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Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) Early Childhood Report.

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

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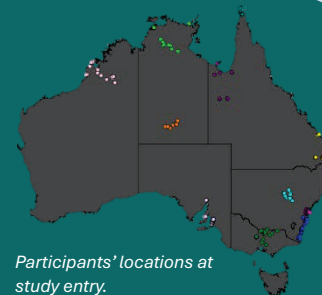
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Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children – Early Childhood Report

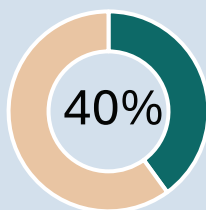
Summary of Findings for Early Childhood Educators

About the LSIC Early Childhood Report

Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) has followed the development of over 1,700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families throughout Australia since 2008. The *Early Childhood Report* explores the factors in early childhood (prior to school and in the first years of school) that help Indigenous children grow up strong. By combining child, parent, and teacher data using various research methods, the Report identifies a range of early childhood factors that support children’s strong development into middle childhood and adolescence.

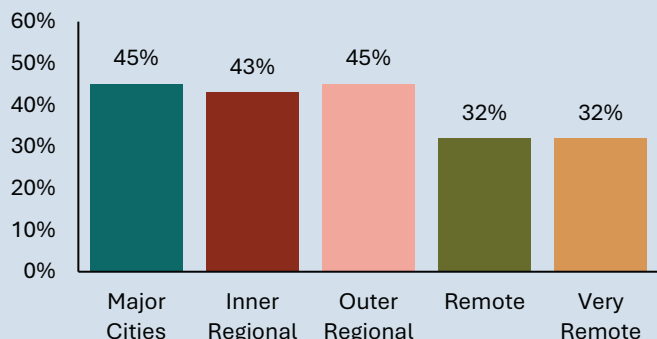


Playgroups

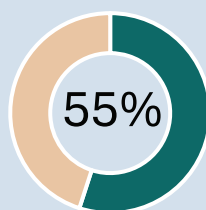


40% of LSIC children attended a playgroup in early childhood, although this varied by region (see below). Playgroups are regular meetings of children and their families in community settings. They provide an opportunity for children to play together and for families

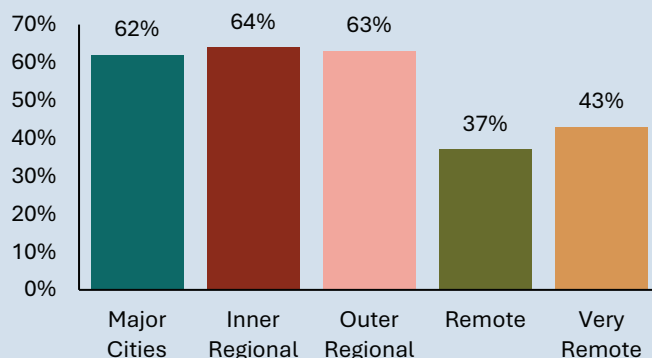
to gain social and parenting support. Playgroups are culturally appropriate given their focus on community strengths in child caring. Playgroups are a key strategy that has been resourced through peak bodies and other organisations, to address *Closing the Gap Outcome 3: Improved access to culturally safe, high quality early childhood education*.



Preschool



55% of LSIC children attended a formal preschool program. Preschool is the term we use here to refer to formal programs for children in the year before fulltime schooling. This has been identified by the Closing the Gap reform as an important year for education participation by children. We found that attendance varied by region (see below).



Figures 1 and 2. Proportion of children who attended playgroup prior to school (left), and who attended preschool in the year prior to school (above), by remoteness of the family’s residence.

Attending a playgroup or preschool program prior to starting school was linked to:

Higher expressive vocabulary (verbal skills to name pictures of objects, actions, and events)

Higher reading and numeracy achievement in middle childhood as measured by Year 5 NAPLAN

Better classroom self-regulation (persistence, independence, and eagerness to learn) in the early school

Attending a playgroup was also linked to:

- higher levels of advice and support seeking among parents
- higher levels of engagement in home learning, which include activities families engage in with their child, such as telling stories, music, dance, and playing
- higher school engagement in middle childhood (based on how parents think their child manages at school).

