



TOOLKIT TIPS

**AMERICAN INDIAN & ALASKA
NATIVE GRANDFAMILIES:**

**HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE THROUGH
CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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NICWA

National Indian Child Welfare Association
Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

Introduction

About 2.5 million children in the United States live in grandfamilies or kinship families, which are families in which children are being raised by grandparents, other extended family members, or adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship. American Indian and Alaska Native children are more likely to live in grandfamilies than children in any other racial or ethnic group. While American Indian and Alaska Native children make up one percent of all children in the United States, they comprise over eight percent of all children in grandfamilies and two percent of all children in state foster care systems.



There is a long and proud tradition of kinship care in Native cultures. In almost all Native cultures, extended family kinship structures prevail. Cousins may refer to one another as brother and sister. Aunts and uncles may be called mom and dad. A grandmother's first cousin might be called uncle. Within this kinship structure, there are many potential caregivers and many natural supports.

This resource is designed as a quick reference tool for practitioners and advocates working with grandfamilies and kinship families who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. It is meant to help them provide services in a way that is culturally sensitive and effective. It also serves as a reference guide for staff orientation/training to work in these communities. The content of this resource is based on the [complementary toolkit](#) by Generations United and the National Indian Child Welfare Association, which provides additional detailed information, resources, references, and infographics. The toolkit also includes definitions and explanations of key terms used in this resource.



Understanding American Indian and Alaska Native Values

Understanding the cultures of Native peoples in the United States can be challenging due to the vast diversity of Native nations. That diversity comes from distinct regional variations, each tribe's or nation's history, and the degree of assimilation of its members. Every tribe has individuals who still adhere to the ancient traditions of their tribe, others who are quite assimilated, and every variation in between. Some speak their own language, and some languages have been lost. In addition to assimilation differences, Native peoples have historically intermarried with each other and with other races. Native people of any tribe can present or appear White, African American, Asian, or Latino or have any range of many differing Native physical features. These differences can be seen in the same family and are often a source of confusion for helpers, including social workers, educators, and health care providers.

The goal of this reference tool is to provide important background information about the strengths of American Indian and Alaska Native communities' cultural values and share examples to promote better understanding and recognition, and to improve service utilization and access. The content is based on the [complementary toolkit](#) by Generations United and the National Indian Child Welfare Association, which provides additional detailed information, resources, and infographics. The toolkit also includes definitions and explanations of key terms used. The terms "Native" and "Indigenous" are used interchangeably in this resource.

**For more information,
see the complementary toolkit.**



Respect for Elders: Indigenous worldviews, values, beliefs, and teachings often include a reverence for elders, and Native peoples tend to treat them with much more respect than mainstream Americans typically show to their elders. Native elders are usually served first at any event, and youth will nearly always fill a plate for an elder before filling one for themselves. Planned program events should acknowledge this cultural preference. When possible, social workers and other helping professionals should consider and discuss with Native families, ways to include the elder(s) in planning and decision-making.

A social worker invites parents and their children to a child welfare case plan meeting to determine goals and activities to help the parents and children. A grandparent or tribal elder shows up to the meeting. The parents defer to the grandparent/elder about decisions related to the case plan.

EXAMPLE

Wisdom vs. Facts: Mainstream American society tends to value facts, data, experts, and degrees. Native cultures tend to value wisdom, patterns, cycles, and experience. One culture focuses on breaking the world into its smallest parts to understand how things work; the other looks at the world more holistically and observes complex relationships to understand how things work. This difference may be illustrated in approaches to medicine and healing. Social workers and other helpers should acknowledge tribal healing cultures and facilitate connections to western medicine where appropriate.

A case plan directs a grandfamily to secure medical care for their grandchild at the office of a pediatrician who practices western medicine. The family chooses instead to take the advice of a tribal elder or tribal healer.

EXAMPLE

Time Concept: Mainstream American culture values clock time, punctuality, and efficiency. The expression “time is money” sums up this perception. Native cultures tend to understand time in terms of cycles and understand that things happen in their own time. For example, Native peoples know that you fish when the fish are running, you pick berries when the berries are ready, and you conduct ceremonies when the time is designated by the season or position of the stars. Native peoples place high priority on ceremony when someone dies. Native tradition may guide people to drop everything and come together for funerals. Many tribes have funeral services that last many days, which may hinder other scheduled events. Native people value time, just in a different way than mainstream western society.

