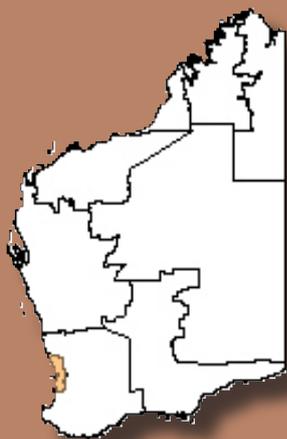


# THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## PERTH NOONGAR ATSIK REGION



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM VOLUME TWO OF THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN  
ABORIGINAL CHILD HEALTH SURVEY

This booklet summarises information from the second volume of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. The purpose of this profile is to provide data and information specific to the ATSIC region of Perth.

To protect the confidentiality of individuals and families, the information provided in this profile can only be given at the Perth ATSIC regional level. Unless otherwise stated, data in this publication refer to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in the Perth ATSIC region.

## About the survey



**T**HE Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (the Institute) conducted the survey in conjunction with the Kulunga Research Network to obtain information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged from 0–17 years. The aim of the survey was to provide evidence to develop strategies that promote and maintain healthy development and the social, emotional, academic, and vocational wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

To obtain this information about these children the survey was divided into three parts:

- ❖ Household survey that visited 2,000 households and obtained information on 5,300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–17 years, as well as information about their carers and other relatives living in the homes
- ❖ Youth self report survey for young people aged 12–17 years
- ❖ Schools survey where information about children was obtained from school teachers and principals.

In Volume Two, analysis was focussed on describing the social and emotional wellbeing of children aged 4–17 years. At the time of the survey, there were 8,260 4–17 year-olds in the Perth ATSIC region representing 36% of 4–17 year-olds in WA. A small proportion (5%) of these children were living in areas where the level of isolation was low. Approximately 37% of the state's 9,100 Aboriginal young people aged 12–17 years were living in the Perth ATSIC region.

## Consultation



**A**LL phases of the survey, including its development, design and implementation, were under the direction of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Steering Committee. The Steering Committee comprises senior Aboriginal officers from a cross section of agencies and settings, and has the ongoing responsibility to control and maintain:

- ❖ the cultural integrity of the survey methods and processes
- ❖ employment opportunities for Aboriginal people
- ❖ data access issues and communication of the findings to the Aboriginal and general community and
- ❖ appropriate and respectful relations within the study team, with participants and communities, with stakeholders and funding agencies and with the governments of the day.



## Measuring social and emotional wellbeing



**CARERS** were asked about any difficulties their children might have with emotions, feelings and behaviours, specific episodes of self-harm or attempted suicide, cultural and spiritual engagement and family experiences of grief, loss and trauma. As well as these issues a version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to measure emotional and behavioural difficulties. This version was adapted for Aboriginal children in the WAACHS.

### Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire comprises 25 questions looking into five areas of emotional and behavioural difficulties: Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity, Peer problems and Prosocial behaviour. Responses from the 20 questions related to the first four of these areas are combined to produce a Strengths and Difficulties Total Score which can range from zero to a maximum of 40. For the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey the maximum score was 38 and the average was 11.

The Strengths and Difficulties Total Score was grouped into three ranges to indicate the risk of mental health problems:

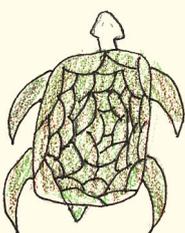
- ❖ Low risk (score 0–13)
- ❖ Moderate risk (score 14–16)
- ❖ High risk (score 17–40)

Therefore, children scoring in the range 17 to 40 are referred to as being at *high risk of mental health problems*.

### Prosocial Behaviour

The prosocial behaviour score, which was not included in the total difficulties score, is a measure of problems with social skills. A very small proportion of 4–17 year-olds in WA were assessed from their carer reports as being at high risk of problems with prosocial behaviour (4%). In the Perth ATSIC region, 5% were at high risk of such problems.

