Key messages

- Body art is a popular form of **self-expression.**
- **Safe** tattooing and piercing **practices prevent the transmission of BBVs.**
- **Tea**



Body art

Body art is a popular form of artistic and self-expression.

There are associated risks with certain types of body art, such as the risk of infection from a blood-borne virus (BBV), if practices are not carried out properly and safely.

Forms of body art

Tattoos - permanent designs on the skin. They are made with coloured inks put under the skin with a machine that uses a needle.

Temporary tattoos - using things such as henna to create patterns and designs on the skin.

Body piercings - holes in the skin that are made so jewellery can be worn. The holes are made with a sharp instrument, often a needle or a piercing gun. Often placed in ears, tongue, nose or lips but can be placed virtually anywhere including genitals.

Brandings - uses heated surgical steel (hot branding) or dry ice (cold branding) to leave a permanent mark or scar on the skin.

Scarification - involves cutting the skin with surgical tools or a laser to create scar tissue.

Body modifications - involves cutting the skin open and inserting stainless steel or silicone implants such as beads and rings.

WA law

It is against the law in Western Australia to:

- **tattoo (or brand)** a person **under the age of 16**
- **tattoo (or brand)** a person between the **ages of 16 and 18 without the written consent** of their parent.
- carry out **intimate body piercing** (nipples, genitals, anal area, perineum) on a person **under 18 years of age, even with parental consent**.
- carry out **non-intimate body piercing** (such as nose, tongue, face, belly button or other skin surfaces except ears) on a person **under 18 years of age without written parental consent.**
- carry out **piercing on the ears** of a **person under 16** years of age **without written parental consent.**

Under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, fines and imprisonment may be applied for breaches of the laws relating to age and tattooing and piercing (although the relevant section of the Act does not apply to body piercing carried out for medical or therapeutic purposes).

Health and safety

If not done in adherence to important safety standards, tattooing, body piercing and other forms of body art carry the risk of BBV (hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV) transmission, as well as bacterial infections, scarring and nerve damage.

These risks may be increased if tattooing, piercing and other body art is done by friends or outside of registered studios. Under health legislation, premises where body art is conducted must be registered with the local government and must comply with infection prevention and control standards.

Tattoos and body piercings are often done with the use of needles. Body art studios will typically open the packaging of the needle to be used on you, in front of you, to ensure you can see they are using safe and clean materials. You have the right to ask if you are unsure if the instruments being used in your body art are clean and safe.

Remember, although all body art studios in WA will adhere to these strict safety requirements, these requirements may not apply overseas. If you are planning on getting a tattoo, piercing, or other body art whilst travelling, it is important that you research the studio and artist, make sure they are reputable, have good reviews, and practice BBV safe methods. Henna tattoos are also popular in some overseas holiday destination and in Australia. While these do not involve skin penetration, they may contain chemicals which can cause skin irritation and allergic reactions.

Cosmetic tattooing (often called permanent make-up) is often performed in beauty salons. It is important to check that they comply with the same safety requirements (i.e. use a new needle and ink each time).

Teaching tips

Some students may already have body piercings or tattoos or might be considering getting one. It is important to tell students to think about the consequences of getting a tattoo or piercing. This includes:

- What are your parents’ opinions on body art?
- What is your school's policy on tattoos and body piercings?
- Does the career you hope to work in have policies surrounding tattoos or piercings?
- Some venues (bars, restaurants, clubs) have the right to restrict entry for any reason, including body art. It is important to be mindful of this when choosing what/where you place your body art.
- If you are getting a tattoo, what does it symbolise?
- Will you be made to take the piercing out or cover up your body art?
- Does the studio use BBV safe methods?

Tattoos, piercings, and other forms of body art can be of cultural significance to some. It is important for teachers to be mindful of this, and their own attitudes/values when teaching about body art to their students.

External resources

Body art, Get the Facts

Body art, Healthy WA

Body piercing, tattooing and branding young people, WA Government

Henna tattooing, Department of Health WA Government

This Educator Note relates to the following Learning Activities

- Blood-borne virus safety

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