My Favourite Book! Young Aboriginal Children’s Book Choices

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by

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My Favourite Book! Young Aboriginal Children’s Book Choices

This study into the reading patterns and choices of three to six year old Aboriginal children revealed that children chose books that promoted social interactions between family members and wider social networks. Books selected most often by the children promoted child agency and problem solving with a cause-effect narrative structure, rather than books of lists and descriptive captions. Fathers of the children were actively involved in contributing to their children’s literacy development and often read aloud to multi-age groups of children in the home. The study revealed that most families had few children’s books in the home and that access to children’s books was limited, while also demonstrating the appeal of good quality children’s literature in generating numerous re-readings of favourite books.

Key Words: Indigenous; family literacy; children’s literature; book choices; fathers; narrative

Word Count: 5,978

Introduction
This article focuses on the reading choices of young Aboriginal children. The study was conducted in a rural township on the Aboriginal Homelands with a high proportion of Aboriginal families. This research was conducted by a literacy researcher, an Aboriginal researcher with strong connections to the research site, and an early childhood researcher who acted as critical friend and reviewed the data, participated in the analysis and commented on the findings. In this way, there were three diverse viewpoints brought to the research: literacy, Aboriginality and early childhood. From a literacy perspective, the research into connections between oral language narrative patterns, print literacy and children’s books was highlighted. The Aboriginal perspective highlighted the importance of cultural authorisation principles, for example reciprocity, joint ownership, mutual obligations and benefits for both the research project and the community. The Aboriginal researcher contributed local cultural knowledge, knowledge of family practices and an understanding of the complexity of living within several competing worlds, along with the undisputed need to improve the literacy learning of young Aboriginal children. The critical early
childhood perspective contributed knowledge of cultural diversity and understanding of dominant privileged views of how hegemony works in unconscious ways, particularly in early childhood research.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it builds knowledge about the development of literacy experiences of Aboriginal children in the age range birth to six years (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2001). Second, it provides new insights into home literacy activities. Third, it provides information about preschool and early years home practices for the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2000).

**Background and significance**

In the wealth of research into storybook reading, shared reading and story-telling to young children, a review of 454 peer-reviewed journal articles by Aram (2008) revealed that researchers have paid little attention to how parents select books for children and the different genres parents choose to read. There is scarce literature on what parents and caregivers read with preschool children and why (Wilkinson, 2003). More importantly for this study, there were no reported studies on what young Indigenous children choose to read or have read to them.

A further meta-analysis of research studies confirmed the importance of early book reading experiences of young children in underpinning their cognitive, social and literacy development (Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995). In the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007) it is reported that the presence of children’s books in the home shows a strong positive relationship with reading achievement. The average reading achievement difference between students from homes with many children’s books (more than 100) and those from homes with few children’s books (10 or fewer) was very large (91 score points, almost 1 standard deviation). Exposure to books in early childhood is linked to later school achievement (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008) and young children’s receptive vocabulary, narrative production and emergent literacy have been found to be highly predictive of their scores on reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary in fourth and seventh grade (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991). Young children need to
have control over several aspects of oral language prior to starting the beginning to read process - phonology, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The size of children’s vocabulary at age three is strongly associated with learning to read and reading comprehension at the end of third grade (Hart & Risley, 2003). Regarding children who speak several languages, young children’s oral language vocabulary acquisition is enhanced through the shared reading of picture books either in English or their primary language (Roberts, 2008).

The literacy levels of Aboriginal children are precariously low, and ‘seven out of every ten Indigenous students in Year 3 are below the national literacy standard, compared to just three out of 10 other Australians’ (Kemp in Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2000, p.4). While many excellent early childhood literacy programs operate in more remote Aboriginal communities and in various rural and urban districts, there have been no previous studies into what young Aboriginal children choose to read and the ways reading is undertaken by significant others. Additionally, there is wide invisibility of Indigenous cultures in book collections and classrooms in Australia generally (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008).

The research questions guiding this study were:

- What books do young Aboriginal children choose to read in homes?
- Who chooses what is read to young Aboriginal children?
- In what ways is reading undertaken by significant others?
- What are the parameters governing the availability of reading material for young Aboriginal children?

