

# Home and Community Native Language and Cultural Experiences Among AI/AN Children in Region XI Head Start: Findings From the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey 2015



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## Introduction

The 2015 American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) – also referred to as AI/AN FACES 2015 – is the first national study of Region XI Head Start children, families, and programs. Region XI Head Start programs serve children and families operated by federally recognized AI/AN tribes (see box 1 for more information). Since 1997, FACES has been a regular source of nationally representative data on Head Start programs, centers, classrooms, children, and families. Until the 2015–2016 program year, however, FACES had not been conducted in Region XI AI/AN Head Start programs. This was due in part to the time and resources required to engage in the intensive community-based planning and implementation process needed to successfully carry out the study in partnership with Region XI Head Start programs and communities. Head Start programs, researchers, and federal staff all identified the lack of data on Region XI Head Start children and their programs as a critical information gap.

Nearly two years of extensive planning preceded AI/AN FACES 2015. Planning was informed by principles of participatory research with AI/AN communities (see Fisher and Ball, 2003, for example) and with advice from members of a workgroup composed of Region XI Head Start directors, researchers, and federal government officials. Members of the AI/AN FACES 2015 workgroup discussed and provided input on the AI/AN FACES 2015 design, implementation, and dissemination of findings, and worked to ensure that Native voices were at the forefront.<sup>1</sup> During the nearly two years of extensive planning that preceded AI/AN FACES 2015, the workgroup added questions regarding children's experience of Native language and culture into the AI/AN FACES 2015 protocol. These data are highlighted in this brief.

<sup>1</sup>In this document, we use the terms American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN), tribal, tribe, and Native to refer inclusively to the broad and diverse groups of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, villages, communities, corporations, and populations in the United States, acknowledging that each tribe, village, community, corporation, and population is unique from others with respect to language, culture, history, geography, political and/or legal structure or status, and contemporary context.

### Box 1. What is Region XI Head Start?

There are 12 regions for federal management of Head Start, ten of which are geographically based. The other two are defined by the populations served: Region XI serves children and families in programs operated by federally recognized AI/AN tribes and Region XII serves migrant and seasonal workers and their families. AI/AN FACES 2015 is a descriptive study of the children, families, and programs in Region XI.

In 2015, Region XI comprised 146 Head Start programs across the United States. These programs served approximately 20,000 children, of whom the majority, but not all, were AI/AN.

Region XI Head Start programs may enroll families that have incomes above the poverty line if: (1) all eligible children in the service area who wish to be enrolled are served by Head Start; (2) the tribe has resources in its grant to enroll children whose family incomes exceed the low-income guidelines in the Head Start Program Performance Standards; and (3) at least 51% of the program's participants meet the eligibility criteria in the Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR Chapter XIII, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hspps-fnal.pdf>).

States with Region XI Head Start Programs are highlighted in red.



## Home and community Native language and cultural experiences among AI/AN children

Research shows that Native culture and language support children's development in positive ways. Cultural identity can foster protective attributes such as health, resilience, and well-being (Fleming and Ledogar, 2008; Pu et al., 2013; Wexler, 2014). Research has provided evidence that Indigenous language use in AI/AN and Canadian First Nations groups is related to positive mental health outcomes (Hallett et al., 2007), engagement in healthy behaviors (Coe et al., 2004), and physical health indicators (Hodge & Nandy, 2011, Oster et al., 2014). More specific to education, research has shown that Indigenous language instruction is associated with increased academic competencies (Smallwood, Haynes, & James, 2009), particularly for students from families who participate in cultural activities and speak a Native language (Vincent, Tobin, & Van Ryzin, 2017).

This report includes data from survey items informed by the workgroup about Native language and cultural experiences **at home** and **in the community**. Data from AI/AN FACES 2015 regarding children's Native language and cultural experiences at school are reported in the brief "Classroom and Program Native Language and Cultural Experiences Among Region XI Head Start Children: Findings From the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey 2015" (Sarche et al., 2020). Other AI/AN FACES 2015 products include a brief that reports the characteristics, development, and well-being of children and families in Regions XI Head Start at the beginning of the program year (Barofsky et al., 2018) and a brief on children's progress over the program year (Malone et al., 2018). Data in this brief, and all others mentioned above, are drawn from the AI/AN FACES 2015 technical report, "[Descriptive Data on Region XI Head Start Children and Families: AI/AN FACES Fall 2015–Spring 2016 Data Tables and Study Design](#)" (Bernstein et al., 2018). A description of how

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the information used in this brief was gathered is reported at the end of the brief.



