

Embedding Tribal Culture into Child Welfare Organizational Policy and Practice Development

This brief is developed by [The Indigenous Wellness Research Institute](#)

Drafted in partnership with Priscilla Day, Ph.D. for and developed under the guidance and direction of the National Tribal Advisory Board and the tribal sites: Red Lake Nation and Tlingit & Haida.

Embedding indigenous culture into child welfare organizational policy and practice involves several key steps and considerations to ensure that the policies are culturally responsive, respectful, and effective in supporting the well-being of tribal children and families. This brief is intended to serve as a resource to the tribal child welfare workforce, including indigenous and non-indigenous staff working in tribal and state agencies in their efforts to embed tribal culture into their organization policies and practice. It could also be useful for state entities or others who collaborate with and serve tribal child welfare programs.

Importance of Embedding Culture in Policy and Practice

Embedding tribal culture in public and agency policies for child welfare is essential for protecting the rights and well-being of tribal children and communities. Central to this is the protection of tribal sovereignty, as emphasized by the **Indian Child Welfare**



Eddie Screechowl, senior director of child welfare at Casey Family Programs.

Act (ICWA), which affirms the authority of tribes to make decisions about the welfare of their children, preserving cultural identity and self-determination. These policies also help prevent removals that have historically disrupted tribal families and communities, ensuring that placement decisions are made in the best interests of both the child and the tribe.

It has been long understood the importance of thoughtful consideration in policy development and implementation, acknowledging that policy is not value neutral. Recognizing that policies are shaped by societal values and beliefs, it is crucial to understand and address the cultural contexts and diverse needs of indigenous communities. Embedding tribal culture in child welfare policies ensures that agencies are responsive to the unique experiences of tribal individuals and families. By doing so, we can better support the preservation of cultural heritage, promote family stability, and address historical trauma, ultimately leading to more effective and culturally sensitive child welfare practices.

Policies can include:

- Federal and state laws (ICWA), tribal codes, and commitments to cultural competence and tribal ways of being. These are implemented through agency goals and mission statements, agency standards, training programs, and organizational policies and procedures.
- For tribal serving agencies, internal practices should embody these policies by aligning job qualifications, interview questions, and evaluations to assess experience with tribal populations and the ability to culturally adapt practice. This includes ensuring that hiring and professional development practices inform and equip staff with the ongoing knowledge and skills needed to perform their daily tasks and strive for a culturally relevant and responsive approach.

Definitions

Tribal sovereignty is the retained rights of tribal populations in the U.S. that are codified in laws and treaties.

Trust responsibility acknowledges the role of the federal government to act in a legal and ethical way to protect the best interest of federally recognized tribes and their lands, assets, and resources, stemming from treaties and historical relationships.

Tribal codes/laws are developed internally by each tribal nation to apply to their citizens within their tribal lands. Tribal codes/laws usually passed by a tribal governments executive branch or tribal council members and are upheld in tribal courts as part of tribal sovereignty.

Culture is the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.

Cultural competence is a developmental process and may be viewed as a goal for individuals and agencies. Cross, et al., describes it as a “set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables [them] to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross, et al., 1989, p. iv).

The definitions above work to ensure a clear and common understanding of the key terms and concepts used throughout the document.¹

Ensuring Tribal Culture and Traditions are Woven into Policies and Procedures

Culturally grounded policies promote the preservation of native languages, traditions, and community ties, all of which are vital to the emotional and psychological health of native children. By prioritizing placement within families and tribes, these practices support family stability and continuity. Moreover, embedding tribal culture in child welfare helps address the historical trauma caused by assimilation and child removal, contributing to a more culturally responsive and healing system.

Ultimately, such policies foster environments that affirm indigenous identity and community connection, resulting in stronger outcomes for children and their tribes. Child welfare agencies can support indigenous children and families more effectively by integrating traditional practices and cultural values into their services and policies through several key strategies. Here are some examples:

- Comprehensive cultural guidance training is essential to helping staff understand indigenous cultures, traditions, and historical contexts, including the importance of family, traditional healing, and cultural identity.

