

# Cultural Enhancement of Mental Health Services for American Indian Children

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Within the field of children's mental health, there has been a distinct move to create transportability of evidence-based treatments (Hoagwood, Burns, Kiser, Ringeisen, & Scheonwald, 2001; Stirman, Crits-Christoph, & DeRubeis, 2004). This has led to a myriad of "cultural adaptations" for a variety of populations to increase engagement and cultural congruency. One specific area of interest is increased adaptation of services provided for American Indian/Alaska Native populations, specifically American Indian/Alaska Native children.

The adaptation of evidence-based treatments within an American Indian/Alaska Native well-being framework presents an opportunity to enhance healing through the blending of science and Indigenous culture. Undertaking an adaptation such as this is complicated. What makes an adapted model successful is not just the translation of language but also the translation of core principles or concepts of the model so that they become meaningful to the culturally targeted group while maintaining fidelity to the original model. There are many considerations that were made at the onset of model enhancement for Indian Country, including the services for both child and family-extended family, understanding trauma exposure from historical to current, and being sensitive to cultural differences among tribal groups.

## Specific Enhanced Models

In 2003, as part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative (NCTSI), the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center (OHASC), Center on Child Abuse and Neglect established the Indian Country Child Trauma Center (ICCTC) to develop trauma-focused treatments and outreach materials specifically designed for American Indian/Alaska Native children and their families. ICCTC identifies existing evidence-based treatments that share common elements with American Indian/Alaska Native cultural beliefs and practices. Our goal was to design culturally relevant approaches that respect shared and tribal-specific teachings, practices, and understandings while recognizing the substantial individual variability in cultural affiliation among American Indian/Alaska Native people. The interventions, the Honoring Children Series, were developed with consultation and input from a variety of cultural consultants. ICCTC continues

training and weekly phone consultation for urban, reservation, rural, and/or isolated tribal communities by being available for case consultation to assist in better implementation.

## Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Honoring Children, Making Relatives (HC-MR) is the cultural enhancement of PCIT that focuses on the incorporation of American Indian/Native Alaska's teachings, practices, rituals, traditions, and cultural orientation. HC-MR represents the fundamentals of PCIT set within a context of American Indian/Alaska Native philosophies by applying Circle Theory and Old Wisdom. The *Parent Training Manual for American Indian Families* (BigFoot, 1989) served as the basis for the cultural enhancement, outlining the underlying parenting and cultural concepts that were elaborated by the ICCTC and their cultural consultants and were complementary to PCIT.



As can be seen in the original work of the first author, traditional American Indian/Alaska Native beliefs hold that children need and desire the warmth, concern, and encouragement they gain from parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters (BigFoot, 1989). Traditional cultural beliefs assumed that each child possessed the qualities to develop into a worthwhile human being. Tribal community expectations for good behavior were ingrained and likely served as an impetus for children to flourish within the boundaries of their surroundings (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998).

Critical is the understanding that a child was received by all relatives and that the child was affected by all interactions, just as attachment theory and family systems theory would suggest.

As described by BigFoot (1989), caregivers' responsibility was to cultivate the positive nature of the child and to touch the child with honor and respect. Because a child was considered a gift from the Creator, caretakers had the responsibility to return to the Creator a person who respected him- or herself and others. Tribal

teachings held that one could positively reinforce American Native/Alaska Native children by honoring them through ceremonies, name giving, or recognition events (e.g., honorary dinners, dances, giveaways). Indigenous parents and relatives encouraged correct behavior by acknowledging traits that would be helpful as the child grew into adulthood.

A child's efforts and accomplishments may indirectly be acknowledged by a giveaway, dinner, or renaming. In a giveaway to honor a child, family members might assemble highly valued items to be given to nonrelated individuals who exemplified the good traits developing in the child. For example, a grandfather might stand before the gathering and announce the reason for the giveaway and how it was to honor his grandchild. Sometimes a giveaway was spontaneous, with the caregiver removing personal items of clothing, jewelry, or other possessions to acknowledge the occasion. Many times small items would be given inconspicuously to a child by an adult with a comment such as, "I am giving this to you because you always listen to your parents, you always seem happy to obey them." So although many doubt that praise as required in PCIT will be accepted by parents, the use of praise to encourage positive actions is an old American Indian/Alaska Native method of rearing children.

### Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

Honoring Children, Mending the Circle (HC-MC) is the cultural enhancement of TF-CBT that focuses on the clinical application of the healing process of trauma within a traditional framework. This framework supports the beliefs of the American Indian/Alaska Native culture of spiritual renewal leading to healing and recovery.

The framework for HC-MC is the circle. For many Indigenous people, the circle is a sacred symbol that has long been used to understand the world. The symbolism of the circle is old wisdom transmitted in oral stories, carved into rock formations, sculpted in wood or clay, woven into reed baskets, or painted in colored sand. The most widely recognized American Indian/Alaska Native symbolic circle is the Medicine Wheel. The constructions of the Medicine Wheel and its teachings have been documented since 7,000 BC (Stanford Solar Center, 2008). The concept of the circle is incorporated into American Indian/Alaska Native lifestyles through practices, teachings, and ceremonies such as at the beginning of the grand entry for pow wows, the physical placement of participants during sweat lodge, shape of the drum, ceremonial structures such as medicine lodges and many kivas, and dwellings such as grass or reed shelters and wattle or daubs.

The HC-MC circle is conceptualized as a model of well-being. The HC-MC circle is based on tribal teachings but remains flex-



ible to accommodate individuals of diverse cultures and spiritual and religious beliefs. It is an elaboration on the CBT core construct of the cognitive triangle that our thoughts, feelings and behaviors are interconnected. Core HC-MC constructs are based on American Indian/Alaska Native worldviews: (1) all things are interconnected, (2) all things have a spiritual nature, and (3) existence is dynamic. HC-MC defines well-being as balance and harmony both within and between one's spiritual, relational, emotional, mental, and physical dimensions.

Spirituality serves as the core of the HC-MC circle. Central to wellness and healing is the American Indian/Alaska Native belief that all things, human and earth, have a spiritual nature. Spirituality has played and continues to play an important role in the individual and collective well-being of American Indians. The spiritual dimension is interwoven and intertwined with the physical, mental, emotional, and relational well-being dimensions.

HC-MC defines personal imbalance as disharmony in one or more of these dimensions. Imbalance may manifest through trauma exposure as spiritual disconnection, unhealthy behaviors, emotional instability, distorted beliefs, or poor relationships. As a result, the goal of the healing process is to restore one's personal balance within the five dimensions, thus re-establishing personal well-being and diminishing trauma responses.

### Treatment for Children With Problematic Sexual Behaviors (PSB)

PSB is a promising practice that incorporates treatment for both children and caretakers. The program focuses on psychoeducation and enhancing safety skills for both children and caretakers through teaching children rules that help keep themselves and other children safe.

Honoring Children, Respectful Ways (HC-RW) is the cultural adaptation of Treatment for Children With Problematic Sexual Behaviors for American Indian/Alaska Native children demonstrating inappropriate sexual behaviors. The adaptation was designed to honor children and promote their self-respect as well as respect for others, their elders, tradition ways, well-being, animals, and all living things. The HC-MR adaptation seeks to honor what makes American Indians and Alaska Natives culturally unique through recognizing and respecting the beliefs, practices, and traditions within their families, communities, and Tribes that are inherently healing and therapeutic. The Honoring Children, Respectful Ways model teaches about rules, privacy, feelings, sexual development, boundaries and personal space, supervision and attentiveness, self-control and self-discipline, intimacy and social relationship, and being a good relative toward self and others.

### Summary

The Honoring Children Series of interventions has at its core to promote better understanding of an individual's responses to the environment; to identify feelings, thoughts, and actions; and to build on a cultural framework toward healing and better ways of interaction with self and others.

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