



# How Tribal Values and Traditions Can Guide Recruitment, Development, and Support of Resource Families

We know that Indian children who are connected to tribal customs and culture have more protective and resilience factors to help them become healthy, functioning adults.<sup>1</sup> And there are firsthand accounts from those who remember growing up away from their birth parents and report feeling protected by and connected to their tribal community.

Integrating cultural teachings and traditions into programs that serve and protect resource families protects children, the community, and the tribe. Tribes can design their programs for resource families in ways that preserve the traditions that maintain a sense of belonging and well-being for Indian children and enable them to heal and thrive. To do this, it is helpful to define success from a tribal perspective and make it the focus of planning and implementing approaches to engaging, training, and supporting resource families.

## What is success from a tribal perspective?

Creating programs that are based on a tribe's customs, history, and traditions is an act of sovereignty and self-determination. When these measures are thoughtfully defined and integrated into child welfare work, they will be embraced and valued by tribal families and children for many years.

These are a few examples of success for an Indian child from a tribal perspective:

- An Indian child is a participating member of the community.
- An Indian child values their heritage and cultural traditions.
- An Indian child feels a sense of belonging to their extended family and tribal community.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenyon, DenYelle Baete & Hanson, Jessica D. (2012). Incorporating traditional culture into positive youth development programs with American Indian/Alaskan native youth. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(3). <https://cnfr.jbsinternational.com/node/246>.

- An Indian child learns to respect the adults and elders who are helping them.
- An Indian child remains part of the community into adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

You can ensure that traditions, customs, and culture are infused into every aspect of your programs and services, including family finding and recruitment, training, and ongoing support for resource families. There are multiple steps to developing a definition of success for your tribe. You can conduct an annual—or more frequent if needed—review of children’s codes, ordinances, and any laws you pass that affect children in foster care and pursue needed revisions to ensure your tribe’s codes reflect the current best practices.

We also need to gather input from elders and other respected members of the community who have knowledge of the old ways. This includes engaging tribal members to help care for children who cannot remain safely with their family, teaching parents and caregivers about helping children heal from trauma, and using traditional practices for supporting families.

Using your definition of success from a tribal perspective as a foundation, you can create or strengthen your approaches for recruiting, training, developing, and supporting resource families that help share and reinforce your culture, values, and practices.

## **Four areas for ensuring tribal culture is embedded in recruitment, development, and support practice**

Working with resource families for Indian children provides key opportunities for incorporating tribal values, culture, and practices that promote safety, well-being, and permanency for children. Regardless of the approaches you take, you will be most successful in infusing tribal culture in your programs if all staff have knowledge of tribal ways. Ensure that staff are able to provide services and support to resource families in ways that align with and reinforce tribal values. You can also embed tribal culture in all of your programs by ensuring that your tribal language is used. Call your services by their tribal names and use your language whenever feasible.

### **1. Define and support well-being of resource families**

Resource families’ well-being is tied, in part, to their sense of belonging to the community and trusting that they will receive the support they need for their children and for themselves. It is helpful to develop a definition of well-being for resource families that is based on your tribal perspectives and values. Consider these suggestions to ensure resource family well-being:

- Create a definition of well-being of resource families that is meaningful to your community. For example: “Resource families experience well-being when they feel safe, are healthy, and have confidence in the services they receive from tribal programs. The families are connected

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<sup>2</sup> Capacity Building Center for Tribes. (2019). Tribal Child Welfare Leadership Academy: Day 1. Denver.

to a network of resources and contribute to this network. They are confident in their ability to access physical, mental health, and spiritual services; housing and food assistance; and other support services. They have opportunities to participate in cultural activities and are supported in gaining knowledge that will help them feel secure as resource families caring for Indian children.”

- Ensure that you have clear processes for assessing and maintaining resource family well-being, as well as clear processes for how to respond when a family is in distress.
- Offer ongoing events that provide for respite, peer support, training, and listening sessions. In addition, provide resource families with details about broader community events, such as important tribal holidays, where resource families can celebrate with other community members.
- Make sure resource families have a true sense of belonging with the community, tribe, and other resource families. Help resource families gain access to elders, healers, and culture keepers and ensure that they are learning how to incorporate cultural practices in their parenting.
- Support resource families in accessing respite care and help them identify ways to schedule time for self-care.
- Make sure resource families see the tribe and your family services agency or team as resources to support them and their children. Help resource families feel valued and appreciated. Consider how to make sure they are comfortable expressing their needs and sharing their accomplishments.

## 2. Establish culturally relevant policies and procedures

Policies and procedures are the foundation for quality practice and service delivery and are needed for all aspects of your child welfare work. For tribes, policies and procedures provide key ways to codify how customs, values, and beliefs should be integrated into services and governance.