Attending preschool was also linked to:

- better visual-motor and early literacy skills, assessed by asking children to draw letters and numbers, and a range of other tasks that increase in difficulty.

First Years of School

The first years of school (Foundation and Year 1) can set a foundation for later school success, particularly for later school engagement. School engagement encompasses students' enjoyment of and attachment to school, their attendance and participation in activities, and their motivation and eagerness to learn. This engagement to school is linked to students' achievement and school completion outcomes.

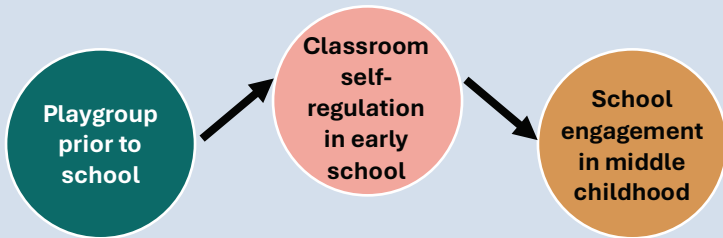
For the LSIC children, several early school factors linked with stronger school engagement in middle childhood and adolescence. These included:



Schools have an important role to play in enhancing children's self-regulation skills, using evidence-based programs; and in fostering positive student-teacher relationships, which set the foundation for strong and enduring school engagement.

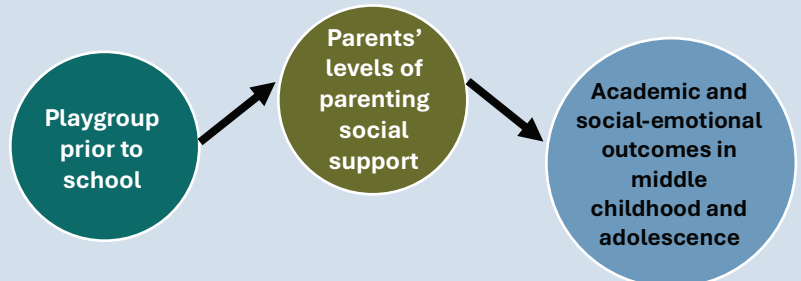
Developmental Pathways

In the LSIC Early Childhood Report, we also explored pathways of development in longitudinal analyses, following children's development from the years prior to school and the early school years, into middle childhood and adolescence.



We found that children who attended a playgroup prior to starting school had higher classroom self-regulation skills in their first years of school. These skills set the foundations for stronger engagement with school (how well child was managing with schoolwork, making friends, being good, feeling strong, and knowing where to be and when).

Parents of children who attended playgroups were more likely to access parenting social support during the early childhood period. We found that accessing higher parenting social support during early childhood was associated with a range of positive outcomes for children in middle childhood and adolescence, including academic success and social-emotional wellbeing.



Other longitudinal analyses from the Report demonstrated important developmental pathways predicting Year 5 academic achievement and the cognitive skills of executive function in adolescents. Executive function was assessed in adolescence using a series of tasks that measured attention, working memory, and impulse control. In these analyses, **early participation in playgroups and preschool was shown to support early child skills in the areas of vocabulary, and visual-motor and early literacy skills.** These skills, in turn, support **children's ability to manage their own learning in formal classroom settings once they enter school,** and are linked with longer term outcomes including **academic achievement and adolescent cognitive functioning.** Social support for parents was also linked with positive developmental pathways for children. These findings show the important role of playgroups, particularly, to provide early parenting support, along with child development support.

Growing up Strong

When LSIC parents were asked about some of the things that helped their children grow up strong in their culture, some parents mentioned playgroup and preschool as important settings:



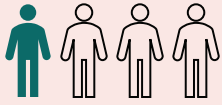
Early engagement with culture supports later wellbeing



Three in four LSIC children had **attended an Indigenous cultural event** in early childhood.



