Towards an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan

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http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/indigenous/programs-towards_child_care_svs_plan.htm

A summary of the findings from consultations with Indigenous communities 2005-06

Introduction

In 2004, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (SNAICC), which is the Indigenous child care peak body, proposed the development of an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan (ICCSP) as a way of addressing the low take up of child care by Indigenous families.

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) commissioned consultations with Indigenous communities, families and service providers. The consultations took place between October 2005 and April 2006. Indigenous families and child care providers from all types of communities across Australia were invited tell their stories and to discuss their child care needs and preferences. These stories highlighted the diversity of Indigenous communities and their variety of needs in relation to child care.

The consultations brought forward a range of views about, and experiences with, child care. There were also many issues common across Australia. Some of the key messages from the consultations are listed below.

- Less formal early childhood services such as playgroups and crèches have played an important role in introducing families to more formalised child care services and pre-school, especially in rural and remote communities. In many cases they

have been a stepping stone to the establishment of permanent high quality child care services and employment opportunities for parents;
- Child care services can provide an excellent platform for the delivery of other programs, such as health screening, parenting support, nutrition programs, child abuse prevention and awareness activities and cultural activities;
- Child care plays an important role in promoting positive development and school readiness. Indigenous communities are increasing their awareness of the benefits of early childhood learning and quality child care services, however more needs to be done;
- The actual services provided need to be tailored to fit the specific needs of the community. Holistic service models are preferred as they can provide Indigenous families and children with a continuum of care promoting children's development and school readiness;
- Indigenous families and communities want mainstream services to be culturally inclusive, culturally safe, and available for their children;
- Flexibility is required in child care accreditation systems, licensing and regulations to recognise cultural differences and value Indigenous approaches to child rearing and family and kinship systems. There are different starting points across child care services in Indigenous communities and extra support and resources are required to assist services to meet compliance requirements;
- The availability of amenities and Indigenous child care workers is a key issue in meeting regulatory requirements for all types of child care services. However, it is acknowledged that it is preferable to at least have a service providing a culturally appropriate, safe and nurturing environment for children than to have no service at all; and
- Many existing Indigenous child care services require additional ongoing resources to ensure sustainability. Appropriate and sustained support for such services is essential.

Most apparent from the consultations was that the provision of child care works best for Indigenous families within a broader early childhood services setting. Services need to be tailored to fit the needs and the experiences of the community.

[top]

Why an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan?

The Australian Government, through FaCSIA, funds a number of programs, services and initiatives that are accessed by Indigenous families. Some of these are universal programs, while others are specifically targeted towards Indigenous families. One of the main findings of the consultations, which is supported by other research, is that community services for Indigenous families are most successful when the mode of service delivery is holistic. The level of disadvantage faced by many Indigenous families

means that Indigenous services generally have a broad focus and often need to address other issues in addition to the ones they are funded for. Therefore, the original focus of the consultations to look at the child care needs and preferences of Indigenous communities has been extended to encompass the range of early childhood services that are needed by these communities. For many Indigenous families and communities, the concept of child care is multifaceted and this has been taken into account in the development of the Indigenous Child Care Services Plan.

Early childhood research

The National Agenda for Early Childhood (National Agenda) is the Australian Government's broad policy framework to support the development of young children. It spells out the aim, goals, principles and priorities for evidence-based action at all levels. It responds to the latest evidence about the importance of the early years for a child's health, development and wellbeing, both now and over the life course, and for the social and economic functioning of society into the future.

The four key action areas are:

- healthy families with young children
- early learning and care
- supporting families and parenting
- creating child-friendly communities.

The National Agenda does not seek to be prescriptive or alter traditional areas of Australian Government and state and territory government responsibility in early childhood. Instead it proposes a holistic way of thinking about children at the centre of broader social and economic environments, and a general approach for working more efficiently and collaboratively towards achieving better child outcomes. There was widespread support for this approach during extensive consultations on the National Agenda held between March and August 2003.

Current programs and services

Indigenous children in Australia are cared for in a wide range of mainstream and Indigenous-specific services. The Australian Government funds a number of programs and services that are used by Indigenous families and children. Those with a strong child care component are listed below.

