



## National Centre for Longitudinal Data

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# Parents' involvement in education of Indigenous children

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Research in Australia<sup>i</sup> and overseas<sup>ii</sup> has shown that greater parental involvement in children's learning and educational activities leads to better outcomes not only for the child, but for their families, teachers and schools, and wider community.

*Footprints in Time*: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) collects information about the family, community and school lives of about 1600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The study began in 2008 and follows two groups (birth cohorts) of children, who in 2012 (wave 5 of the survey) were 4–5 and 7–8 years old. By 2012, most children in LSIC had already started school.

This Research Summary looks at the relationship between parents' involvement in their child's educational activities and the children's cognitive (reading and vocabulary) outcomes. Table 1 summarises LSIC indicators of parental involvement and responses in the most recent wave of data available for each indicator.

Table 1 shows that, on average, parents of Indigenous children are substantially involved in their children's educational activities, regularly reading books to them, checking their homework and participating in a number of activities at school. Levels of parental involvement were found to be higher for the following groups:

- parents with higher education (bachelor degree or above)
- partnered parents
- families receiving income from wages and salaries (as opposed to those receiving government benefits only)
- families with higher income (\$800 or more per week after deductions)
- parents in their 30s and 40s (as opposed to younger or older parents)
- families living in urban areas.

The relationship between LSIC measures of parental involvement and children's learning outcomes may therefore depend on the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the family. These variables are controlled for in the analysis that follows.

**Table 1: Measures of parental involvement in educational activities in LSIC**

Measure of involvement	Summary of responses
<b>Reported by parent:</b>	
Number of children's books in the house	<p>In 2012, for all children in LSIC (n=1,249):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 34.9% had more than 50 children's books in the house</li> <li>• 13.1% had 5 or fewer children's books.</li> </ul>
Frequency of checking homework	<p>In 2012, for children aged 7–8 (n=522):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 45.6% of parents checked their children's homework every day</li> <li>• 37.4% of parents checked homework once or a few times per week</li> <li>• 4.4% of parents checked homework less often than once a week or not at all</li> <li>• 12.6% of parents said the child was not given homework.</li> </ul>
Whether someone read a book to the child in the past week	<p>In 2012, 84.2% of children aged 4–5 (n=715) had someone read a book to them.</p>
<p>Whether the child had been to a library in the month before interview</p> <p>➔ [derived]: whether the child had been to a library with an adult relative (not a teacher, friend, sibling, or by self)</p>	<p>In 2012, 61.3% of children aged 4–5 (n=714) had been to a library in the month before interview.</p> <p>➔ However, most visits to the library were with a teacher. Only 14.8% of children had been to a library with an adult relative.</p> <p>For the older cohort, the question about library visits was last asked in 2011 (wave 4), and had a similar response pattern.</p>
Whether the parent participated in a range of school activities, such as visiting the child's class, attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering etc. (see also teacher-reported measure)	<p>In 2011, for children who were 6–7 years old (n=528), 94.5% of parents participated in at least one type of school activity; 52.8% of parents participated in four or more different types of activities.</p>
<b>Reported by child:</b>	
List of all people who they would go to for help with homework (including 'no one')	<p>In 2012, 12.7% of children aged 7–8 (n=505) said they had no help with homework from their family (only from a teacher or from no one).</p>
<b>Reported by teacher:</b>	
Whether parents of the child participated in school activities, such as visiting the child's class, attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering etc.	<p>In 2012, for all LSIC children with teacher data available (n=462), 91.3% of parents participated in at least one type of school activity; 24.0% of parents participated in 4 or more different types of activities.</p>
Teacher's subjective assessment of the level of parental involvement	<p>In 2012, for children aged 7–8 (n=202):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 28.2% of children had parents who were very involved</li> <li>• 38.6% had parents who were somewhat involved</li> <li>• 18.3% were not involved</li> <li>• in 14.9% of cases the teacher did not know the parents enough to comment.</li> </ul>
Parent-teacher meetings: how many were offered by the teacher, and how many were attended by parents	<p>In 2012, for children aged 7–8 (n=191):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The overwhelming majority of teachers (95.8%) had offered at least one meeting to the child's parents, and 18.8% offered 3 or more meetings.</li> <li>• Of the parents who were offered at least one meeting by the teacher (n=177), 53.1% of parents attended all meetings that were offered by the teacher, 28.2% of parents missed one meeting, and 18.6% missed two or more meetings.</li> </ul>