A court hearing for a family is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. during deer season. The family arrives late to the court hearing because they were hunting and harvesting deer meat, which is critical food for their family for the season.

EXAMPLE



Family and Kinship Networks: Several Native peoples have clan systems that track relationships and lineage far more broadly than they are tracked in American society. Clans do not intermarry, they often have specific roles in helping others in times of crisis, and they may support one another in times of loss and grief. Grandfamilies are common and may be permanent or temporary depending on the needs of the children and the cultural roles of grandparents or other relatives. Native cultures value and prioritize family and kinship networks above work obligations or service provider expectations. Whereas mainstream Americans will often prioritize work commitments and appointments over non-emergency family needs, Native cultures typically will not.

A parent cancels a meeting with a social worker at the last minute because a distant cousin had a need or because the parent is attending a ceremony for an extended family member. The social worker should understand the priority placed on helping extended family.

EXAMPLE

Communication Preferences: People whose first language is an Indigenous language may have to translate mentally before responding in English. Many Indigenous languages have words for emotions and relationships that are hard to translate into English and people may struggle to express themselves.

Most mainstream Americans speak quickly and directly. Native people often speak more slowly and indirectly. They are likely to tell a story in response to a question because they believe that the context is as important as the facts.

The use of eye contact may vary among Native peoples. Some tribes may see eye contact as a sign of respect while lots of eye contact in other tribes may be a sign of disrespect. Be careful not to make assumptions about a Native person's level of engagement or respect based on their eye contact.

Unlike many mainstream Americans, Native cultures find interrupting someone to be rude and usually defer to elders to speak first.

Mainstream Americans tend to give advice and comment on what people should do, buy, read, or try. Native people tend to see this as rude.

Native peoples tend to be modest and reserved with giving praise, whereas mainstream Americans often are less reserved in this respect.

A caseworker visits a family on a routine appointment. The caregiver is quiet during the meeting and does not respond directly to some of the caseworker's questions and does not look her in the eye. The social worker may assume the caregiver is disengaged. In reality, the caregiver is following their cultural norms and being careful not to interrupt.

EXAMPLE

Seven Ways to Promote Culturally Responsive Services

- 1. Recognize that Tribes Are Sovereign Nations:** Tribal governments in the United States retain powers of self-governance. Those inherent sovereign powers are recognized and enforced by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Follow ICWA, a 45-year-old federal law widely considered to be the gold standard of child welfare practice and policy which requires states to recognize the authority of tribes over their own member children and the critical role tribes can play in ensuring their best interest in child welfare matters. Work with tribes on a government-to-government basis.
- 2. Engage and Respect the Role of Elders:** Be open to including elders in case planning and activities to support the child and family.
- 3. Build Trust:** Trust must be earned when outsiders work with Native populations. Native peoples expect to be treated badly by outsiders offering help. It is a survival strategy. Demonstrate that you are trustworthy by following through on your commitments and treating Native grandfamilies with respect and dignity.
- 4. Recognize Diversity Among Native Cultures, Nations, and People.** There are 574 federally recognized tribes. The physical traits, beliefs, traditional practices, and languages of the various groups are distinct based on place, natural resources, climate, geography, historic relationships with each other, and the timing of colonization. Ask and learn about different tribes in your area.
- 5. Be Sensitive to Communication Differences:** Give time during conversation. This may mean allowing for periods of quiet. Don't feel obligated to fill the silence. Be careful not to interrupt.
- 6. Support Connections to Cultural Identity:** Connections to cultural identity help heal trauma and build a positive sense of self-worth and belonging. Ask and educate yourself about cultural traditions and practices. Encourage and support participation in cultural activities.
- 7. Promote Connections to Tribal Services:** In many areas, tribes may offer a range of supportive services to families with a tribal affiliation. If the family is willing to engage in tribal services, learn about available services and help facilitate connections to them. Native people suffer from lateral violence and historical trauma, which can affect how they interact with others in their communities.

For more information and resources for serving grandfamilies, visit gu.org, grandfamilies.org, and gksnetwork.org.





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