

Cultural considerations when teaching Aboriginal students

Background Note

Overview

It is important to recognise that Aboriginal people are diverse. While some Aboriginal students may be completely comfortable with relationships and sexuality education (RSE), it may cause others to feel awkward or embarrassed (what some Aboriginal people call 'shame').

The key to successful RSE in any context is to create an environment which is respectful, supportive and responsive to the needs of students. This requires some familiarity with students' social and cultural influences.

For some Aboriginal people, the topics discussed in RSE might be considered men's or women's cultural business and it may not be appropriate to discuss these issues with or in front of members of the opposite sex¹.

"Sexual health is sensitive, complex and personal. We want to really dramatically change the stats and change the rates of transmission in Aboriginal youth. We want to engage young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to lead honest conversations in their communities about HIV, and about sexual health more generally."

Todd Fernando – ANTHYM: Aboriginal Nations Torres Strait Islander HIV Youth Mob (with permission)².



Strategies for effective RSE with Aboriginal students

To ensure that an RSE program is culturally appropriate, educators can take the following steps:

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- Make personal contact with parents/carers before implementation. Understanding the background and individual learning needs of the students will enable the teacher to plan for and implement a more effective, differentiated learning experience.
- Form strong partnerships with the parents/carers of Aboriginal students, local Aboriginal community members and local elders. A connection between the school, parents, families and local community will be reflected in improvements in student engagement and learning for Aboriginal students.
- Be aware that history has played a part in influencing Aboriginal people's attitudes towards relationships and sexual health, e.g. stolen generations, missions.
- Work collaboratively with Aboriginal staff (including Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) and regional Aboriginal education teams) to draw on their local knowledge and partnership networks and determine the cultural appropriateness of resources and materials.
- Undergo training such as the Mooditj Leader course offered by [Sexual Health Quarters](#).

In order to create a safe space for RSE, it is also important to:

- facilitate cultural respect and ease of communication by making opportunities to split the class into gender groups from time to time, and then find ways to share information gained from each group
- create opportunities for students to practise communicating about relationship and sexual matters
- display respect for, and a basic understanding of, Aboriginal cultures
- acknowledge that certain issues may be embarrassing or difficult to talk about
- build respectful working relationships with Aboriginal students
- create an environment which is supportive and incorporates into learning experiences the knowledge and experience that Aboriginal students have
- not make assumptions about students' knowledge, sexuality and/or behaviour
- use a method for anonymous questions and answers such as the question box which will allow students to acquire knowledge without needing to disclose information which could be seen as embarrassing or shameful
- use visual aids and resources to assist in questioning or when trying to explain something in formats appropriate to students cultural and linguistic background

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- use a variety of strategies such as story-telling, art, humour and dance to cover the range of students preferred learning styles to reduce shame and help students 'open-up' and start talking
- hold community education sessions incorporating sexuality and sexual health issues
- endeavour to normalise sexual health issues and STIs
- display health information around the classroom and school
- develop community peer educators and/or advocates
- provide students with website addresses and phone counselling services where they can learn more or seek help.

Adapted from *Teaching Sexual Health*, NSW Education

Department of Health resources

[Let's Yarn!](#)

Let's Yarn! has been developed to make it easier for educators, parents and health professionals to talk to young Aboriginal people about ways of developing strong, safe and healthy relationships. The website brings together useful resources developed by WA Health and other government and non-government agencies around Australia.

[Kaiyai Girl](#)

An interactive resource for young people aged 12-19 years about making choices and being the boss of your own body.

[Yarning Quiet Ways](#)

A resource designed to help parents and carers of young Aboriginal people yarn about strong, safe and healthy relationships.

External related resources

[Young Deadly Free](#)

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Resources to assist in increasing rates of testing and treatment for STIs and BBVs. Includes: videos, animations, factsheets, TV and radio adverts, posters, games, peer education programs.

[Centre for Cultural Competence Australia](#)

Online accredited and competence based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture Competence Course.

1. NSW Aboriginal Sexual Health Resource. *Cultural Respect and Communication Guide*. NSW, 2009.

Postscript

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

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