



australian **YOUTH**  
**MENTORING**  
**NETWORK**

## Factsheets for Mentors

### Mentoring Indigenous Youth

This fact sheet provides details about Aboriginal culture which will better prepare you for mentoring indigenous youth.



Image courtesy of True Blue Dreaming

## Mentoring Indigenous Youth

Indigenous Australians make up just over 2% of the total population, living with more disadvantage than their non Indigenous counterparts, such as lower levels of education and increased health issues. Young people experience many challenges along the road to adulthood, for Indigenous young people an increased amount of challenges attempt to block the way. As a mentor of an Indigenous youth you will not only have the opportunity to impact your mentees path, but also to learn more about your mentees cultural heritage.

In order to gain a better appreciation and understanding of another culture, you need to first reflect upon your own

culture and what it means to be an individual from your community. With this level of self awareness it is appropriate to explore the traditions, history and challenges of another culture.

Preparing yourself in this way will allow you as a mentor to bring a sense of confidence about yourself, and respect of your mentees background. These qualities will aid in the development of rapport and building of your mentoring relationship. Cultural awareness leads to cultural safety which in turn will establish a secure environment for you both to grow.

[youthmentoring.org.au](http://youthmentoring.org.au)

Factsheet compiled by Danielle Bayes on behalf of the Australian Youth Mentoring Network 2011.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this document the Australian Youth Mentoring Network accepts no liability of any loss or damage associated with its use. Mentors should always refer back to their program's policies and procedures for further clarification.

# Indigenous Australians

The word 'Indigenous' within an Australian context, encompasses two cultures: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The Indigenous term also recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the Nations first people.

People of Aboriginal heritage come from the mainland, Tasmania and other surrounding islands including Stradbroke Island and Groote Eyelandt. Torres Strait Islanders are from the top end of Queensland through to Papua New Guinea.

It is important to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are two different cultures, with their own history, values and tradition. An Indigenous Australian is a person of Indigenous descent, identifies self as and is recognised by their community as Indigenous.

*The term 'aborigines' is a generic term recognising the original habitants of a country. This term should not be used when talking about Aboriginal people.*

Within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities a rich diversity in traditions and circumstance exist. The cultures are complex, being one of the worlds oldest surviving cultures; before European settlement, more than six hundred Aboriginal language groups or 'nations' were present on the mainland. Similarly, the challenges and issues that the communities deal with differ. It is important to understand this difference within Indigenous culture, as a 'one size fits all' attitude does not work.

*The brief information below is only intended to offer some clues about Indigenous culture. As you build a relationship with your mentee seek to learn more about these aspects of their culture as it relates to them.*

- **Kinship** is a complex system within Indigenous society that is concerned with social organisation: it sets out how people are related, how they should relate to each other and what their role/position is in the community.
- **Family in Indigenous culture are not only considered that of blood and marriage ties, but also people from the same language group.**
- **Children** are considered the responsibility of the community, households are typically made up of extended family and as such their upbringing is the role of everyone, grandmothers particularly play an important role in a child's life. Children are provided with an awareness of their kinship. Traditional knowledge, history and beliefs are passed down to the next generation by Elders who are considered role models and educators.
- **Dreaming stories pass on the rules for living, through ceremony, art, song and story. Indigenous people consider themselves belonging to the land, as opposed to owning it.**
- Mourning death is usually known as **Sorry Business**. During this period communities are forbidden to name the deceased person, a different name is used to refer to the person, this can last months or years. Also the face of the person should not be shown without prior warning.

# Challenges

Indigenous Australians experience considerable difference in infant mortality, health, education, lower rates of employment and housing than non Indigenous Australians. This disparity is highlighted through some of the following incidents regarding Indigenous Australians:

- A suggested suicide rate 40% higher than the rate of suicide amongst non Indigenous people.
- Low year 12 completion rates of 42.9% compared to 75.6% for non Indigenous Australians, a difference of 32.7%.
- Within remote areas 50% of the Indigenous population over 18 years old has not completed year 10.



