SUPPORTING PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: CULTURAL CONTEXTS, EVIDENCE GAPS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Community and Behavioral Health
Associate Director, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center
Colorado School of Public Health
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
What this talk will focus on

- **Cultural Contexts**
  - What are American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) priorities for young children and their families?

- **Evidence Gaps**
  - Do we know what works for AIAN children and families?

- **A Way Forward**
  - How can we best begin to address gaps?
Cultural Contexts
Children are at risk

Research on AIAN populations show great variability across tribal cultures and contexts, but consistent themes are:

- **Health disparities are pervasive**
  - Obesity, oral health, substance abuse, suicide, and more

- **Developmental disparities are significant**
  - AIAN children drop below national norms between 6 and 15 months
  - Academic performance falls behind in elementary school and graduation rates are low

- **Exposure to trauma is common and devastating**
  - Exposure rates are high in AIAN populations (>60%); and first exposure almost always (>90%) occurs in childhood
  - Historical trauma continues to impact families and communities
  - The effects can be devastating
    - Substance use problems
    - Suicide
    - Depression, anxiety, other mental health issues
    - Sexual risk
Parents are at risk

- A history of disrupted parenting has lingering effects on AIAN families
  - Boarding schools (late 1800s through 1960s)
  - Child welfare policies (ICWA 1978)
  - Urban Indian Relocation Program (1950s)

- AIAN parents face high levels of stress
  - Poverty
  - Discrimination
  - Trauma exposure
  - Substance abuse
Communities: “We have the answers here”

- Language and identity
- Cultural teachings – transmission of values
- Kinship structures and roles
- Cultural values for child development
Evidence Gaps
Services are being provided . . .

- Federal programs
  - Head Start/Early Head Start
  - MIECHV
  - Child Care
  - Project LAUNCH *(SAMSHA)*

- Tribal/community efforts
  - Brazelton Touchpoints Center *(BTC)* review of >130 parenting/family interventions found many are being used in AIAN communities
    - e.g., Positive Indian Parenting, Triple P, Parents as Teachers
... but the evidence base is thin

- AIAN (Region XI programs) excluded from studies of HS/EHS to date
- HomVEE Review – ONE home visiting intervention – Family Spirit (Barlow et al, 2015) has met criteria for evidence with AIAN populations
- BTC Review – NO parenting/family engagement interventions reviewed had research evidence of effectiveness (criteria = 1 peer-reviewed publication) for AIAN parents/families
- Evidence about the role of culture is particularly scant – mechanisms of cultural impact not well articulated, measures of cultural constructs underdeveloped
Why the gap?

- **Small, diverse population**
  - Determining effectiveness in small samples requires creative, imperfect design

- **Measurement challenges**
  - Little data on reliability and validity of measures for AIAN children
  - Relevant measures don’t exist (e.g., cultural socialization, cultural parenting)

- **AIAN resistance to research**
  - Rooted in a history of research abuses
  - Mismatch between indigenous and western ways of knowing/standards of evidence

- **Implementation challenges**
  - Insufficient AIAN research workforce
  - Scarce community resources
  - Rural settings and dispersed urban communities (distance to services)
  - Resistance to RCT – randomization and “denial of services”
  - Tribal sovereignty – oversight of research, ownership of data
  - Expense
A Way Forward
Building a New Narrative

Collaborative, Culturally Responsive Evaluation

System Improvement

Locally Guided Questions, Data, & Insight

Meaningful Analyses

Bidirectional Learning

AI/AN Evaluation Skills

Developing policies, establishing clear guidelines, & building Tribal infrastructure for evaluation

Cultural protocols for community-engaged, comprehensive evaluation

Mentoring for evaluation design & implementation

Guidelines for selecting, adapting, developing, administering, & interpreting evaluation instruments

