HEALTH
HARMONY
HOPE

Child Sexual Assault

Practitioner's

RESOURCE WORKBOOK

Washington State
Native American Coalition
Against Domestic Violence
& Sexual Assault

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WomenSpirit COALITION

Washington State
Native American Coalition
Against Domestic Violence
& Sexual Assault

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Who
WE ARE

WomenSpirit envisions a nation where Native women are treated with honor and respect, where she is protected under the law and her personal sovereignty is never compromised.

Tribal Coalition

WomenSpirit is the official Department of Justice and Office on Violence Against Women Tribal Coalition. We serve the needs of tribal programs and provide direct services to those victims that tribal programs do not/cannot serve through its program areas.

Subject Matter Expert

WomenSpirit is the subject matter expert on matters related to ending violence against AI/AN women and their families. We provide assessment and evaluation of Tribes/Tribal programs relating to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, dating violence, and sex trafficking.

Family Safety Center

The **Sayu'ʔ X Wey Family Safety Center** (SFSC) provides victim-centered direct services to Native victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. Located in Sequim, WA, the Family Safety Center offers services that can be replicated for tribes across the state. SFSC is affiliated with Alliance for HOPE International Family Justice Centers, which are recognized globally. It is also one of the first Native/Indigenous models of its kind in existence today.

Reach Out to Us

WomenSpirit COALITION

526 N. 5th Avenue
Sequim, WA 98382
(360) 681-3701

Content
ADVISORY

This training module addresses the critical issue of child sexual assault and its enduring effects within tribal communities. The content explores racism, systemic inequality, and historical trauma. It includes real-world examples that may be emotionally intense, which some learners may find difficult to process.

We acknowledge that many child practitioners, particularly those working in tribal programs, may have personal or community experiences related to these sensitive topics. Please feel free to engage with the material at your own pace and comfort level. You are encouraged to pause, skip sections, or seek support as needed.

We recommend keeping support resources readily accessible during your learning process, including access to tribal wellness services, mental health professionals, and peer support networks in your tribal community. While we have approached the topic with cultural sensitivity, respect for tribal sovereignty, and compassion for lived experiences, some content may still be triggering.

During the development of this training, we employ the Indigenous concept of "Two Eyed Seeing," which embodies a mindset that balances the cognitive functions of both the left and right brain hemispheres. This holistic perspective acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge encompasses both the intuitive and metaphorical capabilities associated with the right hemisphere, as well as the analytical and linear reasoning characteristic of the left hemisphere. This methodology is in contrast to Western perspectives, which predominantly rely on the analytical functions of the left hemisphere.

Overall, this training is designed to be trauma-informed and culturally respectful, focusing on healing-centered engagement while honoring the sacredness, sovereignty, and dignity of Native children, their families, and tribal communities.

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WomenSpirit COALITION

SOCIAL
Health Approach

'Community involvement is key; any effort to identify and address child abuse should be done with, not for, the community.'

- Micheal Lee, National Crimes Against Children Investigator's Association

Re-rooting Community Practice in Social Health

Although the federal government does not define social health, various policies and initiatives acknowledge that enhancing health outcomes and addressing health inequities requires more than just medical care. It entails investing in the social fabric that supports people's lives.

In Indigenous communities, this investment must incorporate culturally competent practices, prioritize the establishment of trust, and ensure that child protection measures are developed in a manner that respects Indigenous culture and sovereignty. It involves not only recognizing cultural differences but also understanding the historical context that has influenced the dynamics in contemporary Indigenous communities.

While it is evident that numerous Indigenous communities confront significant challenges, including high rates of poverty, unemployment, insufficient access to essential services, inadequate housing, and limited availability of quality education and healthcare, addressing these issues in isolation does not effectively mitigate the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Native Americans constitute only 2% of the United States population, but they represent 15.2% of reported child abuse cases. This disproportionate statistic underscores a significant social health concern, as Native children endure various forms of abuse at a rate that is seven times greater than that of their non-Native peers. The factors contributing to this troubling disparity are intricately woven in historical, intergenerational, and cultural complexities. Consequently, Native children are at an elevated risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse, neglect, or a combination of these detrimental conditions.

Any effort to address child sexual abuse must prioritize tribal sovereignty, acknowledging tribal governments as the primary authorities in matters of child welfare. This approach empowers Indigenous communities to develop policies, services, and prevention strategies that align with their cultural values and traditions — the factors that influence their social health.

What Is
Child Sexual Assault?

