

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a pink top, smiling and holding a baby. The baby is wearing a bright green shirt and is laughing joyfully. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The image is partially overlaid by a white curved shape on the left side, which contains the text.

INNOVATIONS

in Tribal Early Childhood Programs



Findings from a Webinar Series with Practitioners, Researchers, and Policymakers

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities know well the importance of holistic supports for whole child, whole family, and whole community well-being. This is especially important in the early childhood years when AI/AN communities welcome babies from the spirit world and instill traditional knowledge, wisdom, and blessings that serve as important guideposts for their future. Culturally driven innovations and best practices in tribal early childhood programs honor the past and build promising opportunities for children’s futures.

According to Jessica Barnes-Najor, a developmental psychologist at Michigan State University and co-investigator of the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center, supporting Native language and culture in the early childhood years has a multitude of benefits: communities are able to support and revitalize Native traditions and language; families are encouraged to return to culturally grounded supports for raising healthy children, and children experience higher quality education and better outcomes. Often, though, research and policy overlook the importance of connections to language, culture, and tradition and promote mainstream, Westernized approaches that may not be appropriate for tribal communities. With this awareness and a renewed commitment to self-governance to honor and preserve traditional ways of life, tribal communities are seeking to weave together what they know is needed for their families and the external resources and supports that are available.

Jacki Haight, Early Childhood Education Program Director of the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe explains this well: "What is key to the challenges we face is the understanding of sovereignty and the understanding that this should be the opportunity for tribes to be able to truly self-govern their early childhood programs. And to truly have the flexibilities to partner, coordinate, align within their community itself, and with their counties and state structures to create that program for their children and families."

Across the United States, AI/AN communities are doing just that. They are testing innovations in early childhood and family support programming that are true to their history and culture, and they are finding ways to navigate federal and state policies and resources to benefit their communities. They have much to share, and we have much to learn.

ACF Launches a Webinar Series for Tribal Early Childhood Programs

In 2021, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched a webinar series for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to lift up promising practices and have frank conversations about the challenges of implementing coordinated tribal early childhood services. Looking back, the series was beneficial for the AI/AN community, for states and others partnering with tribal communities, and for the federal staff, who appreciated hearing directly from tribes and considering what could be done at the federal level to support innovations.



"I appreciated learning about the different initiatives for supporting early childhood mental health. Great resources! Thank you!"

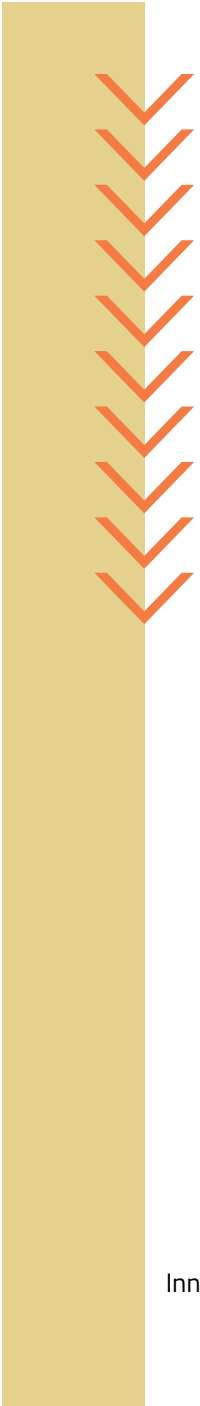
"The specific strategies and insights were so helpful. The big take away for me is respect and taking time to build relationships while doing this work."

"The information on resilience was very valuable. The messaging on language revitalization too."

"Thank you for the much-needed emphasis and diverse examples from tribes on language and culture to strengthen resilience."

"The webinar was profound, effective, and inspiring. Will share the recording with my coworkers."

The webinar series focused on immediate concerns of the early childhood programs and systems operating in AI/AN communities. Each webinar included an overview presentation on the topic, which set up a facilitated panel discussion highlighting innovations from tribal communities. This was followed by breakouts where webinar participants were able to “dive deeper” with the featured speakers to learn more about what they shared during the panel. The topics included:

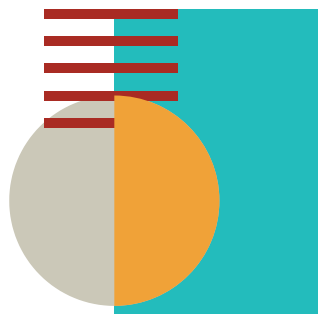
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- **Next Steps for Supporting and Strengthening Tribal Early Childhood Programs and Systems** – This webinar shared about new opportunities for supporting and improving tribal early childhood programs under the American Rescue Plan and other COVID-19 related legislation, including investments in the Tribal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); AI/AN Head Start; and the Tribal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (Tribal Home Visiting).
 - **Addressing Mental Health Among Children, Staff, and Families in Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – This webinar focused on the growing concern among tribal early childhood programs of mental and behavioral health challenges and the need for services and supports for young children, their families, and the providers who work with them.
 - **Family Engagement and Family Leadership in Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – This webinar highlighted the importance of family engagement for children’s development and learning, and suggested approaches to engaging families and promoting family leadership.
 - **Promoting Equity and Celebrating Resilience in Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – This was a two-part webinar. The first part focused on how to think about equity in the context of tribal early childhood programs, with a particular focus on tribally driven efforts to better understand needs and design services and systems to respond to those needs. The second part explored the topic of resilience and celebrated the achievements of tribal early childhood programs and communities as they implement culturally-grounded programs and systems that they design to meet the needs of families.

- **Building and Improving Facilities for Early Care and Education in Tribal Communities** – This webinar highlighted the importance of safe, well-designed, and well-constructed facilities as critical for early childhood programs, and shared strategies and resources to support facility development. It also acknowledged the struggles many tribal communities have with financing, designing, building, and improving facilities.
- **Opportunities and Challenges in Supporting and Growing the Tribal Early Childhood Workforce** – This webinar focused on approaches to support, grow, and strengthen the early childhood workforce in tribal communities. It recognized the desire of tribal communities to grow their own workforce as well as the importance of supporting the professional development, health, well-being, and self-care of employees.
- **Integrating Native Language and Culture into Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – This webinar emphasized the importance of culturally grounded approaches that incorporate language, traditions, and participation in cultural events as critical components of high-quality tribal early childhood programs and as a foundation of education sovereignty for tribal nations.
- **Native Revitalization and Native Language Immersion Curricula in Tribal Early Childhood** – This webinar highlighted the implementation of Native language immersion curricula in tribal early childhood programs as a strategy for both increasing use of language among community members and supporting Native children’s school readiness and connection to their Native identity.



