

## Understanding the Role of Grandparents in Indigenous Families: Principles for Engagement

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**ABSTRACT.** Indigenous grandparents have significant roles in the lives of grandchildren. They are integrally engaged with grandchildren because traditional ways value and support their involvement. Despite historical trauma and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous people, the power of their culture and resiliency are strength-based assets. Understanding Indigenous culture and history can help practitioners provide services to these families. This paper reviews unique characteristics of Indigenous grandparenting and makes recommendations for service providers.

*Keywords:* Indigenous grandparents, historical trauma, marginalization

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## **Understanding the Role of Grandparents in Indigenous Families: Principles for Engagement**

Indigenous grandparents have historically played and continue to have significant roles in the lives of grandchildren. They are integrally engaged with grandchildren because traditional ways and cultural expectations value and support their involvement (Thompson, Cameron, & Fuller-Thomson, 2013; Henderson, Dinh, Morgan, & Lewis, 2017). Further, positive external factors, such as employment or educational opportunities that take parents out of the area, and family crises such as death, mental health, incarceration, and substance abuse, impact families such that grandparent involvement is necessary. However, there remains a paucity of research focused on grandparent and grandchild relationships in Indigenous (e.g., American Indian, Alaska Native, and First Nations) communities in the United States and Canada. Grandparents' roles in Indigenous families are reviewed in this paper, and suggestions for service providers to effectively render assistance presented. This paper reviews the unique characteristics of Indigenous grandparenting followed by recommendations for service providers.

Two important points must be recognized from extant literature. First, the tribal diversity precludes any gross generalizations to all groups. For example, some are matriarchal (e.g., Pueblo) whereas others are patriarchal (e.g., Lakota). However, this diversity does not prevent the presence of similarities. Similarities of interdependent extended kinship networks, collective responsibility for family members, and roles and obligations for cultural maintenance are commonplace. Second, most literature on Indigenous grandparents is offered by grandmothers. There is insufficient information to address whether the thoughts and behaviors of grandfathers are different.

### **Indigenous families and communities**

Indigenous cultures are rich and diverse. Each tribe or First Nation is grounded in its own culture borne of centuries of history. Diverse family patterns can be found among Indigenous peoples within the same region in terms of their adherence to cultural practices and whether or not they reside on reservation lands (Red Horse, Lewis, Feit, & Decker, 1978; Red Horse, 1988; Silvey, 2004; Yellowbird & Snipp, 1998).

Indigenous communities emphasize balance in life and take a broad, comprehensive approach. They believe that every person has value and worth and deserves respect. The interconnectedness of all things is particularly evident in the belief of harmony with nature; harmony with nature is sought to enhance collective health (Silvey, Griffore, & Phenice, 2007; Woods, 1996). This philosophy is inculcated by kinship networks, inclusive of extended family and community members. Traditional practices revolve around a relational rather than individualistic ethos. This ethos is based on circular rather than linear thoughts and a metaphysical reality that incorporates dreams, visions, and spirits (Red Horse, 1980a; Silvey et al., 2007). Additional cultural values include living in the present and a sense of time that is relative and flexible (Grayshield & Mihecoby, 2010).

Indigenous people identify themselves not only as members of specific families but as members of communities that constitute a larger kinship network. Families are composed of biological and fictive kin and matters of blood and spirit. They exhibit a structural openness within a community milieu (Tam, Findlay, & Kohen, 2017). Community family networks are resilient and powerful. It is common to call non-blood-related persons relatives, thereby embracing them as legitimate family members. This is not due to lack of commitment or empathy toward raising children, but because it is an obligation and a desire to cooperate and share this task (Harper, 2011). Grandparents and other family and community members readily assume this responsibility for children with due earnestness (Bigfoot & Funderburk, 2011). In addition, multiple generations often reside in the same household. Cooperation and sharing in the spirit of community is essential to harmony and balance. Thus, examination of the community as a totality is necessary to understand family transactions (Lewis, 1981; Woods, 1996). Routine inclusion of multiple generations in family life is a culturally familiar experience. For grandparents, having a house full of grandchildren is an expected privilege of later life.

Intergenerational experiences of Indigenous families have characteristics and history distinct from those in non-Indigenous society. Family configurations and concepts are inimitable to cultural histories and practices of Indigenous families that do not reflect Western norms. In general, Indigenous families exhibit greater structural flexibility and variability.