**Approach and methods**

In this research project, data was gathered by an Aboriginal researcher from the study area paired with a non-Aboriginal researcher (Colbung, Glover, Rau, & Ritchie, 2007). A case study approach using multiple methods of data collection was employed (Gregory, William, Baker & Street, 2004; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Data collection methods included parent /caregiver interviews, the *My Favourite Book Checklist*, photographs of children and families reading the books and observations on collections of artefacts (reading material) in the home. Importantly, family members were involved as data collectors of children’s book choices.
The research took place 800 kilometres from the state capital city and involved 20 Aboriginal families with children aged three to six years, making a sample of approximately 40 children. The families were selected on the basis that they met the single criterion of having children within the identified age range. The rural study site was selected because it is considered neither remote nor urban and contains a diversity of Aboriginal families. Families differed in their socioeconomic status, home language use and use of early childhood services. Some families had children attending the local child care centre, other families did not participate in formal early childhood programs and lived out of the township, some on Aboriginal Homelands, and there were families who had older children attending the local area school and/or independent school. This diversity of families meant that the children were involved in a range of early learning experiences. The local Aboriginal child care centre was pivotal to the study, recruiting many of the participating families, acting as a collection point for the cameras and advocating the study.

Three home visits were conducted. The first entailed seeking families’ agreement to be involved in the study and sharing information about the study including shared expectations. The second visit involved the researchers interviewing and recording parents’ responses to the home literacy survey, based on the international Learning to Read Survey, PIRLS (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007; De Bortoli, & Cresswell, 2004). The survey allowed data to be collected on the languages spoken in the home, the amount of time parents read to their children, the number of books in the home and the number of children’s books. It also included a question asking the parents to comment on their education level and their view of their financial situation. On this visit, the two researchers delivered the My Favourite Book Collection, which contained 25 books for children aged three to six years. The plan was for the families to read and use the books over a two to three week period. Family members were invited to take photographs of the children engaging with the books using a disposable camera, as well as complete the My Favourite Book Checklist. Families were provided with two disposable cameras, which were later collected and two sets of photographs developed. The My Favourite Book Checklist contained the title of the books, space to record the number of times each book was read, the names of the person who selected the book to be read and the children’s rating of the book from 1-5 (see appendix 1). The photographs and the My Favourite Book Checklist were used as discussion prompts during the third home visit.
During the third and final home visit, the researchers interviewed the parents/caregivers and the children to further explore children’s choice of texts, which may have been additional books in the home, popular culture, magazines and different forms of environmental print (Pahl, 2002). Following the final home visit and completion of the data gathering, the *My Favourite Book Collection* was retained by the family, as was one set of photographs. The provision of books demonstrated reciprocal action and mutual benefits which was fundamental to the focus and success of the project.

**Book selection**

The book selection for the *My Favourite Book Collection* (see Appendix 1) was influenced by research into children’s reading choices (Harris, 2008) and the developmental continuum of children’s narrative skills (Stadler & Ward, 2005). The book selection was undertaken by the Little Big Book Club, a non-for-profit arts organisation committed to the promotion of reading, literature and Australian authors and illustrators. The book selection also incorporated books from the Indigenous Literacy Project Book Buzz (2008) an early literacy project which provides sets of 12 early childhood books to children in several remote communities. There were twenty books in the initial *My Favourite Book Collection*, comprising popular early childhood books with simple narrative structures including descriptions, descriptive sequences and simple cause and effect plots, for example, well known books such as *The very hungry caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell and *Where is the green sheep?* by Mem Fox and Judy Horacek. Several books contained interactive devices such as sound effects and flaps to encourage interaction between parents/caregivers and children (Smith, 2001). Within the twenty books, there were several books which were by Indigenous authors or contained specific Indigenous content. At the research site, in keeping with the collaborative and reciprocal nature of the study, the childcare centre staff requested that five locally written and photographed books were included, making a total of twenty-five books in the *My Favourite Book Collection*.

**Data analysis and findings**

Data analysis involved reviewing the parents’ responses to the home literacy survey, and analysing the *My Favourite Book Checklist* (the family record of what books children selected to be read and
who read to the children), the researchers’ field notes, interviews with parents in the home and the photographs taken by families.

The initial home literacy survey from twenty families revealed that some families have less than 10 children’s books in the home, while others have up to 20 books. There was also diversity in the amount of time parents spend reading with their children and the amount of time parents themselves spend reading in the home, with nearly all parents reporting they spend less than one hour per week reading at home. Overall, the initial home literacy survey revealed that parents had high aspirations for their young children and placed high importance on books and reading for a good start in literacy.

To explore the research questions ‘What books do young Aboriginal children choose to read in homes?’ and ‘Who chooses what is read to young Aboriginal children?’ the results of the My Favourite Book Checklist were collated and tallied. The tally of books selected and read over the two week period revealed that a total of 1025 book were read by families. The books chosen to be read fell into two main groups: the books read most frequently and the books read only once or possibly twice, or not at all in some families. The book Kisses for Daddy was the most read favourite book, with 150 book readings. The Very Hungry Caterpillar and several other books were read repeatedly.