Building Upon the 2021 Blueprint for Action

The webinar series sprung from the 2021 [Blueprint for Action](#) issued by the Tribal Early Childhood Working Group. Congress called for the formation of the Working Group to examine coordination issues that may impact early childhood initiatives in tribal communities. Input from tribal leaders, early childhood program administrators, federal staff, and parents helped to shape six overarching themes:



1. Respect tribal sovereignty and self-determination
2. Support program alignment and coordination
3. Leverage funding and policy flexibilities
4. Prioritize training and technical assistance coordination
5. Facilitate collaboration across tribes
6. Identify resources for capacity building

In response to these themes, the webinar series aimed to highlight innovations to support collaboration across tribes, share resources that could be used by tribal communities to improve implementation and coordination of services, and feature examples of the many ways that tribes are able to exercise their sovereignty in the education of Native children.

In addition to the webinar series, several other efforts have emerged that align with the Blueprint for Action. For example, ACF launched a second round of the Tribal Early Learning Initiative (TELI) in 2022. TELI is a partnership between tribal communities and ACF designed to:

- Better coordinate tribal early learning and development programs, including child care, Head Start, preschool, home visiting, and other services.
- Create and support seamless, high-quality early childhood systems.
- Raise the quality of services to children and families across the prenatal-to-kindergarten-entry continuum.
- Identify and break down barriers to collaboration and systems improvement.

From 2012 to 2017, ACF partnered with eight tribes to carry out the first round of TELI. Since the conclusion of the initial TELI, in nation-to-nation consultation, tribes have continued to indicate an interest in new TELI efforts, including at the Tribal Early Childhood Working Group meetings. The new TELI offers tribes the opportunity to use Tribal CCDF program funds to support coordinated child care and early childhood services and systems in their communities. Tribes can participate in one of two groups. The TELI Collaborative is an intensive peer learning community and technical assistance opportunity available to up to eight tribes. The TELI Network is available to any Tribal CCDF grantee interested in using their Tribal CCDF funds to support a TELI in their community, but less interested in intensive support. The new TELI is designed to respond to nearly all the Blueprint's themes.

Another effort that emerged because of the Blueprint is an ongoing Tribal Early Childhood Federal Partners Working Group, a group of staff from agencies across the federal government, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of the Interior, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, and the White House. The group meets regularly to discuss how to better support high-quality, coordinated early childhood programs and systems through action at the federal level.



Blueprint for Action Themes

Respect tribal sovereignty and self-determination. A fundamental principle is supporting tribes' ability to exercise their self-determination to build tribally driven systems that incorporate language and culture. There is a continued need for enhanced trust between tribal nations and federal and state governments and the recognition and respect of tribal sovereignty.

Support program alignment and coordination. There is need for federal agencies to improve their collaboration and communication to better support programs implemented at the tribal and local level. Other suggestions include identifying and addressing resource gaps, streamlining administrative processes (e.g., eligibility and intake, reporting), and increasing opportunities for identifying shared data elements across programs.

Leverage funding and policy flexibilities. Tribes expressed a need to braid diverse funding streams more easily across federal programs to improve collaboration and coordination of tribal early childhood programs, which could be facilitated by exercising policy flexibilities or existing funding authority. There was significant interest in learning from tribes who have been able to leverage funding across multiple programs.

Prioritize training and technical assistance coordination. Tribes affirmed the importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate training and technical assistance and evidence-based practices to support whole family approaches based on diverse traditions in tribal community settings. There was strong interest in coordinating and leveraging existing technical assistance resources. There was also a need for a comprehensive, one-stop, easy to access tribal early childhood online resource for all technical assistance resources.

Facilitate collaboration across tribes. Tribes want to address and reduce competition among each other for early childhood program funding based on their capacity. There is a need to sponsor tribal innovations that cultivate collective impact initiatives. More work needs to be done to work to support partnership and peer sharing across tribes to allow them to effectively leverage early childhood resources, improve coordination of services, and build systems for collective impact in their own communities.

Identify resources for capacity building. There is a significant need for investments in critical areas such as workforce/professional development, communications, information technology, internet access and facilities infrastructure, needs assessment, implementation of culturally informed evidence-based practices, planning, evaluation, data collection, collaborative research, and testing innovations. Tribes also want to build their own capacity and workforce for early care and education providers within their own communities and need more professional development. They also emphasized a need to identify funds for construction and redesigning existing space for meaningful service delivery to meet the needs such as co-location of job training and child care or co-location of early childhood services near elder services for intergenerational activities. Tribes also expressed the need for community-based participatory research to document evidence-based and culturally appropriate early childhood development practices. In each of these areas, there is a need to identify the federal and non-federal funding that may be appropriate and available to support those capacity building activities.



Hope for this Report

With the Blueprint as a roadmap and the webinars reported herein as guideposts, the hope is that readers will benefit from a summary of the webinar content and a look into an example innovation for each topic. Maybe this will spark conversations within communities about supporting the mental health of children, families, and those who work with them. Maybe it will lead some toward re-structuring programs so that they support larger community efforts to revitalize language and culture. Maybe it will encourage enhanced advocacy in support of the early childhood workforce. In all cases, our hope is that readers will be inspired to seek ways to walk alongside families and communities as they support the early learning and development of their children.



Core Concepts Explored In The Webinar Series

From July 2021 to July 2022, ACF organized nine webinars for the tribal early childhood community. Following an initial webinar that was designed to ensure listeners were aware of immediate federal funding opportunities through the American Rescue Act and expansion of programs such as Tribal Home Visiting, Tribal CCDF, and AI/AN Head Start, subsequent webinars were designed to share current research on specific topics of interest to the broader tribal early childhood community and examples of innovations related to those topics. What follows are brief highlights from the webinars. Links to the full recordings of each webinar as well as the slides and resources that were shared can be found in a [Tribal Early Childhood Webinar Series resource compendium](#).

