

eyes on the election...

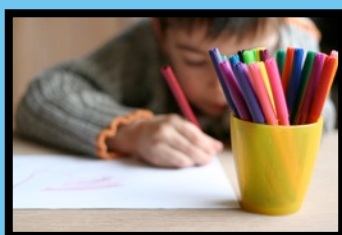


Indigenous equality

Targets

Ensure all four year old Indigenous children in remote communities have access to quality early childhood programs within five years.

In conjunction with the above target, the *Close the Gap* partners aim to achieve a 95 per cent enrolment of Indigenous children in an early childhood education program in the year before formal schooling by 2013.



The *Australian Early Development Index* was implemented in 2009, and will help provide better information about Indigenous children's development opportunities in the coming years.

Early childhood education

Key message

For an equal start in life, Indigenous children need equal early learning, development and socialisation opportunities. Access to quality early childhood education and care services is critical. These include pre-school, child care and parenting programs. In order for these services to be implemented effectively, investment needs to be made into physical infrastructure and growing the early childhood workforce. This is especially so in remote areas. Early childhood education encompasses much more than just the schooling of a young child; parental engagement in educational programs can strengthen community bonds and have a beneficial effect across multiple generations.

Improving early childhood education goes hand-in-hand with the *Close the Gap* target to halve the gap in childhood mortality rates within a decade. Action in the areas of maternal, antenatal and early childhood care is relevant to addressing inequality in both health and educational outcomes. The hands-on nature of early childhood education provides an opportunity for identifying physical and learning difficulties that may have otherwise gone undetected. Hearing, language, visual and behavioural difficulties - which may seriously disadvantage a child in the school environment - can be treated before schooling begins, giving the child a greater chance of succeeding in higher education.

Reality

Data collection in the area of early childhood education needs improvement. Currently there is no single source for data on preschool attendance by Indigenous children. The existing data does, however, indicate that preschool participation rates are lower amongst Indigenous children than non-Indigenous children, especially in remote areas.

Just over 60 per cent of Indigenous children are enrolled in early childhood education programs in the year before formal schooling, compared to around 70 per cent for all children.



Things that are working

The Aboriginal Early Years Program

The Aboriginal Early Years Program is a program that connects Tasmanian Indigenous families with pre-school services. It is one of many similar programs operating across the country. These programs, whether they are run by government or private groups, work to make the *Close the Gap* targets become a reality.

The Aboriginal Early Years initiative is a government project that has been supporting parents and caregivers of Indigenous children aged 0-5 since 2005. Aboriginal Early Years Liaison Officers work with Indigenous children and their families from birth to 5 years of age.

Liaisons also attempt to identify Indigenous students who are not enrolled in Kindergarten, and assist in the enrolment process. Once children are enrolled, the Aboriginal Early Years Liaisons support children and families in the transition to formal schooling.

Engagement of students in both the school and home environment has been vital to the program's success. The program includes workshops to help families create their own resources for literacy and numeracy learning at home.

Closing the gap

Initiatives such as The Aboriginal Early Years Program are making a difference in the lives of Indigenous children and communities across Australia. Each separate program contributes a great deal to the overall outlook for Indigenous children in Australia. However, in order to achieve the Close the Gap target for early childhood education, there are further strategies that need to be implemented.

The target stresses that Indigenous children should have *access to quality* early childhood education. This presents challenges in remote areas where transportation between communities and service providers is often difficult. Appropriate infrastructure needs to be in place so that families can either easily travel to an educational centre, or so that educational services can come to them.

Acquiring and retaining quality teachers is a common problem in rural areas. Thus, a broader strategy is being employed to encourage Indigenous people to train in early childhood health and education. This initiative aims to provide a sustainable source of quality educators and carers who can deliver culturally-appropriate services in remote Indigenous communities.

There are ways we can all be involved in helping to close the gap. If you haven't already done so, make sure you visit <http://www.oxfam.org.au/explore/indigenous-australia/close-the-gap> and sign the *Close the Gap* pledge. As August 21st approaches, get in touch with the candidates for election in your area, and let them know that climate change and refugee policy are not the only important justice issues up for debate at this election.

Find out more

- * http://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/90129/key-indicators-2009.pdf - read pages 14-16 of this document to find out more about Indigenous early childhood education
- * <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/> - Stay up-to-date with the progress being made in Indigenous health through this great website
- * <http://www.closesthegap.com.au/> - *Close the Gap* campaign information

The 'eyes on the election' bulletins are produced by the CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee.
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