## Accuracy of the estimates



**A**LL figures in this booklet are approximations because not all families in the region were included in the survey. As such they may be different from figures that would have been obtained if everyone had been included in the survey. The data have been calculated at a 95% level of confidence. This means that there is a 95% chance that the full population figures would be within the range shown by the confidence interval. In a graph the extent of confidence in an estimate is presented by means of vertical confidence interval bars (  $\bar{\pm}$  ).

The bars show that there is a 95% chance for the true value for a data item to lie between the upper and lower limits. Sometimes, where the populations might be very small it may not be possible for accurate estimates to be made. In this case, bars in the graph will have very large confidence interval bars. The smaller the confidence interval bar the better the estimate.

Furthermore, when comparing two data items in a graph it may appear that there is a sizeable difference between the two. However if the confidence interval bars for these items overlap, no true difference can be assumed. A difference can only be real if there is no overlap of confidence interval bars.

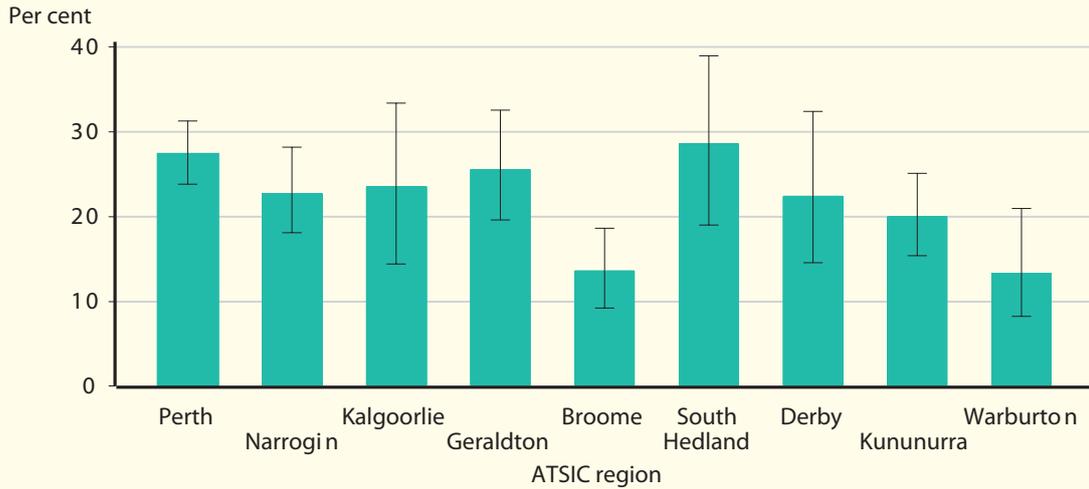


## Emotional and behavioural wellbeing



At the time of the survey there were 22,900 Aboriginal children in WA aged 4–17 years. One quarter (24%) of these children were at high risk of mental health problems. In the Perth ATSI region 27% of children were at high risk. Among the WA non-Aboriginal population, 15% were at high risk of mental health problems.

Children aged 4–17 years — Proportion at high risk of mental health problems, by ATSI region