<http://www.tulalipnews.com/wp/2017/05/10/preparing-for-a-spiritual-rewarding-journey/>

In this brief, we address two questions: 1) What Native **language** experiences did AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start have at home and in their community? 2) What Native **cultural** experiences did AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start have at home and in their community?

To answer these questions, parent survey data for AI/AN children only<sup>ii</sup> were examined in this report. The questions addressed in this report are listed below.

What Native language experiences did AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start have at home and in their communities?

1. What percent of children lived in homes in which some Native language is used?
2. What percent of children lived in homes in which Native language is the primary language?
3. How important was it to parents that their child learn a Native language?
4. How did parents of children who have a Native language spoken at home report supporting their child to learn a Native language?

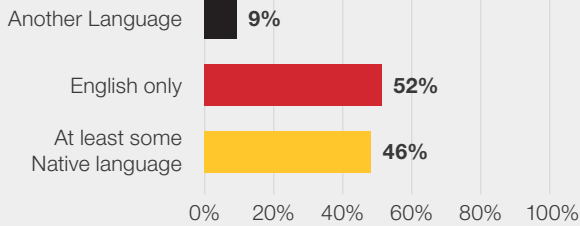
What Native cultural experiences did AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start have at home and in their communities?

1. What percent of children participated in cultural activities?
2. What were parents' reports of their own cultural connections?



<sup>ii</sup>While Region XI Head Start programs are operated by federally recognized tribes, most serve some non-AI/AN children. In AI/AN FACES 2015, 80% of the children were reported by their parents as AI/AN alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity. This brief only reports information about those children.

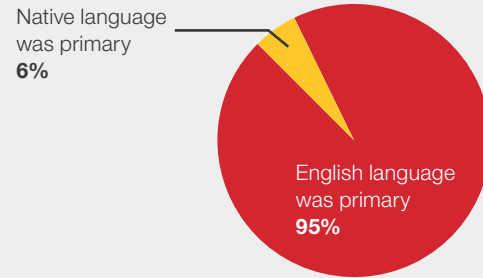
**Question 1: What percent of children lived in homes in which some Native language was used?**



Just over half of AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start had parents who reported English only spoken at home; just under half had parents who reported at least some Native language use at home.

**Source:** Fall 2015 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.  
**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI programs in fall 2015. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. American Indian and Alaska Native children includes children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity. This characteristic is based on the parent's report of any languages spoken in the home, and therefore may sum to greater than 100 percent if more than one is spoken.

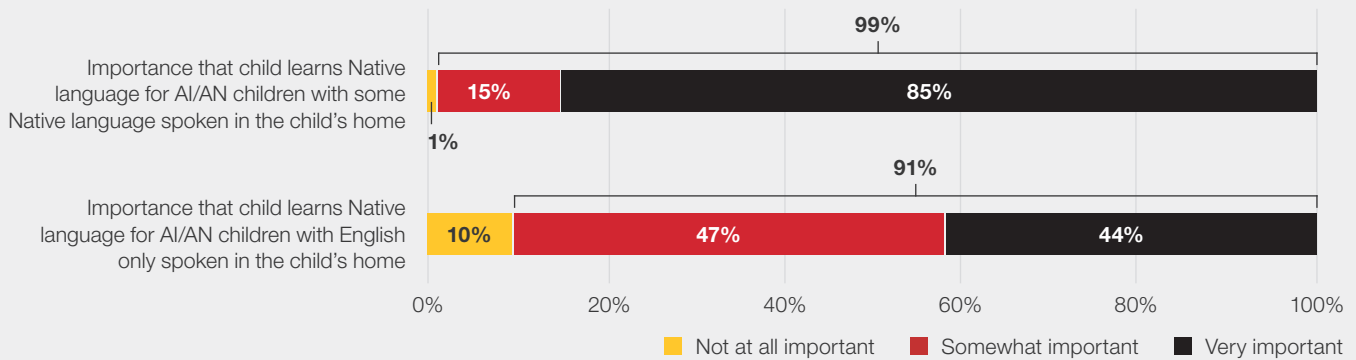
**Question 2: What percent of children lived in homes in which Native language was the primary language?**



The majority of AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start were in homes where English was the primary language.

**Source:** Fall 2015 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.  
**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI programs in fall 2015. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. American Indian and Alaska Native children include children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity. This characteristic is based on the parent's report of whether a language other than English is spoken in the child's home and whether the child's parent primarily uses this language when speaking with the child.

