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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.

*PETROL SNIFFING

II : WHAT SOME COMMUNITIES HAVE DONE ABOUT IT

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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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children forget about being hungry, and they notice that children who sniff a lot are very thin. There might be *loneliness* and feeling left out of things. When children sniff, they usually do it together in a group, and have fun together. They get 'strong' enough to take no notice of what their relatives and white people say. They get 'strong' enough to do things they would not normally do - like breaking into houses or the store, or 'testing' themselves against teachers or other people in authority. There might be *boredom*. When children sniff, they have exciting or frightening pictures in their minds, and they feel as if they can 'travel around' in their head and visit other places. There might be *worry*. Children worry about family things (such as whether they have someone to care for them and make sure they have enough food and blankets), or about growing up and the future (what will happen to them if their relatives die; what will they do when they finish school?)

By sniffing petrol and feeling 'high' some of these problems are alleviated; there is excitement and stimulation; hunger is forgotten; the fun of being 'different' and having a group of friends who do the same thing makes up for being left out and being hit by older people. They can travel around in their heads and see lots of new things.

Children who sniff are making *changes* happen. By having a different experience in their head, they can feel as if everything else around them is different. There are many ways in which communities could change, but it is the people who live in each place who know best what their situation is and how it could change. There is no 'miracle' answer to petrol sniffing: there are only the ideas and decisions that communities try out and learn from.

ACTIONS TAKEN BY COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

Sometimes an individual or a family will take on the responsibility of children who sniff petrol. Sometimes the whole community or the Council will meet and discuss the issue. Here are some ideas that Aboriginal communities have tried.

1) *Making petrol hard to get.* Most communities have tried to make it hard for children to obtain petrol. This is very difficult because only a small amount is needed in the bottom of a can. Vehicles and petrol pumps are locked up, but children cut fuel lines, break pumps, or lever off petrol caps. At an Arnhem Land community residents adapted their cars so that the petrol caps are inside the car. In most communities there are abandoned cars lying around, and these are often a source of petrol. One community in northern South

Australia has been trying to arrange for wrecked cars to be towed away regularly into a lock-up dump.

Another suggestion is to add a bad-smelling substance to petrol to stop children from sniffing. The problem with this is that the petrol gives off bad-smelling fumes all the time. Anyway, visiting cars are always coming and going into settlements. Petrol is hard to obtain in small, isolated outstations where there is perhaps only one vehicle for a family group. This is one of the advantages of small decentralised groups.

2) *Giving extra care to individual children.* At one Central Australian community a committee was formed of people who had particular knowledge of petrol sniffing (fathers and brothers of sniffers, trainee community developers, health workers, teachers, a reformed petrol sniffer, the police tracker). These people gave extra attention and care to sniffers and tried to make sure they took part in activities like films and sports. This is difficult, because often the heavy sniffers are the same children who do *not* join in with activities. At another South Australian community people said that sniffers are deliberately left out by the other children. Some children may need extra care and responsibility taken by relatives, if both their parents have died and they are not regularly cared for. Although an occasional child needs some special help or counselling, it seems that it is better to look at the community as a whole, rather than at an individual child. To some extent, sniffing among children is a problem that should involve everyone.

3) *Punishment: beating, shaming, exile.* Most relatives of young people who sniff petrol have tried physical punishment, but this does not seem to work. It might even make things worse and make the children feel more separate from older people. Some communities want the children sent away to 'whitefella' institutions in the cities, but this is not practical with young children, and even older ones could suffer from being away from their people. Other forms of 'exile' have been tried at islands off the coast of Arnhem Land which were used as punishment places. But the children frequently sniffed again when they returned to the settlement. At another community the YMCA started 'rehabilitation camps' away from the main community. They had traditional dancing and singing, sports and fishing. But later, some of the 'important' sniffers persuaded others to start again. A report from a "Top End" community said that after six boys were sent to the bush with elders for sniffing and delinquency, they were treated as 'heroes' by the others when they returned. At one community in Arnhem Land a list was made of sniffers and their parents, and it was

put up publicly in the settlement. They were also banned from using the store, bank and post office. At a desert community several children were taken to an outstation where there is a cattle project run by Aboriginal people. They work as trainee stockmen and seem to be happy because there is lots to do. Of course, they are tempted to sniff with the others when they return to the main community. But at least they learn skills that are useful and do not sniff while they are there.

