
Fathering and indigenous families – a North Queensland community partnership

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Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land.

And next I would like to consider the situation of these traditional owners today. If you are an Indigenous child in Australia, compared with Non-Indigenous children of the same age, you are:

- three times more likely to die before you are one year old¹.

Between birth and fourteen years, you are:

- 2.4 times more likely to die of homicide
- 3.3 times more likely to die from drowning
- 3.7 times more likely to die as the result of a road accident
- between 3 and 4 times more likely to die from injury, and
- between 10 and 12 times more likely to die from an infection or parasitic disease².

If you survive, you are:

- at much greater risk of suffering from asthma, hearing, skin and chest problems, and have poorer dental health³
- between 3 and 4 times more likely to suffer from abuse and neglect⁴
- up to 32 times more likely to be detained in a juvenile detention centre⁵
- nearly twice as likely to leave school before completing year 12⁶
- twice as likely to be an unemployed youth⁷, and
- if you are a male, 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide⁸.

As these numbers demonstrate, the impact of white settlement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been profound. This paper will provide a brief overview of the diversity of Indigenous culture prior to white settlement, address, in some detail, changes in what has been called the “traditional” Indigenous family structure and the resultant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, a priority interest group for

¹ Moon, L., Rahman, N. & Bhatia, K., 1998, *Australia's children: Their health and wellbeing 1998*, AIHW Cat. No. PHE 7. Canberra: AIHW, p. 226.

² *Ibid.* p. 227 - 229.

³ *Ibid.* p.233.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 234.

⁵ Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Development, 1999, *Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth: A statistical profile*, Brisbane: Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Development, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

the Commission for Children and Young People, and identify issues that need to be considered in parenting programs for Indigenous people.

Earlier I used the phrase “traditional Indigenous family structure”. This term erroneously implies an homogeneity of family structure across Indigenous Australia which does not, and has never, existed.

In pre-European-contact times, over 700 nations, each with its own culture and traditions, existed on mainland Australia⁹. These nations spoke 250 languages, with the people inhabiting many of the hundreds of islands across the Torres Strait also speaking languages traditional to their regions¹⁰. The existence of these nations, documented in early times by explorers and anthropologists, identifies Australia as one of the most diverse and intriguing continents in the world.

This diversity means that there is no one “traditional Indigenous family structure”, and while there are commonalities across clans, there are also a range of relationships and behavioural norms specific to different clan groups. Understanding this diversity is necessary for understanding the current situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and must be integral to any programs for them.

Before white settlement, clan groups were connected to specific areas of land that represented to them their very being and spiritual existence. From birth to death and beyond, Indigenous people were governed by clear principles and values that determined their cultural and social responsibilities, passed down from generation to generation through child-rearing and other practices.

*Childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs are based on culturally-bound understanding of what children need and what they are expected to become.*¹¹

Parenting responsibilities were clear, as were the duties and expectations assigned to the individual, the extended family and the broader community. Connectedness and kinship were, as they still are, an integral part of Indigenous identity and relationships, in contrast to the Western notion of individuality. Training for cultural ceremonies, initiation for achieving adulthood and moral education through story telling and performance were included as primary responsibilities.¹²

The role of men was clearly defined, as were the roles of all members in traditional society. Men were seen as protectors, providers, leaders and skilled hunters. This afforded them respect which was accompanied by the reciprocal obligation of meeting specific responsibilities. Failure to accomplish this provider and protector role had repercussions or punishments for the person, as defined by cultural lore.

⁹Gibbs, R. M. 1993, *The Aborigines*, 3rd edition, Longman Cheshire: Melbourne; Edwards, W. H. 1987, *Traditional Aboriginal Society*, Macmillan: Melbourne; Broome, R. 1982, *Aboriginal Australians: black response to white dominance 1788-1980*, Allen & Unwin: Sydney.

¹⁰ Beckett, J. 1989, *Torres Strait Islanders: custom and colonialism*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge; Singe, J. 1989, *The Torres Strait : people and history*, University of Queensland Press: St. Lucia, Queensland.

¹¹ Evans, J. L. & Myers, R. L., *Childrearing practices: creating programs where traditions and modern practices meet*. p.3 <http://www.ecdgroup.com/cn/cn15lead.html> extracted 12/07/2000.

¹² Gibbs, R.M. 1993, *The Aborigines*, 3rd edition, Longman Cheshire: Melbourne.

According to the continuum described by Judith Evans in her 1994 report to UNICEF on childrearing practices and beliefs in Sub-Saharan Africa¹³, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as a result of white settlement, can be considered to be in a state of transition. Evans argued that when a “modern” and a traditional Indigenous culture meet, the Indigenous society will start to follow the goals of the “modern” society, with a resultant disintegration of its earlier set of goals and values. The previously relatively stable norms, beliefs and practices around childrearing become unclear. Parents can come to feel a sense of powerlessness and lose confidence in their parenting skills and child rearing practices may also become inconsistent¹⁴.

Since childrearing practices in most societies are designed to:

- *Guarantee the child's physical well being*
- *Promote the child's psycho-social well being*
- *Support the child's physical development*
- *Promote the child's mental development and*
- *Facilitate the child's interaction with others outside the home*¹⁵

then the above challenges, which appear when a society is in a time of transition, generally place the well being of the child at risk.

