

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS TRANSITION-AGED YOUTH

The resilience of Indigenous youth in foster care is powerful and the challenges they face are many as they exit foster care into adulthood. System-involved youth often share similar adversities in late adolescence largely in response to having few healthy and strong connections. These challenges manifest in unstable housing conditions, lack of employment, inadequate education, and problems with physical and behavioral health. To improve these outcomes for Native youth aging out of the tribal child welfare system, it is critical to understand the developmental shifts and growth occurring in adolescence.

There are three primary areas of development during adolescence: physical, cognitive, and psychosocial. At the core of healthy development is access to safe, positive, and productive connections. For many Indigenous youth this is connection to tribe, culture, and traditional ceremonies, all of which support building a strong self-identity and having responsibility beyond oneself. It is within the context of safe and stable relationships that youth can gain an understanding and validation of their experiences, learn to recognize and navigate strong emotions, and gain the skills to respond positively to the inevitable adversity life may bring.

Connection to concrete resources provide additional opportunities for youth to gain the life skills necessary to navigate adulthood. The experience of trauma in childhood threatens and disrupts healthy development. Tribal child welfare programs and individual caseworkers who are aware of the impacts of adverse childhood experiences are better equipped to facilitate healthy healing and development and meaningful connections. Supporting Indigenous youth through their healing journeys is correlated with positive outcomes as they become adolescents who are transitioning out of foster care. One way to support Indigenous youth through their foster care journey is by ensuring policy and practices are in place that focus on strengthening existing connections, while building missing connections capable of supporting youth once their involvement with the foster care system has ended.



TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING CONNECTION FOR TRANSITION-AGED YOUTH

A trauma-informed approach provides space for tribal child welfare staff to realize how common and prevalent trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences. The following programmatic and caseworker tips align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION

CONNECTION TO TRIBE, PLACE, CULTURE, AND TRADITION

Connection to tribe and culture is a fundamental right of all Indigenous youth. It is particularly important for those in foster care because foster care involvement is an inherent threat to their familial and cultural lineage. Cultural connectedness is a key protective factor at reducing adolescent risk of substance use, violence, depression, and suicide attempts¹. Policy and programming that is grounded in the youth's tribal culture, values, and traditional teachings is one way to enhance cultural connectedness. Another way is to seek activities that support the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development of each youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood. Tribal child welfare programs are encouraged to identify and nurture strategic community partnerships that increase opportunities for youth to heal from trauma and learn who they are within their tribe, community, and family. As often as possible, prioritize the youth's desires, interests, and choices to learn about their cultural roots and practices to support them in growing their connection and cultural identity.

¹ Borowsky, I. W., Resnick, M. D., Ireland, M., & Blum, R. W. (1999). Suicide attempts among American Indian and Alaska native youth: Risk and protective factors. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 153(6), 573-580.

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Review the tribal child welfare program's policies and procedures for alignment with the culture and values of the tribe(s). Reflect on what specific practices are in place that support the youth's connection to their tribe, to the land, to culture, and tradition. If there are gaps, establish a plan to create access to the people and/or programs that can facilitate bridging the gaps. Develop clear guidance for caseworkers on how to make these connections.
- Develop new hire orientation materials and continuing education opportunities for staff to learn about the history and culture of the tribe and how the tribal child welfare program infuses culture into daily practice. Knowledge of history, place, and practices will support both Native and non-Native staff and will provide clear expectations about the importance of providing culturally-grounded and culturally-responsive services.
- Establish community partnerships that improve youth access and increase participation programs that support youth in developing their tribal identity.
 - Some ideas to consider: Cultural preservation department; a program that hosts culture or healing camps; tribal colleges that teach youth about the tribe's history or traditional language; or local community groups that teach youth cultural practices relevant to the tribe such as beading, drumming, song, dance, and preparing traditional meals.
- Identify who in the community facilitates coming-of-age ceremonies. Establish a process to ensure adolescent youth involved with the tribal child welfare program can participate if they choose.
- Develop resources that share the tribe's history and values. Ensure the resources clearly communicate to youth and families how the agency honors the tribe's history and upholds the tribe's values. Consider providing materials that share the tribe's creation story, places of significance, and traditional practices before and after colonization. Be sure to provide materials that visually display where to access local programs and resources that support connection to culture and community.

What a Worker Can Do:

- Seek to understand the family's unique belief system and connection to the culture of the tribe. Develop service plans that honor and respect family practices to achieve healing and wellness. Use this knowledge to inform what cultural and spiritual supports are provided to the youth.
- Include multiple aspects of cultural development in the youth's care plan to increase their involvement and connection to the community. Consider community events that the youth can participate in. This may include activities such as athletic tournaments, church, Powwows, hunts, harvest, and community feeds.

- Engage youth in voicing what it is they want to learn more about as it relates to their tribe, culture, and community. Include the youth's voice and choices in their care plan and support their empowerment by including them in decision making processes so they can reflect and advocate for their own needs and wants.
- Encourage involvement in activities that teach tradition and culture while mastering skills and increasing connections with mentors and peers.

CONNECTION TO OTHERS

Research has continually found that connection to a safe and stable adult is a powerful protective factor for youth as it serves as a buffer against the negative impacts that childhood trauma can have; clan systems and intricately woven kinship networks are proof of this. Tribal child welfare programs have the difficult responsibility of coordinating care for children who have been harmed by their caregivers. While child safety is the priority, it is also important for programs and caseworkers to prioritize various approaches to healing youth and caregiver relationships, even when the youth cannot return home. Nurturing relationships with known relatives and expanding the youth's network of caring adults who can mentor and provide guidance are equally important especially as youth mature to adulthood. Indigenous youth in foster care have a right to their relatives and to maintain connection to their familial lineage.