- Active collaboration between agencies and indigenous communities-engaging tribal leaders, elders, and members to ensure that policies and services are culturally appropriate and respectful.
- Incorporating indigenous languages, customs, and ceremonies into child welfare programs help to maintain cultural continuity, as does prioritizing kinship care placements with extended family or tribal members.
- Policy development should explicitly uphold the rights of indigenous children, adhering to laws to preserve tribal connections and cultural identity.
- Promoting cultural attachment through language programs, cultural camps, and traditional arts that reinforces heritage.
- Community-based services that are accessible and culturally relevant-such as early education, family support, and mental health services that use traditional healing-can address the specific needs of indigenous families.
- State and tribal serving agencies should work to examine the impact of their traditional practices by challenging systems that perpetuate trauma, while working to foster a more thoughtful environment through culturally respectful reforms.

Together, these strategies foster a more supportive and culturally grounded child welfare system that honors and sustains indigenous identities and communities.

¹ Cross, et al., (1989) developed a model for personal and organizational cultural competence that includes definitions of culture, cultural competence, and includes structural features of policies, attitudes, and structures, practice with and integration of indigenous knowledge including historical and current contexts. This framework

acknowledges that inequities have been embedded through policy and practice and must be addressed for effective policy and practice to occur.



Lucille Echohawk, executive director of the Denver Indian Family Resource Center. Tribal Advisory Board member. Citizen of Pawnee Nation.

Practical Applications for Tribal Serving Organizations

Organizational Attitudes:

- Training for staff and leadership that include teachings about cultural competence and tribal ways.
- The creation of an agency culture that normalizes conversations about tribal practice.
- Staff and administration activities that aim to increase positive contact with tribal community members and traditional practices.
- The agency's awareness and commitment to advancing the knowledge of tribal history and experiences and making a commitment to improving tribal practices.
- Staff and administration's willingness to engage in continual self-reflection, feedback, and change.

Organizational Structure:

- Inclusion of tribal perspectives throughout agency structures (leadership, management, staff and consultants).
- Awareness that agency décor, materials, and brochures should reflect tribal culture that is relevant to that region
- Agency council and other committees should be reflective of tribal perspectives.

Organizational Practice:

- Staff and administration having a willingness to operationalize the use of workforce analytics and integrate tribal knowledge into specific standards, policies, practices,

and attitudes to increase the quality of care that result in more favorable outcomes.

- Agencies demonstrate an ability for effective engagement in different tribal settings. This involves working to build respectful, meaningful relationships that acknowledge their unique cultures, traditions, and governance structures.

Holding Space Framework

The Holding Space Framework for working with tribal populations is designed to foster respectful and effective partnerships between tribal communities and external entities. It works to ensure that cultural understanding, tribal perspectives and needs are prioritized in policy development and implementation. It emphasizes several key principles: recognizing the sovereignty and governance structures of tribal nations, building and maintaining trust through transparent and reliable relationships, respecting and integrating the cultural values and traditions of the community, engaging in participatory research methods, providing education and training on governance and culture, understanding one's own positionality, and focusing on building strong, respectful, and reciprocal relationships. By adhering to these principles, the framework aims to create a supportive and respectful environment that honors the sovereignty and values of tribal populations, while fostering effective and equitable partnerships.

"I think the key is to help workers in the public system be knowledgeable about the Indian Child Welfare Act and also the importance of culturally responsive practice with families, regardless of if they're native or from [other] communities. The key is the importance of listening to families, as opposed to dictating to them. And that's a real important skill that a lot of people don't think about and don't have... People can be trained [on] how to ask questions that help establish trust."

- Lucille Echohawk

This framework is a useful model developed by Lucero, et al., (2020), provides definitions and a structure to consider in policy and practice with tribal nations. The model is broken into three pillars: Governance, Trust, and Culture.

- **Governance** acknowledges the sovereignty of tribes and their wisdom in terms of the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts to be considered in making child welfare policy decisions, while also acknowledging that tribes know what is

best for their people. Governance can include resource sharing, capacity building of all partners, ethical stewardship.