### **Grandparent Roles in Indigenous Families**

Indeed, grandparents are typically involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Grandparents' commitment to intergenerational relationships and kinship care is conveyed in multiple roles. Grandparents expect to serve as Elders, wisdom bearers, cultural conservators, and teachers (Choi, Sprang, & Eslinger, 2016; Red Horse, 1980b; Robbins, Scherman, Holeman, & Wilson, 2005). Elders and grandparents are revered and respected in Indigenous societies. An Elder's status is not necessarily determined by age but rather by the attainment of a certain level of erudition and wisdom that is shared with the community (Baldrige, 2001; Day, 2007; Lewis, 2011). Elders are typically considered keepers of the culture and responsible for teaching traditional beliefs, values, and cultural practices. Children are socialized into traditional ways and values by observing behaviors of Elders, community members, and immediate and extended family members including their grandparents (Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010; Dennis & Brewer, 2017).

Grandparents as wisdom bearers perform crucial acts by conveying traditional knowledge through cultural practices and traditions. Traditional knowledge is considered essential and vital to the endurance of tribal communities (Barnhardt, 2005; Cross, Day, & Farrell, 2011; Day, 2007; Schweitzer, 1999). Indigenous societies respect older family and community members (e.g., grandparents) as holders of traditional knowledge that is essential to cultural continuance. Remaining actively involved in the community while also engaging in the traditional intergenerational transfer of knowledge is an important role for grandparents (Balvinder, Barker, MacLean, & Grischkan, 2015; Collings, 2001; Graves, Shavings, & Rose, 2009; Lewis, 2011).

Indigenous grandparents are typically viewed as key conduits of cultural values and traditional knowledge to their grandchildren (Kopera-Frye, 2009; Thompson et al., 2013; Weibel-Orlando, 2000). Grandparents serve as “cultural conservators” or keepers of traditional Indigenous ways. They enculturate grandchildren with the past through preserving customs, beliefs, history, language, and traditions. Cultural continuity is highly valued considering the historical trauma, acculturation pressures, and contemporary familial circumstances that Indigenous families have encountered (Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Byers, 2010; Grandbois & Sanders, 2012; Struthers & Lowe, 2003; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999).

Ties between grandparents and grandchildren are complex and vital for resilience in the face of social, economic, and emotional challenges. Grandparent roles are based on traditionally and culturally defined responsibilities performed within contexts of tribal ethics, community distribution networks, and economic supports. Grandparents provide a source of stability. It is through this essential role that they provide a sense of belonging, safety, and security (Ginn, 2009; Myhra, Wieling, & Grant, 2015; Red Horse, 1980b).

Grandparents fulfill roles as advisors, guardians of traditional knowledge, oral historians, stewards of cultural values, and mentors (Barusch & Steen, 1996; Cross et al., 2010; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Harper, 2011; Hopkins, Kwachka, Lardon, & Mohatt, 2007; Loppie, 2007; Robbins et al., 2005). Their guidance is esteemed and sought after (Bahr, 1994; Baldrige, 2001; Poppel, Kruse, Duhaime, & Abryutina, 2007). Indigenous grandparents leverage their own experiences of cultural disruption to reinvest in the cultural health and well-being of their grandchildren (Thompson et al., 2013; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999).

Indigenous traditions are conveyed through storytelling. Grandparents are storytellers (Robbins et al., 2005). They offer their grandchildren a sense of knowing their cultures, kinship ties as well as pseudo-kin, and family histories (Cross et al., 2010; Silvey, 2004). Storytelling is commonly used to express feelings, beliefs, and the importance of experience, including historical trauma and marginalization. It helps with healing from experiences of social injustice, along with use of traditional ceremonies that come from deep Indigenous wisdom (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011). The use of storytelling to heal from historical trauma has been characterized as the “process of retraditionalization” or “healing of spirit” (Struthers & Lowe, 2003, p. 269). It is a time when listeners are expected to be silent, patient, and reflective (Plank, 1994). They share traditional knowledge handed down from previous generations through oral tradition. They recognize traditional knowledge as the cornerstone of cultural identity and endurance as a people.

