KEY MESSAGES

Psychosocial factors associated with the mental health of Indigenous children living in high income countries: a systematic review

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Policy context

Indigenous children living in high income countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America (USA) are disproportionately affected by mental health problems when compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Childhood mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression and externalising behaviours are associated with a range of negative outcomes that are overrepresented in Indigenous communities, including high rates of suicidal ideation and completed suicide. The long-term sequelae of poor childhood mental health is believed to significantly contribute to the many health and social ‘gaps’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations that occur throughout the lifespan. This systematic review of published evidence aimed to identify modifiable psychosocial risk and protective factors common to Indigenous children living in developed countries. These factors are associated with mental health outcomes typically reflected in school-aged children. The results may inform policy and aid the design of initiatives to improve the mental health of Indigenous children, as well as identifying areas for further research.

Key messages

- Quantitative research investigating Indigenous children’s mental health is largely cross-sectional and focused upon negative outcomes
- Indigenous children living in high income countries share many of the same risk and protective factors associated with poor mental health
- Negative family relationships, experiences of adversity, and comorbid internalising symptoms exhibited the strongest associations with poor mental health
- Positive family and peer relationships, high self-esteem, and optimism were consistently associated with good mental health. Children’s substance use, experiences of discrimination, and caregiver’s poor mental health were consistently associated with poor mental health
- Family structure and socio-economic factors do not appear to be as reliable predictors of mental health as the quality of relationships between children and their family and the stability caregivers are able to provide for their children
- More research is required to better understand how cultural identification affects mental health outcomes