



Promoting Early Language and Literacy in Tribal Home Visiting Programs

Photo: Choctaw Nation of OK



TRIBAL
HOME
VISITING

The sharing of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) cultures and lifeways provides opportunities for helping young children form deep connections to their community, which, in turn, aids in the development of their early language and literacy skills. With these integral connections, children see eagle feathers in a dancer's bustle at a powwow, they hear creation stories laced with life lessons, they smell sage or other medicines used in ceremonies, and they learn to dance as a way of celebrating life. In all of these respects, tribal cultures and lifeways provide an authentic platform for supporting children's early development and learning.

This issue brief—based on interviews with eight Tribal Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (Tribal MIECHV) grantees¹—focuses on the ways in which home visiting programs can promote the development of early language and literacy skills, which are important aspects of child development. The brief starts with a short overview of early child development to illustrate how language, literacy, and culture are nested within overall development. It reviews why early language and literacy is important and the need for home visiting programs to be intentional in helping families support children's language and literacy development. The brief shares examples of how Tribal MIECHV grantees are helping families build upon everyday activities from storytelling to singing, talking, reading, and other strategies. It also highlights how some grantees are tapping into community resources to extend language and literacy offerings.

Not every shared example ties language and literacy activities to Native cultures, languages, and lifeways, but many do and those examples can hopefully offer inspiration within Tribal MIECHV and other Native early childhood programs for supporting whole child development.

¹ Grantees interviewed for this brief include: Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana; Cook Inlet Tribal Council Inc., Crow Creek Tribal Schools; Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan; Native Health; United Indians of All Tribes Foundation; and White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians.

Children's Early Development

More than 50 years of research in neuroscience and child development highlight the importance of consistent, caring relationships and access to quality early learning opportunities. We know that:

- The brain experiences the most rapid period of development during the first five years of life;
- Early social and emotional development contributes to establishing a sturdy brain architecture;
- Learning occurs in the context of relationships;
- Families are children's most important teachers, and their engagement supports children's resilience, readiness, and school success;
- Culture, language, traditions, and lifeways help children understand who they are, where they come from, and how they relate to the world around them; and
- To reduce the achievement gap, children need multiple years of quality early learning experiences to be school-ready, coupled with multiple years of quality elementary education to help them succeed throughout their formal school experience.

Experts in early education point to five domains that make up the developing child. As defined by the [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#), they are as follows:



Photo: Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc.



1. Approaches to Learning. This domain focuses on the skills and behaviors children use to learn. It incorporates emotional, behavioral, and cognitive self-regulation. It also includes initiative, curiosity, and creativity. Children learn how to acquire knowledge, learn new skills, and set and achieve goals.

2. Social and Emotional Development. This domain refers to a child's ability to create and sustain meaningful relationships with adults and other children. It also refers to a child's ability to express, recognize, and manage emotions. As children's social and emotional development advance, they establish a sense of positive personal identity.

3. Language and Literacy. Language development refers to how children process and understand what others are saying (receptive language) and how children are able to communicate (verbally or nonverbally) with others (expressive language). This domain also focuses on literacy development, which includes the building of foundational skills such as print concepts, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, word recognition, and fluency.

4. Cognition. This domain includes reasoning, memory, problem solving, and thinking skills that help children organize and understand their world. It encompasses mathematical and scientific thinking. Early mathematical thinking includes skills related to counting and cardinality, operations and algebraic thinking, measurement and data, and geometry. Early scientific thinking skills are developed while exploring the natural and physical world.

5. Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. Perception refers to children's use of their senses to gather and understand information. Motor skills support children in fully exploring their environment and interacting with others.

Gross motor skills include, for example, sitting, standing, walking, throwing, and stretching. Fine motor skills are the small muscle movements of the hands and feet that enable children to grasp objects and use tools such as scissors and paintbrushes. This domain also includes children's health, safety, and nutrition.

Whole child development is the aggregation of the domains of development plus family culture, wellness, temperament, personality, and interests. When home visitors and early childhood educators are able to consider the whole child, they are better able to support strategies for learning that build upon the child's strengths and that are consistent with the child's family, culture, and community. In so doing, and in partnership with families, children develop skills to navigate their world.

The Intersection of Early Language and Literacy, Culture, and Home Visiting

Early childhood research tells us that early language and literacy development is important for:

- **Fostering parent–child interaction and strengthening bonds**

Dr. Junlei Li of the Harvard Graduate School of Education reminds us that decades of research suggest that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. When that relationship incorporates playful interaction centered on everyday opportunities, the bond strengthens, and the foundational skills that support language and literacy development take root.

