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# *Honoring Cultural Traditions:* Early Head Start Programs in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities



Early Head Start  
Programs in American  
Indian and Alaska  
Native Communities

Prepared by

Early Head Start National Resource Center @  
ZERO TO THREE



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth, and Families  
Office of Head Start

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This document was developed by the staff of the Early Head Start National Resource Center @ ZERO TO THREE in collaboration with the Office of Head Start. The contents of the paper are not intended to be an interpretation of policy.

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# *Honoring Cultural Traditions:* Early Head Start Programs in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Early Head Start (EHS) programs across the country incorporate the cultures and languages, the strengths and challenges of the families and communities they serve. The American Indian and Alaska Native EHS programs undertake this work in a unique context; as they provide the comprehensive services that characterize EHS, many programs are also committed to restoring the traditional practices of their families. Language, customs, values, and beliefs can survive only if they are passed on to the next generation, who in turn practice and pass on these traditions to their children. Because of decades of assimilation and poverty, only the tribal elders still hold the language and traditions. The American Indian and Alaska Native communities are using EHS programs as one way of bringing these cultures to very young children and their families in meaningful ways.



This Technical Assistance Paper will provide a brief overview of the issues unique to EHS programs working in American Indian and Alaska Native communities and will highlight the features of several programs working with American Indian and Alaska Native families across the country. Although we highlight some of the features that American Indian and Alaska Native programs share with one another, there are many cultural variations between and within these indigenous populations.

## **HOW ARE AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE FAMILIES SERVED BY EARLY HEAD START?**

Before the creation of American Indian and Alaska Native EHS programs, many of the services were either not available or not offered consistently to young families on American Indian reservations or in Alaska Native communities. The assistant director of one program said, “Without EHS, some mothers weren’t getting prenatal care, the children’s health needs weren’t tracked, parents didn’t know about nutrition needs or understand the stages of development. Now they know what to expect from infants and toddlers, to understand them and watch for their cues” (EHS assistant program director, personal communication, October 24, 2006).

EHS programs may offer center-based, home-based, or combination services in responding to the needs of their community. The idea of sending babies and toddlers to “school” was originally a foreign one to Native American families; however, over time, families have enthusiastically embraced both home-based and center-based services that EHS programs have offered in

flexible forms. For example, an American Indian program offers center-based, full-day care during the school year but offers additional home visits for families who keep their children home during the summer.

EHS works with very young American Indian and Alaska Native children and their families through programs funded by the American Indian and Alaska Native Program Branch (AI-ANPB) of the Office of Head Start and through community agencies located in areas where American Indian and Alaska Native families live. EHS programs that are funded through AI-ANPB are either tribes or corporations that have a formal treaty and sovereign status with the federal government.<sup>1</sup> These EHS programs funded through AI-ANPB have a specific mandate to serve American Indian and Alaska Native children. However, EHS

programs in community-based settings base their enrollment criteria on their individual community assessments and may serve both American Indian and Alaska Native as well as non-American Indian and non-Alaska Native children. The high percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native families in these communities influences the program services offered. In both cases, EHS programs provide culturally responsive support and services as well as strengthen early childhood development and healthy family functioning.

### **FAMILY SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Although there are many diverse cultural traditions and languages within American Indian and Alaska

#### **THE FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE OF THE RED CLIFF BAND OF LAKE SUPERIOR CHIPPEWAS**

The Red Cliff EHS program was awarded a demonstration grant for working with fathers in 2000. The initiative used the Touchpoints model, traditional cultural practices, and individualized work concerning specific fatherhood issues.

Red Cliff fathers have responded to many innovative approaches, including the following:

- Creating an outdoor cultural village for children and families that includes wigwams, powwow grounds, and traditional fireplaces
- Recruiting fathers and extended family members to demonstrate and teach drumming to children, which has involved children even as young as the age of 1 year
- Bringing cultural activities, customs, and traditions into classrooms and homes, including a recent lesson that involved using furs and hides to teach children about local wildlife and traditional approaches to interacting with animals
- Recruiting fathers and other family members to build a large storage shed to provide additional space for the Early Childhood Center, a project on which volunteers worked every weekend for 3 months
- Starting a weekly workout night at a local recreation facility, where fathers can come to exercise and to learn about early childhood development
- Holding a "Sharing Our Children" event during which fathers held their young children and shared with the group some special aspects of their relationship, including talking about their child's birth and about sharing native traditions with their child
- Working with fathers on an individual basis around a broad range of fatherhood issues such as custody, child support, unemployment, substance abuse, and mental health

*Source:* Father Involvement, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewas by TriTAC, 2003, retrieved October 28, 2006 from <http://www.nccic.org/tribal/effective/redcliff/fatherinvolvement.html>. Adapted with permission.

