



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## PETROL SNIFFING

### WHAT THE TEACHER OUGHT TO DO

\*D. McClay & M. Christie

People under pressure often turn to drugs to help them cope with their difficulties. This seems to happen in nearly every culture in the world. Alcohol is the major drug used in Australia - by all the racial groups. Aboriginal children under pressure often turn to petrol sniffing. The habit seems to have been introduced to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory during World War II. What to do about it is a worrying problem because it often seems that the harder we try, the worse it gets.

#### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PETROL SNIFFING

1. Teachers should remember that all drug problems are basically symptoms of social disorder. The reason why any individual child takes to petrol sniffing has its basis in the social situation in which the child finds himself. Very few whites have any idea at all of the size of the social pressures that confront children caught up in the cultural conflict situation that is affecting their parents and their community.

2. A teacher should understand the medical facts that underlie petrol sniffing and be able to recognise the symptoms. These are covered in the preceding articles.

3. All new teachers should find out what is happening in their community in terms of petrol sniffing. Firstly, they should realise that not every child in the settlement is a sniffer. Typically there are three groups of children. There are a lot of children who never have and never will sniff petrol. If a teacher wants to help with the problem of petrol sniffing in his community, it is with this group that he will probably be most effective in the long run. In some communities there will also be a group of children who are fairly heavy and regular sniffers. There are few teachers who will be able to have any direct impact on this group. The third group of children are those who become involved from time to time, depending on what is happening to them, to their family and to the community.

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\* David McClay, formerly Principal, Milingimbi.

Michael Christie, formerly Teacher Linguist, Milingimbi.

During the years we spent at Milingimbi it became clear that the number of children who were sniffing at any time was directly related to the spirit of the community at that time; whether things were basically peaceful or whether things were disturbed. For example, we noted that sometimes during and after a big funeral ceremony, when there were a lot of strangers in the community, when people were mourning and perhaps suspicious of the cause of death, various children could become unsettled and take to sniffing. On the other hand, when the community was functioning constructively, there would be long periods with little or no petrol sniffing.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT PETROL SNIFFING

Above all else, you should get to know the children in your class, their background, their families, and how they fit into the community. Is their family group a large one? Do they speak the same language as most of the people in the community? How long have they been in the community? Where is their traditional land? Try to relate to your children both in and out of school.

##### *The children in your class who don't sniff petrol*

Firstly, we would recommend that you don't talk to them on the evils of petrol sniffing. This may seem strange, but remember that all these children are already very well aware of how damaging it can be, and the more you talk about it, the bigger the division between the sniffers and the non-sniffers will become. The sniffers feel this division very strongly and it makes them unwilling to associate with the other children and unwilling to come to school.

Secondly, actively discourage these children from drawing attention to, and being nasty towards the sniffers in the class. This happens a lot and it causes problems. Some teachers think they will stop children petrol sniffing by encouraging the other children to exert social pressure on them. This doesn't work. You will do more good by trying to promote unity inside the classroom.

##### *The children you know well who are moderate sniffers*

You should only talk to these children about their sniffing if you know them really well, and are chatting with them happily and in private. There are few teachers who relate to the children well enough to do this effectively. If you are in any doubt at all, don't talk about it. The children can become very defensive and you run the risk of ruining your friendship and your ability to help. Never lecture or threaten.

If you are dealing with a child who is high, give him something to eat and drink, welcome him into your home, suggest to him that you get rid of the petrol that he is sniffing, but don't force the issue. Think of something that you can do together for the rest of the afternoon or evening. You need to show the child that you are interested in him, you want to help, but you are not putting any pressure on him. Remember that this is a long term problem, and is only solved inch by inch.

These children need extra encouragement at school. Very few petrol sniffers have brain damage. Usually they are just as capable of learning as the others in the class. Their main problem at school is the attitude the teachers and the other children have towards them. It is in this area that you can be most helpful. Sometimes they will be irregular attenders, their concentration will be poor, and the other children may try to exclude them from their groups. Work extra hard at promoting unity in the group, completely ignore the whole issue of petrol sniffing and accept the sniffers without reservation.

Talk to these children alone whenever you have the chance. Tell them how much you like them and how sad you are when they don't come to school. Let them know about the things that your class is going to do and plan plenty of interesting activities and outings that they will want to be involved in.

### *The serious petrol sniffers*

These are the children whom nobody likes. You don't like them because they are the ones who might smash up your classroom or rip the fuel line out of your car. They are the outcasts of the community and they think of themselves in this way. If you are angry about what they do, and if you show this anger to the children in your class, then you will only be making the problem worse. The Muslims believe that the person who leaves temptation in a man's way is the greater sinner. Keep damagable things locked up, make sure your classroom and house are secure and try to keep an eye on your vehicle.

You can't do anything to help these children unless you get to know them really well. If you meet a serious sniffer and have a chance to be friendly to him, do so.

Some communities have a policy of punishing petrol sniffers. Obviously it sometimes gets to the stage where sniffers have to be prevented from doing serious damage to themselves, to others or to the community property. Whether or not you, as a teacher, agree with the type of solutions the community comes up with, remember that punishment is not your right or your responsibility.

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### *Your life in the community*

Few teachers realise how much value their active, constructive involvement in the community can be. Aboriginal communities are areas of intense social conflict and change. This is the direct cause of petrol sniffing. A positive involvement in community life - sports, recreation, hunting and fishing, church, simply getting to know people and making friends - these involvements by ordinary people are the main things that will help Aboriginal people adjust to change.

On the other hand, a single person working negatively in the community can be a very unsettling influence. In fact, even people who are not involved one way or the other, showing they have little concern about the community at large, can be a source of uncertainty, suspicion and apathy.

We have seen that the children who become sniffers are usually the ones who think that people don't care about them. They tend to come from broken families or from groups that are in conflict with the major groups in the community. At the outstations the problem has never been very great, not so much because of the work that people have done in preventing it, but because culturally and linguistically the people have always been a relatively unified group. There is nothing that you can do about unifying the culture or language of your community, but there is a lot that you can do towards helping people get on with each other, trust each other, and live and work happily together.

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### CALENDARS

The Bilingual Resource Development Unit at Papunya has produced a 1981 calendar. The calendars contain original drawings by Thomas Tjapangati Stevens, the resident Aboriginal graphics illustrator for the unit.

The cost is \$4.00, postage paid. Copies can be ordered from :

The Principal  
Papunya School  
via Alice Springs, N.T. 5751.

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