

Celebrating the language competence and rich language environments of young Indigenous children

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The acquisition of speech, language, and literacy is a key aspect of children's development to enable participation in social and educational environments. While much is known about the speech and language acquisition and competence of non Indigenous children, less is known about Indigenous children's speech and language (Westby & Inglebret, 2012).

Aim

To describe the speech and language competence and language learning environments of a large, geographically diverse sample of Indigenous Australian children aged 3 to 7 years.

Method

Participants were 692 3- to 5-year-old children in wave 1 and 570 5- to 7-year-old children in wave 3 from the child cohort of Footprints in Time: Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. The children lived in 11 different sites across Australia. The largest tribal groups/clans were: Wiradjuri, Arrernte, Yorta Yorta, and Gamilaraay. Information was provided by the parent who knew each child the best (FaHCSIA, 2009, 2012).

Results

The children spoke between one and eight languages including

- ❖ English (wave 1: 91.2%, wave 3: 99.6%)
- ❖ Indigenous languages (wave 1: 24.4%, wave 3: 26.8%)
- ❖ Creoles (wave 1: 11.5%, wave 3: 13.7%)
- ❖ Foreign languages (wave 1: 2.0%, wave 3: 5.1%)
- ❖ Sign languages (wave 1: 0.6%, wave 3: 0.4%).

Of children who spoke an Indigenous language (present in both waves)

- ❖ 63.5% spoke an Indigenous language at both waves 1 and 3
- ❖ 12.1% only spoke an Indigenous language at wave 1
- ❖ 4.3% only spoke an Indigenous language at wave 3

Language learning environment

- ❖ The children undertook a wide range of indoor and outdoor activities with family members during the week prior to data collection. Each of these activities was undertaken in an Indigenous language by some of the children (e.g., while swimming, 10.1% of children spoke an Indigenous language) (see Table 1).
- ❖ The children's language environments were rich, with many family members and friends telling oral stories, reading books, and listening to the children read (Table 2).

Key findings

- ❖ Children who spoke an Indigenous language were more likely to live in moderate to extreme isolation; whereas children who spoke English, or a foreign or sign language lived in less-isolated places.
- ❖ Almost a third of families wanted to pass on their cultural language, and many indicated that they would like their child to learn an Indigenous language at school.
- ❖ Indigenous Australian children have rich cultural and linguistic traditions and their speech and language competence is promoted through family, community, and educational experiences.

| TABLE 1 | Percentage of children from wave 1 (n = 692) | Activity in an Indigenous language |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| Played outdoors | 94.9% | 6.2% |
| Played indoors with toys or games | 93.4% | 5.9% |
| Played music, sang, danced, other | 91.0% | 7.8% |
| Shopping | 89.5% | 5.3% |
| Drew pictures, art, or craft activities | 81.9% | 5.5% |
| Housework/cooking | 78.5% | 5.0% |
| Went to playground | 74.9% | 5.2% |
| Swimming | 50.3% | 10.1% |
| Played computer, Xbox, Playstation | 48.3% | 4.2% |

| TABLE 2 | Told an oral story to the child | | Read a book to the child | | Listened to child read |
|----------------|---------------------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------|------------------------|
| | Wave 1 | Wave 3 | Wave 1 | Wave 3 | Wave 3 |
| Overall | 72.0% | 70.4% | 79.0% | 80.7% | 83.5% |
| Mother | 54.3% | 45.1% | 64.3% | 59.8% | 72.1% |
| Father | 23.7% | 20.9% | 21.2% | 19.6% | 27.2% |
| Sister | 11.4% | 7.2% | 17.8% | 12.5% | 14.6% |
| Brother | 9.5% | 4.7% | 10.7% | 4.0% | 8.1% |
| Grand mother | 15.8% | 11.6% | 9.7% | 7.9% | 11.8% |
| Grand father | 5.4% | 4.7% | 2.9% | 1.8% | 3.2% |
| Aunt | 7.5% | 5.8% | 7.7% | 4.2% | 6.3% |
| Uncle | 2.7% | 1.8% | 1.0% | 1.1% | 2.1% |
| Cousin | 5.9% | 1.1% | 5.6% | 0.9% | 2.6% |
| Friend | 1.6% | 0.7% | 1.9% | 0.5% | 1.6% |
| Teacher/ carer | - | 3.7% | - | 7.2% | 4.2% |
| Other | 0.7% | 0.5% | 1.9% | 0.5% | 0.4% |

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