safety:

It’s got its ups and downs. Good thing about it I know she is safe.

Safety also includes consideration of who is a stranger and how many strangers there are in children’s services.

I like the bonding with the child and the grandmother . . . ‘cause when you’re at the day care centre there’s too many strangers.
This notion of strangers looking after children is often compounded when children do not have the same person to look after them. There’s separation anxiety all over again. They are used to being looked after by their mother or grandmother, aunt or cousin.

Non-Aboriginal staff and other strangers also need to make an effort to increase cultural safety by linking to the community and to families and children outside the confines of the service:

And they got to get out. They can’t just come out here and set it up and expect the kids to “blah blah”, they have got to familiarise themselves with the parents, the grandparents and little brothers and sisters and get involved instead of sitting back, taking it easy to wait for the day to go by. That’s why these little kids don’t feel comfortable, you know?

Community members yarned at length about the need for cultural awareness including the need for non-Aboriginal people, on staff and on committees, to access training and education. Some families also linked this to an understanding of children’s needs.

Yeah but I think they might need a bit of cultural awareness up there, trainin’… Nah, no Koori workers up there. Yeah, nah, I think they need a bit of cultural awareness, as they’re not aware of our kids you know? Their needs and that.

Cultural safety is enhanced by having other Aboriginal people around and in particular Aboriginal people who are connected to the families and children:

There is only two Indigenous people there now at the [pre]school. I don’t know how [she] will go, ‘cause they know their faces and it makes it easier for the kids but I don’t know how she will go next year when she starts preschool. Get back to me on it and I’ll let you know.

Some of the teachers are local too, so we just go and have a yarn and see how everything is going.

It’s just that we need more, more Aboriginal in our health, we need them in our school, because majority of the kids at school are all Aboriginal kids.

Early childhood education services in these remote locations would say that they are welcoming to all families. However, Aboriginal families told us over and over again about their lack of connection with the people in these places and their discomfort in taking their precious children to the service or school.

Just go in with my baby. Yeah, um mothers don’t really need to turn up, up there, just that I don’t like that preschool. The teacher I just don’t like her. Yeah, [need] new staff, yeah Indigenous people, they white people up there.
Before and when parents enrol children in services, for some there is also a sense of mystery about how this all works from year to year and no one explains what is really going on:

Been a few changes in that school. It’s still called [Aboriginal name] now but there has been a lot of staff changes and everything. It’s just that they’ve got all new staff. It used to be all Indigenous staff but now it isn’t. It’s meant to be for Aboriginal kids but now they have got non-Indigenous and Indigenous kids there now. It seems to be running okay. It’s a full [pre]school. You have to go on a waiting list. It’s okay. There is another [pre]school there too. I think that’s joined with the primary school. I think they take kids from 4 to 5.

To [pre] school, yeah. She had like the first year like three to four. When she turned three she went to school and she went right up until she turned four and then you she, four and a half months she, school’d started back and I put her in and they said that she weren’t um there was no vacancy for her and they wouldn’t accept her. They sent me a letter saying that she wasn’t allowed in the preschool yep, at that preschool.

They are ready for school but there’s no place the waiting list. It’s too long.

Well it’s bit hard like. I don’t really want to send her to [that centre] but I mean there is a waiting list at [the preschool]. It’s really up to them when they take her. Yeah, they were all for it [going to preschool], mm, only um Jake there when he wanted to go, ‘cause I thought he’d go as soon as he turned three but they told him he had to wait to go, go on the waiting list.

There’s nothing in [town] for em, in the place, there’s no day care centre. He’s too young to go to preschool.

Note: in fact there was a day care centre.

Evidence of authentic Aboriginal culture in a culturally safe setting might include people, language, colours, artwork, local artefacts, books, instruments, music and resources. Respect for culture and kinship should extend to policy and attitudes. For example, a lack of understanding about the impact of sorry business, loss and grief is often reflected in attendance and fee policies. The families told us that having Aboriginal people involved as paid members of staff with genuine input on planning and carrying out the program also adds another layer of respect and safety:

I reckon they should get more funding at that [pre]school to afford things ‘cause at the moment they got all white fellas up there and we’re only volunteers. We do volunteer work up there. So I reckon we need more funding to put Aboriginal, even the young fellas you know they could been trainees or something. I reckon that well out here we need more Aboriginal people involved, young people involved in the school.
Some Aboriginal people would relish the opportunity to be more involved in preschool education in their community.

*I would like to see my kids learn from that preschool ‘cause I’ve been there. I’d like to see my kids come up out of that preschool too. I’d just go and get all the little kids and take ‘em over and teach ‘em and play with them as in puzzles and writing and how to write their name and all that.*

The openness of children’s services to the scrutiny of parents and community can have a huge impact on how safe the environment feels for them:

*You can go there whenever you want to check on the kids and that, easy access to all of them and everything. So you can always know that they not just telling ya that everything is alright. You can walk in whenever you want.*

Inclusion of Aboriginal culture programs and language programs in prior-to-school and school settings is valued and is another aspect of a culturally safe environment for children and families. The opportunity to learn more about culture through services beyond the home is also valued. Like other aspects of learning, families are very proud of their children’s success with learning Aboriginal language.

*I never had the privilege of learning my Aboriginal heritage when I was going to school but now that’s it’s back in the school system these days I definitely think it’s a good thing.*

They do actually have an Aboriginal language program at the school which I think is really good. It gives them an idea of their culture and their background. [She] is really good with language program. She has actually got a few awards for the language. I think it’s really good.

They do they learn about our traditional language which they learn that at the school. It’s part of their learning program. It’s been adjusted into it. But they learn all that, plus they get the elders in to tell them stories.

They [the service] sing “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” in Aboriginal language.

*He knows a couple of words there, language, he knows how to sing “Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”, knows how to say mouth, foot, eyes and that in the language.*

Parents do notice that some aspects of culture are only included for celebrations and special weeks:

*They do Aboriginal stuff during that Aboriginal week but that’s about it. They do the week of celebration. It’s mainly playing though.*
As an extension to culturally safe early childhood education spaces and understanding parents’ desire to learn with their children, parents made suggestions about changing how early childhood education settings “do business”:

If I had my choice they’d [family] be in preschool. Yeah, they’d be around their family not with other people they don’t know.

I mean you taking you kid there, you’re dropping them off and you don’t really know what goes on in there, you know. Your kids come home with all these gadgets, paintings and, you know, but you don’t really know what goes on within the [pre]school. So it’s more interaction with the parents and the [pre] school I think and with the kids as well. It’s a bit like the playgroup we go to. I mean you got to be there with the children. It’s like interaction with your own child. You’re learning things about your child you know, what you didn’t know before. What they like doing and, yeah view of what your child does and you can bring that back into your house then. You know what your child likes. You see your kids, they’re playing with other kids or other things and they can sit there for hours with this one thing but you didn’t know that at your own house. You can just observe on your own child.

Like learn with her. She’s got a little inquisitive mind.

Umm well [it’s] a small town. If they do get something set up like this [an Aboriginal child and family centre) it would be good to see some of the local people go back into the workforce, with the kids. And I mean you know everyone, so you know what your kids, what hands they’re in.

It would be good to take him in and give him a first-hand look with me there so that he can get used to it while I’m there. Then do it on his own after that.

Paint and Play group would have been a bit better if they had a few more days like even three days a week, ‘cause it only goes for like three to four hours in the morning.

There were also examples of mothers who did not feel empowered to have their say about a teacher or the teacher’s approach to early childhood education and their children. Two mothers spoke about reluctance to send their children to a preschool where the program was not appropriate for children of this age:

I think they should have something, something to encourage the kids to come to [pre]school, give a reason for coming.

. . . where they do not really so much school work but having fun at the start to get them used to being in a classroom environment.
Others spoke about their children not being happy or settling in and not being able to talk about this with the staff. Some Aboriginal people in these locations withdrew their children from a service as their only way of coping with their disapproval of how the service was run. Some others persevered:

Well Robbie starts big school next year so that’s a big step for her. She’s had week off so far, she likes going to [pre]school but she doesn’t. It’s long hours for her, like it really gets to her sometimes. She’s got to lay down and have a rest and that.

