

Assessing the Communication Ability of Young Aboriginal Children With, or At Risk for, Developmental Disability



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Abstract

This article reports on a new research project to be conducted in Australia. The aim of the proposed project is to evaluate the utility of a new approach for assessing the communication abilities of young Aboriginal children (3-6 years) with, or at risk for developmental disability. Currently, there are no studies investigating the communication abilities among Aboriginal children who are at risk of expressive language disorders. This has prevented the development of culturally appropriate programs of support (early intervention) to improve the educational and social prospects of Indigenous Australians. Aimed at identifying a culturally suitable approach for assessing communication ability, this project has the potential to enable early intervention to be implemented to enhance children's communication abilities.

Keywords: Assessing; Communication; Young children; Developmental disability; Indigenous Australians

Rationale/Background

Aboriginal peoples experience a higher rate of disability throughout their lifespan in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts [1]. Although current and accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, studies indicate that Indigenous children are 30% more likely, to have a disability than non-Indigenous Australians of the same age, with the majority having a physical disability [2]. The World Health Organisation describes people with disability as among the most marginalised and vulnerable populations in the world [3]. Indigenous Australians with a disability are considered to be 'doubly disadvantaged' due to the additional disadvantage in socially determined areas of health [4]. Aboriginal children with a disability can be considered to have a 'triple disadvantage' due to the additional limitations they may experience during their critical early years of development when they are most vulnerable.

Despite this added disadvantage, little has been published about the needs and experiences of Aboriginal children with a communication impairment and those of their parents/carers

[5]. This neglect was highlighted in a recent audit of disability research commissioned by the National Disability Research and Development Agenda [6]. This audit recommended dedicated funding to 'stimulate disability research that addresses the needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers' and research that pertains to the 'experiences of people with disability as specialist service users' [6].

The proposed research project will assess the communicative acts of young Aboriginal children (3-6 years) who are at risk for communication impairment due to delays in their expressive language development. This project fills a gap as there are currently very few direct culturally validated assessments that account for competence in Indigenous children's communication. In addition, this project will use Indigenous parent reporting mechanisms. Parent reporting has effectively been used to measure prevalence in many studies of Australian children's speech and language (e.g., LSAC, the Sound Start Study). For example, there was an 86.7% match between parent identified concern and direct assessment

on a standardised measure of children's speech [7]. This project will engage First Nation parents, as equal partners, because their knowledge of their children's potential communicative acts will inform the measure of the children's communicative skills.

After more than a decade, the lack of resourcing and investment in the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continues to see unacceptable gaps across a range of outcomes. According to Johnson [8]: The mortality rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-4 years is around twice the rate for non-Indigenous children. We should today acknowledge that it's not just the gap in life expectancy or health or educational results or opportunities, but the gap between words and actions. While more Indigenous children are entering early education, improvements to life expectancy, and infant mortality rates are not closing. A key reason for this is a lack of sufficient funding to vital Indigenous services and programs.

Methodology

Cohort: 20-30 Aboriginal children (3-6 years) at risk for communication impairment will be recruited from the AEIOU Foundation for Children with Autism early intervention centres in Queensland, Canberra and South Australia. Teachers, speech pathologists and parent/carers will be interviewed to inventory the complete communication abilities of the Aboriginal children. This will be collected via 1:1 interviewer assisted surveys. In anticipation of participant access issues due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the parent/carer and staff interviews will be conducted via zoom or telephone. All participants will be recruited via a newsletter/invitation distributed by the AEIOU Foundation). Participants will contact the organization if they are interested in being involved in the research project. Then an Information form and a Participant Consent form will be sent to interested individuals. The consent of the participants will be sought only after the participants directly contact the research team.

Assessment Methods: All Aboriginal children (3-6 years) attending AEIOU Foundation centres for whom informed consent is received will be assessed with the Hearing and Talking Scale (HATS) [9]. assisted surveys. Parents will also be asked if they have any concerns or priorities for their children. The HATS tool has been validated for use with First Nation children and families. Those children who score 6 or more months below the norm level for their age group will then have their potential communicative acts assessed using the Inventory of Potential Communicative Acts (IPCA). The team will also gather the perceptions of parents/carers/teachers/therapists about the strengths and issues faced by children in listening, talking, attention, behaviour and participation at preschool. This will be collected via 1:1 interviewer.

The IPCA will be adapted and validated during this study. The IPCA is an informant-case assessment that covers a wide

range of communication forms and functions. This assessment will allow the identification of what communication forms and functions are reported for Aboriginal children who are at-risk for communication impairment due to having a 6-or-more-month delay with respect to expressive language development (as determined by the initial HATS screening). The IPCA will identify existing communication forms used by the children and the meaning or function of those forms. The IPCA considers a range of communication forms beyond just speech (e.g., gestures, body language, facial expressions, vocalizations). Identification of these forms and their corresponding meaning is critical as these are the building blocks from which parents and teachers can then develop the child's communication abilities by transitioning the child from the use of the early communication forms captured by the IPCA to the more symbolic language forms screened by the HATS.

Conclusion

This project aims to make a unique and significant contribution to local and international literature and advance important clinical aspects of communication assessment and identification of risk for communication delay and/or impairment among young Indigenous children. A reliable, yet practical and easy method for assessing potential communicative acts would prove useful to professionals and carers with respect to increasing the individual's engagement.

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