<sup>1</sup>The U.S. federal government recognizes 562 tribal governments in the United States. Tribes must apply and go through a rigorous process to be formally "recognized" by the U.S. government to receive sovereign status and to operate under a government-to-government relationship. Federally recognized tribes are eligible for financial assistance, support programs, and other benefits from the federal government. Hundreds of other tribes are not federally recognized.

Native communities, the two groups also share similarities that have an effect on how they use EHS to partner with families and strengthen communities. For example, in rural locations such as Indian reservations and across the state of Alaska, access to resources and limited economic growth are common issues. Although these issues are not unique to American Indian and Alaska Native communities, an advocacy organization for Indian rights, the National Congress of American Indians, raises these issues as significant barriers to healthy family functioning and community life.<sup>3</sup> Members of this organization describe how many American Indian and Alaska Native communities face challenges securing the basic services necessary to create an infrastructure that will allow for a strong and vibrant community. Some of these challenges are described in the following sections.

**Transportation.** Transportation is a key factor in community building. Mobility allows individuals to attend school, hold jobs, access health care and other services, and fully participate in community life. Of the 547 federally recognized tribes, only 19 have a public transportation system funded by the Federal Transit Administration Section 18 program (Community Transportation Association, 2005). Two-thirds of reservation roads are unpaved and of poor quality, which has a major effect on highway safety. According to the Federal Highway Administration, the highway fatality rate on Indian reservation roads is 4 times the national average (Tribal Transportation Program Improvement Act of 2003). The tremendous geographic spread across some tribal lands poses additional challenges to initiating and maintaining a transportation infrastructure.

## THE TOUCHPOINTS MODEL IN AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE EARLY HEAD START PROGRAMS

In 2002, the AI-ANPB funded seven EHS programs to work with the Brazelton Touchpoints Center.<sup>2</sup> Both the EHS programs and the Touchpoints faculty have found this partnership to be educational and enriching.

The Touchpoints approach has provided tools for the tribal programs to use in achieving their goals of engaging parents, increasing parent involvement, and improving the self-esteem of both parents and teachers. The Touchpoints faculty not only taught but also modeled the skills of self-reflection in the service of building relationships. Ann Stadler, the director of Collaborative Development and Training at Brazelton Touchpoints Center described their work as a process of “mutual discovery” in which the Touchpoints staff members “go forward with permission” as they develop deeper, more trusting relationships (Personal communication, October 27, 2006).

Caregivers were encouraged to reflect on the parents’ experience, the child’s experience, and their own experience. They thought about what it might be like for a parent to walk into a center to leave his or her child. They considered how to make parents feel welcomed, for example, through their greetings and the conversations they might have. Some programs use teacher’s journals or back-and-forth journal exchanges between parents and teachers in reflective supervision sessions.

A key element of Touchpoints is using the language of the child’s behavior. The teacher describes the behavior in a neutral way and then listens to what the parent says. This approach lets the conversation go where the parent wants it to go.

Many programs have described Touchpoints as a powerful element in sharing information about child development and in engaging parents in meaningful relationships. The skills it enables also extend to program staff members’ ability to bring issues and feelings of dissatisfaction out for discussion and resolution.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, go to their Web site (<http://www.touchpoints.org>).

<sup>3</sup>See the Web site for the National Congress of American Indians (<http://www.ncai.org>).

**Telecommunications and technology.** Many American Indian and Alaska Native communities are lacking even a basic telephone network. In 1999, three reports (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999; Riley, Nassersharif, & Mullen, 1999; Benton Foundation, 1999) examining the state of connectivity in Indian country found that the capabilities of telecommunications and information technology infrastructures in American Indian and Alaska Native communities fall far behind the rest of the United States.

**Financial institutions.** Recent studies conclude that only 14% of American Indian and Alaska Native communities have access to a financial institution (Native American Financial Literacy Coalition, 2003). The lack of access to financial institutions creates a vicious cycle of financial instability and leaves American Indian and Alaska Native communities without the necessary financial resources to build their communities.

