

Walking The Good Path: Keeping American Indian Children Safe From Drugs and Alcohol

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Substance abuse is an alarming problem in American Indian communities. American Indians have a higher alcohol consumption rate than other ethnic groups in the United States (Weisner, Weibel-Orlando, & Long; 1984; Kuntz & Levy, 1994; Vanderwagen, Manson & Owen, 1986). Substance abuse related problems among American Indian populations include high unemployment rates (BIA 1993), low educational attainment, increased high school dropout rates, (BIA, 1993), child abuse (US Congress, 1976) and violent behavior (BIA, 1990). American Indian youth suffer similar problems to the adult American Indian population. There are high rates of problems associated with alcohol and drugs use (Trends for Indian Health, 1997; Mail and Johnson, 1993), school drop out (St. Germain 1995), running away (LaFromboise and Graff Low, 1989) and delinquency (Melton, 1995).

Younger American Indians, aged 15-35, tends to drink sporadically, be at higher risk for alcohol related injury arrest and death and have a higher blood alcohol content (May, 1994). American Indian youth between the ages of 15 and 24 have higher drug and alcohol related death rates than Caucasian adolescents (Trends for Indian Health, 1997). Peer related binge drinking on a regular basis has been found to be associated with high rates of alcohol related criminal activity, death and accidents (Mail & Johnson, 1993; May, 1994, Robin, Long, Rasmussen, Albaugh and Goldman, 1998). Studies have shown that Native American adolescents ranked highest in per capita alcohol consumption, percentage of heavy drinkers, number of times drunk and number of alcohol related problems when compared to other adolescent minority and non-minority groups (Welte & Barnes, 1987).

American Indian youth are clearly at risk for developing serious substance abuse and related problems. This paper will address two main questions in relation to American Indian drug and alcohol use. 1) What increases the risk that a child will end up using drugs and alcohol? and 2) What helps (Protects) keep a child on a drug free path? This paper will conclude with the implementation and results of a prevention program focused on parenting for American Indian children and families.

In terms of what places a child at risk for future problems child, parent and community risk factors were identified. Early child behavior and academic problems are risk factors. For example, children who exhibit behavior problems when they are 4 are more likely to become substance abusers as adolescence than children who are not aggressive. Children who cannot competently read by third grade are more likely to have problems as adolescence than children who can read at grade level. Other early risk factors in children include poor social skills, deviant peer groups and child stress. Early risk factors in parents include parent who are uninvolved with their children, parents with a high stress level, parental lack of affection, harsh, erratic discipline practices, poor parental monitoring, family conflict, parental substance abuse, parental anti-social behavior and

maternal depression. The more unsupervised time a child spends the more problem behavior in which s/he is likely to engage. Only paying attention to negative child behavior reduces the amount of positive child behavior. Early community factors include poverty, communities sanctioning the use of drugs and alcohol and community violence. Communities who allow adults to abuse alcohol at family events place their children at greater risk to display the same behavior as adolescents.

In terms of child protective factors, the family has been identified through traditional wisdom and the academic literature as the biggest protective factor in helping children stay on a healthy developmental path. For American Indian families, low family connectedness is associated with increased risk for substance abuse in youth. (Machamer & Gruber. 1998), family sanctions against drug use influence drug use in American Indian youth (Swaim et al, 1993) and adverse family management predicts multiple problem behaviors in American Indian youth (Barrera et al, 2001). American Indian parents who give their children clear messages that drinking and drug use are not acceptable behavior have less instances of substance abuse in their children than families who do not give these messages. Families who spend time together and express warmth and affection are more protected from adolescent behavior problems.

Over the past two decades, developmental and intervention research supports the use of parenting interventions to treat and prevent problem behavior in children and adolescents (Spoth, Kavanagh & Dishion, 2002). Researchers have developed and tested family-centered interventions in early childhood (Webster-Stratton et al 1990) , middle childhood (Forgatch et al, 2000) and adolescence (Dishion & Patterson, 1992). Parenting has been found to be an effective intervention at reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors in children which sets them on a drug free path. To have a healthy development children need predictable, positive, nurturing environments and appropriate limit setting.