Cultural and spiritual traditions are central to grandparents’ lives, especially in the wake of historical trauma and oppression (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Campbell & Evans-Campbell, 2011; Hanson & Hampton, 2000). These traditions serve as a means of healing and as protective factors for children and families (Cournoyer, 2012; Silvey, 2004; Silvey, et al., 2007). Grandparents in tribal communities expect to contribute to the lives and safety of their grandchildren and maintain tribal identity in extended family ties (Bahr, 1994; Schweitzer, 1999). Grandparents find comfort in maintaining intergenerational relationships and extend the

cultural practice of intergenerational child rearing to support the transmission of culture (Cross & Day, 2008; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005).

Colonialism and ongoing intrusion of contemporary Western values and culture has had a significant impact on traditional parenting styles and intergenerational relationships (Kral, 2011). It is not unusual for Indigenous grandparents to take a central part in raising their grandchildren; however, such care is culturally and traditionally informal (Bahr, 1994; Weibel-Orlando, 1997). For example, the Lakota use the term *ecagwaya* (meaning to raise as one's own) to describe such arrangements (Bean, McAllister, & Hudgins, 2001), and Hawaiian grandparents assume parental responsibilities through *hanai* (i.e., informal adoption) (Werner, 1991; Yancura, 2013). Similarly, Schweitzer (1999) identified the significant impact of grandmothers' child care and childrearing on the young of Indigenous communities. This arrangement is devoid of the benefits of legal recognition because of its informality.

War, genocide, colonization, cultural suppression, and oppression by those who did not understand or respect traditional ways of living nearly eradicated Indigenous communities. They further experienced a corresponding decline in resources and opportunities, the denial of spiritual beliefs, and the near eradication of tribal cultures, languages, and traditional ways of living (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Goodkind, Hess, Gorman, & Parker, 2012). Understanding resilience in the context of life experiences and historical changes, which include forced relocation and displacements, reconfigurations, violent dispossession of property and homeland, and continuing marginalization borne of intentional and unintentional actions and policies is critical (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jefferies, & Baysden, 1998).

Resiliency is a significant benefit that provides strength to both Indigenous grandparents and grandchildren (Cross et al., 2010). Grandchildren feel safe, secure and learn stability through grandparents' resilience, nurturance, and support. They learn that they will not lose their identity, cultural values and way of life, and more importantly, their sense of communal family ties. Resilience develops through various relationships, such as strong, cohesive families and communities. Regarding cultural resilience, Indigenous Elders have reported that "If people stand together, they can be strong. The strength is in the unity and solidarity; it's not the individual" (Grandbois & Sanders, 2012, p. 394). Thus, resiliency is a bidirectional process between grandparents and their grandchildren: the centrality of culture and communal worldview is strengthened, and each learns from the other (Silvey, 2004; Silvey et al., 2007).

### **Six Principles for Working with Grandparents in Indigenous Communities**

Despite historical trauma and its impact on Indigenous communities, family relationships, culture, and resiliency offer important strengths for coping with these challenges. Service providers must be aware of certain key principles (see Table 1) when working with Indigenous communities, specifically grandparents, that support mind, body, and spirit. These principles are transmitted generationally by Indigenous Elders and grandparents. They are central to understanding and successfully working with and providing support to Indigenous families and grandparents who have encountered historical trauma and ongoing marginalization.

Table 1

*Principles for Engagement with Indigenous Grandparents*

<u>Principle</u>	<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Implications for Practitioners</u>
Self-reliance	Resolve problems on own; Hesitant to ask for help outside of community.	Understand there may not be help seeking initially; View self-reliance as a strength.
Non-interference	Disrespectful to interfere in others' lives; Learn from natural consequences; Live and let live philosophy.	Extend respect; Offer aid when sought out.
Non-confrontation	Avoid confrontation when disagree; Harmony reflected through cooperation and sharing.	Avoid directing; Tolerate silence.
Diversity	No stigma in being different; Roles are gender neutral to aid self-reliance.	Every person has inherent value and worth; i.e., disabled, transgender, Two Spirit, etc.
Respect	Respect of Elders; Bearers of wisdom, experience, culture; Do not patronize.	Lay judgements aside; Allow others to teach; Be mindful.
Extended family	Fictive and non-fictive kin, community, tribe; those informally adopted in tribe.	Often multigenerational; People coming and going.

