

Age group differences in facial cleanliness among children in remote communities in Central Australia



Background

Working with Indigenous Eye Health (IEH), Ninti One conducted research on the reasons why children in remote communities in Central Australia aged between 0 and 4 years old tend to have less clean faces than children over four years old.

We ran focus groups and interviews with people from Ntaria, Papunya and Mutitjulu. We also held interviews with health professionals based in Alice Springs. We collected information on other relevant health and social issues, such as mental health.



Themes

Distractions caused by mobile phones, alcohol, drugs and gambling

They are on their phones all night



Shortcomings in parenting skills

Young parents don't know how to look after their kids



Low motivation of parents

Some parents just don't do what they are supposed to do



Self-identity leading to avoidance of frequent washing

They don't want to be seen as acting like a white person

Poverty, high living costs and spending choices that do not prioritise children

Some parents have expensive clothes and the kids are still dirty



Housing deficiencies and overcrowding

Too many people living together



Findings

Poverty and disadvantage

In terms of income, many Aboriginal people in remote communities are poor. At the same time, the cost of living is high. So they face challenges every day in meeting their basic needs. This means that the work of keeping active children clean in a dry and dusty environment is less important.

Conditions in remote communities

Houses often have too many people living in them. So pressures on space and washing facilities are high. Homes are often stressful places. Distractions from mobile phones, alcohol, gambling and other addictive behaviour affect the ability of parents and their children to follow a routine that includes regular washing.

Parental knowledge and skills

Shortcomings in parental skills also affect the facial cleanliness of young children. Many first-time parents are young people. Over four in ten first-time Aboriginal mothers in the Northern Territory are teenagers and over three in ten families have a single parent, usually the mother.

The expectations on young women can be demanding. It is not surprising that many lack the skills to be effective parents. As teenagers, they experience distractions and fluctuating energy levels. Washing their children's faces is often not a priority, especially for the age group of 0-4 years. By the time they reach five years, children are less reliant on their parents.

Strategies for positive change in facial cleanliness

Moving trachoma prevention work towards closer engagement with and understanding of families whose children have dirty faces would be an important step. A priority should be direct educational support to parents who are struggling with their parenting skills and choices.

Work between existing agencies and local people would mobilise existing community concern into positive action. There is also scope for educational work to help teenagers think through the responsibilities that come with parenthood. Existing programs such as the Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program could be extended to support more young parents.

It is also critical that any new strategies should take into account parents' mental health. Supporting parents to prioritise self-care would help their ability to look after their children too. Any direct work with families must be Aboriginal-led and supported by the community itself.

