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Gender, Culture and Intervention: Exploring Differences between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Children's Responses to an Early Intervention Programme

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Evaluation of a group parenting programme in the Northern Territory of Australia showed significant differences in benefits for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal boys and girls. The analysis considers whether boys and girls from different cultural backgrounds present with different problems; whether parental expectations for boys and girls differ and whether the intervention activates different responses in different settings. Conclusions suggest that there is a need to closely examine the 'cultural logic' of interventions, the appropriateness of their assumptions about child development and hypothesised mechanisms of change in different settings. © 2012 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2012 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Australian governments are increasing their investment in 'evidence-based' early childhood services. Framed by national policies to reduce Aboriginal disadvantage, the development of services and interventions in early childhood is now the subject of comprehensive joint agreements between Australian and State and Territory governments (COAG 2009). There is increasing readiness to apply internationally well-known early childhood interventions to Aborigines living in the many scattered remote and rural communities of the Northern Territory. In these communities, Aboriginal languages are spoken and traditional kinship remains a dominant influence in family life. However, policy frameworks on early child development provide little

guidance concerning the development of evidence-based interventions for use by Aboriginal peoples and little commitment to research into the effectiveness of interventions and practices across diverse cultural settings. It should not be assumed that 'evidence-based' programmes developed in general populations will be effective in Aboriginal communities.

An often-cited review of the science of early childhood development emphasised the importance of culture, stating that 'this realm of influence is central to efforts to understand the nature of early experience, what shapes it, and how young children and the culture they share jointly influence each other over the course of development' (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Cultural competence is a characteristic of professional and organisational performance in response to cultural diversity and is essential to the sustainability of early childhood services in diverse societies (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p. 12, p. 66). This review has been criticised for its ambivalence, in that it argues for the pervasive influence of culture on child development, while emphasising the lack of evidence concerning culture and culturally competent practice (LeVine, 2010).

In our view, there is a need for explicit theorisation of the logic of change assumed by interventions to assess whether that logic 'fits', or effectively engages with, trajectories of child development and the many and varied parenting styles of Aboriginal peoples. These questions extend beyond cultural competence, understood in terms of the organisation of programme delivery. They refer to the 'cultural logic' of interventions, the appropriateness of their assumptions about child development and hypothesised mechanisms of change in different cultural settings.

Aims: examination of programme outcomes by gender and Indigenous status

This article examines some outcomes of an early intervention programme implemented in the Northern Territory from 2005 to 2009. The project was called, *Let's Start: Exploring Together for Indigenous Preschools* (Robinson and others, 2009). It was based on a programme called Exploring Together, originally developed in metropolitan Melbourne, drawing on international research evidence. It was implemented both in remote Aboriginal communities and in urban Darwin from 2005 to the present.

In an earlier article, we had described the implementation of the programme in different social contexts, contrasting differences in participation and retention between non-Aboriginal, urban Aboriginal and remote Aboriginal populations (Robinson and others, 2011). In that analysis, it was noted that outcomes varied by gender for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. This study aims to explore these findings more closely. It is divided into two parts: the first sets out findings of the formal evaluation pertaining to differences in outcome by gender and Indigenous status; the second interprets these findings, drawing on qualitative ethnographic and practice-level observations.

The Exploring Together Preschool Program was a manualised intervention targeting children referred for behavioural and social-emotional problems (Reid and others 2008). Implemented in the NT as Let's Start, referrals were mainly by early childhood teachers, sometimes by parents or grandparents. The programme was conducted over the 10 weeks of a school term for weekly two-hour sessions. The sessions had a multi-group format with a parent-child interactive group for one hour, followed by parallel sessions for the second hour: a parenting group for parents only, and a children's social skills group, each led by two group leaders.

Groups of around six children were selected and their parents approached and invited to attend. Inclusion criteria were flexible and primarily based on age, gender and type of problem as well as the parents' capacity to attend with the child. Each child attended with one parent throughout the 8–10 weeks of the programme. Groups were therefore large, with around 12 parents and children and four trained group leaders (two for the parents' group and two for the children's group). In remote community settings, at least two group leaders were trained members of the local Aboriginal community. Over 90% of parents attending the programme with their child were mothers; of the few fathers attending, all but two were non-Aboriginal fathers in the Darwin programme.