Addressing Behavioral and Mental Health Challenges Among Children, Staff, and Families

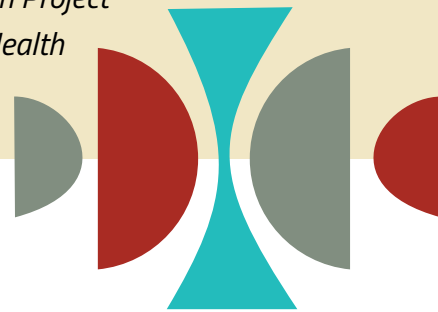
Topic Overview:

- *Deana Around Him, Child Trends, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center*

Panelists:

- *Misty Boyd, Chickasaw Nation Project LAUNCH*
- *Elizabeth Kushman, Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health, Family Spirit*
- *Jennifer Weston, Wopanaak Language Reclamation Project*
- *Dawn Yazzie, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*

For the recording, click [here](#).



Deana Around Him (Cherokee Nation), a senior research scientist at Child Trends and co-investigator of the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center, provided an overview of the topic, emphasizing that infant and early childhood mental health relates to the developing capacity of a child to form close and secure relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore and learn from their environment. She reminded webinar participants that in tribal communities, mental health must be considered in the context of historical, political, economic, and social factors and encompasses physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.¹

All tribal early childhood programs – across early care and education, health care, home visiting, early intervention, and child welfare – have a role to play in promoting the social and emotional well-being of young children and the adults who care for them. The legacy of historical trauma in tribal communities, compounded by cumulative stress and ongoing trauma for parents and providers – especially heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic as families experienced unprecedented levels of stress, depression, and material hardship -- can alter how they show up for children. Therefore, tribal early childhood programs need to link to a continuum of mental health strategies in the community that focus on promotion, prevention, treatment, and maintenance.

¹ Around Him & Pickner (2016): https://www.ncai.org/policy-researchcenter/initiatives/projects/Spirit_Lake_CCA_Cultural_Narrative.pdf

Building on recommendations from ZERO TO THREE, Around Him suggested several strategies for promoting mental health in tribal early childhood programs.²

- *Establish cross-agency leadership:* Designate a person/team to develop policies, make program and funding recommendations, manage implementation, and monitor progress.
- *Ensure Medicaid payment for services:* Leverage Medicaid or CHIP to support prevention and treatment services for children and families
- *Invest in prevention through mental health consultation:* Establish a system that integrates mental health consultants into all early intervention programs, home visiting, early care and education, and other family service settings. Mental health consultants can help staff to understand how best to support children and families.
- *Train the workforce:* Embed mental health education into training and professional development.
- *Raise public awareness:* Develop educational campaigns and materials to promote well-being in everyday moments, encourage caregivers' attention to their own mental health, and identify community resources for support.

Highlighted Innovation: Family Spirit Mental Health Efforts

Family Spirit is an evidence-based early home visiting model that was designed for, by, and with American Indian families through the Johns Hopkins University Center for American Indian Health. Home visits are provided by paraprofessionals to families from pregnancy to three years post-partum. The program leverages cultural assets and Indigenous understanding of health to support families as they care for their children.

Recognizing long standing limited access to culturally resonant mental health services compounded by the added stress that families face because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Family Spirit model developers considered how they could enhance offerings to better address mental health needs. According to

² Zero to Three (2016): <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1221-planting-seeds-in-fertile-ground-steps-every-policymaker-should-take-to-advance-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health>



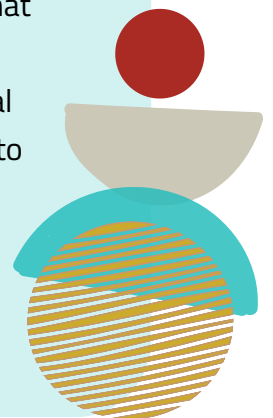
Elizabeth Kushman, senior research associate at the Center for American Indian Health, they sought to “build on the trust and comfort that many home visitors have established with their families and leverage that relationship to provide mental health support.”

First, they developed a standard protocol that home visitors can use when they conduct social support visits. The protocol helps the home visitor determine if the participant appears ready for a regular visit and lesson, or if the participant may be experiencing a crisis and the visit should instead focus on addressing the crisis. For example, when a home visitor determines that a participant is too distressed to participate in a regular lesson, the home visitor can pivot to the social support steps of *listening* while doing a more structured assessment and aiming to stabilize emotions; *responding* by offering practical comfort or clear information, helping the participant regain control, and referring to specialized support; and finally *reflecting* on the visit, attending to self-care, de-briefing with a supervisor, and ensuring documentation is completed.

Second, Family Spirit engaged with a national group of Indigenous mental health advisors and developed a new module that focuses on mental health. It weaves Indigenous knowledge into practices, for example, emphasizing the connection and balance between thoughts, feelings, behavior, and spirituality, as well as the importance of protective and healing cultural practices. The module includes information about basic self-help and specific skills that home visitors can teach to participants such as relaxation techniques, getting active, changing perspective, reducing substance use, and managing safety.

Kushman explained that in developing these mental health efforts, Family Spirit is cognizant of the continuum of support from primary prevention to treatment of acute situations and the need to ensure home visitors are not taking on roles that are best addressed by therapists and behavioral health specialists. All home visitors need to be able to provide general education and support around mental health promotion, but as mental health concerns progress, home visitors need to know when and where to refer families so that they can access a broader network of behavioral health care

For more information on the Family Spirit Home Visiting Program, click [here](#).



Family Engagement and Family Leadership in Tribal Early Childhood Programs

Topic Overview:

- *Catherine Ayoub, Brazelton Touchpoints Center, Harvard University, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center*

Panelists:

- *Catherine Ayoub, Brazelton Touchpoints Center, Harvard University, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center*
- *Barbara Fabre, Indigenous Visioning*
- *Rebecca Riley, Native Community Health Educator, NM*
- *Nancy Versaw, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Project LAUNCH*

For the recording, click [here](#).

Catherine Ayoub, of the Brazelton Touchpoints Center and the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center, provided an overview of the topic and reminded us that “family engagement is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. It is about doing with, not doing for families.” To be effective, a commitment to family engagement and family leadership needs to be owned by program leaders and integrated into all that the program is doing. There needs to be an understanding and openness to learning and evolving to continually reach higher levels of family engagement over time.

Strong family engagement positively impacts parenting, child development, parent well-being, and staff well-being too. For example, Ayoub said that research shows the following benefits:


- **Parenting:** enhanced understanding of child development, more stimulating home environments for children, more bedtime reading.

- **Child Development:** better vocabulary development, increased math and literacy scores, enhanced school readiness, healthy social and emotional development.
- **Parent Well-Being:** reduced risk for living in poverty, overall enhanced well-being, enhanced parent behaviors; and
- **Staff Well-Being:** stronger relationships with families, a better understanding of children and the family context, greater job satisfaction, higher morale and confidence about their work, and reduced turnover.

