



Adapting Evidence-Based Treatments for Use with American Indian and Native Alaskan Children and Youth

It is impossible to capture or explain the nature and extent of assaults experienced by American Indians and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) families. AI/AN communities experience a disproportionate number of events that put them at risk for trauma reactions. Often, these contemporary disruptions have roots in the historical past.

According to the National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), trauma is a unique individual experience associated with a traumatic event or enduring conditions.⁷ This definition is of limited usefulness within the AI/AN communities, however, since it does not take into account the cultural trauma, historical trauma, and intergenerational trauma that has accumulated in AI/AN communities through centuries of exposure to racism, warfare, violence, and catastrophic disease. Cultural trauma is an attack on the fabric of a society, affecting the essence of the community and its members. Attacks on AI/AN communities have included prohibiting the use of traditional languages, banning spiritual/healing practices, removing or relocating individuals or whole communities, and restricting access to public or sacred spaces. Historical

trauma is the cumulative exposure of traumatic events that affects an individual and continues to affect subsequent generations. Intergenerational trauma occurs when the trauma of an event is not resolved and is subsequently internalized and passed from one generation to the next through impaired parenting and lack of support in the community. These types of traumas increase individuals' risks of experiencing traumatic stressors while also decreasing their opportunities to draw on the strengths of their culture, family, or community for social and emotional support.

Service Needs

Currently, the majority of Native people live in urban areas. Although many move from isolated and economically deprived settings to seek better living conditions, they often times have difficulty securing stable employment. Many Native people are employed in low-wage, unskilled positions and they may require assistance such as food stamps, reduced-price school lunches, and/or subsidized housing. Heads of households for the majority of Native families are women, who are not only poorly paid, but also often engaged in a

constant struggle to provide support to immediate and extended family members. The bitter reality is that a large proportion of the Native population experiences severe financial hardship, which increases stress and compounds the risk of exposure to crime and violence.

AI/AN families are also at risk for violence due to political, economic, and social inequalities. According to the Department of Justice,⁹ the average annual violent crime rate among AI/AN people over 12 years of age is approximately 2.5 times the national rate. There is approximately one substantiated report of violent crime per year for every 30 Native children.¹⁰

Average life expectancy among AI/AN people is lower than in the non-Indian population. Given the shorter life expectancy and population growth of AI/AN persons, nearly half the AI/AN population is comprised of minors who need care, guidance, and support. The community's ability to provide these resources is compromised as the challenges of maintaining a livelihood, combating cultural genocide, coping with violence, and rebounding against emotional and spiritual bankruptcy tear at the integrity of home and culture.

Given the multiple risks present in

AI/AN communities, it is not surprising that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is substantially higher among AI/AN persons than in the general community (22% vs. 8%).⁵ It is likely that higher rates of exposure to traumatic events coupled with the overarching cultural, historical, and intergenerational traumas make this population

remarkable resilience. Communities have retained cultural strength in kinship networks, language, stories, songs, ceremonies, and spiritual beliefs. However, to survive, many individuals have developed coping strategies that leave them ill-equipped to deal with the ongoing trauma, stress, and hardship they endure. Because of past experiences with misguided

professionals may be few.

The process of adaptation began with identifying the core concepts within existing EBTs. At the same time, the ICCTC worked to identify Native traditional teachings and concepts that would be relevant for trauma therapy in Indian Country. Particular focus was placed on traditions related to parenting, nurturing, and therapeutic practice. Attention was also paid to traditional ways of teaching and learning, and to cultural worldviews that are used to explain individual behavior. Using a process

of ongoing and open dialogue, the ICCTC worked with EBT developers and a diverse group of Native cultural consultants to create intervention and training materials as well as implementation support strategies and protocols.

Honoring Children, Making Relatives

An existing EBT called Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)⁴ was adapted into Honoring Children, Making Relatives. This intervention maintains the guiding principles and theory of PCIT while incorporating AI/AN practices, rituals, traditions, and other cultural elements.

One Native method of teaching typically moves from observation to teaching others: "Watch. Listen, as I tell you what to do. Do it this way. Now go teach your little sister." This same series of steps is a central feature in Honoring Children, Making Relatives: instruct the parents, model the behavior, let the parent practice, have the parent work directly with the child, and be sure the parent praises the child. For example, when a child demonstrates disruptive behaviors or is difficult to control, some parents may punish the child. The traditional Native concept of respect and honor, however, would dictate that the adult be patient, be instructive, not embarrass, and use the opportunity to teach. During PCIT, the parent engages the child in positive interactions, attends

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more vulnerable to PTSD. In addition, people who have traumatic experiences and develop PTSD are also at risk for several other negative mental health outcomes. Rates of substance abuse disorders and other mental health disorders, particularly depression, are also elevated among AI/AN peoples.¹ In short, the AI/AN population is especially susceptible to mental health difficulties.