First two weeks she used to get up early ready to go then she just cried and didn’t want to go and bailed up when I went to take her to school. Crying and then she said little boys were chasing her around.

Families whose children attended preschool education services talked about the benefits of preschool education as a transition to and preparation for school.

Preschool got them into a routine of getting up early and knowing which day is school.

Yeah they had an orientation day the year before they started. Yeah, get them used to it, know what they are going to.

With the kids all of them they all learnt how to write their name by doing dot-to-dots with the coloured pencils and they coloured in and they learnt most of the nursery rhymes, and colours yeah and their ABC. They thought they were the brainiest baby going to school then. ‘Cause they knew all this here. The most important thing I think is the interaction with other kids. They got around all the other little cousins and learnt how to get along with other kids easily, as in social skills.

Oh yeah it was a real beneficial thing for the kids.

Preschool helped them a real lot because the bus used to come round and pick them up then they’d have all the kids on the bus with them and they would yarn and everything so that was good for them because they had preschool and it was a transition into kindergarten for them.

Preschool helped them. It tells them how to interact with other kids and to sit down at that age getting them ready for a full day at school where at preschool sometimes it was a half day. They only had two full days and a half day. Just getting them ready.

Yeah they come home and show me what they do ... yeah they draw and they paint and come home and tell me what it’s about.
Barriers to accessing early childhood education experiences

For families a lack of culturally safe early childhood education environments creates some barriers as they try to make the best possible decisions for their children in their early years. Other barriers identified by families during yarning sessions include transport, cost and appropriate accessible services in local communities.

In the smallest communities there is not a range of early childhood education services and not the population to support services being established reflecting current models. The need is still there:

*We really need like a child care, our people in child care you know, as mothers who are working … someone could watch the children.*

Transport is also an issue for accessing some services. The communities may be quite small but the layout, particularly where missions are a distance from the centre of the town, presents an issue for families who generally do not have ready access to a car.

*But we have no way of getting them down there aye?*

Affordability stands out as the main barrier for many families accessing early childhood education. However, access to affordable services varies from one community to another. In some locations the availability of a Department of Education and Training preschool provides accessible affordable preschool:

*No, I think the best thing about it is by having a preschool which is affordable. Without this preschool I think a lot of children won’t go to preschool because the long day care is too dear but being an Aboriginal preschool it’s cheaper. I think it’s $2.50 a day. So that’s one benefit but the best thing about it is to get all the parents to get their kids enrolled.*

When available, child care centre and community preschools costs are problematic for families:

*Not only to have a child but to support yourself is expensive. If you do have a child which a lot of people are going to do, you have to pay for your rent and power and water rates plus nappies, food and you’re left with nothing. I mean I know she is safe. I know she is secure, she is being looked after but the down-sider is it costs a bit of money. It’s just too expensive here in [this town] to put the children in day care. It’s just like spending all your pension there sending them to [pre]school. That’s how come I gotta leave them with my grandmother and my mother. There is one in town but it costs about $8 an hour and that’s like 8.5 hours if I send her there and I’m only a low income earner. I can’t afford to really send her there every day of the week.*
Even when preschool costs are low, parents often opt for supported playgroup instead because it has no cost. In one community, supported playgroup is offered for three hours on three days per week.

Cost nothing to come [to supported playgroup in the park]... at preschool. We gotta pay … $3 a day … $15 a week.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the data in a way that has allowed the voices of the families in the urban, rural and remote sites in this study to be heard. We have attempted here to highlight the sorts of knowledge and skills that our yarning with Aboriginal people in these settings has indicated that their children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school, while keeping alert to underlying information that emerges in relation to our third aim of understanding the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how children’s and family services can be more effective for Indigenous families.

The issues that have come through include the deeply held respect and value the families had for education and their understanding of the importance of education in the early years. They articulated throughout the yarning sessions the importance of culturally safe programs that honour diversity and respect Indigenous culture and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Their desire for early childhood settings that provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, staffed with Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous staff with cultural understanding was strongly stated. They identified barriers that prevented participation and shared suggestions for ways that early learning programs could be structured to be more culturally responsive to the needs of Indigenous families, including a consistent call for service to be open for parents to stay with the children and for stronger ties between services and communities.
CHAPTER 5 - TRANSITION TO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The broad framework of this study included identifying and exploring the experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal families in relation to child care and education.

5.1 What urban families told us about transition to school

In each of the urban areas, parents acknowledged the importance of early childhood education in preparation for school and in assisting children make a successful transition. In their yarning sessions, some families shared the starting school experiences of their older children as well as their hopes and expectations for their younger children. One grandmother in the urban group explained she was looking forward to her granddaughter starting school:

   I will be celebrating – a big celebration.

Some children were reported as having had few or no difficulties starting school and many of the families acknowledged that experiences in a prior to school setting, especially familiarity with routines, had helped to prepare their children for this significant life change:

   Day care helped prepare my eldest for school. She knew lots of children from the same day care.

This parent said her child was ready for school at four and half and identified that her experiences mixing with other kids from day-care was the most important experience in preparing her. Relationships and family support were also acknowledged as important factors in successful transition to school and this was reflected in the choices of many families when it came to selecting a school for their children.

There were, however, families who had experienced problems with the transition to school and three families identified they were struggling with settling their children into school. They felt more support was needed to assist children who find it difficult:

   They should have a worker to help them through it.

This parent suggested, It would have been good if they had a preschool, supporting the idea of preschools being situated in school grounds. Another parent, who initially found school transition had been difficult for her child, identified the problem as being due to the lack of cultural awareness, though with time school had developed into a positive experience.

Another parent whose child had not attended preschool or day care said:

   It was difficult. He started when he was four [July birthday] and he repeated because of his age and then it was better for him. He improved and is good at reading, writing, maths.
With hindsight she could see that four had been too young, but she said she had been advised by the school that he could start at four years:

*It was too early. He wasn’t learning things and he only settled well because he knew people, cousins, friends and older brother.*

Quite differently from rural and remote locations, urban families had a choice of school settings as they prepared for their children’s transition to school. Locality and ease of access were frequently given as reasons for choosing a specific school but other reasons influenced this important choice. Indigenous families showed a strong preference for schools attended by family or extended family members.

Feelings of connectedness were identified by families as significant. One mother had selected a school for her daughter because it had a preschool and she believed that this would help prepare her daughter for school. She said: *Other family members go to the school and she wants to go.* Similarly, a grandmother described one child’s negative experience of starting school as being frightening because she had no other cousins with her.

Six families specifically said that they selected schools because other family members attended and another parent selected a school for her child because family members worked there. Other reasons given by families included a high population of Indigenous children in the school, the good reputation of a school and one family identified religion as being important in their choice. Another family said that they had moved house so that their child could attend the school that the child’s mother had attended and that the child’s cousin was currently attending.

Another parent indicated that she would like to send her child to a particular private school because past students from the school had gone to university and had done well. She believed that the teachers dedicated more time to the students but she acknowledged the prohibitive cost of private education the fees at approximately $22,000 per year. That school was out of the question for financial reasons.

Some families had taken advantage of orientation programs offered by schools and six families referred to the value of such programs. They commented that they appreciated parents being invited to participate in the orientation programs and one father commented that visits to the school and knowing the surroundings had helped his children. A mother said that she had gone to the orientation program with her children but she acknowledged that the children’s father was anxious about the children starting school because he felt they were growing up. This was an example of parent concerns about change in children’s lives and highlights the need for supportive programs for families as well as for children during times of educational transition.

In discussing the transition experiences of children who had not yet started school, families usually had an opinion about how their child would manage the change. One mother commented, *she wants to go to school and be a big girl.* Seven families believed that their child would cope well and would be ready to start school when the time came.
One mother discussed strategies they were using at home to help prepare their daughter:

School is important and we try to teach her, she’s got books.