- The Child Care Support Program. This program funds a wide range of child care services, including Indigenous-focused services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outside school hours care, flexible and innovative services, and mobile child care services.

- Indigenous Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Child Care Crèches. These are flexible and innovative services that enable vulnerable groups of parents to participate in training and work activities in remote areas.
- Child Care Inclusion and Professional Support Program - Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs). IPSUs are designed to provide professional support, advice and training to eligible Indigenous-run child care services. They will also work with professional support providers and key child care stakeholders in their state or territory to help ensure that mainstream child care services offer quality care that is culturally inclusive and meets the needs of Indigenous children.
- Playgroups Program. While this program is not Indigenous-specific, it is targeted towards Indigenous children and families, particularly Supported and Intensive Support Playgroups.
- Australian Government payments such as Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR) are available to all eligible Australia families. Targeted payments are Special CCB, Grandparent CCB and the JET subsidy. In addition, Indigenous children are targeted under Priority of Access guidelines for Australian Government funded child care services.
- The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) funds a range of flexible and innovative initiatives for families and children, some of which are Indigenous-specific and most of which target Indigenous children and families. The two main initiatives, Communities for Children and Early Childhood - Invest to Grow, are focused on early childhood and development as well as prevention and early intervention.
- While formal preschool education is the responsibility of state and territory governments, the Australian Government also provides funding to support the participation of Indigenous children in pre-school education through the Parent School Partnerships Initiative.

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Background to the consultations

SNAICC originally raised the concept of an ICCSP in late 2002 through the Child Care Reference Group, an advisory body to the Federal Minister for Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Child Care Reference Group, representing all child care sectors, supported the concept. SNAICC was concerned about Indigenous children being seriously underrepresented in child care and as a consequence missing out on early learning and development opportunities available to other Australian children.

Following a select tender process, Edith Cowan University was engaged to undertake consultations with Indigenous communities. The consultations were conducted between October 2005 and April 2006 and they took place in one metropolitan and one rural/regional or remote area in each state and territory. The sites were chosen in

consultation with FaCSIA, state and territory governments and SNAICC. The consultations were with Indigenous service providers, communities and families. A questionnaire was also sent to relevant child care services.

The total number of those who took part in the consultations across the country was 478:

- 210 parents and grandparents attended the community consultation meetings
- 202 providers of Indigenous services also attended community consultation meetings - Indigenous and non-Indigenous child care workers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous child care centre coordinators, mainstream inclusion support workers, TAFE lecturers, family support workers, refuge support workers, non-government agency staff and other health related service providers
- six written submissions were received from organisations involved in the inclusion of Indigenous children in mainstream settings and local government agencies
- 66 Australian Government and State and Territory Government representatives.

The consultations took the form of focus group discussions with service providers and community members, community consultations with community members and some individual interviews with service providers.

Objectives

The objectives of the consultations were to:

- identify the child care needs and preferences of Indigenous families and children
- examine ways to incorporate culturally appropriate quality assurance in new and existing child care services
- explore pathways to better outcomes for Indigenous children
- identify ways to provide a transparent process for the funding of Indigenous child care services
- guide the development of new and existing child care services

[top]

Key themes from the consultations

A large number of people participated in the consultations and this document only provides a summary of these views. Those who participated represented a diverse cross-section of people from Indigenous communities across Australia.

The key messages from the consultations have been summarised into the following themes.

- Culturally strong programs
- Workforce issues
- Governance and management support
- Access
- Quality
- Licensing and regulation
- Funding
- Types of services

Culturally strong programs

One of the main messages to come out of the consultations is that child care has a much broader role within Indigenous communities and is much more than allowing parents to participate in the workforce, although this too was considered important. This role included:

- providing essential respite for parents who are not coping
- preventing child abuse and neglect
- facilitating links to health and other social support services
- providing support for the whole family
- providing cultural support for children whose families may not be able to provide it

In many Indigenous communities, child care is an essential service that meets the primary needs of children, such as food, basic hygiene and 'time out'. There was also an understanding and desire within Indigenous communities for access to child care that is of a high standard, promotes early learning and development, and prepares children for school.

