Australian Government

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Closing the gap
clearinghouse

Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education

Resource sheet no. 32 produced by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

Daryl Higgins and Sam Morley

July 2014

Summary

What we know

- Engaging parents in their children's education improves the children's educational attainment and ongoing engagement in education.
- A family's level of 'social capital' and socio-economic position affects how they engage with their children's school.
- Risk factors associated with poor parental engagement include:
  - family problems such as poverty, poor parental education, unemployment and poor job prospects
  - parental problems such as poor physical health, substance misuse or family violence
  - community and socio-economic problems such as racial prejudice, poor housing or study facilities at home, and fewer models of educational success in a formal school environment.
- The values fostered by schools are not always consistent with the values that are important to Indigenous children, their parents and their communities.
- These risk factors are present in many Indigenous families and communities, so Indigenous parents need more resources to overcome barriers to engaging with their children's education.

What works

Examples of programs that directly or indirectly support Indigenous parents' involvement in their children's education include: Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program, FAST™, the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters, Indigenous Parent Factor, Let's Start, Play and Learn, and Parents/Families as First Teachers, Parents and Learning, Reading Discovery, and the Yachad Accelerated Learning Project.

Successful programs tend to include the following principles in their design:

- they create a school environment that is culturally welcoming and inviting for Indigenous parents
- they empower parents to support their children's learning
- they actively include parents in the children's programs
- they provide opportunities for parents to meet with and support each other
- they involve the community and coordinate with relevant partner agencies.

What doesn't work

In the literature reviewed for this paper, no evaluations of programs designed to improve parental engagement were found to be ineffective.

What we don't know

There are few evaluations of programs that have been designed specifically to enhance Indigenous parents' engagement in their children's education.

Many evaluations point only to short-term outcomes, therefore it is not known whether improving parental engagement leads to sustained improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people.

Introduction

There is a considerable body of research documenting the poor student and school performance for Indigenous students (Hughes & Hughes 2012). Engaging families, especially parents, in the education of their young children at home and at school is increasingly viewed as an important way to support better learning outcomes for children (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Emerson et al. 2012). This resource sheet reviews the available literature on 'what works' in supporting the involvement of Indigenous parents in their children's education. In their review, Emerson et al. (2012:3) reported that 'positive parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity'.

This resource sheet identifies some of the key practices that have underpinned programs or practices for schools and early learning environments that have successfully engaged Indigenous parents with their children's education. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse has 3 publications that examine related themes:

- *Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes* (Harrison et al. 2012)
- *Parenting in the early years: effectiveness of parenting support programs for Indigenous families* (Mildon & Polimeni 2012)
- *Review of early childhood parenting, education and health intervention programs for Indigenous children and families in Australia* (Bowes & Grace 2014).

Background

There is merit in directing resources to home and parental influences on children's education because they predict student motivation and engagement (Mansour & Martin 2009). Berthelsen and Walker (2008) reported that positive parental involvement in their children's schooling, beyond the potential benefits for their children, also improved the parents' social and cultural capital.

Despite this, little is known about the specific ways in which parents socialise their children in positive school-related behaviors or on the various parental beliefs that influence children's school-related development (Berthelsen & Walker 2008). The two most important parental factors influencing children's educational motivation and engagement are:

- home resources for students, for example, access to computers, books, study space
- the nature and quality of parenting style regarding education at home (Mansour & Martin 2009).

Mansour and Martin (2009:122) also warned that 'the fact that home resources were key … suggests the role of socio-economic factors in school outcomes and points to the ongoing need for attention to access and equity efforts to assist disadvantaged students'.

Parental involvement is strongly influenced by:

- socio-economic status and level of educational attainment (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Mansour & Martin 2009; Walker & Berthelsen 2010)
- ethnic or cultural backgrounds that are different to the school (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Mansour & Martin 2009)
- parents' previous negative experiences and beliefs of school (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Muller 2012)
- different expectations and interpretations of what it means to be educationally helpful, ranging from being 'partners' with the child and school to being 'invisible' and not engaged with the school (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Chenhall et al. 2011)
- parents' sense of self-efficacy to help their children succeed at school (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Walker & Berthelsen 2010).

Risk factors associated with poor parental engagement include:

- family problems such as poverty, poor parental education, unemployment and poor job prospects
- parental problems such as poor physical health, substance misuse or family violence
- community and socio-economic problems such as racial prejudice, poor housing or study facilities at home, fewer models of educational success in a formal school environment (McInerney et al. 1998).

The large gap in school attendance, retention and academic achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is well documented (Chenhall et al. 2011; Purdie & Buckley 2010). However, there appears to be little research on the way Indigenous parents influence their children's education or how best to direct strategies to engage Indigenous parents. Parenting factors play important roles: poor parenting, apathy at home, poor parental encouragement and understanding of the value of school are significant causal factors in Indigenous children's low school success (McInerney 1989). Indigenous parents interviewed by Lea et al. (2011) did not seem to realise that, to overcome any class disadvantage inherent within education, they needed to be active and 'interfere' with the school system (for example, advocate and negotiate on behalf of their children) to achieve positive outcomes. The difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents is 'as much, if not more, defined by social class and affluence as by culture' (Chenhall et al. 2011:14).

In contrast, based on a study of 3 Northern Territory schools with a high number of Indigenous students and parents, Chenhall et al. (2011:11) argued that the issues of 'invisible' parents was an exaggerated problem. They found that many engagement approaches often assume that the invisibility of Indigenous parents is associated with an aversion to school institutions and a naiveté of the importance of schooling. However, they stated 'non-visibility does not equate with lack of interest or lack of participation in schooling' and found that those that were least visible were not necessarily marginalised from school, but had faith the school was in control of the education and depended on school to 'get the job done', rendering forthright engagement unnecessary.