**Health care.** American Indian and Alaska Native peoples experience higher disease rates and lower life expectancy rates than any other racial or ethnic group in the country. The Centers for Disease Control (2004) reported that the prevalence of diabetes is more than twice that of all adults in the United States, as is the mortality rate for chronic liver disease. The rate of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome is the highest of any population group. Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for children older than the age of 1 year, and suicide rates for American Indian and Alaska Native youth are 3 times the rate for White children. Access to health services is a significant barrier because of lengthy travel distances to health-care facilities, lack of reliable transportation, and extensive waiting periods before appointments are available (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005).

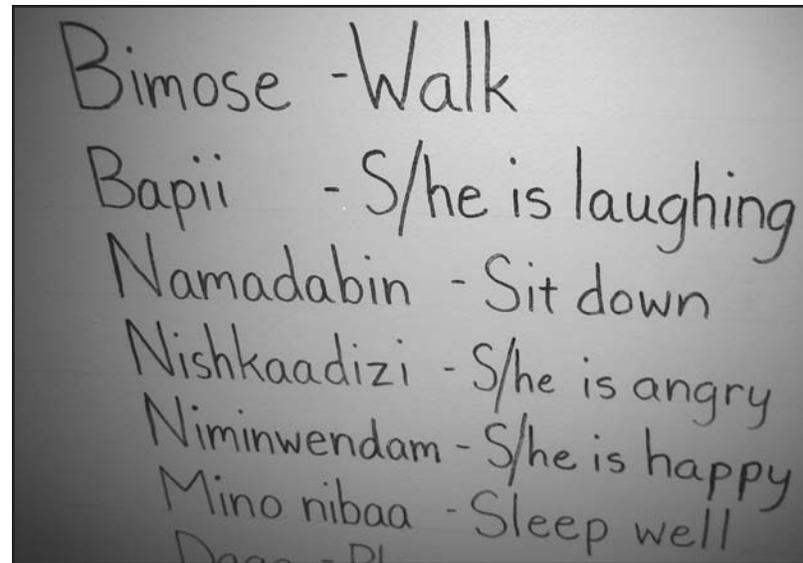


**Housing.** The National American Indian Housing Council (2005) reports that less than 33% of the residents of Indian reservations own their home; 40% of Indians live in substandard housing; 12% of Indian houses lack kitchens; and 11% lack bathrooms. Overcrowding, lack of plumbing, and substandard conditions contribute to a host of social, medical, and economic problems.

**Economic development.** The poverty rate for American Indian and Alaska Native Americans is approximately 26%—more than twice the average for all Americans. The unemployment rate is 22% compared with 6% for the general U.S. population (Taylor & Kalt, 2005). Advocates such as the National American Indian Council (2005) assert that myths about the benefits of the gaming industry for tribes who operate casinos has led to the misconception that casino revenues have eliminated the need for other sources of financial assistance. In reality, the living conditions in American Indian and Alaska Native communities still fall far below acceptable standards.

### THE HEAD START PROGRAM PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

*The Head Start Program Performance Standards recognize the critical importance of respecting individual differences and honoring family culture. EHS and Head Start programs must “provide an environment of acceptance that supports and respects gender, culture, language, ethnicity, and family composition” [45 CFR 1304.21(a)(1)(iii)]. The regulations also require that “all interactions with families be respectful of each family’s diversity and cultural and ethnic background” [45 CFR 1304.40(a)(4)(5)]. In addition, each program’s approach to curriculum must be “developmentally and linguistically appropriate, recognizing that children have individual rates of development as well as individual interests, temperaments, languages, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles” [45 CFR 1304.21(a)(1)(i)].*



### REVITALIZING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN EARLY EDUCATION SETTINGS

Today, educators recognize how child development and early learning are enhanced by cultural diversity, and they design curricula and educational materials that are culturally sensitive and inclusive. Historically, the goal of education for American Indian and Native Alaskan children has been to assimilate students into the predominant culture, which has consequently obliterated the rich and varied American Indian and Native Alaska heritage (Tippeconnic, 2000). EHS programs use a variety of strategies for bringing the native language and traditions to life within the American Indian and Alaska Native programs.

Some programs are creating immersion classrooms where the teachers use only the native language with babies and toddlers all day. Many programs invite tribal elders to visit the classrooms regularly to speak their native language and sing traditional songs with the babies. The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council EHS program uses native language as well as flute and drum music in their work with expectant families, exposing the babies in the womb to traditional sounds and rhythms. When the baby is born, the prenatal instructor arranges a ceremony that honors the generations and welcomes the new baby into the tribe. Elders talk about the family’s background, the child’s name, and the importance of being a member of the tribe.

The Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe recently completed construction of a longhouse. Children and families from the EHS and Head Start programs visit the longhouse twice a month to sing traditional songs and learn ceremonial protocols. The traditional role of nature is taught through a variety of experiences. The S’Klallam EHS program participates in “gathering beaches,” activities that include digging for clams and participating in a traditional clambake cooked on a fire built over rocks. Cooking salmon on a stick and baking bread in sand are other activities overseen by the elders. The Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewas used “furs and hides to teach children about local wildlife and traditional approaches to interacting with animals” (TriTAC, 2003). A program director described the use of nature this way:

*We studied our trees and animals and how our ancestors may have referred to them. Our curriculum followed the seasons, how the animals prepared for the winter. The elders would come in and tell the stories and the legends. (Willis & Edwards, 1999, p.11 )*

## TLINGIT AND HAIDA EARLY HEAD START, JUNEAU, ALASKA

The Central Council Tlingit and Haida EHS program developed the Alaska Native Home-Based Video Project in support of their efforts to promote culture and language development. The videos are created for parents and caregivers and can be used in home-based or center-based settings. The videos support parents by examining the richness of their heritage, their parenting traditions, and the connection between Native parents and their elders. The videos for parents of infants and toddlers, titled “Parent’s Journal,” uses traditional values to explore topics such as child development, breastfeeding, newborn care, creativity, brain development, father involvement, language and literacy, preventing Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and other parenting concerns. There is another set of videos called “Family Feathers” for parents of older children. Each of the videos in both series offers topics for discussion, activity ideas, ways to communicate about the topic with families, and additional resources.



In an attempt to determine how to best support the early education of young American Indian and Alaska Native children, the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives at Mississippi State University and the American Indian Leadership Program at the Center for Rural Education and Communities at Pennsylvania State University held a forum in 2005 on American Indian and Alaska Native early learning and development. The goals of the participants were to identify gaps in rural Indian early education and initiate research projects to improve the quality of early education for American Indian and Alaska Native children in rural communities.

Tribal leaders, along with experts in early childhood education (Rinehart, 2000), are beginning to identify effective approaches for fostering the progress of linguistically and culturally diverse learners, for example,

- Connecting generations of knowledge, particularly supporting oral traditions in native populations;
- Encouraging relationships between children and other significant adults, recognizing that intergenerational connections are important to the well-being of children;
- Acknowledging ancient links to history, thought, emotions, and practices still relevant today;
- Encouraging spiritual grounding;
- Fostering connections to community participation and history;
- Developing or honoring a unique worldview; and
- Opening pathways that allow American Indian and Alaska Native children to be successful in many ways.

Valuing diversity, respecting ethnicity, building on family strengths, and meeting community needs has long been central to Head Start's success. American Indian and Native Alaska EHS programs reflect Head Start's commitment to develop culturally responsive curricula that emerges from the program participants, reflects deeply held values, and strengthens the relationships between children, families, and communities.

### **THE AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE PROGRAM BRANCH OF THE OFFICE OF HEAD START**

The AI-ANPB of the Office of Head Start first funded American Indian and Alaska Native programs in 1965 with 43 grantees in 14 states. During the next 5 years, the Office of Head Start (formerly the Head Start Bureau) funded 26 more tribal governments to support Head Start Programs, bringing the total number of grantees on American Indian reservations to 69 in 19 states. The next expansion period came 8 years later in 1978, and EHS was initiated in 1995. In EHS, the smallest program enrolls 12 children and the largest 162. Currently, there are 43 American Indian and Alaska Native EHS grantees located in 19 states across America. Grantees provide services not only through center- and home-based options but also through combinations of those options and local designs. In all program design options, services are provided through a holistic approach encompassing comprehensive services to children and families.

The American Indian and Alaska Native programs are administered centrally from Washington, D.C. through Region XI, AI-ANPB. Region XI, AI-ANPB plays an integral role in the policy development of the Office of Head Start by conducting tribal leadership consultations, which provide a forum to identify concerns and facilitate needed change.

EHS programs are offered through community-based agencies across America, and many serve American Indian and Alaska Native families who may not be members of tribes, who live in recognized tribal communities that do not have their own EHS programs, or whose tribes are not recognized by the

### **EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE, CHEROKEE, NORTH CAROLINA**

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians live and work on 57,000 acres of trust land in the mountains of Western North Carolina. The EHS program currently serves 32 children in center-based care, 20 home-based families, and 18 pregnant women.