In addition, Indigenous families noted the importance of having these services delivered in a 'culturally safe' environment. Care that is culturally safe is care that is non-judgemental and recognises and promotes Indigenous culture(s) in ways that make the child feel a sense of belonging and connection.

The following statement, from Sharijn King, Manager, Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Organisation, highlights the complexities involved in creating culturally strong child care services for Anangu and Yapa children in remote central Australian communities.

"…you learn about your culture, your values and beliefs from

everything you do and everything around you. For non-Aboriginal people, mainstream child care and schools reflect Kardiya [non-Aboriginal] culture. The books, TV, the way people dress, the way people talk to each other - all these things help to keep Kardiya culture strong. Yapa [the 'people' in Warlpiri] culture is reflected in how Yapa live and what they do and their responsibility and relationships. Yapa child care and schools need to be like Yapa camp and way of living if they are going to keep Yapa culture strong".

Early learning and development

Understanding of the role child care plays in children's early learning and development varied between and across communities. For many of the parents and service providers, early learning and development was seen to contribute to a resilient child who is comfortable in the transition to school. Parents stated that child care was an important place for children to develop basic skills for literacy and numeracy. Parents spoke about wanting their children to become literate, to be familiar with books and handling equipment such as scissors and paintbrushes, particularly when the children did not have access to these things at home. They also wanted their children to be familiar with the routine associated with getting up each day and going somewhere. Many of the parents made comparisons between their older children who had not attended child care and younger children who were currently attending child care. Many parents reported that the children who attended child care were more outgoing, less shy and better able to cope with school than older siblings who did not have this experience.

Recognising the benefits

In one remote community, when asked about the sort of things they learned at crèche, the mothers talked about the children learning to paint, to play with toys (there are no toys at home) and the importance of the outings with the crèche workers. These mothers also valued highly the teaching of manners and routines such as sleep and brushing of teeth. It was also important to these mothers that the children learned about bush food on their culture day when the Elders taught them about their country, gathering wild foods, and learning about bush medicines. Indeed the coordinator reported that the local preschool teacher had noticed an improvement in the school readiness of children who have been to crèche. Importantly, the crèche also provides one of the few employment opportunities for the local women who are "active people" and need things to keep them stimulated. On the day we visited 26 women who have worked in the crèche came to talk about how it benefits their lives and the lives of their children.

Views of child care

Many parents made reference to their own, unhappy early childhood and schooling

experiences. These views were often reinforced by experiences associated with attempting to use mainstream services. Many parents said they had approached services and felt judged and put off by the staff they met.

Often child care was only associated with employment or as a babysitting service. Some Indigenous parents were concerned they would be judged on their ability to raise their children, either by non-Indigenous families in mainstream centres or by non-Indigenous child care workers in either Indigenous-specific care centres or mainstream centres. In areas where child care services did exist, but families were not using them, the concept of 'shame' and ideas about personal and family responsibility were important barriers to the use of child care. Others spoke of being judged by other members of their own community, who believed they should be at home taking care of their own children. This was particularly the case in rural and remote locations, where priority of access to child care is given to those participating in the workforce or Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP). The parents who were not working believed they would be judged by other members of the community if they put their children into child care.

Service providers identified the benefits of child care for overstretched grandparents in many Indigenous communities. Due to high rates of family breakdown, incarceration, health problems and substance abuse, many grandparents are carrying the child care responsibility. Often not in good health themselves, those who attended the consultations expressed concern for the future of their grandchildren.

Cultural inclusiveness

The importance of culture in child care was a strong theme in the consultations. While food, art and music are important parts of what makes up culture, they are not the only aspect. Less visible aspects of culture, such as the ways in which a group views and interacts with the world, rules for behaviour, communication styles and local meaning systems, are more important although less tangible. Indigenous culture is also diverse across the country, and intersects with other factors, such as remoteness and levels of disadvantage. Whatever the culture specific to an Indigenous family, the ability of a child care service to recognise and incorporate cultural practice into the way the child and family is dealt with was identified as the most important aspect of child care for Indigenous children. The importance attached to culture by Indigenous families has particular implications for mainstream child care services that cater to Indigenous families.

