

# Practice Brief: Culturally Responsive Services

Native Child Advocacy Resource Center

December 2021



## **The Importance of Cultural Humility When Providing Direct Services**

Non-Native child advocates serving American Indian and Alaska Native populations should expect to navigate fraught histories and cultural differences across many dimensions of their practice, including in personal interactions with Tribal children and families. While these histories and differences may be barriers to building relationships in the initial stages of your work with communities and families, an approach centered on cultural humility may allow you to build trust over time. Cultural humility encompasses questioning our own assumptions, judgments, and prejudices when interacting with people from a different culture, while being guided by the other person's cultural understandings and being aware of potential power imbalances. In Tribal communities, cultural humility might also involve self-education about the specific colonial histories and collective experiences of the communities you are serving, as well as about the differences in cultural norms that may affect your practice.

## **Understanding Historical and Contemporary Experiences of Colonization**

Historically, colonization took many forms, including genocidal violence, forcible removal of Indigenous peoples from traditional homelands, biological warfare, the breaking of treaties, slaughter of bison, the breakup of families through boarding schools, and the removal of Indigenous children from their communities to be placed with non-Native adoptive families. The impacts of these practices reverberate into the present and are experienced by Indigenous peoples in ways unique to their own communities. In addition, many Native people today experience contemporary practices of government, policing, and service provision as ongoing forms of colonization leading to overrepresentation of Native youth in detention facilities and foster care systems, as well as disproportionate school expulsions, among other outcomes.

## **Strategies to Consider**

- Seek out knowledge about any community, family, and/or individual harm caused by past “helpers” in the area. Be respectful of and responsive to concerns that families may have as a result of these events.
- Keep family and community in mind even if you are only working with an individual person. Whatever happened in the past may be impacting a family now. The family may interpret your attempt to support or gather information from them in light of past events.
- Be aware of the impact that your decisions may have on future generations of the family, community, and Tribe. Tribal communities are often small and tightly knit, with overlapping kinship networks, so that traumas and losses affect almost everyone. Your work has ramifications not just for the family but for the entire community and for the future of the Tribe.
- Be mindful that communities have not always had an opportunity to own the path toward healing or improving the systems of care you work within. You will be able to work more effectively with a family and build more meaningful relationships in the community if you co-create solutions with families and Tribal members, and if you build partnerships that make it clear you are working with Tribal authorization and in the interest of the community.

## **Acknowledge and Respect the Differences Between Western and Indigenous Cultural Norms**

Western and Indigenous cultures differ in multiple, often fundamental, ways. Indigenous cultures also differ from one another. As a service provider working in Tribal communities, you may need to navigate unique expectations that families bring to basic human interactions, such as those between people of different ages, sexes, and family relationships. While it is unrealistic to expect that you will ever fully understand or become an expert on the cultural differences that you encounter, practicing cultural humility and prioritizing the understanding of those you are working with may allow you to navigate differences in ways that help families feel safe and respected.

For example, some Indigenous cultures are matriarchal, and some are patriarchal. Western or European cultures tend to be more consistently patriarchal. These differences may result in different expectations for how people of different sexes or gender identities relate to one another. Be sure that you aren't applying a Western or mainstream U.S. lens to such encounters. Similarly, Tribal child-rearing norms often differ from Western norms and from Tribe to Tribe. These differences may include approaches to discipline, education, and the division of caretaking roles among various family and community members. Another cultural difference to be alert to is the privileging of the role of elders that is common in many Tribal cultures. In some Tribes, children learn to defer to elders and avoid speaking up or asserting themselves when elders are present. This may affect the ways that you interact with children. It also may speak to the need to enlist the support of elders in the community where you are working. Yet another common

difference between Tribal and Western cultural norms is contrasting perspectives on individualistic behavior. Whereas Western or mainstream U.S. culture often privileges individual achievement and the demonstration of unique character, Tribal cultures typically privilege one's role as a member of the Tribe, community, and family.