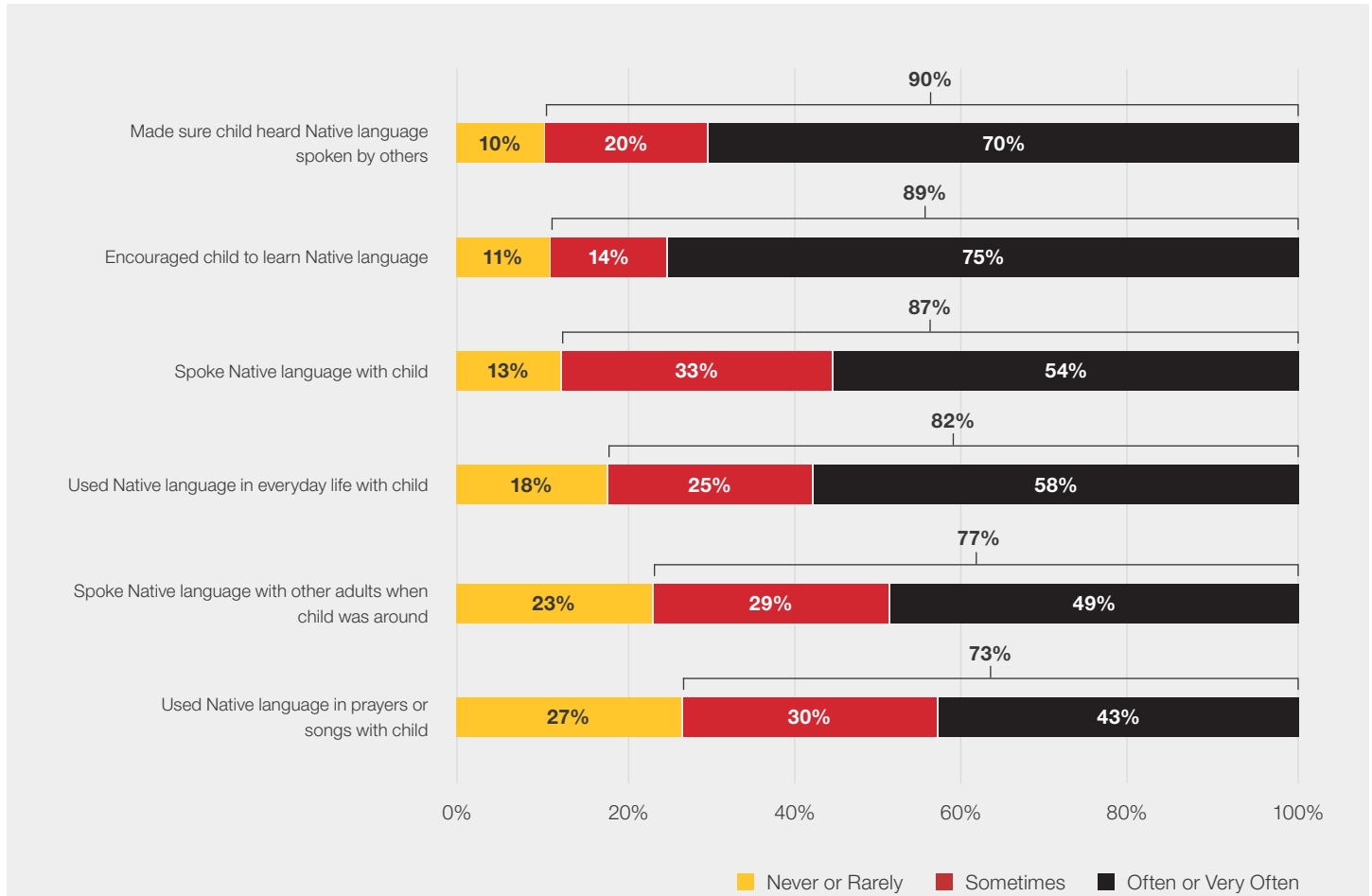
**Question 3: How important was it to parents for their child to learn a Native language?**



The majority of AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start live in homes where some Native language was spoken. In homes where English only was spoken, 91% of parents reported that it was somewhat or very important for their child to learn a Native language. In homes with some Native language use, 99% of children had parents who felt it was somewhat or very important for their child to learn a Native language.

**Source:** Fall 2015 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.  
**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI programs in fall 2015. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. American Indian and Alaska Native children includes children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity.