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Tribal child welfare programs seek to preserve and rehabilitate families so that youth can grow up in safe and supportive environments. Consider assessing the effectiveness of practices in accomplishing this goal. Ask families, staff, and community partners which child welfare practices work to support health and healing and which practices work against health and healing. Use the information collected to make shifts in policy and approaches in order to improve outcomes for youth.
- Expand the community's awareness of what youth in foster care need. One way to accomplish this is by participating in community outreach events and providing information about how to become involved as a kinship caregiver or foster parent. Provide information about additional ways youth in foster care can use support aside from out of home placement. Some community members may be interested in mentoring youth, offering employment opportunities, providing transportation, or they may be willing to donate items to help furnish a youth's apartment.
- Consider implementing youth-centered and youth-led meetings to bring together an extended network of relatives. Utilize the meetings to identify the youth's strengths and successes, explore their interests, and discuss the youth's needs as they prepare for independence. At the end of these gatherings, assign activities to participants who will assist youth in meeting their goals and prepare them for exiting foster care.

- Implement peer support groups that offer older youth in foster care opportunities to connect, share experiences, and support one another. Connections to peers are strengthened as they become young adults and can be vital especially as their relationships with child welfare and foster care professionals begin to fade.

What a Worker Can Do:

- Continually explore connections for the youth. This includes their kinship network and beyond. Remember to not only seek out those who may qualify to be a placement option for the youth. Relatives who can listen to the youth and provide guidance and encouragement have immense value and will continue to be important as the youth becomes an adult.
- Weave together kinship networks beyond people the youth has a pre-existing relationship with. Include those who the youth is connected to because of their clan, identify the community members skilled at working with youth, and bring in trusted adults connected to the youth through school, activities, and community events. The more people the youth has available to them, the better equipped they will be as they transition out of foster care.
 - Remember to ask the youth who it is they feel connected to or would like a relationship with. Almost always, the youth will share people who are supportive that the caseworker would not have identified on their own.
- In collaboration with the youth and their team, create an ecomap that clearly identifies for the youth who their people are. This will increase the youth's sense of belonging and identify when connections and relationships are limited. The final map can serve as an action plan when the team identifies areas where the youth may need more support.
- Prior to the youth exiting foster care, ensure they have names, phone numbers, and addresses of those who they have been connected to and feel safe with. Think of people they can call when they need someone to listen, when they need reassurance, and when they need help. Create a paper and electronic document that captures this information. If they have a cellphone, encourage them to also take a picture of the document.

CONNECTION TO RESOURCES

Tribal child welfare programs and caseworkers are responsible for the youth's successful transition to adult services. As youth prepare to become independent, it is important that they have access to services necessary to support their success. Service connections can be vital for safety and well-being outcomes of Indigenous youth as they transition out of foster care and into adulthood. It is important that resources are put into place early and accessed regularly so the youth can develop relationships and build a sense of familiarity and confidence in accessing the support services they need.

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- In coordination with tribal leadership, determine if it is possible to increase the age in which the tribe can provide foster care and youth services to 21 years old. This creates a buffer for youth as their brains continue to develop the necessary executive functioning skills to navigate independence.
- Review agency policy and practice to support youth transitioning from youth services to adult services. If needed, outline necessary procedures that will guide caseworkers on the timeline and process to coordinate adult services such as medical and behavioral health care, case management services, financial assistance, and housing.
- Consider specialized caseworker positions for transition-aged youth. Determine the criteria for this caseload based on historical and present data around the ages and needs of youth in custody of the tribal child welfare program. This caseload may be youth ages 16 years and older, or it could be youth 12 years and older depending on capacity.
- Create continuing education opportunities for staff to develop knowledge and skills around typical child development, the impacts of complex trauma, and trauma-informed practices that contribute to healthy development.
- Assess community partnerships that support transition-aged youth. Determine which services are most utilized and those that may be under-utilized. Develop agreements with these programs such that youth in foster care are prioritized for service. Necessary services and important partnerships include employment services, housing, medical and behavioral health, case management, financial assistance, and financial literacy.
- Implement continuous quality improvement strategies to learn what is effective at improving outcomes for youth as they transition from foster care to adulthood. Formalize the practice of elevating youth voice to share their experiences of what they needed and compare that to what they received.

What a Worker Can Do:

- Focus on building rapport with the youth so that they feel safe to communicate their interests, needs, and fears. Incorporate activities and services within the care plan that are responsive to what the youth has expressed to help build trust between the youth and the caseworker.
- Encourage and facilitate youth participation in activities that build independent living skills while strengthening connections to available services to the youth after they exit foster care. Consider activities such as: drivers' education, obtaining a license, financial literacy, opening a bank account, job training (e.g., build a resume, practice interviews), and student support groups.
 - Remember the youth's preferred recreational activities. Fun activities are also important to improve confidence, build prosocial skills, and increase positive relationships. Consider activities such as after school programming (e.g., arts, athletics, music, technology, debate, drama), youth groups, camps, community celebrations, and community action groups.
- Prior to the youth's 18th birthday, ensure the youth is in possession of all the necessary documents they will need throughout their lives such as their tribal identification card, state identification or driver's license, birth certificate, social security card, and relevant insurance cards.
- Prior to the youth's 18th birthday, ensure they have the names and contact information for programs and services that they will likely use as an adult. Create an electronic and paper document for them that shows where and how to access Indian Health Services, housing, financial assistance, the tribal child welfare office, local food banks and/or food pantries, and ongoing community activities and events.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [We R Native](#)
- [Healthy Native Youth](#)
- [Center for Native American Youth](#)
- [Indigenizing Movement](#)

