

Child Welfare Redesign Approaches and Experiences within Indian Country

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Tribal nations have worked to redesign child welfare to better serve Indigenous communities and to promote the wellbeing of children and families. Child welfare redesign as it is discussed in this paper is synonymous with tribal efforts to decolonize their programs, which is a fundamental redesign of programs and services to reflect tribal culture, customs, traditions, and beliefs. This paper will discuss key factors in establishing successful child welfare redesign for AI/AN children and families and will provide the reader with a view of approaches that work within Indian Country.

History of Federal Attempts to Assimilate Indigenous Children and Families

The impact of colonization on Indigenous people(s) affected all facets of Indigenous traditional society. Assimilation of Indigenous people into mainstream culture and society was the expressed goal of the federal government and carried out with the help of private and religious institutions (Kunesh, 1996). With the introduction of government run boarding schools in the 1860's, children were forcibly removed from their families and stripped of their culture (Kunesh, 1996). Indigenous families were threatened with the loss of food, shelter, or other forms of assistance if they did not allow their children to attend boarding schools (Kunesh, 1996). As Indigenous children were removed from their communities, their families and tribal nations were no longer able to have a role in how their children were raised. Indigenous children's ability to maintain connection with family, speak their language, practice their culture and religion, and provide for their families was severely curtailed and reinforced through harsh punishment and conditions in the boarding schools (Kunesh, 1996).

Following almost a hundred years of the boarding school era, the Indian Adoption Project was introduced by the federal government working with private agencies and religious institutions. From the 1950's until well into the 1960's the Indian Adoption Project was considered bold, progressive policy to help provide healing and permanency to Indigenous children (Herman, 2012). During this time social workers were trained to "rescue" Indigenous children from their families and culture and place them in non-Native adoptive homes far from their communities (Kunesh, 1996). The close bonds of extended family were seen as obstacles to assimilation into mainstream culture. Indigenous children were taken from their homes with the goal of becoming "civilized". They were kept from their parents, relatives, and tribal communities in an effort to destroy cultural identity (Kunesh, 1996). The intergenerational loss of connection to tribal culture, traditions, customs, and extended families from these federal policies is a continuing trauma that continues to reverberate today in tribal communities (Kunesh, 1996).

Challenges of Colonization Today for Indigenous Children and Families

The impact of colonization continues today, as historic and intergenerational trauma is allowed to flourish in tribal communities. Resources that could support culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services in tribal communities are scarce (National Indian Child Welfare Association [NICWA], 2018). Policy change at the federal and state level that could provide tribal nations with the tools they need to address long term trauma and related social problems often are not contained in policy reform proposals. The inadequate resources and ineffective policy solutions have created a child welfare system for tribes that is often out of step with what tribal leadership needs to address long standing trauma in their communities (NICWA, 2021a). Most of the concerns of tribal nations with mainstream child welfare services are rooted in the fact that mainstream society has imposed their ways on Indigenous people without adequate thought or validation of Indigenous ways of living and knowing. To be successful, child welfare redesign must embrace Indigenous thought and experience to effectively address long standing issues like historic and intergenerational trauma (NICWA, 2020a).

As an example, most federal funding is focused on services to children in out of home care (NICWA, 2018). A small percentage of federal child welfare funds are focused on services to prevent out of home care (prevention) (NICWA, 2018). To address the disproportionate placement of AI/AN children in out of home care, more prevention-oriented funding is needed to address child maltreatment early on and avoid out of home placement. Child neglect is the overwhelming type of child maltreatment that AI/AN children face (Attorney General's Taskforce on AI/AN Children Exposed to Violence Attorney, 2014), which is often due to structural barriers, such as poverty, substance use disorders, substandard or limited housing, and untreated mental health issues from generational trauma (NICWA, 2021b). Many of these issues can be mitigated with early prevention efforts and more flexible funding that support tribal cultural practices. While evidence-based services can be part of the solution in prevention services, full consideration needs to be given to the lack of support for tribal nations to conduct evidence-based studies and the value of tribal cultural practices whether they are used by tribal nations or in coordination with state child welfare systems with custody of Indigenous children (NICWA, 2021a).