Two in three LSIC children had a **connection to Country or place** in early childhood.



One in four LSIC children **spoke an Indigenous language** in early childhood.



Two in three LSIC children **identified with Mob (a language group or Nation)** in early childhood.

Engagement with culture varied by region of family's residence (Figure 3):

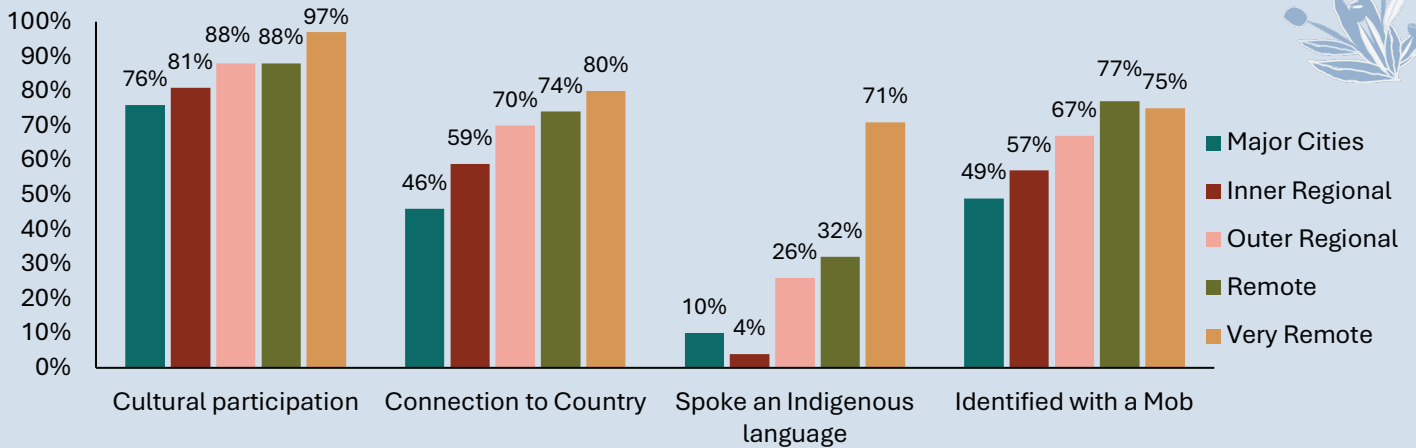
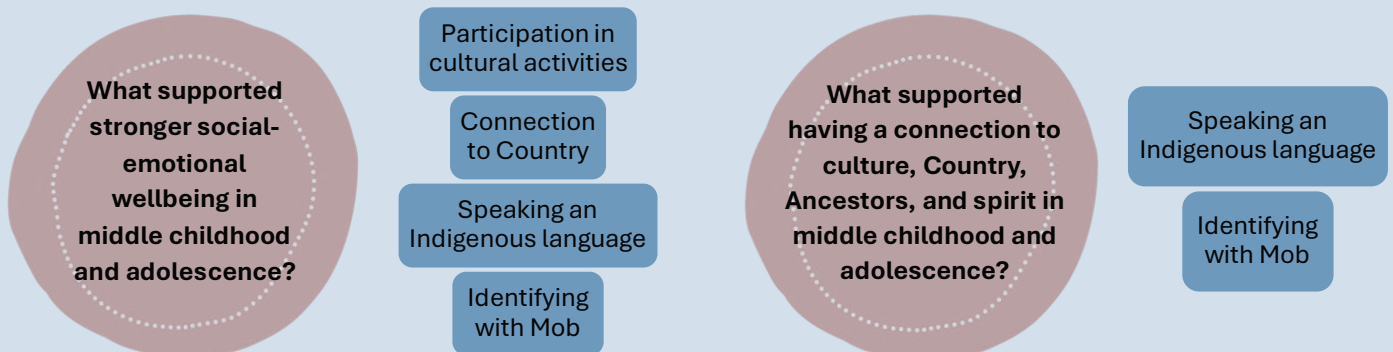


Figure 3. Proportion of LSIC children for whom parents reported a variety of cultural connections during early childhood, by remoteness of residence.

