Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Factsheet

Talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth about alcohol and other drugs



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General), Tobacco

Tags: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, effective communication

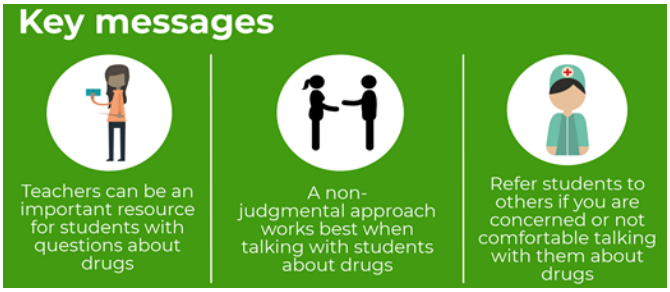
Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Attachments

Talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth about alcohol and other drugs

Key Messages



Talking with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students about alcohol and other drug use

A trusted teacher can be a first point of contact for students to talk about alcohol and other drug use. Teachers can offer advice and support.

However, when you are not comfortable talking to your students about this, it is important to refer your students to other help that might be available in your area. For example a school counsellor, psychologists, or other relevant support services such as Headspace.

As a teacher, you can help young people understand the risks associated with using alcohol or drugs and decrease the likelihood that they will use and experience associated problems (here are some tips of how to do this). **A non-judgemental approach** is most effective when talking about alcohol and other drugs.

Below are some tips to communicate effectively with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students about alcohol and other drug use:

1. Wait until the student is willing to engage and talk about alcohol and other drug use

- Wait until the student comes to you for support. This approach may help in reducing an angry or frustrated response from the student when talking about alcohol or other drug use.

2. Establish and maintain a good relationship with the student

- Take the time to get to know them and build trust before talking to them about alcohol or other drug use.
- A good relationship will make it more likely a student will trust you to talk about alcohol and other drug use.

3. Bring up the topic informally to show that you are someone they can talk to about drug use

- Never make assumptions about what drugs the student is using or not using as students often expect adults to make judgements about their behaviour.

4. Help the student weigh up the good and not-so-good things about substance use

- Avoid using scare tactics or being negative.
- This approach can stop the student from feeling like you are telling them what to do. While discussing the good and not-so-good things, it is important to ensure that the student is aware of the possible harms of drug use.

5. Show that you are listening carefully by summing up what they have just said to you

- Using open questions is a good way to help the student make their *own* decision to change their drug use.

Examples of open ended questions to start the conversation and use during conversation:
"I've noticed a few changes in you lately, and I'm a bit worried that you aren't all that happy...what's going on in your life at the moment?"

"How is your family going?"

"You mentioned that [summarise what the student said], how are you feeling about that?

6. Encourage the student to engage in positive cultural and recreational activities

- Young people are less likely to use alcohol or drugs if they attend school, are involved in recreational activities such as sport, and have a strong support network. As a teacher, you can help them by informing them on the programs available to them in or outside of school.

7. Reassure the student that sometimes it takes many attempts to make change happen

- Let them know that you are there for them when they need you or would like to talk.
- Emphasise that there are many services and other people available to support the student.

8. Encourage the student to talk to someone they trust

- Encourage them to seek cultural and spiritual support and talk to an Elder, family member or friend. Help them to identify a trusted person they can talk with.

9. Inform the student about services that are available if they decide to make changes later

- You can always inform the student about services that are available if they decide to make changes later.

A list of services is provided here.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, the University of Sydney (formally the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney) and Gilimbaa Indigenous Creative Design Agency (2018). Input was received from external Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experts on the Expert Advisory Group.

Positive Choices artwork by Jenna Lee (Larrakia artist, Gilimbaa)

© 2026 Positive Choices | Built by Netfront