A father told us about his second child, who was four years old and ready for school the following year:

She can spell her name and her sister’s name and is a really good talker.

However he said that he had been worried when his eldest child started school:

There was some bullying at the start and she was shy. Now she stands up for herself.

Two parents who thought their child would not be ready for school gave their reasons as they expressed their concerns. In both instances, there were developmental problems. One mother said that her child had a disability and she was anxious because, in her words, children can be nasty. Another mother said that her child has a speech problem and she was concerned that he would not be understood.

Another mother discussed a pilot program she had heard about at a particular school, one of five across the state, which helped children with school attendance and encouraged family interaction with schools. She explained that a playgroup is one of the programs they have set up. This parent gave this as an example of ways to support families with this significant change in their children’s lives.

5.2 What regional families told us about transition to school

Some families talked about all the things children could do before they started school whether they attended preschool or not:

They could all write their name and everything before they went to school. They could count, they knew colours. [She] could read a bit before she went to school.

I taught her heaps. I read a lot and when we were out walking

Well [she] learnt to write her name before she went to school.

She was pretty good ‘cause I was teaching her at home to write her name and all that.

They also acknowledged the programs in some preschools and schools that support the transition to school:

An Early Bird program. Even up here I noticed too the preschool, [town] preschool, takes them regularly for visits for little lunch at both schools. So the kids know, oh these are the two schools. Down there my kids wouldn’t have even known where the school was until they attended.
And if he can go next year it depends on his speech, ‘cause he’s five in February so he could go, but I’m not going to send him if his speech hasn’t improved, because it would be hard for him. I spoke to Mrs. [school principal] so he can do transition at the end of the year and see how he goes in transition, and if he doesn’t feel comfortable with it, which he will, but he’ll go back.

So maybe preschools make an effort, maybe twice a term to take the preschoolers up to the schools and they have little lunch in the playground and that. Yeah, especially him, because he’s got no siblings there.

They go for half a day for two weeks and then it’s four days there. Two weeks. Just to get ‘em settled in there. Then it’s a full day from 9 to 3.

Oh well, they done that, the orientation and the Early Bird, like they had a parent-teacher morning, just like morning tea or somethin’. So the parents could get used to the teachers. Some of ‘em did, like some of the Koori kids did, didn’t like leaving Mum. But the principal up there made sure there was a Koori worker for the little Koori kids.

In the view of these families, no matter what, some children are ready for school and others are not:

He was getting bored and was looking forward to going to school and getting excited about wearing a uniform. He would come home any day and put his uniform on.

[She] is the only one I can see so far who is picking up on things. I don’t know if the other two are slow or if they are just delayed. I just believe a child will learn when they are ready to learn. I don’t believe in pushing them. I suppose too with [other child], he has been diagnosed as autistic. We can see now why he couldn’t learn, why he couldn’t comprehend. Like he would hear me say the beginning of a sentence and the end of a sentence but everything else is muddled up. But since he has been going to school and getting on-on-one help he runs around the house now counting whereas he couldn’t do that before. He is saying a lot more things, and Dora the Explorer is just fantastic because she is teaching him lots of things.

Oh well, she doesn’t like it. Her brain is like off with the fairies when she’s got to learn what someone is teaching her. Like with a group of kids, one-on-one she’ll do what she’s got to do but she’ll be giggling and . . . yeah, yeah. But [other child] was ready when she was four years old to go to school.

Selecting a school is part of the transition process for some families and others have little or no choice depending on where they live:

I sort of chosen the other one there but I knew a lot of people already there, teachers and that already there. I’d already done a lot of voluntary with them and stuff . . . I mean if I wasn’t doin’ what I was doin’ up there I wouldn’t know what’s happening at the school at all. Besides the little newsletter, you don’t get much and the AEA [Aboriginal Education Officer] don’t come out and yarn with you and that.
I wouldn’t send my kids to Catholic school ‘cause I’m not Catholic. It costs more than the public school.

[We chose Catholic school] ‘cause we went there and it’s better than the public. Yeah it’s more... kids don’t get teased or just little things like that. It’s better through the Catholic school. Yeah, there’s not as many kids as in the public school. You have to get in early to be enrolled there or you miss out.

In some communities, some schools and preschools also offer programs for parents to help them connect with school education.

They had a little course which they ran up there, to help you to, to help learn like what the kids are doin’, like maths and stuff... what they’re gonna teach ‘em. I went to a couple of them.

Yeah and then the Aboriginal teacher come out and had a yarn to us. Yeah she come round and seen us to say like... Every little thing about like just talk about it and she gave us pamphlets and that.

Parents talked about varied experiences and concerns when school is part of their child’s life. School provides yet another set of hurdles, celebrations, relationships and other experiences:

At [the Catholic school] there was no Early Birds or anything like that. Nope, you just went and enrolled them.

Came home, went to bed, he was exhausted. No dinner, nothing. First couple of weeks he would come home and go to bed.

She always does writing the alphabet. She has got numbers everywhere. She has written on the lounge at home, 1 to 10 on the lounge. She has learned a lot. She can say the whole alphabet now and she is counting to 20. From 10 back to 0, she can do it backwards. She used to be able to count to ten before she went to school and she could write her own name and all that but now she can count backwards.

[She] is already in school, but before she was 4 and a half, when she started kindergarten and we had no problem with her, she learnt her name and colours, alphabet, numbers, basic maths, knew how to write, knew a lot of words.

[The school should have] blended the classes more and should do more with the Koori kids like, taking them and teaching them stuff about themselves.

The AEAs that are up there I don’t think does much or don’t do anything. Only comes to door, “Oh Eli didn’t went to school today!” That’s the only time they come to see you.

I hate them changing teachers. Yep and that just disrupted him so much and that’s why I said I won’t have them in a class that swaps their teachers.

Hard to say to your kids, “We’re all the same” but then have kids calling them black!
5.3 What remote families told us about transition to school

The transition to school for Aboriginal children in the west of NSW is a matter of interest for their families. Some children are keen and ready to begin this important move into a wider social space and make a successful transition, while others find it less successful. As one mother said of her son:

*He actually told me to go home on his first day of preschool. I was happy with that.*

In our yarning sessions in rural and remote settings, families spoke openly about their children and their children’s interests, showing pride in their development and indicating their parental aspirations for their futures. What the children enjoyed doing varied as much as their personalities. The personalities the children showed to those outside of the family and some children’s willingness to engage with others is built on a foundation of trust of those around them.

*She’ll talk our ears off but if she don’t know them, she won’t talk.*

While some families were concerned for their children starting school others celebrated with great excitement, often supported by preschool experiences and school transition programs:

*They did a transition day before the commencement of kindergarten yeah just so they get a feel of the school and get a feel of other kids that will be in their classes and stuff. What happened was the parents, they more or less just dropped the kids off. It was two half days. They drop the kids off and had to leave them. I think it did help a bit as well.*

*They also had a thing to with peer support. They had peer support groups as well for the kids, sort of like that [a buddy system], hey, where once a week the younger kids that were starting would go with the year 5 & 6s and do stuff with them. I think they both settled in really well. They both with their friends that they grew up with during preschool so they didn’t have any problems making friends and stuff. Yeah they are pretty outgoing people. Yes they have orientation day and that start in term 4 of the preschool and they will go down one day a week and spend 2 or 3 hours there at the kindergarten, like a transition.*

Some parents attributed a smooth transition to school to the closeness of community and family rather than to any other experience:

*Transition to school was easy] because they, yeah they knew a lot of kids. [It’s] a close knitted little town with a lot of Aboriginal kids here and got many cousins and that.*
Others identified missed opportunities for some children:

That [a transition program] would have had a major impact I think sending them to the kinder to get them ready for school.