The main programme outcome measures were behavioural: children's behaviour change measured by the Ngari-P (NP), a 36-item parent inventory and 43-item teacher inventory of children's behaviours, and the 25-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), also administered to both parents and teachers (Goodman, 2001; Robinson and Tyler, 2008). The SDQ has four main five-item subscales: Emotional symptoms; Conduct problems; Hyperactivity; Peer problems. Its general validity for use among Indigenous people has been well established (Zubrick and others, 2006). The six-item Kessler 6 (K6) questionnaire was adopted as a measure of parents' psychological state (Kessler and others, 2003). Both scales showed more than acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha values at referral of 0.743 and 0.733 for Parent and Teacher SDQ scales, respectively, and 0.895 and 0.943 for Parent and Teacher Ngari-P scores respectively (with roughly half of participating parents and one-sixth of teachers Aboriginal). General hypotheses were that participation in Let's Start would lead to significant reductions in problem behaviours that would be sustained at follow-up and that sociodemographic variables (age, gender, Indigenous status and location) would predict attendance and other programme outcomes.

The profile of children in the evaluation sample of those attending one or more sessions of the programme is described in Table 1. The main change in composition over three data points was increasing representation of Tiwi Islanders with low attendance of urban Indigenous children in the final Indigenous sample (Robinson and others, 2009, 2011). Most Indigenous children in this sample are of Tiwi descent.

Table 2 describes changes in mean problem behaviour ratings by teachers and parents using two measures between programme beginning (referral) and final assessment at six-month

Table 1: Descriptive statistics^a of total attending one or more sessions (*N* = 110)

Sample characteristic	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	SEM
Male gender	110	0.67	0.47	0.04
Age (years)	110	5.01	0.92	0.09
Age 3–5 years	110	0.68	0.47	0.04
Attended 1+	n/a			
Attended 50%	110	0.79	0.41	0.04
Prop. attended	110	0.67	0.27	0.03
Indigenous	110	0.57	0.5	0.05
Tiwi Indig.	110	0.44	0.5	0.05
Valid <i>N</i> listwise	110			

^aMeans for dichotomous variables are expressed in decimal form, e.g. Indig. Mean 0.57 = Indigenous are 57% of total sample.

Table 2: Significance and size of change, referral to six months' follow-up

Paired samples	Mean	SD	SEM	95% CI		<i>T</i>	d.f.	Sig. (two-tailed)	Cohen's <i>d</i> ^a
				Lower	Upper				
Parent P1 – P4 NP	15.71	22.89	3.20	9.27	22.14	4.90	50.00	0.00	0.62
Parent P1 – P4 SDQ	2.12	5.69	0.80	0.50	3.74	2.64	49.00	0.01	0.38
Teacher T1 – T4 NP	20.15	38.91	5.40	9.32	30.99	3.74	51.00	0.00	0.48
Teacher T1 – T4 SDQ	2.71	6.85	0.95	0.8	4.62	2.85	51.00	0.01	0.39

^aStatistics computed from the pooled variance (original standard deviations, uncorrelated). 1 = referral; 4 = follow-up at six months.

follow-up. All scores indicate significant change in the direction of improvement, with moderate effect sizes at follow-up.

The results of comparison of scores of those attending half or more of sessions with those attending less than half of sessions indicated a dosage effect: increasing programme attendance was associated with decreases in children's problem behaviour, and higher attenders outperformed lower attenders by about two to one. Further analysis of mean differences between paired scores was conducted for a range of covariates, specifically Indigenous status, gender and age (Table 3). The distribution of covariate effects on change scores showed a consistent pattern of gains across the various assessment types and points of observation. All Indigenous groups showed reductions in problem behaviours, with the smaller size of the urban group reflected in lower significance levels. However, non-Indigenous groups generally recorded higher reductions than either Indigenous category. Males generally recorded greater improvement in behaviour than females, with both genders showing higher reductions at follow-up than at programme end. The influence of age on reduction was inconsistent, although the older groups (perhaps because of higher attendance levels) showed higher rates of problem reduction, particularly at follow-up.