### **Strategies to Consider**

- Engage in ongoing critical self-reflection that builds an understanding of cultural differences. Approach difference with curiosity, care, and patience. When someone acts or speaks in a way that you can't immediately make sense of, consider that your inability to decode the behavior or speech may be rooted in your own lack of knowledge about their culture.
- Pursue knowledge about the Tribal community. When possible, contact the Tribal program or programs charged with preserving traditional culture and language to learn about the Tribe's culture, history, and priorities. Strive to embed your respect for Tribal traditions in your work, for example by demonstrating your respect for traditional healing practices as treatment options or by being aware of important community events, holidays, and observances that may affect the scheduling of meetings or other work-related visits.
- Make every effort to learn about local tribal child-rearing practices. Outside expectations related to child-rearing may be vastly different than what is common within the Tribal Community. Misunderstanding Tribal norms in this area may negatively impact your ability to understand a child's situation and to build relationships in the community.
- Avoid minimizing concerns that don't align with your culture. For example, hair follicle samples may signify something different to an Indigenous family whose hair is an important part of their cultural identity than to a non-Indigenous family. Be proactive in addressing such matters by developing relationships with elders or others in the community who will be willing to consult with and advocate for the cultural needs of the youth and family.
- Do not expect youth and families to bear the burden of educating others about their culture nor to educate you when you've made a cultural mistake. Take ownership of your own cultural education as well as any mistakes you may make.

### **Understand the Importance of Language and Communication Styles**

Depending on the individual community where you are working, using a Tribe's traditional language in your CAC procedures or making language resources available to CAC staff may enhance your ability to build relationships and gather accurate information. Younger children may be more proficient in their Tribal language than in English, or for youth of any age, there may be words in their language that cannot be translated into English. Even youth and families who are fully proficient in English may prefer to use their traditional language or may derive feelings of culture, comfort, and connection from communications in their language. In cases such as these, traditional language supports should be a standard part of your center's programming. It is important to be mindful, however, that not all Indigenous people speak their native language and that language preservation efforts differ from Tribe to Tribe. In such cases, inquiries about Tribal languages might alienate children and families. Additionally, even in cases

when you are not using Tribal languages with children and families, consider possible cultural differences in communication styles. Standards relating to the pacing of conversations and the privileging of different identities (youth vs. elder, Tribal member vs. outsider) are among numerous factors that may affect your ability to communicate effectively.

### **Strategies to Consider**

- Pursue knowledge about the status of traditional language preservation and use within the Tribal community where you are working. In some cases, a Tribal department may be tasked with language preservation and education efforts. Consider seeking out resources and developing relationships with staff and/or leadership in the department.
- Depending on the availability of personnel and the nature of the community, the use of translators may be advisable. When this is not possible, the development of other resources in partnership with a local expert may be helpful. For example, some CACs have developed cards or sheets offering translations of relevant terms from the Tribal language into English to assist interviewers and team members in understanding what clients are communicating.
- Gauge a youth's and caregiver's language needs and comfort with their native language in early conversation, being careful to avoid embarrassing them or drawing attention to a lack of language knowledge. Adjust accordingly, seeking out support or resources when necessary.
- Respect the various communication styles of those you serve. As with other cultural differences, be guided by the standards and norms of those you are serving, and do not make assumptions or judgments. Be curious and approach with genuineness.
- Allow the client and their culture to set the pace of conversation. Accustom yourself to listening at that pace even—or especially—when it conflicts with your own habitual pace.
- Provide longer intake sessions. This may help ensure communication is respectful and effective.
- Take extra time to explain the process, the terminology, and the many complications related to the legal system as a case moves toward trial. Define legal terms, acronyms, and other words that may be unfamiliar to non-specialists. Explain how the legal process works, including the overall complexity of cases and individual aspects of the process that may be confusing or troubling to clients. For example, when a child or family discloses that abuse has occurred and yet a suspect is never charged, you may need to explain the reasons not only in legal terms but in ordinary terms.

### **When in Doubt, Reach Out to Your TTA Provider**

As you read through the suggested strategies in this document, you may find yourself thinking, “Easier said than done.” We sympathize. It is one thing for us to advise you to seek out cultural leaders in a community, learn about a Tribe's culture and history, and apply your new knowledge in your work with children and families. The reality of such a situation involves thousands of small decisions, details, and interactions.

The challenges in this work are large, complex, and unpredictable. We at the Native Child Advocacy Resource Center are honored to walk through them with you. Building authentic relationships as an outsider in a Tribal community is unlikely to be a straightforward, linear process, but it is a necessary part of the work you are aiming to do. We hope that this document will help you begin to think productively about this necessary work, but we are also aware of the limits of the suggested strategies above. Every Tribal community is different and has its own history of dealing with outsiders, so there is no set of guidelines that will be guaranteed to work or easy to apply in real life.

We are always available to answer questions, troubleshoot community-based issues that arise, address cultural concerns, and offer guidance in how to move your work with Indigenous populations forward. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your Training and Technical Assistance Lead, or [submit a TTA request](#) on our [website \(www.nativecac.org/\)](http://www.nativecac.org/).