

Identify and build connections



As an educator working in the Kimberley or Pilbara, it's vital you build meaningful relationships with, not only the children and young people you support directly, but also their caregivers, family and the broader community.

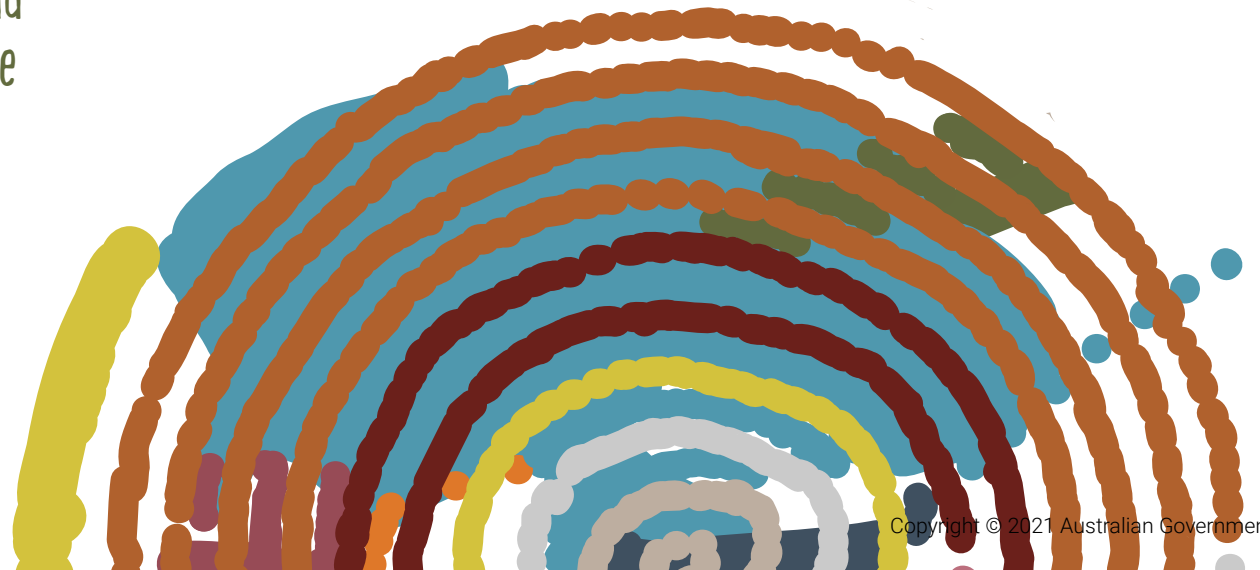
Children, young people, families and communities don't just see you as an educator. They are also looking to find out if they can connect with you, to see if you are trustworthy, respectful and not judging them. Children and young people want to know if they are safe in the educator's hands and that they will be accepted.

Take the time to invite connection with the children and young people you are teaching. It's best when these relationships develop organically and authentically. For more information about this, check out the 'Cultural Responsiveness and School Education' report by Menzies School of Health Research here: https://www.menzies.edu.au/icms_docs/312407_Cultural_Responsiveness_and_School_Education.pdf

“You can't come in and be like, ‘I'm the boss because I'm the teacher’... and respect me and that's it. You can't do that, especially because these kids are making, like, adult decisions already themselves, you know, so you can't come in and be that big authority person.”
- Roebourne educator

You'd be more aware than most that children and young people have an innate ability to see through superficial attempts at building relationships. It's helpful to share a bit about yourself with your class, such as personal interests and skills.

*“Grab that connection.
You only get a first try.
If you don't have that connection,
you're not going to engage them.
So, connection is the key.”*
- Newman youth worker



For example, an educator in Roebourne played guitar for the class. The students were able to see them as more than their teacher because they shared interests beyond their professional persona. A Jigalong educator used their computer screensaver to share photos of their pets and school holiday adventures. This fostered more meaningful connections between the educator and students and started a conversation about how they spent their holidays. By being willing to share a bit about yourself, you invite connection and the opportunity to build trust and meaningful relationships.