Responses from the consultations illustrated the degree to which child care is about holistic services that address the primary needs of Indigenous communities and are often linked to other services, such as health and housing. For the families who took part in the consultations, cultural appropriateness encompassed a range of issues, including:

- family involvement - elders, fathers and the extended family of the children
- family and social support - child protection, managing fees, recognition of family commitments, a safe place in communities that are chaotic

- parent education - understanding the benefits of child care and early learning and development, improving the parenting skills of very young mothers, opportunities for parents to access education and training that leads to employment
- health and nutrition - children have access to healthy food, parents become aware of the impact of food on children's growth and development.

One parent stated that the inclusion of cultural artefacts in mainstream child care centres was an important part of creating a culturally inclusive environment, but should not just be a tokenistic gesture.

Indigenous families identified programs that were culturally strong as those that included Elders and had developed strategies to involve them in the daily activities of the centres. A major problem identified with involving Elders in child care centres was the requirement for police clearances or working with children checks for people accessing child care centres. The fact that some Indigenous people have some record of criminal activity has created a conflict between the need to ensure children's safety and the importance placed on involving Elders in child care centres.

The importance of language in identity formation and early learning for Indigenous children was also discussed. Bilingualism, which can include first language maintenance programs for children who speak community languages, early exposure to Standard English or community languages for those who speak English at home, was seen as a valuable asset. Several parents and grandparents in urban areas spoke of the pride they felt when the children came home and sang songs in language. They explained that through their children's songs they too were able to learn some of the language lost to them in their own childhoods. Nevertheless, many service providers spoke of the difficulty of finding language teachers, explaining that they are very much in demand. Other services used Elders from the community to provide language sessions with the children.

Workforce issues

The problems reported by Indigenous child care services and child care workers. Dissatisfaction with pay and conditions, high staff turnover and the cost of paying qualified workers seriously affected the operation of many centres, particularly in rural and remote areas. Some services were unable to expand while others had to close for periods of time due to lack of staff. It was also reported that family responsibilities conflicted with working hours. In addition to having children of their own, Indigenous child care workers often had responsibility for extended family members. In many communities, this responsibility has priority over other activities. Services reported that often there were no staff to take the place of those who had to take time off.

Increasing the skill levels of Indigenous child care workers was identified as important, however some service providers reported that when staff did become qualified they could no longer afford to pay them. Once they are qualified and experienced, child care workers

have skills that are transferable to other types of employment. Service providers reported that losing staff to better paid positions outside the child care sector was an ongoing problem. Services also reported that when staff increased their qualifications they were often promoted too soon and the levels of responsibility given to newly qualified staff was too onerous. In some communities, experienced child care centre directors were utilised by other organisations, leading to extra demands on their time and on the service.

There are only small numbers of Indigenous child care workers currently employed in mainstream child care services and this was identified as one of the main barriers to accessing mainstream child care. Indigenous staff who had been employed in mainstream centres were usually the only Indigenous person there and they reported feeling uncomfortable and isolated.

Training

While some services were able to provide professional development opportunities to their staff in the form of exchange visits and exposure to conferences and seminars, training opportunities for Indigenous child care workers was limited. Generally, Indigenous child care workers are not as highly qualified as non-Indigenous and many staff in rural and remote areas do not have any formal qualifications.

The consultations revealed many reasons for this. While there is high Indigenous participation in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector as a whole, it is mainly at Certificate levels I and II. In addition, Indigenous students often take longer to finish training and study. One child care worker in a remote service reported taking up to five years to achieve her Certificate II in child care. The ability of Indigenous child care workers to achieve Certificate III and above appears to be limited by the design of current training packages. Indigenous child care providers reported that training packages are primarily designed for mainstream services and reflect non-Indigenous culture and values. While there are Indigenous training providers, it is not always financially viable for them to operate in remote and in some rural areas. The types of flexibilities in training reported as needed include:

- flexible on-site delivery of training by Indigenous workers
- time and space to study at work because of chaotic home life
- recognition of prior Indigenous-specific experience
- access to formal training once in employment
- ongoing on-the-job support
- up-skilling of senior staff to act as mentors

When the opportunities exist, working as an untrained child care worker can lead to better opportunities for Indigenous women. However, the barriers can be personal as much as structural:

Never really understood the benefits of qualifications in the early years, this place has pushed me forward into wanting to know

more, so lucky to have…my little sister who pushes me forward - couple of years ago went back to school and did a lot of RPL with TAFE who came here and did a lot of assessment which was good as I feel inadequate - a lot of trained staff here were white and I always felt down because the whites were qualified and I wasn't in my Aboriginal organisation - always felt intimidated then decided I need to benefit me and the kids - became Aboriginal student of the year which was a good experience - don't think I would ever leave here, the pay is not great but I'm not concerned about that (Service provider).