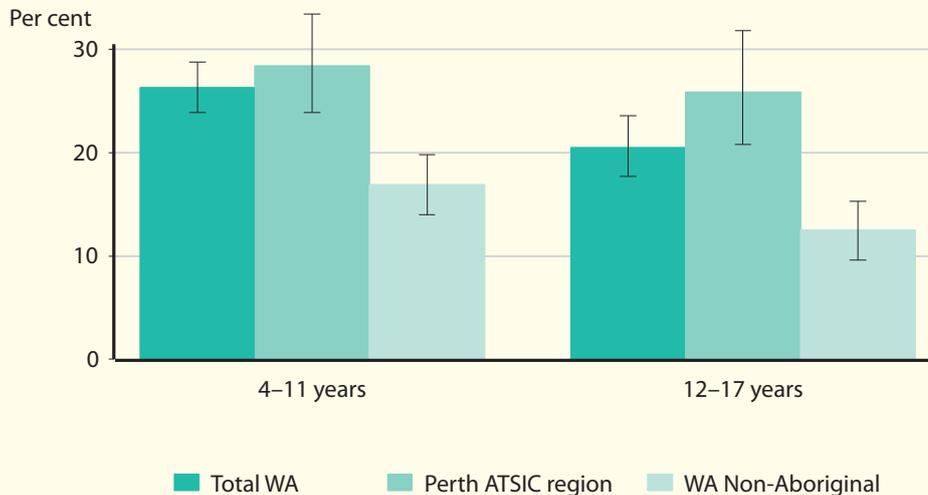


### Age

In the Perth ATSI region, 28% of children aged 4–11 years were at high risk of mental health problems. This was similar to the whole state where 26% of children were at high risk. In the non-Aboriginal population a lower proportion (17%) of 4–11 year-olds were at high risk.

For teenagers (12–17 years), 26% in the Perth ATSI region and 21% in WA were at high risk of mental health problems. This was considerably higher than for the state’s non-Aboriginal teenagers with 13% were at high risk.

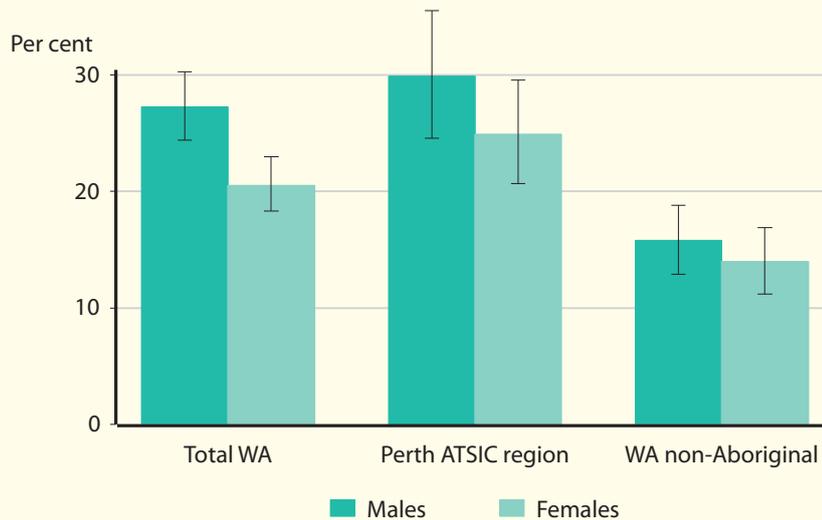
Children aged 4–17 years — Proportion at high risk of mental health problems, by age group



## Sex

In WA, over one quarter of males (27%) were at high risk of mental health problems and this was much higher than for females (21%). In the Perth ATSIC region 30% of males and 25% of females were at high risk of mental health problems. However this difference was not significant. In the non-Aboriginal population there was very little difference between males and females.

### Children aged 4–17 years — Proportion at high risk of mental health problems, by sex



The table below shows how many children were at high risk difficulties in each of the items of the total difficulties score (mental health problems) and problems with prosocial behaviour. These items include emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems. For each item, there was very little difference between children in the Perth ATSIC region and the whole state. For example in Perth, 44% of males were at high risk conduct problems compared with 39% of males in WA.

