



# Building Relationships with Indigenous Students

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## Reasons for Poor Relationships:

- Historically, Indigenous people have not been well served by non-Indigenous institutions and individuals. People are likely to be wary of non-Indigenous staff;
- Negative perceptions held by teachers of Indigenous students;
- Resistance by Indigenous people to a variety of negative treatments;
- Racism;
- Poor communication between home and school;
- Expectation by the school that it is the parent's responsibility to initiate change.

## Power and Relationships:

Teachers are relatively powerful; students are relatively powerless. If teachers aren't aware of their use of power, it will be difficult to develop good relationships. Power is demonstrated by the following characteristics of the classroom:

- The way the teacher talks to the students. If the teacher talks down to them, Indigenous students will not like it because they are accustomed to a more egalitarian relationship with all people;
- The expectations the teacher has for student behaviour. Some teachers expect students to show subservient behaviour in the way they respond to the teacher. Indigenous students are not likely to do this and poor relationships might result;
- Command of Standard Australian English is central to the exercise of power. Indigenous students are less likely to demonstrate such competence and will feel intimidated as a result;
- The teacher's control over displays of individuality. Students who don't conform are penalised;
- The teacher's ability to utilise the 'hidden curriculum' to establish conformity in such things as taking orders, sitting and behaving without any resistance.

## Factors that contribute to poor relationships due to power differences:

Indigenous students are less likely than other students to subscribe to the cultural values of the school. This is shown by:

- Strong family ties: the student who chooses to put school goals above family goals would be very brave - and perhaps considered selfish or misguided.
- Egalitarian outlook: teachers are not considered to be superior, and students treat them as equals.
- Different values influence the reception of school content and methods. Eg. the demand for conformity, obedience to the teachers.
- Command The language of the school excludes Indigenous students.
- The curriculum of the school is grounded in the dominant culture. Content, skills, processes and values reflect that culture. Indigenous students are likely to feel excluded.

## To develop good relationships with Indigenous students:

- Have a good knowledge of students' backgrounds. Don't assume they all come from the same background. For example, some will have highly educated parents; others will not speak English except when with non-Indigenous people;
- Build on knowledge of children in classroom and playground interactions;
- Be firm, consistent and fair. Students do not like teachers who are unfair and inconsistent;
- Don't harangue students or speak 'strongly' to them. Try to be calm and pleasant;
- Set standards regarding performance: high expectations but with good support and warm relationships. Students like teachers who help them in their work;
- Work individually with students, particularly when public awareness of their lack of knowledge could be embarrassing;
- Use humour: students appreciate teachers who can defuse potentially explosive situations with a witty remark. Humour helps to establish good relationships, but don't use it to embarrass individuals;
- Ensure the curriculum has elements of cultural relevance;
- Show that you want students to be successful and competent. Stress the need to acquire skills for success and show them the pathways to success so that schooling isn't a mystery to them.
- Work with Indigenous support staff to establish sound learning environments;
- Engage informally with parents, students and others so they get to know you are a good person.



**Finally:**

All people find it easier to relate to people like them. Teachers have to work harder at relationships when they aren't familiar with the backgrounds of the people;

Teachers have to demonstrate that the relationship is meaningful

Indigenous students learn best from teachers they respect;

There is a need for high expectations as well as good relationships.

Remember, you are one of, if not the, most significant role model in these children's lives. Therefore you have a responsibility to be professional in everything you do, as your actions will greatly influence every student that you teach.