The above example highlights the importance of having targeted training that is designed to suit Indigenous child care workers.

Governance and management support

Lack of management experience and low levels of literacy within the Indigenous population affects their ability to manage all types of Indigenous owned and managed services, including child care. The ability to manage services is also hampered by the small population size of many Indigenous communities in rural and remote areas, which are also spread out across large geographical areas at some distance from regional centres. Small, isolated communities have a smaller pool of workers to choose from.

Many of the well-run Indigenous-specific child care services started as playgroups or activity centres, which then grew in response to community demand and need. Some services were established as fully fledged services in communities with no previous experience of child care and a few of these struggled with the day to day running of the services and were not well attended. Lack of experience led to pressure being placed on staff and resulted in dissatisfaction at the community level. In other areas, however, there were a number of small services under pressure to expand in response to community demand but they did not have the funding, capital resources or knowledge of how to do so.

I still see a need for X [resource agency] to provide ongoing training. They understand child care and provide good governance training. This is a great help with the legal aspects of the Director's role in child care service delivery. There is always someone on the other end of the phone to help work through issues. They provide fantastic support (Service provider).

The support from the funding body is crucial. You need a project officer to support the service, these people need to move around and support organisations, but instead it's going backwards; people are stuck in their offices and not allowed to go out to organisations

(Community member).
The paperwork's scary and difficult without some administrative background - a coordinator spends 90 percent of her time justifying what she is doing to the funders - all with different due dates (Service provider).

Well run child care centres in Indigenous communities often act as a hub for other community activities. An example of this is the service director who took an active role in providing governance training and support to their management committees, providing employment for families using the service and support to young people entering the workforce for the first time. The demand for the skills of these directors, however, meant that some reported feeling overstretched and not having enough time and energy to put back into the child care centre.

Indigenous child care workers and services also have to deal with the complex social and economic problems experienced by many Indigenous families. They reported that child abuse and neglect was a particular problem, especially as many staff lacked experience dealing with these issues and had little support and training. Inexperienced staff also reported difficulties dealing with parents who did not pay their fees or their lack of understanding of licensing requirements, which led to the pressure of taking more children than licensing requirements permitted.

Access and availability

Parent perception of the cost of child care varied between regions, depending upon the type of care accessed and where the community was located. Parents generally reported that fees for Indigenous-specific services were a lot less than those for mainstream child care. Some Indigenous service providers stated that parents were asked only to make a contribution to the cost of food, while in another cases child care fees were covered by the community council through their membership. However, even token fee amounts, such as $20 per week, were reported as being a problem for many families. Another cost issue for Indigenous parents was the size of their families. Where there were a lot of children, even inexpensive care of $10 per day was a reported as being a problem for Indigenous families on low incomes.

There were also parents who were not aware of their entitlement to Child Care Benefit (CCB). This was either because they are not aware they were eligible or they were unable to access payments due to poor literacy skills. Many participants in the consultations were unaware of the availability of Grandparent CCB. In some remote areas, the issues of access to Centrelink and the associated paperwork were perceived to be a problem, although very few Indigenous families access CCB.

Non-payment of fees or an inability to pay fees after they had built up over a period of time was widely reported. The outcome of accumulated fees was usually that the family

left the child care centre. Some service providers reported that they had been verbally abused by parents and staff were threatened with violence when they attempted to collect fees. Service providers reported that the collection of fees in Indigenous communities was a sensitive matter and were proactive in developing ways in which to do it in a culturally acceptable and sensitive manner. These included:

- deduction from CDEP wages
- assisting parents with the Centrepay service
- allowing families to do voluntary work in the centre in lieu of fees
- payment of fees in advance
- providing positive reinforcement for bill payment
- having a culturally appropriate approach to the collection of fees

Availability was also an issue and the general view from the participants was that there are not enough child care places for those who need them. This was reported in most areas where the consultations took place. Availability of child care was also linked to other issues, such as staff shortages, particularly in remote areas.