[INSERT Figure 1: The children’s favourite books]

A large number of books (15 out of the 25) were only read once or twice by the families. The books in the non-favourite group included books written specifically for the local community. To further examine the features and format of the books that young Aboriginal children prefer to read or have read to them, sets of two different books on the same topic, one with Indigenous content and the other with non-Indigenous content were compared. On the third visit, researchers asked the children which book in the pair the children liked best. Overall, the children preferred bright, cartoon-style books with cut-outs and flaps, rather than books with specific Indigenous content.
To explore the research question ‘In what ways is reading undertaken by significant others? (parents, grandparents, pre-school teacher, teachers, siblings)’ the photographs taken by fifteen Aboriginal family members were analysed. The photographs were taken by the children, older siblings, neighbours and parents/caregivers. The photographs were used as discussion prompts with parents to further explore the children’s book choices and who selected the books to be read. The three researchers later analysed the photographs from each family to explore: Who is in the photograph?, What social interactions are apparent in the photographs?, Where did the reading take place?, What else was happening?

**Who is in the photo?**
The photographs showed many different people reading to the children. Fathers were shown reading to children including neighbours’ children. There were also neighbours and other family members reading to the children. A strong pattern was older brothers and sisters reading to younger children. This book reading was rarely a one-to-one activity, with many younger and older children and neighbours shown in the photographs. There were a few photographs of a child reading a book alone while an older sibling or a parent took the photograph, but overall reading was a shared activity.

**What social interactions were apparent in the photographs?**
The analysis revealed that there was not a consistent pattern of one-to-one adult-child interaction in the book reading as many individuals took on the role of reader. The interactions around the books were at times adult-child, sometimes child-child or child-group of children, sometimes the father or mother read and at other times, grandparents, aunts or visitors read to the children. The photographs revealed children pointing to the pages of the book and conversations occurring between the reader and the child/ren. The child or children being read to appeared to be conversing about the book rather than passively listening.

Book reading as shown in the photographs and also in the observations made during the home visits revealed that book reading was usually something that happened along with a lot of other activity with numerous activities occurring simultaneously. Family members and visitors in the house watched television or DVDs, played music or computer games while another group was
reading. In most homes, people came and went, moving in to listen for a while without any expectation that anyone would stay and listen for the whole reading time. The young children moved in and out of the book reading as well. Even when two children read their own books, side-by-side, one of the children was looking at the other child’s book and talking about it to the reader. The photographs showed that the mainstream, bed-time reading experience of one parent reading to one child took place rarely. This is similar to the findings of Hill and Nichols (2008) which demonstrated considerable diversity in the literacy interactions in busy families rather than one idealised bed-time reading pattern.

Where did the reading take place?
The photographs showed children reading on the trampoline, on the floor, at tables, on sofas and outside on the verandah. One parent took a photo of the child reading in the car as the family set off on an 800 kilometre car trip to visit other family members in a distant regional centre. For this family and some others as well, the books went in the car when the family travelled.

The following three case studies of participating families, two living on Aboriginal Homelands and one in the rural township, reveal some of the home literacy practices of young Aboriginal children.

Alice 4 and Jeremiah 6
Alice and Jeremiah live with their mother and father in a house on Aboriginal Homelands approximately five kilometres from the township. The walls of the home are filled with framed photographs of family members. Both children regularly attend childcare and school respectively. The initial literacy survey was completed by the father. The family speaks Aboriginal English and English. Dad said that he reads for enjoyment about one or two times a week and there are about 50 children’s books in the house. The parents had called the child care centre when they heard about the study as they wanted to be involved. Mum said she had never been read to as a child but wanted the children to be exposed to children’s books. She bought books for the children from a discount store in the next major town about 500 kilometres away, which meant limited exposure to good quality children’s literature.
When the collection of books was handed out, Alice quickly and excitedly began to open the books, turning the pages and talking to her brother. Alice’s father works long hours and participated in the book reading after eating his evening meal, so most of the reading was done by the mother and a neighbour. A neighbour, who was staying in the house during the week, also read to the children, took photographs and knew some of the action songs from one of the books. Jeramiah also read the books to his younger sister. Jeramiah read all the books except the local photographic books and said his favourite book was Kisses for Daddy.

The family took 36 photographs. These photographs show the books being read in bed, at the kitchen table, in the lounge room and outside on the verandah. Two children were sitting on the trampoline reading during the last home visit. No pattern for when and how the books were read was identified; however, a lot of time was spent reading according to the tally of books read. The tally was 134 book readings in the two weeks of data collection, which is nearly ten books a day. The photographs also showed bedtime reading with the mother on the bed with several children reading before the children went to sleep, as well as many other different book reading times. When a relative visited, she requested that her daughter be involved in the study. While this was not possible, she was able to borrow some of the books and also brought her daughter to the house to read the books.

