

FACTSHEET

Sexual health promotion with Aboriginal young people



We need to be highly proactive and aware of cultural requirements when working with Aboriginal young people around sexual health promotion.

Health disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, including young people, are often linked to issues of accessibility and culturally appropriate practice which stem from delivery of cultural incompetence and discrimination within health institutions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people can face many barriers in accessing sexual health services, information and education, including a lack of access to culturally appropriate resources and services. In turn, this contributes to inequity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's sexual health outcomes.

There are many strengths and protective factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people hold. These include strong cultural identity and belief systems, extensive kinship systems, strong community bonds, cultural and spiritual strengths including connection to Country and ways of learning. It is important to identify how these strengths can be supported and utilised to enhance the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to take control of their own health and wellbeing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are a culturally diverse group. Approaches that are appropriate for one person or community may not be appropriate for others. It's important to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people when planning health programs and activities.

In seeking sexual health care as well as information and education, feeling protected, empowered and culturally safe is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. How we, as health professionals, present ourselves and interact will have a significant impact on how the young person will respond to us, the impact on the consultation, their health outcomes as well as their future engagement with the health system.

NSW Health has recognised Aboriginal people and sexually active young people as priority population groups in the NSW Health STI Strategy 2022-2026. As people working with and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people around sexual health, you have an important role to play in ensuring positive experiences.

The following tips may assist you when working with Aboriginal young people around sexual health.

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Follow these tips

#1

Work alongside and partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services to support all needs of young people, including developing rapport and trust.

You can do this by contacting a local Aboriginal Health Worker or Aboriginal Liaison Officer. They can provide valuable advice about the community you are working with. Consultation is essential when working with Aboriginal communities. It can take time to build trusting relationships – remember to be patient. It is also a good idea, where possible, to invite an Aboriginal Youth Worker, Aboriginal Health Worker or Aboriginal Liaison Officer to provide cultural support and expertise.

#2

Be aware of the Aboriginal definition of health

It is important to understand the cultural underpinnings of the Aboriginal definition of health as the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which the young person lives. This approach to health is communal and holistic.

#3

Be conscious of 'men's business' and 'women's business'

For some Aboriginal people, certain topics are only discussed within their own gender group. Check the level of comfort of the young person and ask permission first before bringing up a new topic. A local Aboriginal Health Worker or Aboriginal Liaison Officer can provide guidance in this area.

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#4

Be conscious that some Aboriginal young people may feel shame about their sexual health

The concept of shame is very powerful for some Aboriginal people and is associated with feelings of inadequacy and disempowerment. It is important to create a relaxed and safe environment. Try to avoid creating a teacher/student relationship. Instead, create a safe, collaborative and open environment for learning. For example, try taking the session outside or sitting together on the floor, or in a circle. Never push people to participate if they seem uncomfortable. Depersonalising an issue can also help – rather than asking personal questions, try asking about young people in general.

#5

Be highly proactive and aware of cultural customs, sensitivities and traditions when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

You can promote safety and ensure cultural competence by upskilling yourself. [The Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council](#), [AbSec](#) and [Family Planning NSW](#) have excellent online and face to face trainings available. Often, local Government Council's also run freely available cultural responsiveness training for the public.

#6

Ensure a 'Welcome to Country' or 'Acknowledgement of Country' is conducted at the start of workshops or sessions according to local and organisational protocols

An Acknowledgement of Country is a way for non-Aboriginal people, or an Aboriginal person who is not a Traditional Owner of the land where the workshop or session is being held, to show recognition and respect for Aboriginal people. A Welcome to Country is only undertaken by Elders or members of their family who are recognised as Traditional Owners of the land or a locally recognised Aboriginal community spokesperson who may be engaged through the [Local Aboriginal Land Council](#).

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#7

Use inclusive language when talking about families and relationships

As with any group of young people, families and living situations are unique. Use inclusive terms such as 'family member' instead of 'mum, dad or parent.' It is best to ask young people the terms they use to discuss their families and relationships. You can then reflect this in your language within the session or workshop.

#8

Consider using visual activities, storytelling, diagrams and interactive activities

Using interactive strategies to promote learning will increase engagement with your session and content. It's important to use Aboriginal-specific resources and teaching materials if they're available.

More info



Visit [Take Blaktion website](#) for culturally appropriate content for Aboriginal communities.



Visit the [Family Planning NSW website](#) for culturally appropriate reproductive and sexual health resources for Aboriginal communities.