Chenhall et al. (2011) also warned against Indigenous parental engagement strategies being based on a cultural deficit model. This involves an 'ideal' parental standard that is based on a Western middle-class parental archetype, which invalidates different forms of involvement from across ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, reinforces the marginalisation of already marginalised parents, and fails to promote higher standards for these students. Walker and Berthelsen (2010) also argued schools are biased to represent and to promote more middle-class values, and this places many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds at a disadvantage.

In their study of some Northern Territory schools, Chenhall et al. (2011) and Lea et al. (2011) highlighted that the labour of getting their children to school is difficult given other priorities such as cultural obligations, demands of multiple authorities, funerals and ceremonial commitments, and ensuring food and shelter. Indigenous parents and families have complex competing social worlds that make prioritising schooling difficult. Chenhall et al. (2011) also found that rather than being 'engaged' to attend school-organised events, parents needed assistance with more foundational issues like:

- techniques to coax greater outcomes from the education system on behalf of their children

- information and skills in how to handle and manage children who are in their care

- support in how to deal with loss of authority and absenteeism.

As a result, Chenhall et al. (2011:19) recommended that schools not underestimate the different dimensions of Indigenous parental engagement and that they 'not necessarily do more, but that they focus their current activities with a more precise set of outcomes in mind', such as supporting and encouraging parental responsibility and involvement in all their children's education.

Many of the factors associated with poorer academic achievement of Indigenous students relate to parents and their socio-economic background (see McInerney et al. 1998). The presence of multiple risk factors is likely to manifest in 'a lack of parental encouragement and appropriate support for children to continue schooling' (McInerney et al. 1998:622). Another important factor to consider is whether there is a lack of consistency between the values fostered by schools and what is important within the broader sociocultural context for Indigenous children. McInerney et al. (1998) compared motivational beliefs about school success between Indigenous, immigrant-background and Anglo-background Australian students from both urban and rural areas of New South Wales. Overall, they concluded that the perceptions of school success held by Indigenous, immigrant-born and Anglo-Australian students were largely similar. They found that across all groups, 'mastery orientation' (intrinsic motivation to understand and do well) was the predominant factor in students' understanding of school success (though they note that Indigenous students did not agree as strongly as the other two groups). Again, irrespective of cultural background, performance goal orientation (that is, winning against others) and social goals were not predominant factors.

Australian data on parental educational engagement

Engagement with schools tends to be associated with the family's level of social capital. MacLaren (2011) analysed data from a representative longitudinal national survey of Australian children's experiences and found that:

- The frequency with which mothers helped their 6–7-year-old children with homework was related to their socioeconomic position (for example, levels of education, wealth, occupation, residence). Mothers from the middle 50% of families were most likely to help on a daily basis (72%), followed by those in the highest 25% (70%), with those in the lowest 25% socio-economic position the least likely (68%). Similar patterns were observed for assistance from other family members (measured when children were aged 8–9).

- Parental involvement in class activities, helping with homework, expectations of future educational achievements, parents reading to children, and the number of books in the home were (in general) positively related to such factors as:
  - family socio-economic position (middle and high compared with low)
  - family type (2-parent families compared with single-parent-headed families)
  - level of parental education (whether or not they completed year 12)
  - maternal age at birth of child (younger than 25, compared with 25 and over).

- As well as finding a strong correlation between socio-economic status and degree of parental involvement, Zedan (2011) also found that a larger number of children in the family was also negatively related to parental involvement.

- Although the data were not disaggregated by Indigenous status, Indigenous families tend to experience higher levels of disadvantage, and Indigenous children are at greater risk of growing up in families that are disadvantaged in terms of the family educational environment.

Data from *Footprints in time: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children—report from Wave 4* confirms the relationship between children's 'educational and economic resources' (which includes parental factors) and children's educational capacity and attainment:

> Children who had better access to a wide range of educational and economic resources had higher WAI scores [The Who Am I (WAI) score is one indicator of a child's readiness for school]. Children whose primary carer received education or training beyond year 10 scored an average of 1.0 point ($p<0.05$) higher on the WAI than other children. Children in more advantaged areas had higher average scores than children living elsewhere. Younger cohort children who had no children's books in the house (1.5% of the sample) had average scores of 10.2, while children with one to five children's books (15.0% of the sample) had average scores of 12.1 and those with more than 50 children's books in the house (32.2%) had average scores of 14.1. Similarly, school-aged children who used a computer at home or at school scored an average of 14.5, whereas those who did not scored an average of 12.6. (FaHCSIA 2013:9)

In recognition that parents and families play a major role in children's academic achievements, the former Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) developed a framework to guide schools and families in creating what they called 'family–school partnerships' (DEEWR 2008). See <http://www.familyschool.org.au>.

What does parental engagement mean?

It is a complex task to define what is meant by parental engagement or involvement (Emerson et al. 2012). There is a difference between merely involving parents in school activities and engaging parents in their children's learning (Emerson et al. 2012): engagement is a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities; it is continuous from birth to young adulthood; and it occurs across multiple settings where children learn (Weiss et al. 2010). Berthelsen and Walker (2008:35) defined it broadly as 'parental behavior with, or on behalf of children, at home or at school, as well as the expectations that parents hold for children's future education'. It is shown in actions such as:

- home discussion and supervision
- school communication and participation
- school choice
- involvement in school governance
- involvement in teaching and learning
- communication with the school (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Walker & Berthelsen 2010).

