SB-CaRT
Sexual Behaviours
Context and Response Tool

NSW GOVERNMENT

Information Sheet Social and Cultural Contexts

July 2026

Understanding children, families and culture

What do we mean by social and cultural context?

- Culture is about shared beliefs, values, behaviours, and ways of living. Culture shapes how peoples understand the world around them and how they respond to different situations.
- Social identity is feeling sense of belonging through being part of a group, such as a family, community or culture.
- As children grow, they connect with different groups and build relationship. These connections can influence their thoughts, values and behaviours at different stages of their development.
- A child's social and cultural world can include many things, such as culture, community, age, beliefs, education, ability, gender identity, where they live, their family and friends, and the influence of media, including social media.

Intersections between a child's social and cultural context and their sexual development and behaviour

Culture influences how we behave, interpret and react to situations. Our beliefs and values are informed by our cultural contexts.

1. Culture refers to the beliefs, norms, behaviours, and values that a range of groups of people consider acceptable.

2. Children interact with a variety of groups, as they grow and form relations, from early childhood and through to adolescence. These groups will have various levels of influence, at different times.

3. The culture context for a child can include nationality, ethnicity, age, religion, education, ability, gender identity, financial status, geographic location, the environment with an institution, family. peers, social media and more.

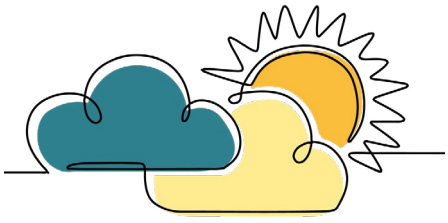
4. Child development involves a process of learning and growth. Children can only learn when others are there to support them, like parents, careers, teachers and siblings.

Child development is both a biological and a social process and children's knowledge of sex and sexual behaviour are shaped by the values and beliefs held by the child's own family, social groups and broader community.

"Children's cultural environments affect how they understand body changes, public and private sexual behaviour, pregnancy, birth, intimacy, and relationships." [2]

Cultural influences may shape the way a child learns about sexual development and behaviours and how sex education is accessed or provided within the community.

For example, it might be acceptable for an aunt to teach her niece about sex, but not acceptable for an uncle to do so. Some cultures may have specific stories or rituals that are part of teaching the youth in their community about their transition into adulthood [3].



Societal gender norms and expectations play an important role

Sexual development and behaviours by children are influenced by the broader social context. This includes inequitable gender norms and expectations.

75% of children reported to the NSW Child Prostection Helpline who presented with PHSB in 2018 and 2019 were male[4].

Aboriginal children and young people grow up learning through the strong influences of family, kinship systems, community, and culture, as well as the wider world, including media and social media. These influences all contribute to how young people understand relationships, identity, and respectful ways of being with others.

Learning is strengthened when trusted adults, including parents, carers, Elders, and community members, guide young people through open, honest, and culturally safe conversations.

Children and young people can be supported and empowered to make positive, safe, and culturally informed choices that reflect their values, identity, and connection to community.

Aboriginal children often play an important and active role in their own development, with growing independence supported by strong cultural foundations. As they reach school age, they begin making more decisions about who they spend time with, the activities they take part in, and how they engage with the world around them.

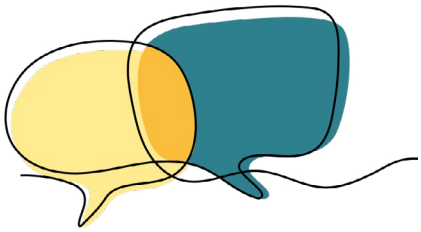
As children and young people grow, their curiosity and interests expand, and they continue to seek out knowledge and experiences that shape who they are, guided by culture, connection, and community.

The 7th National Survey of Australian Secondary Student and Sexual Health 2021 found that young people seek information about sex and sexual health from friends (76.5%), websites (56.7% and their mothers (49.7%)[5].

Not only can peers influence sexual knowledge, but numerous studies have found an association between the dynamics of young people's peer groups and their experiences of sexual abuse. Studies have found that in some cases the influence of peers can be stronger than families.

For example, when young people become involved in violent gangs or are part of a male social group that condones and normalised sexual violence6. A UK report found that:

"It is increasingly recognised that some forms of sexual harassment and abusive behaviours between adolescents are so commonplace in schools and colleges that some young people may regard them as 'normal'" and teachers underestimated the problem[7].



Social media and technology use can be very influential

The e-Safety Commissioner found that it is common within youth culture for children and young people to:

"Explore their identity, relationships and sexuality through online information, conduct and contact."[8]

The social and historical events that influence a child, their family and community are important to understand

It is important to take time to explore and understand the impacts of social and historical events on a child, their family and broader community. Part of understanding a child's cultural context, is the:

"Need to consider the different and interacting elements of how people are oppressed because of their racial background in the past and in contemporary times. Despite considerable changes in Australian society, racism is still a reality for members of marginalised groups. Racism is invasive, pervasive and unrelenting." [10]

Refer to "SB-CaRT Refugees Cultural Context Fact Sheet" and "SB-CaRT Aboriginal Cultural Context Fact Sheet," for further information.

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