

2006/07 Directions

for

FOOTPRINTS IN TIME

A Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

Developing Research Options

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What is *Footprints in Time*?

'Footprints in Time' (FIT) is the name given to a proposed *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* managed by the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA – formerly FACS).

'Footprints in Time' will invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from all over the country to permit a series of annual interviews to help better understand what impacts on their children's lives over time – and especially to explore how they can be better supported to grow up strong and resilient regardless of location.

Resilient: The capacity to thrive despite disadvantage or hardship.

The project continues to be overseen by a specially formed Steering Committee chaired by Prof Mick Dodson (ANU), which has mandated that 'Footprints in Time' must be designed and conducted so that it has the acceptance and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and of participating families.

The study will concentrate on babies (0-12 months) and 4-5 year olds.

How is 'Footprints in Time' different to other surveys or research?

This is the first time a *longitudinal* study has been proposed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Australia. It means that parents/carers will be asked for permission to be re-interviewed every so often for quite a long time – and ways have to be set up to enable that to happen.

Longitudinal Study: A research project that gathers information with the same group of people over several points in time. Longitudinal studies explore how people and their various community circumstances (social, economic, cultural and family) change over time.

What sort of information will FIT gather?

Getting the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – whether good health, being able to learn at school, participating in their community, being safe and happy – requires understanding of all the factors that influence their lives as they grow up, such as their family, their communities, their culture, and the use and effectiveness of services.

Footprints in Time aims to gather information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents/carers and other community sources (where appropriate) in order to look at the child's health, characteristics and temperament, developmental milestones and their place in the family and community. Significant events in the child's life, like illness, birth of a sibling,

death in the family, or parental separation could also be noted as these events impact on the child's development.

In looking at the child's parents or carers, the study may explore their culture and how it shapes their values and aspirations, their upbringing, health, work or lack of it, and their relationships and roles in the area in which they live. In looking at the child's community and environment, the study may gather information on available services, the characteristics and history of the community in which they currently live, and housing, transport and other infrastructure issues.

The type of information that will be gathered and the methods used to do that, are currently under intense discussion. What we have learnt so far is that in order for a national Indigenous study of this scale to be a success, the project team must plan carefully and explore options for the most effective design.

Following the trial of community engagement strategies in the Torres Strait and in ACT/Queanbeyan which took place in 2005, the 'Footprints In Time' FaCSIA team, under the direction of the Steering and Design Committees, is *this* year exploring various research models. This includes approaching various community and peak bodies for further guidance, ethical oversight, and advice on ways of building potential research partnerships with certain communities in remote, regional and urban Australia.

Such partnerships, it is believed, will greatly enhance the project and increase the likelihood of parents wanting to participate for several years in this ambitious research exercise that could help shape government policy for Indigenous early childhood for many years to come.

Who would use the information FIT collects?

- *Communities*
Communities will be able to use the information to help make decisions on the services and resources they need, to support funding applications for these services, and to manage such services.
- *Governments*
Federal, State and Local governments will be able to use the information to plan better, more co-ordinated services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.
- *Service Providers*
Services such as health centres, childcare providers, preschools, sports and education sectors, will be able to use this information to make sure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children they work with get the best possible outcomes.

We also hope that this Study can show governments and service providers how important it is to acknowledge, respect and include the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in their planning, policy and services.

What has the 'Footprints in Time' project done so far?

In 2003, the FIT team visited every capital city in Australia and at least one regional/ remote area in each State and Territory to hold community meetings. In these meetings, Indigenous stakeholders gave feedback on the potential value of a longitudinal study, what issues the study should address, and the ways such a study should (and should not) be conducted.

From the end of 2004 and during 2005, the FIT team conducted initial trials of community engagement, data collection and dissemination of consultation results in the Australian Capital Territory/ Queanbeyan and the Torres Strait Islands and Northern Peninsula Area. From these trials, the Team learned more about the ways in which a national study could be carried out.

FaCSIA has published three (3) Occasional papers.

OP No15: The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review, Professor Robyn Penman

OP No 16: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views on research in their communities, Professor Robyn Penman

OP No 17: Growing up in the Torres Strait region: A report from the Footprints in Time trials, CRCAH

Please contact: 1800 009 263. These papers are free.

During 2006 FaCSIA engaged the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to assist with the quantitative data collection. A number of pilot site areas were selected and these included:

NSW: Wagga Wagga

QLD: Logan, Ipswich, Mt Isa, Mapoon, Naprunum and Hopevale

In 2007 FaCSIA will continue to recruit RAO's to cover most areas including the new sites for pilot 2. The pilot 2 sites include:

NT: Hermansberg and Yuendumu

NSW: Lower South Coast (Bateman's Bay – Eden)

NSW: Blacktown (Blacktown – Riverstone)

The ABS has tested the questionnaire in the pilot 1 sites and will be adapting a number of content areas to make the questions more relevant to the communities before testing this again in pilot 1 & 2 sites in May 2007.

Qualitative data collection was conducted in all areas where participants agreed to be re-contacted after the quantitative collection.

What is the 'Footprints in Time' Project doing in 2007?

The RAO's will continue to test the Community Engagement Strategies and finding the children throughout the first part of 2007. This will lead into the pilot 2 quantitative data collection and possibly some qualitative data collection throughout these areas.

The Footprints in Time team will continue to develop and test a number of research designs (both quantitative and qualitative) and community engagement strategies, in order to produce a design for a national study that is ethical, effective, relevant, and useful.

Not a 'one size fits all' approach

The project has learnt that it is unlikely a 'one size fits all' research approach will be either feasible, or desirable, across the Nation.

That is, it is likely that FIT will include options such as structured interview with core questions posed across the nation, supplemented with other questions of particular concern to particular communities – *and* much less structured research in some communities which could explore, for example, how best to use existing information on early childhood in particular communities/regions, how best to support services already operating, or how best to establish services which might be lacking. The latter would be designed in such a way to complement what is already happening 'on the ground', and to permit parents and carers to discuss the key issues as they see them, without the limitations of a series of set questions.

It is hoped case studies like this would not only enrich the study as a whole but help us understand what the core/National survey data actually means and how best all information can best be used to increase resilience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

For background on 'Footprints in Time': Visit the website at: <http://www.facsia.gov.au> and follow the links through research.