Staff at Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana recently heard of a testimonial that speaks to the power of responsive parenting and



Photo: Southcentral Foundation

"I worked with a mom and her son, who was having a lot of trouble speaking. His vocabulary was limited, and we could not understand what he was trying to say. Mom was worried that he needed to know his letters so that he would be ready for school. She mentioned that he loved to sing and dance, so we decided to play music videos as part of the home visit. I brought instruments so he could sing and play along with the music. He had a great time. Within a year, his vocabulary grew, and he was ready for school. This reminds us that there are many approaches to language development—it's not only sitting and reading a book."

—EMBER TAHY, HOME VISITOR, NATIVE HEALTH

“When we are able to provide books in a family’s own language and when we are able to provide things that are unique to their culture, it’s valuable for families. The families are enthusiastic and soak it up. They make connections and talk about MY people, or MY tribe.”

—ELIZABETH MOORE SIMPSON, PROGRAM COORDINATOR, UNITED INDIANS OF ALL TRIBES FOUNDATION

the role of the home visitor in supporting this. A grandmother witnessed her son, a new young father, soothe his colicky baby by singing. The grandmother was astounded, because she was not a singer and certainly had not modeled that for him. He told his mother that the home visitor taught him a few songs and explained that singing could help calm the baby.

- **Helping to preserve and revitalize Native cultures and languages**

Most families are eager to share their cultural teachings and languages with their children. In fact, data from the 2015 Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) of AIAN children show support for children learning their Native language. For example, in homes with some Native language use, 99 percent of children had parents who felt it was somewhat or very important for their child to learn a Native language. In homes with only English spoken, 90 percent of children had parents who felt it was somewhat important for their child to learn a Native language. The key is to follow the lead of the parents, respecting where they are with their own understanding of their culture and language and what they want for their children.



Photo: Cook Inlet Tribal Council



- Because some languages are not written and there has been a loss of speakers in many communities, it can be challenging to meaningfully incorporate Native language into children’s everyday learning opportunities. But Tribal MIECHV programs are demonstrating that where there is a will, there is a way. Kailey Cline, a home visitor with the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, labels items in the program’s community room so that children and parents can see the word in English and Anishinabemowin for things like chair, table, and doll. According to Elizabeth Moore Simpson of the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, “When we are able to provide books in a family’s own language and when we are able to provide things that are unique to their culture, it’s valuable for families. The families are enthusiastic and soak it up. They make connections and talk about MY people, or MY tribe.” Furthermore, Moore Simpson notes, “We have a few people in our community who speak their language, and we engage them in monthly family learning circles. This helps the children and families recognize Native languages and learn about tribal culture. Families get a touchstone to their community when they are able to connect with the indigenous language.”

- **Enhancing school readiness**

Several Tribal MIECHV grantees reflect on their needs assessments and note that rates of literacy and school readiness have shown that AIAN children were less prepared than their peers for entry to kindergarten. Sarah Snetsinger of White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians notes, “When we looked at rates of early literacy and school readiness, our children were less prepared than others for entry to kindergarten. That drove us to make early language and literacy a priority. We knew we needed a high-quality program that would provide services and that we needed to be in families’ homes for as long as possible before school entry. So we paired two home visiting models—Nurse–Family Partnership with

Parents as Teachers—to be able to serve children from birth to school entry. We find the two programs complement each other nicely and give the extra boost our children need.”

Research by Hart and Risley shows that children living in poverty hear, on average, 30 million fewer words by their fourth birthday than their high-income peers do. This “word gap” translates into reduced vocabulary, language development, and reading comprehension—all before children start school. For most children, these early disparities only widen over the course of their education. However, as cautioned by Dr. Li and others, the word gap may oversimplify the issue and lead to an overemphasis on counting words when young children most need high-quality, loving interactions that give them the safety, permission, and confidence to develop and learn through everyday activities.

Evidence-Based Home Visiting Models

According to Jessica Barnes-Najor, a developmental psychologist at Michigan State University, most evidence-based home visiting models focus more on health than on language and literacy development. “If there is some attention to early language and literacy, it tends to be broad,” said Barnes-Najor.

The four home visiting models currently being implemented by Tribal MIECHV grantees include the following:

- **Parents as Teachers (PAT):** PAT parent educators provide services to families for at least two years some time between pregnancy and kindergarten entry. The model includes four components: home visits, monthly group meetings, developmental screenings, and connection to community resources.