Practically every family she sees has a history of child sexual abuse.
"They're just little victims everywhere."
-Dr. Renée Ornelas, Pediatric Specialist

Child sexual assault in Washington State is governed by several statutes outlined in the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Chapter 9A.44, which pertains to sex offenses. These statutes aim to protect minors from sexual exploitation and ensure that offenders are held accountable for their actions.The legislation defines specific crimes involving minors, including the following:

Rape of a Child (First, Second, and Third Degree)

These charges are applicable when an adult engages in sexual intercourse with a child under a specified age. The classification into degrees is based on the age difference between the perpetrator and the victim, as well as the circumstances surrounding the offense.

Child Molestation (First, Second, and Third Degree)

This category addresses sexual contact with a child, which does not necessarily include intercourse. Degrees of child molestation are determined by the age of the child and the extent of force or coercion involved.

Sexual Misconduct with a Minor

This provision applies to individuals in positions of authority, such as educators or coaches, who engage in sexual activities with minors.

Sexual conduct is defined by the following actions perpetrated by an offender:

- Touching or fondling an individual's genitals, anus, or breasts, whether directly or through clothing.
- Displaying one's genitals, anus, or breasts for the purpose of eliciting arousal or sexual gratification.

Review Chapter 9A.44 Sex Offenses
https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=9A.44

What Is
Child Sexual Assault?

- Coercing an individual to touch the offender's genitals, anus, or breasts.
- Coercing an individual to touch another person's genitals, anus, or breasts.
- Coercing an individual to reveal their own genitals, anus, or breasts for sexual gratification.
- Touching the body of a child under the age of 16, whether clothed or unclothed, for the purposes of sexual arousal or gratification.
- Coercing a child under the age of 16 to touch or fondle, whether directly or through clothing, their own or another person's genitals, anus, or breasts.

Sexual penetration is defined as the following:

I. Any contact involving the sex organ or anus of one individual with:

- An object; or
- The sex organ, mouth, or anus of another individual

II. Any intrusion into the sex organ or anus of one individual by: -

- Any part of another individual's body -
- Any animal -
- Any object

It is important to note that the presence of semen is not a prerequisite for establishing that sexual penetration has taken place.

Sexual Assault Protection Orders (SAPO)

In the context of protection orders, Washington law explicitly defines **“nonconsensual sexual conduct” and “nonconsensual sexual penetration”** as forms of sexual assault. These definitions encompass any sexual contact or penetration that occurs without the voluntary and informed consent of the child, recognizing that, under legal definitions, minors below a specified age are unable to provide such consent.

In order to protect individuals who have experienced nonconsensual sexual conduct or penetration, it is essential to recognize that even a single incident may serve as sufficient justification for filing a petition for a sexual assault protection order. A singular occurrence of nonconsensual sexual conduct or nonconsensual sexual penetration constitutes valid grounds for such a petition.

In the state of Washington, legislation permits parents, guardians, or other concerned adults to initiate petitions on behalf of a child.

Review RCW Chapter 7.105 Civil Protection Orders

https://leg.wa.gov/media/dqgl5w4i/7105-rcw.pdf

Child Sexual Assault In Indigenous Communities

"Kill the Indian, save the man."
-Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt

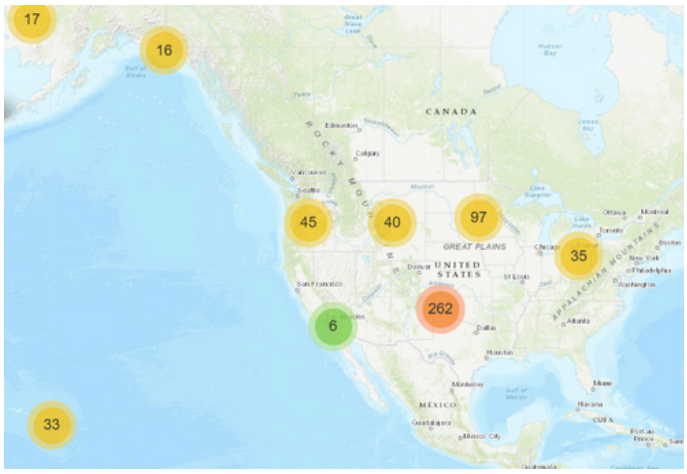
A Continuing Cycle

Photo: The National Indian Boarding School Digital Archive (NIBSDA).