Storytelling to support staff & community interpretation of evaluation data

Training in use, interpretation, & storage of data

Consolidation & coordination of data across community programs

Evaluation practice that involves the community in determining priorities

Dialogue with community to anchor evaluation within cultural & ethical practices

Clear guidelines & examples of evaluation components important to the community

Clear guidelines & examples of required evaluation components tied to funding

Transparency in evaluation & translation for community

Program Directors

Tribal Evaluators

Evaluation Partners

Program Staff

Relationship Building

Knowledge & Skill Building

Values

Indigenous Ways of Knowing | Respect for Tribal Sovereignty
Strengths Focus | Cultural and Scientific Rigor | Community Engagement
Ethical Practices | Knowledge Sharing

Historical Context

Intergenerational and community trauma

Invasive, imposed evaluation

Judgmental evaluation

Co-Creating Collaborative & Effective Evaluation to Improve Tribal Child Welfare Programs

Workgroup – Marla Jean Big Boy, JD (Oglala Lakota), Board of Directors, National Indian Child Welfare Association

Dolores Subia Bigfoot, PhD (Caddo Nation of Oklahoma), Indian Country Child Trauma Center, University of Oklahoma

Nancy Dufraine, MEd, Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation

Lucille Echohawk (Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma), Director of Denver Indian Family Resource Center

Francine Eddy Jones, MSW (Eagle/Wolf of the Yanyeidi Clan of the Taku Tlingit people), Central Council of Tlingit & Haida

Carol Hafford, PhD, NORC at the University of Chicago

Joan LaFrance, EdD (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), Mekinak Consulting

Sylvia Murray, LMSW (Macro (Lake Superior Band Chippewa, Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe), Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of MI

Deborah Painte, MPH (Arikara), Native American Training Institute

Carlette Randall, MSW (Oglala Sioux Tribe/Lakota), JBS International, Inc.

Paulette Running Wolf, PhD (Blackfeet Tribe), Running Wolf & Associates

Malia Villegas, EdD (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq - Alaska Native), National Congress of American Indians

Joe Walker, MPM (Delaware Tribe of Western Oklahoma), National Resource Center for Tribes

Virginia Whitekiller, EdD, MSW (Cherokee), Northeastern State University

Nancy Whitesell, PhD, Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Health at the University of Colorado

Workgroup Coordinator – Mary Jane Peck, MSSW, JBS International, Inc.

Federal Staff – Melinda Baldwin, MSW, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

Brian Deakins, MSW, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

Erin Geary, MSW, Administration on Children, Youth and Families

Rosie Gomez, MS, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

Molly Mee, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

Aleta Meyer, PhD, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families

Eileen West, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families
A vision

- Scientific & cultural rigor
- Creating the new narrative will take time
- Addressing each piece will bring us closer to better – more trustworthy – evidence

Download the publication: *A Roadmap for Collaborative and Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities*.

View the companion videos:
- *Creating a New Narrative: Collaborative and Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities* [Tribal Video 1]
- *Collaborative & Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities: The Roles and Voices of Key Stakeholders* [Tribal Video 2]

Watch the conference session: “*Creating a Strategic Roadmap for Collaborative and Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities: Panel Presentation at 2013 Tribal Early Childhood Research Center Summer Institute*”
Examples

- **AIAN FACES Design**
  - Community partnership in study design on a national level (strategically including Region XI programs)

- **MIECHV evaluation partnerships**
  - TA for research/evaluation capacity building in the context of program implementation by tribal grantees

- **SWYC Feasibility Study**
  - Engaging diverse AIAN communities in measure validation
Intentional scientific-community partnerships focused on understanding how to best support parenting among AIANs will be critical to understanding how to redress the gaps.

It will not be easy, cheap, or quick.

It WILL have the potential to address some of the most significant health and developmental disparities in the country.
Contact information

Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell, Ph.D.
nancy.whitesell@ucdenver.edu

Tribal Early Childhood Research Center
www.tribalearlychildhood.org

Native Children’s Research Exchange
www.ncreconnect.org
Selected references

Specific to early childhood


Broader context of AIAN communities and research