

# Engaging Native Families

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# Native Families

- American Indian and Alaska Native families have very high levels of need, especially in underserved rural tribal communities
- Often in the context of multiple adversities and health disparities
- that have been shaped in important ways by history
- which has often cut people from traditional sources of strength

# Early Childhood

- Parents often express very strong desires to create a better life for their children
- This is especially poignant in the context of high levels of trauma and dislocation
- But parents often feel inadequately prepared to do so
- and turn to programs for help

# Head Start and Early Head Start

- Head Start and Early Head Start are often core services in tribal communities
- and parents and communities often have very high expectations of these programs
- both to prepare their children for school
- and to prepare them as tribal citizens
- But it is not clear that programs have adequate support to do so

# Tribal Language and Culture

- As we began work under the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center, there was widespread concern about the impact of training requirements on tribal language teachers
- And considerable concern that requirements for evidence-based curricula may not support local innovation
- Our work in programs, with parents and staff, consistently emphasizes these problems

# Mental Health Services

- Parents often also have significant needs for mental health services
- Our analyses of the PIR have underscored dramatic disparities in mental health consultation
- which seem entirely consistent with other data
- e.g., our analyses of NSCAW suggest that AI/AN parents have high levels of unmet mental health needs
- and national data suggest significant shortages of mental health care

# Historical Trauma

- There is widespread interest in understanding current difficulties as a response to past trauma
- Much of this work focuses explicit attention on parenting
- There is tremendous untapped potential to join tribal communities to develop programs oriented to parenting in this context
- Available data suggests that awareness of historical trauma is often high, a correlate of psychological distress

# A Little Reflection

- The growing emphasis on reflective supervision constitutes one important way to increase cultural awareness
- States within the League are creating systems to support required reflective supervision
- The evidence base for this practice is admittedly slim
- But future Head Start programming and research can contribute to understanding how and when the process is helpful
- And there is much to commend the practice in tribal settings given the concern with intergenerational patterns

# Cultural Services

- All of us seek health and wellness from within cultural frames
- And emerging literature on health care more generally supports the importance of choice and shared decision making
- Understanding and responding to cultural values and practices can and should be a core component of this work
- But support to develop these approaches is often negligible

# Approaches to Service Development

- In some cases, existing models may be important points of departure
- e.g., in substance abuse, both motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioral approaches are sensitive to how people see the world and make decisions
- At the same time, there are likely also important lessons to learn from communities
- e.g., a persistent emphasis on spirituality that emerges in discussions of healing may have broader appeal

# Other Possibilities for Engagement

- Mental health services can be stigmatizing
- An alternate way to support parents is through their concern for their child
  - especially with regard to care in infancy
  - and support for development in early childhood
- We have developed and are now moving to test materials to support this engagement in physical health (obesity and oral health) as well as infant development

# Choice and Respect

- These approaches all seek to provide choices to parents
- And utilize the techniques of motivational interviewing to respect parents' perspectives
- A major limitation on choice are the environments in which parents live
- So these approaches equally emphasize the possibilities for community action and advocacy

# Families

- Our approaches also emphasize the need to intervene in families more broadly
- Maternal social support is a significant correlate of children's social and emotional development
- And broader evolutionary thinking suggests that mothers cannot be considered in isolation
- Yet we lack good intervention models for families in early childhood
- although many of our constructs are likely more broadly relevant, i.e., attachment is not about food

# Community-Based Research

- This research arises from long-term collaborations
- funded in the context of specific opportunities,
- but tailored in ways that also fit local priorities,
- and responsive to feedback from parents, families, and communities,
- and which emphasize, within them, the importance of individual autonomy and variation
- All of which suggests ways forward in these efforts

# Research

- American Indian and Alaska Native communities remain outside most national Head Start and Early Head Start research
- Specific research opportunities are limited
- and capable interested partners can be hard to find
- But communities are frustrated by mandates for evidence-based practice
- and often eager to respond to these
- if the research can be done in ways that respond to their needs and values

# Questions of Trust

- Our work in research ethics consistently emphasizes trust
- In this context, Onora O'Neill focuses on duty and the ways in which accountability actually may undermine the dynamics of trust
- But our conversations in communities consistently emphasize care
- The ethics of care emphasizes relationships
- and a sincere engagement with the needs of the other
- which native communities often feel is missing in research

# Recommendations for Research and Evaluation

- T&TA may be able to better support local initiatives
- Dedicated funds for program development (with research and evaluation) can serve to connect programs with research
- Tribal programs should be invited to participate in national research
- But time needs to be devoted to jointly articulating protocols
- National research design should include space to address questions of local significance

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