The principle of self-reliance is taught to children by their community family network, especially grandparents, who practice self-reliance through silence, modesty, and patience. Indigenous people generally prefer to deal with problems on their own rather than seek help or support. Practitioners need to understand that oftentimes Indigenous people will not seek outside help until they have exhausted all resources through community family ties first, and by then, they may experience more serious concern. This reticence to turn for assistance from a group outside the community who have evinced a history of exploitation and maltreatment is reasonable and can be viewed as strength rather than belligerence or obstinacy. Indigenous people generally prefer to be self-reliant and are therefore, hesitant to ask for help outside their communal ties (Silvey, 2004; Silvey, 2009).

The principle of non-interference is an important tradition which considers it disrespectful to hamper others' lives. Practitioners must recognize and understand that Indigenous culture is predicated on a "live and let live" approach (National Indian Child Abuse and Neglect Resource Center, 1980; Wark, Neckoway, & Brownlee, 2019). One way to be supportive of Indigenous grandparents is to extend the same respect that they offer others. Support and assistance can be provided when Indigenous grandparents seek it. If it is extended without being asked, it can be considered an act of disrespect, threat, or rudeness. This view is a residual affect from imposed residential schools, other historical trauma, and enduring marginalization.

The principle of non-confrontation is one in which many Indigenous people prefer not to oppose others when they disagree with them. Instead, they walk away or avoid the person. Direct confrontation is avoided as it disrupts the harmony and balance that are a vital part of interacting with others. For example, if a practitioner were to direct a grandparent to take their grandchild to a doctor for treatment, the grandparent may appear agreeable, but later fail to comply. It is important to understand non-confrontation to prevent misinterpretation of this behavior (Bigfoot & Funderburk, 2011). Harmony is reflected through cooperation and sharing. Cooperation and sharing are facilitated through being less verbally active and tolerate silence, attend to the ways communication norms are expressed, be patient and honor the role of storytelling (Weaver, 2004).

Indigenous culture reveres the principle of diversity. There is no stigma attached to being different in any form. For example, many Indigenous people are raised in a gender-neutral environment; that is, there are no prescribed roles for females and another for males. A child with a disability is seen as having as much value and worth as a non-disabled one. A Two Spirit individual – one who is gay, lesbian, or transgender – is not stigmatized, but is valued and given worth as an individual (Brown, 1997; Walters, Evan-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006).

The principle of respect is a key cultural value, especially toward Elders and family networks. It would behoove practitioners to treat grandparents with utmost respect and avoid patronizing an Indigenous Elder if one wishes to be accepted. Simply stated, practitioners would do well to lay judgments aside, be willing to let Indigenous grandparents teach them about their way of life and cultural values; be mindful (Red Horse, 1980a; Silvey, Griffore, & Phenice, 2007).

The principle of extended family is prominent in Indigenous culture. Family consists of biological as well as fictive kin, community, tribe, and anyone chosen to be informally adopted (Sutton & Broken Nose, 2005). Practitioners need to be mindful of Indigenous families being multigenerational and the flow of people coming and going from the home. For example, it is not unusual to find a pot of food on the stove and common place for people from the community to come and go while family members go about their business. This practice is commonplace, and practitioners should not judge this way of life against Western norms.

Historical trauma, marginalization, and social injustice have been significant factors in the lives of Indigenous people of the United States and Canada. They have caused multiple oppressions, emotional, psychological, social, and physical distress that have transcended generations. This has often been referred to as a “wounding of the soul where the blood doesn’t flow” as it relates to the spiritual realm (Struthers & Lowe, 2003, p. 260). Despite continued marginalization and racist oppression of Indigenous people, historical trauma and intergenerational stress can be tempered. Practitioners need to honor longstanding cultural traditions inherent in the six principles discussed and learn from Indigenous grandparents and Elders. By recognizing the resiliency and strength-based assets these principles represent, practitioners can provide support, assistance, and respect within Indigenous culture that is value-added and aids in healing of spirit.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

Taking time to learn about Indigenous culture and history promotes empathy and respect for those who have experienced generations of injustices and hardships perpetrated by social and political travesties, and is necessary when working with this population. Indigenous grandparents are more likely to report unmet service needs and less likely to access formal support services (Yancura, 2013) which may be due to mistrust due to historical injustices.

The stories of Indigenous families must be approached with receptivity and an open mind. Indigenous grandparents and families are willing to share if they sense others are interested and care. Let community members be the teachers. Practice active listening to get to know Indigenous families. Rather let them impart what they know best—their culture and life experiences.

