

## **The State, Cultural Competence and Child Development: Perspectives on Intervention in the North of Australia**

*Gary Robinson*

Menzies School of Health Research,  
Centre for Child Development and Education

### **Abstract**

Policies to ameliorate Aboriginal disadvantage increasingly focus on early childhood and show a growing readiness to apply internationally well known evidence-based interventions to Australian conditions for Aboriginal families, children and youth. This trend has some important implications.

Firstly, capturing the place of young people in colonised societies is a difficult conceptual task that needs more than one disciplinary perspective. Socio-demographic trends form a powerful influence underlying ethnographically observable patterns of relationship. In the Northern Territory (NT), the ratio of young Aboriginal people to older people was at its highest late in the twentieth century, when there was a very large surplus of children with a much diminished cohort of people in their forties and older. Former hunter-gatherer societies are now ageing as cohorts of the period of very high fertility grow older. The competencies and vulnerabilities of today's young parents and householders were acquired under conditions very different from those experienced by their parents and grandparents and are now being put to the test. Arguably a crucial challenge for anthropologically informed practice is to see that intervention is able to support, rather than undermine or further confound the development of those competencies among the young.

Secondly, the tendency to reduce complex issues of social change and development to single-focus interventions may be inherently problematic in communities where multiple stresses and pervasive social change overwhelm the effects of intervention on individuals. Against this, strategies aiming to build participation or control at the community level are unconvincing without culturally competent and professionally credible tools to help build needed competencies or address problems of risk and vulnerability in early childhood.

Thirdly, there are gaps in policy concerning the rationale for adopting early childhood interventions: there is a lack of clarity about just what is worth doing and about what evidence should guide implementation. Here, policy ambivalence is exacerbated by deficiencies of the sciences of child development in respect of Aboriginal peoples. The implicit cultural logic of many interventions may simply not sit with the cultural logic of child development and parent-child relationships

in some contexts. Interventions are likely to be ineffective and unsustainable unless they are supported by proven systems of practice and unless they are capable of tapping into normative expectations about child development in a given context. They need to be backed by knowledge of different patterns of family functioning and, perhaps more importantly, a regard for the cultural life of families and their children. These principles can be illustrated with material from an early intervention program adapted for implementation in NT remote communities.