

# Longitudinal patterns of language use, diversity, support, and competence

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## Background

Children's acquisition of speech and language is a major area of focus in childhood. Speech and language competence enables positive educational and social outcomes in childhood and occupational outcomes in adulthood (McCormack et al. 2009). Cultural beliefs, practices and identity are transmitted through language. Children's language and culture are inextricably linked with the development of their personal identity and sense of belonging. For example, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia states:

Children's use of their home languages underpins their sense of identity and their conceptual development. Children feel a sense of belonging when their language, interaction styles and ways of communicating are valued. They have the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English. (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 38)

The ability to speak multiple languages can facilitate relationships and communication within the family (e.g. with grandparents) and the community. In addition, the ability to speak more than one language has been linked to cognitive and social benefits (Adesope et al. 2010; Bialystok 2011; Gathercole et al. 2010; Nguyen & Astington 2014). Therefore it is important to provide opportunities for children to develop competencies in multiple languages. It is also important to celebrate Indigenous children's speech and language competence (McLeod, Verdon & Bennetts Kneebone 2014), and understand factors that promote children's use and maintenance of Indigenous languages (Verdon & McLeod 2014).

Australia has been identified as the continent where the most rapid decline in languages is occurring (Nettle & Romaine 2000). For example, the results of the recent National Indigenous Languages Survey indicate that of the 250 Indigenous languages originally spoken only 13 are still spoken across all generations and 100 languages are endangered (Marmion, Obata & Troy 2014). Intergenerational transmission of Indigenous Australian languages is important. For example, Article 13 of the United Nations (2008) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons. (United Nations 2008)

The aim of this article is to describe longitudinal patterns of language use, diversity, support and competence by Indigenous children in *Footprints in Time* during the early years.

## Method

The sample used in this report contained 1,031 children from both cohorts of *Footprints in Time* who were present at Waves 1, 2, 3, and 4 of data collection. Children were aged between 0 and 6 years at Wave 1 of data collection and data were collected each year. There were 534 males (51.8 per cent) and 497 females (48.2 per cent). Level of relative isolation for the children in this sample was reported as high/extreme for 71 children (6.9 per cent), moderate for 128 children (12.4 per cent), low for 515 children (50.0 per cent) and urban for 317 children (30.7 per cent). The Indigenous status of the children was reported as Aboriginal (89.5 per cent, n = 923), Torres Strait Islander (5.7 per cent, n = 59) or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (4.8 per cent, n = 49). Questions pertaining to the children’s speech and language were extracted from the dataset and were analysed.

## Languages spoken by the children over time

The children in the sample spoke between one and seven languages (see Table 39). At Wave 1, 84.7 per cent were learning to speak one language while 15.3 per cent were multilingual (i.e. spoke at least two languages). By Wave 3, more children were multilingual (24.3 per cent) and a similar number (24.4 per cent) were reported to speak multiple languages at Wave 4.

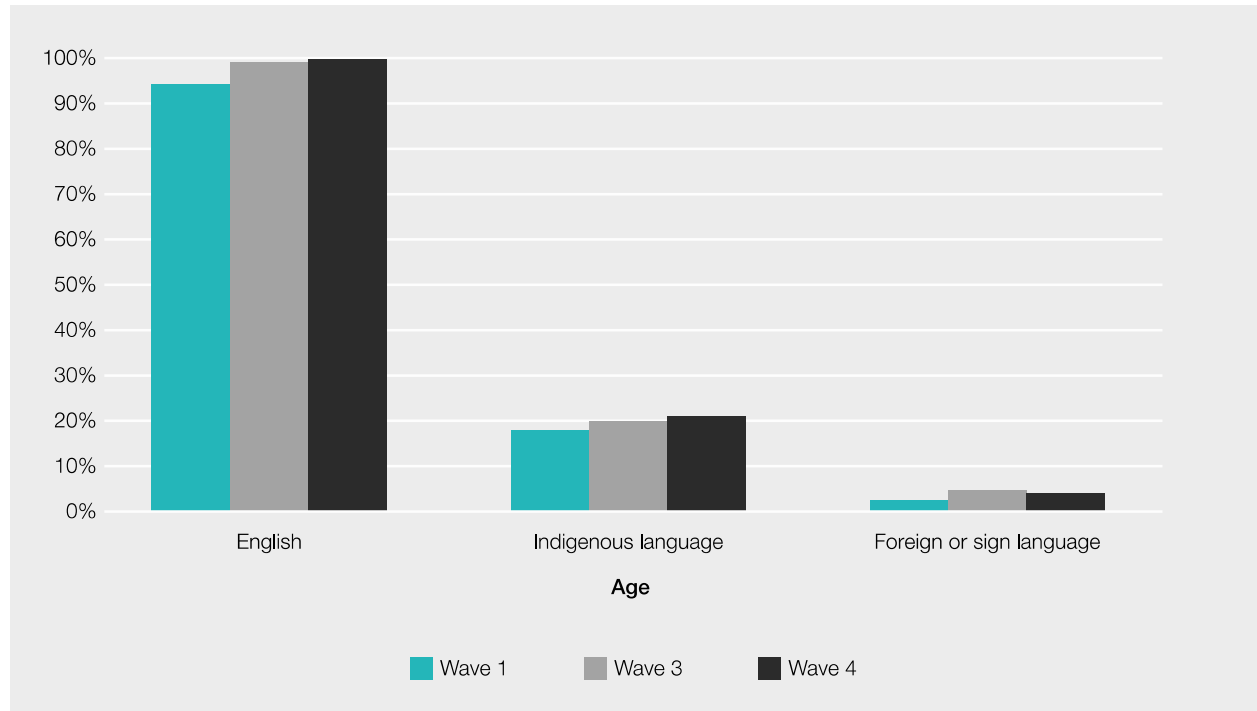
**Table 39: Total number of languages spoken by the children across waves (n = 1,031), per cent**

