



# Speech Pathologists working in Early Intervention Programs with Aboriginal Australians

*Please read the Important Notice on the reverse of this Fact Sheet.*

## **Facts about communication problems affecting Aboriginal children**

Aboriginal children are generally at a higher risk of health and developmental problems, due to extreme socioeconomic disadvantage caused by higher unemployment rates, lower educational standards, overcrowded housing and poorer general health (Matthews et al. 1995). They are about twice as likely to be born with low birth weight (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999) which places them at a higher risk of developmental problems, such as failure to thrive.

Aboriginal children have extremely high rates of middle ear disease, with very early onset and low recovery rates. Studies show that between 15% and 67% of aboriginal children (some as young as 4 months) have bilateral perforated eardrums (Morris, 1998, Leach et al. 1994). This can lead to middle ear disease, which in turn causes conductive hearing loss. When hearing loss is present for long periods or occurs early in life, development of listening, speech and language skills can be affected. Difficulties with the development of the home language can lead to behavioural and academic problems, especially when there are cultural differences between the home and the preschool or school environments (Lowell, 1993). The home language is not always Aboriginal English, although it is the language spoken by some 80% of Aboriginal people - in remote areas children may speak an indigenous language or a creole as their first language.

## **Facts about Aboriginal English**

Whilst Aboriginal English is the main language of more than 80% of Aboriginal Australians (McKay, 1996), it varies across Australia, with some varieties being more similar to Standard Australian English. Aboriginal English differs from Standard Australian English in its phonology, syntax, pragmatics, discourse structure and lexico-semantic system (Malcolm et al. 1999). Aboriginal English is of considerable social importance to its speakers as a means of maintaining a minority culture, and signalling group affiliation, (Eagleson, 1982; McKay, 1996). Diagnosis of language disorders in speakers of Aboriginal English is complicated, as some characteristics of Aboriginal English may be misinterpreted as evidence of language disorder, leading to over-identification. Conversely, characteristics of language disorder may be mistaken for characteristics of Aboriginal English, leading to under-identification. In Western Australia, Aboriginal English children are under-represented in language development units and speech pathology clinics (Oliver et al. 1999).

In the Australian education system Aboriginal children are a minority group which as a whole achieves poor levels of literacy and poor retention rates at higher education levels (Department of Education, 1994). These educational difficulties have been linked to cultural and linguistic differences between the home and the school (Walton 1993).

There is a need to examine the needs of Aboriginal English speakers from the perspective of their own community, with local initiatives being recommended. The urban Aboriginal community has its own special set of characteristics and needs, which must be taken into account and which cannot be glibly regarded as the same as of those who live in more remote areas. (Eagleson, 1982).



## Facts about speech pathologists working with Aboriginal children and their communities

Speech pathologists covering remote communities play a role in ensuring access to other specialist medical, allied health or educational services. They also have a role to play in consulting with community services, such as pre and primary schools, child care centres, health centres or Strong Women Programs, aiming to ensure coordinated care for clients. Resources must often be developed from scratch as existing materials may have little relevance to the community. Standardised assessments are usually inappropriate for people from remote Aboriginal communities due to culture and language differences between them and the standardisation population.

In remote communities speech pathologists work wherever possible with Community Based Workers. These workers are based in the community itself and can provide:

- assistance with identifying and locating people with communication difficulties and their families
- the opportunity for these people to discuss their needs and perspective in their first language with someone they know
- advice on cultural and linguistic issues relating to the clients needs and possible ways of meeting these
- assistance with specific assessment of communication problems and development of intervention programs

Working without the support of Community Based Workers significantly compromises a speech pathologist's ability to provide an effective and culturally appropriate service.

### Existing early intervention programs and resources

- "Time for talk" is an oral language package (with a screening procedure linked to classroom activities for oral language development) integrating information about second language/ second dialect learning and includes references to Aboriginal English, developed by speech pathologists in collaboration with teachers and Aboriginal parents. Published by EDWA.
- "Do you hear what I hear?" is a CD ROM developed by EDWA with input from speech pathologists. It looks at the effects of otitis media on learning, with specific reference to Aboriginal populations. Contains teaching approaches to minimise the effects of Otitis Media.
- "Growing Children Up" is a flip book designed in Darwin (with substantial Aboriginal input) specifically for use with urban Aboriginal communities, and provides culturally appropriate information on normal child development.
- "Poopajyn Boori Norta Norta Bola" is an Aboriginal resource book for Early Childhood Services, a NSW initiative funded by the Department of Community Services

**References:** A full list of the references used to compile this Fact Sheet is available on request from Speech Pathology Australia

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