Figure 3 shows that **culture engagement during early childhood was more frequent in remote and very remote regions** than in major cities and inner and outer regional areas. By contrast, Figures 1 and 2 demonstrated that attendance at **playgroups and preschool programs were more likely in urban areas**, relative to rural areas. Thus, playgroups and preschool programs are ideal settings for embedding opportunities for children living in urban areas to engage in cultural learning and activities. Early childhood education should also seek to promote and celebrate children's identity and belonging as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and include Indigenous arts and storytelling in programming.

LSIC children who had engaged in culture during early childhood (they participated in cultural activities, were connected to Country or place, spoke an Indigenous language, and/or identified with Mob) demonstrated **stronger social-emotional wellbeing** in middle childhood and adolescence. The Report used information related to five areas of social-emotional wellbeing: connection to mind and emotions; connection to body and behaviour; connection to family and kinship; connection to community; and connection to culture, Country, Ancestors, and spirituality.



Children's connections with family and kin

The Report includes drawings that children in the study created when asked to draw their family. Strong themes of extended kinship networks emerged, with children depicting parents, siblings, Elders, aunts, uncles, and other community members. Some children also included dogs and elements such as the sun, blue sky, and Country.





What does growing up strong mean to you?

From children's responses to this question, Wiradjuri researcher Jessa Rogers crafted poems by combining the children's own words. In these poems, we hear the children's voices on growing up strong. Here is one example:

*When you are older you are brave and smart.
Growing up mentally strong and get through any problem in life.
Having a well supported family, having good mates,
Being confident, knowing what to do and help people,*

I think it means to be strong in life.

*Being healthy and making good decisions,
Growing up healthy with a strong mind.
Good relationships. Confident, independent, and reliable.*

*Respect my Elders and culture,
Being kind hearted, helping and looking after people.
Getting a good education, keep growing strong.
Being resilient and persistent. Getting better at something.*

You have learnt how to be a good person and be safe. Strong and brave.

Recommendations from the LSIC Early Childhood Report

- Ensure families have **access to local and culturally-responsive playgroups** across the early years, to support family wellbeing, provide social support, and foster children's healthy development.
- **Embed playgroups in all schools as essential hubs in the community**, supporting the transition to school for children and families.
- Ensure all children have **access to high quality preschool in the year prior to school**. Early learning programs and playgroups can enhance children's self-regulation and preparation for early schooling. Successful cognitive engagement and learning in these early years sets the foundation for later school engagement and success.
- From the early years, focus on **promoting positive student-teacher relationships** and reducing student-teacher conflict, to build a strong foundation for students' engagement with and enjoyment of school.
- Playgroups and preschool programs should **focus on enriching oral language environments to develop vocabulary, and emergent literacy skills** (for example, shared book-reading with family, and play activities involving drawing and writing, which involve fine motor skills). Engaging in active and playful activities with young children sets a solid foundation for future learning through the school years.
- **Recognise and celebrate the playgroup and preschool workforce** who provide important family support and early learning experiences for young children. Our research shows that this makes a significant difference even years later, as children enter middle childhood.
- **Celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's identity and embed opportunities for cultural learning and engagement in cultural activities**, such as arts and dance, and Indigenous language learning, within early education centres and schools.

Please see the full Report for detail on the study findings: Rogers J, Ekberg S, Ritchie T, Carpendale EJ, Williams KE, Berthelsen D, Piltz LM, & Laurens KR (2025) *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) Early Childhood Report*. Queensland University of Technology. <https://doi.org.10.5204/rep.eprints.259312>

