

Creating culturally secure schools

What are we trying to achieve?

The aim of the **Solid Kids, Solid Schools** project is to understand the prevention, reduction and management of bullying and aggression in the Aboriginal context and to help schools to implement guidelines and practices to prevent, reduce and manage bullying in the school.

The school needs to develop a solid vision of what it wants to achieve. Some examples could be:

- 'Our *solid* vision is to create an environment where everyone treats each other with respect'.
- 'We have a supportive and safe environment for all school community members'.

For interventions to be successful it is important to understand that bullying is a relationship issue; schools need to address relationships and social skills.

Schools have an obligation to keep all children safe and to provide a nurturing environment for all children who attend. If schools do not have structures in place to support Aboriginal students, they are likely to perpetuate the institutionalised racism that Aboriginal community members expect to feel and see in the educational environment. This is possible when school – community links are established with Aboriginal community members of strong standing, such as **Elders** (Coffin, no date).

Aboriginal worldviews

Aboriginal worldviews encompass societal, cultural, spiritual, customary, health, educational and familial knowledge and traditions. When embedded within educational environments, Aboriginal worldviews lead to:

- organisational frameworks that are consistent with the values and expectations of Aboriginal students and their families
- culturally inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practises
- curriculum content and delivery
- environments that are culturally and community inclusive
- employment of Aboriginal staff
- a model for reframing individual cultural frameworks

Whether Aboriginal children live in urban, rural or remote locations, they identify with varying aspects of their Aboriginal culture. Identity is personal and evolves as individuals grow (Howard, 2001).

Education systems must provide culturally secure guidelines so that staff can respond to the strengths and needs of Aboriginal students involved in bullying (Paki, no date). Positive outcomes can be achieved in schools where there is a genuine desire to establish meaningful partnerships with the Aboriginal community (Paki, no date). There is a lack of acknowledgement in the education sector of the importance of Aboriginal culture in the lives of Aboriginal students and their families. This is reflected in:

- poor management of bullying behaviour among Aboriginal students
- lack of staff awareness and interest in Aboriginal culture
- negative attitude of some teachers towards Aboriginal students
- lack of empowerment for **AIEOs** in behaviour management
- lack of recognition of cultural diversity in many schools
- lack of Aboriginal family engagement in many schools
- poor management of racism issues in schools (Paki, no date)



Recommendations from Sharing Days:

Schools need to create induction programs to help new Aboriginal students feel welcome and comfortable in their new environment. For example,

- First day –
 - student and parents and carers meet Principal and Deputy to discuss child's history and complete form for school-based activities (e.g. hearing testing permission)
 - student and parents and carers meet other students and school staff (**AIEO** (ATA or AEW) and teacher) but student doesn't join class
- Second day –
 - student joins class and is assessed so teacher can direct learning to meet needs
 - **AIEO** (ATA or AEW) works through induction booklet with parents and carers to inform them about:
 - contacting school staff
 - expected behaviour of students



Recommendations from Sharing Days:

- take Aboriginal students on off-site activities with local **Elders** to develop and strengthen a sense of community and cultural pride

- provide students with incursions/excursions celebrating dancing, didgeridoo playing, cultural awareness as part of NAIDOC week and Sorry Day
- make sure there is a wide range of books in the library about Aboriginal culture
- include more Aboriginal history and culture in the curriculum
- invite successful, local Aboriginal role models (e.g. mechanic, hairdresser, nurse, teacher) to schools to talk about their personal journeys

Cultural security



Yamaji

Recommendations from **Sharing Days**

- ‘Enhancing cultural awareness is especially important in facilitating a positive school environment and ethos’

Regardless of location (i.e. urban, regional or remote communities), many Aboriginal people maintain their cultural identity and engage in cultural practices. The cultural diversity of the Mid West Education District ranges from Aboriginal students living in remote areas to students living in larger towns.