**Question 4: Among children who had a Native language spoken at home, how did their parents report supporting Native language learning?**



Among AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start whose parents reported at least some Native language use at home, parents reported different ways they supported their child to learn the Native language.

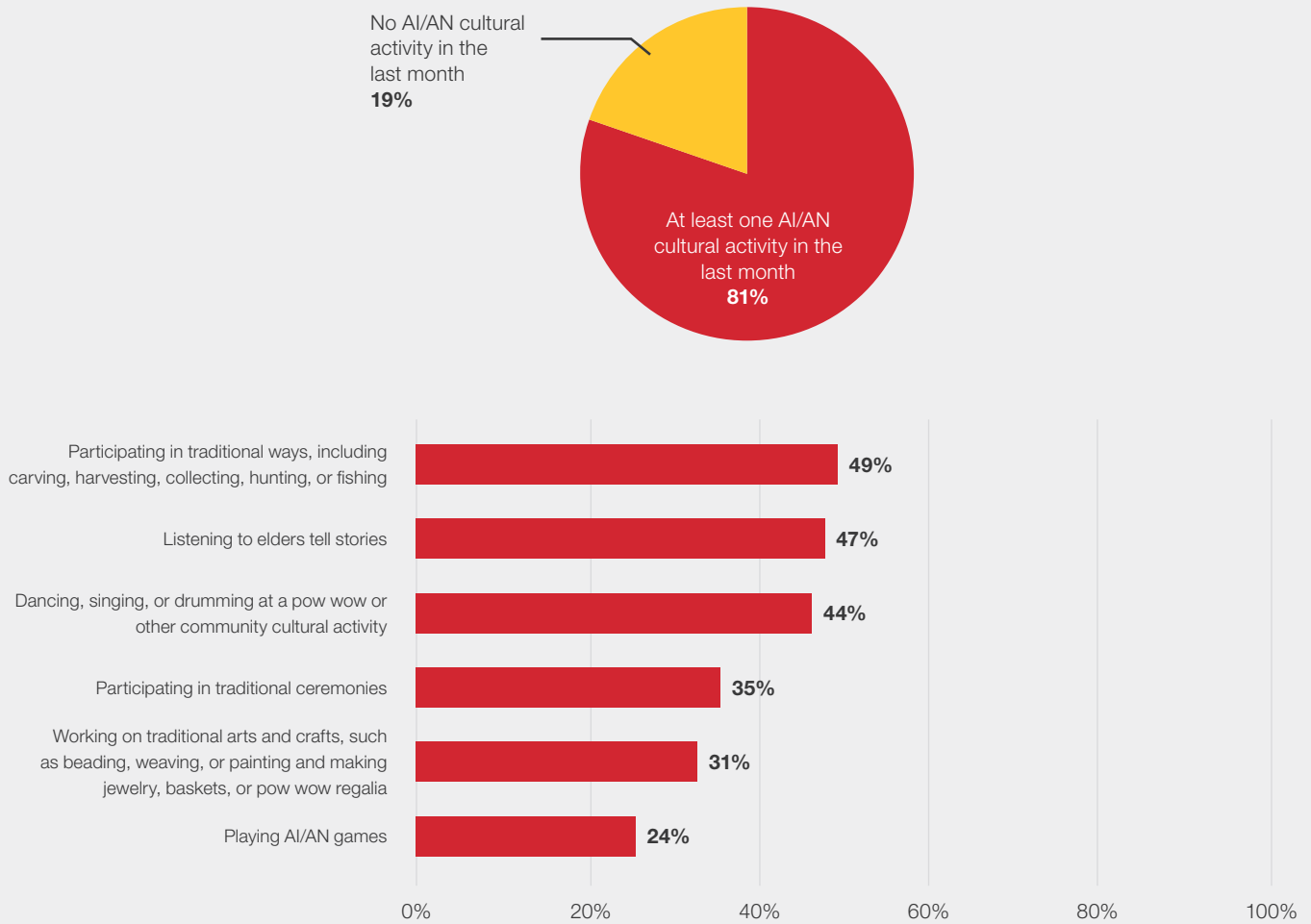
The most commonly reported ways of supporting their child to learn Native language sometimes, often, or very often were encouraging the child to learn the Native language (90%) and making sure the child heard Native language spoken by others (89%).

While parents were not as likely to report often or very often speaking to the child in a Native language (54% spoke the Native language with the child and 58% used a Native language in everyday life with the child), most parents reported engaging in these activities at least sometimes (87% spoke a Native language with the child and 82% used a Native language in everyday life with the child).