The value of silence is evident in the belief that it is better to listen and reflect on what others, especially Elders, say and speak only when spoken to or when there is something important to contribute (Silvey, 2004). Careful listening and observation are exercised among Indigenous families to understand more of what is meant and less of what is said. Practitioners working with this population would benefit through doing the same.

Trust is important in all relationships, whether work or personal. Building trust may take longer due to historical trauma and injustices. Trust building may also take longer if an individual or agency has violated tribal norms in the recent past. Learn from the mistakes of others. Sustaining trust and relationships requires maintaining contact over time (Phenice, Griffore, Silvey, & Hakoyama, 2015).

Honor the custom of seeking out a respected Elder, tribal leader, or grandparent who can serve as a mentor and provide guidance. This custom is an especially important protocol for non-Indigenous to follow to establish trust as this is critical in building a personal or working relationship with Indigenous communities (Bailey & Silvey, 2016).

Visiting the community numerous times is necessary to become familiar with the people and culture. Each community has as much in common as they have differences. It takes time to garner the trust of tribal communities, and thus it is critical to spend time with the communities prior to, during, and after implementation of projects (Nicotera, Walls, & Lucero, 2010). Practitioners must plan programs that are sustainable. Too often, programs are implemented within the community only to end once funding is gone. If this occurs, then services and support are lost. After years of broken promises and treaties, pulling out once funding stops can lead to further distrust and animosity.

When implementing programs, realize all who come expect to experience humility and aided. This can be difficult with limited budgets. An invitation for a meal needs to be open for all who may want to attend. This can make planning somewhat challenging. Watch for events within the Indigenous community to avoid competing with cultural events. The family orientation of Indigenous groups encourages extended family participation in sundry community events (Tam et al., 2017).

Collaboration facilitates acquisition of knowledge and respect of alternative perspectives often held by Indigenous families that is different from Western empirical science (Grayshield & Mihecoby, 2010). Rather than doing something for an Indigenous group, work alongside them. Feedback from Indigenous grandparents must be solicited and heard wherever possible, soliciting creative ways of doing things, and engaging grandparents in helping prepare translational documents that benefit the community. In other words, use community-based participatory protocols whenever possible (Hacker, 2013; Phenice, Griffore, Silvey, & Hakoyama, 2015). Applying this view allows the Indigenous community a voice and respects their contribution. Simply put, do not impose ideas, or designs on the Indigenous community; rather, be an active listener and learn from Indigenous families and their experiences.

Assorted tribal communities are traditional, while others adopt many Western ways. Practitioners must listen and observe to become culturally competent in working with Indigenous peoples. Admit mistakes if a tribal norm is inadvertently violated. And practice mindfulness as this is consistent with Indigenous views of living in the present (Napoli & Bonifas, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous grandparents support and bolster family life in Indigenous communities, often without assistance from formal agencies. The inclusive nature of extended family (fictive, non-fictive, tribe, community, and those informally adopted) promotes the principle of self-reliance, thereby taking care of problems or concerns within the Indigenous community first. It is only when all efforts have been exhausted within the Indigenous community and/or when matters have reached a crisis or emergency that Indigenous people look outside their extended family for help.

When serving Indigenous grandparents, it is important to recognize and respect the unique approach to life among Indigenous populations to provide useful resources and ways of

knowing. Despite historical and political injustices that Indigenous communities have encountered, there is much to learn about their resilient nature that can serve as protective assets and lessons learned from contemporary grandparents in Indigenous families who encounter historical trauma and marginalization.

Indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada continue to experience social injustice from historical trauma, oppression, and marginalization. It is important for practitioners to understand the longstanding history of Indigenous people to effectively engage in working relationships. Of importance is the fact Indigenous people have a sovereign relationship with governments of North America: that is, one based on government-to-government relationships rather than race.

The six principles discussed in this paper are at the core of Indigenous culture and ways of knowing. Service providers need to be mindful of the value and meaning of extended family when engaging with Indigenous grandparents and their communities. Understanding these valued principles as strength-based assets at the core of self-reliance evince the power of culture and resiliency. Practitioners can help temper effects of historical trauma, oppression, and marginalization by incorporating these cultural values and principles when engaging Indigenous grandparents in provision of services. Most importantly, culture is not only treatment, culture is prevention.

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