

## **REACTIONS BY NATIVE AMERICAN PARENTS TO CHILD PROTECTION AGENCIES: CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS**

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The oppression suffered by Native Americans has so undermined their culture and ability to parent that child abuse and neglect are frequent problems. Yet the history of oppression often seriously damages the capacity of many Native American parents to accept help from child protective service agencies and staff members. This article explains the particular characteristics and behaviors of some Native American parents, and closes with a summarized guide to understanding these parents and to appropriate behavior on the part of social workers.

Certain community and cultural factors affect how Native American parents react to child protection investigations and interventions concerning child abuse and neglect. Native American parents may behave in ways that cause practitioners to view them as uncooperative, unmotivated, resistant, or hard-to-reach. This is not to suggest that a high proportion of Native American parents abuse or neglect their children, or that those that do are always resistant to or uncooperative with child protection services (CPS). Rather, this article focuses on the small percentage of Native American parents who react to CPS with extreme aggressiveness, passivity, or avoidance, and on the factors that may account for their behaviors. Unfortunately, such behaviors by a parent may precipitate court action even in cases where the CPS worker would prefer to avoid court involvement.

In those cases where the abused or neglected child is removed and placed in foster care, both tribal and state agency CPS practitioners observe that it is not uncommon for the parents to leave their home area, avoid further contact with the agency, and seemingly abandon their child. These actions by a parent depart radically from traditional tribal family values that assign much importance to children.

How can we explain these reactions? Why do Native American parents so often behave in ways that are certain to get them into deeper trouble with authorities and the court? Why do parents so easily give up and run away? Obviously, there is no single or complete explanation. Many interrelated personality and situational factors might give rise to this behavior. Alcohol or drug abuse are of critical importance in most cases. In addition, the authors believe that cultural and community dynamics are equally significant.

### **CPS as a Threat to the Parent**

When confronted with a CPS investigation, abusing or neglectful parents, regardless of cultural background, typically feel that the intervention is unfair and unjustified, and often react with anger and sometimes aggression. Others react with extreme fear and become psychologically immobilized and passive. Still others try to flee. A skilled CPS social worker can work through these reactions in most cases and obtain from the parent, at a minimum, a beginning level of cooperation so that steps can be taken to reduce risk to the child. Some parents, however, remain intensely hostile, resistant, and uncooperative.

Working with an angry and uncooperative parent becomes even more complex when the parent is a member of a cultural minority or an ethnic group having values, beliefs, and social norms significantly different than those of the CPS worker. Cross-cultural interaction increases the potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation by both the worker and the parent.

In a CPS investigation, a powerful governmental agency has, in effect, pointed its finger at the parent and accused him or her of being bad or irresponsible; although these words are never spoken, that is what the parent hears. Whenever a person is threatened and frightened, the primitive fight-or-flight response is activated. Thus, the parent who feels threatened is motivated to either attack the CPS worker/agency or to escape by fleeing. A number of cultural, historical, and community factors magnify this threat for the Native American parent. Goodtracks [1973: 32], for example, explains that when confronted, the Native American typically withdraws from the interaction but when pushed beyond endurance, he may lose self-control and drive the aggressor away with verbal or physical force.

### **The Need for Understanding**

The CPS worker's capacity for empathy is vital for engaging and working with these parents effectively. This ability to accurately tune in to the life experiences and feelings of other persons, to step into their shoes and to see things and feel life as they do, is difficult but necessary to sense the parent's underlying feelings and the meaning he or she attaches to being forced into a relationship with the agency. With empathy, the worker can accurately address the parent's fears, anger, and other feelings and adapt his or her own approach to winning the parent's cooperation.

CPS workers must be sensitive to the wide variety of personal, social to the wide variety of personal, social, and economic elements that contribute to the problem of child abuse or neglect by any parent. When the parent is Native American, the worker must, in addition, be alert not only to cultural differences but also to the events of remembered history that have shaped the attitudes of native people toward child welfare agencies, social workers, and other professionals. Lack of money, health problems, chemical dependency, discrimination, psychological problems, and inadequate parenting skills intensify enormously the complexities of parenting. Below, we briefly describe some of the social problems and cultural and community factors that affect all Native American parents and may directly or indirectly influence how an individual parent responds to a CPS worker and agency.