The variable pattern of influence of sociodemographic variables on behavioural outcomes warranted further analysis to identify possible explanatory effects to establish whether unique combinations of values across the sociodemographic influences might explain more than each effect by itself. Multivariate procedures were employed to address the question of whether unique combinations of gender and Indigenous status exert similar effects on measured behaviour change across both types of parent and teacher scales.

Table 3: Mean change scores by Indigenous status, gender and age

Paired (differences ^a) covariates	P1P3NP mean	P1P4NP mean	P1P3SDQ mean	P1P4SDQ mean	T1T3NP mean	T1T4NP mean	T1T3SDQ mean	T1T4SDQ mean	K61K63 mean
Non-Indig.	15	22.52	4	4.17	16.81	17.4	2.27	3.9	2.71
Urban Indig.	14.11	9.5	1.11	-1.75	19.88	23.6	-1.88	-2	0.67
Tiwi Indig.	1.59	10.21	0	0.74	7.44	21.92	2.38	2.65	0.79
Female	7.17	14.74	1.21	2.1	10.29	19.78	3	4.67	0.86
Male	9.98	16.28	2.27	2.13	13.73	20.35	1.27	1.68	2.14
Age ≥ 6 years	7.9	19.81	2.15	3.19	2.57	25.7	0.43	1.65	2.2
Age ≤ 5 years	9.54	13.83	1.88	1.62	17.33	16.69	2.47	3.37	1.58

Mean differences greater than twice their SEs are shown in bold.

^aCode for 1 = referral; 3 = programme end; 4 = follow-up.

Table 4: Mean change scores, Ngari-P and SDQ by gender and Indigenous status*

Gender	Sample pair changes ^a	Non-Indigenous			Indigenous		
		Count	Mean	SEM	Count	Mean	SEM
Female	P1 – P3 NP	19	10.33	4.13	17	4	5.42
	P1 – P4 NP	19	13.56	6.91	17	15.8*	3.10*
	P1 – P3 SDQ	19	2.25	1.26	17	0.17	1.11
	P1 – P4 SDQ	19	4.00	1.94	17	0.55	1.56
	T1NP – T3NP	19	1.45	12.62	17	20	11.13
	T1NP – T4NP	19	3.00	10.93	17	36.56*	10.27*
	T1SDQ – T3SDQ	19	0.45	2.05	17	5.80*	1.43*
Male	T1SDQ – T4SDQ	19	2.78	1.82	17	6.56*	1.99*
	P1 – P3 NP	28	17.33*	4.74*	46	4.29	4.58
	P1 – P4 NP	28	28.29*	8.37*	46	6.94	4.23
	P1 – P3 SDQ	28	4.88*	0.99*	46	0.26	1.15
	P1 – P4 SDQ	28	4.29*	1.23*	46	0.25	1.56
	T1NP – T3NP	28	28.07*	9.31*	46	6.57	6.27
	T1NP – T4NP	28	27.75*	8.10*	46	16.32	10.01
	T1SDQ – T3SDQ	28	3.60*	1.00*	46	0.10	1.25
	T1SDQ – T4SDQ	28	4.75*	1.51*	46	0	1.63

Mean change greater than twice the SE is shown in bold; change greater than three times the SE is in bold*.

^aP = parent; T = teacher; 1 = referral; 3 = programme end; 4 = follow-up; e.g. T3SDQ = teacher SDQ score at programme end.

Basic statistics showing counts, means and standard error values for the score reduction for each subsample and for both relevant assessment scores (Ngari-P and SDQ) are shown in Table 4.