Consider establishing or updating policies and procedures related to the following:

- **Defining roles of staff who work with resource families.** Include expectations for job performance that are measurable where possible and that tie directly to performance reviews. Have a clear process for assessing and certifying resource families, including the home inspection. Provide clear details and examples of how to conduct assessments. Provide staff with information, tools, and support so they can be successful in meeting and exceeding expectations for working with resource families.

- **Establishing values that guide interactions with resource families.** It may be helpful to create and establish culture-based values that guide interaction with resource families that align with your definition of well-being described above. This is an opportunity to gather information from your elders and culture keepers and incorporate that information into formal statements that will shape your work.
- **Integrating input and guidance from tribal elders.** Seek out elders who have experience and passion for working with children—especially those who have served as resource caregivers themselves. Involve community elders in your efforts to evaluate your programs and engage in continuous quality improvement.
- **Codifying procedures regarding tribal customary adoptions (if applicable to your tribe).** Review your current adoption policies with your tribal elders, attorneys, and judges. Ensure that there are procedures and codes to assist your tribal advocate/social worker when interacting with state courts and state child welfare, when necessary. Ensure there are procedures for supporting families after the customary adoption.
- **Evaluating resource family finding and recruitment, development, and support services.** Consider evaluation procedures that help staff and families to define short- and long-term goals, which relate to positive outcomes for resource families. Make sure whenever possible that these relate to your tribal definition of success.
- **Ensuring access to community services and other supports.** Ensure staff and resource families are aware of available services and how to access them. It may be helpful to provide a handbook of available resources and services to resource families and discuss the information during training.
- **Updating policies and procedures.** Consider avenues for input on needed changes even during times when policies are not scheduled for review. Management should maintain an active file of issues and areas where policies and procedures could be improved. Additionally, as some state laws, welfare, and institutions codes can change annually, a mechanism should be in place to adjust to these changes if needed without affecting services for resource families.

### 3. Provide training for resource families

Whether families are caring for children temporarily or permanently, it is critically important to adequately prepare them for this monumental task.

Resource parents need to understand the fundamentals of the impact of trauma on children, grief and loss, and child development. They must also have a clear understanding of the child's tribal culture and how success and child well-being are defined by that culture.

Providing resource families with helpful, relevant training also helps build trust between families and your agency while contributing to positive outcomes for children.

As you examine the training you currently provide to your families, consider asking the following questions:

- 1. Does our training provide families with awareness of the culture and history of our tribe?** Are we connecting tribal culture to the success and well-being of an Indian child?
- 2. Do parents leave training with an understanding of tribal approaches to child rearing?** Do parents understand what the tribe expects of them as they care for an Indian child?
- 3. Is it clear how connection to culture is a protective factor for an Indian child and contributes to their resilience?** Give examples of how connection to tribal culture has positively affected children in your community. A great way to accomplish this is to incorporate Indian youth and their extended family in your training.
- 4. Does the training provide parents with a clear definition of success and well-being from a tribal perspective?** For resource parents to partner with tribes toward shared goals, everyone needs to have the same understanding of what success and well-being look like.
- 5. What other training and skill development do parents need to help them meet children's needs?** There are many areas of training that are important to provide for resource parents in addition to those that are specific to cultural connections and practices.

If you don't have it already, consider incorporating a post-training evaluation for resource parents, or survey families about their training experiences

#### 4. Ensure families and children have an active voice in your work

Incorporating perspectives from resource families and youth in developmentally appropriate ways benefits your efforts to recruit, develop, and support families in several ways:

- It helps to ensure that your practices are in alignment with the needs and strengths of families.
- It gives resource families greater trust in the program and sense of belonging.
- It helps families feel valued and demonstrates to other families that you value family voices and input.

You can engage families and youth and encourage their participation in several ways, including:

- Support and encourage communication between families and your staff and community members through cultural events, community conversations about ways to support children, and other opportunities for connecting around shared interests in positive outcomes for children and families.

- Strengthen resource families' sense of belonging to community, including by intentionally involving resource families in cultural activities and rites of passage, such as naming ceremonies and feasts.
- Support families' active participation in decision-making, including breaking down barriers to their participation, such as by providing advance notice of meetings and decision points and scheduling meetings at times and locations that are accessible to families.
- Emphasize the importance of understanding the needs of resource families to tribal elders and program staff. This includes identifying needed changes in policies or practices in order to build programs that support compassionate action.
- Set and reinforce consistent expectations for staff to be responsive when resource families request assistance.
- Ensure that you are seeking input and evaluation from resource parents and young people you serve and have a plan for responding to feedback.

Find more resources for tribal child welfare administrators at the Tribal Information Exchange of the Capacity Building Center for Tribes (<https://tribalinformationexchange.org/>) and on the AdoptUSKids website (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/category/open/for-tribes/>).

AdoptUSKids worked with tribal consultants to provide this information to help you, as a tribal child welfare administrator, ground resource family support efforts in tribal culture and have tribal values, language, traditions, and teachings guide your work with resource families.



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