

Article brief

Raising children in the Nunga Aboriginal way

Malin, M., & Campbell, K. (1996). Raising children in the Nunga Aboriginal way. *Family Matters*, (43), 43-47.

Abstract

This article provides a snapshot of some aspects of Aboriginal child rearing. It argues that Aboriginal child rearing practices that may be seen in a negative light by non-Aboriginal people are, in fact, effective means for preparing Aboriginal children to deal with the conditions they will encounter as adults. These findings have important implications for the decisions made by non-Aboriginal service professionals who work with Aboriginal families in urban environments.

Article summary

Non-Aboriginal professionals often judge Aboriginal child-rearing practices negatively, and this can have 'devastating consequences' (p. 43). This ethnographic study conducted over four years follows the child-rearing practices of two Nunga¹ Aboriginal families and two 'white'; Australian families in order to illustrate 'the ease with which certain different child rearing practices, despite their effectiveness in preparing children for adulthood, can be viewed negatively by people from other cultures' (p. 44). Data were collected through observations, video and audio recordings, interview and discussions, and findings were corroborated by informed people from both cultural groups.

Findings

Video footage compared several activities, with a particular focus on the picnic outings of Nunga mother 'Dorothy' and Anglo mother 'Ann' to reveal significant differences in their parenting styles. Dorothy adopted a hands-off approach, allowing her children autonomy in when and what to eat, whether or not to swim in the cold water on a winter day, and how they played together. Ann, on the other hand, exerted greater control over her children's actions and etiquette, and intervened in sibling interactions. Dorothy's parenting promoted self-sufficiency, responsibility, and resilience through exposure to challenges. Ann, however, prioritised a structured and controlled family meal, and the maintenance of order. Dorothy used indirect

¹ The term 'Nunga' refers collectively to South Australian Aboriginal peoples.

methods to influence her children's behaviour, and relied on teasing and scaring at times to exert control. In contrast, Ann preferred direct communication and guidance to manage her children's conduct. For Dorothy, it was important that 'her children learned to accept the consequences of their own decisions by being allowed to make decisions about actions – actions that would not be permitted in Ann's family' (p. 45).

Both Ann and Dorothy reviewed the video footage of the other, and each noticed significant differences. For example, Ann expressed frustration at Dorothy's perceived lack of control and supervision over her children, while Dorothy 'felt that Ann seemed to want everything to be "just right", even at a picnic' (p. 44)

Conclusions

The study showed that Dorothy's child-rearing goals were consistently met. She used a range of indirect strategies such as selective attention, non-intervention, modelling and loaded conversations to nurture her children's independence, affiliation, self-regulation, and resilience. However, such practices could be misconstrued by outsiders from a different culture with different values and traditions. The misconstrued perceptions, often compounded by the Aboriginal family's visible poverty, detract from or obscure the real achievements of Aboriginal parents who have definite and deeply held aspirations for their children.

The authors hope that this article provides a better understanding and alternative perceptions of Aboriginal child-rearing practices, and enable non-Aboriginal Australians to become more aware of issues facing many Aboriginal Australians.

Key take-aways

- Aboriginal child-rearing practices are often misinterpreted and viewed negatively by non-Aboriginal professionals and workers.
- Nunga parenting techniques encourage children's independence, self-regulation, and self-reliance, which are highly valued in Nunga culture.
- Non-Aboriginal professionals are encouraged to gain more understanding of Aboriginal child-raising practices and the issues Aboriginal Australians are facing.

Further reading

Colquhoun, S., & Dockery, A. M. (2012). *The link between Indigenous culture and wellbeing: Qualitative evidence for Australian Aboriginal peoples*. Centre for Labour Market Research, Curtin University.

Malin, M. (1990). The visibility and invisibility of Aboriginal students in an urban classroom. *Australian Journal of Education*, 34(3), 312-329.