

Consulting with Aboriginal communities: finding out about the facilitators of, and barriers to, healthy eating for our children

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Poor nutritional status is often reported for Aboriginal children but little is known about the physical, economic, policy or socio-cultural factors that may be barriers to, or facilitators of, healthy eating.

As part of planning for the NSW Hunter New England Area Health Service childhood obesity prevention program 'Good for Kids. Good for Life.', (www.goodforkids.nsw.gov.au), an Aboriginal community consultation project was conducted. Sites were selected based on high numbers (>2000) or a high proportion (>50%) of Aboriginal people. The consultation involved networking, formal consultation (groups of up to 8 people), informal consultation (groups of 2 to 3) and questionnaires (individuals). Over 40 community and stakeholder consultation sessions were held.

Barriers to healthy eating included the cost and availability of fresh fruit and vegetables as well as difficulty in accessing these foods. The unhealthy nature of the foods available outside of home, the lack of culturally appropriate and realistic dietary advice and limited knowledge about healthy foods and cooking practices were also identified as barriers. Facilitators were harder to identify but included provision of fruit by active after school programs, support from community dietitians and incorporation of nutrition in Aboriginal Medical Service. Barriers and facilitators varied considerably by community, highlighting the importance of taking the local context into account during program planning.

The consultation not only provided Good for Kids with valuable information for developing locally relevant activities but also with a model for giving Aboriginal communities a voice in program delivery. We consider both essential for the program to have a meaningful and sustainable impact.