Home visits focus on parent–child interaction, development-centered parenting, and family well-being.

- **Family Spirit:** Family Spirit provides services to pregnant women and families with children younger than age three. Paraprofessional health educators promote mothers’ parenting skills while assisting them in developing coping skills. The curriculum covers prenatal care, infant care, child development, toddler care, life skills, and healthy living.
- **Nurse–Family Partnership (NFP):** NFP provides home visits by registered nurses to low-income first-time parents until the child turns two years old. The three main areas that NFP seeks to improve are prenatal outcomes, child health and development, and family economic self-sufficiency.

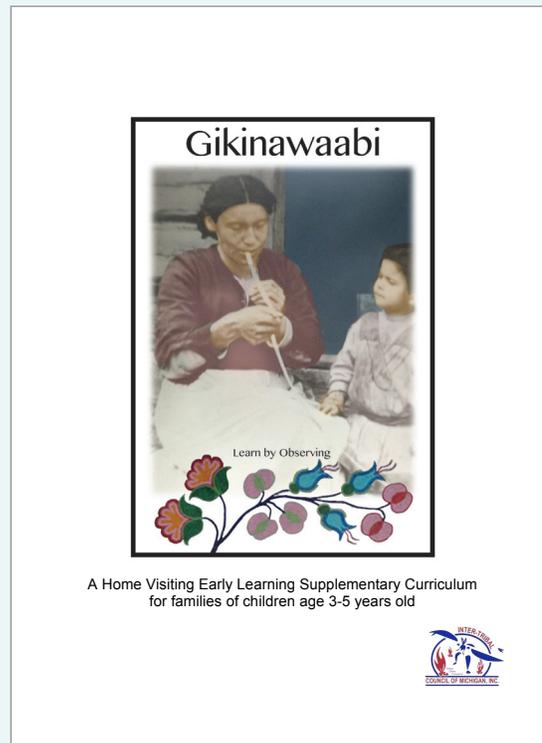
- **Parent–Child Assistance Program (PCAP):** PCAP is a case-management model for mothers who abuse alcohol or drugs during pregnancy. The emphasis is on helping mothers build healthy families and preventing future births of children exposed to substances prenatally.

Grantees create adaptations, supplements, and enhancements to make sure the program fits community needs, including supporting community interest around tribal cultures and languages.² “This allows them to meet their objectives and community needs in a way that is defined by their cultural strengths,” said Barnes-Najor. For example, the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan pairs Family Spirit with their own early language and literacy curriculum, Gikinawaabi. Cook Inlet Tribal Council enhances the PAT curriculum by integrating cultural imagery or language in lesson activities where applicable. White Earth pairs NFP and PAT to provide support from the prenatal period to kindergarten entry.

² For more information, please see the issue brief “Cultural Enrichments, Enhancements, and Adaptations of Tribal Home Visiting Programs” https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/1533_thv_cultural_enhancement_brief_508_compliant.pdf.

The Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan – Developing a Curriculum Rooted in Lifeways

Recognizing gaps in early learning related to literacy, language, and numeracy among three- and four-year-olds at Head Start entry, the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan set out to develop their own early learning curriculum for children ages three to five—Gikinawaabi—to supplement the Family Spirit home visiting model. In developing the curriculum, they worked with resources provided by Head Start—most notably, a resource called [Making it Work: A Guide for Implementing Cultural Learning Experiences in American Indian and Alaska Native Early Learning Settings for Children Ages Birth to 5](#). It also helped that they had an established Head Start program and that they were participating in the [Tribal Early Childhood Research Center](#), because these connections gave the staff additional experience with and understanding of early learning and development.



Elizabeth Kushman, Manager, of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Services, notes, “The Head Start resource—*Making it Work*—starts with the acknowledgement that, prior to preschool classrooms and current pedagogy, indigenous communities had ways of teaching early skills. Foremost is through experiential ways and culture. We know that culture and lifeways in and of themselves are both comprehensive and adequate. In the course of teaching the lifeway and culture, you are teaching a lot of the early learning skills that are academically defined and foundational for early reading, language, and math.”

Gikinawaabi is grounded in two important indigenous lifeways: (1) learning through respectful observation; and (2) the medicine wheel. “The medicine wheel provides so many opportunities for teaching counting, language, and literacy. It is something many tribal communities are familiar with,” said Lisa Martin, Evaluator and Project Director for the Tribal MIECHV project.