They were good, they were saying you know they just ran off and started playing with the other kids. They weren’t worried about me. Poor old me was the one who was sad. The first day at preschool, yeah. But going to Kindergarten they were okay, just a couple of new faces they seen, but once they were playing they joined in straight away. No problems there with them, but the other little kids I think missed out on preschool, that didn’t have the opportunity to go to school, I think they were the ones that clung to their parents or some of the cocky [farming] parents kept their kids at home and done sort of a home schooling thing with them, they were the clingy kids who didn’t like to leave their mum and be around just that one little group.

The process of settling in to formal schooling for those children less eager to take on the larger world needs to be seen as an ongoing concern for the school. Families see early years’ experiences as important not just for “here and now” but also for their future. Some yarns revolved around what children had already learnt socially, emotionally and cognitively prior to school. Learning and teaching with and from siblings and cousins is valued and expected. In addition, interactions with parents and other adult family members were identified as part of the learning process.

When speaking of support for children and aspirations for them in early learning, some made the link between home environment, extended family and goals of education and social interaction with peers. Children’s knowledge about their surrounding environment was a point of pride in discussion for the families. Learning that included life skills valued in the home culture was seen as being important by many families:

[When we] go fishin’, she cook’ ‘em, she cleans up.

The transition to school was often seen as an important life passage for children, and one family spoke of the way in which they see the whole family taking responsibility for supporting and assisting the child with the transition to school:

Support from the family, they’ve had a good stable home environment. With a Mum and Dad and grandparents and extended family if they needed support and encouragement from friends as well . . . felt good because they were going to learn and get an education and also interact with other kids their age.

The value families place on schooling for social and educational learning was clear, and this suggests that there are positive foundations and attitudes to education in and across these communities that should give schools a strong basis on which to build positive outcomes in both these areas.
In remote communities there is little choice about where families can send their children to school. The local state school is often the only primary school available and the only choice can really be about attendance. Larger rural towns provide families with more choice and many families in these settings talked about making the decision about where their children would go to school and how they were involved in their child’s school education. Here are three examples:

Both our families, my side and their father’s side are Catholic, and we just felt that they needed be given the history of the Catholic education, the importance of the religion and the importance of the content of the teaching program. I’ve been there on numerous occasions since they’ve started. I’ve attended teacher-parent interviews, NAIDOC day celebrations, their mass every term for both of them and stuff like that. You get to know other parents and stuff, get to know the teachers and all the staff at the school. I’m also on the school board there too, as their Aboriginal parent and so there is also a voice there too on behalf of Aboriginal people that attend the school.

She will be attending [community preschool with Aboriginal name] yeah, hopefully there will be a space for her, from there she will go to public school. She will follow the same as her elder sisters. Because it was a public school, I think most of the kids that they knew were at that same school, so it was the public school and only the Catholic kids went to the Catholic school . . . Yeah I go in and out. I go in and do voluntary work, for Aboriginal day and NAIDOC week and parent teacher interviews sometimes. We just go in for a yarn just to see how the kids are going.

All of my children went through preschool, they went through primary school. It’s a public school in town. From there, they went to the public high school except Melissa. She did Year 5 & 6 at the Catholic school here. From there she went to school in Sydney and she went to year 10 there and finished school there. Sharon went to Year 12 at [local] high school and Kris he went to Year 10 at [local] high school. Mitchell he dropped out. He had difficulties at school. I think he went to about Year 9 though. Now he is living in SA with his Aunty. He is going to TAFE there trying to do his Year 10 certificate.

It is clear that these families have a significant experiential basis on which to make decisions about the forms of schooling best suited to their children, and that they have been able to use their knowledge of what it takes to succeed in school to better prepare younger family members for what is expected there.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter we have attempted to extend the examples and illustrations that support our recommendations related to the second of our research questions: What knowledge and skills do Indigenous children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school? In exploring this question through our yarning sessions with the parents and caretakers of Aboriginal children across our range of settings, we have sought also to keep in mind our concern with trying to understand reasons for the low
proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how children’s and family services can be made more effective for Indigenous families, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The families we spoke with differed in their experiences of school transition, within and across our research settings. Those with older children told of both successful and difficult school transitions. Some families reported successful transitions to school for their children and attributed the smoothness of the transition to attending children’s services in the years before school and to the established relationships with other siblings, cousins and friends from children’s services attending the same school. Other families reported difficulty for their children starting school and expressed a wish for greater cultural understanding in the schools. Some suggested that a playgroup or other transition program would have helped their child.

Families who had not yet experienced a child’s transition to school said that they were preparing their child at home by teaching them to write their name and having books in the house. Some families who were yet to send their child to school expressed concern that their child might be teased, especially if they had a disability or were shy and one family reported that their girl had experienced bullying when she first started school.

From the families’ viewpoint it appears that families are clear about the double benefits of schooling for their children, in both educational and social terms, and we found substantial support for the belief that children’s services can serve a useful purpose preparing children for school entry across both of these. Many families saw that they also played a role in the preparation of their children for school, and appear to take this very seriously. The need for children’s services to acknowledge and build on what the home culture can provide seems a clear recommendation from our review and analysis of these findings.
CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapters where the results are recorded, we have kept the participants’ voices strong. This continues the commitment of the methodology and connectedness to the experiences of these people who shared their lives with us. If we are to hear the voices of all those involved in the yarning throughout the project we must consider what we were asking. “What’s it like for Aboriginal families bringing up young children in the early 21st century?” We must also step back from the temptation to only create a list of what people say they want when yarning around the question. That would be applying a linear approach to a project where a holistic and interconnected circular approach influenced the methodology.

A completely non-Aboriginal way of thinking would lead us directly back to questions about why Aboriginal children are not accessing preschool services in NSW, something we could have attempted to answer with another much simpler and less time-consuming methodology. Others have tried this. Practices have not changed because it comes back to a framework considered through a non-Aboriginal lens.

Instead we should acknowledge that we have attempted to apply cultural interface protocols (Yunkaporta, 2010; 8ways.wikispaces) for engaging with Aboriginal people’s experience of child rearing. Therefore, conclusions which give direction to implications for policy and practice cannot be simplistic and may provoke feelings of discomfort as policymakers work towards applying dual lenses to what they consider to be issues for universal access to early childhood education. If we consider the concept of increasing knowledge in order to get closer to a common ground, “the cultural interface” (Nakata, 2007), there are likely rewards of innovative policy and practice.

We also need to acknowledge that no matter how we wrestled with a suitable method of collecting data there is still the possibility that aspects of the yarns were influenced by what the participants thought was expected of them by non-Aboriginal perspectives of child rearing, care and education. This is where the more successful yarns are those that did not impose the suggested question structure as the absolute framework for the yarns. Where the yarns were more wide-ranging and circular there was greater depth of discussion and greater opportunity to explore what was really at the heart of many comments.

6.1 Discussion of findings in relation to the research questions

All that having been said, there is much that we can learn from the stories recorded in the Results chapters and the many additional hours of yarning.

What is the experience of Aboriginal families in NSW raising children under school age and what can be done to create better opportunities for early childhood education for Aboriginal children?

Changing practice requires a holistic response, not a mere tinkering at the edges or changing one or two aspects. The NSW government has already acknowledged that
this is important through the whole-of-government approach through Families NSW and through recent commitments to universal access to preschool education.

The stories we have heard suggest that on the ground, in communities, the pattern of provisions offered by government departments and agencies is linear. That is, the services appear to relate to a child’s age but they are not clearly connected and families have trouble making connections for themselves. It is not the focus of this report to unpack the reasons for and ways of improving the other contextual factors in the lives of these families. However, health, poverty, wellbeing, and community development are only some of the aspects that also need to be considered given the stories we have heard.

An ecological approach to considering all these factors is suggested. In addition, we recommend a hub approach to conceptualising how government departments and agencies plan with community for provisions related to early childhood education and development (see Figure 6.1). From the SNAICC list of 8 Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, we are reminded that “results take real planning” at all levels.