### Children aged 4–17 years — Proportion at high risk mental health problems, Perth ATSIC region compared with total WA

	Perth ATSIC region			Total WA		
	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total (%)
High risk of clinically significant —						
total difficulties	30	25	27	27	21	24
emotional symptoms	26	28	27	23	24	23
conduct problems	44	31	37	39	29	34
hyperactivity	23	15	19	18	12	15
peer problems	33	29	31	28	28	28
problems with prosocial behaviour	5	4	5	5	3	4



## Factors associated with mental health problems in Aboriginal children and young people



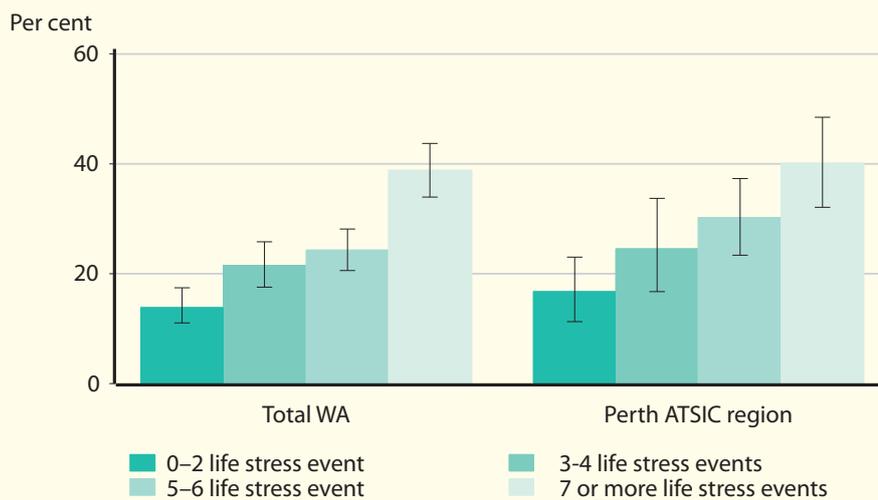
**T**HERE are many social circumstances, health conditions and lifestyles experienced by children, their carers and families that may be linked to mental health problems.

### Life stress events

Children living in homes where there have been many life stress events are at greater risk of mental health problems. Some of the events that can affect families are chronic illness, family break-up, arrests or financial difficulties. The WAACHS found that in WA as the number of life stress events increased, so did the number of children at high risk of mental health problems.

In WA, the carers of over one-fifth (22%) of children said that their families had had 7 or more life stress events. Four out of ten (39%) of these children were at high risk of mental health problems. For children in the Perth ATSIC region the story the same with 22% of children in families affected by 7 or more life stress events with 40% of these children being at high risk of mental health problems.

**Children aged 4–17 years —Proportion at high risk of mental health problems, by number of life stress events**



### Quality of parenting

Carers were asked in the survey how often they hit or smack their children and how often they laugh together with their children and how often they praise their children. From their answers to these questions carers were grouped into four equal sized categories of parenting quality. These were labelled: poor, fair, good and very good.

Children living in families with poor quality of parenting were almost four times as likely to be at high risk of mental health problems than children living in families with very good quality of parenting. Around one in four children (25%) in WA and 21% of children in the Perth ATSIC region were living in families with poor quality of parenting.