Engagement obviously exists on a continuum. It can be the most basic support families provide (for example, ensuring children are rested, breakfasted, and arrive on time to school on each school day), as well as active participation and support in their children's educational endeavors at school and promoting a learning environment at home. Parental engagement in parent–school partnerships generally describes two types of relationships with the school:

- parents participating at the school (attending events, volunteering, talking to teachers)
- parents taking a role as educators after school hours (Chenhall et al. 2011).

However, Chenhall et al. (2011:20) warned that 'despite the vast and growing quantity of literature about the importance of parental engagement in schools, there is little evidence to support the notion that it automatically yields positive academic outcomes'. The literature emphasises school–parent engagement, but this might ignore the most significant relationship of the parent: that of supporting the child's education outside school (Chenhall et al. 2011). Parental engagement also includes activities that include advocating or negotiating on behalf of children with the school and an ongoing involvement to extract opportunities (Lea et al. 2011). For engagement in the Indigenous context, it is important for the school to establish a dialogue within the whole community rather than developing relationships with the parents (Emerson et al. 2012).

Research also shows that a parent's 'academic socialisation' is also important to a child's educational outcomes. Academic socialisation refers to deliberate parental behaviours that seek to increase a child's enjoyment of and belief in learning, including discussing learning strategies, linking schoolwork to current events, and fostering and planning for educational aspirations (Emerson et al. 2012).

Determining what is considered 'success' for a program aimed at improving Indigenous parental engagement is also problematic. Several studies could not clearly identify the intended outcome of some parental engagement programs, and they found that policies that exhort engagement have unclear objectives (Chenhall et al. 2011; Lea et al. 2011). One benefit of this lack of clarity regarding the specific outcome of 'engagement' is that it allows schools to adapt programs to their local community (Lea et al. 2011). Some of the competing, though rarely specified, outcomes that are assumed to result because of engagement programs include:

- improved academic outcomes and attendance
- empowered parents who can be engaged in school and make demands of the school on their child's behalf
- general connections that are important in themselves to a child's education.

Others have suggested that the focus on parental engagement is misdirected and places too much pressure on schools to rectify a major social issue through parental engagement (Chenhall et al. 2011).

Despite these complexities, this resource sheet examines the available literature to determine key practices that have appeared to improve parental involvement and other parent-related behaviours that can influence the educational outcomes of Indigenous children.

Policy context

Community-driven programs for parents and carers of Indigenous young people are supported by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet through the Parental and Community Engagement Program (PaCE). PaCE is a funding initiative designed to support programs and activities that:

> assist families and communities to 'reach-in' to schools and other educational settings to engage in their children's education through participation in educational decision making, developing partnerships with education providers and supporting and reinforcing their children's learning at home, with the aim of improving the educational outcomes of their children (DEEWR 2013:116).

According to the Department of Education website, the PaCE funding stream has not been evaluated.

Source: <http://education.gov.au/parental-and-community-engagement-programme-pace>.

Evaluations of programs to support Indigenous parents' engagement in their children's education

There are many programs that follow a similar program logic, of improving parents' engagement with schools and their children's education to produce better outcomes for children (see Guenther 2011; Muller 2009). Some are general programs (for example, AusParenting in Schools; see Giallo et al. 2008), but this resource sheet is focused on evaluations of programs that have been developed or adapted specifically for Indigenous parents and families.

According to Guenther (2011), there is good evidence for the efficacy of some national and international programs that target the important role of parents and other family members as children's first educators. The rest of this section discusses evidence-based Australian programs that target Indigenous parents (see Table 1). They have been grouped according to various developmental stages: from the early years and preschool through to school-aged children.

Table 1: Evidence-based programs to improve Indigenous parental engagement

Program	Description/aim	Target age group	Further information and evidence of effectiveness
Parents and Learning	An early childhood parent-engagement program based on HIPPY	0–3	Flückiger et al. (2012) Parents and Learning (2014) <http://parentsandlearning.com/our-program/research/>
Play and Learn	Build capacity of parents and carers through home visits by physiotherapists and occupational therapists	0–3	Guenther & Arnott (2009, in Guenther 2011)
Parents/Families as First Teachers	Early childhood parent education and family support program to enhance readiness for preschool learning	0–3	Guenther (2011) <http://www.faft.net.au> <http://www.parentsasfirstteachers.org.uk/> <http://www.parentingrc.org.au/index.php/sharing-knowledge/program-evaluation-and-implementation-research/families-as-first-teachers-data-synthesis>
Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program	A group-work program for parents to strengthen their capacity to engage in education services and parenting skills	0–5	Cargo & Warner (2013) See Case Study 3
The Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)	A combined home and centre-based early childhood enrichment program that uses home tutors to support parents in their role as their child's first teacher; targets communities that experience various forms of social disadvantage	3–5	See Case Study 2 Dean & Leung (2010) Liddell et al. (2011)
Reading Discovery	To model shared reading to parents in marginalised communities	Preschool	Wexler (2009) Stagnitti & Jennings (2009) <https://apps.aifs.gov.au/cfcaregister/projects/1163>
Let's Start: Exploring Together Indigenous Preschool Program	Engaging Indigenous children and families in a therapeutic early intervention group program	Preschool	A Northern Territory adaption of the Melbourne-based Exploring Together Preschool Program Robinson et al. 2009 <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/profiles/itg_lets_start.html>
FAST™	After-school program to strengthen family functioning and children's resilience, based on family therapy principles	Primary school age	See Case Study 7 Guenther (2011)
Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF)	Improve understanding among Indigenous parents of the ways their children learn	School age	Muller (2009) Australian Parents Council (2011) See Case Study 1
Yachad Accelerated Learning Project (YALP)	Tutors, classroom teachers, and parents and caregivers work together to share ideas and resources to improve student outcomes	Prep–Year 10	<http://www.yalp.org.au> School of Education, Deakin University (2011)

Supporting Indigenous parents' engagement in their children's education—key practices

The practices that have been shown to be either critical to a program's perceived success or a necessary requirement for future programs are:

- creating a school environment that values and welcomes parents
- empowering parents to support their children's learning
- actively including parents within programs directed at children
- parents supporting other parents
- involving the community and coordinating with relevant agencies.