Wave	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Wave 1	84.7	11.6	2.9	0.6	0.2	–	–
Wave 3	75.7	19.1	4.3	0.8	–	–	–
Wave 4	75.6	18.9	4.5	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.1

Notes: ‘is learning to speak’ was used for the younger cohort. This question was not asked at wave 2.  
– Data not available or no observations.

The type of language spoken by the children was reported at Waves 1, 3, and 4 (see Figure 10). At Wave 1, 94.4 per cent were learning to speak English and 18.0 per cent were learning to speak an Indigenous language. By Wave 3, the number of children speaking English had increased to 99.3 per cent and the number of children speaking an Indigenous language also increased to 20.1 per cent. By Wave 4, all of the children (100 per cent) were reported to speak English and approximately one-fifth (21.0 per cent) spoke an Indigenous language. By Wave 4 the majority of the children were attending school, so the increase in children’s use of English over time may be as a result of English being spoken at school, as well as on television, and within the children’s social environments. A small number of children throughout the sample used a foreign or sign language.

**Figure 10: Type of languages spoken by the children by wave (n = 1,031)**



Notes: Children could speak more than one language type. This question was not asked at Wave 2

**Tabular version of figure 10**

	Wave 1	Wave 3	Wave 4
English	94.0	99.0	100.0
Indigenous language	18.0	20.0	21.0
Foreign or sign language	3.0	5.0	4.0

Dominance in languages spoken by the children was reported at Waves 1, 3 and 4 (see Table 40). At Wave 1, primary carers of the older cohort (n = 423) were asked to report the language fluency of their children. There were 86.1 per cent of children who were dominant in English, 10.6 per cent who were dominant in an Indigenous language and 3.1 per cent who were equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language. In Waves 3 and 4 primary carers of both cohorts (n = 1,031) were asked to report the fluency of the language(s) of their children. In Wave 3, 85.3 per cent of children were dominant in English, 7.5 per cent were dominant in an Indigenous language and 4.0 per cent were equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language. By Wave 4, 86.0 per cent of children were dominant in English, 7.9 per cent were dominant in an Indigenous language and 4.8 per cent were equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language.

**Table 40: Dominance in languages spoken by the children by wave, per cent**

Wave	Dominant in English	Dominant in an Indigenous language	Equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language	Missing data
Wave 1 (n = 423)*	86.1	10.6	3.1	0.2
Wave 3 (n = 1,031)	85.3	7.5	4.0	3.3
Wave 4 (n = 1,031)	86.0	7.9	4.8	1.4

\* This question was not asked for the younger cohort in this wave.

At Wave 3, primary carers were asked about the kind of English spoken at home. Approximately half of the families (55.7 per cent) reported that their English did not contain any Indigenous words and would sound the same as that spoken by a non-Indigenous person. English that was 'sometimes mixed with a few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander words' was used in 28.0 per cent of children's homes and English 'mixed with lots of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander words (which might be difficult for a non-Indigenous person to understand)' was used in 15.9 per cent of children's homes.

At Wave 3, primary carers were asked whether they would like their child to learn an Indigenous language at school. Learning an Indigenous language at school was valued by almost all of the primary carers in the study. Half (51.4 per cent) indicated that they would like an Indigenous language to be available as a second language at school, and 28.0 per cent indicated that they would like their child to learn an Indigenous language in a bilingual program, learning both English and an Indigenous language. Some (10.0 per cent) indicated that they would like the study child to learn an Indigenous language as a compulsory second language and very few (0.9 per cent) wanted an Indigenous language to be used as the main language at school, with English taught as a second language. Few primary carers (7.7 per cent) did not want their child to learn an Indigenous language at school.

