

Peer Support: A Key Strategy for Supporting Resource Families in Tribal Communities

Parents and others who care for children in foster care can encounter a variety of challenges. Shifts in family dynamics as a child enters and adjusts to their home and the profound behavioral impacts of trauma and loss mean that relative caregivers, foster and adoptive parents, and permanent guardians are often in need of effective support services to help the children thrive and preserve these placements.

For families in tribal communities, the challenges may be compounded by the unique experiences of native children and families. While these parents are likely to experience the same feelings of isolation and fatigue as other resource parents, they must also navigate complex—and often overlapping—state, county, and tribal systems to access services and support for themselves and the children they care for. These families also need to commit to meeting the cultural needs of the native children they are parenting and keep them connected to their tribal traditions, especially if they are not of the same tribe as the child.

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Navigating these complexities while parenting children who have experienced loss and trauma can be draining. Without sustained access to effective supports, caregivers may burn out, resulting in placement disruptions and more trauma for children.

The value of peer support

While many forms of support are necessary for resource families to thrive, peer support can be an especially valuable tool for tribal (and other) systems to address the support needs of these families. Peer support—where parents, caregivers, children, and teens spend time with others in similar situations—helps to normalize challenges and emotions as families make connections with others who share similar experiences. Peers can provide helpful insights for navigating systems, accessing services, and addressing children’s needs and behaviors, and can

decrease feelings of isolation and stress for all members of the family. For children and teens, time spent with peers can help them develop friendships and reduce their own feelings of isolation or worry that they are the only ones living away from their birth parents.

For families parenting native children, peer support offers even more benefits. Peer support in tribal communities connects families with shared culture and value systems. For non-native families parenting native children or native families parenting a child from another tribe, peers within the child's tribe can offer invaluable insights into the child's cultural needs and traditions and provide connections to cultural experiences and elements (such as ceremonies, food, or music).

Peer support as a tool for tribes to achieve their goals

Many leaders in tribal child welfare systems face challenges in meeting the needs of children and families while working with limited resources. While most child welfare systems experience difficulty in maintaining a pool of resource families, tribes may face the added challenge of recruiting families who understand the importance of cultural connections for native children and who are committed to maintaining strong ties to the tribal community.

At the same time you experience challenges, though, you may also have additional flexibility in seeking solutions. The structures of tribal systems may mean that you can be more nimble in your response to the needs of children and families than some other child welfare systems. Staff may have many roles within your tribal system, making services less siloed and enabling practice shifts to happen more easily across the system as a whole. As a tribe, you may also have access to more flexible streams of funding to finance support services.

By using peer support to fortify the support services families receive, you are more likely to build and maintain a strong pool of resource families for your tribe. By investing in the development and support of existing relative, foster, and adoptive families, you demonstrate your commitment to the well-being needs of children in your agency's care, as these children are then less likely to experience placement disruptions, more likely to find permanency within their tribal communities, and more likely to be parented by families who understand the cultural needs of a native child.

In addition to helping promote positive outcomes for children and families, peer support can help your tribal child welfare system make good use of limited resources. Tribes invest substantial time, money, staff, and other resources in the recruitment and preparation of parents based on the needs of your system. If families are not well supported after placement, though, you risk losing these families and the investment they represent.

Forms of peer support

Peer support is flexible and can take many forms:

- **Support groups—in-person or online**
Perhaps the most common form of peer support, online and in-person support groups involve a group of caregivers coming together to share successes, struggles, and resources with each other.
- **Mentoring, coaching, and buddy matching**
These techniques involve matching peers—formally or informally—to provide guidance, insight, help, and reassurance. For caregivers, the mentors, coaches, and buddies are other caregivers. For children and teens, the mentors may be youth leaders in the tribe or young adults who experienced foster care placements themselves.
- **Information and referral**
This involves a peer—often a staff member—who helps families find their way through complex systems. A kinship navigator, for example, may help kinship caregivers through the approval process, understand the court system, and apply for benefits and other services the family is entitled to. Navigator programs can be particularly helpful in tribes, as navigators can help families maneuver through overlapping tribal and state systems.
- **Peer liaisons**
Some systems use peer liaisons to assist newer families as they move through the approval process and receive a placement. In other cases, liaisons provide ongoing emotional support and information and referral to any caregivers.
- **Activities for children and teens or whole families**
Camps, retreats, cultural events, picnics, and other social gatherings offer many opportunities for peer support to naturally develop.
- **Support from a hub home**
This service—called the Mockingbird Family Model—involves more intensive support provided by one specialized resource family (the hub home) to a group of other resource families. The hub home provides planned and crisis respite care, training and support group facilitation, and mentoring support.
- **Peer advocates**
Peer advocates act as the voice of a resource family across various systems to ensure that the family has what they need and their concerns are heard. They also help caregivers develop their own advocacy skills to ensure they can meet their children’s needs.

Formal peer support services like these can also lead to increased informal supports. As connections develop, families may rely more on peers for respite care, information and answers to questions, referrals, and other forms of support. When parents make connections with one another, they also open the door to peer connections for their children and teens.