The curriculum includes 13 lessons, each with specific goals, age staging so that the home visitor is able to tailor the content to the age of the child, and materials to support the lessons. The home visitor goes into the home, demonstrates an activity, and then encourages and coaches the parent to do the activity with the child. Resources are left behind so that the family can repeat the activity with the child between visits and then report at the next visit about their experience. Gikinawaabi makes space for materials to be modified to reflect the different dialects of communities.

Kushman notes that, “For so long, our home visiting model was delivered by nurses and focused on reducing infant mortality. So there was a real shift and all home visitors needed to increase their knowledge about early child development and early learning. Now, we have added a focus on the connection between early learning and health, addressing overall comprehensive child well-being.”

An evaluation of the implementation of Gikinawaabi shows that parents exposed to the curriculum have more specific things they could say about the ways to interact with children to foster their learning, compared with parents who had not been exposed to Gikinawaabi.

While the work being done with individual families in the home is important, Martin points out that the work happening at the systems level should be noted as well. “We are finding that when we work at the organizational and program levels in unison (rather than silos) across early learning and home visiting, we are better able to understand the context of early learning and provide programming that enhances children’s overall development.”



Photo: Southcentral Foundation

Regardless of the model being implemented, it is important that grantees lift up the key role of early language and literacy development and its contribution to the development of the whole child. To do this, grantees need to be sure that home visitors have the knowledge, skills, and resources to support parents as their child’s first teachers. It is not about the home visitor teaching the child to read but, rather, the home visitor supporting and empowering

parents so that they more confidently interact with their children in ways that support early language and literacy development. Aptly put by Snetsinger, “Home visitors are there to support the families and encourage their interaction with their children, recognizing that the parents are the most important people to the child.”

Home visitors need to understand the basics of child development and the trajectory of early learning so they can share this information with parents. Katie Stover, Home Visiting Program Supervisor at United Indians of All Tribes Foundation explains, “If we are working with infants, we then talk with the parents about the importance of speaking to their baby throughout the day in their Native language (if they choose) as well as English. We emphasize modeling language and self-talk. In toddlerhood, we add ‘parallel’ talk to our modeling of language as well as exploring one-, two-, or more-word sentences. We help parents understand there is a progression in language development, so they don’t just focus on one aspect (e.g., number of words) and then worry that their child is not developing or learning their language.”

In addition to conveying information on child development during home visits, some grantees also use monthly group connections as an opportunity to provide information and guidance to families. Rhea Pierre, Program Manager of the Early Foundations Home Visiting Program of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana, notes, “The focus



Photo: Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Strategies

Strategies for Helping Home Visitors Support Parents As First Teachers

Barnes-Najor emphasizes that single trainings for staff without coaching and other supports are insufficient. To support long-term change in the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of home visitors so that they can guide parents in supporting their children's early language and literacy development, home visiting programs need to:

- Hire staff with knowledge of child development and progressions of learning;
- Implement an evidence-based curriculum that includes a focus on early language and literacy development or is supplemented with such;
- Help home visitors understand how to weave Native languages and lifeways into their work with children and families, always being sensitive to what parents want for their children;
- Provide reflective supervision to all staff;
- Utilize a strengths-based, relationship driven approach; and
- Offer (or facilitate access to) services that families may need.



of our last group connection was child development and kindergarten readiness. We stress with our families the importance of using everyday moments as teaching opportunities that support children's development—that it doesn't have to be structured sit-down time to learn. We encourage them to talk about what they are doing throughout their routine and to name objects in their natural environment. We encourage them to point out letters and words. For example, when they go to a store, they can talk about the sign out front or the words on a poster. Singing can be incorporated into everyday routines, too. We might suggest that parents make up a song they can sing while brushing teeth or picking up toys."

Grantees Promote Storytelling, Singing, Talking, and Reading

Tribal MIECHV grantees are experimenting with multiple pathways to support early language and literacy development. Some are bringing in Native storytellers or encouraging families to share their own stories. Others find ways to incorporate singing into home visits and group activities. Some are helping parents understand the importance of simply talking with their children and sharing books. Still others are adapting the home visiting curriculum to make it more culturally and linguistically rich. By supporting a range of opportunities to expose children to language and literacy, grantees are able to honor where parents are with their own language and literacy skills. For many families, connecting learning to the cultural context is important. Barnes-Najor notes, "When exposure to language is tied to the cultural context, it feels more meaningful for the families and children."

STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a long-held practice in Native communities. It offers a rich way of supporting early language and literacy development through the sharing

of traditional lifeways and beliefs. The cadence, flow, and rhythm of how the story is told support the development of language skills for young children. Often, storytelling incorporates visual symbols and natural objects, which can support pre-literacy skills as well. At the heart of every story are relationships—between adults; between adults and children; between children; and with the land, nature, and animals. According to Barnes-Najor, "I don't think I've ever heard a traditional story that does not have relationship at the heart of it."

"We had an activity in the PAT curriculum to make a barn house. During the summer months, our people rely on subsistence food like fish. So I made this into a fish house activity instead. I included pictures of fish that were hanging and drying. I also brought sticks to the visit, so we could pretend that we were fishing at a camp. And I took a book about fish too."

—GAIL FITKA, FAMILY MENTOR, COOK INLET TRIBAL COUNCIL, INC.

Grantees support storytelling during home visits. "If the home visiting lesson is focused on safe sleep, the home visitor will ask to share the story of the dream catcher and provide the family with a copy of the story and a dream catcher," said Snetsinger of White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians. A home visitor with United Indians of All Tribes Foundation supported a family in developing a story cube with a different animal on each face of the cube. The child would flip the cube and then be encouraged to make up a story about the animal. One mother liked this activity so much that she cut up a second story cube and made a mobile for her baby, using it as a prompt for telling her baby stories.



Storytelling is also happening during group gatherings. Many grantees bring in community storytellers or elders to share legends. Some use music and props to act out the stories being shared. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma incorporates puppet shows in the Choctaw language.

“We teach parents that anyone can be a storyteller. They can tell stories that are traditionally shared in their culture, or they can make up their own stories based on their experiences,” said Katie Stover of the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation. It is about tapping into the imagination. The power of storytelling for supporting early language and literacy development should be valued.

SINGING

Singing is yet another pathway to supporting language and literacy development, and it is central to many tribal ceremonies and traditions. The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation has three Kaya (this is the word for *grandma* in the Lakota language) on staff who are able to provide cultural connections. Kaya visit families at the parents’ request and often bring a drum and teach the family a song. Drumming and songs are also often incorporated into group meetings as well.

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma supports a Music and Me program during monthly group meetings. There are music CDs, instruments, books, and activities that the parents and children can do together in the group and at home, too. “The kids love to get out and dance, shake the egg shakers, and blow the train horn,” said Brandi Smallwood, Program Director.

Ember Tahy of Native Health remembers a family she worked with long ago. “We knew that the young boy had a developmental delay. We also knew he liked drums. I talked with the family and we decided that they would encourage him to play the drum and sing along in Hopi, and English too. It helped that his mother knew Hopi songs and could support her son’s

learning in this way. The mother just needed the suggestion to incorporate song as a way to support his language development, and she went with it. In time, the family gave him his own drum. Now, the boy is years older and performs in pageants.”

TALKING

The simple act of talking with young children is enormously important. Even when children are too young to talk back, they are still listening and learning. Home visitors encourage parents to talk to their children as they engage in everyday activities to create language-rich environments. They also provide tools that families can use to teach their Native language.

For example, family mentors in the Cook Inlet Tribal Council home visiting program created “language cards” that could be used during home visits. For instance, Gail Fitka said, “Each family mentor was assigned to a different language, since we have many tribes and languages that are part of our community. We did our own research to find the names for fish, birds, and basic animals that would be native to the land where the tribe was originally located.” With this information, they created language cards that included a picture and the native word. Dialects were added as appropriate. These cards were then assembled in a ring binder. Fitka added, “We bring these on the home visits and

“Each family mentor was assigned to a different language, since we have many tribes and languages that are part of our community. We did our own research to find the names for fish, birds, and basic animals that would be native to the land where the tribe was originally located.” —GAIL FITKA, FAMILY MENTOR, COOK INLET TRIBAL COUNCIL, INC.