Within tribal communities, family engagement reaches an even deeper dimension as it is grounded in culture and tribal values. It is about standing with families and building solidarity. And it is about strong, bi-directional relationships and sharing power.


Engagement may look different for each family as it needs to build on where families are and ensure that family voices guide decisions about engagement.

All tribal early childhood programs are encouraged to engage families as leaders and advocates. Rebecca Riley (Acoma Pueblo), Early Childhood Consultant and Native Community Health Educator in New Mexico, said that it is important to ask families what family engagement means to them and how they would like to see it in their program. Family engagement and parent leadership might look like parents:

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- Creating and tending a community garden
 - Establishing and leading a parent social support group
 - Working as peer leaders
 - Joining with staff as co-trainers
 - Serving on advisory boards
 - Entering professional positions within the home visiting and early care and education fields

Highlighted Innovation: Indigenous Parent Leadership Initiative

The Indigenous Parent Leadership Initiative, under the leadership of Barbara Fabre, CEO of Indigenous Visioning, LLC, received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Health to bring a culturally-adapted version of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) curriculum to the Red Lake Nation and White Earth Nation communities. According to Fabre, “the purpose of the Indigenous Parent Leadership Initiative is to support parents and build on their leadership skills through a cultural lens.”



The project is a 21-week program that includes the 20 core PLTI training sessions scheduled once per week. Each core session lasts 4-5 hours and covers topics related to parent leadership, advocacy, civic change, government, and policy and is designed to help parents identify their hidden skills. In addition to the sessions, parents participate in a retreat, community project, and graduation.

The Indigenous Foundations curriculum – developed by Dr. Anton Treuer of Bemidji State University in partnership with community elders – is shared weekly in conjunction with the standard PLTI sessions and reinforces the notion that culture is a protective factor that can lead to a new way of thinking, living, and raising children.

There are multiple cultural teachings that are grouped by Ojibwe seasons and include:

- Spring: Starting a Cultural Journey
- Summer: Growing in Your Culture
- Fall: Maturing in Your Culture
- Winter: Finding Wisdom

Facilitators are from the community and participate in train-the-trainer events to deliver the curriculum. In addition, each reservation has a voluntary civic design team to help connect the community to the project. This includes informing the community of the project, assisting with recruiting and selecting parents and community members to participate, locating class sites, mentoring project participants, and other related activities.

Families participating in the training receive supports such as child care, mileage assistance, and meals.

For more information on the Indigenous Parent Leadership Initiative, click [here](#).



Promoting Equity and Celebrating Resilience

Part 1

Topic Overview:

- *Michelle Sarche, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Colorado School of Public Health, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center*

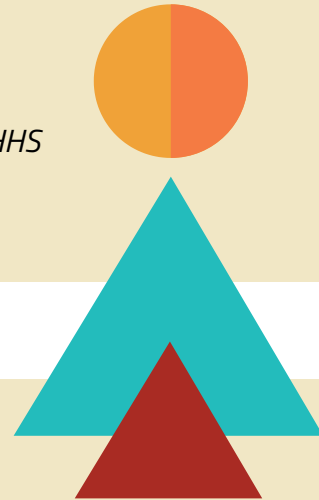
Panelists:

- *Carolyn Codopony, Comanche Nation, OK*
- *Daphne Colacion, Lake County Tribal Health Consortium, CA*
- *Micker “Mike” Richardson, AI/AN Head Start Collaboration Office*
- *Tina Routh, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians*

Federal Perspectives:

- *Bernadine Futrell, Office of Head Start, ACF, HHS*
- *Katie Hamm, Office for Early Childhood Development, ACF, HHS*

For the recordings, click here for [part 1](#)



Part 2

Topic Overview:

- *Melissa Wells, Center for American Indian Health, Johns Hopkins University*

Panelists:

- *Shamika Dokes-Brown, Native American Health Center, CA*
- *Jennifer Leask, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, WI*
- *Bernadette Panteah, Zuni Pueblo, NM*

Federal Perspectives:

- *Jennifer Amaya, Office of Head Start, ACF, HHS*
- *Ruth Friedman, Office of Child Care, ACF, HHS*
- *Michelle Sauve, Administration for Native Americans, ACF, HHS*

For the recordings, click here for [part 2](#)

Centuries of harmful policies of colonization and assimilation have left lasting scars for Native communities. Fortunately, growing awareness of racial inequities and structural racism creates opportunities for learning and change, building on the strengths, resources, and resilience of tribal communities.

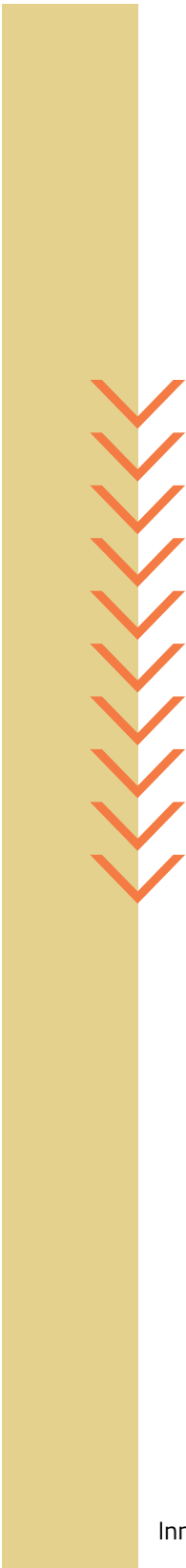
To promote equity, Katie Hamm, ACF's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, emphasized the need to "document and understand the needs of communities so that services can be tailored accordingly." Adding to that, Michelle Sarche (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe), associate professor, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, and principal investigator of the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center shared, "Equity and justice in early childhood programs involve understanding the needs of children, families, programs, and communities so that services are responsive to needs and so that we address the conditions that drive needs in the first place." Promoting equity goes beyond meeting needs; it also involves fixing the systems to offer equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Data is critical for understanding where inequities exist and driving change. Too often, though, there have been limitations to data collection in AI/AN communities. Sometimes not enough data is collected to tell an accurate story of needs and opportunities for particular populations; other times the data is unreliable, or it lacks the historical, sociopolitical, and policy context. Sarche emphasized that, "Without quality data, policymakers and community planners cannot set policy goals, monitor implementation, measure impact, or plan for demographic shifts in an effective way."