#### **Poverty**

When compared to other minority groups in the United States, Native Americans are among the poorest of the poor [Levitan 1990]. Poverty places families under great stress and shapes their behavior, attitudes, and expectations, forcing parents to devote an inordinate amount of time and energy to tasks of day-to-day survival. A life of grinding poverty often gives rise to feelings of hopelessness and a belief that one is helpless to control or influence one's life and its circumstances. Sometimes poverty generates feelings of hostility toward those in positions of authority and those who are better off economically. These attitudes

and beliefs are culturally passed from one generation to another. When parents, who already feel helpless, are confronted by a CPS agency, they may feel completely overwhelmed and the intensity of that feeling may lead to extreme and inappropriate behavior.

### **Effects of Racism and Discrimination**

Most Native Americans encounter racism and discrimination daily. Sometimes it is as subtle as a disapproving look from a store clerk; sometimes it is as open as being refused rental housing or a job. Anti-discrimination laws exist but they protect only those persons willing and assertive enough to report an offense and to make an issue out of an act of discrimination.

Typically, Native American children begin to experience racism and discrimination early in life. Upon entering elementary school, they learn that the customs and values of their tribal community are not only different, but often opposite to those of the dominant society. All too often, the school experience teaches Native American children that the dominant society does not understand and does not value their culture and traditions; and that those in the dominant society feel superior to those who are culturally different.

On the playground the Native American child may be called drunken Indian or wagon burner. Sooner or later the child hears that the only good Indian is a dead Indian. Some Native American children may incorporate these expressions of bigotry into their self-concept, giving rise to feelings of inferiority. To escape this pain, the children may withdraw or act out. They may, for example, avoid school, where they encounter beliefs of the dominant society [Redhorse 1982]. They may also develop self-defeating or antisocial behaviors such as depression, suicidal tendencies, glue sniffing, alcohol abuse, violence, promiscuity, and other problems that are frequently rooted in low self-esteem [Three Feathers Associates 1987]. A study by Finley [1989], for example, found that 29% of Native American girls and 100% of Native American boys were heavy drinkers by the ninth grade.

Personal experiences with racism and discrimination can give rise to fear and distrust of persons from the dominant culture and of persons representing social service agencies operated by non-Native American governments. A fear or suspicion of agencies will, of course, affect how a parent responds to a CPS agency and its workers.

### **Early Death, Endless Grieving**

Given the high rate of chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, alcoholism, heart disease, and liver disease), suicide, and accidents among Native American people, their life expectancy of 44 years is relatively short when compared to that of the United States population as a whole [Man Keung Ho 1987: 70]. Comparatively speaking, Native American people die at a young age: more than one-third of all deaths are of people under age 45, three times the rate of the general population [Campbell 1989]. For Native Americans, such grim statistics are experienced as a seemingly endless stream of funerals and an unending sense of loss and grief.

Within tribal communities, the emotional impact of death is felt more intensely because so many in the community are bonded or attached to each other by blood, marriage, or long-time friendship. Frequent losses can exhaust one's coping capacity. As one Blackfeet woman expressed it: It seems as if another death or another tragedy always comes along before you have had time to grieve the last one.

A personal history of frequent loss and incomplete grieving can affect how some parents respond to a CPS worker who has the power to place their child in foster care and thereby inflict still another loss. Faced with a threat that carries the same emotional impact as death, they may react in an apparently irrational manner, such as attacking the worker, or, on the other extreme, running away or perhaps becoming completely passive.

### **The Boarding School Legacy**

Beginning in the late 1800s, U.S. government policy toward Native American people emphasized forced assimilation into the world of the white man. The Indian boarding school was designed to remove children from the influence of their parents and Tribe and create a new social environment where they could be civilized.

Discipline in these schools was harsh and the daily routine rigid. Children were required to speak only English and were punished for using their native language. Their hair, an important cultural symbol, was cut short. Uniforms replaced individually created and uniquely decorated native clothes. Visits home were few and far between. Clearly, the boarding school was an effort to destroy cultural identity; unfortunately, it was quite successful. Many who attended these schools lost touch with their tribal language, religious beliefs, customs, and social norms.

The boarding school experience has had a far-reaching effect on Native American culture and family structure. Those people who spent much of their childhood in boarding schools were deprived of an opportunity to experience family life, and many reached their adulthood with no clear concept of parenting behavior and family functioning. The boarding school effectively destroyed the intergenerational transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behaviors. Now, one or more generations after the boarding school era, many Native Americans are ill-prepared for the parent role.