The pattern of statistically significant differences across all paired change samples shows a concentration of problem behaviour reductions among non-Indigenous males and Indigenous females. Despite the small sample sizes, change scores for all of these subsamples are greater than three times the standard errors of their mean values, an indication that the probability of their values being equal to zero is well below one in a hundred times ($P < 0.01$) due to sample error. The other differences noted are those for non-Indigenous females: Parent Ngari-P score pairs between referral and programme end (top left-hand cell P1 – P3 NP); the change to follow-up (P1 – P4 NP) is just short of significant at 1.96 times the standard error of the mean. Parents' SDQ score to follow-up (P1 – P4 SDQ) is similar. These differences are more likely to have been due to sampling error. Conversely, change scores for Indigenous males are discouraging. Only one of these (Teacher Ngari-P from referral to follow-up) falls well above zero (most are about zero or well within the range of one standard error), but even this fails the test of significance (at only 1.6 times its standard error). Apart from the change scores just noted, the same largely applies to non-Indigenous females. This interaction effect has considerable implications for interpretation of programme outcomes, as there is a clear, non-additive effect (in size and significance) across the Indigenous/gender dichotomies.

Discussion: outcomes by gender and sources of contextual variation

Epidemiological and clinical research suggests that differences in the rate and severity of problem behaviours in boys and girls emerge by about the age of four years – the age targeted by Let's Start (Keenan and Shaw, 1997). A review of evidence found support for two

theses: first, that girls' more rapid cognitive and social-emotional development at this age leads to a reduction in problem behaviours; secondly, that socialisation patterns respond selectively to boys' and girls' behaviours, and favour the development of internalising problems (depressed mood, anxiety, behavioural inhibition) among girls, but anticipate and even allow externalising problems (aggression, oppositional behaviour, attention problems) among boys (Keenan and Shaw, 1997). Elements of socialisation favour different kinds of normative resolution of problem behaviours in boys and girls that are primarily mediated by parent-child relationships and parental expectations. These vary across cultures.

The findings reported for Let's Start highlight the possibility of variations in problem, process and effect. If, for the purposes of this discussion, we leave aside variability of referral and rating by teachers and parents and variable delivery by practitioners across contexts, the main sources of variation can be summarised in terms of three hypotheses, namely that the observed differences in programme outcomes can be explained by:

- Differences in problems at presentation that may reflect actual differences in incidence of problems among the gender/Indigenous subgroups
- Differences in response to intervention by boys and girls
- Differences in the processes activated by the intervention in different cultural settings based on different potentials for response by participants.

Presenting problems of boys and girls

As a preliminary test of the hypothesis of different presenting problems, an analysis of problems based on scores on the four subscales of the parent-rated SDQ was conducted (a paired means comparison, one-way ANOVA, followed by a Bonferroni *post hoc* test of each group against the other three groups).

Owing to the small sample sizes for each category, differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls on all but one of the four subscales failed to reach significance. Overall, it appeared that non-Indigenous females and Indigenous males (groups appearing to benefit least from the intervention) were *higher* in SDQ *total* scores, both groups in the low clinical range. However, it is striking that Indigenous girls showed significantly lower scores from the others on the items of hyperactivity subscale (mean differences significant at the 0.05 level). Non-Indigenous boys were lower on the emotional symptoms subscale, although this just failed to reach significance with the current sample. The significantly lower scores of Indigenous females on one subscale lends some support to the hypothesis that differences in the profile of presenting problems account for some differences in programme outcomes. The lower distractibility and better concentration of Indigenous girls at this age may underpin their capacity to respond to the programme. More detailed investigation of differences and similarities between presenting problems is clearly justified.

The findings may point to issues of measurement. There is a need to test for any differences in responses of teachers and of Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents to externalising and other behaviours as measured by instruments such as the SDQ. Whether the two behavioural measures are equally sensitive to change across the behavioural profiles of all participants may need investigation. From a practice-level perspective, numerous individual cases contradicted the aggregate outcome pattern. For example, case analysis for some Tiwi boys showed highly significant changes in behaviour, verbal and social skills and attentiveness

along with improved parental responses that were not fully captured by the standardised teacher and parent behaviour scores.