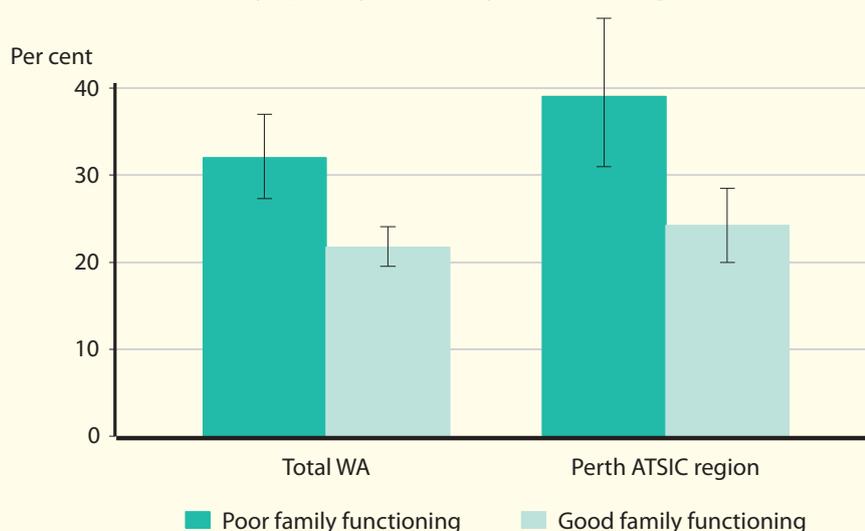


## Family functioning

Family disharmony is associated with poorer child development outcomes. Children exposed to family disharmony are less likely to have a good sense of emotional wellbeing. Responses to the nine questions used to determine how well families functioned were split into four categories: poor, fair, good and very good.

About one-fifth (21%) of children in WA live in families where family functioning is poor. Of these children, one-third (32%) were at high risk of mental health problems. In the Perth ATSIC region approximately 22% of children live in families with poor family functioning. Of these children, 39% were at high risk of mental health problems.

**Children aged 4–17 years — Proportion at high risk mental health problems, by quality of family functioning**



## Family care arrangements

Children cared for by a sole parent were almost twice as likely to be at high risk of mental health problems than children living with both their original parents. At the time of the survey, 34% of children in WA and 43% of children in the Perth ATSIC region were cared for by a sole parent.

Children cared for by a person other than an original parent (such as aunts and uncles) were over twice as likely to be at high risk of mental health problems. In the Perth ATSIC region 9% of children were in the care of someone other than an original parent. This was similar to the state figure of 14%.

## Mobility

Children who had lived in 5 or more different homes since they were born were one and a half times as likely to be at high risk of mental health problems than children who had lived in less than 5 homes. In the Perth ATSIC region 36% of children had lived in 5 or more different homes since they were born. This was much higher than for the whole state where 27% had lived in 5 or more different homes.

## Speech impairment in the child

There were 2,240 Aboriginal children in WA who had difficulty saying certain sounds and 45% of these children were at high risk of mental health problems. In the Perth ATSIC region, 940 children had difficulty saying certain sounds and 47% were at high risk of mental health problems.



### Children with runny ears

Throughout the state, children who have had runny ears have a much higher percentage at high risk of mental health problems (32%) than those who had never had runny ears (22%). This was the case also in the Perth ATSIC region where 39% of those who had ever had runny ears were at high risk of mental health problems, compared with 25% of those who had never had runny ears.

### Physical health of the carer

Children living with a primary carer who has a limiting health condition were three and a half times more likely to be at high risk of mental health problems. Throughout WA, 15% of children are living with a primary carer who has a limiting health condition compared with 16% in the Perth ATSIC region.

## Forced separation from natural family, forced relocation from traditional country or homelands, and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people



**T**HE survey found associations between the social and emotional wellbeing of children aged 4–17 years and the effects of past policies and practices of forced separation of Aboriginal people from their natural families on their carers and on their children. At the time of the survey, the carers of about 2,800 children in WA had been forcibly separated from their natural family by a mission, the government or welfare. In the Perth ATSIC region the carers of 1180 children had been forcibly separated.

Aboriginal carers who were forcibly separated from their natural family were more likely to live in households where alcohol or gambling caused problems. They were twice as likely to have been arrested or charged with an offence and less likely to have someone with whom they could discuss their problems. These carers were also one and a half times more likely to have had contact with Mental Health Services. These events contribute to life stress events that have been shown to have a negative effect on the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children and young people.

Among children in WA whose primary carers had been forcibly separated from their natural family, one-third (33%) were at high risk of mental health problems compared with one-fifth (22%) of those whose primary carer had not been separated. In the Perth ATSIC region, 35% of children whose primary carer had been forcibly separated were at high risk compared with 25% of children whose carer had not been forcibly separated.