## Relationship between parental involvement and learning outcomes

Children's learning outcomes are measured in LSIC using the following instruments:

- **Who am I?** – a school readiness test which asks children to copy figures, draw a picture and write their name, numbers, words and sentences. In 2012, the test was administered to the younger LSIC cohort (4–5 years old), with scores ranging from 0 to 43 (maximum possible score 44) and a median of 25 (n=656).
- **Renfrew** – a vocabulary test where children are asked to identify and name up to 50 images of increasing difficulty. In 2012, this test was administered to the younger LSIC cohort (4–5 years old). The children's scores ranged from 0 to 49 (maximum possible score 50) with a median score of 25 (n=698).
- **PAT Reading** – a reading comprehension test, with total scores scaled according to the difficulty level, was administered in 2012 to the older LSIC cohort (7–8 years old). The scores ranged from 17.3 to 130.3 (the test has no maximum possible score), with a median of 88.6 (n=418).

Most of the parental involvement indicators were found to be strongly associated with all three learning measures in bivariate analyses (that is, where one learning outcome was compared against one measure of parental involvement and no other factors were taken into account). However, it can be expected that parents who actively participate in one aspect of the child's learning are likely to be more active in other aspects as well, so looking at measures of involvement in isolation may exaggerate their importance. In addition, as shown by the previous analysis, demographic and socio-economic characteristics of families are likely to influence both the involvement measures and the child's development, so not controlling for family background may result in biased estimation of the effect of parental involvement on child's outcomes. Therefore, the analysis needs to account for all measures of parental involvement and family characteristics in one comprehensive model.

Once all parental involvement variables are taken into account, and the family characteristics controlled for, some involvement indicators retained their significant relationship to children's outcomes:

- For the younger cohort (4–5 years old), **the more books the children had in the house the better their vocabulary was**: on average, children with 11–30 children's books in the house knew 2.7 more words on the Renfrew test than children who had only 0–10 books; children with 31–50 books knew 4.8 more words and children with 51 or more books knew 5.1 more words.
- The number of children's books in the house also had a significant albeit weaker relationship with the *Who am I?* test score: children with 31 or more books in the house scored on average 1.6 points higher than children who had fewer books. For the *Who am I?* test, having been to a library and having been read a book in the past week also improved the score, and the more active the parents were in school (according to the teacher) the higher the score.
- For the children in the older cohort (7–8 years old), **going to the library was associated with a PAT Reading score increase** of 12.3 points if the child went to a library with an adult relative<sup>iii</sup>, and of 9.4 points if they went to a library with someone else. **Having no one to help with homework was associated with a decreased reading score** (by 10.7 points), **as was having parents who were not involved in the child's education** (according to the teacher's assessment) — this lowered the reading score by 10.0 points.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the LSIC data demonstrates that parental involvement in the child's education is associated with higher learning outcomes for the Indigenous Australian children in the study. This relationship held even after the family's characteristics were taken into account. However, it is still possible that the observed relationship between parental involvement and learning outcomes is not a causal one: one possibility is that parents whose children are more capable (and achieve higher scores on tests) may try to foster that achievement by participating more actively in their education — in this case, the impact of parental involvement on learning outcomes would be overstated in the analysis presented above. Further research to confirm the nature of this relationship would add value to the conclusions in this Research Summary.

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<sup>i</sup> Emerson, L, Fear, J, Fox, S & Sanders, E 2012, *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra.

<sup>ii</sup> DCSF [the Department of Children, Schools and Families] 2008, *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education*, Nottingham, UK.

<sup>iii</sup> For the older cohort, the indicator for having been to the library in the month before interview was only available in wave 4 (conducted in 2011).

A more complete version of this research is available at:

**Department of Social Services (DSS) 2014. 'Parental engagement in child's learning and development', in *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children—Report from Wave 5*, DSS, Canberra, available from <[www.dss.gov.au/lisic](http://www.dss.gov.au/lisic)>.**