**Source:** Fall 2015 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.

**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI programs in fall 2015. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Households that do not include a biological/adoptive mother and/or biological/adoptive father are not included in the relevant percentage calculations for Native language use. American Indian and Alaska Native children includes children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity.

**Question 5: What percent of AI/AN children participated in community cultural activities in the past month?**



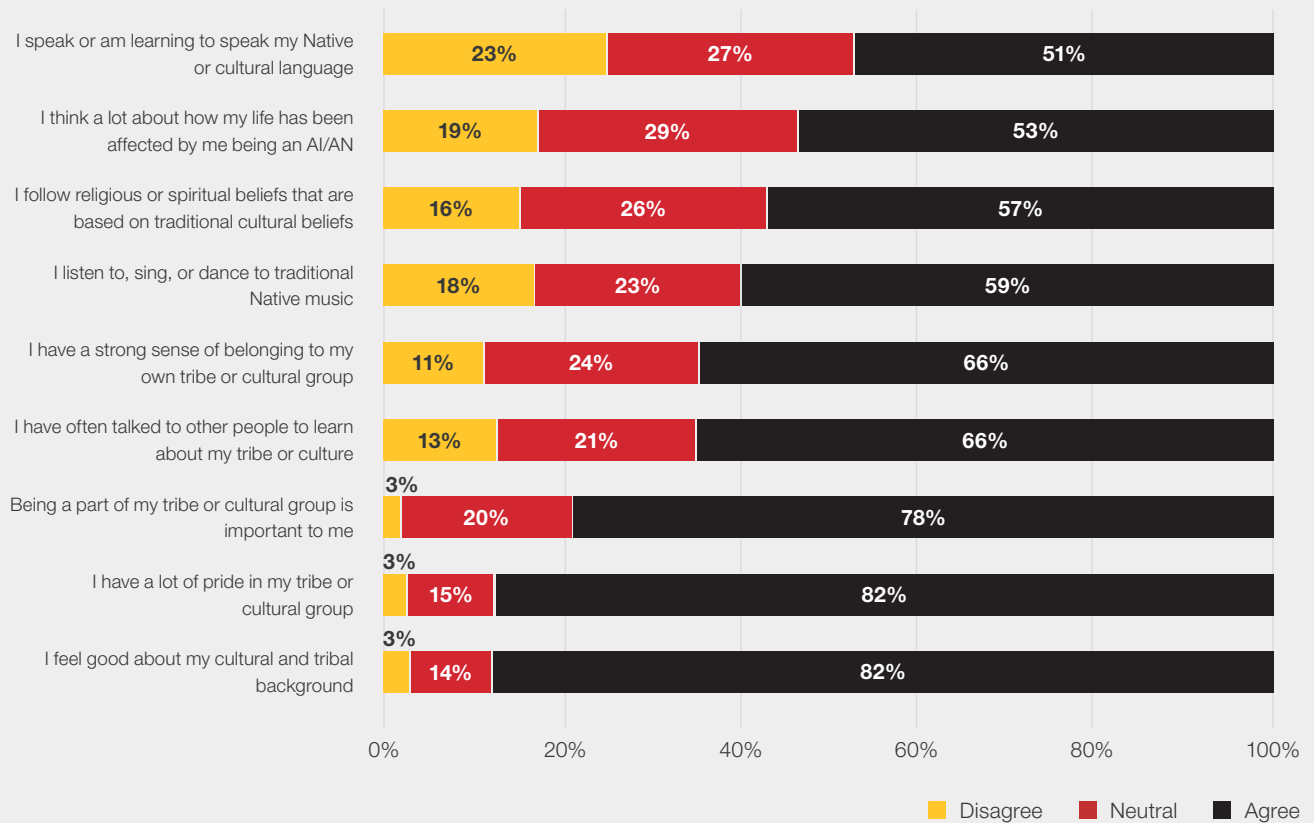
The majority (81%) of AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start participated in at least one AI/AN cultural activity in the community in the last month according to their parents' report.

The most common past-month AI/AN community cultural activities for AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start were participating in traditional ways, which included carving, harvesting, collecting, hunting or fishing; listening to elders tell stories; and dancing, singing, or drumming at a pow wow or other community cultural activity. Other activities included participating in traditional ceremonies; working on traditional arts and crafts; and playing AI/AN games.

**Source:** Fall 2015 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.  
**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI programs in fall 2015. American Indian and Alaska Native children includes children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity.



Question 6: What were parents' reports of their own cultural connections?



The majority of AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start had parents who reported a variety of Native or cultural beliefs and practices.