Tina Routh, director of the Department of Early Education for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, encouraged webinar listeners to assemble a team that can help define what questions need to be asked and what data is needed, and then find a self-assessment that will address the questions. Routh said, "Don't bite off more than you can chew. Give yourself time. And build on what you already have." For example, Head Start and Early Head Start programs gather data that can provide helpful starting points for AI/AN communities. She said it is important to then share the work so that it doesn't become the responsibility of just one person. Some people can help with distributing

the self-assessment; others can help to calculate and analyze the data; and still others can help to create reports and share the findings in the community. Routh emphasized that data tells a story that can be helpful for shaping programs.

In addition to documenting and understanding needs as a strategy for promoting equity, conversations also focused on the importance of protective factors and resilience. Melissa Walls (Bois Forte and Couchiching First Nation Anishinaabe), an Indigenous researcher and associate professor at the Center for American Indian Health at Johns Hopkins University defined resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.” She suggested that there are three components to resilience:

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1. Recognizing adversity and its many forms – including, but not limited to: stress, trauma, poverty, and adverse early childhood experiences.
 2. Engaging in healthy functioning after adversity.
 3. Developing mechanisms to avoid negative or distressing outcomes.

Too often science underestimates the burden of stress and historical trauma. Walls emphasized that, while adversity does not need to define AI/AN existence, it is real and should not be ignored. Some suggest that promoting the concept of resistance – rather than resilience -- is more empowering and can help to emphasize the importance of culture and community as pathways to well-being. Ruth Friedman, director of the ACF Office of Child Care, acknowledged the work of many tribal early childhood programs in “implementing culture, language and traditional practices that best support protective factors for children and families.”

Walls spoke of her twenty years of research with Native communities and how she sees culture, language, and traditions as important buffers or offsets to adverse experiences. Whereas the widely recognized Adverse Early Childhood Experiences (ACE) study measures and makes meaning of adversity, on the other hand, the Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE) scale looks at positive experiences in childhood such as love, predictability, and support that contribute to healthy outcomes later in life. Walls shared that, in her work with the Anishinaabe people, she found that they had many positive BCEs to share and that the very act of asking positive questions can be empowering. Focusing on protective factors and centering work to promote these at an individual and community level was an important theme of the webinar.

Highlighted Innovation: Weaving Healthy Families Program

In 2019, the Weaving Healthy Families Program (Chukka Auchaffi' Natana in Choctaw Language) was implemented across the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) communities. The program built upon a decade of community and culturally grounded work and partnership among Catherine McKinley (Tulane University) and the MBCI, the United Houma Nation, and the All Nations Health Center in Missoula, Montana. The program is a shortened, culturally adapted version of Celebrating Families! It promotes family resilience and wellness using tribal teachings, the medicine wheel, talking circles, and tribal values to help heal the psychosocial wounds of historical oppression and prevent substance abuse and violence. After preliminary success in promoting health and wellness, this ten-week program is being tested with the support of the National Institutes of Health to see how well the program works across the MBCI communities.

The program takes a whole family approach to support wellness and resilience by promoting community and social support, and providing skills to help people regulate their emotions, communicate effectively, connect with themselves and others, build healthy and safe relationships, set boundaries, and live in healthy ways free of addiction and violence. According to Tina Routh, "It is not an alcohol prevention program. The program does not tell parents to quit; the program is helping you and your children to be able to communicate with each other. Each weekly session begins with a family meal and teachings on tribal foodways and wellness. Families then break into groups with their peers (parents-adolescents, school-age, and younger children) where they learn about session topics in age-appropriate ways. These groups begin with a centering talking circle that includes smudging, speaking from their heart, and communicating in healthy and culturally grounded ways. During the breakouts, all are encouraged to use "I" messages, and a safe environment is created for children to share freely. Finally, families return to the full group for a fun and experiential family activity that reinforces the teachings of that session. The evening ends with the following statement: *I put my hands in yours and together we can do this. Keep coming back. It works.*



A recent family building activity centered around creating a tree and labeling each limb for the different people they could depend on for support and strength. This exercise was intended to help families recognize their strengths, and for the younger generation to understand they too are strong and carry the strength of their ancestors. "Only with this belief in their strength, can they combat drug and alcohol addiction," said Routh.

For more information on the Weaving Healthy Families Program, click [here](#).
For research findings, click [here](#).



Highlighted Innovation: Zuni Pueblo Language Immersion Program

The Zuni Pueblo developed a child care language immersion program to expose young children to their Native language. Bernadette Panteah, director of the Zuni Education and Career Development Center, shared that "Zuni families find strength and comfort through connections to language and religious traditions. Our language immersion program helps our children and families with their self-identity, increases a sense of purpose, boosts self-esteem, and enhances cultural well-being."

To support families in exposing their youngest children to the Zuni language, child care providers were invited to attend information sessions to learn about the immersion program. The information sessions were conducted in Zuni and therefore provided an opportunity to determine which providers truly understood the language. The immersion program started with 10 child care



providers and now includes nearly 30. Providers go through training with a Zuni language instructor to ensure they know how to empower children to speak Zuni. Providers are trained to be positive with the children, avoid scolding, and work with them one-on-one to reiterate the correct way of saying things. Because most participants are relative care providers, they have strong connections to families and are able to work with the parents so that they can reinforce language in the home environment as well. Children as young as three are counting from one to ten and responding to simple questions in Zuni, such as what they would like as a snack.

Panteah notes that it helps that the Zuni language is written. A past partnership between the Zuni school district and the University of New Mexico provided an opportunity to create an online repository of language immersion resources. Panteah encourages all programs that have Native language speakers in their community to implement an immersion program – “It doesn’t have to be complicated. I encourage you to go for it.”



Building and Improving Facilities for Early Care and Education in Tribal Communities

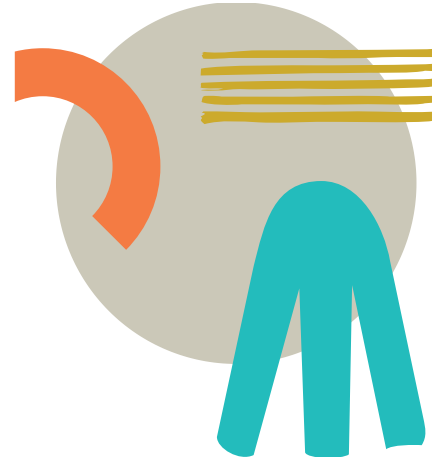
Topic Overview:

- *Angie Garling, Low Income Investment Fund*

Panelists:

- *Ashlee Fox, Cherokee Nation, OK*
- *Jennifer Kirby, Cherokee Nation, OK*
- *Marsha Leno, Zia Pueblo, NM*
- *Kim Nall, Colusa Indian Community, CA*

For the recording, click [here](#).