Cultural sensitivity and understanding is of utmost importance when working with Aboriginal students involved in bullying. Determining the best approach for students at your school should be undertaken in discussions with Aboriginal staff and local Elders (**Rising to the Challenge in Aboriginal Health by Creating Cultural Security** (Coffin, 2007) and Application of Coffin’s (2007) **cultural security model** to bullying prevention and management in an education setting (Paki, no date)).

AIEOs (ATAs or AEWs) are an invaluable resource.

They can:

- provide cultural-awareness training
- assist with ways to enrich classroom programs
- provide support for Aboriginal students

Investing time in developing a good relationship with your **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) is essential to establishing relationships of trust with Aboriginal children and their families.

Understanding Aboriginal protocols

Relationships developed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are guided by community protocols and developed through trust and respect.

Cultural protocols within communities vary and knowledge of them is needed to work in a particular region with a particular group of Aboriginal people. School teachers need to consult their **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) about how to engage with their local Aboriginal community.

AI (ATAs or AEWs) are an excellent resource to discern how and when to teach particular curriculums and how and when to invite local community involvement in the planning, delivery and evaluation of school programs.



Points to consider

- Wadjela (Wajilla) is the word used by some Aboriginal language groups in Western Australia to refer to non-Aboriginal people.
- Some Aboriginal people use Aboriginal English. It has its own meanings and structures that are different to Standard English.
- Students who use Aboriginal English may be unaware that it is different to Standard English. It is important that they are not penalised or made to feel they are wrong for their use of Aboriginal English when they start school.
- Aboriginal culture is dynamic and vibrant. Aboriginal culture, like non-Aboriginal culture, is real and is happening right now.
- The local people have been in their schools and communities for a long time. They have seen teachers and principals come and go and are valuable resources about why things happen in the community.
- There are cultural protocols associated with death. For example, some groups avoid using people's names or pictures once they have passed away; it is important to find out how your local community undertakes **Sorry Business**.
- Many Aboriginal people avoid eye contact as a sign of respect – it is important to find out how your local Aboriginal community and/or your Aboriginal students feel about this. Where eye contact is impolite, try sitting next to people rather than opposite them.

Yamaji children

It is critical that every **Yamaji** child has a feeling of belonging, importance, being needed and appreciated.



Yamaji wangi

Observations from **Sharing Days**

Bullying between Aboriginal kids may stem from **family feuds**. Generally Aboriginal kids are more concerned about what other Aboriginal kids say to them than what non-Aboriginal kids say. In some towns, divisions among Aboriginal students were associated with:

- where you live (e.g. 'town' and 'out-of-town' kids)
- skin colour (e.g. being 'too White' or 'not Aboriginal enough')
- being too smart (some students were reluctant to participate in more advanced classes because they got teased)
- being friends with white kids



Yamaji wangi

'Lots of the jealousy and bullying stems back to the family – it is just carried on from the parents who are feuding ... which makes it hard for the school'

'Bullying just happens at school because the kids are there ... the school is the meeting place'



Points to consider

- Aboriginal children are very proud of their heritage.
- Aboriginal children come from diverse backgrounds. Some families are better equipped to deal with the social issues and their children reflect this.
- Find ways to celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal culture and learning about all students' backgrounds.
- Many Aboriginal children are shy. They can easily feel '**shame**' by:
 - being put on the spot to talk
 - having attention drawn to them
 - having to do something in front of a group
- There will be times when some Aboriginal children arrive late to school. Sometimes they may need to organise themselves and their brothers or sisters, or there may be family business to attend to.

Yamaji families

It is very important to involve Aboriginal families in the school activities. To reduce bullying, the school needs to make good connections with Aboriginal families so they feel they are a valuable part of the whole school.



Recommendations from Sharing Days

Principals and teachers should:

- Encourage parents and carers to become involved in school committees – especially fathers.
- Provide Aboriginal parents and carers with an opportunity to be leaders in the school.
- Invite and support Aboriginal parents and carers to be lead cultural **Sharing Days** at your school.
- Support multiple opportunities for staff to get to know families (e.g. BBQ or through school social activities)
- Adopt an Elder Program (Nanna/Pop); this has been very successful in some schools.
- run an end-of-term camp; Aboriginal families could be invited to develop, plan, promote and conduct camp activities.
- empower Aboriginal families to confidently deal with bullying, by informing them:
 - who to contact
 - roles of support staff
 - action steps for contacting staff
- contact parents and carers immediately when their child is involved in bullying (bullying/being bullied); it may be necessary to meet parents and carers off the school grounds.
- use a 'Bush Rangers Program' to reward students who demonstrate desirable behaviour, with privileges such as cooking bush tucker, developing survival skills, and painting.