These practices are briefly outlined below.

Emerson et al. (2012) also identified five key strategies that feature in many of these practices:

- parent teacher meetings
- use of internet and new media
- community liaison officers
- homework centres
- ongoing work to support learning.

Emerson et al. went on to say that schools should include not only parents, but the broader community in discussions and actions related to education and learning.

Creating a school environment that values and welcomes parents

The literature supports efforts by schools to reach out and involve parents who are not engaged with the school because of language or cultural barriers (Muller 2009). Several studies highlighted that schools play a strong role in influencing the level and nature of parental involvement and that practices aimed at increasing involvement are important (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; DEEWR 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). In particular, DEEWR's (2011b) case study of 15 secondary-schools' parental engagement practices concluded that schools need a culture that values and supports parental engagement and that the school needs to welcome all parents, especially if they are not comfortable with the school environment. Strong school leadership and capacity building for staff is critical. Staff need to understand parents and the local community and be more inclusive of parents, and reach out to them through personal contact (DEEWR 2008).

Supporting this, Muller (2012) advocated for an approach that included outreach, making immediate and personal contact, providing an Indigenous presence in the school, improving front office culture, and providing a communal venue for Indigenous parents.

Berthelsen and Walker (2008:36) reported that the 'critical factors include teachers' beliefs about parents' role in the classroom and their responsibility to provide involvement opportunities to parents'.

They identified 3 important opportunities to invite parents into the classroom through:

- school culture and events
- teachers (which builds individual trust)
- the children themselves.

Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Berthelsen and Walker found that the most likely form of school involvement reported by parents was talking to parents of other school children at school (92%), visiting the child's class (87%), followed by attending a school event, contacting the teacher, and, least of all, volunteering in class or helping with an excursion (48%). However, they concluded that although frequency of contact can foster good relationships between schools and parents, it's the quality of contact that matters most (Berthelsen & Walker 2008). In particular, the research suggested that many of the parents who are not well engaged in their child's education come from social and cultural backgrounds that differ from the Anglo middle-class norm: schools and teachers must be aware of these cultural and social differences. Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggested school requests for involvement are never framed 'neutrally' and presuppose a certain cultural and social background. Berthelsen and Walker argued that strengthening and expanding the involvement of parents is an important avenue for schools to reduce educational inequalities for children:

> Schools must ask what they can do to make parents feel more confident and comfortable with involvement and to provide activities and resources that parents need to feel empowered. (Berthelsen & Walker 2008:41).

DEEWR (2011b) included 2 school case studies that examined effective ways of improving Indigenous parental engagement. The information collected from each school was gleaned through interviews with principals and others in the school community. It included information about student demographics, examples of parental engagement strategies, critical success factors and the role of school leadership and partnerships. These case studies are outlined later in this resource sheet.

The work of the Manyallaluk Homeland School (Katherine, Northern Territory) is a good example of how a local community has been engaged to improve educational awareness (see Case Study 5). Emerson et al. (2012) provide examples of how schools can create positive environments for Indigenous parents, such as having an open door policy, valuing interactions with parents, and ensuring that parents feel welcomed in a culturally appropriate way. Clearly, local community engagement and consultation is necessary for this to occur. For other practical suggestions of how to improve parents' school-related communication with their children, see O'Meara (2010).

Empowering parents to support their children's learning

Supporting parents in their role as their child's first teacher is a primary goal of many programs developed for, adapted for, or implemented with Indigenous families.

Several studies indicated that an important practice was taking steps to provide parents with the skills and knowledge to feel more confident to assist their children with learning and the school environment (DEEWR 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Lawler 2009). An indicator of the increased capacity among some parents to engage in and support learning is the frequency of parent contact with the school and teachers, which results in parents becoming partners in the learning process. Extending the idea of the empowerment of parents further, some schools provided the opportunity to continue their own education in the school environment.

Actively including parents within programs directed at children

One of the key messages from evaluations of programs identified in Table 1 is the strategy of actively including parents in the program activities. Although not explicitly a parental engagement program, the motor and sensory development program for at-risk young children demonstrated the importance of parents seeing first-hand the activities their children are engaging in, and hearing the explanation from teachers or program therapists as to the rationale for the particular activities (Priest 2006). See also Case Study 6.

Parents supporting other parents

Many of the programs that have been evaluated point to the importance of parents being able to meet together, share experiences, and support each other as they learn to better engage with their children's learning (for example, DEEWR 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Priest 2006).

Involving community and coordinating with relevant agencies

A number of researchers have hypothesised that differences in the educational attainment of Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous students is a function of not only parental expectations, but broader community expectations about educational success and its importance. To be effective, programs need to be cognisant of this, and include strategies to address parents' and communities' expectations. Programs also need to recognise the genuine feelings of hopelessness that have resulted from the parents' own past negative educational experiences.