“I think there would have been a big difference with people coming in, someone they don't know, they got to build up that relationship... you can come in and say, ‘I'm the coordinator’ but they're not going to listen to you until you show them... respect and make a bond with them.”
- Roebourne educator

In smaller, close-knit communities, educators are more likely to see students and families outside the school environment when compared with large cities. It's important you are open to speaking with students, their caregivers and families during your own day-to-day activities, such as grocery shopping. This is an opportunity to show an interest in the child or young person's life beyond the school walls. You can also give them positive feedback in front of their family or caregivers if you meet in these informal settings. A Newman educator volunteered with local sports organisations and was able to see students “in their element”, giving the educator a chance to praise their abilities outside the school environment.

“If a lot of the feedback you get is negative then it's going to be quite hard to engage with the lady that you've only ever known to tell your child off ... it's pretty hard to go to them and say ‘Hey, I need your help.’”
- NDIS support worker

While it's useful to be open to engaging with children, families and caregivers outside school hours, this can be overwhelming. Be You has a range of resources and tools you can use to support your own social and emotional wellbeing. For more information check out the Be You Wellbeing Tools for You page: <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-you>



It's important to develop an understanding of the whole child or young person. This includes their cultural background and associated traditions and practices, their family background and circumstances at home, the local history of the place they are from, but also where they live now. These can all affect how a student presents in the classroom and their readiness to engage in learning.

If you consider these intersecting factors, you may be able to form a well-rounded, empathetic understanding of the child or young person and identify the best ways to engage them and support their social and emotional wellbeing. You may then be better positioned to speak with students and their caregivers about this, if needed, but through a lens of respect and compassion. For more information about how intersecting factors can affect social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal children and young people, check out the 'Working Together' resource developed by the Kulunga Research Network: <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/early-environment/developmental-origins-of-child-health/expired-projects/working-together-second-edition/>

Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO) and Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATA) play an important role in growing your understanding, as they can help bridge the gap between educators and community members. Working in partnership with AIEOs and ATAs will give you insight about when to involve a student's support network and bring in other agencies and informal supports.

It's important to create a space to notice when things have changed for a child or young person and have established relationships where you as an educator can speak openly with students, their caregivers and their family.

“For too long, I think, we've looked at mental health as an issue that there's something wrong with you. It's not about that...particularly working with young people, how do we change that stigma attached to mental health? How do we promote healthy support-seeking behaviours by really enforcing that mental health is not a bad thing?”
- Kimberley Aboriginal youth worker

Aboriginal children may be reluctant to talk about things that are worrying them, due to ingrained concerns about the shame and stigma of 'mental health issues' and fear that others in their close-knit community will hear about them. It may be a more helpful approach to focus more on their social and emotional wellbeing.



If you are concerned about a child, you can download the Behaviour, Emotions, Thoughts, Learning and Social Relationships (BETLS) Observation Tool from the Be You website to record observations: <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/betls-observation-tool>. You can also check out 'Wellbeing Tools for Students' on the Be You website: <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-students>, which includes helpful links and resources for children and young people.

When engaging families and caregivers, it's important to note that they may have barriers to entering a school or talking to educators. This could be for a range of reasons. Some Aboriginal people may mistrust schools, seeing them as symbols of colonisation and assimilation. Some traditional desert men may see schools as a women and children's space.

Family members and caregivers may feel unwelcome due to their own school experiences or the behaviour of previous educators in your learning community. For example, 'fly in, fly out' educators who didn't engage with the community, ones who demanded respect without earning it or who treated family members as ignorant.

“When I walk in there, I feel like I'm back at school going to the principal's office. So, you know, if your schooling wasn't a great time in your life then that's bringing up a lot of things as well.”
- NDIS support worker

This is why it's vital to work with AIEOs and ATAs to make your learning community a welcoming and culturally inclusive space. The 'Provide flexible, culturally responsive education' and 'Cultural Actions' sections of this resource will help you do this. For more information about communicating effectively, check out the Be You Fact Sheet 'Communication skills for educators' here: <https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/relationships/communication-skills-for-educators>

Work from a place of knowing that everyone wants the best for children and young people to live happy, healthy and safe lives.

Where meaningful relationships, based on mutual respect and understanding, are created between educators and children – and their caregivers, family and community – the students will be more likely to open up to educators about things that are worrying them.

“Teach them about their feelings and making sure they got someone to talk to ... it's OK to seek help.”
- Community member