A preschool Tiwi boy of four years was referred for hitting other children, crying and frequent running away. His parent-rated SDQ score was 22, well in the range indicating clinically significant problems for a standard population (17–40), but not extreme. He had recently been returned to his parents after a period in foster care. His mother had in the past been neglectful and violently abusive. At the time this boy was referred, she had a new baby and attended a domestic violence course with the boy's father. The boy would not speak, would roll on the floor and bang or break things when seeking his mother's response. He would cry, sulk and retreat behind the furniture if group leaders gave attention to other children or required him to wait his turn. He would punch other children with little provocation.

Attendance at ten sessions over two terms saw remarkable improvement in the boy. After two months, he began to speak, to respond, to wait his turn, to help. The improvement undoubtedly flowed from the consistency and intensity of attention given by group leaders to the pair, a form of containment of their interactions. There were relapses in her behaviour – at one point she feared that he would be taken into care again. However, she became much more responsive. Participation restored some reciprocity between her regard for him and her preoccupation with the baby. Given the history of neglect, the programme created an opportunity to 'repair' aspects of the parent-child relationship that produced an observable, sustained effect.

The boy's SDQ score at programme end was no longer in the clinical range and the improvement was sustained at follow-up. Improvements were in hyperactivity and conduct problem items. Although consistent with observation, this was an understatement of difficulty and of the change achieved. Is the programme more effective with some kinds of severe difficulty for Aboriginal boys than the overall outcome suggests? Aggregate change scores may flatten out important gains by some children across the sociodemographic categories and may not be a sufficient basis for a final judgement about the effectiveness of the programme for specific needs in different contexts. Cultural differences and the individual differences identified cannot be operationalised as variables and resolved by large sample sizes alone; outcomes need to be measurable for whole persons (Bornstein, 2010).

Assuming that various behaviour profiles are measured with equal sensitivity and accuracy, it is not clear that the amplitude of change caused by the programme for different behavioural profiles predicts longer term outcomes of greater or lesser significance. A smaller measured change in 'internalising' behaviours might potentially be more significant than a larger change in 'externalising' behaviours, depending on what, how and when longer term outcomes are measured and in what sociocultural contexts. Short-term changes in behaviours in response to treatment will not predict all classes of outcomes – academic, social and psychological outcomes – equally. Longitudinal study of measured outcomes within cohorts is needed to resolve these questions.

The programme's model of change: same intervention, different mechanisms?

The programme logic of the intervention is multidimensional. Firstly, the multi-group format targets parent-child interaction (in the interactive group), children's social skills (the children's group), and parenting and parental self-efficacy (in the parents' group). Secondly, its content and organisation promote social learning and skills development as well as therapeutic effects. Does it activate the same or different processes of response in different cultural settings?

Each child attends the programme with one parent – usually the mother. The pair participates in weekly group sessions of interaction with four to five other pairs. The group activity involves games, singing and turn-taking that set parents and children the task of joining in with all others, and, for the parents, of assisting the child to participate and to regulate behaviour. The activities require cooperation between parent and child: for example, an extended ‘dyadic’ task each week requires parent and child to focus on an activity – making a story book with pictures, making a collage or playing a particular game.

Language differences are accommodated by employment of local community members as group leaders and use of songs and some discussion in local language. However, differences between styles of participation in remote Aboriginal communities compared with urban settings affect the functioning of the interactive group. All persons in remote communities are known to one another and are in acknowledged ongoing relationships (relate to one another as kin), although not of the same degree of closeness. Children are usually in the group with classmates, some of whom are kin and playmates outside the school as well as in the school.

In the urban groups, this is not the case. Participants are not known to one another beforehand and, although they form some friendships over the course of the programme, the focus of the experience is concentrated on their joint attendance as parent and child. In the interactive group, there is no great deal of spontaneous engagement or play with other participants. This may have the effect of reinforcing the concentration on the performance of the dyads. In the case of remote Aboriginal parents and their children, from the outset, some spontaneous interactions are based on their existing familiarity, so that parents easily allow their children to as it were leave the dyad and interact with other children, sometimes taking time out to talk to each other when this happens.