* Traditional American Indian societies knew what children needed and the tribes were set up in a way that maximized development. Children learned values, empathy and respect from adults rather than from not other children. In the values chart below the differences between traditional American Indian societies and modern Western societies are noted.

Traditional	Western
1:4 child to adult ratio	4:1 child to adult ratio
Parents supported by extended family/clan	Parents isolated from extended family/clan
Value of Elder: Wisdom	Value on youth

Apprentice: Youth as role
Role models models
Interdependence Independence
Connectedness Materialism

Value: giving
back to the
community

Value on child Value on
work

Traditionally tribes existed within a circle of care model in which the child was supported by the parent who was supported by the clan who was in turn supported by the entire community. Within this model there was a ratio of one adult to four children as opposed to today. In modern society 6 children to 1 adult is considered an acceptable ratio for day care centers. Traditionally youth apprenticed with adults to develop their skills and talents as opposed to following peer role models. There was a high value placed on parenting and caring for children. In industrial societies we see this high value placed on work. The National Indian Child Welfare Association reported that children were seen as gifts from the creator and if they were not cared for properly they would be taken back. By applying traditional wisdom American Indian communities are able to promote the vision that leads to youth walking their true path in life. By drawing on traditional values communities are better able to protect their youth.

The question arises, if American Indian societies knew so much about healthy child development why do we see such high rates of youth substance abuse today? For the answer we must go back 500 years. When Columbus first came to America, the first people here, American Indians, suffered an enormous amount of loss and abuse. The impact on the American Indian family was devastating. Prior to Columbus coming here many American Indian tribes lived within a Circles of Care model in which the child was supported by the parents, who were supported by the extended family: aunts, uncles and grandparents, who were supported by the entire tribal community. Children were protected, mentored and taken care of in a way that helped them to grow up to be happy, be good people, to live the life they were meant to live and to be a useful member of their Indian community.

The genocide brought on by the European invasion broke up these Circles of Care through the loss of life of many American Indian people, loss of land, forcing Indians onto reservations and trying to turn them into mainstream Americans by taking Indian children away from their families and putting them into boarding schools, adopting them into non- Indian homes and through re-location programs where they offered the men jobs for leaving their communities to work in other places. Boarding schools and Missions had a devastating impact on American Indian culture, spirituality, language,

identity, relationships, and knowledge, including parenting knowledge. In the 1800's, many American Indian children were taken by force from their families and communities and sent to boarding schools. In California, in the 1700's many Indian families were also taken by force from their communities and sent to work in the missions. This had two major effects on Indian families and children.

First, traditional styles of parenting, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs, which were healthy and protective for Indian children, were not passed down. Second, new models of severe and overly strict styles of raising children were introduced. For example, in the early boarding school and mission environments, many American Indian children experienced harsh treatment including physical abuse, punishment for speaking their native languages or practicing their cultural and spiritual traditions, and messages that what their parents believed in was wrong and that being Indian was something to be ashamed of. Later experiences at boarding schools received some positive reports because the family was so disrupted at that point that children experienced the boarding school as an improvement to living with their family. However, a healthy family is the most protective factor for Indian children.

The European invasion reduced protective factors and increased risk factors for families and children so today we see risk factors putting children on a path to develop child behavior problems, become disrespectful, lose pride in their Indian identity, develop problems with drugs and alcohol and have low self esteem increased. At the same time protective factors, like the extended family providing healthy support for the parents and child, positive adult role models teaching children love, self discipline and self respect; and guiding children onto a path for their life where they were able to develop their skills and fulfill an important place within the tribal community have decreased.

Today most of the work of raising a child falls on individual parents rather than on an entire tribal community. This puts more of a strain on the parent. When parents are under strain and stress they are more likely to fall back on the parenting skills they were raised with even if they were harmful. Some of these parenting strategies may be very helpful but, because of disruptions to families, some may be harmful. Also, the world has changed so much that parents need new strategies for protecting their children that may not have been necessary when they were growing up. It is very important for American Indian parents to think about what was handed down in each family that was abuse or neglect brought into the American Indian community versus what was traditional and healthy for children.

When trauma occurs people sometimes learn the practices of the people who abused them and think it was part of their culture when it may not have been. For example, The National Indian Child Welfare Association reports that harsh physical punishment was uncommon in many tribes prior to the boarding schools. If physical punishment did occur there were strict rules about using it. It was typically done only in extreme situations, after several warnings, and lightly.