The majority of children had parents who reported feeling good about their cultural backgrounds and having a lot of pride in their tribe or cultural group (82% agreed). Approximately 78% of children had parents who reported that being a part of their tribe or cultural group was important to them.

Over half of children had parents who reported a variety of cultural or language activities, including learning or speaking a Native language (51% agreed); following traditional religious or spiritual beliefs (57% agreed); or listening to, singing, or dancing to Native music (59% agreed).

**Source:** Spring 2016 AI/AN FACES Parent Survey.

**Note:** Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Region XI Head Start in fall 2015 and who were still enrolled in spring 2016. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. American Indian and Alaska Native children includes children whose parents reported they were American Indian or Alaska Native only or in combination with another race or Hispanic ethnicity.

## What story do these data tell?

The data presented in this brief inform our understanding of the Native language and cultural experiences that AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start have at home and in their communities. They tell the story of Region XI Head Start children's Native language and cultural experiences through the eyes of their parents.

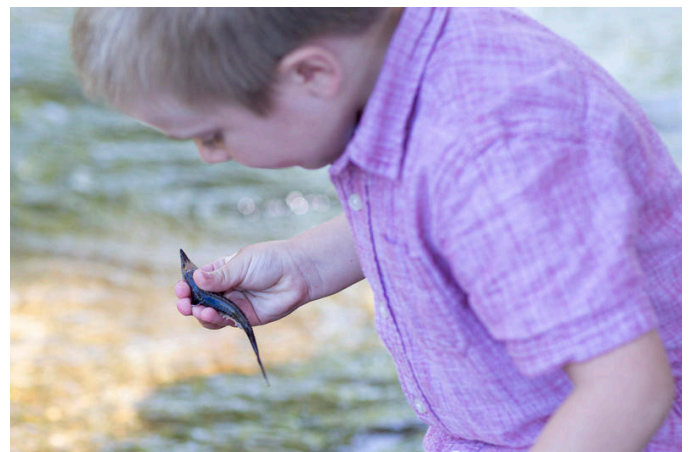


<http://gutierrezphotography.com/gutierrez-photography-in-honor-of-mothers-pictures-of-moms-their-children-at-the-alaska-native-heritage-center-anchorage/>

### Importance of Native language in the face of rapid declines in Native language fluency

Knowledge and use of Indigenous languages has rapidly declined over the years due to postcolonial policies and social pressures (Dussias, 1999; Oster et al., 2014). With the steady and rapid decline in fluent Native language speakers, it is not surprising that, according to parent report, just less than half (46%) of all AI/AN Region XI Head Start children reside in homes in which at least some Native language is spoken and that only 6% of AI/AN Region XI Head Start children reside in homes in which a Native language is spoken as the primary language (see questions 1 and 2). These percentages likely vary across communities as the information we present in this brief represent the experiences for all Region XI AI/AN children. Some communities have many Native language speakers, while others have very few or none at all (U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2015).

Almost all Region XI AI/AN children had parents who reported that they believed in the importance of their child learning a Native language (see question 3), foregrounding the centrality of Native language for cultural practices and lifeways in tribal communities. Parents who reported a Native language spoken at home engage in a number of activities to support their child in learning a Native language (see question 4). The activities most likely to be reported as occurring often or very often included encouraging the child to learn the Native language (75%) and making sure the child heard the Native language spoken by others (70%). Given the scarcity of fluent Native language speakers in many tribes, it is important to note that these most frequently reported activities, even among families who report a Native language is spoken at home, do not require the parent to be fluent in the Native language as they provide opportunities to learn through exposure to Native language from other sources. While language fluency and language use are distinct with likely different impacts on children's language ability, our data indicate that many families are supporting Native language acquisition through small building blocks.



Logan Dey examines his sturgeon before releasing it into the river. <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/little-traverse-bay-bands-odawa-indians-has-always-been-home>



## Importance of AI/AN cultural practices and lifeways

In addition to supporting children's Native language learning, the majority (81%) of AI/AN children in Region XI had parents who also reported that their child participated in cultural activities in the community (see question 5). The most common past-month AI/AN cultural activities for AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start were participating in traditional ways, which included carving, harvesting, collecting, hunting or fishing (49%); listening to elders tell stories (47%); and dancing, singing, or drumming at a pow wow or other community cultural activity (44%). Again, it is important to note that these aggregate figures do not show the vast differences across Native communities in the types and forms of traditional cultural activities and when it is considered appropriate for children to engage in these activities.