However, in addition to the absence of ongoing relationships in the urban setting, there are differences based on culturally shaped styles of interaction: the mainly non-Aboriginal urban parents are accustomed to engaging the child directly in an instructional way, making eye contact, explaining and talking to the child in response to various behaviours, such as wandering of attention, frustration or impatience, inability to sit still or to understand and comply with a task. Such intensifications of dyadic responsiveness to regulate interaction by remote Aboriginal parents tend to be less frequent and are less sustained. They more often respond by allowing the child to retreat and to engage with the other children: there is an ebbing and flowing of attentiveness to one another as each regulates intensity of demand by leaving to engage others and returning. The parent sits back and the child turns his attention to what another parent and child are doing, or to what some other children, who have similarly detached themselves, are doing together. The ebb and flow of cooperation and concentration in the dyad are often subtly motivated by moments of frustration, disagreement and minor misunderstanding, which see either parent or child withdraw. At the same time, there may be a lively conversation between parents and between children, while they refocus attention to one another and to the tasks of the group.

Differences in the Aboriginal mothers’ expectations about boys and girls appear to be reflected in these patterns of interaction. Aboriginal mothers and their daughters stay more closely in contact, while the boys seem to be allowed, even expected to wander off, react to other stimuli and disengage in response to frustrations of the task. Girls may be attentive to what the others are doing and engage with others by calling out, but are less likely to detach

spatially from their mothers to do this. In response to tension over interaction with boys, mothers often show frustration and react with certain styles of teasing or mild 'growling' that seem to provoke distancing and disengagement by their sons and sometimes to result in shows of defiance by them. With the girls, tension or disagreement is less likely to see this kind of distancing interaction, but is more likely to be contained and to manifest itself in more subtle shows of non-compliance, ambivalence, refusal to listen – called 'stubbornness'. For both boys and girls, there are difficulties for parent and child 'tuning in' to the other's mental state. Note that these are tendencies rather than absolute differences between styles of response to boys and girls.

Different expectations about independence for boys and for girls may have consequences for the effects of the programme. Normative social expectations favour independence for boys and an orientation to other males, including, but certainly not limited to, their fathers. The girls are expected to follow their mothers as well as female kin and peers. The interactive group's focus on dyadic cooperation appears to help Tiwi mothers and daughters to achieve improved reciprocal responsiveness. The relative lack of distractibility and hyperactivity noted above for Indigenous girls might favour this outcome. For mothers and sons, this effect may be much more uneven: the focus on the dyad may, in fact, be working against aspects of what the mother is trying to achieve for her son in terms of independent engagement of other people, the father, perhaps father's kin or older male siblings in everyday life, and so in a sense is either resisted by her, or may not lead to forms of responsiveness that are sustainable outside of the group setting.

A Tiwi mother agreed to attend the programme with her son. However, she was reluctant to attend, although available and located nearby. One day, she absented herself just as the programme was about to commence, when the group leader saw her husband nearby and spoke to him about attending instead (as the boy was there, ready to start). He entered the room to start, and suddenly his wife appeared and sat down with her son and his father. She was much more content for the two of them to attend, and to allow her husband to take the lead in the sessions with the boy. She was uncomfortable with a situation, which saw her having to respond to his behaviour alone. Normally, both her husband and her own older children would be the significant actors in social responses to the boy and her reactions mediated by theirs.

In the interactive group, some mothers show a little discomfort at some behaviours (clinging, attention-seeking and sitting on lap) that elsewhere they might resist. Some respond awkwardly to the active, collaborative engagement the programme appears to promote. Mothers thus may tend to show more sustained patience and responsiveness in working through conflicts and tolerating ambivalence more consistently with girls than with boys, allowing the latter to be distracted by the group without seeking to re-engage them. They use the group's availability to manage the intensity of dyadic cooperation and to regulate interpersonal boundaries and reduce anxiety. For some individuals, there may be resistance to the intensification of dyadic responsiveness that is promoted by the programme.

