Early childhood education and care experiences pave the way for future outcomes. However, accessing early childhood services does not come easily for everyone. For example we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely to access early childhood education than non-indigenous Australians. This can be a factor in poorer academic, social and wellbeing outcomes later in life.

In cases where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child attends a mainstream service it is important for the service to recognise and cater for cultural differences and practices. Programs that are culturally inclusive, building upon linguistic and conceptual skills for Aboriginal children can help to give them the best start in life. Education and care programs that are specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been recognised as important, particularly in areas where there is a high Indigenous population.
The New South Wales (NSW) state government recognises that this is an important area and has identified early childhood education strategies as part of the Close the Gap campaign. Close the Gap aims to eliminate the disparity between life outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

The early years sees the greatest growth and development for an individual. During these early years children build the foundations for their cognitive, physical, emotional and language development. Connecting children to their heritage during these first years can help them develop these foundations.

Research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents look for a sense of connectedness and understanding when choosing a preschool for their child. Many services are already actively creating supportive environments for children and families from diverse cultures. However it is worthwhile considering what can be done to further promote the inclusion of these families.

**Aboriginal Programs in NSW Government Preschools**

The NSW Government has implemented several strategies over the past few years with an aim of increasing the participation of Aboriginal children and families in targeted preschools.

These projects aim to:

- improve the confidence of families and children when engaging with education
- strengthen the relationships between communities, families and schools
- increase the understanding that staff have of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and develop better responses to the communities needs
- and increase participation.

**Building Stronger Connections**

The Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014 aims to ensure all four year old Aboriginal children in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (2013). Based on this target, the Building Stronger Connections (BSC) project aimed to increase access by Aboriginal children to NSW Government preschools through enhanced engagement of Aboriginal families and communities.

The project objectives were to develop culturally appropriate resources and strategies and to encourage parents and caregivers to participate in the education of their children with the goal of building stronger connections between preschools and the Aboriginal community.

During 2009, 22 schools across NSW participated in the early childhood BSC project. Windale Public School preschool, in Newcastle, was one of the preschools to participate in the project. When Windale preschool opened in 2005 it had an Aboriginal population of 15%, which has since increased to 34%.

Windale Public School joined the BSC project in order to increase the number of Aboriginal children attending the preschool. The importance of early childhood education is reinforced to parents through the school through Milabah, the Schools as Community Centre located in the grounds of the school; through connections with Awabakal Preschool; the Birra-ii Birthing Unit; and Awabakal Aboriginal Medical Service.

The preschool has worked in many ways to engage Aboriginal families. With funding from the BSC project the preschool implemented a ‘Read Aloud At Home’ program. Families and carers were involved in selecting culturally appropriate books for the children. Initially they were invited into the preschool to help their children paint book bags. They continue to be involved through the exchange of books and are encouraged to read regularly to their children.

One parent who was involved in the program now works in the preschool and she reflected on this journey, “I helped out in the preschool as a volunteer parent and last year as part of the Building Stronger Connections project I was employed to assist in the preschool for Reconciliation, NAIDOC, and ATSI children’s days. This year I have been employed too in the preschool as an ACEO (Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer). I am being trained by a speech pathologist to assist the children, parents and teachers with Language and Speech development of children.”
Another parent who was involved in the project related their experience, “Both my children and fiancée identify as Indigenous and the Building Stronger Connections program has been a very powerful tool when we talk to our children about their heritage and history... I think the program gives parents a great sense of pride in playing such an important role in their child’s education.”

**Kids Excel Program**

Kids Excel was introduced in 2004 under the New South Wales Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy. This strategy built on the work carried out through the NSW Government initiatives Families First and Better Futures and focused on improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities. The purpose of Kids Excel was to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people by focusing on 0-12 year olds.

The Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy aimed to develop more responsive and integrated service networks to support families and communities in bringing up healthy babies, children and young people. It emphasised better coordination and targeting of existing resources, ensuring mainstream services were meeting the needs of Aboriginal people and testing new ways of supporting communities.

As part of Kids Excel Phase 2, funding has been provided to four preschools across the Hunter and Central Coast to employ part-time ACEO.

The role of these additional support workers is to work in the preschool to support quality transition to school programs and create opportunities for Aboriginal parents to engage in their child’s learning.

Windale preschool has used the funding from this program to expand their ‘Read Aloud At Home’ project. This project is monitored by a parent and reading strategies to assist parents have been included in the bags.

The ACEO has been trained by a speech pathologist to assist teachers implement a speech and language program with a focus on vocabulary development, phonemic awareness and expressive and receptive language.

**Outcomes**

Following the conclusion of round one of the Building Stronger Connections project a state wide evaluation was undertaken. It was found that the project led to increased enrolments in 16 out of 22 participating schools, with enrolments of Aboriginal children in the 22 services state wide increasing from 16% to 24.6%.

This project identified that the most critical aspects of ensuring enrolment of Aboriginal children and successful transition to school are:

- Building strong and respectful relationships between parents, the broader Aboriginal community and the preschool and school.
- The development and implementation of culturally appropriate strategies for engaging children and their families including the employment of an Aboriginal person to work in the preschool.
**Something to think about.....**

What can you do to increase enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in your service? The evaluation of the Building Stronger Connections project identified a range of creative, practical strategies being implemented, these included:

- the employment and involvement of Aboriginal Australians
- promoting a sense of Aboriginal identity within the preschool
- promoting the preschool and raising its profile in the Aboriginal community
- developing a sense of sharing and teamwork
- supporting Aboriginal parents to value the role of early childhood education for their children and their involvement with the service.

(NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2010)

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**Resources and References:**


