

MEDIA RELEASE

Call for strengths-based approach to school readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

4 October 2012: A new paper highlights the need for a strengths-based approach to school readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in order to recognise the skills, cultural knowledge and understandings they already have when they transition to formal learning.

The study, a joint project by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), reviews the literature and uses a strength-based analysis of information from Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) to examine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's abilities and knowledge at 4-6 years of age.

"There is a continual message of gaps, failures and 'lack'," said co-author of the paper, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Michele Lonsdale. "We need a more positive approach."

The authors believe that school readiness is as much about schools recognising the existing capabilities and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have when they arrive at school as it is about supporting children and families to become ready for formal learning.

The study confirms that family support, strong cultural identity, good health, positive self-identity and engaging in shared activities such as storytelling are likely to lead to resilience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Furthermore, responses of LSIC parents and carers show the critical importance of family and connections to land and culture in developing children who are resilient.

The authors make the point that resilience is critical for successful transitions from home to school, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who possess the resilience attributes of social competence, autonomy, mastery, optimism and problem-solving skills are better able to adapt and learn.

But while LSIC shows strong and rich interactions between children and their parents and carers, and shows the importance of cultural knowledge and identity in the development of resilience, the paper's authors note that these factors are not currently being reflected in testing and checklists used to measure children's wellbeing and school readiness.

The authors therefore call for the use of a strengths-based approach to support children as they make the transition from home to school. Among other things, such an approach would involve:

- Recognising and valuing the factors that contribute to building resilient young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, namely: shared activities, family support, strong cultural identity, health and positive self-identity.
- Developing appropriate assessments that reflect a strengths-based approach, in which children can experience success, show what they can do, learn from what they cannot yet do, grow in confidence and look forward to the next challenge that is presented.
- Developing resources and activities that reinforce and build upon the knowledge, understandings and skills that already exist in children.

"Some of the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children identified in the literature include being independent from an early age, having well-developed visual-spatial and motor skills, and having the capacity to self-judge and to take risks," said Dr Lonsdale.

The full report, *Starting school: A strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*, is available from www.acer.edu.au/documents/Starting_school_report_Oct_2012.pdf

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