Image courtesy of True Blue Dreaming

# Cultural Difference

It is important to be aware of the historical events that lead to the break down of Indigenous community and the way in which these events have impacted the current Indigenous communities.

These events include: European colonisation, Australian law practices (such as the removal of children from their family) and the use of missions.

Refer to The Australian Collaboration, Indigenous Australians 2010 link at the back of the factsheet for more information or other sources listed.

# Misconceptions

- **Misconception:** alcohol consumption is much higher within the Indigenous community. Census data demonstrates the amount of alcohol consumed by Indigenous and non Indigenous adults drinking at high risk levels to be similar (ABS, 2006).
- **Misconception:** Indigenous Australians receive large government benefits. The Centre for
- Aboriginal Economic Policy Research has found that funding programs are very much under funded and do little to deal with the disadvantages faced by Indigenous Australians.
- A negative picture of Indigenous Australians is portrayed in the media, rather than focusing on successes and the contribution made in all areas of Australian society the spotlight regularly comes back to negative descriptions.



- Your mentee may seek knowledge by presenting information for confirmation or disapproval.
- Silence/s may provide your mentee with a chance to listen and prepare an answer. The length of your mentees reply may be something that you need to be flexible with.
- Follow your mentees lead on the amount of eye contact to use. In some Indigenous cultures it is considered inappropriate or rude to look someone straight in the eye.
- Your mentee may not initially offer opinions. They may prefer to listen to others and wait to share their view.
- Speak at a medium pace, too fast may be hard for your mentee to understand, while slow speech may seem condescending.

## Communication

- Confirm what your mentee likes to be called, write down their name and ensure you have the right pronunciation.
- Use clear and uncomplicated language. Steer away from using jargon or acronyms.
- Do not attempt to copy your mentees way of speaking, this is inappropriate in any culture.
- Genuinely listen, watch out for the non verbal cues which may provide information as to your mentees feelings.
- Use questioning carefully, do not probe. Use indirect questions as direct or blunt questions may be considered confrontational.

*These cultural terms should always be written with a capital letter:  
Aboriginal,  
Torres Strait Islander,  
Elder and  
Indigenous*

- Use verbal (oh, yes, mmm) and non verbal (nod head, lean forward) cues to show you are listening, while providing space and time for your mentee to share.
- Let your mentees actions guide you on the appropriate amount of personal space to provide.

# Strategies to Build the Relationship

- Do your homework: find out as much as you can about your mentees background, this may involve spending some time researching.
- Depending on the type of mentoring program you are part of, develop another means of communicating with your mentee, such as email or phone.
- Be aware of any cultural boundaries that exist: if you are uncertain ask your program coordinator.
- Help your mentee become resourceful, provide them strategies to support themselves, such as directing them to appropriate support services.
- If within program boundaries seek to make yourself known to your mentees family.
- Be sure to get involved in program activities: encourage your mentee to develop friendships with the other mentees in the program.

*The acronym 'ATSI' should not be used when speaking of a person of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders descent.*

## Tips for Success

- Do some research and be aware of special occasions and dates relating to your mentees background, whether it cultural or religious.
- Although you may not understand certain cultural differences, respect your mentees culture.
- Try and find something that you both have in common to help build rapport and the relationship.



# Join the AYMN Online Community

A national online networking space for Mentoring Programs, Mentors, Youth Mentoring Organisations and Practitioners

The screenshot shows the AYMN Online Community website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: AYMN Community Home, AYMN Community Activities, AYMN Blog, Groups, Discussions, and Members. Below this is a 'Latest Blog Posts' section with two entries. The first entry is 'The Goldilocks approach to Mentoring' by Kathleen Vella, dated June 21st, 2011. The second entry is 'To re-match or not to re-match – Is that the question?' by Kathleen Vella, dated May 23rd, 2011. Below the blog posts is a 'Latest Forum topics' section with two entries: 'New Zealand Mentoring Conference Keynote Speaker Comes to Town!' and 'Thanks for attending the first Sydney Local Support Network Meeting'. On the right side, there's a sidebar with 'GROUPS' and 'CATEGORIES'. The 'GROUPS' section lists: AYMN Community (23 members), Australian Youth Mentoring Conference (16 members), Sydney Metropolitan Local Support Network (10 members), Tasmanian Local Support Network (4 members), and Perth Metropolitan Local Support Network (4 members). The 'CATEGORIES' section lists: AYMN Blog (4) and Mentoring Programs (1). At the bottom of the sidebar, there's a 'RECENTLY ACTIVE MEMBERS' section.