Transport

The ability of Indigenous children to access child care on a day to day basis was reported as being hampered by the lack of availability of transport, particularly in outer metropolitan, rural and remote areas. Due to the circumstances of many Indigenous parents, access to private transport is not always available. Service providers in remote communities reported that funding for the services' own transport was an important way to get Indigenous children to the service on a regular basis.

Quality

Throughout the consultations, participants expressed a strong desire for Indigenous children to experience high quality child care. The Quality Assurance (QA) system, while seen as a daunting process to participate in, was also viewed by many Indigenous service providers as a measure of the quality of the service they were providing. For Indigenous-specific services, participating in the accreditation process meant that Indigenous-specific child care was as good quality, safe and as accountable as non-Indigenous child care services.

Very few service providers who attended the consultations were accredited, although some had gone through the process. Those who had, reported that the accreditation process was difficult due to a lack of experienced staff and the need for a high level of support throughout the process, particularly with the paperwork. Service providers suggested that alternative forms of monitoring, such as visual reports and site visits by coordinators, would be more appropriate for some Indigenous child care services. Validators who were not familiar with local cultural practices (whether the validator was Indigenous or non-Indigenous) were identified as a problem. Others felt the QA system was simply a bureaucratic process and one that did not reflect the values of the

community. For a QA system to be appropriate, it would need to take into account the fact that many Indigenous child care services provide much more than just child care and this also contributes to the quality of the service.

Licensing and regulation

Child care is regulated by state and territory governments and each jurisdiction has different licensing requirements. Children's services are required to meet legislative and regulatory requirements regarding safety standards, staff qualifications, child/staff ratios, health and safety requirements, and child development in order to obtain a license to operate. National standards have been developed for some types of child care, however, the extent of implementation of these standards varies across jurisdictions. In principle, licensing provides the basis for high quality care. The Australian Government's quality assurance systems are designed to build on and complement state and territory government licensing requirements.

Despite the diversity between jurisdictions regarding licensing requirements participants perceived a lack of flexibility. The licensing standard requirements were seen as creating a barrier to delivering child care because of cultural differences in the understanding of quality care, the shortage of qualified Indigenous child care staff, difficulties posed by kinship relationships and problems within communities. Many of those who participated in the consultations acknowledged the importance of licensing regulations, but expressed concern about their ability to meet these rules. In particular, they felt they did not receive adequate support and resources to comply with regulations and that the lack of flexibility meant there was little opportunity for services to use their discretion in the interpretation of licensing requirements.

Participants also identified issues with having to provide services in what was considered substandard accommodation because that was all that was available. Licensing under these circumstances was seen as contradictory.

> [Our] facilities [are] at the bottom of the scale, but the care [is] at the top end of the scale. If we were white, our facilities would not be acceptable, but sometimes it seems like we are expected to be grateful for what we got (Community consultation, metropolitan).

Some of the comments reflected a misunderstanding between regulations and individual centre policy. For example, one person stated that the requirement to bring a certain number of nappies was a problem for Indigenous parents, while another believed that new birth certificates needed to be obtained. In the first case, the number of nappies required was centre policy, while the second was actually in relation to regulations becoming more flexible where it was decided that proof of birth or immunisation certificates could meet the requirement.

Other stories highlighted the importance of tailoring standards to local needs through consultation, particularly in remote areas of Australia.

They built a centre at X. They built it to 'normal' specs, but X children are short and skinny so you have little kids going through the fence…the gap they left under the fence will let the dogs go under there and the toilet seats are too high.

The gradual licensing process that currently exists in the Northern Territory was seen by some service providers as being beneficial to Indigenous services. Working towards meeting regulation requirements, a process that involves gradual growth and development, was seen as a way in which a service could evolve to meet the needs of the community, particularly where the community was not familiar with centre-based child care.

