



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Research in early childhood services in rural South Australia

Why Aboriginal people use early childhood education services, and why they don't

A research project conducted in three rural centres in South Australia explored reasons why Aboriginal people sent their children to preschool and why they didn't. A sample of 60 parents/carers were interviewed.

Why they do

Nearly all respondents cited educational reasons for sending children to preschool: it provides a good start to education — knowledge of routines, the stimulus of learning different things and about non-Aboriginal worlds, etc (75%); the children have an opportunity to mix with children who are not members of their family or extended family (33%); and they are happy and have fun there, and it increases their confidence (10%).

Personal relationships with staff and the climate of the centre were important factors. Familiarity with the staff and ease of communication were mentioned in more than 15% of the responses. Others mentioned the knowledge staff had of their children. Ten per cent commented on the welcoming and comfortable environment that centres provided.

Cultural factors were given as reasons by about 15% — 'It's an Aboriginal centre'; 'It has Aboriginal staff'; 'There is a high number of other Aboriginal children'; 'There are opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture'.

Nearly half mentioned that some form of child care was required because of work or other commitments. Other functional issues were mentioned such as: ease of access to transport or close at hand; the manageability of fees; and the existence of a lunch program.

Why they don't

One respondent didn't know about the early childhood education service. Several thought that the restrictions it might impose could well come later — 'Kids want to play not work'; 'Too many rules, too much structure'. Several parents wanted to maintain their supervisory role. Other reasons cited included the availability of additional family support or other children to play with. In a small number of cases, transport, the payment of fees or the need to access a range of (uncoordinated) services were problems.

But by far the largest incidence of reasons were cultural: little consideration given to Aboriginal culture; few other Aboriginal children attending; and, in one case, 'didn't want his/her children mixing with white kids'. Negative staff attitudes to Aboriginal people, coupled with consequent poor communication, were cited in about 10% of responses.