

CULTURE FORWARD



VII. NATIVE YOUTH LEAD US TO RECLAIM OUR
AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING

SECTION OVERVIEW

- ▶ **Children are sacred and carry an important purpose in our lives and communities.**
- ▶ **Our youth are strong, resilient and represent the future of our communities.**
- ▶ **Family-based programs that strengthen children's social and emotional development reduce suicide risk among Native youth.**
- ▶ **Programs and policies that support youth development show our children their purpose and value in life.**

“As a Lakota, we think of our children, the world is ‘wakhan,’ wakhan is sacred, chosen, and we reintroduce that, that these children are sacred. We reintroduce that and sometimes it’s not there, the cultural components that are so vital. How children see the world, how we introduce the value of those elements of culture that are vital.”

—Tribal Leader

INTRODUCTION

Children are sacred to our communities. They carry forward our beliefs, cultures, strengths and traditions for future generations. It is our communities' responsibility to provide our children with a foundation for supporting their mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being over the course of their lives. This must start in early childhood. And, as they grow and learn, it becomes increasingly important to engage them in leadership roles. This section will discuss both topics: the importance of family-based early childhood approaches that nurture well-being and promote youth leadership in designing programs to support thriving futures.

HOW DOES FOCUSING ON EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND UPLIFTING YOUTH LEADERS PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE?

Early childhood from pregnancy to age three is known as the most critical developmental period in human life. It is when the building blocks of our social, emotional and behavioral well-being are formed through nurturing, protective and stimulating relationships with our caregivers. On the other hand, when children experience trauma, emotional and social neglect or harsh treatment early in life, their risks increase for suicide, substance use and other related behavioral, mental and spiritual challenges in adolescence and young adulthood. Developing community approaches to promoting early childhood development through home visiting and Early Head Start programming can help to protect against suicide across the life course (see stories below).

Our youth are reclaiming their role as leaders in our communities and beyond. Native youth councils are organizing across the country on reservations and in urban Native communities.

“Our children are our most valuable resource, and to me it’s not just about prevention, but it’s making them the best they can be. We want them to flourish. We want them to be an example to everybody else for what kids that have support can become. We want to look at the whole person, not just preventing suicide. We don’t want them just to survive, we want them to thrive.”

—Tribal Leader

Youth learn responsibility, grow as leaders and help others. Our communities know the importance of hearing from our youth and these councils provide our youth with a voice to make a difference. Some Native youth councils give direct input to governing bodies. For example, the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board’s (NPAIHB) Youth Delegates are appointed to one-year terms and they provide recommendations to the NPAIHB and other state and federal agencies about health programs and policies. Coupled with our obligation to teach and protect our youth is our responsibility to include their voices in leading our communities and beyond.

Family members and community stakeholders can play an important role in elevating youth voices and leadership. Specifically, engaging youth in the development and implementation of suicide prevention efforts, as well as strengths-based programming to promote protective factors, is key to success. Youth are closest to the solutions and know what will motivate their peers to live life with purpose and determination.

STORIES ABOUT HOW NATIVE YOUTH LEAD US TO RECLAIM OUR AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING

In this section we feature three examples of family-based, culturally adapted prevention programs: Family Spirit, Thiwáhe Gluwásh’akapi Program and Native H.O.P.E. Program. These three programs support our youth through distinct approaches, but at their core they recognize that our youth are vital to the survival of our future and are sacred gifts that we must protect.

Family Spirit Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

Family Spirit is an early childhood home visiting program designed with and for Native communities to prevent mental and behavioral health problems throughout the lifespan. The Family Spirit model is distinct from many other maternal, infant, early childhood home visiting programs in the U.S. in three main ways:

- 1. It leverages cultural assets and an Indigenous understanding of health;**
- 2. Encourages the use of culturally embedded family health coaches to deliver the program; and**
- 3. Addresses early behavioral and mental health, in addition to children’s physical needs.**

The Family Spirit Home Visiting Program has been successful in increasing parenting knowledge and involvement, decreasing maternal depression, improving home safety, reducing emotional and behavioral problems of mothers and decreasing social, emotional and behavioral problems of children. All of these results predict protection or lower risk of suicide and related problems later in life. Family Spirit started with the Navajo, White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache communities, but has now been

adopted by more than 120 tribal communities across Indian Country. An all-Native training team teaches the curriculum and program implementation to new communities who desire to use it.

Thiwáhe Gluwáš’akapi Middle School Children and Parents Program

In response to growing concerns about suicide and substance use among youth, one large reservation in the Midwest worked to adapt an evidence-based intervention, Strengthening Families, for their community. At the heart of the program, the pathway to reducing suicide and substance use was through the family. The community selected a family-based intervention and adapted it to align with their specific cultural values, traditions and practices. Thus, Thiwáhe Gluwáš’akapi, translated as “sacred home where families are made strong,” was born.

The program engages youth ages 10 to 14 along with their parents and other family members for seven weekly meetings. Each group includes eight to ten youth and their families. Families begin each weekly meeting by sharing a meal together before participating in separate youth and parent sessions, and later come together again for a family session. Weekly meetings are designed to:

1. **Build on family strengths;**
2. **Encourage appreciation for one another;**
3. **Improve family relationships;**
4. **Decrease family conflict; and**
5. **Decrease risky behavior among adolescents.**

As an example of how to engage youth in program development, local youth were heavily involved in shooting program videos to reflect community settings and were featured in the videos as actors.



Photo Credit: National Congress of American Indians

PROGRAMS WITH NATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

- National Congress of American Indians Youth Commission
- The Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB) Youth Delegates
- Center for Native American Youth — Champions for Change
- Urban Native Youth Association (First Nations, Canada)
- United Nations Indigenous Youth Caucus
- George Washington University’s Native American Political Leadership program
- United National Indian Tribal Youth, (UNITY)
- National Council of Urban Indian Health Youth Council

Native H.O.P.E. (Helping Our People Endure)

Native H.O.P.E. is a strengths-based Native youth leadership program that creates networks of youth natural helpers to prevent suicide. Adult leaders (teachers, counselors, spiritual and traditional healers) facilitate curriculum delivery to youth and support them as they embark on a community-based approach to suicide prevention. Training involves developing prevention strategies at multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, school, community), breaking “codes of silence” about suicide among youth and providing them with skills to identify risk, provide support and referrals and other strategies that allow youth leaders to build local capacity for suicide prevention. Native H.O.P.E. has been delivered to approximately 2,000 youth in both reservation and urban settings. Several studies evaluating Native H.O.P.E. have found increased traditional culture, resilience, community attachment and intergenerational connectedness after participation.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- ▶ Does your community have a youth council? Can one be started? Or can you think of ways that community organizations can actively support their goals?
- ▶ Consider adopting programs to promote healthy early childhood development. Some resources can be found through the Tribal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (Tribal-MIECHV) program.
- ▶ Identify suicide prevention resources that exist or are needed. When suicide prevention programs are being developed in a community, engage youth at all stages of planning and implementation.

- ▶ Encourage parents and community leaders to attend youth events, such as basketball games, rodeos, cultural events, council meetings and school events to bolster youths’ self-esteem.
- ▶ Encourage adults to get involved in agencies and organizations that support youth—such as parent-teacher organizations, school boards, Boys and Girls Club of America, Head Start and child welfare services.

LEARN MORE HERE:

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