Children whose carers had been forcibly separated from their natural family

- ❖ were more than twice as likely to be at high risk of mental health problems after adjusting for age, sex, LORI and whether the primary carer is the birth mother of the child
- ❖ were more likely to be at high risk of emotional symptoms, conduct problems and hyperactivity
- ❖ had levels of both alcohol and other drug use about twice as high as children whose Aboriginal primary carer had not been forcibly separated from their natural family.



## Youth Risk Factors – self reported by 12–17 year-olds

**YOUNG** people aged 12–17 years were asked to complete a Youth Self Report (YSR) questionnaire which contained a range of questions about activities and behaviours, including whether they had used alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, their sexual knowledge and experience, whether they had done any physical exercise or participated in organised sports, or whether they had been bullied at school or treated badly because they were Aboriginal.



### Smoking

Over one-third (35%) of young people in WA smoke regularly compared with 37% in the Perth ATSIC region. In the Perth ATSIC region 31% of males and 42% of females smoked regularly. These figures were similar to WA as a whole where 31% of males and 40% of females smoked regularly.

Young people were almost twice as likely to smoke regularly if their parents smoke. In WA, the parents of 66% of 12–17 year-olds smoke. In the Perth ATSIC region the parents of 73% of 12–17 year-olds smoke.

Smoking is related to being at high risk of mental health problems. In the Perth ATSIC region 20% of young people who smoked regularly were at high risk of mental health problems, a much higher proportion than for young people who did not smoke (7%).

### Alcohol consumption

Alcohol had been drunk by 27% of Aboriginal young people aged 12–17 years with 12% who had drunk to excess (had drunk so much that they had vomited at least once in the past six months). In the Perth ATSIC region, 31% had drunk alcohol and 15% had drunk to excess. Over one third (34%) of females and 28% of males in the Perth ATSIC region had drunk alcohol. This was similar to the whole state where alcohol was drunk by 27% of both males and females.

### Marijuana use

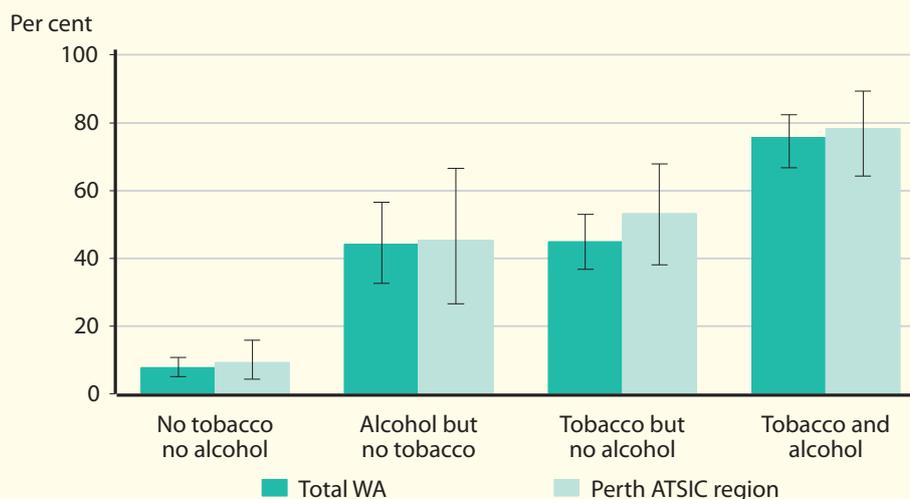
In the Perth ATSIC region, 34% of young people had used marijuana at some time compared to 30% state-wide. It was used at least weekly by 16% of young people in the Perth ATSIC region and 12% of young people state-wide. In WA, 45% of 17 years-old males and 21% of 17 year-old females used marijuana at least weekly. In the Perth ATSIC region however, there was little difference between 17 year-old males and females who used marijuana at least weekly (38% compared with 27%).