Although it was not a strong theme in all evaluations, several identified the need for schools to develop engagement strategies beyond just working with parents. The whole community needs to be included in any dialogue about the value of education and strategies to enhance and support the early learning environments of Indigenous children. Given the significant risk factors that many Indigenous families and communities face, agencies wanting to work with parents need to be able to partner with other relevant services in the local community, particularly services that address parental problems such as substance misuse, violence, and other issues.

Gaps in evidence

The following topics have been identified as needing further research.

- differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents in the specific ways they socialise their children into school-related behaviours
- which elements of Indigenous parental engagement strategies are more effective than others
- whether the timing of parental engagement matters: whether it is more cost-effective to address parental engagement in preschool learning for all Indigenous students, or target at-risk families
- whether improving parental engagement leads to sustained improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people, as many evaluations identify short-term outcomes only (for example, see Muller 2009)
- what the benefits of parental engagement are for the parents themselves.

Case studies

The seven case studies presented below describe programs that support Indigenous parents' involvement in their children's education.

Case Study 1: Indigenous Parent Factor

Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF) has been conducted by the Australian Parents Council since 2004. The IPF was developed for use with Indigenous families and educators in remote, rural and urban Indigenous communities. It consists of a 3-day workshop aimed at engaging Indigenous parents and carers and helping them with the skills to support early learning in pre-school and the early years of schooling. Among its objectives, the IPF aims to

build interest and confidence among Indigenous parents about their child's early learning experiences, how to partner with schools, and to encourage a pattern of adult learning in Indigenous communities.

The IPF has been evaluated twice, with the following findings:

- participants have viewed the workshops as positive learning experiences
- participants have gained confidence that they could assist their children's learning at home and talk to teachers about their child's learning
- the IPF was considered effective in that it increased parent knowledge of and participation in education, and improved their link with schools and other services
- the IPF was considered appropriate as it was designed with Indigenous people and used a culturally appropriate presentation style
- the IPF was efficient as it over-performed on its delivery targets.

Source: Australian Parents Council (2011).

Case Study 2: The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) program is a combined home and centre-based early childhood enrichment program that supports parents in their role as their child's first teacher. The program was implemented in five sites with a high population of Indigenous participants. The HIPPY program has been described in detail in several Closing the Gap Clearinghouse publications (CtGC 2013; Harrison et al. 2012; Bowes & Grace 2014).

Results of evaluations showed that HIPPY parents:

- were significantly less angry or hostile in their parenting style
- did significantly more in-home and out-of-home activities with their child
- reported their children liked being read to for longer periods of time in any one sitting
- were more involved in their child's learning and development and had greater contact with the school, according to teachers.

Key learnings relevant to engaging Indigenous parents included:

- recruiting and enrolling Indigenous parents takes time
- maintaining engagement with Indigenous parents and children requires flexible modes of delivery
- attracting and retaining engagement with Indigenous parents, home tutors and coordinators requires extra resources and support
- the program appeared to be most successful where the local community was closely involved in the ownership and lead up to the commencement
- although there are positive results, they cannot necessarily be generalisable to other communities with different characteristics
- there is a general lack of knowledge of the appropriateness and acceptability of HIPPY with Indigenous communities, particularly in regional or relatively remote locations; however, the program holds significant promise as an appropriate and acceptable program with Indigenous Australians.

Source: Liddell et al. (2011).

Case Study 3: Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program

The Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program was a 2-stage group-based program aimed at enhancing the school readiness of Indigenous children aged 0–5 years, by strengthening their parents' capacity to engage in education services as well as their skills to parent. The program was designed and facilitated by a local Indigenous woman and engaged 31 parents and carers of Indigenous children. It was funded by the former DEEWR, and implemented by the Young Women's Christian Association of Adelaide. The program used the following strategies in the group-based work:

- talking in a group
- facilitators educating parents on their obligations and responsibilities in their children's education
- educating parents on how the education system operates and what resources and supports are available for Indigenous children
- educating on the elements of culturally safe schools and quality learning environments
- role playing interpersonal communication supported by storytelling
- ongoing feedback for parents taking steps to engage with the education system
- mentoring.

An evaluation of the program found the outcome of parental educational engagement was expressed differently depending on the circumstances of parents and children. Participants felt:

- competent to ask questions and communicate concerns
- they understood the education system and the parental role in child's education
- less intimidated.

Source: Cargo & Warner (2013).

Case Study 4: Bradshaw Primary School's Irrkerlantye Unit

Bradshaw Primary School is in Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The school's Irrkerlantye Unit has about about 65 Indigenous students enrolled. It offers alternative education mainly for children of the Arrernte people by, among other things, allowing for intergenerational learning in which students work with family members. The Unit uses a variety of strategies to engage parents including:

- visiting families and parents after school
- employing a student support officer—among other things, the staff member continued to build relationships with the families, listened to parent's issues, accompanied students to school on the bus and supported parents during the day with personal and community obligations (for example, appointments with health care agencies)
- hosting family days—parents share a meal and attend their children's classes to see a showcase of the students learning, reinforce expectations, and explore barriers to learning
- hosting arts shows for students and families
- 'learning the Aboriginal way'—this includes families visiting their homelands to learn about culture and language.

The school stated that the results of the Unit's parental engagement strategies have been:

- progress in improving a once distrustful relationship with some parents
- parents are happier to engage with the school and their children's learning (the principal estimated that 90% of parents are engaging with the Unit about their children's learning)
- student attendance has improved from approximately from 55% to more than 80%.