However, the term "transition" does not adequately reflect the effect of colonisation on Indigenous Australian societies.

Colonisation has been a powerful, destructive force, leading to individual, family and community trauma over many generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Initially, frontier violence left many groups traumatised and dispossessed, introducing the traditional owners of the land to disease and racism.

Legislation removed people to reserves, took children from their family, and separated husbands and wives. Relationships with the land, cultural and spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices, and social and family relationships were fractured, replaced by a dependency on Western policies and people who had no understanding of, and in many cases, no interest in, what these Indigenous peoples had lost.

When Communities were established, the administration and the authority of these Communities were in the hands of the “protectors”. Use of traditional language and cultural practices were forbidden, denying Indigenous people their values, beliefs and mores, and robbing them of this core of their identities. Aboriginal men, for example, were no longer responsible for the physical and emotional safety of the family. They were not permitted to hunt for the essential food for the family. As their traditional roles were denied them, a major source of their sense of identity was eliminated.

The policies of removal and subjugation contributed to the break up of Indigenous families and erosion of the security that the traditional family unit once provided. This has been exacerbated in many cases by incarceration of one or more parents, and removal of the children into state care:

¹³ Evans, J. L. 1994, *Childrearing practices and beliefs in Sub-Saharan Africa: Report of a workshop held in Windhoek, Namibia, October 26-29 1993*, sponsored by UNICEF. <http://www.ecdgroup.com/archive/crwrepo.html> extracted 12/07/2000.

¹⁴ Evans *ibid.* p. 8

¹⁵ Evans, J. L. & Myers, R. L., *Childrearing practices: creating programs where traditions and modern practices meet.* p.3 <http://www.ecdgroup.com/cn/cn15lead.html> extracted 12/07/2000.

...we didn't know anything about stealing or anything about that. One morning we got a knock on the door - the Police came to take us away. It was back in the early seventies. They separated us up, the four kids and put us into different homes. We didn't have any understanding of why this had happened.¹⁶

The institutional care given to many of these children meant they had no experience of living in a family and consequently no appropriate nurturing behaviours or modelling of parenting. Indeed, the loss of parenting skills has been identified as one of the effects of the removal of children in the report, *Bringing Them Home*¹⁷.

Dignified, proud, self-sustaining and healthy by tradition, Indigenous Australians today live a very different existence. Alcoholism, violence, abuse and poverty are the legacies of the colonisation process, as the statistics I referred to earlier in this paper attest.

This conference is about "Helping Families Change". Parenting programs are generally seen as doing this, as being effective measures to promote and protect the well being of children¹⁸. It is important, however, that we continue to seek to identify and describe features of highly successful programs. James¹⁹, for example, argues that, "The more significant question ... is not so much whether prevention works, but rather which approach is most effective for a certain population, under a given set of circumstances?" That is, there is a need to identify factors at the community level that impinge on program design and implementation, and ultimately, effectiveness.

When we contemplate programs for Indigenous communities, it is critically important that we consider the factors which have the capacity to impinge on the effectiveness of the programs.

One factor that needs to be consistently acknowledged and addressed is the transgenerational trauma that has been experienced by Indigenous people. This trauma manifests itself in many ways but one effect is a distrust of government or other agencies, particularly those responsible for the well-being of children and families. It is recognised that even Non-Indigenous families who have never experienced any form of official assessment or intervention in their parenting role, either personally or generationally, often lack the confidence to ask professionals or paraprofessionals for parenting help or information²⁰. Considering the history of intervention and family destruction experienced by Indigenous families by government agencies, it must be expected that discussions about "proper parenting" from mainstream departments identifiable with those that must take responsibility for removing Indigenous children from their families, is viewed with suspicion, even alarm.

Another issue that needs to be widely recognised is how 'proper parenting' is culturally determined. This includes acknowledging that even what is meant by the term "parent" can

¹⁶ Personal Communication between Barry Malezer, Indigenous researcher and Indigenous father who has been incarcerated, 23 June, 2000

¹⁷ Australia National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997, *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* [Commissioner: Ronald Wilson], Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

¹⁸ James, M. 1994, Child Abuse Prevention: A perspective on parent enhancement programs from the United States, *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*, 3 (4), Melbourne: AIFS; Tomison, A. M., 1996, Child abuse programs in Australia: An audit of the National Child Protection Clearing House database: *National Child Protection Clearinghouse Newsletter*, 4, (1) Melbourne: AIFS.

¹⁹ James, M. 1994, Child Abuse Prevention: A perspective on parent enhancement programs from the United States, *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*, 3 (4), Melbourne: AIFS, p. 7.

²⁰ Bowes, J. 2000, Parents' response to parent education and support programs, *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter*, 8 (2), Summer, 12- 21.

vary from culture to culture, in terms of who is considered to be a "parent", as well as what a "parent" should do. In many Aboriginal clans, childrearing responsibilities were shared beyond the biological parents to their siblings, while Elders had a specific socialisation role. Torres Strait Islander customary adoption also challenges Western notions of "parents"²¹.

