Drug prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth: What works?

When selecting resources or programs to use in your classroom, it is important to consider the evidence from research that shows whether they will work. Consider the cultural and personal context and note there may be different or additional strategies that work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

There is evidence about what alcohol and drug school-based programs are effective in the general population. However, there has been little research examining whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students benefit from these programs. However, there has been research into alcohol and drug prevention programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in other settings (e.g. family and community settings).

What prevention programs work?

Programs that combine several strategies have been found to provide the most benefit to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. These strategies include:

- **Drug and alcohol education** which addresses the risks and consequences of drug and alcohol use;
- **Skill development activities**: activities that focus on developing problem-solving skills, drug and alcohol refusal skills, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills and improving self-esteem and self-confidence;
- **Cultural knowledge enhancement**: such as cultural ceremonies, storytelling, and dancing, the use of culturally-specific concepts including connection to country and the use of appropriate artwork and designs;
- **Mainstream programs that are adapted** to specific cultures through collaborating with local communities can also be effective. Adaptation can include changing the content and delivery to reflect unique local cultural values, traditions and language).

What prevention programs don't work?

- **Prevention programs that are designed for non-Indigenous populations** and used with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians, without any changes to fit with cultural context and values;
- **Programs that are forced upon the community**, without any consultation with the community;
- **Prevention programs which stigmatise people who use alcohol and other drug**. This can make people feel isolated, guilty or ‘to blame’.
What's uncertain?

Not much research has looked at whether school-based prevention programs work to reduce drug and alcohol use and related harms among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, particularly for those delivered in classrooms with students from a range of cultural backgrounds. Research is currently underway to explore this.

Recommended Programs

No Smokes

Get involved!

A new culturally-appropriate school-based prevention program is currently under development, based on the effective Climate Schools program. To give feedback or get involved in the development process, contact us and sign up to get more information on the program. We'd love to hear from you.

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.

The summary of what works/doesn't work is based on the conclusion reached by the following reviews:


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