Some of the challenges the school experienced in engaging parents include: the high mobility of the local Indigenous population made it difficult for staff to keep regular contact with parents; the need for some parents to access literacy programs to be able to help their children; and the pressure to find additional funding to maintain programs additional to the school's core work.

Source: DEEWR (2011b).

Case Study 5: Manyallaluk Homeland School

Manyallaluk Homeland School in Katherine, Northern Territory, is a small school in an Indigenous homeland community about 100 kilometres from Katherine. Opened in 2006 after successful community lobbying, the school has about 20 students. As a result of significant parent lobbying to build the school, there is a strong sense of ownership over the school. Some of the key strategies that the school uses to continue to engage parents include:

- providing genuine opportunities for the Indigenous community to have a central role in decision-making— this has been facilitated through an advisory group of parents and community members, which acts as a link between the principal and the wider community
- giving parents the opportunity to re-engage with their own education through night school provided by the teacher-principal
- employing Indigenous teaching staff
- engaging the broader community: examples include opening the school library for community use and the principal being available for parents to support their personal needs (such as giving them help to fill in forms and translate documents)
- implementing a culturally appropriate school reporting system, which uses visual rather than written reports, to help parents better understand their children's progress.

Some of the acknowledged success factors of the program include:

- the principal's respect for the community's ownership and determination to have the school highly value education
- the principal's ability to build strong relationships with the community
- a parent group being placed at the head of the school's decisions making process
- the high quality teaching environment the school provides.

Source: DEEWR (2011b:32).

Case study 6: Motor Magic: addressing motor and sensory development

Motor Magic is an example of how to include parents in approaches to supporting the development and educational needs of young children.

The aim of the program is to improve the health and wellbeing of preschool-aged children who have, or who are at risk of having, fine motor and sensory processing difficulties in an early childhood education setting (that is, preschool or kindergarten). In a small-scale, qualitative evaluation, Priest (2006) reported the program goals, objectives, and strategies, which focused equally on the children, the parents, and the kindergarten staff. The strategies used with parents to increase their skills and capacity to support the development of their children include:

- holding morning teas for parents to discuss with each other their children's needs
- encouraging parents to actively participate in the weekly program

- encouraging parents to have individual discussions with the occupational therapists running the program
- referring parents to other agencies to have their own needs addressed.

Positive outcomes for children from the program included improvements in willingness to participate in new activities, peer-relationships, school-readiness, and behaviour. In the evaluation, Priest (2006) identified the following elements relating parental engagement to be part of the reason for the positive outcomes:

- parents providing external praise and encouragement to their children
- parents seeing first-hand and joining in the group therapy sessions, which lead to parents providing greater levels of support at home, and children feeling they have their parents' attention and are valued
- parents being given a clear rationale for the particular activities.

Source: Priest (2006).

Case study 7: FAST™ Families and Schools Together

Families and Schools Together (FAST™) is a set of preventive and early intervention after-school programs for families of 'at-risk' primary-school-aged students. According to the FAST™ Northern Territory website, the aim of the program is to:

- connect parents and children to their schools and communities
- promote community service and voluntary participation
- guide parents in building personal success in their kids
- build skills and change attitudes through experiential learning
- preserve precious classroom time through school-focused, extracurricular parental involvement
- assure that capable parents and caregivers remain the primary agents of protection for their children.

According to Guenther (2011), FAST™ aims to prevent children from experiencing school failure by:

- improving children's behaviour and performance in school
- empowering parents in their role as partners in the educational process
- increasing the children's and family's feelings of affiliation toward their school.

These results are from the mixed-methods evaluation of the pilot program at Shepherdson College.

Guenther (2011) outlined a clear program logic model for FAST™ that identifies how families are the target of intervention, and how parent and family-level changes are necessary for increasing students' educational outcomes (see Figure 2 in Guenther 2011). Results included:

- improvements in parental capacity
- parents feeling connected and supported in their role
- improvements in children's behavior (at school and at home), including listening to others and showing respect
- some anecdotal evidence of improvements in attendance (although there is no statistically significant difference).

The program was supported by strong interagency coordination between the school and the health clinic.

Source: Guenther (2011); <http:\\www.fastnt.org.au>.

Conclusion

Parental engagement is a critical factor associated with children's positive educational attainment, but it is positively associated with socio-economic position. The considerable disadvantages and lower social capital of many Indigenous families and communities means children often don't experience the same benefits as non-Indigenous children in terms of engagement by their parents and family members in their education. However, there is a range of evaluated programs that have been demonstrated to improve Indigenous parents' engagement.

Within these programs, essential components seem to be:

- including parents directly in programs
- modelling the kinds of educational supports that parents can develop at home
- addressing barriers to parental involvement (such as referring parents to services to address problems such as substance misuse; addressing social isolation; engaging parents in further education and training)
- creating new family norms that prioritise the involvement of Indigenous parents in their children's education.

Appendix

Table A1 contains a list of Closing the Gap Clearinghouse issues papers and resource sheets related to this resource sheet.

To view the publications, visit <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Table A1: Related Clearinghouse resource sheets and issues papers

Title	Year	Author(s)
Review of early childhood parenting, education and health intervention programs for Indigenous children and families in Australia	2014	Bowes J & Grace R
Improving the early life outcomes of Indigenous children: implementing early childhood development at the local level	2013	Wise S
Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes	2012	Harrison L J, Goldfeld S, Metcalfe E & Moore T
Engaging Indigenous students through school-based health education	2012	McCuaig L & Nelson A
Parenting in the early years: effectiveness of parenting support programs for Indigenous families	2012	Mildon & Polimeni
Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school	2011	Sims M
Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students	2011	Helme S & Lamb S
Teacher and school leader quality and sustainability	2011	Mulford B
School readiness: what does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities?	2010	Dockett S, Perry B & Kearney E
School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students	2010	Purdie N & Buckley S
Pathways for Indigenous school leavers to undertake training or gain employment	2010	Hunter BH

References

Australian Parents Council 2011. The Indigenous Parent Factor: successful early learning at home and school. Launceston: Australian Parents Council. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.ipf.edu.au/about-ipf>.

