

Better health for Aboriginal youth

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Life expectancy for Aboriginal people is approximately ten years lower than other Australians. The generational transference of past trauma and hardship continues to impact the mental and physical well-being of Aboriginal youth.

So how are Aboriginal youth coping with the stress of fractured culture, families and communities?

Telethon Kids Institute researcher, Katrina Hopkins has studied the foundations of resilience and found having a friend with social skills and a supportive family makes a critical difference to the [mental health](#), and in turn, the [physical health](#), of vulnerable Aboriginal youth.

Dr Hopkins explored how psychosocial resilience (good mental health, despite being exposed to high risk such as violence) also offers protective health benefits.

Dr Hopkins says the research team predicted psychosocial resilience may act as a buffer for physical health so they devised a large epidemiological study that tapped into a cohort of over 5000 Aboriginal youth who had been admitted to Western Australian hospitals.

"Vulnerable Aboriginal youth with a supportive friend were more than twice as likely to have good mental health as those with no supportive friend and significantly more likely to have better physical health than vulnerable youth with no supportive friend," says Dr Hopkins.

The measure of physical health used for the research was drawn from self-reports of asthma symptoms by urban Aboriginal youth, and lifetime physical health problems also reported by their carers.

"These findings highlight the importance of prosocial connections for the healthy development of mental and physical health for youth when families are themselves struggling," Dr Hopkins says.

Dr Hopkins has vast experience working in Aboriginal affairs that included evaluation, monitoring and policy development for over 20 years and for the last decade she has put her knowledge into research.

She says it is very important for Aboriginal children to have an adult who is emotionally invested in their wellbeing and who can provide

positive role models that affirm a cultural identity and sense of belonging.

"Maintaining connections to community and country by engaging in programs such as the Bush Ranger Cadet Program and the Yirriman Project is hugely beneficial to vulnerable youth," Dr Hopkins says.

"Real opportunities exist to leverage multiple benefits, particularly for vulnerable youth, from existing programs such as these that are already on the ground and working well."

By studying what helps those at risk to become more resilient and subsequently healthier it could lessen the devastating [life expectancy](#) gap for ironically one of the oldest known cultures in the world.

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