

Overview

Ben Edwards

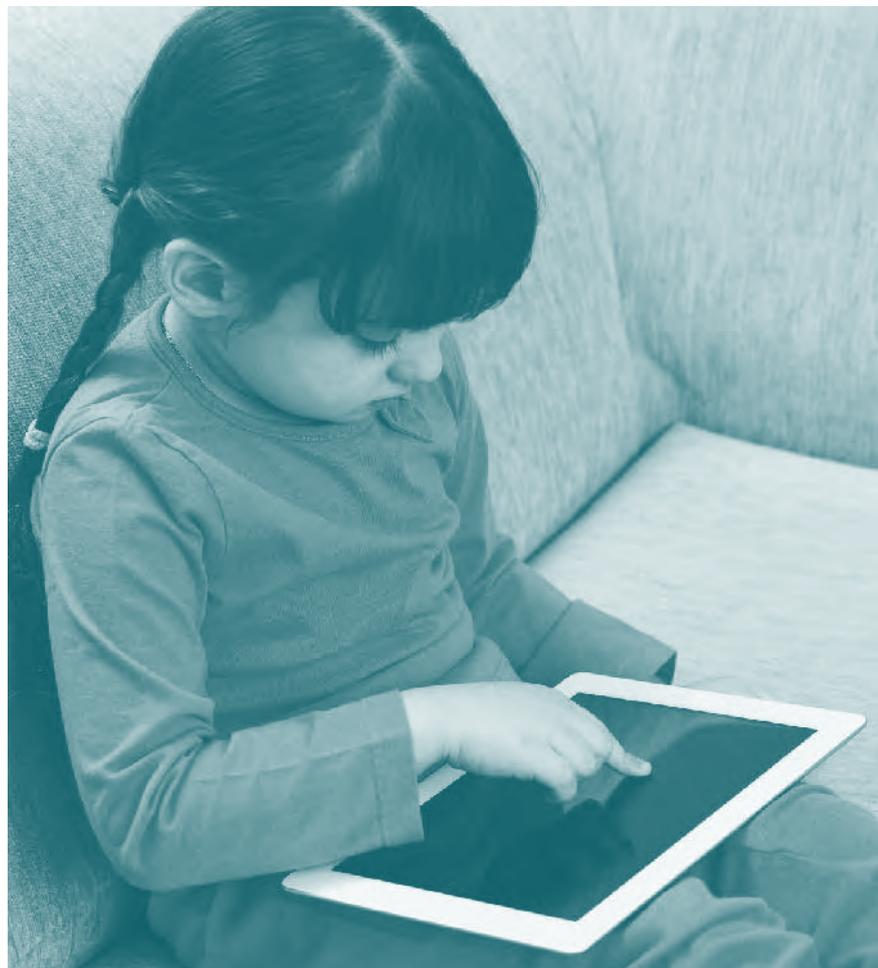
The articles of this edition of *Family Matters* are mainly based on presentations from the *Growing Up in Australia* and Footprints in Time Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) Conference that took place from 15–16 November 2011 in Melbourne. As such, there are two sections of this edition, the first focuses on papers using data from LSAC and the second on papers focusing on the use of data in LSIC. Both highlight the power of longitudinal data and the potential for the rich information collected to enhance our understanding of children’s development and inform better policy-making for children.

In the LSAC section, Bittman, Rutherford, Brown and Unsworth test whether access to digital technology and new media are more important than watching television and reading books, in terms of the development of children’s vocabulary and language acquisition. They also ask whether parents have a role in providing a context for accessing and mediating children’s “new media” experiences. The authors’ results suggest that a parent’s role in helping their children negotiate new media is important, and that reading is a key element in the development of children’s vocabulary and language skills.

Barnett, Roost and McEachran report on a national evaluation of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPPY), a parenting program targeted at disadvantaged families that supports parents to read to their children. The paper highlights that LSAC is playing an important role in child development research in Australia by providing a set of valid and reliable measures of children’s development. The authors also use some novel methodology in that they employ the LSAC sample as a comparison group to the surveyed sample who received HIPPPY. The evaluators used the same measures that were used in LSAC as in their HIPPPY sample, and a statistical procedure called propensity score matching to “select” a group from the LSAC sample that were similar to the HIPPPY group so that they could evaluate the effectiveness

of HIPPPY. This study highlights that LSAC can be used in sophisticated ways to “benchmark” the effectiveness of social programs, given that the LSAC sample is large and representative of the general population of children. The evaluators reported promising findings of the effectiveness of HIPPPY in improving parenting and the home learning environment.

The next article in the LSAC section dovetails nicely with an evaluation of a program focused on encouraging parents to read to their children. Farrant reviews the literature and reports on several studies he and colleagues have conducted using LSAC data on the role of joint or shared attention when reading books to children and how this enhances



school readiness and subsequent academic achievement. These studies suggest that differences in joint attention and book reading account for differences in the children's vocabulary by family socioeconomic status (Farrant & Zubrick, 2011).

Taylor and Edwards present some of the first national estimates of the influence of housing on children's development, using the rich information collected in LSAC on housing characteristics. They find that children residing in public housing have much worse emotional and behavioural problems and a poorer vocabulary. Children who were 4–5 years of age also had significantly worse outcomes when exposed to higher rates of residential mobility.

The section focused on LSIC begins with an overview of the study by Bennetts Kneebone, Christelow, Neuendorf and Skelton. They provide an outline of the study design, including the timing of the survey waves, the method of data collection, the responding sample at each wave and location of the survey sites. Information is provided on how to access the data, some examples of how the data have been used previously and some future developments.

Dodson, Hunter and McKay give a brief history of the LSIC survey and rationale of the data and survey methodology. They analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the survey and identify some useful research questions using the LSIC data. Two of the authors have been heavily involved in the survey—Professor Dodson has been the chair of the LSIC Steering

Committee since 2003, and Associate Professor Hunter was a member of the design sub-committee and a Steering Committee member from 2003 to 2011—and as such provide some very nuanced insights into the strengths and limitations of the study.

Very little is understood about post-separation parenting among Indigenous families. Walter and Hewitt use the LSIC data to make a significant contribution to what is a limited evidence base. They describe the demographic characteristics of children who do not reside with both biological parents, the amount and pattern of contact with the parent who lives in another residence and patterns of payment and receipt of child support for children. They find that parental separation is an even greater issue in the Indigenous community than in the general population, with two out of five children in the LSIC study living in households without both biological parents, and doing so when they are under 4 years of age.

Finally, Little, Sanson and Zubrick report on the temperament of Indigenous children; something that has never been undertaken before in any previous study in Australia. Temperament is a relatively stable pattern of behaviour that is evident from birth. Temperament is thought to have biological origins but can be influenced by environmental factors. Given that temperament has been found to play an important role in children's psychosocial adjustment, it is important to understand the structure of temperament as well as the associations with children's adjustment. Little and colleagues report that temperament among the LSIC sample has a similar structure to non-Indigenous samples; however, data users should be aware that there are some technical issues with using the temperament data, which they identify and resolve. The three temperamental traits identified have strong associations with children's emotional and behavioural problems as well as parenting styles.

Reference

Farrant, B. M., & Zubrick, S. R. (2011). Early vocabulary development: The importance of joint attention and parent-child book reading. *First Language*. doi:10.1177/0142723711422626.

