



# Learning Tool 8



## Native Americans and Child Welfare

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**T**here are more than 150,000 Native Americans living in Los Angeles County, and most are classified as the “working poor.” They and their ancestors came in the 1950s, when the federal government moved Native Americans from different reservations to large urban areas to discourage tribal identity and unity and to encourage assimilation. The resulting isolation from extended families and support networks has caused and exacerbated poverty, substance abuse, lack of health care, inadequate housing, and other factors that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect: Native American children in the county come to the attention of the child welfare system at an alarming rate. Once in the system, Native children tend to stay for very long periods of time. The terms of the Indian Child Welfare Act—which seeks to keep Native American children with Native American families—often are not enforced, with staff claiming not to know of children’s Native American heritage.

### Changing the System

Indian Child and Family Services (ICFS), part of the Southern California Indian Center, works to change these trends, strengthen Native American families, and make the child welfare system fairer and its staff more supportive. The agency is partially funded through the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Program (Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act) and now provides training to others through that program.

ICFS staff—who are largely Native American—all have intensive, culturally specific training and experience. They provide case management, family support services, assessments, and referrals to families in the system; after referring families, they stay in touch with the family until services are accessed, helping them learn how to access the services they need and advocate for themselves. ICFS has

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created relationships that benefit Native American families: Staff have reached out to the judge in the Native American Children’s Dependency Court, attorneys, and court personnel to tell them about services that American Indians can receive because of the Native American Community-Based Family Resource and Support Program. They have collaborated on an interagency community health fair providing Indian families with health screenings, immunizations, lead testing, and eye and dental screenings. Staff often access the Southern California Indian Center’s WIND (Walking In A New Direction) program on behalf of their clients.

WIND provides mental health and substance abuse–related services to Native American adults and adolescents experiencing alcohol and/or substance abuse as well as their families. Services cover prevention, intervention, and aftercare. A strong aftercare component focuses on preventing relapse. WIND is a 12-step program with a holistic approach to sobriety. Services are provided in a supportive environment that recognizes the strength and significance of Native American culture. Transportation to cultural and recovery activities and supportive services is provided. WIND also provides workshops and educational materials on:

- > Mental health
- > Family dynamics
- > Stress management
- > Anger management
- > Domestic violence prevention
- > Wellness
- > Conflict resolution
- > Relationships
- > Parenting

## Meeting the Challenge, Building Trust

Any agency wishing to provide services to the Native American population is faced with the challenge of overcoming distrust of those outside the family or tribe. ICFS have expertise in this area, and have used their knowledge and skills to help others do the same.

Most ICFS staff are Native American, and those who are not are largely from other minority groups. All have the appropriate educational qualifications for their positions and have lengthy work experience

Staff meet with families in their homes for the amount of time needed and as often as is necessary and appropriate.

with the Native American community in Los Angeles County. All are trained to work at the client’s pace, to give time for families to get to know them and for trust to develop. Since the service team stays with families involved in the child welfare system as long as their services are needed, they have time to build trust.

They start their relationship building by working with the immediate problems presented by the families, such as health and school-related issues, difficulties parenting—often the result of being raised by a parent who was raised in an institution—unsafe homes, substandard housing, and lack of job training and adequate transportation. This approach helps the families see that the program can quickly be of assistance to them in a tangible way. It also keeps families involved long enough for a level of trust to develop so they can begin to work on some of the less concrete issues.

Finally, ICFS staff do not require families to come into the office for the traditional 50-minute weekly office visit. Instead, they meet in families' homes for the amount of time needed and as often as is necessary and appropriate. They also have flexible work hours and meet with families at their convenience, not just during a nine-to-five work day. ICFS staff have shared these techniques with other programs as trainers in the Native American Community-Based Family Resource and Support Program; their techniques that have proven very successful in engaging families and in building their trust.

Through the Native American Community-Based Family Resource and Support Program, ICFS provides regular in-home services to birth parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents. While in families' homes, staff provide:

- > Childhood development information and training
- > Individual and family counseling
- > Therapeutic recreational activities for children
- > Respite for the caregivers
- > Court advocacy
- > Help obtaining financial assistance
- > Emotional support
- > Health advocacy
- > Educational advocacy

The team is comprised of a professional counselor and a case manager and is supervised by the program coordinator.

In addition to the services listed above, the team helps to meet all needs as they arise, including those related to health and safety, school, housing, food and clothing, job training, and transportation. Project staff are committed to helping family members develop the skills they need to access community, state, and federal agencies and resources in order to become more self-sufficient, competent, and stable. Through this approach, project staff help to preserve and strengthen families, reunify children with their families, ensure appropriate permanency plans for children, and secure the health and well-being of all family members. The focus is on preserving families and, when that is not possible, on providing permanence for children through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or placement with kin. Services to families involved in the child welfare system are provided in compliance with the mandates of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, ensuring that children are kept within their families when possible and, barring that, within their cultures.



FRIENDS, a service of the Children's Bureau, is the National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program grants, under a cooperative agreement between Chapel Hill Training Outreach Project, Inc. and the Office

on Child Abuse and Neglect, ACF, HHS. FRIENDS assists and supports the CBCAP state lead agencies by providing training, technical assistance, and information. Contact: Yvette Layden, Office Manager, 800 Eastowne Dr. Suite 105, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 919/490-5577, ext. 222