Strategies for Helping Parents Support Their Children's Early Language and Literacy Development

There are many ways that home visitors can help parents support their children's early language and literacy development. A few simple suggestions follow:

- **Talk about a plan for routines that will support early language and literacy in the home and/or community.** For example, during pregnancy, the adults might sing a bedtime song or read a bedtime story. After the baby is born, the family might incorporate cuddling and storytelling before naps or at the end of each day. As the child becomes mobile, the family might designate a space for creative learning and books.
- **Provide concrete examples of how to incorporate language and literacy development into everyday moments.** For example, talk with parents about how meal preparation can be a language-rich learning opportunity when parents talk about the ingredients, amounts, and steps of the cooking process. The same is true with gathering and shopping, where parents can ask their children to pick out a red fruit, for example, or gather ten sticks. Riding a bus, crossing the street, visiting the doctor's office, and attending ceremonies and other cultural events all provide opportunities for parents to talk with their children about what they are seeing and doing.
- **Help parents understand the progression of language and literacy skills.** For example, babbling with babies teaches them about conversation turns—you go first, and then I respond. Inviting a baby to point to a flower on the page of a book happens before the child can say "flower."
- **Coach parents to feel confident with active reading and storytelling.** Encourage parents to go into a character and use different voices and gestures to make the book or story come to life. Silly is good!
- **Encourage parents to make up stories to go along with pictures in books.** This may be especially helpful for parents with low literacy and for parents who simply want to use their own words to tell the story.
- **Check in with parents, and ask what books, stories, and songs their child seems to enjoy the most.** The simple question helps parents to take interest and ownership in their child's development and learning.
- **Talk with parents about appropriate use of screen time and technology.** Children are not able to learn social-emotional and self-regulation skills on an app; those are skills that are learned through play with parents, siblings, and peers.





Photo: Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

share them with the adults and children. I work with one mother who is fluent and was able to read the cards to her child." With other families, the adults may not already know the language, so this is a learning opportunity for them, too. Children often try to repeat what they are hearing, and in time, they begin to recognize the words and pictures.

Similarly, home visitors with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma share coloring sheets and flash cards with the Choctaw words. "We often do these around the holidays. Easter is my favorite. For example, we have cards with a rabbit, egg, flower, basket, and underneath each picture is the word," said Barbara Moffitt, Project Coordinator.

For each family, Cook Inlet Tribal Council home visitors also create books of photos taken during group gatherings. Families can then share this

book with their children, and together they can talk about what they did. In addition, the home visitors place emphasis on the verbal greetings at the beginning and end of home visits as a way of modeling communication and incorporating the Native language. According to Fitka, basic phrases like "hello" and "goodbye" can be the easiest starting place for teaching the language.

READING

Most Tribal MIECHV programs share a book with the family at each visit. When possible, home visitors bring a book that relates to a planned lesson. The books provide an opportunity for home visitors to talk with the families about how to approach reading and literacy skills. For example, home visitors can help parents understand that reading a

"It's as natural as breathing. We incorporate books into every home visit." —AUDREY FALLIS, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, CROW CREEK TRIBAL SCHOOLS

book is not just saying the words on the page but talking about what they see (e.g., naming objects, talking about the colors and shapes, counting things that are similar or different). Parents can help their children begin to explore the relationship between letters and sounds. Home visitors can also remind parents that part of literacy development is about print awareness, and parents can teach their

children this by pointing out that each book has a title or helping their children learn how to turn the pages. Books are often left behind to help build a library in the home, or families "check them out" and return the book during the next home visit.

Sometimes, home visiting programs go beyond sharing a book during a home visit. For example, the home visiting program of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana organized Bingo for Books during a quarterly group gathering. Families came together at a local resort for a meal and left with books from their bingo wins. The home visiting program borrowed bingo cards from



Photo: Cook Inlet Tribal Council

the church and recruited a staff person to be the caller. To make sure all left with books, when one person got bingo, everyone seated at that table was able to select a book. The program made sure they had a variety of books that would be of interest to babies, young children, and adolescents.

Native Health organizes Read it and Eat as part of group socializations. During the first half hour, staff from the Phoenix Public Library read a book out loud, modeling how to share a book with children. The next hour is spent with a cooking demonstration emphasizing the preparation of healthy foods, introducing new vegetables and fruits, and talking about nutrition for children. Sometimes, the book relates to the food that will be eaten. The home visiting staff and the library staff plan these gatherings together.

“The engagement of a child often depends on how the book is read. One of our home visitors shared a story about a mother who was frustrated that her child would not sit still and listen to the book. The toddler would pull the book out of her mother’s hands or crawl out of her lap. The home visitor talked with the mother about ways to read that might be more engaging. The mother tried changing the pitch of her voice for the different characters, and all of a sudden, her daughter was entranced by the story. Weeks later, the mother reported continued success with reading with her daughter, now that she had these strategies to use.”