Berthelsen D & Walker S 2008. Parents' involvement in their children's education. Family Matters 79:34–41. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2008/fm79/bw.pdf>.

Boon HJ 2008. Family, motivational and behavioural links to Indigenous Australian adolescents' achievement. In: Jeffrey P (ed.). Proceedings of AARE 2007 International Educational Research Conference. Research Impacts: Proving or Improving? Fremantle, Western Australia, 25–29 November 2007. Canberra: Australian Association for Research in Education. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/2048/>.

Bowes J & Grace R 2014. Review of early childhood parenting, education and health intervention programs for Indigenous children and families in Australia. Issues paper no. 8. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. AIHW cat. no. IHW 116. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Sudies. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Cargo M & Warner L 2013. "Realist evaluation" in action: a worked example of the Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Viewed 14 March 2014, <https://www2.aifs.gov.au/cfca/knowledgecircle/discussions/service-capacity/"realist-evaluation"-action-worked-example>.

Chenhall R, Holmes C, Lea T, Senior K & Wegner A 2011. Parent–school engagement: exploring the concept of 'invisible' Indigenous parents in three North Australian school communities. Darwin: Charles Darwin University. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.academia.edu/2212325/Parent-school_engagement_Exploring_the_concept_of_invisible_Indigenous_parents_in_three_north_Australian_communities_Darwin_The_Northern_Institute_Charles_Darwin_University>.

CtGC (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse) 2013. What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage: key learnings and gaps in the evidence 2011–12. AIHW cat. no. IHW 107. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Sudies. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Dean S & Leung C 2010. Nine years of early intervention research: the effectiveness of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in Australia. Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin 42(1):14–18. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au/file/1975/I/Nine_Year_of_Early_Intervention_Research:_Effectiveness_of_HIPPY_in_Australia.pdf>.

DEEWR (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) 2008. Family–School Partnerships Framework: a guide for schools and families. Canberra: DEEWR. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.familyschool.org.au/index.php/s/family-school-partnerships/>.

DEEWR 2011a. 'Learning from their stories': school case studies in parental engagement: findings and themes. Canberra: DEEWR. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%204_Learning%20from%20their%20stories_Case%20Study%20Finding%20and%20Common%20themes_FINAL.pdf>.

DEEWR 2011b. 'Telling their stories': school case studies in parental engagement: case studies. Canberra: DEEWR. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%203_Telling%20their%20Stories%20-%20Case%20Studies%20Full%20Version_FINAL.pdf>.

DEEWR 2011c. 'Telling their stories' and 'Learning from their stories': school case studies in parental engagement: executive summary. Canberra: DEEWR. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%202_School%20Case%20Studies_Executive%20summary_FINAL.pdf>.

DEEWR 2013. Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000: program guidelines 2009 to 2013. Canberra: DEEWR. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://education.gov.au/parental-and-community-engagement-programme-pace>.

DET (Department of Education and Training, Western Australia) 2005. Walk right in: you can make a difference. Perth: Department of Education and Training. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/detcms/aboriginal-education/aboriginal-education/docs/walkrightin.en?oid=com.arsdigita.cms.contenttypes.FileStorageItem-id-11252695>.

Emerson L, Fear J, Fox S & Sanders E 2012. Parental engagement in learning and schooling: lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family–School and Community Partnerships Bureau. Canberra: Family–School and Community Partnerships Bureau. Viewed 3 May 2014, <http://www.familyschool.org.au/index.php/what-we-do/research/original-bureau-research/parental-engagement-learning-and-schooling-lessons-research/>.

FaHCSIA (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) 2013. Footprints in time: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children—report from Wave 4. Canberra: FaHCSIA. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/publications-articles/families-children/footprints-in-time-the-longitudinal-study-of-indigenous-children-lsic/key-summary-report-from-wave-4>.

Flückiger B, Diamond P & Jones W 2012. Yarning space: leading literacy learning through family–school partnerships. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood Education 37(3):53–9. Viewed 3 May 2014, <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/australian_journal_of_early_childhood/ajec_index_abstracts/yarning-space-leading-literacy-learning-through-family-school-partnerships.html>.

Giallo R, Treyvaud K, Kienhuis M & Matthews J 2008. AusParenting in Schools: a parenting information and support strategy for primary schools. Developing Practice: The Child, Youth and Family Work Journal 21:43–52. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=206372510678854;res=IELHSS>.

Guenther J 2011. Evaluation of FAST Galiwin'ku program. Ulverstone, Tasmania: Cat Conatus. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.fastnt.org.au/documents/File/Galiwinku_FAST_evaluation_report.pdf>.

Harrison LJ, Goldfeld S, Metcalfe E & Moore T 2012. Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes. Resource sheet no. 15. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. AIHW cat. no. IHW 76. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Sudies. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Hughes H & Hughes M 2012. Indigenous education 2012. CIS policy monograph 129. Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies. Viewed 16 March 2014, <http://www.cis.org.au/images/stories/policy-monographs/pm-129.pdf>.