As the NSW community, we do need to acknowledge that there is still some considerable distance to go before Aboriginal children have similar opportunities to their non-Aboriginal peers. In some locations this is more marked than others. The added difficulties of geographic location must be considered and addressed. Cost and travel as barriers to accessing early childhood education have been addressed for some but not for others. This means a deeper understanding of context must be considered for individual locations and individual families in each site: urban, regional and remote.

What is the experience of Aboriginal families in NSW raising children under school age?

The stories are presented in the Results sections of this report. They are all different and we must respect the fact that place and belonging does have an impact on experience. However, there are some common threads woven through the stories.

Families value the early years of children’s lives and understand the importance of this period. Life for families with little children is complex and involves extended family in many cases. Families want some control over what happens for their children. Some families manage better than others. Some families are more greatly affected by poverty, location and family disruption.

Family members look after children. Parents, grandparents and aunties are responsible for much of the care and home education of the children. Aboriginal people in this study want their children to be around family not strangers. They access other services for early childhood care and education if they can and as they need it or see it as important.
The home learning environment for Aboriginal families is rich in ways that are not traditionally valued from a non-Aboriginal perspective. Young children are taught about kinship, cultural practices, respect for elders and language when those close to them have knowledge of their Aboriginal language. Children are surrounded by loving adults, and relationships with siblings and cousins and other extended-family are strong. Interactions with the environment are varied but are identified as being important. Books, games and toys are part of the environment as well as the physical environment and community activities and events. Many families read with their children and teach them their numbers, teach them how to write their name, and expose them to art and music activities that they see as ways of preparing their children for formal school education.
Parents and grandparents told us of their wish for their children to learn about their Aboriginal culture so that they develop a strong Aboriginal identity. This identity they saw as helping to support the children to thrive and achieve. Alongside this aspiration for a number of families is the desire for their children to learn about other cultures as well as Aboriginal culture.

Experiences of services to support families in bringing up their children are also varied. There is considerable distrust and dissatisfaction expressed by families. Families often felt judged and misunderstood by staff in all types of services. While family members often do not want to complain, they can see that children’s services do not always offer the quality of service that they want for their children. As staff talk down to them, families feel intimidated and disempowered. Some families persevere because they want their children to “survive” in the education system developed by non-Aboriginal people. Others tend to avoid using services, especially when a parent is at home, and feel that they can teach their children themselves.

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

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

According to their families Aboriginal children bring the same skills to school as non-Aboriginal children do as well as their experience in socialising and connecting in an extended family and community context. The children when they start school are also growing with knowledge of culture and country. However, those who do not attend preschool and other early learning programs miss out on some skills that make it easier for them to settle into school and know what school is about. Preparing for school requires local knowledge as well as confidence and self-esteem.

As many of the families in this study have done, policy makers need to look closely at what happens in the 4 to 8 years transition phase of children’s lives. The quality of preschool programs and the effectiveness of the early years of school must be part of the same picture. In fact, birth to 8 years is a connected kaleidoscope vision of growth and experience for children. Some families in this study expressed their understanding of the need for a smoother more connected pathway through this maze for them and their children. Instead of relying on the interest and particular commitments of local staff, it appears that there is a need for policy at a state level to increase effective communication between services, schools, other agencies and community.
What are the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how can children’s services be more effective for Aboriginal families?

It would be easy to answer this question with the expected list: fees, access (transport), waiting lists, family responsibilities, and personal choice not to attend. These are definitely factors in explaining the low proportion of Indigenous children in children’s services. Addressing issues of transport and cost needs and access to places must be a priority. This requires some local solutions but also some commitment to considering new models of support for addressing these issues in specific locations.

It is unfortunate that one conclusion of this study is that while Aboriginal families want the best for their children in a culturally safe environment, not many children’s services appear to offer such an environment.

Perhaps a question should be asked about how “natural” the arrangement of children’s services is. Karen Martin (2009) talks about it being quite unnatural to have 20 children of the same age together with only two adults for a set period of time. What else is unnatural about the context in which Aboriginal children and families are asked to engage with formal early childhood education?

The stories told in this project suggest that other aspects which require deconstructing and reconstructing include “ownership” and “belonging” within early childhood education services, the cultural and philosophical base for service provision, employment/workforce strategies, approaches to teaching and learning, professional development strategies, management of services and connectedness to the whole community.

In NSW in 2010, there is still a lot of rhetoric about all families being welcome in children’s services. The reality is that not all families feel welcome. Many Aboriginal families do not consider themselves as belonging in these contexts. Creating a sense of belonging and ownership is a bit “hit and miss” according to experiences of the participants in this study. Surely more than “hit and miss” results can be achieved by enacting the philosophy of Belonging, Being and Becoming, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009).

In order to progress the first step toward cultural safety, all those working in children’s services, including management, need to undergo professional training which has them reflecting on their own cultural identity, their belonging and being. This is a “cultural plunge” that must be experienced before they can expect to engage with and respect other cultures (Simpson & Letts, 2003). The next stage is significant cultural engagement and cultural competency education in addition to experiences at a general level and local level. Such an approach is about deep learning and understanding not just cultural awareness. Like the work of this project it takes time. This is difficult work moving toward the cultural interface in providing the most effective early childhood education services. A commitment to this work and increased knowledge would essentially involve agreements at a local level but also a major shift at the State level toward compulsory standards of engaging in cultural development.
Members of this research team have moved toward the cultural interface differently. The different experiences afforded each of us by geographic location and connection with people and communities and our individual cultural identities have meant different journeys. We would expect the same would apply for services involving different mobs, different people and cultures and a range of contextual impacts.

Simultaneously, there is an opportunity to reflect on and reconstruct approaches to teaching and learning that include Aboriginal perspectives but are effective for all children. An example of reconstructing approaches to teaching and learning could be to connect the Australian Early Years Learning Framework with a pedagogical framework such as “8Ways" which “allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives by using Aboriginal teaching and learning techniques (processes of knowledge transmission)” (RAET, 2010).

8Ways includes interconnected pedagogies: story sharing, learning maps, non-verbal, symbols and images, land links, non-linear, deconstruct/reconstruct and community links as a “culturally safe point for teachers to begin engaging with Aboriginal knowledge” (RAET, 2010). This pedagogical framework has been introduced in some school communities and teacher training courses recently in the regional and remote areas where this study has taken place. Including this as professional development for those involved in early childhood education would slot another piece into the puzzle of achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal children and communities.

Having moved toward a space of cultural safety all teachers and workers will be more open to “rethinking” the place of and a commitment to Aboriginal culture and languages in children’s services and school curriculum. The opportunity to “rethink” expectations and move from a deficit way of thinking about Aboriginal children is also important. Valuing the learning that occurs outside formal settings such as kinship knowledge, mathematical and science concepts, respect, and people skills will impact on the possibilities for children as teachers plan to build on these strengths. Moving from a broad position of all services being “early intervention” for Aboriginal children will change expectations in the early years and will also provide a stronger base for learning. We need to consider where the strengths-based discussions with the one hundred and more families in this study fit with the academic outcomes of Aboriginal children in the early years of school.

New ways of “doing business” in early childhood education can only be introduced in a context where those involved respect different cultural perspectives. Developing a strategic workforce plan so that Aboriginal people can be employed at every level in early childhood education and care must happen at a State level. At a time when early childhood workforce capacity building is a key to meeting a range of planned developments it is important that a specific Aboriginal workforce capacity building strategy be put into place.

Any strategy should include education and training plans to achieve specified targets of numbers of qualified Aboriginal early childhood teachers and other workers. For example, a target needs to be set of a particular number of university-trained early
childhood teachers, a particular number of Diploma-level workers and a particular number of Certificate III-level workers over a 2-year, 4-year and 10-year period. The target might be influenced by a number of overall goals. For example, one goal might be to have a qualified workforce to meet a State requirement to have one Aboriginal employee for between one and ten Aboriginal children in a service; or a number of Aboriginal family day caregivers in particular communities.