High quality facilities are important for healthy child development and for staff well-being too. All too often though, tribes and early care and education programs do not have access to financial support for facility construction, repair, and renovation, and administrators do not have training or support for developing and implementing facilities plans. It is essential to have access to funding and to have a plan for proper facility development and maintenance.

Angie Garling, vice president of early care and education at the Low Income Investment Fund, reminded webinar participants that “Public, private, and philanthropic investments in the physical conditions of child care facilities are rare.” She advised that it is wise to create a fund that is a mix of public and private dollars that can be used for the facility, technical assistance, and capacity building.

Fortunately, Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI), like the Low Income Investment Fund, can fill the gap by mobilizing capital to support low-wealth communities. Most CDFI’s are concentrated in urban areas, but some focus extensively on tribal Nations. States with the most certified Native CDFIs include Oklahoma, Hawaii, Minnesota, South Dakota, Arizona, Montana, Washington, and Wisconsin. The U.S. Department of the Treasury keeps a list of all CDFIs. Other financing options could include the Indian Community Development Block Grant, Indian Housing Block Grant, Tax Credits, state and local facilities funds, other public funding, bridge loans, and small business loans. Sometimes philanthropy will support facilities as well.

Together, Garling and the webinar panelists encouraged early care and education programs to consider the following five steps to developing and maintaining quality facilities:

1. Planning – engage stakeholders (including parents, elders, and tribal leaders) to set goals and priorities, forecast the future related to market demand, understand policies that might impact the work, and consider financial feasibility and organizational capacity
2. Pre-development – select the site(s), secure site control and approval, design the project, hire a licensed contractor, and identify and obtain layered financial support
3. Development – undertake construction or renovation, equip the facility, secure license approval, hire personnel, and market the program
4. Start-up – phase in staff and children, work on program sustainability
5. Maintenance – develop a schedule for regular maintenance

Highlighted Innovation: Child Care Centers for the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma

Jennifer Kirby, executive director of human services for the Cherokee Nation, shared her experience related to upgrading and expanding child care facilities on the reservation. Two original facilities were aging and needed repair. Further, the community recognized that additional facilities were needed in areas where there would be future employment opportunities for tribal citizens. With funding from the Tribal CCDF, American Rescue Plan Act, and the tribe, they were able to build four new centers.

Kirby shared that there were challenges along the way. “How many of you thought you would need to become construction experts? We know what our kids need but don’t necessarily know how to build centers.” In addition, she said that turnover in tribal leadership posed challenges because the people who needed to be in meetings and take ownership often changed. Further, staff shortages made it difficult to stay on top of the projects. Despite these challenges, “everyone stepped up because they knew that in the end it would be better for everyone and would help achieve the goal of expanding child care on the reservation,” said Kirby.



Opportunities and Challenges in Supporting and Growing the Tribal Early Childhood Workforce

Topic Overview:

- *Jessica Barnes-Najor, Michigan State University, Tribal Early Childhood Research Center*

Panelists:


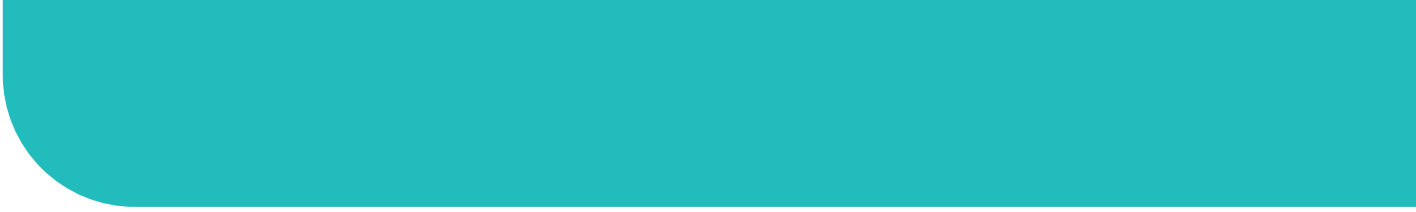
- *Barbara Moffitt, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma*
- *Kimber Olson, Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, AK*
- *Lee Turney, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, MN*

For the recording, click [here](#).

A professional, well-compensated, skilled, and supported workforce is critical to the successful implementation of high-quality early childhood programs from home visiting to child care, Head Start, and preschool. But all too often, these programs are under-resourced, which creates barriers to high quality. For example, Barnes-Najor, who provided an overview of the topic for the webinar, reminded participants that, “child care workers are in the bottom quintile of annual salaries in the US (averaging less than \$15 per hour) and are less likely to have benefits when compared to similar workforces. In fact, almost one-half of child care workers are enrolled in at least one public assistance program. When adults are facing stress due to poverty and income volatility, it influences the social, emotional, and academic well-being of children.”

The Center for American Progress outlines six policies to support the early childhood workforce that are tied to the provision of professional development and appropriate compensation. These include creating and maintaining a comprehensive professional development system; developing or revising state career pathways; making progress toward compensation and benefit standards at parity with kindergarten teachers; promoting data-driven policies with workforce registries; bolstering scholarship programs; and rewarding degree attainment with wage supplements or tax credits.³

³(Center for American Progress. (2017). 6 Policies to Support the Early Childhood Workforce. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/6-policies-to-support-the-early-childhood-workforce/>)



Barnes-Najor called out the following barriers for the AI/AN community to act on these policies:

- Many programs lack stable funding for professional development systems and measures for quality assurance.
- Accessing professional development can be challenging, particularly for relatively remote tribal communities.
- Professional development content is not necessarily aligned with the most recent research, standards of practice, and the needs of programs.
- Professional development content is not necessarily aligned with the cultural context of tribal communities.
- There are limited clear career pathways for professionals to advance.
- Degree programs are inaccessible to many teachers.
- A bachelor's degree does not mean a teacher is prepared to teach in a Native classroom. There are other characteristics such as language proficiency and cultural knowledge that are equally or more important.
- In addition to external professional development offerings, programs need internal infrastructure, such as supervision and coaching.