It seems that 'negative' reactions like physical punishment or exile do not influence sniffing in the long-term, although there is the advantage that children removed from petrol *cannot* sniff, and are free from the physical effects of petrol for that time. If this period is long enough, the child may lose the 'taste' for petrol sniffing, and when he tries it again, it will be so unpleasant that he will not bother.

4) *Recreation.* The most common attempt made to distract children from sniffing is to offer alternative activities after school, such as sports, games, a recreation hall for listening to music, reading, or playing table-tennis. One Central Australian community set up its committee to provide activities from 6.00 p.m. to midnight each night; in another, the YMCA provides recreation facilities. In an Arnhem Land settlement the Aboriginal residents run a club which is open every night. Other communities noticed that sniffing decreased after a program of traditional dancing and painting was introduced. Another Arnhem Land settlement employed a community development worker to strengthen traditional Aboriginal culture, and also introduced traditional painting and dancing as school subjects.

Even if many recreations are available, a lot depends on *who* is running them, how well known that person is, and how sensitive he is to the needs of the community. One YMCA officer thinks it is vital that the *community* recognise the problem of petrol sniffing and attempts to find a solution.

5) *Education about the dangers.* Although children who sniff petrol occasionally are probably not in physical danger from the lead contained in petrol, children who sniff frequently over many years will cause themselves physical harm. Some communities have tried to inform their people through schools and clinics, about the damage that comes from taking the lead into the body through sniffing. One community in the Northern Territory thought that fathers should explain to their children the dangers of sniffing and not just punish them. This is a good idea, of course, but explaining often does not have any effect.

It might be that Aboriginal communities could explain to each other the dangers of their children sniffing, and this would have more effect than white doctors and nurses or teachers trying to do so. If nursing staff and Aboriginal health workers have good rapport with people in the community, and if people feel involved with the 'health' (in a general sense) of the community, then educational programs might have a good effect.

6) *Decentralisation.* The move away from settlements into smaller decentralised communities has helped a great deal to cut down on the amount of sniffing. When the people are back living on land that is their home country, it gives them new strength. The children can learn more about bush ways. The older people are happier too, because the Law is strengthened. Some outstations or decentralised communities, however, are themselves becoming larger, and even on them some children are sniffing. The size of the community seems to be the problem, and the number of interesting activities available for the young people. Small groups of children under the care of an individual family in an isolated homeland site seem to be fairly successful, as long as the main settlement can assist with food supplies, financial support for that caring family, and maybe even a visiting teacher. When children are under the care of elders in this situation, the authority of the older people is more effective, because the daily life is close to how it was traditionally.

Girls, too, sniff petrol in some communities, not just boys, so it is important that activities (either in decentralised communities, or settlements) include them. Sometimes the activities suggested for sniffers include only boys' sports like football; communities could try to involve the young girls too, with women's camps and learning bush ways from the older women.

7. *Religious Revival.* One Arnhem Land town recently had a Christian religious revival. This followed the visit of an evangelist, and was then maintained by the faith and energy of the local religious community. People often felt blessed by the grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit. There was a sharp increase among the adults of religious activity of various kinds, and of morale generally. During this period petrol sniffing by the children fell off dramatically in the families concerned.

These are some of the ways that Aboriginal people have been trying to make decisions about their communities and their young people. To make these decisions work, suggestions from communities need to have funding and support in every way possible. But it is only when people are in control of their own lives and their own communities, when their Councils are strong, that decisions can take shape and be effective.

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