Cultural obligations

Problems with complying with licensing requirements were often partly due to community and family relationships within Indigenous communities. One example was where staff in some services were asked to look after additional children because their parents had to attend cultural events or other functions. Although staff realised that accepting more children than they were licensed for was in breach of the regulations, they saw this as part of their cultural obligations.

Regulations say that you can't look after your own nephews and nieces, but we often look after our relatives' children who are not registered, especially during special occasions such as funerals (Service provider, remote).

Staff from this service also noted that some of the rules were too hard for parents to understand. They emphasised the need to educate the community about the role of child care and licensing requirements. Similar issues were raised in other areas.

We are licensed for 14 places so we have to knock kids back. Families don't understand the rule about only being able to have 14 kids (Service provider, remote).

We have about 12 kids coming here. We can only take that many, but people don't know that rule and get cross with you. They think you are just being mean when you say kids can't come in (Service provider, remote).

We are funded for 15 kids, we take on 20 per day with no extra funding. The money is taken from other local projects to cover additional staffing (Service provider, metropolitan).

We are like an extended family. We need to support families in

> crisis (Service provider, metropolitan).

Health issues

Generally, child care is understood as a place for healthy children and regulations are meant to prevent sick children from attending due to the risk of infecting others. However, many Indigenous children suffer from illnesses and some services reported that meeting the health aspect of licensing requirements was almost impossible.

> Children come for a short period when parents do their training. Children come to the centre with constant diarrhoea. If the staff followed the rules there would be no children (Child care worker, regional).

In some Indigenous communities, the role of child care is understood in the context of the community in which it operates. At one community consultation, participants talked about child care as the:

> …place where you can bring sick little kids, feed them, make them healthy (Community member, very remote).

At another service, child care workers talked about the role child care plays, not only in children's health, but also how it supports families with sick children.

> Some kids come with diarrhoea. If it's bad we ask them to take the child to hospital. Sometimes we get underweight kids here - we feed them and help make them better. We give them health food to make them strong…in the morning with the parents, we wash hands, have breakfast. Staff have breakfast too, and we give the leftovers to the mothers, children brush their teeth, we check their ears, get them to blow their noses (Service provider, very remote).

Staffing

One of the main barriers to meeting licensing standards is the shortage of qualified Indigenous staff. In addition to being required for regulatory purposes, qualified staff also enable the service to operate through their understanding of regulatory requirements. Services reported having to close because of staff shortages, particularly due to cultural events, such as funerals. At other times, shortages occurred when staff had to take leave to complete their training. Some services stated that those with qualifications were not always considered the 'right' people to work in their centre. Often the skills of a child care worker, such as empathy, enjoyment of children and having strong connections to the community were valued above qualifications.

Funding

Funding for Indigenous-focused child care services was reported as being inadequate and insecure. In addition to child care, Indigenous-focused services usually provide linked up services and funding can come from multiple sources. Some services reported that they then had difficulty addressing the requirements of the different funding models. Many of the Indigenous-specific service providers spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the accountability requirements they faced on a daily basis. Instead of spending more time with children or supporting other staff, they reported spending large amounts of time dealing with paper work required by their funding bodies. An example of this is the service provider who had to report to three or four different funding agencies. The service was only operating on a half million dollar budget, yet was required to provide six month utilisation statistics, targets for children's development, targets for employment, management reports, state government curriculum standards and accountability reports. This was in addition to state government licensing requirements and child care quality improvement and accreditation.

Types of services

Mainstream services

Amongst the parents who attended the consultations there was a general view that mainstream services were generally not welcoming of Indigenous families, although only a small number of these families had used them. A number of parents reported that they wanted their children to receive an education that reinforced their cultural identity but also one that prepared them for mainstream schooling. Some chose mainstream services for this reason, but expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of cultural programming in these services. Parents also reported that the lack of Indigenous child care workers in mainstream child care centres meant they were generally reluctant to use them.