With respect to parents' cultural connections and beliefs, the majority of children (82%) had parents who reported feeling good about their cultural backgrounds and having pride in their tribe or cultural group (see question 6). Approximately 78% of children had parents who reported that being a part of their tribe or cultural group is important to them. Research has found that AI/AN teen parents who have strong cultural connections are more likely to have positive parenting and family functioning and less likely to engage in substance use (Barlow et al., 2010).



Lawrence McDonald, a Colville and Nez Perce Indian, chats with Kaienna Noel, 3, while dancing in the Celebrating Salish Conference pow wow March 7 at Northern Quest Resort and Casino (Jesse Tinsley). The three-day conference focused on the revival of the Salish language. As reported in <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2013/mar/14/tribes-keep-language-alive/>

## Guidelines for Application of the Data

These data describe the overall experiences of AI/AN Head Start children in Region XI across programs and communities. Because of the variation in language use and cultural practices across AI/AN communities, caution must be taken in how the data are interpreted and applied. The data do not describe the experiences of individual AI/AN children. They do not describe the experiences of AI/AN children who are not in Region XI Head Start programs. They also do not describe the experiences of specific AI/AN communities or programs.

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*“It seems like it is important and helpful to connect language acquisition to health and education outcomes. And not just western medicine health and education outcomes, but to outcomes that are important to respective Tribal communities like knowledge of self, connection to spirituality, knowledge of place and purpose within the community, and connection to beliefs, teachings and practices that created vibrant, healthy communities before western practices and policies hurt our people profoundly. I believe that in our language and culture we find the strength and resiliency that have allowed our people to survive to now. And I think that through that, we will continue to thrive as Tribal Nations.”*

— Tribal early childhood education program administrator

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## Policy and practice implications

The information presented in this brief indicates that AI/AN children in Region XI Head Start had parents who valued children's Native language learning and participation in cultural events. This finding is particularly important given the fact that many AI/AN communities have experienced significant declines in the capacity for passing on such knowledge (Morris, 2015), and, as sovereign nations, AI/AN communities have been addressing issues of Native language and culture revitalization for many years. Each AI/AN community holds the knowledge regarding their unique strengths and needs. However, their capacity to engage in this work is limited due to historic federal policies and the stripping of resources during colonization efforts.

Historically, policies and practices in education have hindered young children's Native language learning and cultural development. While involuntary boarding school experiences and bans on the use of Native languages and practices from the 1800s through the 1980s effectively halted the passing of Native language and cultural practices from generation to generation, current practices regarding workforce qualifications and English-only legislation in some states hinder progress in AI/AN communities' Native language and culture revitalization efforts.

Alternatively, more recent understandings of the importance of supporting Native language development in the early years and the role of early childhood education in this process have led to a shift toward supporting early childhood programs as allies to Native language revitalization efforts. The Head Start Program Performance Standards, specifically standard 1302.36 *Tribal language preservation and revitalization*, clarifies that programs serving AI/AN children "may integrate efforts to preserve, revitalize, restore, or maintain the tribal language for these children into program services."

Moreover, community-based credentialing to certify language teachers and support for bilingual instruction and assessments in languages other than English can



Holy Childhood boarding school circa 1893, Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians Archives and Records. As reported in: <http://michiganradio.org/post/native-american-boarding-schools-have-nearly-killed-michigans-native-language#stream/0>

support AI/AN communities' efforts to revitalize Native language and culture by removing some of the obstacles. Home- and center-based early childhood education and care programs such as Home Visiting, Head Start, and Child Care can support the inclusion of Native language and culture in the programs' home-to-school connection efforts. These programs are in a unique position to get to know families and build upon families' specific cultural strengths (see Sarche et al., 2020, for description of Native cultural and language experiences in Region XI classrooms and programs).

Focusing on cultural strengths has the potential to build trust and provide opportunities for collaboration between families and program staff to support young children's engagement with Native language and cultural practices.

This work requires hiring Native language speakers. However, in some communities, the few Native language speakers are elders without early childhood education credentials. Yet these individuals hold rich cultural knowledge and wisdom that could benefit children, families, and staff. Some Region XI programs have allocated funding so that these knowledge holders can work alongside teachers and credentialed program staff in supporting families and children to engage with Native language and cultural practices. Connecting AI/AN children and families with their Native language and cultural practices supports a world view that promotes cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being for children, their families, and the staff working in AI/AN communities.



