

# MESSAGE GUIDE: OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Evidence-based tips to help us build more  
constructive conversations about children and  
young people.



**NORTHERN  
TERRITORY**  
PREVENTION  
ALLIANCE

# MESSAGE GUIDE: OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## Background

This document is designed to help you respond to media questions, create communications materials, and talk about our children and young people in ways that help to generate constructive conversations, rather than trigger the same old myths and arguments.

It is based on research conducted in the US and is a guide only.

Reference: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/the-core-story-of-adolescence/>

**NOTE: The recommendations in this document are general in nature. In reality, our NT young people come from a diverse range of cultures and experiences and not all these suggestions will apply to everyone.**

# Useful 4-step structure for effective framing:

1. Start with shared **values**
2. Explain the **problem** (show the context, shift the blame away from individuals, use metaphors)
3. Show **solutions** and tell stories about what works
4. End with a shared **vision**.

## WHAT IS THE STORY THAT WE WANT TO TELL?

- ✓ *Structural factors like racism, poverty, and access to services, lead to disparities among adolescents (i.e. systems change is necessary).*
- ✓ *Use a discovery metaphor to explain that adolescent brains are in an important stage of development that benefits from trying new things.*
- ✓ *Advance stories of youth service and activism without acknowledging negative myths about adolescents.*
- ✓ *Supporting adolescents is good for individuals and we all benefit from stronger communities. When talking about these benefits, use words such as 'now and into the future'.*

## UNHELPFUL BELIEFS THAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

- ✗ NOT helpful to focus on individualism - and therefore not consider the importance of community and social context.
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe adolescence is solely a period of risk, danger, and vulnerability.
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that young people are out-of-control or 'problem youths'.

NOTE: It is NOT helpful to simply rebut these beliefs. By repeating them, we risk reinforcing them. Instead, we need to tell a new, more constructive, story.



## How can we tell this story?

The following provides an example of how we might tell a more positive 'core story' about adolescent development in the NT, using a 4-step structure for effective framing:

### 1. START WITH SHARED VALUES

The Northern Territory has a young and vibrant population with almost 1 in 5 people aged 10-24.

When our adolescents and young people are happy, healthy, and connected to community, we all benefit - now and into the future.

### 2. EXPLAIN THE SITUATION/ CHALLENGE

Youth is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. From around age 10 to about 25, we discover, learn from, and adapt to the world around us.

We forge our sense of who we are and who we aspire to be. We learn to make decisions, manage our emotions, and create deeper connections with peers and others in our communities.

Younger adolescents are developing skills to make good decisions and build their resilience. They need space for positive interactions with peers to fully develop these skills.

### 3. SHOW SOLUTIONS AND TELL STORIES OF EFFICACY

We need to provide young Territorians with safe opportunities to try new things and explore the world beyond their families.

Often this involves remodeling our dysfunctional and discriminatory systems.

### 4. END WITH A SHARED VISION

Supporting every young person, in every community, leads to healthier and more connected communities throughout the NT.



# Choosing our words carefully...

## USEFUL TERMS



***Emphasise the positives about adolescents and their development.***



***Focus on examples of youth service and activism. By even just mentioning stereotypes we help to reinforce them.***



***Point out the benefits to society that result from positive social, emotional, and identity development. Young people are an important part of a connected community.***



***Explain the structural factors like racism that lead to disparities and inequities among adolescents.***



***Remind audiences that we have all experienced this time of life by using 'we' and 'our.'***



***Define the term 'adolescence.' Use age or grade ranges or descriptions like "the developmental period between childhood and adulthood."***



**AVOID** focusing solely on risks and vulnerabilities.  
This is a counterproductive narrative already exaggerated in public understanding.



**AVOID** restating myths or negative stereotypes about adolescents, even to debunk them.



**AVOID** focusing only on individual success as a measure of positive adolescent outcomes.



**AVOID** talking about poor outcomes among marginalised youth - leaving out how systems disadvantage certain groups of young people.



**AVOID** 'othering' young people by solely referring to 'they' or 'them.'



**AVOID** relying on the term 'teenagers' as it risks 'othering' young people as an outsider group

## When talking about adolescence it can be useful to use the 'discovery metaphor':

Adolescence is a critical period of discovery and opportunity. During adolescence, we explore the world around us, mapping out the terrain so we can find our path to adulthood. This is a time of trial and error as we pursue new experiences and different ways of expressing ourselves. That's why we need to create environments where all adolescents have room to take safe risks and discover who they are and what they want for their future.

Examples:

- "Young people learn by trial and error."
- "When we're adolescents, we need opportunities to test out new ideas and experiences."
- "Adolescence is about unearthing new experiences and making sense of them."
- "Adolescents need to experiment - to try new things where they don't know what the outcome will be."
- "During adolescence, we begin to explore the world outside of our family in new ways."



## IN SUMMARY - QUICK TIPS:

- Tell stories about youth **activism** and young people's **engagement** in their communities.
- Draw attention to **support** required for positive outcomes and avoid focusing on vulnerabilities.
- Use the discovery metaphor to emphasise the need to provide adolescents with **opportunities** to expand and grow.
- **Listen** to and **amplify** the stories young people tell about themselves.
- Order matters - make the **positive case first**.
- Highlight how **strong and connected communities** support positive adolescent development.
- Explain, don't just assert, how **supporting adolescent development** leads to positive community-level outcomes.

# FIND THE FACTS

## Mission Australia Youth Report

## NT Story of Our Children and Young People Report

**34.5%**

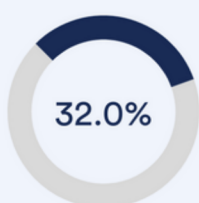
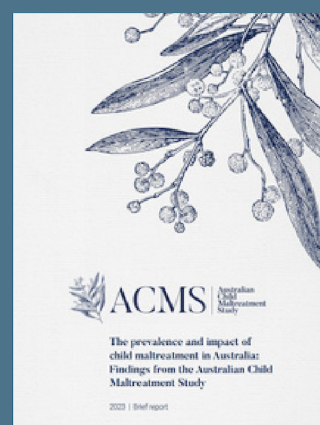
The Northern Territory has a young population with about 1 in 3 people aged 0-24.

**41.2%**

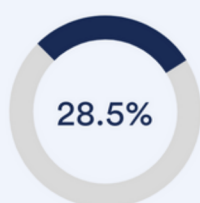
More than 4 in 10 children and young people, aged 0-24 are Aboriginal peoples.

In 2023, the [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) was released, providing world-class evidence about the prevalence and impact of child abuse and neglect in Australia (for the first time ever!). The research shows that approximately 60% of Australians have experienced child maltreatment.

It's strongly recommended that communicators use the data from this report and be clear that this is quite separate to the statistics about child protection reports and notifications.



experienced physical abuse



experienced sexual abuse



experienced emotional abuse



experienced neglect



experienced exposure to domestic violence

In childhood before the age of 18\*

This guide has been developed under the auspices of the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (NTPA).

The NTPA is an independent, high level leadership group that emphasises the collective role that different sectors, communities and individuals play in keeping children and young people in the Northern Territory safe, and ensuring they have the opportunities they need to reach their full potential. It aims to maximise opportunities for NT-wide action.

## Northern Territory Newsroom contacts

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