**—AUDREY FALLIS, PROGRAM DIRECTOR,
CROW CREEK TRIBAL SCHOOLS**

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana organize “Reading Is Fun” events that are open to the broader community and scheduled quarterly. The home visiting staff create five activity stations, each centered on a storybook. For example, one recent station was tied to the book *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak. They talked about the book and had a group reading, and then the children and parents made masks. Each family was able to take home their own copy of the book. The same model is sometimes used in the home visiting monthly group connections as well. During those times, staff might go into more depth to help parents understand how to support children’s learning and development by, for example, talking about reading strategies. “We always try to make it fun. One time, we read *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear*, by Don Wood, and then we made dessert pizzas with super large sugar cookies, a cream cheese frosting, and strawberries on top,” said Pierre.

TWO ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

Some Tribal MIECHV grantees are stepping further outside the box with their approaches to supporting early language and literacy development. Two examples are worth noting:

- **Sign Language.** One of the home visitors for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana is particularly interested in working to introduce parents and children to sign language. She believes basic signing can be a helpful way for children to communicate when they do not yet have the words to describe their feelings and needs. She teaches the children and families the signs for words like *eat*, *drink*, *more*, *toilet*, and *please*. The home visitor also shares baby sign books with families. Parents are receptive and acknowledge that it diffuses parent and child frustration that stems from communication challenges. According to Pierre, “This

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma – Preserving the Choctaw Language

In an effort to preserve the Choctaw language, the Oklahoma state legislature passed HB 2921 in 2014, a law that recognizes Native American languages as an official language art. With the support of the Choctaw Nation as well as the Oklahoma State Department of Education, this law stipulates that Native American languages can be taught in high schools to fulfill the world language core curriculum requirement.

Choctaw language classes are brought into public schools via One-Net communication, a distance learning system that is supported by the School of Choctaw Language. Those selected to teach the language classes have Choctaw as their first language and a certificate in Native American languages by the State Board of Education. This means that they can be certified in language instruction and not have a degree in education.

The One-Net communication system delivers remote teaching that allows the students to hear the spoken language in daily lessons given by the Choctaw language teachers. In addition to the language teacher who comes into the classroom via the screen, participating high schools have a person in the school setting who is able to help students with their homework.

Although the law only addresses learning at the high school level, the School of Choctaw Language recognized an opportunity to introduce language instruction at younger ages and began to partner with Head Start more than ten years ago. Today, more than 300 children in 14 Head Start centers are receiving instruction via distance learning. Ten-minute sessions at least once a week focus on colors, numbers, and greetings. Teachers use puppets and songs to make the teaching engaging for the children. In addition, the School of Choctaw Language provides Head Start teachers with lessons and activities for promoting language during the school year. Teachers can access activity sheets, coloring pages, vocabulary lists, and corresponding audio files so that children and teachers can hear the pronunciation of words in Choctaw and English. According to Jim Parrish, Executive Director of the School of Choctaw Language, “We were fortunate to have a leading curriculum person who taught in the first and second grade in the public schools to help write the early childhood curriculum.” This early exposure is paying off: According to the Choctaw home visiting team, they find that children in Head Start know more Choctaw words than those who are not in Head Start.

can be helpful for getting through that period where the communication burst has not yet happened.”

- **Early Math.** Barnes-Najor notes that, “Math is another language. It is as close to a common language as we have. It is so easy to incorporate numeracy in the cultural context. For example, children and parents can count drumbeats, collect and sort rocks by shape and size, and measure things in the natural environment. There are multiple ways to fit in numeracy.” In fact, the

Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan wove early math skills into Gikinawaabi so that every third visit incorporates developmentally appropriate early math activities. “Numeracy can be connected to so many things,” said Cline, a home visitor with the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan who makes laminated M&Ms and uses them for counting games. It is another conversation starter that can be part of everyday activities while cooking, setting the dinner table, exploring outside, playing music, or going to the store.



"Many of our parents recall being shushed at the library as a kid and so are worried about using the library with their children. We're trying to get them to understand that the library does not have to be a quiet space and that it can be a great resource and place for learning and exploration."—**RHEA PIERRE, PROGRAM MANAGER, CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES**

Photo: Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Inc.

REACHING INTO THE COMMUNITY TO EXTEND OFFERINGS

In addition to making use of public libraries and engaging elders from the community who can share stories, songs, and other traditions, Tribal MIECHV grantees are tapping into other community resources to support their language and literacy offerings. Sometimes, there is a direct partnership between the home visiting program and another program like Early Head Start; other times, home visitors simply refer families to events that are open for the community and might benefit the family.