The AYMN Community is built to bring people **together**, to **connect** and **communicate**.

Members of the Community can join groups that are of interest to them and participate in different discussion topics. Members can ask questions of the Community who can then provide advice and sources of support.

Does youth mentoring make a difference? Where is youth mentoring heading in Australia? Come, listen, learn and discuss the latest issues affecting youth mentoring programs, mentors and young people.

Some of the **fantastic features** offered are:

- Posts
- Groups
- Discussions
- Members
- Activity Stream

The AYMN Community will also include a Blog which will provide a platform for publishing articles related to Mentoring, Conferences, Events and other updates. The Blog will include **guest bloggers** from **across the globe**. AYMN Members of the community will be able to

- Post their views and comments
- Reply to comments of other members

**Join the community today!**

[www.youthmentoring.org.au/community](http://www.youthmentoring.org.au/community)

# Program Profiles

## True Blue Dreaming

True Blue Dreaming is a youth and community development mentoring program targeted at young people aged 12-18 in rural and remote Australian communities.

The program provides young people with mentors to inspire them and build their potential. Specifically, they focus on areas such as personal growth, thriving communities, health and wellbeing, environmental stewardship, and enterprise development. True Blue Dreaming is a journey of discovery. Communities have a strong sense of ownership over their program.

The program has been successfully delivered in the Wheatbelt and Kimberley regions of Western Australia since 2004. During that time they have made many friends and helped in the development of many young people.



True Blue Dreaming firmly believe that youth mentoring provides an invaluable contribution to community development and a practical way to help young people strive for their dreams.

## AIME

AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience) is about unlocking potential. AIME puts a key in the hands of Indigenous youth, equipping mentees with the tools and knowledge necessary to unlock their aspirations.

AIME does this by partnering Indigenous high school students with university students in a unique, structured, one-on-one mentoring program.

From its 2005 inception in Sydney with a 25 mentee / 25 mentor split, AIME now works with 1,250 mentees and 1,250 mentors across three states of Australia.

The nonprofit organisation works to improve Year 10 completion rates, Year 12 completion rates and university admission rates for participating Indigenous students.

AIME CEO Jack Manning-Bancroft says the foundation of successful mentoring lies in mutual respect. "As young adults not long out of high school, our university mentors help create a safe space for mentees to explore concepts of leadership, heritage and success. For our mentors, there's enormous professional and personal learning that comes from working with the world's oldest living culture."

*Do your homework: find out as much as you can about your mentees background, this may involve spending some time researching.*

*The Australian Youth Mentoring Network would like to thank True Blue Dreaming and Big Brothers Big Sisters Melbourne in providing some of the images in this factsheet*



Image courtesy of Big Brothers Big Sisters



## Further Information & References

- Australian Youth Mentoring Network - [www.youthmentoring.org.au](http://www.youthmentoring.org.au)
- True Blue Dreaming – [www.truebluedreaming.org.au](http://www.truebluedreaming.org.au)
- Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience: AIME—[www.aimementoring.com/](http://www.aimementoring.com/)
- Share our Pride, An introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture, and to building respectful relationships <http://www.shareourpride.org.au/topics/welcome-to-share-our-pride>
- Queensland Studies Authority, Career Information Service, Deadly Pathways <https://cis.qsa.qld.edu.au/deadly/index.html>
- Royal Children’s Hospital: Centre for Adolescent Health, Youth Suicide in Australia [www.rch.org.au/cah/research.cfm?doc\\_id=11036](http://www.rch.org.au/cah/research.cfm?doc_id=11036)
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