The mainstream services that attracted Indigenous families were regarded as being flexible. They were usually located near Indigenous housing areas and catered for large numbers of Indigenous children. For the parents and service providers, successful mainstream child care services were those that:

- referred families to additional services if needed
- took time to talk to families and involved them in some of the day to day aspects of the centre
- incorporated Indigenous cultural knowledge, language and practices into their programs
- invited local community members/Elders to participate in these programs
- were flexible with children's routines
- had a flexible system of fee payments so that fees did not build up to a point where families were unable to pay them

Indigenous focused services

In 2004, 11,971 Indigenous children attended Australian Government Supported child care, with 11.7 per cent attending Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). Many parents at the consultations stated a preference for MACS because of the holistic nature of the service and the strong links to local Indigenous communities. Indigenous parents who attended the consultations reported that they felt most comfortable accessing this type of service.

Playgroups and JET crèches are other examples of child care used by Indigenous families. These types of care offer communities, who have had little or no experience with formal child care, an opportunity to access child care in an informal setting. Playgroups and JET crèches link parents with other community services and offer an environment that facilitates child learning and development. Parents reported that these types of child care services offered many benefits, such as employment opportunities and the education of communities about child care.

At one centre visited during the consultations, there was a dual focus on food and nutrition as well as transition to school. While providing healthy food for the children and mothers, the crèche also focused on early learning. When asked about the sort of things they learned at the crèche, the mothers talked about their children learning to paint, to play with toys (as there were few toys at home) and the importance of outings with crèche workers. The teaching of manners and routines, such as sleep and the brushing of teeth, were also valued by the mothers. The coordinator reported that the local preschool teacher had noticed an improvement in the school readiness of children who had been to the crèche. The crèche also provided one of the few employment opportunities for the local women, who spoke of the need to keep stimulated.

Mobile child care services and toy libraries visit remote areas and provide occasional care, vacation care, playgroups, storytelling, games and toy library services. Mobile child care services introduce families to knowledge and resources about child care and family support in areas and circumstances where there is no child care. Mobile services in remote regions often travel between 400 and 800 kilometres a week. The following story illustrates the kind of service provided.

Reaching out to children in remote areas

One of the mobile services visited during the consultations is sponsored by a MACS and funded by FaCSIA. Two young caregivers run the service and provide playgroup and holiday program activities to six communities and various out-stations throughout the dry season in one of Australia's most remote regions. During the wet season when roads are blocked, the caregivers focus on communities closer to town. When travelling, the playgroup leaders sleep out overnight and set up their activities under a tree or anywhere that provides shelter from the weather. The two young women spoke enthusiastically about their work, explaining that the children direct the content of the program by ordering the equipment and activities they want the caregivers to

bring back the next time they visit. At the time of the researchers visit, the children were learning to knit and were also engaged in fishing and learning about bush foods.

The caregivers also provided support to staff in small occasional care services in some of the communities as they travelled. They sometimes coordinated their visits with the TAFE lecturer so that staff could be released to spend time with their TAFE tutor. They also explained that they intended to provide some mediation to two feuding family groups who were fighting over which children should be allowed to attend the after school program offered by the mobile service. The women received mentoring and ongoing support from the coordinator of the child care service and this had a positive influence on their capacity to carry out their work.

Innovative child care services are designed to provide flexible services for families in rural and remote communities where child care is either not available or not an appropriate service for that community. The innovative child care services that took part in the consultations operated a range of child care services, including outside school hours care, long day care, occasional care and vacation care, while others were offering a more holistic service, similar to MACS. One of the innovative services visited started out as a JET crèche in 1997. As community interest and understanding of the benefits of child care grew, planning began for an extended child care service. In 2000, a child care centre was built and now operates with Australian Government funding. The service provides long day care, after school care, a family program and nutrition program, with staff trained in areas of child nutrition and child development. The centre works with the local shop and has its own vegetable garden. Based upon its work in improving the nutrition of the children and community, it won an award for the Best Healthy Nutrition project in the Northern Territory and has been highly commended by the Heart Foundation. The centre also receives regular visits from the Menzies School of Health Research and has a focus on ear health.

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The way forward

The findings from the consultations have provided significant insight and understanding of child care issues facing Indigenous families and their children across Australia. These findings show that child care for Indigenous families often means a range of services beyond what is traditionally thought of as child care. The way forward clearly needs to include a holistic approach to child care, with links to children's services more generally. A strategic plan encompassing a cross-government approach will set the framework for the development of future policy for Indigenous children and will work towards closing

the gap between them and other Australian children. The first part of this strategy is the development of an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan.