Exploring Native Perspectives on Child Development

NICWA
National Indian Child Welfare Association
Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities throughout the world have always had traditional ways of child-rearing, teaching, and learning that support healthy child development. Understanding, respecting, and incorporating Indigenous knowledge of child development into service delivery to American Indian and Alaska Native (Native) children and families is critical to program success.

This tip sheet may be useful to practitioners and service providers who work alongside Native children and families, including mental health providers, child welfare professionals, legal advocates, researchers, students, and other child welfare advocates.

THE IMPACTS OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Research has shown that the impacts of historical trauma on traditional child-rearing practices and child development, including the long history of colonization and federal policies that disrupted tribal lands, cultural practices, language, and family relationships, are still felt by families today (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014).

Supporting Native children and families requires an intentional effort to deepen our understanding of the history of assimilation and its generational impacts, including the United States Indian boarding school era (Boarding School Healing Coalition, n.d.; University of Minnesota, n.d.), subsequent public and private child welfare agency removal of Native children (Haaland v. Brackeen, 2023, Gorsuch, J., concurring, p. 43), and the contemporary disproportionality of Native children (NICWA, 2021) in state child welfare systems.

Historical and intergenerational trauma interrupted the passing down of traditional parenting knowledge and child-rearing practices that supported the well-being of Native children, families, and their communities, disrupting teachings and practices that had been in place for thousands of years (NICWA, 2019; Muir & Bohr, 2019).

"...disrupting teachings and practices that had been in place for thousands of years."

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DIVERSITY OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES

As a result of these experiences, many Native parents were deprived of critical opportunities and role models that supported learning of traditional parenting skills, life skills, and basic principles of child development (Cross, 2004). Indigenous communities also face the challenge of parenting and raising Native children in two worlds, both traditional Native and mainstream American systems of values, beliefs, and practices.

Balancing and navigating two cultures with varying value systems can produce stress, anxiety, fear, and a sense of burden, which can create barriers to relationship building and influence a child's identity development and sense of belonging to family, community, and culture (NICWA, 2019). Today, Indigenous communities are revitalizing traditional practices that support child development, relying on family and community perspectives on healthy childrearing practices, including collective community responsibility for children and the critical role of extended family in children's lives.

"...raising Native children in two worlds, both traditional Native and mainstream American..."

Due to the long history of trauma related to the loss of language and cultural ways of life, Native children and families are connected to their culture in different ways and may not always feel comfortable sharing their culture or identity with others. Expression of a person's values may depend on tribal affiliation, cultural identity, and degree of assimilation, among other factors. The degree of assimilation may be viewed on a continuum, with some Native people who hold to their traditional values on one end, those who have assimilated or assume the values of mainstream American society on the other end, and those who are acculturated or move between two cultures at varying points in between (Cross et al., 2023). Understanding the diversity of cultural identities among Native families and how this experience influences parenting can help service providers facilitate dialogue, activities, and interventions that support parents in deciding what values they want to be instilled in their child's learning environment.

Indigenous communities often conceptualize the world through a relational or cyclical worldview, which is a holistic understanding of a person's wellness as a balance of the mind, body, spirit, and context (Cross et al., 2011). In contrast with the predominant American society's linear worldview, which is organized around cause and effect thinking, the relational worldview embodies and values relationships, process, spirituality (e.g., ceremonies and rituals), harmony with nature, and interdependence (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014).

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UNDERSTANDING TRADITIONAL CHILD-REARING PRACTICES

Cultural identity can include a person's attachment to cultural values, teachings, language, sacred traditions, land/ territory, shared history, and learned wisdom (Peroff, 1997). Understanding the worldviews and values of Native families and how those cultural values shape behavior and influence child development can help service providers address the needs of the Native children and families by selecting or adapting interventions that align with Indigenous perspectives of child development.

Traditional teachings regard children as sacred gifts of the Creator (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014; Allison-Burbank & Collins, 2020). Native children and youth learned through oral tradition, including stories, legends, and teachings that communicated values, taught children the ways of their people, and supported healthy brain development (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014). Traditional child-rearing practices emphasize the importance of child autonomy, extended family, interdependence, attachment, developmental milestones, discipline, language, ceremony, and spirituality (Muir & Bohr, 2019).

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For example, children and youth were respected members of the community and developed a sense of autonomy at an early age, often working to transition from being dependent on others to providing for others by helping with family tasks or caring for younger siblings or elders (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014). In many Indigenous communities, a child's parents and extended family have an integral role in nurturing, teaching, training, and caring for their children (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014; Allison-Burbank & Collins, 2020; McWilliams et al., 2011). Extended family is often community defined and may extend beyond mainstream definitions to include distant relations and clan systems (Cross & Cross-Hemmer, 2014).

For example, the Iroquois people in the northeastern United States are a matrilineal society, meaning identity and family follow the mother, so married couples would live with the maternal family that often included the mother's parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. The clan mothers were the voice of the people, responsible for appointing chiefs and listening to and informing the people; the chiefs were the ears, voice, and advocate for the community's best interests; and the faith keepers brought the community together through sacred ceremonies and spiritual advising.

"While family and social structures vary based on each community's traditional values and customs and how those ways of being are practiced today, relationality and cultural connectedness play a role in grounding children to place in their early years."

TRADITIONAL VALUES, DISCIPLINE, AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Traditional child-rearing practices in many Native communities emphasized the importance of discipline in child-rearing, which often encompassed the values of self-control, consistency, and respect (Cross et al., 2023). Discipline was never separate from teaching but rather presented an opportunity to teach the right way to behave, which was closely intertwined with spiritual beliefs (Cross et al., 2023).

As a young child, one of the most important lessons learned was respect for elders, a value grounded in cooperation and sharing (Cross et al., 2023). Through storytelling, often an important role of elders, children learned to be good observers and listeners, the value of relationships with people and the environment, and gained knowledge of community rules and expectations. Traditionally, child growth and development were recognized through different ceremonies, such as naming customs where a baby name is replaced later by an adult name, and nicknames changed as a child entered different developmental stages (Cross et al., 2023).

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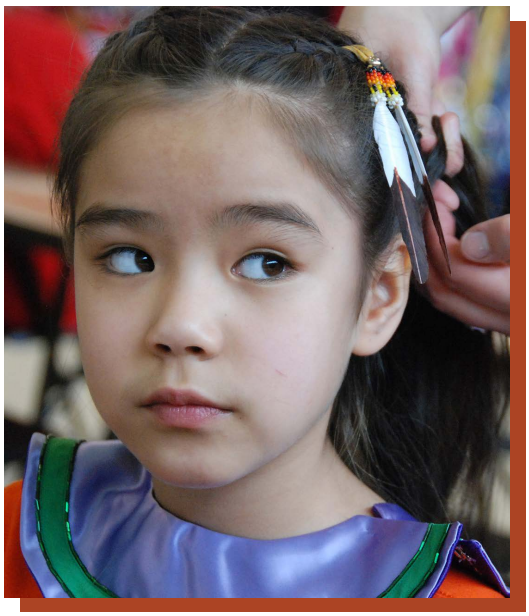
Additionally, children were not rushed to meet specific developmental milestones; rather, this was gauged on the child's readiness to take on new skills and tasks. Cross explains, "Children have to walk before they can run, but they have to have an environment first in which it is safe to walk" (Cross et al., 2023, p. 200). This underscores that Native families have always had an understanding of child development and approaches to supporting child growth and development across the lifespan.

While these traditional ways may be present in varying degrees in the lives of Native children and families today, it is a clear indicator that Native families work together to create safe, secure, and respectful environments for their children to grow and thrive. **Awareness of traditional child-rearing practices and how these ways of caring for children may influence family decision-making can help service providers better engage Native families in meaningful conversations that support the roles of the whole family in teaching and passing down values to their children.**



Learning is often guided by family and community in relationship with the land and the child's innate gifts and skills, which are observable through communal and ceremonial processes, for instance, the role of elder stories in shaping worldviews, responsibilities, and commitments (Peltier, 2021). In one study of the priorities and preferences of Native American caregivers on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, caregivers shared the importance of supporting their child's knowledge of and participation in cultural traditions (e.g., powwows, dancing, sweat lodge ceremonies, speaking their traditional language, etc.), their development of relationships with peers and community, and acquiring social and emotional competence (e.g., sharing, respect, manners, self-care, etc.) (Ferris, Guiberson, & Bush, 2021).

Understanding family and community-defined cultural and linguistic goals and aspirations for children may help service providers be responsive to the needs of Native children and families that support early child development. In contrast with mainstream American learning environments that often prioritize individual performance and generate competition, Native learning environments emphasize process, group participation, and respect for others (Cross et al., 2023). This is important to note because children learn most effectively when their learning environment aligns with their lived experiences and values.

FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS WITH NATIVE FAMILIES

Service providers might facilitate conversations with Native families by asking questions such as:

- **What constitutes appropriate early education for this child?**
- **What are the family and community beliefs and socialization practices?**
- **What adjustments need to be made to support early learning and development among Native children? (Romero-Little, 2010).**

When service providers understand the cultural differences in child rearing and child development among the Native families they serve, they can be better equipped to tend to the cultural needs of the child, their family, and community.

ALIGNING EARLY EDUCATION WITH CULTURAL VALUES

During early childhood, parents and extended family would socialize their children into the language and culture of their homes and communities (Romero-Little, 2010). Early education programming can support, conflict, or misalign with a child's cultural values. For example, the Pueblo of Cochiti, a tribal nation in New Mexico, had been working to revitalize their tribal language by encouraging their children to learn and speak their language, as opposed to English, from a young age (Romero-Little, 2010). When Cochiti children would attend Head Start, instruction and other communications were in English, conflicting with family and community values of passing on the language and culture to the next generation (Romero-Little, 2010).

Services and programming that value the role of family, community, and culture in early child development can support better alignment with the needs and life experiences of Native children in early learning environments. This might include **inviting family and community members to be involved in the planning, development, and implementation of services, such as elders teaching children traditional drumming, dancing, beading, fishing, or hunting.**

In another example, the value of interdependence could be recognized in mainstream practice by engaging the child and their nurturing network (e.g., parents, extended family, elders, community healers or helpers, etc.) early in the intervention process, prior to the provision of services, to ensure that practices and customs are integrated into a family-driven plan that supports the child's connections to their cultural ways of learning and growing. This intentional awareness and integration into practice acknowledges culture as an invaluable resource that supports healthy child development and strengthens the overall well-being of Native families.

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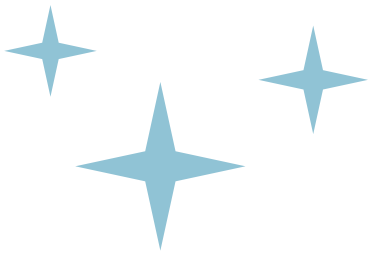
ALLYSHIP BETWEEN PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES SUPPORTS NATIVE CHILDREN

Service providers can work towards allyship by actively uplifting the voices and experiences of Native children and families. This involves cultivating a deep self-awareness of one's own positionality and recognizing the impact of their role in interactions with Native families.

It also means actively seeking opportunities to listen and learn about Native history, cultures, and contributions, as well as being open to questioning and challenging the status quo when it serves to enhance the well-being of Native children and families. By developing new skills, service providers can foster intentional engagement with families, **ensuring that programs and interventions are aligned with the cultural, spiritual, social, educational, and mental health needs of Native families.**

These actions demonstrate a deliberate and ongoing commitment to cultivating cultural competency, coupled with an enduring curiosity to learn and grow, embodying the essence of cultural humility. This approach places the perspectives and needs of Native families at the forefront, ensuring that early childhood development interventions are tailored to prioritize the family unit and promote the health and educational development of Native children.

"...making it essential to understand the diverse ways...to support early child development through integration of culture, language, and traditions..."



Allyship also acknowledges that children are an integral part of their communities, making it essential to understand the diverse ways in which tribal nations operate early childhood programs or support early child development through integration of culture, language, and traditions into systems of caring for their children and families.

Alongside the experiences and knowledge of the family unit, tribal programs and urban Indian organizations (Indian Health Service, n.d.; National Council of Urban Indian Health, n.d.) offer essential services and guidance on how to best support Native families and their children during the crucial early years of life.

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About the National Indian Child Welfare Association

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) protects the safety, health, and cultural identity of Native children and families today and for future generations. NICWA strengthens tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect, advances policies that uphold tribal sovereignty, and promotes Native-led, culturally grounded approaches to child welfare.

Through advocacy, coalition-building, workforce training, and technical assistance to improve service systems, NICWA works at the tribal, local, state, and national levels to ensure that Native children can thrive within their families and communities.

Learn more at www.nicwa.org.