In Indigenous communities, child sexual assault is often an unspoken issue intricately linked to the ongoing sexual trauma that commenced with settler colonization. This problem has persisted through the boarding school era and has been exacerbated by various forced assimilation strategies and practices of extermination, all of which contribute to a continuing cycle of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities.

An Understudied History

Between 1869 and the 1960s, the United States government, along with various religious institutions, financed the establishment of more than 523 Indian boarding schools. By the year 1900, the enrollment of Native American children in these institutions exceeded 20,000. A quarter of a century later, this figure had tripled, reflecting a significant increase in the number of children affected by this strategy of forced assimilation and cultural eradication.



U.S. Indian Boarding Schools; 'national crime scene.'
Photo: NIBSDA

The U.S. boarding school era now represents a 'national crime scene' as this dark chapter of history is being revealed. This systematic effort to seize tribal lands and eradicate Native cultures has resulted in the sexual abuse of over one thousand children by more than one hundred members of the Catholic Church, including both sisters and brothers. It is important to note that these statistics are likely underreported.

Child Sexual Assault In Indigenous Communities

BIA-Run Schools

In 1974, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was enacted across all 50 states, aimed at enhancing mandatory reporting laws and stipulating that states would lose federal funding if they failed to comply. However, during that period, federal and Indian lands were excluded from this mandate, and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools were not required to report incidents of sexual abuse involving Native children.

The chapter investigting "Child Sexual Abuse in Federal Indian Schools" is part of the 1989 report entitled "Final Report and Legislative Recommendations," produced by the Special Committee Investigations of the Select Committee on Indian Affairs. This chapter systematically examines the issues related to child sexual abuse and how BIA allowed the sexual abuse of Native American children to go unpunished within BIA-run schools.

Native children experienced various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, cultural, and spiritual neglect. They were deprived of their traditional clothing, possessions, and hairstyles, and faced punishments for speaking their Native languages or engaging in behaviors reflective of their cultural practices. A significant number of children never returned to their homes, with their whereabouts still unaccounted for by the U.S. government

“Unknown” marked graves at Carlisle Indian Boarding School cemetery. Photo: NIBSDA

Child Sexual Abuse in Federal Indian Schools
https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED325263.pdf

Indian Adoption Project

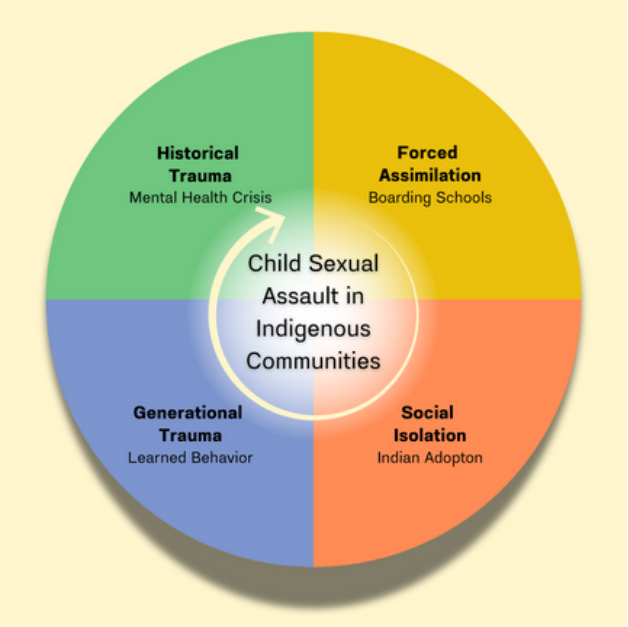
In the mid-20th century, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) initiated the Indian Adoption Project. Between the 1950s and 1970s, thousands of Native children were placed in non-Native foster or adoptive homes, frequently without obtaining parental consent. This initiative was part of a broader federal policy aimed at the integration of Native children into white culture and American society. The program deliberately targeted the dismantling of Tribal Nations, thereby resulting in financial savings for the government.

Child Sexual Assault In Indigenous Communities

The removal and placement of Native children in non-Indian families led to their separation from other Native children. This situation contrasted with their experiences in boarding schools, as these children were raised within white middle-class households at no financial burden to the government. The initiative was founded on the erroneous assumption that Native families lacked the religious and spiritual underpinnings of a functioning family system. This conclusion was drawn as a result of the challenges posed by alcoholism and poverty, both of which were exacerbated by the effects of colonization.

