

# STARTING TO SMOKE:

## Experiences of Indigenous Youth



By early adulthood, about 40 per cent of Indigenous Australians are smokers, most starting before the age of 18. If young people don't start smoking by then, they probably never will. Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about why they start (or don't start) smoking.

The 'Starting to Smoke' project, completed in 2011 in the Top End of the Northern Territory, collected stories from 46 young Indigenous people aged 13–20 years about their experiences of smoking and what influences them to start (or not). We also spoke to 19 non-Indigenous youth to find out whether there were major differences. Some young people who participated took photos of how they experience smoking in their everyday lives.

From the stories we were told, we learned that the strongest influences on Indigenous youth smoking came from family and friends.

### The role of family...

We found that family influences were especially important around the time young people started experimenting with smoking. This included family members smoking around and with young people, providing access to tobacco, and promoting smoking. Young smokers also reported lack of monitoring by parents and lack of consequences (eg. punishment) for smoking.

*Because you learn a lot when you're growing up through visual and seeing how everything works really. So it's accepted and the fact that your family is doing it, so yeah, must be okay if mum's doing it.*

(Male, smoker, 19 years)

On the other hand, we learned that a major reason young people did not take up smoking was anti-smoking attitudes at home, including having smoke-free indoor spaces, not smoking around children, giving strong anti-smoking messages, and punishment for smoking. This was the case even when parents were smokers.



*My brother came along at an age where I was probably the most likely to make my mind up about smoking. I was around 11 or 12 years old and I had a lot more exposure from my friends... but then once he came along and my mum stopped, there was just none around the house. It helped reinforce the decision not to smoke.*

(Female, non-smoker, 17 years)

Non-Indigenous youth were also influenced to smoke by watching family members who smoked, and frequently took tobacco from the household. However, experimenting with, or being actively given tobacco by family members was less common.

### The role of friends and peers...

Young people told us that as they moved through high school, the influence of friends and peers on smoking behaviour increased. Social pressure to smoke became more common and open, and there was also more (subtle) pressure to smoke to fit in with the group. In non-smoking groups, peers often encouraged others in the group not to smoke.

*I see lots of people just having a quick smoke before they go on a bus or kids just sitting around, I don't know, copying each other, having a smoke before and after they go to school.*

(Female, smoker, 15 years)

We found that the close friends of smokers were likely to be smokers, and the same applied for non-smokers.

*In school smoking was something that was frowned upon by most people, so I did feel singled out as a smoker, which encouraged me more to hang around with more smokers and begin the cycle of more and more cigarettes going into my body too... Like the whole smoking group socialised together and we all mixed in after a while...*

(Male, smoker, 19 years)

Alcohol use, stress, and nicotine dependence also influenced young people to take up or to keep smoking.

### What does it mean...?

- Family, friends and peers play an important role in smoking uptake among Indigenous youth.
- These social influences are similar between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people but are more widespread (especially in the family) among Indigenous youth.
- Programs to prevent Indigenous youth smoking need to focus on making smoking 'less normal', especially within families and communities. Such programs could be delivered both at school and together with families.

For more information about this research, please contact Vanessa Johnston on [vanessa.johnston@menzies.edu.au](mailto:vanessa.johnston@menzies.edu.au)





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