Implementing peer support in tribal systems

Investment in peer supports does not necessarily mean that your tribe must manage every aspect of a peer support program on your own. Implementing or strengthening peer support for tribal resource families does not necessarily require a substantial investment of resources. While you may choose to implement any of the peer support approaches mentioned above yourself, here are some other ways that your tribe can invest in peer support:

- **Hire resource parents in support positions within your tribal system**

Current and former tribal resource parents are well-positioned to meet the support needs of their peers. This means they are also qualified for employment in family support positions or in other roles in your child welfare system. Share position openings with parent group leaders and talented resource parents and ask them to help recruit qualified candidates. Those with lived experience as resource parents or adults who experienced care themselves bring valuable insights to your team and will benefit your system overall.

- **Provide financial and material support to existing peer groups or organizations**

Learn about the existing parent groups or emerging parent leaders in and around your tribal community and invest resources in them to promote their success. While money to help sustain these independent groups is often needed, these groups also may need space to hold events and food and childcare during events that the tribe could provide. Take time to learn about the services the group offers, and inform them about your own support services. Connect with these groups around shared interests, such as funding or assessing and meeting community needs. You can each make better referrals when you are aware of each other's services.

- **Provide training and tools for emerging peer group leaders**

Although parents can provide great peer support to each other on their own, peer group leaders can provide the most effective support to other families when they receive training and development. You can develop curricula for these leaders on topics such as group facilitation, self-awareness and boundaries, vicarious trauma, or the intricacies of your tribal child welfare system. You could also develop tools for peer group leaders to use in their groups, such as discussion guides or evaluation tools. Alternatively, you can use training or tools that have already been developed and adapt them to fit your systems and communities. By providing this content, you are developing these peers into more effective leaders, and strengthening the support they are able to provide to other families.

- **Organize cultural events or retreats to encourage and support peer connections**

Social events are the perfect place for peer connections to take root. Cultural events that are relevant to your tribal community are especially valuable to resource families whose tribal affiliation does not match that of the child in their care. These events provide opportunities for learning, connection, and fun for all members of the family.

- **Advocate to state and county partners to invest in peer support for tribal families**

If you are aware of independent parent groups serving tribal families, make your state and county partners aware of them and of their funding needs. Educate them on the effectiveness of peer support and on the value you place on these groups in your tribal community. Discuss shared funding with these partners if you are able to provide some support.

- **Assist peer groups with fundraising efforts, including grant proposal writing for state funding or fundraising events**

Make independent groups aware of any grants or other funding opportunities that may be beneficial to them. Brainstorm other fundraising ideas with them and assist with planning and outreach.

- **Partner with agencies outside the tribe that are already serving native families**

State, county, or private agencies may be serving tribal families as well. You could provide these agencies with relevant discussion topics or training specially designed for tribal families. Tribal representatives could lead or support a group of tribal families served by the non-tribal agency or train agency staff on the needs of tribal children and families and the services provided by the tribe.

Examples from the field

Three Precious Miracles, Gila River Indian Community (Arizona)

Founded by an experienced Native American foster and adoptive parent, Three Precious Miracles offers support services for children, teens, and families of the Gila River Indian Community and other tribes throughout Arizona. The organization provides peer-led support groups for foster parents and for grandparents raising grandchildren. Tribes also refer to the agency for some basic material supports for families when they receive a new placement, including clothing, bedding, and food. Three Precious Miracles also provides cultural education and support to families outside the tribes who are raising children with tribal connection, and their Cultural Connection Giving Project provides each child a blanket from their tribal community.

Yakama Nation Kinship Program (Washington)

The Yakama Nation Kinship Program began after kinship caregivers and youth in relative care met with tribal leaders to discuss their needs. The program serves relative caregivers who are affiliated with the tribe. Services include connecting caregivers with community and tribal services, peer-led support groups, activities for caregivers and youth, and providing material supports such as food and clothing.

Mockingbird Family Model, various locations

In the Mockingbird Family Model, a constellation of six to ten foster, kinship, birth, or adoptive families (satellite families) receive support from an experienced foster family (the hub home) and from one another. The hub home offers multiple services, including:

- Peer mentoring and coaching
- Planned and crisis respite care for children in the satellite families
- Help accessing other support and services (system navigation)
- Coordination of planned and impromptu social activities
- Support for the implementation of a child's permanent plan

The Mockingbird Family Model has been used by several jurisdictions, including the Blackfeet Nation.

Native American Youth and Family Center Foster Care Support Program, Oregon

The Native American Youth and Family Center (known as NAYA) is a nonprofit organization that serves self-identified Native American families throughout the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. It was founded by parent volunteers and provides services to children, teens, and young adults who are in or have been in foster care, as well as their foster and birth parents. One service NAYA provides is called the Generations Project, which seeks to support youth and their kinship, foster, and adoptive families by providing housing and cultural supports. Elders live in an intergenerational housing complex and volunteer 10 to 12 hours each week to support the youth through tutoring and mentoring in cultural ways. Other services include coaching, training, and educational support.

For more resources on family support, including our peer support tip sheet, *Providing Peer Support for Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families*, please visit adoptuskids.org/for-professionals.

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.

