



Honoring Children and Integrating Culture When Responding to Child Abuse

Supporting a Child Experiencing Abuse

Tribal victim service programs have a critical role in supporting children and their families who are victims of abuse. As a Tribal victim advocate, you work with families to provide support across systems and to ensure services are aligned with Tribal values and sovereignty. The following ideas are a few ways to weave culture, community voice, and victim-centered practices when supporting children who experienced abuse.

Create Safety

Establish physical and emotional safety for children by supporting children through culture and relationships that reflects Tribal values.

Lean on Cultural Strength, Wisdom, and Values

Leaning on cultural strengths, wisdom, and values reminds children that they are not alone in navigating their healing and that they are deeply rooted in a community that values and protects them.



Lean on Cultural Strength, Wisdom, and Values

Build a circle of support around a child who has been abused by reflecting the core values of kinship, interconnectedness, and collective care across Tribal communities.

Work Interconnectedly

Working interconnectedly mirrors how healing requires comprehensive support across multiple systems.

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Create Safety

According to Dr. Gretchen Schmelzer (2018), a survivor-leader and trauma expert, human beings are born with a deep need for connection and safety in relationships. From infancy, children naturally seek comfort and protection from their caregivers, families, and community. When a child becomes a victim of abuse, this sacred bond of care is disrupted, impacting their sense of safety. Before a child shares their story, they need to feel a sense of safety. A calm and non-judgmental presence and environment

You can do this by—

Principles

Establishing Safety involves restoring physical, emotional, and spiritual security. Establishing safety also includes recognizing that healing is rooted in a sense of belonging which involves strengthening connection to culture, language, and ceremony.

Safety is not only an individual experience but a relational and cultural one. Establishing a safe space can be a nurturing physical space, such as a grandmother’s room, community gathering space, or time spent in nature where the child feels grounded and calm. It can also be a physiological feeling like a comforting relationship. Taking children out in nature near water can help them reconnect with something greater and provides a safe place to share their story. Safety can also be a spiritual experience felt through connection with an Elder.

Action

Connecting a child to caregivers who believe them is profound. Acknowledge clearly and consistently that what happened to the child is not their fault, that they are believed and that their feelings and reactions make sense. Invite them to take a few deep breaths, to feel the floor beneath their feet, and to feel the chair that is holding them up. Remind them that all of what they feel is connected to Mother Earth and that they are not alone.

Language for Tribal Victim Advocates

“When you feel unsafe, remind yourself that you are safe at this moment.” Victimization within a family may also activate trauma responses in relatives who carry their own histories of harm. Walk alongside family members with cultural humility and support them as they navigate overwhelming emotions such as shame, guilt, or grief.

Practice

The [Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation](#) in Montana uses their Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) grant funding to provide cultural activities to victims of crime through family activities based in the Cheyenne language and traditions such as the Bear Butte cultural camp, plant identification and harvesting, and storytelling. This program works to create safety outdoors by understanding that safety is more than protection from harm, it is reclaiming their voice, belonging, power, and connection.

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The Boys and Girl Club weave those threads into a healing environment that is rooted in Cheyenne tradition and community care.

Build a Circle of Support Around Children

Building a circle of support around a child who has been abused reflects the core values of kinship, interconnectedness, and collective care across Tribal communities. This circle of support includes supporting non-offending family and caregivers. Family members may also experience a range of emotions, potentially including a response from their own abuse. Be ready to refer family members and caregivers to resources so that they can also seek care for themselves.

Tribal victim advocates help ensure that children and their caregivers are not alone and are surrounded by culturally rooted advocacy and options that support healing.

You can do this by—

Principles

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice are essential principles for restoring agency, rebuilding trust, and reducing the risk of additional harm. Empowerment also means honoring children’s cultural identity and right to healing within their traditions. Since traditional and cultural practices differ among Tribal nations, it is important to meaningfully partner with families to identify practices that are culturally responsive. Threading together agency and cultural support strengthens resilience and long-term healing.

Action

Work with community partners, multidisciplinary teams, and Tribal coalitions to offer support and guidance to empower children and their families to make the choices and access the resources that best meet their situation.

Language for Tribal Victim Advocates

“All tears are welcome here. Tears are our hearts’ way of releasing sadness. Healing is possible.” It is important to use language that validates emotions and reinforces that children are believed and that their reactions are a normal response.