Dancers line up during the Grand Entry at the Hannahville powwow (Emily Fox). As reported in: <http://michiganradio.org/post/how-potawatomi-tribe-lost-its-culture-and-what-it-takes-bring-it-back>

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*“Overall, I think our messaging from early childhood education and care programs could be stronger and more deliberate around language acquisition. Cultural programming, activities, teachings, and exposure are all frequently requested by both the community and program staff. Perhaps there is an opportunity to promote language and culture in a way that provides family, community, and early childhood education and care serving staff with support for learning tribal language and culture while continuing and strengthening the work in our programs.”*

*— Tribal early childhood education program administrator*

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## AI/AN FACES 2015

Head Start is a national program designed to promote children's school readiness by enhancing their social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The program provides educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to enrolled children and their families. Head Start places special emphasis on helping preschoolers develop the reading, language, social-emotional, mathematics, and science skills they need to be successful in school. The program also seeks to engage parents in their children's learning and to promote progress toward the parents' own educational, literacy, and employment goals (ACF 2015a). Head Start aims to achieve these goals by providing comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and their families through grants to local public agencies and to private nonprofit and for profit organizations. Region XI Head Start programs also offer traditional language and cultural practices based on community needs, wishes, and resources.

This research brief draws upon data from AI/AN FACES 2015, which is the first national study of Region XI Head Start children and their families, classrooms, and programs. Other AI/AN FACES 2015 products describe the study's design and methodology and the characteristics of Region XI Head Start children in fall 2015 and spring 2016 (Bernstein et al. 2018), children's progress over the program year (Malone et al., 2018), fall portrait (OPRE, 2018), and children's Native language and cultural experiences in the classroom (Sarche et al., 2018).

For AI/AN FACES 2015, we selected a sample to represent all children enrolled in Region XI Head Start in fall 2015. We selected a nationally representative sample of Region XI Head Start programs from the 2012–2013 Head Start Program Information Report, with one to two centers per program and two to four classrooms per center. Within each classroom,

we selected all children for the study. In total, 21 programs, 36 centers, 73 classrooms, and 1,049 children participated in the study. The sample used for this brief includes 708 AI/AN children who were enrolled in Region XI Head Start in fall 2015. All findings are weighted to represent this population.

### Measures for this brief

Data for the current brief were contained in the AI/AN FACES 2015 parent survey. Parents completed surveys via phone or online, providing information about their Region XI children's home and community Native culture and language experiences. The surveys included questions about how important it is that their child learn their Native language, frequency of Native language use, and community activities such as participating in traditional ceremonies. Parents were also asked about aspects of their own cultural connections and identity. In the fall, 83% of parents completed surveys, and in the spring, 82% of parents completed surveys.

#### *About the parents*

Surveys were completed by one person in the family for the child selected to participate in the study. In the full AI/AN FACES 2015 sample, 79% of the parent survey respondents were biological/adoptive mothers, 9% were biological/adoptive fathers, and the remainder were other household members. Given the focus on AI/AN cultural experiences at home and in the community, this brief focuses only on the experiences shared by parents of AI/AN children.

#### *About the children's race/ethnicity*

Child race/ethnicity is based on parent survey items asking separately about ethnicity and race and is defined as Hispanic/Latino ethnicity (regardless of race); American Indian or Alaska Native,



non-Hispanic; White, non-Hispanic; African American, non-Hispanic; Asian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic; multi-racial or bi-racial, non-Hispanic; and other, non-Hispanic.

Children could be identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity. This brief includes all children whose parents reported they are American Indian or Alaska Native on the survey item about race regardless of whether they reported another race for their children or indicated that their child

was Hispanic/Latino. This brief includes all American Indian or Alaska Native, non-Hispanic children and may include children defined as Hispanic/Latino or multi-racial/bi-racial, non-Hispanic.

#### *About the sample used in this report*

The sample used for this brief includes information reported by the parent or family member who completed the fall and spring surveys for the 708 AI/AN children participating in the study. All findings are weighted to represent the children enrolled in Region XI Head Start programs in fall 2015.

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Source: National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning

# Home and Community Native Language and Cultural Experiences Among AI/AN Children in Region XI Head Start: Findings From the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey 2015

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To learn more about AI/AN FACES, visit

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/american-indian-and-alaska-native-head-start-family-and-child-experiences-survey-faces>.

A restricted-use data set is available for additional analyses by qualified researchers in order to further provide critically needed information about Region XI Head Start programs and the children and families they serve. Information about the data set and how to apply for access is available at <https://www.researchconnections.org/childcare/studies/36804>.



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