- **Trust** is a belief and confidence that partners will follow through with what they have committed to do (Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center). Trust develops over time when partners' actions are consistent with their promises and includes open, challenging interactions with a way to resolve differences as they arise.
- **Culture** component recognizes tribes have thrived for millennia, with concepts of community, family, spirituality, and customs that may diverge from western notions. A connection to a child's tribal culture can produce healing, a sense of belonging, support, and emotional life-giving. A thriving tribal community produces thriving children and families. Policy must be in alignment with cultural values of tribal partners, include diverse active engagement with the community, and practice cultural humility to create safety.

An example of the Holding Space Framework can be found on pages 5 and 6 of this brief.



Melissa McGee, Indian Child Welfare Supervisor for Choctaw Nation Children & Family Services. Secretary of the Oklahoma Indian Child Welfare Association. Choctaw Nation citizen.

The Role of Workforce Analytics

Workforce analytics can play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of incorporating tribal perspectives into tribal child welfare policy development by providing tools and insights that enhance data-driven decision-making and workforce development. Here are some ways workforce analytics can assist.

1. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Collecting and analyzing demographic data on the child welfare workforce in state and

tribal serving agencies can help identify the make-up of the workforce. This is essential for understanding whether the workforce is reflective of the children, families, and communities it serves. This allows the agencies to identify gaps and develop strategies to recruit and retain more tribal frontline staff to help maintain cultural continuity and address the unique needs of indigenous families, ensuring that their voices are heard and their practices are respected.

2. **Workforce Development:** Workforce analytics can help identify the needs and challenges faced by tribal social workers, such as turnover rates. This information can be used to develop targeted training programs and support systems to improve retention and job satisfaction among tribal workers. This is beneficial to both tribal and tribal serving state agencies.
3. **Policy Development:** By providing evidence-based data on the impact of workforce culture and practices on child welfare outcomes, workforce analytics can inform policy development and help create more inclusive and effective child welfare policies. Similarly, child welfare intake and placement data can help to identify any tribal population specific challenges and highlight the need for targeted interventions and policy changes aimed at creating opportunities for improvement.
4. **Collaboration and Partnership:** Engaging tribal advisory boards in the data collection and analysis process ensures that tribal perspectives are incorporated into policy development. This collaboration can lead to more culturally appropriate and effective child welfare practices. Similarly, collaborations between state and tribal child welfare leaders can be strengthened through shared data and analytics, leading to better outcomes for tribal children and families.
5. **Evaluation and Continuous Improvement:** Workforce analytics can be used to monitor the implementation and impact of workforce interventions and policies. This ongoing evaluation helps in making necessary adjustments to improve outcomes continuously.

Child welfare agencies can effectively support indigenous children and families by integrating traditional practices and cultural values into their services and policies. By leveraging data, agencies can create a more inclusive, culturally competent, and effective workforce that include tribal voices in policy development involving tribal child welfare organizational practice.

Embedding Culture into Tribal Child Welfare Agencies’ Policies and Practices Using a Holding Space Framework