The EHS program is designed to reflect the cultural heritage of the community. Ninety-seven percent of the staff are from the community. The program strives to increase every child's knowledge of the Cherokee culture by introducing the language, having cultural foods on the menu, and inviting Cherokee elders and craftsmen to the classroom to share their skills with the children. Images of native culture decorate the classroom. For example, in one room, the seven clans of the Cherokee are each represented with a corresponding animal mask on the wall.

The Tribal Child Care program offers the Immersion Classroom, which was implemented in April of 2004 as part of the Eastern Band's Language Revitalization Effort. The program currently serves eight infants who began the program between birth and age 6 months. All of the teachers in the classroom are fluent Cherokee speakers. The classroom follows Head Start Program Performance Standards, and all the teachers must obtain the Child Development Associate credential. The children are completely immersed in the Cherokee language from the minute they enter the classroom. No English is spoken throughout the day. Staff members are currently planning a second Immersion Classroom for 2-year-olds. At this time, the Immersion teachers visit the EHS classrooms each day to provide daily exposure to the Cherokee language. The teachers join in the activities of the children and speak with the infants and toddlers as they play or go about their routines. An Immersion Classroom for the Head Start programs is planned for 2007.

Members of the community worked together to build an outdoor environment for the center-based EHS and Head Start programs that reflects their heritage and cultural traditions. In one outdoor area, the Cherokee syllabary, or alphabet, is represented in tiles on the wall and on the ground. In addition, the Head Start playground includes "talking trees" where children can enter an enclosed space and listen to recordings that teach Cherokee language and history.

U.S. government. These EHS programs that are working through community agencies to serve American Indian and Alaska Native families are all grappling with similar issues with respect to preserving American Indian and Alaska Native culture and revitalizing lost languages. In addition, they are also facing the challenges that many rural American families face, including poverty, isolation, and limited resources.

EHS and Head Start programs are playing an important role in helping American Indian and Alaska Native families to improve the quality of their lives through their revitalized cultural traditions.



### **SHOSHONE AND ARAPAHO EARLY HEAD START, WIND RIVER, WYOMING**

The Shoshone and Arapaho EHS and Head Start programs are located in West Central Wyoming on the Wind River Indian Reservation, home of the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes. The EHS program was funded in 1997 and currently serves 48 children and their families in the center-based program. Approximately 40% of the families include teen parents, and approximately 60% of parents are either working or in school. The community faces tremendous challenges in terms of alcohol and substance abuse.

Ninety-four percent of the staff members are Native Americans. Each week, the Head Start culture teacher visits in the toddler room. Native language and music tapes are played in the classrooms during quiet times. The tribes are looking into implementing an immersion program where all instruction would be in the native language.

The EHS program has been a great asset for the children and for the working parents. The children entering Head Start from the EHS program are generally significantly more advanced than those coming directly from the home to Head Start.

### **ST. MARY'S EARLY HEAD START, ST. MARY'S, ALASKA**

The village of St. Mary's is located in the Yukon Delta and has approximately 500 residents. St. Mary's is accessible only by plane, boat, or snowmobile. The residents are primarily Yu'pik and continue to follow a subsistence way of life. They hunt, fish, gather berries, and sew their own clothing, including fur parkas and boots. There are few opportunities for employment, and the cost for consumer goods is high. Most adults rely on hunting, gathering, and fishing to ensure their families have enough food and necessities for living. However, the subsistence living requires seasonal absences from other work, which further complicates the employment situation. Many families have indoor plumbing only in the bathroom, and few homes have hot water. The cost of electricity is exceptionally high.

St. Mary's is extremely isolated and has few resources for families. Medical and dental providers do not live in the community and visit only periodically to provide services. Pregnant women typically leave the community in the last months of their pregnancy and fly to Bethel where they can give birth at a medical facility, staying there until mother and baby are strong enough to fly back. Early intervention providers and other special service providers similarly are flown in periodically, but services are inconsistent.

The home-based EHS program brings families to the EHS center for weekly socializations where the families participate in group activities and share a meal. A typical meal might be berries, dried fish, and moose soup. Staff members will speak with the children about where the food comes from and about the different seasons that bring different foods, for example, moose hunting in the fall and salmon fishing in the spring. The EHS teachers sing songs, read stories, and play games that reflect the daily subsistence lifestyle of the community. The staff members, who are all members of the community, speak to the children in both English and in the native Yu'pik dialect.

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