### Combined drug use

The combined use of marijuana, tobacco and alcohol was the same in the Perth ATSIC region (12%) as for the state as a whole (11%). About 9% of males and 15% of females in the Perth ATSIC region used all three substances. This was not much different to the state as a whole where 11% of males and females used all three substances



### Young people aged 12–17 years — Proportion who use marijuana, by use of alcohol and tobacco



### Physical activity and organised sport

In WA, 28% of young people had *not* done strenuous physical exercise in the week prior to the survey compared with 29% in the Perth ATSIC region. Many more females (36%) than males (20%) in WA did *not* do any strenuous exercise. The same applied to the Perth ATSIC region where 35% of females and 23% of males had *not* doing any strenuous exercise.

In WA, almost two-thirds (63%) of young people had taken part in organised sports in the 12 months prior to the survey. This was similar to the Perth ATSIC region where 61% participated in organised sports. In WA 70% of males and 56% of females participated in organised sports compared with 69% of males and 54% of females in the Perth ATSIC region.

### Bullying

Almost one-third (31%) of young people in WA who still went to school had been bullied at school. In the Perth ATSIC region, 36% of young people who still went to school had been bullied. Students who smoked cigarettes regularly were over twice as likely to have been bullied. Over one quarter (28%) of young people in WA who still go to school also smoke regularly compared with 32% in the Perth ATSIC region.

### Racism

Over one in five (22%) Aboriginal young people in WA and 26% in the Perth ATSIC region had been treated badly or refused service because they were Aboriginal.



## Sexual knowledge and experience

In WA, over one-quarter (28%) of 12–17 year-olds have had sex and three-quarters (75%) of 17 year-olds have had sex. In the Perth ATSIC region 29% of all 12–17 year-olds and 68% of 17 year-olds have had sex. About 13% of young people who had had sex were found to have a limited understanding of sexual health and contraception.

Young people were six times more likely to have had sex if they were no longer attending school, four times more likely if they smoked regularly and four times more likely if they drink alcohol. They were also over six times more likely to have had sex if they used marijuana weekly or daily than those who had never used marijuana.

## Youth self reported self-esteem and suicidal behaviour



**T**HE following sections apply only to 12–17 year-olds (young people) who completed a youth self report.

### Self-esteem

Low self-esteem is a risk factor for health risk behaviours, as well as for mental health problems. In WA, more females (32%) had low self-esteem than males (21%). In the Perth ATSIC region 34% of females and 23% of males had low self-esteem.

Young people who do a lot of physical exercise tend to have higher self-esteem than those who do very little exercise. Throughout the state, one-third (35%) of young people who had not done strenuous exercise had low self-esteem compared with a much lower 24% with low self-esteem among those who had done exercise. In the Perth ATSIC region however there was little difference in the percentage having low self-esteem between those who had *not* done strenuous exercise (33%) and those who had (26%).

Smoking cigarettes was also linked to low self esteem. In WA 32% of young people who smoked cigarettes had low self-esteem compared with 24% who did not smoke. In the Perth ATSIC region 42% of young people who smoked regularly had low self-esteem, over double the figure for young people who did not smoke regularly (20%).

### Suicidal behaviour

A particular concern to Aboriginal people, communities and health professionals is the prevention, early intervention and clinical management of children with suicidal tendencies.

Throughout WA 16% of young people said that in the 12 months before to the survey, they had seriously thought about ending their own life with 39% of these actually attempting suicide. In the Perth ATSIC region 18% thought about ending their own life and 36% of these made a suicide attempt.



## Discussion



**T**HE WAACHS is the most comprehensive study ever conducted describing the many factors that contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and their families. The survey findings highlight the magnitude and urgency of the mental health problems faced by many Aboriginal children and families. In the Perth region 27% of children were at high risk of mental health problems.

A number of factors were related to mental health problems in children, the most significant of which were the number of life stress events experienced by the household, level of family functioning and quality of parenting. These inter-related factors highlight the degree to which the wellbeing of children is influenced by the environment in which they live. This suggests that a key to preventing emotional and behavioural difficulties lies in building strong, positive and supportive family and community environments to reduce the negative effects of multiple family life stress events.