The boarding schools not only destroyed or distorted the intergenerational (cultural) transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behavior, but they also introduced new and dysfunctional behaviors, such as the use of severe punishment in child rearing. Parents who had as children been spanked and hit while attending boarding school responded similarly to their own children. Before the boarding school era, the use of physical discipline was uncommon in most Tribes.

Even worse, a report published by the National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse [1990] cites evidence that many Native American children were sexually abused while attending boarding schools. The introduction of child sexual abuse into tribal communities, where it had not existed before, is especially troublesome: Native American people tend not

to talk openly about sex because sexual matters are highly private matters. This cultural taboo prevents the sexually abused child from reporting the offense. For the same reason, adults troubled by childhood sexual abuse avoid using professional services to cope with unresolved issues. When cases of child sexual abuse are disclosed, the tribal community is thrown into conflict and is often unable or unwilling to deal with the problem.

The boarding schools also disrupted the cultural transmission of parent-child attachment behaviors, which has created personal and family problems that have persisted over as many as three generations. As a sad aftereffect of these disruptions, we now see many Native American children being raised by biological parents with few parenting skills; some children are being raised by grandparents who lack real attachment to their own children, the parents of their grandchildren. The lack of parenting skills and the problems in attachment place children at risk of abuse or neglect. Unless these problems are dealt with, each new generation is at risk of repeating this dysfunction cycle.

When parents lack parenting skills and have no clear concept of the parent role, they are easily frustrated by normal parental responsibilities and especially by a difficult or special-needs child. The Native American parents who come into contact with a CPS agency usually need help in learning how to be parents. The most effective parent training programs are those that blend principles derived from modern child development with the spirituality, customs, traditions, and other cultural ways of their Tribe [Cross 1986]. Culturally oriented programs of parent education help parents rediscover tradition-based family patterns that were obscured and suppressed by boarding schools and one or more generations of family dysfunction.

Unfortunately, in some cases the parents are so dysfunctional that these programs have little effect. There may be no alternative to foster care and possibly court action to create an opportunity, usually through guardianship, for the child to attach to another family. It should be noted that most tribal courts are extremely reluctant to terminate parental rights because it is culturally offensive. As one tribal attorney explained, We don't even use the "T" word.

### **Foster Care**

According to Cross [1987], Native American languages did not contain words that translate into our contemporary concept of foster care. Historically, the extended family and the clan system provided whatever substitute family care might be needed. As part of its assimilation policy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was responsible directly, or indirectly through church-related programs, for placing large numbers of Native American children in non-Native foster homes and adoptive homes. It was this extraordinarily high rate of out-of-home placements and cultural dislocation that eventually resulted in passage of Public Law 95-608, the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978.

Even today, many Native American people have bitter feelings toward foster care and the agencies and staff members associated with foster care. Many of today's Native American parents have parents or grandparents who were snatched from the reservation and placed in

foster care or sent off to boarding school. Consequently, there exists a genuine and deep-seated fear of government agencies that have the power to place children. This fear intensifies the parent's fight-of-flight reaction when faced with a CPS agency expressing concern over the care of the children.

Today's Native American parents and grandparents have grown up with the reality-based belief that once a child goes into foster care, he or she never returns home. In other words, in their experience and from what they were told by their parents and grandparents, foster care is always permanent. This belief increases the parent's fear of CPS and accounts for the frequent observation that once a child is placed, parents seem to give up and walk away. Unfortunately, this reaction is sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of motivation or a lack of concern for the child. A more accurate interpretation is to view the parents as making an effort to get on with their life after the death of a loved one.

### **The Reservation Experience**

In the early years of reservation life, traditional tribal leaders were stripped of their authority to make decisions concerning the well-being of the tribal society. The influence of chiefs and elders was replaced by that of the Indian agency or agency superintendent, and the actions of government agencies became central to the very survival of Native Americans. Life and livelihood were tied directly and closely to the resources provided by the government agencies.

Many years and several generations of forced dependency on government authority gave rise to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. Because there was no choice, Native American people came to expect agencies to make decisions for them. The aftereffects of this forced dependency persist even today. Out of habit or fear, or both, many Native Americans are easily intimidated by government agencies. Some assert themselves and make their opinions known but many respond with resignation, or more accurately, with quiet and passive defiance.