Honoring Children: EBT for Indian Country

Despite the hardships outlined above, Native people have shown



programs offered by the government and social service organizations, many AI/AN people are distrustful and reluctant to consider professional mental health services. What is more, therapeutic services offered to Native people in the past have often proven ineffective and inappropriate for AI/AN populations. Recognizing these barriers to treatment, the Indian Country Child Trauma Center (ICCTC) at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center is working with the NCTSN and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to develop, refine, disseminate, and evaluate culturally relevant trauma intervention models for use with children in Indian Country. The interventions are adapted from existing evidence-based treatments (EBTs). The premise of the cultural adaptation is that AI/AN cultures have traditional healing practices, activities, and ceremonies that are used therapeutically to provide instruction about relationships and parenting. The resulting four Honoring Children interventions developed by the ICCTC build on common and tribal-specific cultural elements to provide culturally relevant therapeutic approaches that also respect the substantial individual variability in cultural identity among AI/AN people. The adaptations are also based on the recognition that these interventions must be appropriate for dissemination in rural and/or isolated tribal communities where li-

to the child, lets the child know what the child is doing right, and eventually instructs the child in good behavior. Honoring Children, Making Relatives is the clinical application of parenting techniques in a traditional framework that supports the emphasis that AI/



AN culture places on honor, respect, extended family, instruction, modeling, and teachings.

Honoring Children, Respectful Ways

Native youth confront many challenges that negatively impact their sense of self, their interactions with others, and their connection to their culture. Traumas of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and violence, overlaid with historical and cultural trauma, can lead young people to disregard or devalue modesty and to develop inappropriate sexual behavior. Inappropriate sexual behaviors can have wide-ranging impact on the children themselves, and can also significantly affect the family, the extended family, and the community. Ultimately, inappropriate behavior can result in serious negative social or legal consequences. Honoring Children, Respectful Ways⁸ is designed to honor AI/AN children and promote their self-respect while also promoting respect for others, elders, and all living things.

The Honoring Children, Respectful Ways curriculum teaches young

people culturally congruent ways to honor themselves. The use of traditional healing and cultural practices encourages young people to identify with their AI/AN heritage. This treatment approach is congruent with an evidenced-based group treatment program for children with sexual behavior problems.³ In addition, Honoring Children, Respectful Ways is an approach that can be implemented as a prevention or intervention treatment program that helps AI/AN children and their families to connect with their traditional values, ways, and practices, and to develop positive beliefs about themselves and healthy values and behaviors in their relationships with others.

Honoring Children, Honoring the Future

The impact of youth suicide in Indian country cannot be underestimated. The resultant loss of family members reverberates throughout the community, putting other family members at risk for depression, grief reactions, poor work performance, drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence, as well as for contemplations of suicide. The American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum (AILSDC),⁶ the only evidence-based suicide prevention program in Indian country recognized by SAMHSA and the National Registry of Effective Programs, is the clinical component of Honoring Children, Honoring the Future. The larger intervention includes supports for case consultation, program development, and training in risk.

The AILSDC uses risk and protective factors specific to AI/AN youth as the basis for its prevention strategies. The curriculum, designed for middle- and high-school students, teaches such life skills as communication, problem solving, depression and stress management, anger regulation, and goal setting. Problem solving and suicide intervention skills are taught through activities that encourage students to seek out cultural knowledge in their communities. AILSDC curriculum is specifically tailored to be compatible with the norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of Native communities. Special attention is paid to worldviews, communication styles,

and forms of recognition.

Honoring Children, Mending the Circle

Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is an evidence-based application of cognitive behavioral techniques to support the healing process of trauma in children. Honoring Children, Mending the Circle² is grounded in a traditional framework that supports the AI/AN traditional belief in spiritual renewal leading to healing and recovery.

The TF-CBT adaptation is based on traditional AI/AN beliefs and practices about behavior, health, healing, humor, and children. The premise is the belief that AI/AN cultures have current healing practices, activities, and ceremonies that, like cognitive-behavioral therapy, instruct individuals about how to manage thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions. For example, with trauma-exposed children, a common symptom is intrusive thoughts that create anxiety and inability to concentrate. During many traditional ceremonies and activities traditional healers instruct participants to "leave bad thoughts at the door" or "come in with good thoughts." A similar technique used in TF-CBT is the "stop sign." A child is instructed to use a stop sign image when intrusive thoughts begin.

Common reactions to trauma include physical sensations of rapid heartbeat and breathing that result in distress or discomfort. Relevant tradi-

There are currently over 550 federally recognized tribes in the United States. There are 33 states with reservations nationwide. Twenty-one of the 24 states located west of the Mississippi River have at least one Indian reservation within their borders. Tribes range from two to three members in several California tribes to the Western Band of the Cherokee Nation, headquartered in Oklahoma, with over 300,000 members. Navajo Nation, located at the Four Corners region connecting Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico, has over 200,000 members.

tional instructions during ceremonial or related activities might be to "Bring yourself to this place, think about this place, close your eyes, breathe in, think about where your body is, your spirit, your connection with Mother

these sacred teachings. With Honoring Children, this prophecy has been partially fulfilled. Respect for American Indian and Alaskan Native ways of healing is being upheld.



Earth, you being okay with who you are." This kind of instruction is similar to the relaxation techniques of TF-CBT.

Summary

The Indian Country Child Trauma Center is providing important resources to American Indian and Alaskan Native communities. Beyond the culturally-based therapeutic approaches, the Center offers training and implementation support that is also culturally based. The guiding vision is that Native children who are experiencing trauma will be able to access treatment that is structured and systematic, but also culturally responsive, promoting connection with their community, their culture, and their heritage.

There is a prophecy held sacred by Native people which foretold the coming of a different people who would bring disease and sickness to the Great Turtle Island (America). The story tells that it would be the ancient traditions and teachings of past generations that would help Native people climb up and regain their heritage as proud and rightful Nations. The Native people hold to the promise of

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The authors are dedicated to providing more trauma informed services for American Indian and Alaskan Native children. For more information, please go to www.icctc.org.

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