While these barriers may feel insurmountable, many tribal communities are finding ways to address them, including supporting community members to become early childhood professionals. In part, this is because they recognize the importance of early child development, and they understand that programs are more effective when culture, language, and Indigenous values are integrated. Of the 37 tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) in the country, 23 have early childhood programs and degrees. The American Indian College Fund has had four initiatives in seven tribal colleges that specifically offer professional development and create partnerships with early learning programs. Barnes-Najor emphasized that “Native communities are the best educators of their earliest learners and should be able to build their own workforce that can be unique to each community based on community language, heritage, tradition, and cultural lifeways.”

Finally, retaining a strong workforce is of top concern for tribal early childhood programs. The COVID-19 pandemic called attention to the need to support the health, well-being, and self-care of staff so that they can provide the best learning and care environments for children. Programs can support staff well-being by offering reflective supervision, reflective practice, mindfulness opportunities, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, and culturally grounded wellness initiatives.

Highlighted Innovation: Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association Holistic Self-Care and Wellness

Kimber Olson, manager of the Employment Training and Related Services Division at the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association that includes child care services, shared multiple strategies that they created to address staff relationships, self-care, and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early in the pandemic, they met virtually as a core team four to five days a week to support one another, make sure they were not duplicating offerings, and strategize to ensure their innovative services were continued.

They also contracted with an Indigenous yoga instructor to offer zoom yoga classes twice a week for anyone who wanted to join. Olson said that they thought yoga would be “an appropriate offering because it is a weaving together of traditional knowledge and western approaches.”

In addition to yoga, they worked with the Center for Mind, Body, Medicine and offered an 8-week culturally grounded evidence-based class for staff. The classes focused on mediation, movement, breathwork, journaling, and drawing. They incorporated traditional music and made other cultural adaptations. “The groups were found to reduce anxiety and depression, and ease post-traumatic distress symptoms. They were also found to increase coping skills, immune functioning, and relationships,” according to Olson. She added, “I saw more than one individual leave that 8-week setting with a much stronger connection to his or her culture and traditional practices in a way that changed their life path.”



Integrating Language and Culture into Early Childhood Programming

Topic Overview:

- Micker “Mike” Richardson, AI/AN Head Start Collaboration Office

Panelists:

- Trisha Moquino, Keres Children’s Learning Center, Cochiti Pueblo, NM
- Terri Rattler, Great Plains Tribal Leaders Health Board, Tribal Home Visiting, SD

For the recording, click [here](#).

Micker “Mike” Richardson (Haliwa-Saponi), director of the AI/AN Head Start Collaboration Office, reminded webinar participants that, “Language and culture go together and impact everything around us. It is the foundation of who we are as a people. It makes a strong connection to our past, community, ceremony, and way of life.” Further, he emphasized that evidence shows that tribal early childhood programs are likely to be more effective and yield additional benefits when they integrate their community’s culture, language, and values. As was shared in the webinar on promoting equity, these help to build protective factors that are necessary for supporting whole child development and they serve as a buffer to trauma and other adversities.



Equally important is the recognition that culturally grounded approaches are a foundation of educational sovereignty for tribal nations and can support decolonization. Sophia Taula-Lieras (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), project director of the Programmatic Assistance for Tribal Home Visiting, noted that “By focusing on culture and language we are able to bring this beauty into spaces where we could not have them – literally, legally we could not have them -- for many years.”

Richardson acknowledged that the incorporation of culturally grounded approaches may not look the same for each tribe because the starting points are unique – such as different historical contexts, environmental settings, and resources. Even with these differences, there are many ways to integrate Native language and culture into programs that support children’s early development and learning. For example, programs can:

- Use traditional ways for teaching language, math, and science
- Create outdoor learning opportunities
- Engage elders to be part of programs
- Offer language immersion classrooms and programs
- Create cultural adaptations and enhancements to evidenced-based curricula
- Build assessment systems that are tied to the cultural curriculum

Highlighted Innovation: Keres Children’s Learning Center

Trisha Moquino (Cochiti, Kewa, Ohkay Ohwingeh) had a personal motivation when she co-founded the Keres Children’s Learning Center for the Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico. Moquino was raising her daughter in the Keres language and culture and was disheartened to find that all the early childhood programs in her community centered English. She envisioned a learning community that would support the Keres language and cultural learning as well as children’s academic development.

With the support of tribal leadership, Moquino began planning the immersion program in 2006 and the center opened to children in 2012. Her sight was on creating a continuum of learning opportunities for children from birth to adolescence. They first opened as a Montessori program serving children 2.5 to 6 years of age. The initial program was then tied to a dual language elementary program that serves children ages 6 to 12. In 2022, they will launch an infant/toddler immersion program as well as an adolescent dual language program so that they ultimately can serve children from birth to age 18.





Moquino emphasized the importance of building awareness of Keres fluency for the entire community. “Rebuilding our fluency is not just about the children but all of us. Sometimes our fluent speakers are not talking. We have a level of assimilation where we have been taught that English is the language. How do we raise awareness and support our own families and our own tribal leaders so we have conversations about this and don’t just let things happen to us? How do we disrupt this? We can still participate in mainstream society, but we don’t have to have an education that is at the expense of losing our languages.” They also created a mentor program with Keres-speaking elders to support other parents and community members in learning the language.

The overall hope is to get back to intergenerational community wide fluency so that Keres is used not just at school but throughout the community. Beyond benefiting children’s learning, this will support the health and vitality of the community. Moquino noted, “All tribes are trying to get back to this point. There is a correlation between when the language is healthy and when the people are likely to be healthier overall.”

For more information about the Keres Children’s Learning Center, click [here](#).



Native Language Revitalization and Native Language Immersion Curricula in Tribal Early Childhood Programs

Topic Overview:

- *Melody Redbird-Post, Tribal Child Care Capacity Building Center*

Panelists:

- *Jewell Arcoren, Wicoie Nandagikendan, MN*
- *Dallas Nelson, Lakota Language and Education Initiative, Thunder Valley Community Development, SD*

For the recording, click [here](#).



Melody Redbird-Post (Kiowa Tribe), director of the Tribal Child Care Capacity Building Center shared her doctoral research exploring curriculum development in Indigenous early childhood language immersion programs. “Many of our languages are considered endangered because they are not naturally transmitted one generation to the next. That is why we need our schools, or others, to help carry on our language,” said Redbird-Post. The Kiowa Encampment Story Circle provided a compass for Redbird-Post to investigate and understand the Kiowa language and the opportunities for revitalizing language and culture to build a strong future for the Kiowa people. She emphasized that it is important to acknowledge that here is Indigenous pedagogy – pedagogy is the intersection of curriculum and instruction – that is about empowerment, with teachers empowering students to embrace their identity and build power in their community. When this is done, children are more connected to their culture and lifeways and have stronger educational outcomes. And the community benefits too, by reclaiming, revitalizing, and restoring Native language.