Lareau A & Weininger EB 2003. Cultural capital in educational research: a critical assessment. Theory and Society 32(5–6):567–606. doi:10.1023/B:RYSO.0000004951.04408.b0.

Lawler L 2009. Closing the gap through secondary school education. In: Gregory G (ed.). Proceedings of the 10th National Rural Health Conference, Cairns, Queensland, 17–20 May. Canberra: National Rural Health Alliance. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://nrha.ruralhealth.org.au/10thNRHC/10thnrhc.ruralhealth.org.au/papers/docs/Lawler_Louise_A6.pdf>.

Lea T, Thompson H, McRae-Williams E & Wegner A 2011. Policy fuzz and fuzzy logic: researching contemporary Indigenous education and parent-school engagement in North Australia. Journal of Education Policy 26(3):321–39. doi:10.1080/02680939.2010.509813.

Liddell M, Barnett T, Roost FD & McEachran J 2011. Investing in our future: an evaluation of the national rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY). Final report to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, August 2011. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au/file/2377/I/Investing_in_our_Future,_National_Evaluation_2011.pdf>.

MacLaren S 2011. Chapter 7: Family education environment. In: Australian Institute of Family Studies. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children annual statistical report 2010. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, pp. 71–9. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au/pubs/asr/2010/asr2010g.html>.

Mansour M & Martin AJ 2009. Home, parents, and achievement motivation: a study of key home and parental factors that predict student motivation and engagement. Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist 26(2):111–26. doi:10.1375/aedp.26.2.111.

McInerney DM 1989. Urban Aboriginal parents' views on education: a comparative analysis. Journal of Intercultural Studies 10(2):43–65. doi:10.1080/07256868.1989.9963353.

McInerney DM, Hinkley J, Dowson M & Van Etten S 1998. Aboriginal, Anglo and immigrant Australian students' motivational beliefs about personal academic success: are there cultural differences? Journal of Educational Psychology 90(4):621–9. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.90.4.621.

Mildon R & Polimeni M 2012. Parenting in the early years: effectiveness of parenting support programs for Indigenous families. Resource sheet no. 16. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. AIHW cat. no. IHW 77. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Muller D 2009. Parental engagement: social and economic effects. Report prepared for the Australian Parents Council. Launceston: Australian Parents Council. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://austparents.edu.au/2014/wp-content/uploads/Muller_Australian-Parents-Council_Parental-Engagement_Social-and-Economic-Effects_Final_20091.pdf>.

Muller D 2012. Parents as partners in Indigenous children's learning. Report by Denis Muller & Associates for the Family–School and Community Partnerships Bureau. Canberra: Family–School and Community Partnerships Bureau. Viewed at 3 May 2014, <http://www.familyschool.org.au/index.php/what-we-do/research/original-bureau-research/parents-partners-indigenous-childrens-learning/>.

O'Meara J 2010. The what, why and how of family engagement. Professional Voice 8(2):31–7. Viewed 3 May 2014, <http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/541159.html>.

Parents and Learning 2014. Engaging families in education. Weipa, Queensland: Parents and Learning. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://parentsandlearning.com>.

Priest N 2006. 'Motor Magic': evaluation of a community capacity-building approach to supporting the development of preschool children. Australian Occupational Therapy Journal 53(3):220–32. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1630.2006.00546.x.

Purdie N & Buckley S 2010. School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students. Issues paper no 1. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. AIHW cat. no. IHW 33. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Robinson G, Zubrick SR, Silburn S, Tyler W, Jones Y, D'Aprano A et al. 2009. Let's Start: Exploring Together: an early intervention program for Northern Territory children and families. Final evaluation report. Darwin: Charles Darwin University. Viewed 3 May 2014, <http://www.lowitja.org.au/let's-start-exploring-together-early-intervention-program-nt-children-and-families>.

School of Education, Deakin University 2011. Evaluation of Yachad Accelerated Learning Project: final report. Melbourne: Deakin University. Viewed 14 March 2014, <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/vlns/deakinreportyalp.pdf>.

Stagnitti K & Jennings C 2009. Chapter 2.8: The Reading Discovery Program: increasing social inclusion of marginalised families. In: Taket A, Crisp BR, Nevill A, Lamaro G, Graham M & Barter-Godfrey S (eds). Theorising social exclusion. London: Routledge.

Walker S & Berthelsen D 2010. Chapter 13: Social inequalities and parent involvement in children's education in the early years of school. In: Green V & Cherrington S (eds). Delving into diversity: an international exploration of issues of diversity in education. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 139–49. Viewed 4 May 2014, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/29735/>.

Weiss HB, Lopez ME & Rosenberg H 2010. Beyond random acts: family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Family Research Project. Viewed 8 April 2014, <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/beyond-random-acts-family-school-and-community-engagement-as-an-integral-part-of-education-reform>.

Wexler J 2009. An evaluation of the Reading Discovery Program. Prepared for Community Connections (Victoria) Ltd. Warrnambool, Victoria: Community Connections (Victoria) Ltd.

Zedan R 2011. Parent involvement according to education level, socio-economic situation, and number of family members. Journal of Educational Enquiry 11(1):13–28. Viewed 1 May 2014, <http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/EDEQ/article/view/636>.

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

DEEWR   Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

IPF   Indigenous Parent Factor

HIPPY   Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters

PaCE   Parental and Community Engagement Program

WAI   Who Am I

Terminology

Indigenous: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people. This term includes 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'Torres Strait Islander people'.

Funding

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse is a Council of Australian Governments initiative jointly funded by all Australian Governments. It is being delivered by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Suggested citation

Copyright