In addition, a workforce capacity strategy should include steps to ensure that Aboriginal community members are not required to be volunteers to bring an Aboriginal perspective. There should be budgetary planning for employing community members to carry out this important work. Such work should involve cultural perspectives in the overall education program rather than an occasional activity for input into services.

Families in this study did talk about possibilities for the development of the early childhood education workforce to include more Aboriginal teachers and workers, particularly local people. Having Aboriginal staff would bring a stronger cultural perspective to the service. They also spoke about many other experiences that suggest it is time to review what services “look like” and how they are developed.

While one might take the discussion in this report and apply it to the development of new services we cannot afford to ignore the fact that current services do not meet the expectations of Aboriginal families. Action should be taken to address all issues highlighted above in every existing early childhood education setting. Also, actions should address other aspects of service provision in general and management of individual services.

If we believe that access to a high quality early childhood education is important for every child then it might be timely to consider what services would provide this opportunity for all children, including Aboriginal children. Traditional preschool services where parents and family are expected to leave their children and return to collect them at a particular time is outdated for some.

A service where family members are welcome to observe, interact and participate would create an education community option for early childhood education. This option would overcome issues of trust and also provide opportunities for parents to learn with their children if they wished. There are likely education and training offshoots from this sort of approach also. Playgroups with university-trained teachers as the leaders would offer another option, as would hub models of early childhood education and development services. Whatever the model, it is clear that services need to be sufficiently flexible to reflect the needs and culture of their communities. Services need to be based on a core philosophy of the provision of high quality early childhood education for all children set in an ecological framework that also responds to the associated needs of family and community.

Families in this study highlighted inequities between the costs of services depending on how they are funded and where they are offered. The fees charged when their children are sick and when they are absent because of sorry business cause much angst and
have been the wedge that disconnects families from early childhood services. What doesn’t make sense to families is frustrating and what doesn’t seem fair is often the last straw. Strategies to inform families about the policies and procedures would not only solve some of these issues but also enhance the relationships between services and families. Many strategies position families as “being’ the problem because they “don’t understand.” Strategies which position the families as partners in change add opportunities for connection, engagement and capacity building (see Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2 Opportunities for Connectedness (Simpson, 2000, 2008b).**

Finally, if families and community are valued and respected they are included in every aspect of service development, not just more “consultation” about what is needed and what people want but more authentic partnerships. Aboriginal communities tell us that they are “sick of consultation” that gets nowhere but seek consultation that involves them in shaping and improving the experiences of their children. Day-to-day involvement increases the opportunities for connectedness at the cultural interface and for developing leadership for the future.
6.2 Summary of recommendations

The following table provides a summary of the suggested ways forward:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus for change</th>
<th>Some suggested strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning for Results</td>
<td>• Community Early Childhood Education and Development Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New models of service provision - flexible to respond to the community and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce</td>
<td>• Strategic plan with specific goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Interface</td>
<td>• Intensive identity education program in all services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intensive cultural education in all services and in pre-service training programs using local registered courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Interface – Teaching and learning</td>
<td>• Introduce 8Ways or the like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intensive in-service training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>• Introduce leadership programs using Opportunities for Connectedness model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Review policies and procedures in children’s services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Connectedness</td>
<td>• Introduce new expectations of consultation and inclusiveness in licensing and quality assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>• Address local issues of cost and transport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


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Tripcony (2002).


## APPENDIX A - Number of Families and Children in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>No. of families</th>
<th>Total no. of children represented by families</th>
<th>Average no. of children in immediate family</th>
<th>Age range of children in families</th>
<th>Average age of focus preschool-child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2 mths - 22 yrs</td>
<td>3.0 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1 mth - 15 yrs</td>
<td>2.8 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban 3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>18 mths - 12 yrs</td>
<td>3.2 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 mths - 6 yrs</td>
<td>1.9 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5 mths -16 yrs</td>
<td>2.8 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3 mths - school age</td>
<td>2.8 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional 4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Birth - 28 yrs</td>
<td>4.3 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>7 mths - 7 yrs</td>
<td>2.4 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34 (+ other children referred to but not included in information provided)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2 yrs - adult</td>
<td>2.6 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>18 mths - adult</td>
<td>3.0 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1 mth - 12 yrs</td>
<td>2.3 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote 4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>10 mths -19 yrs</td>
<td>2.3 yrs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B - Aboriginal Community Consultation Toolkit

The first step in a long journey -
*Laurie Crawford, Indigenous Child Care Choices Project (2006).*

This title has been deliberately selected because if you bugger up the first step, then not only have you buggered up the rest of the journey, but you have also buggered it up for everyone following you.

Do the right thing and leave the door open for the next lot.

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Our research and in-field documentation
[http://www.axys.net/expertise/consultation/aboriginal.htm](http://www.axys.net/expertise/consultation/aboriginal.htm)

has unearthed some very important Aboriginal community consultation processes and protocols that can help identify ways to minimise the potential for disaster. We have called these protocols and process Aboriginal Community Consultation Toolkit The first step in a long journey.

Non-adversarial

Non-adversarial approaches dealing with Aboriginal community involvement in research and community consultation activities should be considered an essential core business component of any government department’s Aboriginal research and community consultation development plans.

No automatic entry

Don’t expect to be automatically accepted into any Aboriginal community uninvited, to carry out research, you must earn this right by going through the correct protocols and cultural procedures. Failure to do so means failure of your project.

New methodologies

The old traditional research methodologies on data collection in Aboriginal communities are disappearing and being replaced with a whole array of “new” research methodologies, which strongly challenge traditional research methodological approaches. What was once coined as being Aboriginal research is today starting to be known as joint-ventures, partnerships and co-management.

Giving back

The time for “taking” is long gone and has now been replaced with the concept of “giving back”. The time of the researcher being the expert, is diminishing and being
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yarning</td>
<td>The new research principle that has influenced the development of our community consultation and has been a guiding light is yarning. Yarning does not embrace the traditional research data collection methodologies nor does it incorporate the “scientific language” associated with traditional research. It often means starting over, approaches must be flexible and adaptable, taking into account that information obtained during consultations may alter. The level and extent of the consultation may change as the process unfolds and new information comes to light. Yarning allows the cultural characteristic of not using direct questioning, to be objectively overcome. Aboriginal people tend to talk “around” the issue and not directly to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincere willingness</td>
<td>A sincere willingness by the Department of Human Services to communicate and work with Aboriginal communities on an equal footing, observing Aboriginal protocols, is the catalyst in building a working relationship that will ultimately have an enduring, positive effect on successful outcomes for both DOCS and the Aboriginal community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical principles</td>
<td>The ethical principles of social justice and respect for persons should be upheld in all community-based research. The primary message to researchers is: &quot;do no harm.&quot; It is equally important, that not only do you observe local protocol in gathering your data, but just as important to do the right thing by ensuring that the door is left open for the next lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor record</td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal researchers have a poor record of developing positive relationships with Aboriginal communities. There may be many specific reasons for this but it boils down to the lack of understanding that protocols exist within Aboriginal communities and that an honest effort must be made to observe them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners of local knowledge</td>
<td>In all cases requiring consultation, departments must act in good faith to provide meaningful consultation appropriate to the circumstances and in doing so must...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
acknowledge that the local elders and Aboriginal community members are the custodians and owners of the “local” knowledge, they are the experts in Aboriginal issues and their views must be accepted and respected.

**Closed minds**

In all its dealings with Aboriginal peoples, departments must act respectfully, honestly and with integrity taking into account its perception and historical relationship with the Aboriginal peoples in question. For many Aboriginal people as soon as the name DOCs is mentioned minds become closed and relationships broken before they even begin. Department of Human Services representatives need to fully comprehend the real fear that many Aboriginal people have of them.

**Meaningful conservation**

The seriousness of the potential impacts of a Department of Human Services-proposed action or decision and the implications for researchers wearing many hats.

