BACKGROUND

In 2006 the Starlight Children’s Foundation introduced its Healthier Futures Initiative to the Northern Territory (NT). The professional costumed performers, known as Captain Starlight, work in partnership with health care professionals to provide distraction, entertainment, play, and creativity during clinic visits and hospital stays, and deliver positive healthcare education to children utilising NT health care services. Based in Darwin, the program is provided five days per week at the Royal Darwin Hospital as well as to community outreach clinics across the Northern Territory. In 2008 Starlight engaged the services of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH) – predecessor to the Lowitja Institute – to evaluate the impact of the NT Healthier Futures Initiative.1

AIMS OF THE EVALUATION
The evaluation sought to determine both the acceptability and impact of the Healthier Futures Initiative in the NT. In addition, suggestions for improving the program were explored. This snapshot provides a summary of the findings.

WHAT WAS INVOLVED?
Data was obtained through:
- Analysis of program records.
- Semi-structured interviews with health professionals in community health centres, hospitals, and child-care centres; staff employed as Captain Starlight; and other key stakeholders, including school and preschool staff, parents, and community members.
- Observations of the Captain Starlights’ performances, activities, and interactions with participating children and their families.

Using an action research model, the evaluators regularly fed back findings and observations from the field visits to the Captain Starlights and their managers. This feedback provided opportunities for clarification, discussion, and improvements to the program.

WHAT WE LEARNED
The findings fell into three categories:
1. Recognition and Acceptability;
2. Impact; and
3. Recommendations.

Recognition and Acceptability
Overall the evaluation found that Captain Starlight was:
- Recognised by staff, parents, and children;
- Regarded as highly skilled, professional in their interactions, self-sufficient, and non-intrusive;
- Appreciated for their willingness and flexibility in providing support to community initiated activities;
- Able to provide activities that were fun; and
- Provided important play activities for children who often have had little exposure to this type of entertainment and distraction.

"...it gives them exposure to live theatre, live performances...I think the bush kids probably really miss those sorts of experiences...It’s good role modelling for nurses and doctors to see this kind of thing because play often gets left out of things, but we know it improves health."
—Child Care Director

Captain Starlight
- Is recognised and highly valued among children, families, and health professionals in the NT;
- Provides much needed entertainment and play activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- Supports health professionals by reducing the fear, anxiety and boredom children often experience during medical procedures and health checks;
- Enhances the effectiveness of health promotion programs through entertainment and play;
- Encourages attendance at health clinics.
Impact
Health professionals identified a number of positive impacts. These included:
- Improved attendance at clinics;
- Parents and children staying longer at clinics;
- Easier management of clinics;
- The creation of a more welcoming environment which was less institutional and more family-centred; and
- Support of existing health promotion programs.

Recommendations
Recommendations included:
- The promotion of, and continuation of regular visits to hospitals and centres;
- Building the Captain Starlight program into school, preschool, and child care health promotion programs;
- Expanding Captain Starlight visits to additional communities; and
- The recruitment of Indigenous Captain Starlights.

HOW DID WE USE THE EVALUATION?
Since the evaluation Starlight has significantly expanded its Healthier Futures Initiative in the NT through increasing hospital visits and being active at numerous rural and remote community health centres, at Healthy School-Aged Kids screening clinics, and health and community events and festivals. In addition, the program is being piloted, in collaboration with the NT Government, at Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics. With a permanent and respected presence in the NT, the Healthier Futures Initiative continues to be promoted and recommended by numerous health agencies.

“Captain Starlight has been an awesome asset during HSAK (Healthy School-Age Kids Program) rising from 50% of the children being screened in the community in 2011, to 80% in 2012.”
—Remote Child Health Nurse

The findings of this evaluation, including updated program information, have been presented at the Rural Health Conference, 2011, 2013 – Cairns/Adelaide, and the Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Conference, 2013.
**Program Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Term</th>
<th>Medium Term</th>
<th>Long (13+ visits)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1 – 6 visits)</td>
<td>(7 – 12 visits)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction during treatment and consultations increased</td>
<td>Positive mood, anticipation, ‘in the moment’, and reflection achieved</td>
<td>Positive reframing of having a serious or chronic illness and hospitalisation achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to entertainment, play and creativity increased</td>
<td>Self-expression and creativity enhanced</td>
<td>Self-esteem and self-confidence improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mood enhanced</td>
<td>Attitude and beliefs about health care positively changed</td>
<td>Health care participation and treatment compliance increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress and tension reduced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at health clinics increased</td>
<td>Early detection and management of chronic diseases improved</td>
<td>Improved health outcomes achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of healthy living strategies enhanced</td>
<td>Healthy living strategies are adopted</td>
<td>Prevention of chronic illnesses increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for arts activities and play in health services provided</td>
<td>Awareness of the positive impact of arts activities and play in health services increased</td>
<td>Inclusion of arts-based and play activities in the delivery of health services achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and community-based activities provided</td>
<td>Opportunities for family and community social interaction increased</td>
<td>Family and community well-being strengthened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research and Evaluation at Starlight**

Starlight is committed to research and evaluation so that we can ensure our programs are making a significant difference to the lives of seriously ill children, young people and their families. Captain Starlights are professional performers with backgrounds in music, acting, media, visual arts and comedy. If you would like to learn more about our work please email us at impact@starlight.org.au.