



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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## \* PETROL SNIFFING

### I : WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IT

#M. Brady, R. Morice  
and H. Swift.

Aboriginal communities all over Australia from time to time have to deal with their young people sniffing petrol. It seems to be a 'craze', like playing knucklebones or yo-yos. Suddenly everyone is doing it, and all the parents get worried. Then, sometimes, it suddenly stops happening - the kids get more interested in going out bush with the older people, or perhaps someone gets sick, or they might burn themselves with the petrol, and this frightens the others.

When kids sniff petrol they see 'pictures', feel dizzy and funny in the head, a little bit drunk, and they like to have those feelings. Young people (and older people) everywhere sometimes take drugs or drink alcohol to help them feel 'high'. They do this sometimes when they feel depressed or angry, and it seems to help those feelings. Kids use petrol because it is available everywhere and is easy to get. But there is a big problem with petrol which makes it different from other things. It has LEAD in it, to make car engines run better - and lead is very harmful to people, especially children.

#### WHAT DOES LEAD DO?

Lead sits in the petrol, a bit like salt in the sea (you can't see it but it is part of the liquid). There are two kinds of lead: inorganic lead and organic lead. The kind of lead kids get in their bodies from sniffing petrol is *organic lead*. Kids sniff petrol usually in two ways: either from a can which has no lid, or by soaking a cloth in petrol and holding it over the nose and mouth. If a kid sniffs from a cloth like this, the lead can go into the body *through* the skin of the face as well as into the lungs while he sniffs. In a can, not so much lead can rise up in the petrol

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\* Adapted from *The Aboriginal Health Worker*, Vol.4, No.3, with permission of the Editor, Professor J.E. Cawte.

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fumes. The fumes, which make a child feel high, go into the lungs, then into the bloodstream, and from there into the body tissues. The lead may then damage : the liver (enlargement of the liver); the kidneys (inflammation/abscesses); the brain and nerves.

#### PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF LEAD POISONING

Physical signs of lead poisoning can include:

- . loss of weight.
- . increased reflexes.
- . slow heart rate and/or low blood pressure
- . clumsy, uncertain walk. The person lifts a leg suddenly and too high, then bangs it down on the ground so that the foot hits the ground flat. This is a sign of brain damage.
- . tremor, or trembling of the fingers. This does not show when the hand is resting still on something, but when the hand makes a movement.
- . lack of co-ordination.

So it is important to watch out for children who are a bit unsteady on their feet; who often fall over; who don't seem to want to run and play; and who have headaches and seem 'lazy'. These are all signs of damage to the peripheral nerves.

#### MENTAL SYMPTOMS

Children who are *chronic* sniffers can show any or several of these symptoms:

- . disorientation
- . staring spells
- . poor attention span
- . slow responses
- . 'flat' or dull mood
- . confusion
- . can't sleep
- . nervous and irritable
- . forget things

If a child is having these things happen to him or her, then school isn't going to be much fun. Often children are tired during the day

if they have been sniffing at night. They feel ill with a 'hangover'. The teachers notice these symptoms in their children in the school.

#### WHAT DOES SNIFFING FEEL LIKE?

The immediate physical effects of inhaling petrol include feeling sick and dizzy and sometimes vomiting. The children also hallucinate, see pictures in their heads that are sometimes funny and sometimes frightening. They feel confused and a bit out of control and might stagger around not knowing where they are. They can hurt themselves and not feel the pain. After a while a feeling of sleepiness comes on and the child might fall into a deep sleep from which it is hard to wake him. Sometimes this can become a coma when the child is unconscious and he might have convulsions. Children can die after sniffing petrol: their respiratory system becomes paralysed and stops working. Sometimes if the child does some violent physical exercise after sniffing, like running or jumping, the heart changes its movements and the child may collapse and die. This is called a 'sudden sniffing death'.

#### OTHER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL COMPLAINTS

In some places children sniff glue or other things to make them feel dizzy and high, and they might complain of these things:

- . frequent severe headaches
- . chronic cough
- . depression and anxiety
- . chest pain
- . coughing blood
- . extreme tiredness and weakness
- . sinus, nose and throat complaints
- . difficulty concentrating
- . poor memory
- . shortness of breath
- . dizziness

#### MEDICAL TREATMENT

There is no way that doctors can remove, from the body, lead that has been taken in by petrol sniffing. There are drugs called chelating agents which can remove lead that is still in the blood immediately after sniffing, before the lead is absorbed into the brain and is then impossible to remove. Some doctors think that the best therapy is hospitalization and sedation with sleeping tablets. But we must conclude that there is no generally accepted method of treating organic lead poisoning.

It seems that communities' solutions to the problem will need to be broad, to look at why children feel they need to 'get strong' and feel powerful in this way, and how relatives can be helped to take extra care of children who are sniffing all the time.

#### CHRONIC *vs.* OCCASIONAL SNIFFING

Since in some communities nearly all the children will try sniffing at least once or twice, it is important to notice the children who really are 'problem' sniffers. Some children who are not cared for may be at risk of developing into heavy sniffers, because then they have the friendship and excitement of being in the 'group'. So in one way it might be 'normal' to occasionally sniff petrol, but it would not be normal to be sniffing for six hours every day, and *those* children need to be carefully watched for physical and mental symptoms.

There is one very important and strange point that should be remembered: often when people get worried and anxious about kids doing something (like taking drugs or sniffing petrol) and start to talk about it and maybe punish those children, whatever it is GETS WORSE. For the kids, it becomes *more* exciting because everyone thinks it is bad, and it makes them feel even 'stronger' and more daring. Instead of being obedient and stopping, they do it even more. Care needs to be taken in dealing with the situation.

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#### II : WHAT SOME COMMUNITIES HAVE DONE ABOUT IT

# M. Brady

One way of trying to understand why children sniff petrol is to look at the 'good' things (from their point of view) they experience. Ask the question, "What *problems* are solved by this sniffing?"

Reading through the reports from different communities in Australia, and also in other countries, and talking to people in Aboriginal communities in South Australia, I noted some problems. There might be *hunger*. Some people think that sniffing petrol makes

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