Panelist Dallas Nelson (Oglala Lakota), Lakota Language and Education Initiative at Thunder Valley Community Development on the Pine Ridge Reservation, shared the challenges of fitting indigenous philosophy related to teaching into the standards and


curriculum of federal, state, and parochial schools. “How long are we going to sit back and try to fit in a box that doesn’t fit us?” asked Nelson. He emphasized that these challenges create an opportunity for Tribal Nations to design their own standards and curriculum that “can tap into our own ancient ways of learning and teaching.”

Redbird-Post worked with four programs to learn about the journey they took to build a successful Indigenous language immersion program. She found that there are several essential ingredients for implementing culturally revitalizing pedagogy. These include:

- Supportive tribal leadership
- Community support, including authentic parent engagement
- A clearly defined program vision
- Specific goals and objectives for the students that take a measured approach with one step at a time
- Connection to cultural themes and traditional knowledge and activities, including seasonal activities, ceremonies, songs, stories, and even traditional child development milestones
- Community and elder input into curriculum, with fluent speakers fully engaged in every aspect of the process
- Program staff engaged in the process
- Supports and resources for immersion teachers, especially if they are second language learners

Funds are available to support Native language revitalization. For example, Redbird-Post reminded webinar participants that the Child Care Development Fund quality dollars can be used for this purpose. Panelist Jewell Arcoren of Wicoie Nandagikendan shared how they cultivated Native language champions in the Minnesota state legislature and that legislation ultimately passed to provide a direct appropriation from the state for this work.

Highlighted Innovation: A Language Immersion Apprenticeship Model

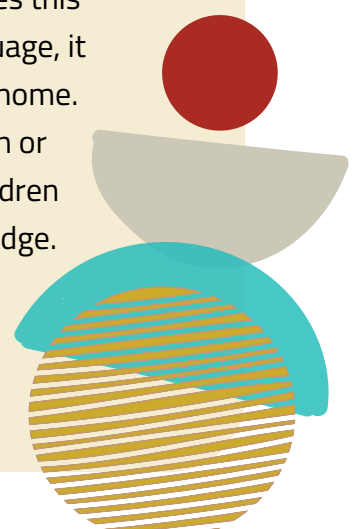


According to Jewell Arcoren, “I have gone to elders across the nation and all say, ‘Save your language and the rest will follow.’” And that is just what Arcoren and her colleagues are doing. In 2006, the Dakota and Ojibwe Early Childhood Urban Immersion Program – *Wicoie Nandagikendan* – was established to provide immersion classrooms to preschool age children in Minneapolis, Minnesota. With funding from the state of Minnesota’s Legacy Arts and Culture grant and a direct appropriation, they were able to create a master apprenticeship model for training early childhood teachers.

The apprenticeship model relies on Dakota and Ojibwe elders who are first-language speakers and pairs them with an early childhood teacher in the immersion classroom. Now there are more than 70 early childhood teachers who have been trained as early childhood language immersion teachers. They are reaching out to middle and high school students to plant the idea that being an early childhood language immersion teacher is a viable career and a way to learn their Native language.

In addition to the apprenticeship model for teachers, Arcoren recognized that efforts were also needed to support parents, many of whom did not have the opportunity to hear first language speakers during their own childhood. *Wicoie Nandagikendan* works with parents so that they can reinforce at home what children are learning in the program. According to Arcoren, not only does this help the children and parents to begin to understand their Native language, it also “opens the door for healing when the children bring the language home. They bring songs that have not been sung in the family for a generation or longer. Parents and elders are filled with pride when they see their children reading, talking, singing, putting out tobacco, and knowing how to smudge. These contribute to healing in the community.”

For more about *Wicoie Nandagikendan*, click [here](#).



A Shining Example for the Rest of the Nation

Above all, this webinar series highlighted the truth that tribal communities know best how to support the early learning and development of their children. When they tie their efforts to language, culture, and traditional lifeways, the benefits go beyond simply preparing children for school: they reinforce educational sovereignty, provide opportunities to focus on decolonization, and emphasize the overall revitalization of the Native nation as a whole.

Current times have exacerbated hardship for children, families, and those working in the early childhood fields. Coupled with a greater understanding of systemic racism, oppression, and historical and intergenerational trauma faced by the AI/AN community, tribal communities are finding ways to focus on the protective factors that make them strong despite adversity. They are doing so while also creating programs or adapting evidence-based practices to align with the need of their communities. Whether it is by adding modules focused on emotional well-being to home visiting programs, building language immersion programs for children and their parents, or offering yoga classes and other self-care to promote staff wellness, the AI/AN community is demonstrating its strength and creativity.

Jennifer Rackliff (Cherokee), executive director of the National Indian Child Care Association, reminded webinar participants that, “Tribes have a unique opportunity right now to be a shining example of exactly what comprehensive high-quality early childhood services can look like. We can focus holistically...and be an example for the rest of the nation.”



Acknowledgements

ACF extends appreciation to the many experts who presented their research and practical examples throughout the webinar series, and the hundreds of listeners from child care, Head Start, child welfare, home visiting and other early childhood fields who joined to both learn and share during the breakouts.

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APPENDIX

Recordings, slides, and additional resources for each webinar can be accessed through the following links:

- **Next Steps for Supporting and Strengthening Tribal Early Childhood Programs and Systems** – July 29, 2021. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Addressing Mental Health Among Children, Staff, and Families in Early Childhood** – August 23, 2021. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Family Engagement and Family Leadership in Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – September 28, 2021. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Promoting Equity and Celebrating Resilience in Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – November 8 & 16, 2021. For the recordings, click here for [part 1](#) and here for [part 2](#).
- **Building and Improving Facilities for Early Care and Education in Tribal Communities** – January 10, 2022. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Opportunities and Challenges in Supporting and Growing the Tribal Early Childhood Workforce** – March 14, 2022. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Integrating Native Language and Culture into Tribal Early Childhood Programs** – April 11, 2022. For the recording, click [here](#).
- **Native Revitalization and Native Language Immersion Curricula in Tribal Early Childhood** – July 18, 2022. For the recording, click [here](#).