Today, American Indian children have some of the highest rates of drinking and drug problems, going to jail, problems with anxiety, depression and anger and child abuse and neglect in the nation. The biggest resource we have in stopping this cycle of unfulfilled dreams is parenting skills. Each parent determining what traditional parenting values and techniques are important to carry forward to the next generation and developing new strategies needed for today's world is extremely important for the future generations of American Indian children.

Parenting programs are critical for putting an end to substance abuse problems in American Indian youth. Understanding that children's development is embedded within a family system that dramatically effects the potential for socialization of children and adolescents is critical for professional training in general, and for working in the American Indian community in particular. There are many unknowns that need to be addressed when defining 'best practices' for parenting interventions in the American Indian community, especially the reservation community. Careful consideration of the needs and cultural context of minority families can lead to improved services and outcomes for children.

In sum, children are most impacted early in life. When they are teenagers it is much harder to make changes. The earlier a parent intervenes the better. Culturally appropriate prevention programs are the best strategy. We know providing children with predictable, nurturing, positive environments with non punitive and consistent limit setting and giving children both quality and quantity time greatly improves the likelihood that their lives will unfold in a way that is consistent with the spirit of who they are meant to be. We urgently need to pay attention to prevention programs for our children. Focus on early intervention begins at the level of child behavior problems, parenting stress and community acceptance.

At Riverside San Bernardino County Indian Health, Incorporated, through a project funded by the California Endowment we were able to test a parenting model. An evidence based program was identified. The program is called, The Incredible Years and was developed by Carolyn Webster Stratton. Dr. Renda Dionne culturally adapted the program and oversaw the implementation. The program was evaluated to see if it is successful in American Indian Communities. The design was a treatment waitlist control and consisted of 11 in home parent sessions, and 12 child group sessions.

The parent program was designed to promote social competence, prevent, reduce and treat aggression, increase positive parent affect such as praise and reduced criticism, increase the use of effective limit setting. reduce parental depression, increases parental self confidence, increase family communication and problem solving and reduce conduct problems in children

Program effectiveness for parents was defined as the parent having a warm, positive relationship with their child, the parent believing she or he knows how to care for child, the parent's discipline being respectful, safe and consistent and the parent providing supervision needed to protect the child.

The child program was designed to strengthen social and emotional abilities. The group focused on helping children understanding and communicating feelings, using effective problem solving strategies, managing anger and learning appropriate classroom behavior

Program effectiveness for children was defined as the child showing self respect for self, others, and surroundings, the child not feeling unusually sad, angry, or frightened., the child enjoying playing with friends and the child is able to pay attention and focus on school work.

There were 58 participating families with 30 boys and 28 girls. The average child age was 6 years of age. Preliminary results indicated decreases in child's behavior problems and high parent satisfaction. Ninety five percent of parents reported they learned useful discipline techniques, 100% reported their relationship with my child was better, 95% reported they were more confident in their ability to discipline and 100% reported they liked the program. Overall, the Family Strengthening Program resulted in improved child behavior, parents reported that the parenting program was helpful for their families and questionnaire measures were found to be helpful in examining the effectiveness of family programs.

Currently at Indian Child and Family Services in Temecula the SPIRIT project is underway utilizing more extensive cultural adaptations and more rigorous evaluations with The Incredible Years parenting program to improve the program for use in the local community. This project is funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse. In addition, the Office of Victims of Crime is currently funding the Soboba Family Resource Room. This program is designed to strengthen American Indian families and children and includes, the Incredible Years parent and child program as well as an Adolescent Transitions parenting program. This project is specifically looking at ways of motivating American Indian parents to participate in parenting programs.

In sum, effective parenting programs should impact parent awareness and skills, reduce behavior problems or stop them from developing, reduce parenting stress and make the experience for the child and parent a happier one in the family and weave a healthy social fabric within the family for the children to grow up in. Cultural consultation and leadership from cultural experts is critical in designing and implementing effective programs in minority communities. The solution to the emergence of adolescent substance abuse is prevention. Stop the problem from emerging and target problem behaviors early when they are less severe and fewer. For this goal the family, or more specifically parenting, is the solution!