*Nancy 4*

Nancy lives with her mother and father on Aboriginal Homelands about 8 kilometres from the township and is being homeschooled by her parents. Her parents intend that Nancy will eventually go to school, but this is not a high priority as they are happy home schooling. Neither parent was working at the time of the study, but both parents were busily engaged in range of activities including visiting, shopping and catching up with family.

Similarly to many of the other homes visited in the Homelands, this home contained many visual displays of photographs of family members. The family enjoyed a range of multimodal communication, including television, computers and music. During one visit, older children visiting the house were playing computer games, while one parent was watching a DVD and the other parent was using Facebook.
The family took 11 photographs. Analysis of the book checklist showed that 91 books were read over the data collection period. The books were read in the bedroom, the lounge room and outside. The photographs show a high degree of adult-child interaction, with the adult and the children appearing engrossed in the books and unaware of the camera. In most of the photographs, Dad was reading the books with several children and the interview confirmed that Dad did most of the reading. The parents said that their children, Nancy and her younger brother, directed the reading and pushed the parents to ‘read, read, read’. According to the parents, the children wanted to be read to all the time, ‘morning, noon and night’, not just at bedtime. The parents also commented that ‘these are the only books they have’.

The favourite book was Kisses for Daddy. The parents said they had had requests from visiting parents who wanted to get books for their family as well. They commented that a visiting nephew aged ten, who had been in some trouble at school and had poor reading skills, had been reading aloud to his cousin Nancy.

Catherine 3
Catherine is three years old and is the sole child in a highly social and mobile extended family living in the township. Her grandmother is Aboriginal, her grandfather is Greek and her father is African and now estranged from the family. The family speaks English, Aboriginal English and Greek. Catherine is enrolled in the three year old program at the child care centre and attends on a regular basis. During the week she moves between her two grandmothers’ homes and, as the youngest family member, is treasured by all in the family. The extended family believes that Catherine is very talented and active, and the books were often used to pacify and quieten her. One grandmother said about Catherine, ‘We know that she will be a great athlete, a runner, as she is so fast. She will do well at school as she already knows her numbers and letters.’

The family took nine photographs and a total of 88 books to Catherine by various people in the house. Catherine usually chose the book. In this family, there is a strong orientation towards reading and learning and early on the mother initiated contact with the researchers wanting to be involved in the study. More than 20 children’s books were in the home. The home also had a lot of
multi modal literacy, including television, DVDs, computers and Catherine’s mother had purchased several electronic learning games and electronic books. Catherine’s favourite book was *Kisses for Daddy*, which was read five times day according to her grandmother and mother. An absent dad made this book very poignant for Catherine.

**Key findings**

This study into what books young Aboriginal children choose to read revealed that 1025 books were read in families over a short period of time. The overwhelmingly favourite book, *Kisses for Daddy*. This is a book about a young bear who refuses to go to bed and the Daddy Bear assumes various characters such as a koala and a giraffe to try to get the Baby Bear to give him a good night kiss before bed. The story has the Daddy Bear play acting and using koala, crocodile and giraffe actions and voices. Baby Bear takes charge and claims ‘No kisses for Daddy’ until the end of the story when Baby Bear decides that the kiss will be granted. In the book, Baby Bear has agency and power, in keeping with the views of many Aboriginal families about young children’s individual rights and autonomy. This book was also a favourite in homes where the father was absent and in one family where the father was in hospital.

In addition to *Kisses for Daddy*, other popular books encouraged interaction between the reader and the child/children, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Rocket Countdown* and *Dear Zoo*, and these books were read most often. Several books had the child as the protagonist in control, as in the book *That’s Not My Frog*, a puzzle book where the reader/child explains (to an invisible and not clever adult) why the item could not possibly be theirs. Books of a very simple narrative level (Stadler & Ward, 2005) such as labels, lists, isolated description or caption books without cause and effect or books without character goals and intentions were not requested.

The children, not the parents, usually selected the books to be read. Parents, siblings, neighbours, extended family members or whoever was in the house was asked to read to the child, often again and again. Aboriginal children are viewed by the parents as independent beings with a strong sense of agency and this study’s findings emphasise the parental role as responder to the children’s requests. This contrasts to the mainstream view of children as dependent with the ‘good’ parent in
control, displaying ‘teacher-like’ book reading interaction so that children can be inculcated into the right habits (Nichols, Nixon & Rowsell, 2009).