**No big noting**

Protocol is the way to have a meaningful conversation. Researchers, who don't respect proper protocol and who go in “big noting themselves” fail in their efforts before they get to "the meat of the issue" because people are turned off. Likewise those who adopt a “wishy-washy” approach will also fail. Never give false hope, never give false promises, never promise false rewards. Do what you said you are going to do and do it properly.

**Get it right the first time**

It is very basic, but if people aren't even aware of it (protocol) and they try to accomplish things with Aboriginal people and they don't succeed, it is probably because they have botched the initial protocol.

**Respecting diversity, nationally, state and local level**

Aboriginal protocol is not difficult or complicated, it only requires common sense. Knowledge, understanding and observance, that it exists is the way to get to first base. But, there isn't just “one group of Aboriginal people in Australia”, there are many different language groups. Each has a different language, different environment, and different cultural characteristics. Begin with a basic understanding of protocol and then realise that there are protocols unique to different groups, not just on a national or state wide basis but also within the community.
No single model

There is no single model for how the Department of Human Services should conduct consultations with Aboriginal communities. The Department of Human Services must assess each situation on its own particular circumstances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Politics</th>
<th>COMMUNITY POLITICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time-consuming</td>
<td>It takes time to develop an experience with the people you want to talk to and develop a relationship with. This starts with respect for the ways of the community you are visiting. Watch, listen and learn about the different ways of groups. And, be &quot;real&quot;, don't be false; if you are, you'll be spotted a mile away. Relationships that are possible are deep and fundamental and a trusting and respectful partnership, a two-way street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be “real”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Brevity            | Don’t think you can “breeze” into a community get what data you require in the shortest time possible and “breeze” out again, this is a recipe for disaster and seen as being extremely disrespectful. You need to spend as much time, as it takes to gather your data in the “proper” way. |

| Flow on effect     | Obviously if it’s going to take more time, then the flow of effort is going to impact upon other components of the project, for example extra funding for travel. |
Some lessons learnt from research in Aboriginal communities: Simple concepts-Complex practices


- While it may appear to be a simple notion, the success of working with Indigenous communities depends on authentic acts of respect and practising effective relationships.
- Find out how each group likes to be referred to. For example in our project some groups preferred the use of the word “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous”.
- Time is a key element. One needs to allow enough time for all the following points but most of all to develop a relationship where you work with community members. They are the experts!
- Allow time for many visits. Be patient and wait to be welcomed to the community before starting whatever it is you have in mind.
- Allow time to create and develop relationships so you and the community members have similar understandings of what this is all about.
- A major part of the work one does should be about relationships and connections.
- Respect the expertise, knowledge and experience of every community member.
- Maintain a balanced relationship where power is not an issue.
- Listen first.
- Yarn with people to learn what it's like being them. Do not assess or evaluate what you are hearing. Listen and learn.
- Always give something back. For example from our project, give time or books for children, copies of photos they took with disposable cameras.
- Create events so there is an activity or opportunity for yarning. For example from our project, community BBQ, scrap-booking sessions.
- Listen and learn about what’s women’s and men’s business for each mob.
- Include all mobs in all that you do. Be very careful not to align yourself with one particular mob.
- 'fess up to any connections with DoCS or government departments. Get any discomfort about this out of the way as soon as possible and also be ready to revisit this along the way. If it is brought up it is because there are deep issues. Deal with the concerns.
- Be very clear about the purpose of the “project”. Explain short and medium term implications as well as sustainability of whatever you are doing. Do not make promises or even suggest outcomes that you cannot produce.
APPENDIX C - Information and Consent Forms

Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families - Project Information Sheet

Aims of Project: The Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families Research Project aims to provide evidence to drive decision-making in relation to the provision of quality children’s services and family support services which lead to policy planning for better child care options suited to the needs of Indigenous families in rural, remote and urban NSW. The NSW State Government is interested in providing care and support services appropriate for the needs of Indigenous children and families.

Who is involved? A research team from Charles Sturt University and Macquarie University that includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers has been asked to consult with Indigenous communities. They wish to document the experiences of 100 families in relation to experiences in the early childhood years including child care (in formal and informal care) and transition to school.

What are the benefits for Indigenous communities? The NSW Department of Community Services has funded the research. The needs and preferences of indigenous families will be heard by government. There is a real possibility of improved early childhood care and support services for Indigenous children based on recommendations of this project.

The project employs Indigenous research assistants to talk with the families, record information and write up the research in a way that communicates to both communities and government. Research assistants will be given training that will mean that they have research skills to conduct future projects in Indigenous communities.

Where and when will the project take place? Three broad areas will form the sites for the project: Far West NSW, Central West NSW and Sydney so that remote regional and city areas are part of the study. The project commenced from mid 2004 and will continue over the next 3 to 4 years.

What will it involve? Consultation within the communities will help identify the issues about the early childhood years for that community and also their preferred way of conveying their experiences and ideas to the research team. Consultations have already begun in Far West NSW and Sydney and will commence in Central West NSW at the end of 2005. We are seeking approval for this research project to take part in your community.

What would be expected of participants in this project?
- A member of the research team will visit your community on a number of occasions. They will arrange meeting with you at negotiated times and places to discuss further access to families who may participate in the research project and further outcomes of the research.
• **Data Collection and Shared Information:** The research team member will interview parents or other caregivers and ask them to record aspects of your experiences with their child/ren. Use of data gathered such as photographs, audio records of yarns (interviews), image-work, and or diarised accounts, of information gathered in the research project will be shared with your community, and individuals who consent to participating. Families participating in the project will be expected to meet with the researcher for ‘yarns’ for 1-2 hours per visit. Any other ways of recording experiences (such as photos) will be negotiated. We will come back and talk with participants about what we have written about their family.

• Please be assured that any information about families and children will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by members of the research team. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity participants will not be identified but referred to as families and children in the research project.

If you would like to know more about the project, please contact any of the research team:

**At Charles Sturt University-Dubbo**
Tracey Simpson 6885 7351 tsimpson@csu.edu.au
Senior Lecturer
Co Investigator

**Indigenous Research Assistant-Dubbo**
Sophia Pearce 6885 7353 spearce@csu.edu.au

**At Charles Sturt University-Bathurst**
Laurie Crawford 6338 4452 lcrawford@csu.edu.au
Jo-anne Reid 6338 4433 joreid@csu.edu.au

**At Macquarie University**
Jennifer Bowes 9850 9844 jennifer.bowes@mq.edu.au
Chief Investigator
Ros Kitson 9850 8093 ros.kitson@psy.mq.edu.au

**Indigenous Research Assistant-Sydney**
Michelle Doolan 9850 9810 Michelle.Doolan@aces.mq.edu.au
Chantelle Davis 9850 9810 Chantelle.Davis@aces.mq.edu.au
I have heard or read and understand the information about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families.

As the Chairperson of the ____________________________________________,
I am happy to support the project being undertaken in this community.

I have been given a copy of this form and an information sheet about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families to keep.

Name:______________________________________________

(block letters)

Signature:____________________________________________

Date:                                 _______/_________/_____________

Researcher's Name:___________________________________

Researcher's Signature:________________________________

Date:                             _______/_________/________________
Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families - Research Project
Consent Form – Research Team copy

I have heard or read and understand the information about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families.

As the Chairperson of the ____________________________,
I am happy to support the project being undertaken in this community.

I have been given a copy of this form and an information sheet about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families to keep.

Name: ____________________________________________  
(block letters)

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: __________/________/________

Researcher’s Name: ____________________________________

Researcher’s Signature: ________________________________

Date: __________/________/________
Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families  
PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET FOR FAMILIES

Aims of Project: The project aims to provide evidence to drive decision-making about the provision of quality children’s services and family support services in NSW. The intended outcomes of the research are more effective policy planning for child care options suited to the needs of Indigenous families in rural, remote and urban NSW. The NSW State Government is interested in providing care and support services appropriate for the needs of Indigenous children and families.

Who is involved? A research team from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University that includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers has been asked to consult with Indigenous communities. They wish to document the experiences of 100 families in relation to experiences in the early childhood years including child care (formal and informal care) and transition to school.