Because of the power of government in the everyday life of Native Americans, parents typically view the CPS agency, whether tribally or state operated, as powerful, arbitrary, and beyond their influence. To cope, the parents react by trying to escape or with artificial submission.

### **Effects of Substance Abuse**

Since first introduced by Europeans, alcohol has had a devastating impact on Native American families and tribal cultures. Three Feathers Associates [1989] estimates that 95% of Native Americans are affected directly or indirectly by alcoholism. The authors of this article believe that 100% is the more accurate figure. Many children are the products of two, three, or more generations of alcoholic families, and the pattern of dysfunctional behavior caused by the alcohol has often passed from one generation to another.

Recently, however, a growing number of Native Americans have begun their recovery from alcoholism, and the denial surrounding this problem is gradually breaking down. More emphasis and tribal resources are now devoted to primary prevention and to healing the effects of growing up in an alcoholic family. Consider, for example, the rapid growth of the recently organized National Association for Native American Children of Alcoholism (NANACOA). Despite these encouraging signs, though, substance abuse remains a major problem.

In most cases, the parents who come to the attention of a CPS agency are either actively drinking or are caught up in a codependent relationship with an alcoholic. As suggested above, most grew up in dysfunctional homes where they learned to make heavy use of denial, avoidance, and blaming of others as primary methods of coping. They also learned the three rules for living in an alcoholic family: don't let yourself feel, don't trust others, and don't talk about the problem. Many continue to struggle so intently with their own pain and conflicts that they are unable to attend to the needs of their children. The parent's problems are often interrelated with those of other family members. To reduce risk to the child, the problem of chemical dependency must be addressed by the CPS worker.

### **The Struggle to Establish an Identity**

Developing a sense of identity (e.g., Who am I? Where do I belong?) is a challenge for all people. Some live their whole lives without ever arriving at a satisfactory identity or self-concept. Individuals who are members of an ethnic or cultural minority group face a special challenge in establishing an identity. Native Americans, for example, must learn to live in two worlds, the world of the Tribe and the white world shaped most strongly by European cultures. To function effectively, they must become bicultural. This is difficult, and it can be especially difficult when the individual is of mixed blood or was raised by non-Native Americans, such as the native child placed with Caucasian foster or adoptive parents.

A confusion over one's identity results in self-doubt and frustration, which can, in turn, push or pull the individual into extreme efforts to develop a sense of self. Some Native Americans, for example, may completely reject or deny their ancestry and pretend to be white; others may reject everything that represents the white world. Some, who were not previously close to tribal culture, may immerse themselves in cultural and tribal activities in an effort to find or build an identity.

When the foundation is not solid, our sense of identity and belonging can be fragile. For example, a move to a new community or a life crisis can reactivate or intensify questions about who one is and where one belongs. And needless to say, being subjected to a CPS investigation can precipitate a crisis leading to a loss of self-confidence and increased feelings of isolation.

### **Extended Family Structure**

Native Americans are typically part of an extended family structure. Aunts may be called mother, uncles may be called father. An individual's cousins may be treated as brothers and

sisters. Grandparents are often key decision-makers and frequently play a central role in the parenting of young children. Other members of the extended family usually assume child care responsibilities and may discipline children.

For the Native American, this family structure is essential to economic and social survival. Members of the extended family are expected to share what they have and take care of each other. Within the extended family, the individual learns the importance of loyalty to the family and of maintaining peaceful relations among its members. When making important decisions, an individual will consult with other members. Much importance is attached to the process of gaining approval from others before proceeding on a course of action.

The extended family structure and its many members can be a tremendous source of support, and it can compensate for inadequacies in a biological parent's ability as a parent. It is one of the greatest strengths and assets of Native American people, but it is also possible for an entire extended family to be dysfunctional, especially if many of its members are alcoholic. In such cases, the power and solidarity of the extended family then become a barrier to the parents' correction of problems that place a child at risk of abuse or neglect.

### **High Birth Rate, Young Parents**

The mean age of Native Americans in the United States is now about 22 years, and the median age is 18. This demographic fact reflects a high birth rate, especially among young women [Campbell 1989]. For many Native American parents, the birth of their first child takes place while they themselves are still teenagers. Needless to say, the high level of sexual activity and the large number of pregnancies among teens is a societal problem, not just a problem among Native Americans. Among Native Americans youths, however, problems of low self-esteem, frequent use of alcohol, and disenchantment with school can easily pull these teens into irresponsible sexual activity and parenthood for which they are poorly prepared. Unless the young parent has a strong and functional extended family ready and able to assist in child care, he or she will be placed under enormous stress and the child may be at risk for abuse or neglect.

