

## **NACCHO Conference 2017**

**October 31 to November 2 2017, Darwin**

### **Keynote: The Health & Formation of Aboriginal Adolescent Males**

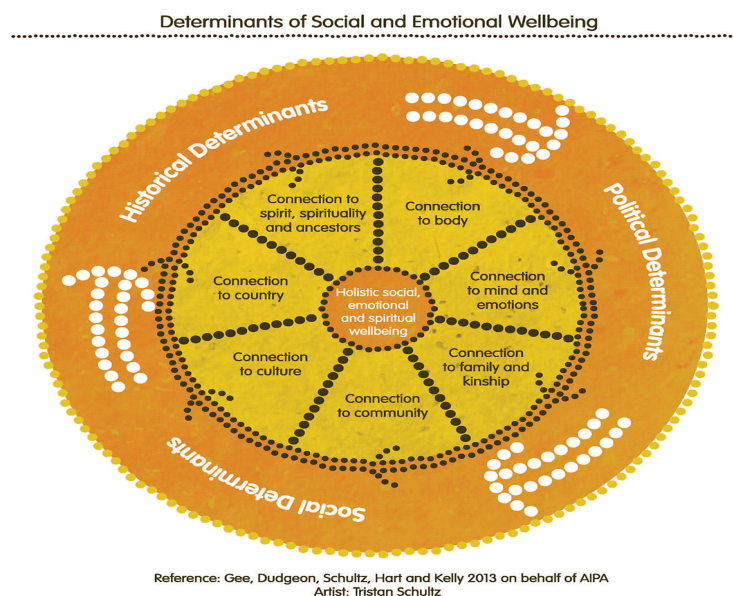
This paper will explore the work Interrelate is taking to assist with the Health and formation of Aboriginal Adolescent Males through community partnerships, the use of wrap around services while utilising cultural knowledge's to take a holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal male youth. It is my belief that adolescent youth can develop resilience, positive decision making processes, develop an understanding of the importance of making positive healthy lifestyle choices and build strong emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing when applying a cultural approach to their development. This approach should also take into account education and encouraged employment prospects as the adolescent's development reaches the appropriate ages.

Over the course of the last twenty years there have been many discussions around how best to combat the issues that face Aboriginal adolescent males. There have also been many discussions on the severity and broad range of social, systemic, emotional, spiritual and physical issues facing our Aboriginal male youth. These issues leave many of our youth feeling hopeless and powerless to change their futures and as a result often turning to substance abuse and suicidality. Scott Henggler the Developer of Multi Systemic Therapy Stated 'We spend so much of our time talking about the prisons our people live in and not enough time helping them find the keys to set themselves free'. This statement rings very true when reviewing past years of systemic outcomes for Aboriginal adolescent males. Although there has been some great work done, one can be excused for thinking that we have not done enough, and still have many miles to travel before the journey can be completed. I believe we have spent enough time discussing our prisons and it



is now time to start talking about a holistic approach to the Health and Wellbeing of our youth. To start conversing about development of keys rather than the creation of more bars.

Professor Pat Dudgeon, Dr Graham Gee and their colleagues developed this culturally connected framework to Social and Emotional Wellbeing from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' Perspective. Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, (2014, p.57) and stated that "this conception of self is grounded within a collectivist perspective that views the self as inseparable from, and embedded within, family and community'. (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, (2014, p.57).



When exploring this model it allows individuals to assist Aboriginal male adolescents build a framework around how to best understand and guide their own social and emotional wellbeing outcomes. The framework can also act as a guide for practitioners when working with Aboriginal male adolescents. Breaking down this framework is what assists in this process beginning with the following:

**Connection to family and kinship:** Family and Kin is where our youth obtain their identity and learn many behaviours that will carry them through their lives. Whether they be good or bad behaviours positive or negative, this is one of the first places where individuals develop life patterns and identity of self. Therefore it is extremely important that when working with youth we utilise and strengthen, if needed, connection to family and kin. The other important factor is to work on the strengths that the youth has already been given from their family and kin.