The importance of AIEOs (ATAs or AEWs)

Aboriginal staff are essential to the school as links to the Aboriginal community (**more information on Aboriginal staff**). They are critical sources of information, sensitivity and insight into cultural awareness. They provide the vital links between children, family and schools.





Yamaji wangi

The community emphasised the importance of the role of **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs), Aboriginal Teacher Assistants and other Aboriginal staff in preventing and addressing bullying in the school community.



Recommendations from Sharing Days

- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) should have active involvement in school planning.
- Staff need to be proactive and initiate conversations with **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs).
- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can be actively involved in improving school attendance (encouraging kids to attend school, come with kids to the classroom when they are reluctant, check local play areas to collect kids etc.).
- **Yarning** time with **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) and Aboriginal kids is very important. Staff found this to be an effective strategy in building relationships of trust with the students.
- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can enhance kids' social skills and problem-solving skills.
- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) are very important in liaising with teachers and families.
- **AIEOs** (ATAs and AEWs) should work with principals, teachers, parents and carers to address student behaviour management issues (including explaining procedures to parents and carers and helping parents and carers negotiate with staff).
- **AIEOs**(ATAs or AEWs) to have their own space so they can meet with students and families in a private environment.
- Teachers and principals need to have realistic expectations of the number of students and families **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can support.

New **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) and other Aboriginal Staff



Recommendations from Sharing Days

- It is very important for new Aboriginal staff to be mentored through a buddy system to help them to meet and get to know community members and school families.
- It is also important, where possible, to have a balance of gender, age and experience among **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) employed in the school or area.



Points to consider

- The role of **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) is invaluable.
- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can be a great source of information for staff and students.
- The role of the **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) needs to be flexible so they can be where they are needed around the school and in the community.

The role of the principal

It is crucial for the principal to develop his/her relationships with the local community members based on mutual trust, understanding, and genuine care. This way, school community members can relate to the person rather than the position.



Points to consider

- Some Aboriginal parents and carers may have painful memories of their own schooling and/or have since had unpleasant encounters with principals. This may cause them to be ambivalent about bringing their concerns to the school or the principal.
- The principal's office is often seen as a very formal and authoritarian place and can create a power imbalance. Every care should be taken to avoid using the principal's office for parent and carer interviews and meetings. Instead, try a friendly room or somewhere outside.
- It is easier for the principal to build relationships with students if she/he is seen around the school, in the classroom and in the schoolyard.
- Parents/carers and teachers should talk about the achievements and positive attributes of their child.
- Parents/carers and teachers should have an open door policy so they feel they can approach the school when/if they need to.
- Principals need to be good listeners, and when there is a problem they should

allow the solution to evolve so that everyone feels resolution.

- Though teachers and principals may come and go, by referring to the school as 'our school' they can foster a community sense of connectedness to school staff.

The role of the front office

The first point of contact in the school for parents and visitors is usually the front office. It is through this first contact that impressions are made about the warmth, support and attitudes of the school.



Points to consider

- The front office should be staffed by caring and sensitive people. Having an Aboriginal staff member in the front office is very helpful.
- The staff should always project a welcoming atmosphere of friendship and support.
- It is helpful to have an **AIEO** (ATA or AEW) involved when enrolling Aboriginal students.
- The front office is usually the focal point for the welfare of the children. Children should see the office as a place of refuge and support.
- The office is the perfect place to display the work of children and show off what is going on in the school. Displays are an opportunity to demonstrate the cultural diversity of the school.
- The office should also reflect the community, with pictures and displays of the local community (e.g. local events can be advertised on a bulletin board).