There are also differences from culture to culture in what is considered to be good or "proper" parenting. An interesting study reported by Malin, Campbell and Agius²², for example, looked at the childrearing practices of two Nunga Aboriginal families and two Anglo families. While stressing that "Nunga families are as different from each other as any family differs from another"²³, the authors identified clear cultural differences in childrearing practices. The Aboriginal children were encouraged to be independent, self-regulating and self-reliant. "Dorothy", the mother, trusted that they were competent at looking after their younger siblings, even when quite young themselves. She used more indirect means of disciplining her children such as selective attention, non-intervention, modelling and loaded conversation. The Anglo mothers, in contrast, encouraged dependence and attention-seeking behaviour. Aware of these differences, one of the Nunga mothers expressed her concerns in this way:

*These are the kinds of things that government workers will see and turn around and say that maybe I'm not a fit mother. Because they are only seeing things through their white culture, they will misinterpret the way I discipline the kids, and they won't notice that my kids are happy and loved and growing up in a way that they can look after themselves and do the right thing by their family...*²⁴

It is clear that these factors affect what is seen as "appropriate parenting", and hence parenting programs.

Any program is based upon particular beliefs about the way families should be, the ways parents and children should interact, and the types of people the children should grow up to become. An exclusively Western view of this is not appropriate for all peoples. Parenting programs need to be inclusive of the culture of the particular group of parents they are designed to help.

Culture is an important part of a parenting program because it is central to an individual's identity. Restoring familiarity with essential aspects of "traditional" culture and then pride in their cultural identity is necessary for Indigenous adults before appropriate parenting behaviours can be addressed in a parenting program. Clarke, Harnett, Atkinson and Shochet²⁵ argue that the starting point must be the process of healing, with individuals, families and communities first coming to terms with their pain. Rebuilding culture and reestablishing pride may help lead to a new sense of identity which promotes a new form of Indigenous "family" to encompass supportive family relationships like those which existed previously.

This brings me to the final consideration for program development which is inclusion of the role of fathers. It is only very recently that it has been recognised that parenting programs are often actually about mothering and that there is a need for programs specifically targeted at

²¹ Ban, P., Mam, S., Elu, M., Trevallion, I. & Reid, A. 1993, Torres Strait Islander family life, *Family Matters*, 35, 16-21.

²² Malin, M., Campbell, K. and Agius, L., 1996, Raising children in the Nunga Aboriginal way, *Family Matters*, 43, 43-7.

²³ *Ibid.* p.47.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 43.

²⁵ Clarke, C., Harnett, P., Atkinson, J. & Shochet, I. 1999, Enhancing resilience in Indigenous people: the integration of individual, family and community interventions, *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 23 (4), 6-10.

supporting men to be more effective in their fathering role. The Commission for Children and Young People has been concerned for some time about the invisibility of fathers in many parenting programs. Given the suicide and incarceration rate of young Indigenous men, the poorer outcomes for Indigenous males on every measure, and their pronounced marginalisation from parenting roles and responsibility, the Commission sees this as a matter for urgent consideration.

As a consequence, the Commission, is, as part of its Focus on Fathering Project, collaborating with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (ATSIAB), the Queensland government's peak advisory body on Indigenous issues, to develop and trial an Indigenous fathering program that meets the needs of children whose fathers are in prison.

Involvement of respected local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women is seen as integral to the development of the program. Invitations to the scoping meeting in Cairns in July 2000 and to participate in the Reference Group went as broadly as possible to groups such as the Cairns Indigenous Men's Support Group, Gumba Gumba Elders, Yarrabah Community Council, Injinoo Land Trust and the Aborigines and Islanders Alcohol Relief Service (AIARS).

Invitations were also extended to government and non-government stakeholders including: the Family Court of Australia; the Queensland Police Service; the Parole Board; the Youth Justice Unit of Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland; the Cairns Domestic Violence Service; St Johns' Boys' shelter; St Margaret's Girls' shelter; and Warringu Women's shelter.

The meeting of these local community members in Cairns scoped the program and proposed that it:

- will have components INSIDE and OUTSIDE the prison
- will consider issues of CULTURE, IDENTITY and PRIDE
- must be based in COMMUNITY and involve ELDERS and relevant COMMUNITY GROUPS
- must build on the positive things or programs that are already happening inside and outside, and
- consider COMMUNICATION and INFORMATION as key aspects.

From this scoping meeting, a Reference Group was established to provide advice and direction to the project. Gumba Gumba is playing a key role, and in December 2000, two members visited Tasmania to experience the Fathers' Day activities organised as the culmination of a fathering program at Risdon prison.

What will the fathering program look like, in terms of both its content and delivery? The Commission initiated this project through the support of ATSIAB, and an ATSIAB member chairs the Cairns Reference Group, but we do not really know, and will have little further input into decisions about the nature of the program. The program is for a particular group of Indigenous men, coming from particular Aboriginal and Islander communities. To be relevant to them, to be meaningful for them, and to have the chance of making a difference for them, it must be developed and delivered by respected people from those communities. It must, indeed, be their program.