**Connection to community:** This gives the opportunity for youth to further develop identity and learn from a greater group of individuals outside of family and kinship. In saying this, often members of our family and kin are connected to the community that we are connected to, allowing youth to build a safety net and strong connections. With connection to community comes the opportunity to wrap services around the youth to assist with positive growth and opportunity to access services such as medical, health and wellbeing services, educational services, employment opportunities and positive mentoring.

**Connection to culture:** Connection to culture further builds positive identity, a sense of pride and ownership, connection and access to traditional knowledge that allows the youth to make sense of the world through a cultural lens. This connection provides the youth with the ability to talk about their culture from a knowledgeable place and to not feel confronted when they are asked to discuss certain aspects of cultural history. Connection to culture allows adolescent males to learn how making a boomerang is an active form of mindfulness and a great way to find an opportunity to discuss life's issues and be mentored to possible positive outcomes.



**Connection to country:** Provides a safe space for the youth to heal and work on building mindfulness and strong wellbeing. Country provides story of creation and connection to the outdoors. Country builds a place of belonging and a space for the youth to learn responsibility and resilience. Learn about the trees and how they can be used for tools of hunting and instruments for music. Being on country and in the outdoors assists the youth to slow down and feel the emotions that are running through their body and time to sort the thoughts that are running through their heads without the pressures that are placed on them constantly in the western world. A safe place for the youth to be themselves instead of what the world expects them to be or expects them to do. This provides an opportunity to decolonise and develop an understanding of how our ancestors spent their lives in peaceful and fulfilling states of mind by living and connecting to the land and country they live on.

**Connection to spirit, spirituality and ancestors:** When on country and practicing culture the youth have time to connect to the land and to the ancestors that are all around them. With the right teachers the youth can learn the deeper aspects of Aboriginal spiritualism. Learn traditional methods of meditation that allows them to connect with the ancestors and seek guidance. Connect with their totems and build an understanding of what their totem has to teach them. Build an understanding of the importance of connection and how it helps create mindfulness, self-soothing techniques and develop strategies on how best to combat poor wellbeing and traumas they are dealing with

**Connection to body:** Through learning from all of the above adolescent males learn that to develop a strong spiritual connection they must understand their bodies and feed their bodies the right foods in order to be strong and have good mental and physical wellbeing. This can be influenced through strong mentorship and modelling. When working with the youth it



helps to show them images of how men looked before and during early stages of colonisation. Whilst talking to the youth discuss how foods that have been introduced, such as un-natural sugars, impact on our bodies due to not being used these types of foods. It is also important to educate on heart disease and how it is the biggest killer of Aboriginal males. This leads to assisting the youth to understand why connection to body and looking after themselves is extremely important.

**Connection to mind and emotions:** Males of all ages for far too long have been told to shut off their emotions and to “harden up”. Through programs using this type of structure it is vital to let our Aboriginal adolescents know that is not only ok to be connected to our minds and emotions, it is actually a strong trait of a man. Modelling for our youth that emotions are healthy, and it is important to be connected to and display them, is a huge step in combating suicidality. When looking at connection to country and spirituality and teaching youth mindfulness activities such as meditation it is very common for emotional issues to arise. These issues could be connected to trauma that the adolescent has had in the past or is currently dealing with, they also could be dealing with intergenerational trauma effects or a whole myriad of emotions just from going through adolescence. Supporting the youth positively through this is vitally important and is why there is a connection to community component in this paper. Community members in different areas of employment will be able to connect the adolescents to the appropriate services that is required.

All the above sections are extremely important when we are looking at the Health and formation of Aboriginal adolescent males. We indeed also need to ensure that obtaining a positive education is a priority as part of this formation. From a quality, engaging education, and from strong community connections, the pathway can be laid for the youth to move onto gainful employment whilst



still being mentored and supported. When these structures are followed it is believed that Aboriginal male adolescents have a much better chance at having a happy and successful life. It gives our youth the cognitive ability and decision making processors to be able to make healthy decisions for their future and for their overall health and wellbeing. Although this is not an exact science and the formula most certainly does not always work out as expected, as youth may have all the above education and connections, yet still be unable to fully develop the hoped for overall wellbeing. It is my belief that the youth will still have had the learning, connections and the chance to come to a place where they are able to utilise in the future, the experiences they have had along the way.