A working assumption of the programme has been that, insofar as the intervention is responding to the adjustment problems of children referred by their teachers at school, it is likely that the effects of the programme on the children's behaviour reflect the role of the primary caregiver, most often the mother in facilitating the transition to school and the child's behavioural adjustment between home and school settings.

This brief example illustrates that gender differences in outcomes may need to be explored in terms of different family characteristics and roles. For non-Aboriginal families, the mother's role was clearly central to both boys' and girls' negotiation of adjustment to school, with fathers tending to play a supportive role – albeit with fairly wide variation in degrees of involvement of fathers in getting the child to school, engaging with teachers and so on. In most cases where the father's involvement was central, he was the attending parent. For Tiwi children, although the mother was often the key person managing children's early school attendance, there was almost always significant influence by siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles of the child who might lead in organising the household in the morning. These others might assist or confound the parents' attempts to have the child present for school each day – parents were rarely the sole source of adult influence or authority. The child who for whatever reason was encountering difficulty at school had many options for refusal to attend or refusal of parental direction. Exploration of the influence of household relationships on attendance, or indeed the possibility of response pedagogically in the classroom is beyond the scope of this article. However, given the multiple sources of influence on children's behaviour, the programme's capacity to effect change needs to be augmented by additional strategies that reach out to their families.

In summary, given the different normative and cultural expectations about child development and the different relationships between participants in different settings, it is plausible to suggest that in some senses, the 'same' intervention may well activate somewhat different processes for children and family members of different sociocultural backgrounds and with different presenting problems in different community contexts.

Conclusions: the cultural logic of intervention

These interpretations suggest that a number of factors might combine to produce differential effects of the Let's Start programme for Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls. There are indications that boys and girls from different backgrounds are referred to the programme with somewhat different behavioural profiles. While this may reflect different incidence of problems across these groups, it may also reflect specific cultural influences on child development. Different cultural expectations about behaviours for boys and girls are observable in styles of interaction between mothers and children, suggesting that the same programme may elicit different responses for parents (mothers) and boys and girls, with some dampening of treatment effect for some Indigenous boys and their mothers. Normative patterns of interaction may, in a sense, reinforce what appears as the distractibility of boys, by promoting their engagement with other children at the expense of engagement with parent. They point to different expectations of parents about boys' and girls' readiness to learn from them, about the independence of boys and girls and about the orientation of boys to males, both their peers and adults. The relationship of such 'problems' at this age to later developmental outcomes needs further exploration through a longitudinal study.

Despite methodological qualifications, the evaluation findings are generally consistent with analysis of cases and with ethnographic observations about parenting and child behaviour in participating communities. They suggest the need to continue to review the programme's logic and methods of delivery, paying attention to (a) the framing of intervention practices within the interactive group; (b) the engagement of mothers with regard for their expectations about their children's development and for the constraints on their sense of responsibility and efficacy or agency in extended family life; (c) the engagement of family members

who do not normally attend, and extending the role of males in programme delivery as a means of engaging fathers and other family members to augment the effectiveness of the programme for Indigenous males. There were many cases that showed that the programme did achieve significant benefits for individual boys and girls, suggesting the need for investigation of specific treatment effects with different presenting problems. More valid and sensitive measures may be informative at the level of clinical practice.

This analysis suggests that cultural competence is not a matter of tinkering with cultural symbols and other external aspects of programme design. It rests on the logic of the intervention, that is, its fit with patterns of problem behaviour and how these are perceived within specific communities, and its fit with expectations of child development and with their real embodiment in patterns of interaction between children and caregivers. The development of effective clinical and therapeutic practices needs to be attuned to parental self-understandings and expectations about children's development and to the cultural significance of observable patterns of interaction with children.

On the basis of this experience, it is not enough for governments and communities to simply adopt right-sounding approaches – even if well supported by research in general populations. There needs to be investment in evaluation both at sufficient scale and with sufficient sensitivity to capture important differences in meaning, response and effectiveness for different clients, with different problems and different potentials for change.

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