The survey data also demonstrate the negative effects that the past practices of forcibly separating children from their families are now having on the children of those people who were separated.

Also documented in the WAACHS was the extent to which young people are participating in a range of health risk behaviours including smoking and other substance abuse, sexual knowledge and experience, and suicidal behaviour. The survey found that in the Perth ATSIC region 37% of young people smoke, 31% drank alcohol, 34% used marijuana and 12% used all three. Around 29% of young people have had sex. Of particular concern is that of those young people who had had sex, 13% indicated a limited understanding of sexual health and contraception. Some 18% of young people had seriously thought of ending their own life in the year prior to the survey.

The survey has demonstrated that physical health, of both the child and of the carers, affects social and emotional wellbeing. Actions taken to address the disparities in physical health in both Aboriginal children and adults can have important flow-on benefits for the social and emotional wellbeing of children. These data indicate that significant benefits could also be achieved by further actions to foster and support parenting skills in carers.

In terms of mental health, children and young people in the Perth ATSIC region generally reflects the state overall. What affects the emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in the state overall are the same issues for children in the Perth ATSIC region.

The WAACHS data suggest that future programs and strategies should seek to extend the benefits for children which derive from lower levels of the family and community risk factors mentioned above. Additionally, for young people aged 12–17 years, efforts are needed to reduce the high levels of tobacco, alcohol and marijuana use and early sexual activity. Strategies to buffer children from the effects of multiple stresses affecting the family (especially chronic illness) and reducing bullying and racism in schools and the community are also likely to bring significant benefits for the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.



Proportion at high risk of mental health problems and specific difficulties, by carer report and youth self report — Perth ATSIC region compared with Total WA

	Carer report		Youth self report	
	Perth ATSIC region (%)	Total WA (%)	Perth ATSIC region (%)	Total WA (%)
<b>Proportion at high risk of clinically significant —</b>				
total difficulties	27	24	11	11
emotional symptoms	27	23	10	11
conduct problems	37	34	25	23
hyperactivity	19	15	18	15
peer problems	31	28	5	5
problems with prosocial behaviour	5	4	8	6

Carer reported factors affecting the emotional or behavioural wellbeing of children and young people — Perth ATSIC region compared with total WA

	Perth ATSIC region (%)	Total WA (%)
7 or more family stress events	22	22
Quality of parenting —		
Very good	38	34
Good	24	26
Fair	16	15
Poor	21	25
Family functioning		
Poor	22	21
Good	76	76
Family care arrangements		
Both original parents	38	42
Sole parent	43	34
One parent and new partner	10	9
Other (aunts uncles etc)	9	14
Lived in 5 or more houses since birth	36	27
Difficulty saying certain sounds	11	10
Runny ears	19	22
Vision problems	11	8
Carer health – limiting health condition	16	15
Household occupancy – High	16	29
Primary carer separated from family	14	12



Youth reported factors affecting the emotional or behavioural wellbeing of children and young people — Perth ATSIC region compared with total WA

	Perth ATSIC region (%)	Total WA (%)
Still attending school	77	74
Strenuous Exercise - lack of	29	28
Organised sport	61	63
Smoking	37	35
Alcohol - had drunk to excess	15	12
Marijuana - used weekly or more often	16	12
Ever had sex	29	28
Bullied at school (school attendees only)	36	31
Racism experiences	26	22
Suicidal thoughts	18	16
Attempted suicide	7	7



## How to obtain a copy of the main report

A copy of the report *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People* can be purchased for \$80 (plus postage & handling) from:

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research  
Telephone: (08) 9489 7777.

A PDF version of the main publication can also be downloaded from our website:

[www.ichr.uwa.edu.au](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au)

## Further information

If you would like further information about the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey:

call our information line on (08) 9489 7777, OR

email: [waachs@ichr.uwa.edu.au](mailto:waachs@ichr.uwa.edu.au)





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