Learned Abuse

During the colonization of Native lands, settlers employed rape as a weapon of war. According to Dr. Barbara Bettelyoun, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community in Minnesota with doctorates in child development and child clinical psychology, child sexual assault is a learned behavior of abuse that has been transmitted through generations.



Bettelyoun asserts that the underlying intention behind the acts of rape, molestation, and egregious abuses inflicted upon Native children was to cultivate a sense of shame regarding their Indigenous identity. This was intended to manifest when these individuals returned to their families and communities.

Little Victims Everywhere

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_-Z0PQf7rE&t=76s

Mental Health Crisis

Dr. Renée Ornelas, a child abuse pediatric specialist with three decades of experience at Tséhootsooí Medical Center in Fort Defiance, Arizona, articulates a concerning cycle of violence that arises when children, lacking appropriate parental guidance, return to their homes and, in turn, assume parental roles themselves. This situation results in a troubling dynamic where children inflict harm on their children, resembling a contemporary iteration of boarding schools. However, this issue is not motivated by sexual gratification; rather, it perpetuates a cycle of humiliation, embarrassment, and shame that requires urgent mental health attention and intervention.

Indigenous
Social Health

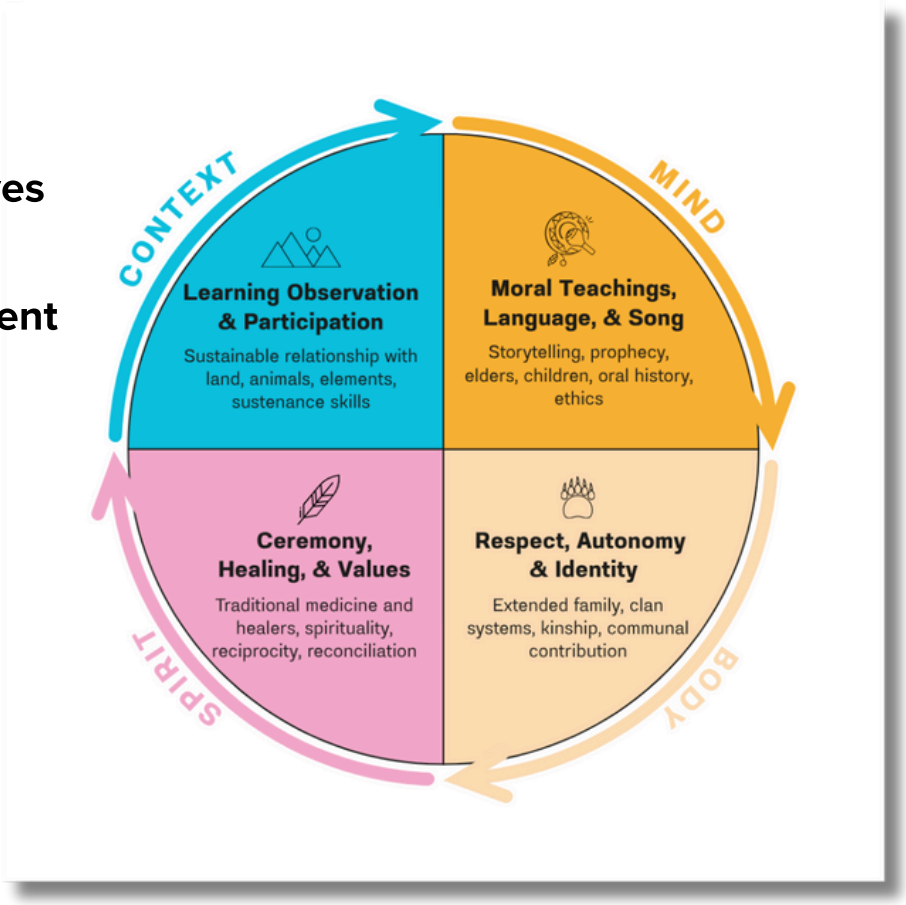
"That's when I realized the learned behaviors, the coping, the triggers."
-Rachel Janis, Sicangu Youth Council, Rosebud Indian Reservation

Sacred Gifts of The Creator

In Indigenous communities, the understanding of the world is framed through a relational or cyclical lens, which reflects a holistic approach to wellness encompassing the balance of mind, body, spirit, and context. This perspective contrasts markedly with the predominant linear worldview present in mainstream American thought, which is characterized by a reliance on cause-and-effect reasoning.