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	BUILDING/MAINTAINING TRUST	INTEGRATING CULTURE/CULTURAL VALUES
Tribal sovereignty over child welfare policy and practices and support of tribal government.	Participants rely upon each other for consultation and support of indigenous families. Inclusion of diverse voices with lived experience across the lifespan to inform best practices with tribal communities.	Core tribal values and ways of being that are familiar to tribal members such as Grandfather Teachings and customary laws, are embedded in child welfare policies and practices.
EXAMPLE: Tribal/tribal serving agencies consider customary adoptions as a permanency outcome. Customary adoptions in the context of tribal programs allow children to be adopted without requiring the termination of parental rights. This practice is an exercise of tribal sovereignty that retains some parental responsibilities and maintains family connections.		
Creative and flexible funding sources that can be adapted as needed to meet family needs, including basic needs for healthy families as well as cultural needs.	Community engagement at all levels including spiritual teachers, existing ceremonies, and regular feedback about agency policy and practice.	A workforce that represents the community and understands tribal family structures and tribal values, and the use of restorative healing practices.
EXAMPLE: Community supports focused on prevention with a focus on community wellbeing. For example, CSK Tribal Home Visiting Program which uses a culturally adapted "Parents as Teachers" program to improve parenting practices and prevent child abuse and neglect. American Indian Strengthening Families Program adapts the Strengthening Families Program curriculum with culturally specific elements to enhance family dynamics and reduce risk factors. Chagha She Binalwod (Strengthening Youth) provides intensive in-home substance abuse counseling and community-based recreational programs for at-risk youth on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation.		
Systemic changes throughout agency in policy, practice, attitudes, values, and procedures informed by tribe.	A workforce that represents the community and understands tribal family structures and tribal values.	ICWA active efforts within agencies that treat families as an extension of the agency and going the extra mile for their success; not giving up on families.
EXAMPLE: Ready access to cultural services. Agencies incorporate cultural activities and events into their services to help children and families maintain their cultural identity. This may include participation in traditional ceremonies, language classes, and other cultural programs. This also includes using traditional language in policy and within organization (name, positions, etc.).		
Clear, indigenous practice model used in training and decision making.	Shift practice from reactive to a more proactive approach that anticipates and addresses family needs.	Relational models of engagement, not adversarial.
EXAMPLE: A proactive approach shifts focus to the strengths and capabilities of families rather than just their challenges. This encourages families to build on their strengths to foster resilience. The Family Group Decision Making model is a process that involves the child's extended family, friends, and professionals in making decisions about the child's care. This model emphasizes family preferences and strengths, fostering a collaborative and inclusive approach to decision-making. Also, the kinship navigator services assists kinship caregivers in connecting with tribal supports and resources. It helps caregivers locate		





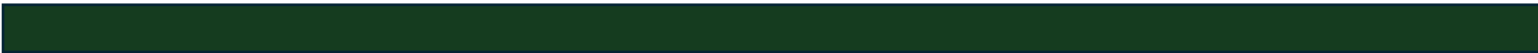
GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	BUILDING/MAINTAINING TRUST	INTEGRATING CULTURE/CULTURAL VALUES
additional resources and supports that can benefit their families, ensuring that children remain connected to their cultural heritage and community.		
Seek positive engagement with systems that have historically caused harm in policy development, and develop strategies and agreements to serve tribal families in the context of their communities	Transparent and consistent communication aimed at positive outcomes for tribal families, keeping up to date with emerging policy/practice.	Use of culture to promote positive relationships and repair harm.
EXAMPLE: For tribal serving child welfare agencies, this can look like providing comprehensive cultural competency training for their staff. This training includes understanding tribal history, cultural practices, and the importance of maintaining cultural connections for children. By fostering cultural awareness, staff can better support families and build trust. Similarly, adopting trauma-informed care approaches that recognize the impact of historical trauma on tribal communities. By addressing the root causes of trauma and promoting healing, these approaches help repair harm and build resilience within families.		
Build internal tribal infrastructures, onboarding and ongoing training for staff.	Include indigenous perspectives in training and policy development.	Practice traditional ways of being in the agency.
EXAMPLE: Tribal/tribal serving agencies work to collaborate with tribal organizations, such as cultural centers and community groups, to provide comprehensive support. This also includes hiring cultural consultants, elders, community members to engage in meaningful ways. These partnerships ensure that services are culturally appropriate and community-driven, fostering a sense of belonging and support for families.		

This brief was prepared for the University of Washington [Indigenous Wellness Research Institute](#) team: Tamarie Willis, Ph.D.; Lanz Christian Bañes, DSW; Angelique Day, Ph.D.; Tessa Evans-Campbell, Ph.D.; & David Huh, Ph.D.

[Dr. Priscilla Day](#), is a professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, Department of Social Work.



Indigenous Wellness Research Institute
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON



Resources

- Center for Native Child and Family Resilience: Indigenous Ways of Knowing. <https://cncfr.jbsinternational.com/IWOK>
- Data Governance Strategies for States and Tribal Nations <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Data-Governance-Strategies-for-States-and-Tribal-Nations-.pdf>
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