

Contemporary Attachment and Bonding Research:

Implications for American Indian/Alaska Native Children and their Service Providers

A publication of the National Indian Child Welfare Association

Attachment and bonding considerations are very important in child welfare cases and placement decisions. It can be a challenge to understand the large body of research about attachment and bonding and how that might apply to service providers working with American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) families. Historically, attachment theory focused on the dyad of parent and child, looking at the quality of relationship between the two as a predictor of well-being (Flaherty and Sadler, 2011). However, this model was based on Western cultural assumptions and did not account for cultural variation in family structures (Neckoway, Brownlee, and Castellano, 2007). Extended family structures, traditional for many AI/AN communities in particular, were not accounted for in traditional attachment theory. In recent years, there has been updated cross-cultural research showing that children thrive in many different family structures (Lancy, 2008). This research is infrequently cited in court cases involving the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the placement of AI/AN children, but this newer science supports the placement preferences in ICWA, as well as the benefits of keeping children connected to their AI/AN communities.

Recent child and adolescent development research has said that developing cultural identity and passing down of values between generations is an important milestone for adolescence (Albert and Trommsdorff, 2014). The benefit to youth is a sense of “groundedness,” which means a sense of coherence in one’s self-identity (Super and Harkness, 2002; LaFromboise et al., 1993). That strong sense of self helps to foster youth well-being and may be protective for adverse mental health outcomes (Sahota, 2019). Newer research in developmental psychology has highlighted the importance of the “niche” in which a person’s psychology is developed. This niche includes the entire social environment within which a child is raised, including their family, school, and community, and caring adults in all these settings, which help to shape the child’s psychological development and identity. Therefore, this entire niche needs to be

HIGHLIGHTS

- *Research supports the importance of the extended family, community, and cultural context for the well-being of AI/AN children and youth, in line with the placement preferences of ICWA.*
- *AI/AN communities can ensure that community and cultural strengths are integrated into their service delivery for children and youth.*

considered in decisions about placement and child and adolescent well-being more broadly.

It is also important to consider the long-term impacts on a child deriving out of placement decisions (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2017). ICWA opponents have sometimes argued that the attachment a child has developed with his or her foster family is a reason to deviate from ICWA placement preferences. While it is very important to consider the immediate impacts on a child’s mental health that could occur with a change in placement, it is also important to consider the longer-term effects on their mental health as youth and adults. There is limited research on the outcomes for adults who were adopted out of their AI/AN communities as children. One survey of that group showed that adoptees had much higher rates of mental health challenges than what would be expected in the general AI/AN adult population (Landers, Danes, and White Hawk, 2015). A recent narrative review of literature conducted by NICWA also found that cultural connectedness, meaning a sense of feeling connected to cultural identity, is an important variable linked to mental well-being for AI/AN children and youth across multiple studies. More information is available in *Cultural Connectedness and Indigenous Youth Well-Being Fact Sheet*. All of these points may be made in individual child custody cases or child placement proceedings to support individual recommendations aligned with ICWA placement preferences. The sources mentioned here could be cited in court testimony and briefs.

Recent new research (mentioned on the front page) says that the entire social environment or “niche” in which a person is raised matters when considering attachment and bonding. This may have implications for how services are designed and provided in communities as well as outcome measurements.

Some AI/AN communities have developed mental health care systems that include services to foster cultural connectedness. For example, some Systems of Care tribal grantees have included cultural healing services as part of their broader children’s mental health programs. The Systems of Care grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration are aimed at supporting communities in developing mental health services for children (www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/sm-19-009). Others have developed curricula about traditional tribal culture as a way to help parents and caregivers in their communities develop healthy relationships with children. These kinds of cultural components of service provisions are often provided in community settings, outside of clinic buildings, and involve members of the community identified as cultural leaders. Tribal communities working with NICWA have also focused on enhancing strengths in children and families, rather than only looking at problems.

Another principle for community-based care is to involve different parts of the community outside of the health system. For example, a best practice in the suicide prevention research literature for AI/AN communities is to build a community-based task force involving collaboration among behavioral health, education/schools, emergency responders, cultural and language programs, police, and others (Sahota and Kastelic, 2014).

AI/AN communities looking at outcome measures to use in quality improvement initiatives could also consider cultural connectedness scales. There have recently been survey instruments designed and validated with Indigenous communities to look at cultural connectedness. This is different from cultural participation, which refers to being part of specific cultural events or practices. Cultural connectedness refers to the feelings of being connected to a cultural identity independent of whether someone is able to participate in cultural events or practices. Recent publications provide short versions of cultural connectedness scales that AI/AN communities could consider using as outcome measures for their programs (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, and Hinson, 2017). Finally, communities could also consider using a community-based process to define their own measures of what well-being means for their children, youth, and families.

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The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) works to support the safety, health, and spiritual strength of Native children along the broad continuum of their lives. We promote building tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect through positive systems change at the state, federal, and tribal levels.

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