The cultural identity of a Native child constitutes the foundation for their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental development. Children and youth are recognized as valuable members of the community, fostering a sense of autonomy from an early age. This transition from dependence on others to the ability to provide for others reflects their relational capacity with the world, emphasizing their roles as protectors and caregivers of both the environment and their own well-being.

Native Perspectives on Child Development



Indigenous
Social Health

Navigators of Complexities

The enduring legacy of the U.S. government's child removal systems continues to adversely impact contemporary Native children. These violent tactics were designed to enforce assimilation, resulting in several significant effects on the social health of tribal children and their communities today. The key areas of impact include:

- Parenting styles influenced by trauma
- Impaired emotional regulation
- Dysfunctional family dynamics
- Loss of native languages
- Disconnection from cultural identity
- Feelings of shame and confusion regarding heritage
- Distrust towards educational institutions and social services
- Barriers to accessing help and support
- Mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Issues related to substance abuse and addiction
- Elevated risk of suicide
- Incidents of familial sexual abuse and violence

Consequently, Native children today must acquire the skills to navigate the complexities arising from the residual impacts of colonization, the realities of contemporary life, and the imperative to honor and uphold their rich cultural legacies.

Aspect	Pre-Colonization Harmony	Historical Trauma	Generational Trauma
Scope	Extended family, clan systems, kinship, communal contribution	Collective, cultural, and community-wide	Individual and family-based
Origin	Sustainable relationship with land, animals, elements, sustenance skills	Colonization, systemic oppression, displacement, subjugation	Ancestral, family, personal retraumatization
Transmission	Storytelling, prophecy, elders, children, oral history, ethics	Cultural memory, social structures, exploitation, community narratives	Family dynamics, learned behaviors, epigenetic changes
Examples	Traditional medicine, healers, spirituality, reciprocity, reconciliation	Forced removal, assimilation, boarding schools, social isolation, cultural genocide	Poor parenting, domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide, addiction
Outcome	HEALTH →	HOLOCAUST →	HARM

CULTURALLY Responsive Approach

". . .it is not always what is terrible that has happened [that impacts us], but our response to the trauma is what makes a difference."

– *California Tribal Health Professional*

Grounding Professional Practice in Healing, Justice, and Prevention

Navigating the complex issue of child sexual abuse within Indigenous communities requires a collective effort that prioritizes a comprehensive understanding of cultural dynamics, the utilization of culturally specific strategies, addressing historical injustices, intergenerational trauma, and robust collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries.

A considerable number of children and youth are being raised by parents who experience various mental health challenges stemming from the ongoing effects of colonization. Tribal communities recognize the necessity of acknowledging their collective history as an essential step toward dismantling the cycles of trauma and abuse that significantly impact the lives of Native children.

In addressing the issue of child sexual abuse within a tribal community, it is essential to prioritize sensitivity. Practitioners must approach this matter without preconceived biases and with a genuine commitment to understanding the distinct tribal and cultural contexts involved. It is vital to acknowledge occurrences of child sexual abuse in a manner that does not intensify harm or alienate the tribal community. This task may present particular challenges for practitioners who are also members of the community. Therefore, consistent self-reflection and self-care are imperative ethical standards that should be maintained.

In addition, a strong commitment to the tribal community is essential for fostering trust, implementing culturally adapted interventions, and advocating for the necessary resources and support. Such efforts are crucial for paving safe and just pathways into the future for Native children. A culturally responsive approach entails a profound respect for tribal sovereignty and acknowledges the significance of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices to harmonizing the imbalances of a child's mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

Cultural Sensitivity
Nuanced Behaviors

The behaviors of Native children who are victims of sexual assault are shaped not only by the trauma itself but also by cultural, historical, and systemic factors unique to Indigenous communities. Here are some nuanced behavioral patterns and considerations:

Silence and Reluctance to Report

Cultural norms, such as respect for elders and the importance of community harmony, may discourage children from speaking out. There is often a fear of backlash from family or the community, particularly in close-knit tribal settings. Additionally, a historical mistrust of authorities, stemming from experiences with boarding schools, forced removals, and systemic neglect, can make children and families hesitant to report abuse due to fears of potential removal.

Internalized Shame and Guilt

Native children not only feel responsible for the abuse but also fear that they have dishonored their family. Feelings of worthlessness, shame, and confusion are compounded by intergenerational trauma from colonization and institutional abuse.

