

## Listen to our voices and our stories: Including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in decisions that impact them

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images, voices or names of people who have passed away.

To understand the issues that are impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and how to best provide support, it's important to listen to, and empower the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This fact sheet and accompanying podcast were co-created with and include the voices of two Aboriginal young people, Kahli Regan and Tannielle McHugh.

### Why is it important to listen to and empower young people?

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**A lot of people assume they know what young people want.**

TANNIELLE McHUGH

But they do not. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's voices must be at the forefront of any issues that impact their lives, because they know best about the problems they're dealing with. For this reason, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are also the best people to ask about the solutions which are required. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people provide a voice for their own lived experiences, they are more likely to offer effective solutions, and solutions from different perspectives.



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**We are extremely creative and resilient ... and very self-determined.**

KAHLI REGAN

Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people also strengthens their wellbeing. Prioritising these perspectives enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to gain a sense of agency that can drive change, and reclaim control over decisions that impact their own lives.

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**Oh, I'm actually being listened to. I'm doing something. And that's again about connection ... you're feeling connected to your community by helping the community.**

KAHLI REGAN

## What issues are impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people today?

Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's wellbeing flourished (Dudgeon, Bray, & Walker, 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing is supported through strong connections to culture, kinship and community (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, 2014). These connections and strengths have allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to survive, despite high levels of adversity following colonisation (Milroy, 2014). Colonisation continues to negatively impact the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for example, through intergenerational trauma and through disrupting these important connections (Menzies, 2019; Milroy, 2014). The impacts of colonisation are also expressed through other challenges, such as substance misuse and violence.

Watch the following video (43 seconds) as Tanielle and Kahli speak about the challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people today.

The following statistics provide a snapshot of some of the wellbeing challenges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are experiencing as a result of the historical and continuing impacts of colonisation.

- In 2020, almost 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reported they had been treated unfairly in the past year (compared with 27% of non-Indigenous respondents; Tiller et al., 2020).
- Almost one in four 15 to 24-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long-term mental or behavioural challenge (ABS, 2019).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people under 15 years old are 12 times more likely to take their own lives compared to non-Indigenous young people (Gibson et al., 2021).

Although social media can be an avenue for connection, it can also negatively impact wellbeing. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, access to and use of social media is increasing. Unfortunately, social media can also provide a platform for stigma, racism and discrimination (Carlson & Frazer, 2018). This was particularly prevalent in the lead up to the 2023 Voice referendum, where young people witnessed negative stories and division. Young people are sometimes made to feel 'bad' or 'less human' because of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, and social media provides another channel for this discrimination.

## What does strong social and emotional wellbeing look like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people?

Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a holistic and strengths-based concept of wellbeing, which is centered around connections (Gee et al., 2014). These include connections to:

- body and behaviour
- mind and emotions
- family and kinship
- community
- culture
- Country (land); and
- Ancestors (spirituality).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's SEWB is strengthened through connections with each of these seven domains. For example, SEWB is strengthened through connections to Country (the term often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe the lands they are connected to). This connection is also psychological and spiritual, and doesn't translate into non-Indigenous ways of thinking. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's wellbeing is also supported by rich kinship systems. These kinship relationships place each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in a comprehensive and supportive system, with multiple attachment figures.

It's important you acknowledge and nurture all of these connections to support the mental health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people you work with.

Figure 1: Social and emotional wellbeing from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective (adapted from Gee et al., 2014)



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I like going back home. Whenever I'm stressed out in the city, I want to go back home, feel connected to my family and my Country.

TANNIELLE McHUGH

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We are much more connected to family than a lot of non-Indigenous people are. That's our strength: our kinship and connections. We feel close together.

TANNIELLE McHUGH

## How can professionals help empower young people's voices in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people?

In the following video (58 seconds) hear Kahli talk about how practitioners can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people by creating space for telling stories and listening, and through recognising the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In addition to providing space for listening to the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, professionals and organisations can offer support in the following ways.

- Provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's voices to be heard in your organisation. For example, develop a youth reference group, and include young people in decision-making processes using participatory action approaches. Work collaboratively to determine what young people need, the best way of meeting these needs, and building capacity to support their needs.
- Create a safe space and avenues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to raise concerns, and make changes in response to these concerns. This might involve meeting young people in a space where they feel comfortable to raise concerns (such as outside, or on Country), rather than in a service or clinical space.
- Building a relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people can take time, so be patient. Start by having a yarn to help create a safe space and build trust before getting into any formalities. For example, ask about connections to Country and family/mob. Be mindful of your body language and other social signals.

- Listen without interjecting or judgement.
- Reflect on your own potential biases, which may influence your interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and don't assume all mobs are the same.
- Consult with other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff or services that could help if you don't feel you have the appropriate resources to successfully and appropriately engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

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**I hope for young Aboriginal people to become the positive role models that other Aboriginal young people can see ... and for kids to stand up and say, 'yeah, I'm proud.'**

KAHLI REGAN

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**I'd like to see a lot more Aboriginal people in a variety of industries.**

TANNIELLE McHUGH

To hear more from Kahli and Tannielle, listen to the accompanying podcast episode.



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**Thank you for being an ally and supporting the next generation of strong, deadly and self-determined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

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