Practice

[White Earth Tribal Child Advocacy Center in Minnesota](#) integrates opportunities for children to intentionally make choices for themselves as a way to increase autonomy and support healing. Cultural activities such as ribbon skirt making involves decisionmaking over items such as fabrics, colors, and styles. The program recognizes this may be the first time a child who has been abused has a choice over their body and can serve as an opportunity to dialogue about body sovereignty.

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Lean on Cultural Strength, Wisdom, and Values

Children rely on their Tribal communities to teach them how to carry culture and traditional values forward. Culture can provide a sense of belonging, stability, and grounding. Leaning on cultural strengths, wisdom, and values reminds children that they are not alone and that they are deeply rooted in a community that values and protects them. It is important for children to know that they are the result of the love and resilience of their ancestors.

Thoughtfully weave in cultural practices such as storytelling, language, land connection, and ceremony to support emotional and spiritual healing in ways that are holistic and developmentally meaningful for children and their families.

You can do this by—

Principles

Honoring Cultural and Traditional Service Needs acknowledges the strength and resilience of Tribal communities. When victim services reflect Tribal values and sovereignty, they recognize the child's identity, history, and community. This approach views culture as a primary source of healing, shifting the focus from individual victimization toward a strength-based model of community protection.

Action

Plan ahead by identifying victim-centered cultural teachings, practices, and stories that may be appropriately integrated at key moments when supporting children and their families. Offer time for traditional activities such as ceremony, connecting to Elders, beading, berry picking, and connecting to the land through gardening, harvesting, and outdoor activities. Traditional activities create space to connect to the land and alternate forms of healing they may not be aware of.

Language for Tribal Victim Advocates

"I honor your strength in being here, and I know how much courage it takes. Our Tribal values are rooted in children being at the heart of our communities and our hope for the future." This language shifts the focus from the abuse experienced to the strength it took for the child and their family to seek support.

Practice

[Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan](#) offers a cultural component to child therapy by teaching Anishinabek values, customs, and art forms to children involved in the system. In addition, the program offers three child visitation rooms that are designed to be culturally responsive. This program leans on cultural wisdom by creating safety through identity, belonging, and connection. Traditional values and practices remind children that they are supported by their community and provide a trusted foundation for healing.

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Work Interconnectedly

In many Tribal communities, interconnectedness is a core cultural value. The safety and well-being of children is a shared collective responsibility. An interconnected framework recognizes that every person has a role in protecting and caring for children who have been abused. Tribal victim advocates play a central role in supporting a coordinated response by serving as a bridge between children, families, and resources to support healing. Programs can work together to share knowledge and create a unified care plan that includes Elders and cultural mentors. Working interconnectedly mirrors how healing requires multiple layers and comprehensive support across systems.

You can do this by—

Principles

Collaboration and Mutuality acknowledges the power of meaningful partnerships and collaborations for children and their families to access a wide range of services and support. Healing comes in a variety of forms. Collaboration allows providers to coordinate across systems and supports access to holistic healing for children.

Action

Cultivate partnerships and engage in coordinated response teams, such as multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) with professionals of different experiences and responsibilities, including Elders and cultural bearers. MDTs bring together multiple supportive resources and work collaboratively to respond to a report of child abuse and neglect so that children and their families feel heard, believed, and supported. Information on MDTs can be found by visiting the [Native Child Advocacy Resource Center website](#).

Tribal Victim Advocates

“We heal in relationships. We do not heal alone. We are all connected to the strengths and love of our ancestors.” This language reiterates that you are walking alongside the child and their family, responding with care and connection, and that you honor the sacred role to protect children as the heart of our communities.

Practice

[Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Family Advocacy Center](#) in Arizona provides coordinated services for children who have been abused and deliver support in ways that respect traditional community values around family, wellness, and balance. The advocacy center brings together professionals from multiple disciplines, such as law enforcement, social services, healthcare, victim advocacy and legal support to streamline assistance and reduce the possibility of doing more harm by requiring children and their families to navigate separate agencies.



CONTACT INFORMATION

Email to request training and technical assistance. A member of the T-VSTTA team will respond promptly.

Web: ovc.ojp.gov/t-vstta/home

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