AI/AN Traditional Norms and Values: Key Factors in Shaping Tribal Child Welfare Redesign

Promoting tribal ownership of the challenges in child welfare and solutions is not only key to validating tribal sovereignty and meeting its governance responsibilities but it ensures federal and state funding is effectively spent and focuses on issues and approaches that will meet policy goals (NICWA, 2021a). Traditionally, tribes have been responsible for the safety and wellbeing of their children

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and families (NICWA, 2017). Through kinship structures, children are protected by their parents, grandparents, great grandparents, siblings, cousins, uncles, and aunts (Kunesh, 1996). More generally, children were protected by tribal teachings about children, cultural traditions and spirituality. Connections to culture through activities such as hunting, gathering, beading, drumming and singing, dancing, storytelling, regalia making, all contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous children and families (NICWA, 2021c). The value of connectedness with culture is now well known to support healthy tribal families (NICWA, 2021c). Vital and positive teachings are related through these practices. A positive cultural identity can help families heal and meet their needs by teaching healthy ways of being that are culturally relevant. By supporting tribal ownership and control over the identification and prioritization of child welfare issues that need to be addressed and the approaches used to address them, we are ensuring that the most relevant knowledge and experience are available in the development and implementation of child welfare solutions (NICWA, 2021a).

Indigenous people know what's best for their families. Indigenous social workers have innate knowledge of Indigenous ways of living and knowing. Many tribal child welfare workers have college degrees or are licensed social workers. They learn important tools and practices in higher education that when incorporated in a culturally relevant way can promote decolonization and successfully contribute to the well-being of children and families (NICWA, 2021b). There is value in adapting what works in mainstream social work education with Indigenous ways of living and knowing. Given the opportunity and flexibility in funding, Indigenous communities have been able to exercise their sovereign right to protect the well-being of their families and children and create child welfare solutions that are designed to promote wellbeing (NICWA, 2021a). There are many tribes that are taking ownership of tribal child welfare programs and implementing traditional teachings. When tribal nations are able to do this, they are successfully decolonizing their programs and services (NICWA, 2021a).

For example, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) have effectively decolonized their tribal child welfare program. Previous to their decolonization efforts, their program was largely based upon mainstream models of child welfare services. The state and federal funding they used to support their child welfare program shaped how they operated their services. One of the concerns was how child removal was overused as a way to keep children safe. This resulted in large numbers of CTUIR children being removed from their homes and the ongoing challenge of securing enough foster homes in the community to keep up with removals (NICWA, 2018).

With input from the tribal community, tribal leaders, and child welfare staff the tribe redesigned their child welfare program to become more prevention based. They instituted a stronger cultural basis in their program design and restructured their funding sources to support prevention and cultural approaches (NICWA, 2021c). After redesigning their child welfare program they are able to provide more services to families that need extra support and help alleviate the risk of removal. They also supported their focus on prevention

by restructuring child welfare positions to include skills in family engagement and support (NICWA, 2021c). With these changes they have been able to decrease and stabilize the number of children in out of home care and free up tribal funds previously used for foster care for prevention services (NICWA, 2021c). The community now sees the child welfare program as a valuable resource and increased numbers of families have begun voluntarily seeking help before a crisis sets in (NICWA, 2021c). They have transformed their tribal child welfare by recognizing and acknowledging the tribal perspective and providing hope to their people by validating Indigenous ways (NICWA, 2021c).

Conclusion

It is evident that tribes have the capacity to transform their communities and child welfare systems, to take ownership in the prioritization of which issues need to be addressed, and the approaches used to heal their children and families. This extends to the value of federal and state governments actively engaging tribal nations in child welfare redesign efforts for AI/AN children in both tribal and state care. Responsive funding, clear authority in support of tribal sovereignty, culturally appropriate programs and services, and community engagement are the hallmarks of tribal child welfare programs that have decolonized. Federal and state policymakers can support successful child welfare redesign efforts involving AI/AN children and families by becoming informed of tribal decolonization and child welfare redesign efforts, and applying the lessons learned in collaborative efforts with tribal nations to redesign federal and state child welfare policies.

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