What are the benefits for Indigenous communities?

The NSW Department of Community Services has funded the research, which will inform the government of the needs and preferences of Indigenous families. There is a real possibility of improved early childhood care and support services for Indigenous children based on recommendations from this project.

The project employs Indigenous research assistants to talk with families, record information and write up the research in a way that communicates to both communities and government. Research assistants will be given training that will mean that they have research skills to conduct future projects in Indigenous communities.

Where and when will the project take place?

Three broad areas will form the sites for them project: Far West NSW, Central West NSW and Sydney so that remote, regional and city areas are part of the study. The project commenced from mid 2004 and will continue over the next 3 to 4 years.

What will it involve?

Consultation within the communities will help identify the issues about the early childhood years for that community and also their preferred way of conveying their experiences and ideas to the research team. Consultations have already begun in Far West NSW and will commence in Central West NSW and Sydney in 2005.

How can you assist us in making this project work so that we can help give Indigenous communities a voice in policy decisions about child care?

By taking part in the project, you can let the State Government know about:

- Your ideas on children’s and family’s services in Indigenous communities
- Your family’s experiences of children’s services
- Your ideas about improving children’s growth and development
What will be expected of you as a participant in this project?

- A member of the research team will visit your community on a number of occasions. They will arrange meetings with you at negotiated times and places to discuss issues about child care and transition to school.

- The research team member will interview you and record aspects of your experiences with your child/ren on two occasions. We will ask you about your willingness to have audio records of yarn (interviews).

- You may also wish to contribute your ideas by taking photographs (disposable camera supplied), by keeping a diary of your child’s care experiences or by artwork. Any images and quotes from yarning may be used in the project reports or in presentations about the project.

- Families participating in the project will arrange to meet with the researcher for two ‘yarning’ sessions that could last up to three hours per visit. We are happy to talk to any family member who may be with you at the yarning sessions. We will check what we write about your family with you, including the use of any direct quotes, before it goes into any reports. If any school age children are present, we would like to ask them about their experiences starting school.

- Please be assured that any information about families and children will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the offices of the investigating researchers either at Macquarie University, Sydney or Charles Sturt University, Dubbo. Only accessible by members of the research team. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity participants, will not be identified but referred to as families or children in the research project.

- A summary of the information gathered in the research project will be shared with your community and with individuals who consent to participate. No reference will be made to specific places or participants. We will also be writing a report for the State Government on the issues you have raised.

- You are free to withdraw from further participation in the research project at any time without having to give reason and without consequences. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Tracey Simpson, (CSU Dubbo) on 02 68 857 531 or Laurie Crawford, (CSU Bathurst) on 02 63 384 452 or Jennifer Bowes, (Macquarie University) on 02 9850 9844.

NOTE: This study has been approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (tel: 02 9850 7854) or email ethics@mq.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcomes.
Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families
Research Project

Consent Form – Researcher’s Copy

I have read (or have had read to me) and understand the information about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families.

I agree to participate in the research project and know that I can withdraw from participating from the research project at any time.

I have been given a copy of this form and an information sheet about the research project Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families to keep.

Participant’s Name: ________________________________
Participant’s Signature: ________________________________
Date: ______/_____/_______

I agree to allow my child or children to talk to the researcher about child care or school as long as my child agrees to do this.

Participant’s Name: ________________________________
Participant’s Signature: ________________________________
Date: ______/_____/_______

I agree to any photos, artwork or other images collected from my family as part of the research project being reproduced in reports or presentations about the project.

Participant’s Name: ________________________________
Participant’s Signature: ________________________________
Date: ______/_____/_______

Researcher’s Name: ________________________________
Researcher’s Signature: ________________________________
Date: ______/_____/_______
APPENDIX D - Yarning Sessions Protocols

Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families

YARNING SESSION CHECKLIST (Session 1)

1. □ Project information/consent form distributed and signed

2. □ Permission to record the yarning session

3. □ Family details (Family Details Sheet completed)

4. □ Introduction given:

“In this project we’d like to hear about what different families do as far as child care goes for their young children, how happy families have been with child care services and how children get on when they start school. I’d like to talk to you about who looks after your children before they go to school this time and then come back another time to talk about starting school. Is that OK with you?”

5. □ To begin the yarning:

“I’d like to have a yarn with you about all the different people who help look after (child’s name) during the week. Is there a regular pattern each week?”

   If yes, “Who is involved each week?”

   If no, “Who are all the people who are involved in looking after (child’s name)?”

For each person/service named, ask the questions on the Child Care Arrangements Sheet.
6. □ Asked about response to regulated services

If the child has been to Family Day Care, Long Day Care or Preschool, ask “Were you happy with (service name)?” “What would you like to see improved in the service?”

If no experience of regulated services, ask “Did you think about sending (child’s name to (name of service)?” If yes, “What made you decide against it?” If no, “What was it that stopped you using that service?” and “What would have needed to be different for you to send (child’s name) to that service”?

7. □ Discussed 2nd visit, set a date for 2nd visit, and given own contact number

What will happen in second visit:

i. Check our understanding of session 1
ii. Ask about children starting school
iii. Talk about disposable cameras and willingness to take photos of who looks after child.

Set a date for return of camera in stamped, self-addressed envelope (2 weeks away)

iv. Discuss how photos might be used (in reports, presentations of project) plus photos will be in public domain

8. □ Permission given to reproduce photos, artwork or other forms of media in reports or project presentations

9. □ Thanks given

“Thank you so much for your time today and for all the information you have given us about your family’s experiences of caring for your children. I look forward to coming back to see you and talking some more.”
YARNING SESSION CHECKLIST (Session 2)

1. ☐ Permission for researcher to take a photo during Session 2

2. ☐ Permission to record the yarning session

3. ☐ Yarning session summary from Session 1 shown and approved with any amendments noted

3. ☐ Prompt questions asked about any areas omitted in Session 1 (see Topic Checklist)

4. ☐ Discussion of starting school

"Tell me about any of your children who have started school".

“What are some of the things that (child’s name) learned from home and other family, friends and children in the years before school? What is he/she especially good at?”

“How did they find school when they first started”? 

“Of all their experiences before they started school what experiences do you think helped prepare them for school?”

“Looking back, is there anything you would have liked to do to help (child’s name) adjust to school when he/she first started?”

5. ☐ Discussion about photos from disposable camera
   If camera given in Session 1, thanks for return of camera and give set of photos to family

6. ☐ Permission given to reproduce photos taken in Session 2 in reports or project presentations

7. ☐ Thanks

"Thank you so much for your time today and for all the information you have given us I look forward to coming back to see you and talking some more."
About the yarning session (Session 2)

Date of Session 2 ________________

Interviewer ________________

Place of yarning session_______________

Names of people present at the yarning session and their relationship to the child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First name</th>
<th>Relationship to child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About school

- Why did you start child at school when you did?

- What school does he/she attend?

- Why did you send child to that school?

- Have you been into the school since he/she started? For what reason (e.g., parent-teacher interviews)?

- Did the school have a program for new children starting at the school?

- How did he/she settle into school at the beginning?

- Did he/she learn about their language/culture at school?

- What do you think helped your child when they started school?

- What else do you think would have helped your child’s adjustment to school? (at school or at home)
APPENDIX E - Research Presentations on Project

Articles in refereed journals

Published abstracts of conference papers

Conference presentations
Pearce, S. (2009, December). *Yarning Circles: A different way to doing research.* The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family and Community Strengths Conference, Newcastle.


Invited seminars and presentations


Simpson, T., & Smith, M. (2009, March). Yarning tells us what it’s like for Aboriginal Families bringing up little kids: Reflections from the Indigenous Child Care Choices project. Keynote address, Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Project conference, Blacktown.


**Thesis**

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we yarnd and worked with Aboriginal families to gain greater knowledge and understanding of what is needed for improved present experiences and futures for Aboriginal children and families.