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 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
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.
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. For example, 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.
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.
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.
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
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
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
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.
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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