## Language environment and support

At Waves 2 and 3, the 1,031 children's language and literacy support was described. There was consistency in the percentage of children who were read a book in the last week (Wave 2 = 82.1 per cent, Wave 3 = 82.9 per cent)<sup>1</sup> and the percentage of children who were told an oral story in the last week (Wave 2 = 69.1 per cent, Wave 3 = 70.8 per cent). By Wave 3, many of the children were able to read themselves and 79.0 per cent were listened to as they read in the last month. The people who read, told stories and listened to the children read included parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, teachers and others, demonstrating wide family and community support for language and literacy development.

## Speech and language competence

Primary carers were asked two questions regarding whether they had worries about their children's communication (see Table 41). The first question considered whether primary carers had worries about how their children talked and made speech sounds. There were 13.5 per cent of parents who were concerned at Wave 1 (7.2 per cent 'yes'; 6.3 per cent 'a little'), 17.3 per cent at Wave 3 (8.0 per cent 'yes', 9.3 per cent 'a little') and 21.4 per cent at Wave 4 (11.6 per cent 'yes'; 9.8 per cent 'a little'). The increase in the percentages relates to children's language development as they grow older. In Wave 1, those in the younger cohort were just learning to talk (most were 0 to 2 years old). In later waves the children were talking, so speech and language concerns would be more apparent. The primary carers' main area of concern was that the children's speech was not clear to others (Wave 1 = 7.3 per cent, Wave 3 = 9.3 per cent, Wave 4 = 12.3 per cent). The second question considered whether primary carers had worries about how their children understood what they said. There were 4.4 per cent of primary carers who were concerned at Wave 1, 5.1 per cent at Wave 3 and 5.2 per cent at Wave 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Don't know and refused responses have not been omitted in this analysis.

Another study undertaken by the Australian government, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (n = 4,983) also asked about parental concern regarding their children’s speech and language competence. These findings were similar to those reported by *Footprints in Time* families. That is, when children were 4 to 5 years old, 25.2 per cent had concerns about their children’s speech (11.8 per cent ‘concerned’, 13.4 per cent ‘a little concerned’), and 9.5 per cent had concerns about their children’s understanding of language (4.4 per cent ‘concerned’, 5.1 per cent ‘a little concerned’) (McLeod & Harrison 2009).

In Waves 3 and 4 primary carers were asked whether they were receiving intervention (e.g. from a speech pathologist) for children’s speech and language difficulties. In Wave 3, there were 6.7 per cent of the entire sample receiving intervention for expressive speech and language difficulties and 2.3 per cent who were receiving intervention for difficulties understanding language. In Wave 4, only those in the younger cohort who were identified as having a speech or language concern were asked about receiving intervention. There were 9.0 per cent who were receiving intervention for expressive speech and language difficulties and 1.8 per cent who were receiving intervention for difficulties understanding language. Primary carers were asked to indicate why the children were not receiving speech therapy and their responses were entered using free text. The reasons included that they were on a waiting list, could not afford to pay to visit a speech pathologist,<sup>2</sup> their teachers had not suggested that intervention was required, they thought that their child would grow out of their speech difficulties, and they were seeing other specialists. These reasons resonate with other Australian studies of children with speech and language difficulties (McAllister et al. 2011; Ruggero et al. 2012), indicating reasons that children did not attend speech pathology services included long waiting lists and because parents were waiting for teachers to recommend intervention before they made contact with a speech pathologist.

**Table 41: Primary carers’ concerns about their children’s expressive and receptive speech and language competence over time, per cent**

Wave	Concerns about how your child talks and makes speech sounds				Concerns about how your child understands what you say			
	Yes	A little	No	Missing/other	Yes	A little	No	Missing/other
Wave 1 (n = 1,031)	7.2	6.3	81.3	5.2	1.7	2.7	95.1	0.5
Wave 3 (n = 1,031)	8.0	9.3	82.5	0.2	1.9	3.2	94.9	0.0
Wave 4 (n = 611)	11.6	9.8	78.6	0.0	2.0	3.3	94.6	0.0

Note: These questions were not asked of the older cohort in Wave 4.

## Summary

Indigenous Australian children in *Footprints in Time* included in the current article were culturally and linguistically diverse. Many were multilingual with some speaking up to seven languages. Most of the children spoke English (with all of the children speaking English by Wave 4). One-fifth of children spoke an Indigenous language, and the percentage slightly increased over the four waves of data. Indigenous Australian children have rich cultural and linguistic traditions and their speech and language competence is promoted through family and community experiences, including book reading and telling stories. Almost all primary carers wanted their children to learn an Indigenous language at school in some capacity. Primary carers were concerned about children’s speech and language competence at similar rates as reported for all Australian children. While some children were receiving speech pathology services, others were

<sup>2</sup> Free speech pathology services are available in community health settings, and in some states also in schools and preschools. There may be a waiting period, and a limitation on the number of sessions offered for free services.

unable to, or did not plan to access services. Encouraging Indigenous children's speech and language competence is an important endeavour for families, communities and society to support children to grow up strong.

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