Because they have learned from their parents and grandparents to distrust government, Native American teens are easily overwhelmed and frightened by government agencies, especially those associated with law enforcement and the court. When their fear and suspicion are coupled with law enforcement and the court. When their fear and suspicion are coupled with their immaturity, they often respond to CPS in extreme and unpredictable ways, including running away with or without the child.

### **Living in a Tribal Community**

Life in a tribal community is much like living in a very small town where everybody knows everybody else and their business. The lives of people in a Native American community are even more interwoven because so many are related by blood, marriage, or long-time associations; privacy and confidentiality are nearly nonexistent.

If Native American parents are investigated for child abuse or neglect, everyone in the community soon knows about it. Gossip and rumors can have a devastating effect on an individual in a tightly knit community, which can intensify the parents' embarrassment and shame and their impulse to flee. It also places friends and relatives in a position where they feel obligated to take sides, either for or against the parents. Some friends or relatives may feel an obligation to approach the CPS agency and volunteer their thoughts on the matter or ask what they might do to help the parents and their child.

As in all communities, local politics and the power structure influence the social fabric of the tribal community. Whom you know and whom you are related to can affect your chances of gaining access to opportunities and resources, which can affect how the parents are treated or how they think they will be treated by the tribal police, tribal court, and tribal agencies.

A parents' or a family's access to power, or lack thereof, also affects the CPS investigation. It can be difficult to properly investigate the parenting behavior of a powerful tribal member. A parent may look to a powerful relative to stop the investigation, or in another instance, a powerful relative may try to use the CPS agency to fight his or her battles as part of an ongoing family squabble.

The fact that the CPS worker and the parent know each other or might even be related adds to the complexity of the CPS worker-client relationship. A lack of social distance between professional and client can be an advantage in some service and treatment settings, but in law enforcement and CPS it usually creates discomfort for all involved. For the parents, it usually adds to their shame and fuels their feelings of unfairness and anger. For the CPS worker, it creates a situation where personal issues can affect professional judgment and objectivity.

## **Summary**

In summary, we list interrelated, situational, cultural, and community factors that may provoke an extreme fight-or-flight reaction by Native American parents confronted with an accusation of abuse or neglect and a CPS investigation. Generally, the parent is directly or indirectly affected by alcoholism and/or codependency; is young, lacking in parenting skills, and easily overwhelmed by parental responsibilities; is emotionally overtaxed by a history of loss and incomplete grieving; is overwhelmed and exhausted by the daily grind of poverty; has low self-esteem and lacks self-confidence; is often a product of a dysfunctional family to which he or she feels obligated and loyal and is easily influenced by family members; feels embarrassed and shamed by the community's knowledge of abuse or neglect; has a tendency to run away rather than confront problems directly; is reluctant to talk about or even mention sexual matters; is fearful and distrustful of child welfare agencies and of social workers who can place children in foster care; believes that once a child goes into foster care, the child will always remain in care; is fearful of the power associated with tribal politics and the tribal court; does not believe he or she will be protected by or treated fairly by tribal and/or state courts and by tribal and/or state child welfare agencies; or is easily

confused and intimidated by complex organizations, government programs, laws, and agency procedures.

In addition to techniques commonly used to engage the non-voluntary and hard-to-reach client [Shea for et al. 1991], CPS workers serving Native American parents should emphasize: reducing parents' need to fear the worker and the agency; explaining the placement will be avoided if at all possible and if placement does occur, the child will be returned to the parents as soon as the conditions placing the child at risk have been effectively dealt with; involvement and support by members of the parents' extended family; culturally relevant and appropriate parent training; treating parents with genuine respect and fairness so as to counteract their expectation that they will be subjected to discrimination and prejudice; empowerment of the parents to counter feelings of helplessness and powerlessness; use of culturally relevant programs to confront problems of substance abuse and codependency; sensitivity to the parents' history of loss and the stages of grieving; and addressing the problems of poverty and the parents' need for concrete services (e.g., financial assistance, housing, day care, job, job training).

The foregoing description explains, for the most part, why some Native American parents involved with a CPS agency react and behave in ways that get them labeled as uncooperative and resistant, and also explains why some parents become so frightened and intimidated that they give up and seemingly abandon their children.

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