Parents, grandparents, older siblings, friends and neighbours read to the children. Although family structures were diverse, there were many extended families with grandparents, parents and children in the home as well as visiting aunties and uncles. Neighbours visited often and it was common to have a neighbour read to the child. In several families, the caregivers were foster parents and at times the children returned to their parents and then came back to the foster family. The books went with the children on their many visits to family in different towns and were read in cars, at the houses of others, outside sitting on the veranda or trampoline, and inside the house at the table, on the floor or in the bedroom. Some families read books as a bedtime routine but this was not common. It was more common to have a small group read a book selected by the younger child; for example, an older brother reading to a younger brother, or an older step-brother reading to younger sisters and neighbours reading to a group of children.

The photographs, surveys and checklists showed that fathers were doing much of the reading. While many mothers filled out the initial survey forms, fathers or other males in the house were more likely to do the reading, reaffirming the strong role of Aboriginal men in the upbringing of their children. It may be that in the division of domestic labour, males were to do the reading, particularly as in some families the fathers were at home during the day and the mothers were working outside the home. The favourite book Kisses for Daddy involved the fathers in the reading and the design of the book encouraged the fathers to interact with children as they read. In many studies into family literacy practices, fathers’ involvement has been invisible. Morgan, Nutbrown and Hannon (2009) wrote that fathers are often involved in family literacy practices with their children but are less likely to be visible participants in family literacy programs in childcare centres or homes. They suggest that fathers’ contributions to their children’s literacy development may be underestimated.

Analysis of the parent reading survey showed the parameters governing the availability of reading material for young Aboriginal children. The survey data revealed that some homes had fewer than 10 books and others had up to 20 books. There are few places in the community where books for
children under six year of age can be purchased. The community library in the local area school is usually fully occupied with school activities and the Aboriginal parents in this study chose not to use the library.

In recognition of the importance of print for early reading, this study focused on book reading. However, the study also demonstrated the multimodal communications in children’s homes. In all the homes in this study, the children watched DVDs, played computer games and used or watched other family members use sophisticated phone and music applications. It appears that the multimodal devices in children’s homes are working in parallel with books and many parents commented that the children liked to read books related to the televised shows available by satellite.

**Conclusion**

This study into the reading choices of young Aboriginal children revealed that children choose books that promote social interaction with family members and wider social networks of friends and neighbours. The books were selected by the children and had a theme of child agency and problem solving. The favourite books involved goals and intentions in a cause and effect narrative structure rather than books with lists and captions. Fathers were actively involved in their children’s literacy development and fathers read to multi-age groups of children in the home. This study demonstrated that high-quality children’s literature appeals to children and generates numerous re-readings. The study also revealed that many families had few children’s books in the home and that access to children’s books was limited. The collaborative research methodology involved family members in data collection and this approach promoted extensive book sharing.

**Acknowledgements**

We are truly grateful to the wonderful parents and the young researchers for taking the photographs and collecting data for this study. More importantly, we are grateful to the families for allowing us into their lives and homes. We acknowledge also the staff at the child care centre, area school and independent school for their time, effort and invaluable contributions to this research project.
Figure 1: The children’s favourite books
Appendix 1

My favourite book checklist
Please complete this form each time your child engages with any of the books we have left with you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book No.</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Tick each time read</th>
<th>Who selected book?</th>
<th>Child’s interest level in book (1=low interest and 5=high interest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Possum and wattle: My big book of Australian words</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Alison Lester’s ABC: staring Alice and Aldo</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Five little monkeys: Over 50 action and counting rhymes</em></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td><em>Rocket countdown</em></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td><em>Dingo Dan</em></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td><em>Tractors</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Kisses for Daddy</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Parsley Rabbit’s book about books</em></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td><em>The night Marcus won the flag</em></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td><em>Animals: An Indigenous first discovery book</em></td>
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<td>11</td>
<td><em>I went walking</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Dear Zoo</em></td>
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<td>13</td>
<td><em>That's not my frog</em></td>
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<td>14</td>
<td><em>These are my hands</em></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td><em>Aussie two's like to...</em></td>
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<td>16</td>
<td><em>The very hungry caterpillar</em></td>
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<td>17</td>
<td><em>Where is the green sheep?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><em>That's not my truck</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><em>An Australian 1 2 3 of animals</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>Yoyo’s day</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Additional books from the community</em></td>
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References


My Favourite Book Collection


Additional locally produced books included: *Kids picking quandongs, Making artefacts, Friends care and share, At Minya Bunhii, Little nest babies.*
My favourite book