Head Start, Child Care, and WIC

- Cook Inlet Tribal Council has an Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership program as a

subsidiary. The Early Head Start program is beginning its fourth year operating a Yup'ik immersion classroom. They have developed a curriculum for children from birth to age five and are working with the school district for children in kindergarten through second grade. The program has also created a variety of educational materials in the Yup'ik language, such as books, calendars, flash cards, and electronic media to share with the home visiting program.

- The Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan home visiting program makes use of resource libraries that are part of the child care Quality Rating and Improvement System. They also work with the special education preschool program to access some of their resources.

United Indians of All Tribes Foundation – Connecting With the Seattle Public Library to Enhance Early Language and Literacy Offerings

The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation Tribal MIECHV program partners with the Seattle Public Library to bring books written by indigenous authors into the program. Children's Service Librarian Mai Takahashi has been supporting local preschool programs and the home visiting program for at least three years. "The Seattle Public Library's strategic plan includes bringing the library outside the building and into the community in order to reach historically underserved populations. The librarians are encouraged to approach community groups and have conversations to learn about their organization, their work and needs, and their audience. First, I met with the preschool program at United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, and through them I met with the home visiting program," said Takahashi.

"Mai seems to have a keen interest in our program and is always supportive of our work," said Program Coordinator Elizabeth Moore Simpson. Takahashi spots opportunities to weave in literacy activities for the children and families. For example, she saw on Facebook that there was going to be a doula training, and she showed up with 50 giveaway board books by indigenous authors to hand out at the gathering.

Takahashi attends most events and spends time with the families so that she is able to be in tune with their interests. Because family gatherings include all children, Takahashi is always thinking about books that will interest babies through adolescents. "For example, at a monthly family learning circle, one family asked about Harry Potter. Takahashi heard that and the next time she came, she brought Harry Potter books to distribute," said Simpson.

Sometimes her staff bring tote bags with the library logo, pencils, notepads, and pens, in addition to giveaway books from the Library Foundation. Takahashi encourages families to sign up for library cards, and she reminds them that the library is a place where they can access the Internet and other resources for free.



Photo: Yellowhawk Tribal Health

- The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma home visiting program partners with the Early Literacy Program (affiliated through WIC). The Early Literacy Program has staff who meet families at their homes, and together, the staff and parents spend up to an hour reading to the children.

Book Distribution Programs

- Many grantees connect families to book distribution programs such as Raising a Reader; Montana Hopa Mountain Story Makers; Dolly Parton Imagination Library; or Reach Out and Read, which is a partnership with health providers. Some of these programs offer much more than a book. Hopa Mountain, for example, provides a bookmark that is unique to each book and offers parents specific tips about how to read the book to the child.

Community Events

- The White Earth Child Care/Early Childhood Program, along with the Communities Collaborative Committee, sponsors an annual Communities Collaborative Brain Development Conference. This conference, open to anyone to attend, offers information and strategies from national and local experts to use in the home, early childhood programs, and elementary/secondary classrooms or programs. The conference has been organized for nineteen years.
- Public health nurses from the Indian Health Services clinic in Crow Creek Tribal Schools organize a Lunch and Learn gathering every month for pregnant women and families with young children. They talk about brain development and other topics related to early growth and development.



Closing

Tribal MIECHV grantees recognize the importance of strong families and healthy children. They know that health transcends physical well-being and encompasses all aspects of children’s development and learning. Home visitors work with intention to support parents so that they can be their children’s first and most important teacher. Increasingly, home visitors are incorporating language and literacy skill development activities into individual home visits and group gatherings as well, so that parents have the understanding and tools to support early learning and development. Home visitors are helping families make the most of everyday moments so that storytelling, singing, talking, reading, and even counting can help prepare children for school and deepen their connection to their tribal cultures and lifeways.

In closing, Crow Creek Tribal Schools Program Director Audrey Fallis aptly states the end goal of all these efforts: “Our hope is that through participating in the home visiting program and attending our events, more parents will engage in activities that support their children’s early learning. Then when the children reach kindergarten, they will be a little more ready.



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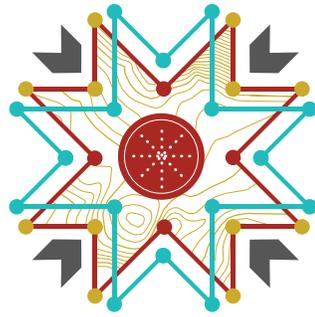
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