Behavioral and Emotional Signs

- Withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, or depression.
- Regression to earlier developmental stages (e.g., bedwetting, thumb-sucking).
- Risk-taking, sexualized behaviors, or self-harm and suicide ideation in older children.
- Difficulty concentrating or a sudden drop in academic performance (mistrust of schools).
- Expressing distress through storytelling, art, or spiritual disconnection rather than direct verbal disclosure.
- Loss of interest in cultural practices or ceremonies may be a sign of a suppressed identity.

Community Dynamics

Often, discussing sexual abuse in tribal communities is forbidden. Victims and survivors may fear isolation and disbelief, and feel pressured to forgive or reconcile, especially if the abuser is a respected tribal member.

Cultural Storying
The Story of the Sun and the Moon

Tribal communities encounter recurring cycles of abuse that are deeply rooted in historical contexts such as colonization, the legacy of boarding schools, and systemic neglect. Cultural storying serves as an effective means for these communities to engage with sensitive issues, such as abuse, in a manner that does not alienate their members. This practice respects and upholds traditional forms of knowledge and healing, as opposed to imposing external frameworks that may not be relevant or effective within the community.

Survivors often find strength in cultural narratives that validate their experiences and help them explore pathways to safety and resilience. When evaluating a cultural story used to express child sexual assault, it's essential to approach the narrative with cultural humility, trauma-informed sensitivity, and a deep respect for the community's values and storytelling traditions.

Understanding Cultural Context

- What cultural values or teachings are embedded in the story?
- How is trauma traditionally expressed or communicated in this culture?
- Does the story use metaphor, symbolism, or allegory to convey harm or violation?
- What role does the storyteller (e.g., elder, healer, survivor) play in the community?

Interpreting Meaning and Intent

- What is the intended message, teaching, or lesson of the story?
- How might the story be interpreted differently by insiders versus outsiders?
- Are there culturally specific terms or imagery that require deeper understanding?

Centering the Child's Experience

- How does the story reflect the child's (survivor's) voice, agency, or emotional state?
- Are there signs of protective silence, coded language, or indirect disclosure?
- What cultural norms might influence how the child processes or communicates trauma?

Supporting Healing and Justice

- What traditional healing practices or ceremonies are associated with this kind of trauma?
- How can outside professionals (therapists, advocates, legal personnel) support without imposing their own frameworks?

Respecting Community Dynamics

- Has the story been shared with permission and in a culturally appropriate setting?
- How does the community respond to disclosures of abuse—through justice, healing, or both?
- Are there risks of retraumatization or stigma if the story is misinterpreted or shared outside the community?

THE STORY OF THE MOON AND THE SUN

Based on a story heard from elders and retold by Delores Subia Bigfoot, 2021

THERE was a brother and a sister who were part of a tribe. They loved one another very much because they had lost many relatives, including their own parents. The brother would do anything for his sister.

As they grew into adults, the sister would tell the brother about her longing for companionship, the desire to share her life with someone, and her dreams of having a family. She would pour out her longing to her brother.

However, there never seemed to be anyone that could pass the scrutiny of the brother. One night when darkness covered the camp and the brother was gone, someone came to her. She could not tell who it was.

Darkness obscured his features. He was a mystery. He told her stories, and it made her laugh. He cared for her. She felt tended to and adored by this stranger that came to her.

Eventually, the stranger became her lover. She felt very much cherished. She loved the compassion and joy this stranger brought. She would ask, 'Who are you?' He would say, 'I will tell you later.' She would say, 'You make me laugh; you bring me gifts and comfort.' She sensed there was a deep bond between them. She wanted to know who this man was that slipped into her camp at night.

One evening she stared at the cooling ashes from her cooking fire and an idea formed in her mind. Very slowly she rubbed ashes upon her fingers. She thought, I am going to put these ashes on my fingertips and touch his face. In the morning I will know who it is.

She was so excited to find out who this stranger was. She started about the camp the next morning, searching, wondering. The brother was returning from his hunt. She was excited when she saw him. She ran to him to tell him she might discover the stranger.

As she approached him, she was shocked and so saddened, her heart immediately broke in pieces. As she looked at her brother she saw the ash marks where she had caressed him.

This is when the brother knew he had violated his sister. He had taken advantage of her. He was so ashamed; he left the village.

Both were heartbroken. In their sorrow, they tell their story. He became the MOON who does not shine except in the darkness of night and she became the SUN. You can still see his shame because he never shines brightly when the sun is out, and because of the evidence of the ash marks across his face.

The sun shines bright but can fade away when storms or clouds shield her from earth. She is sorrowful for the loss of the brother on these days.

Cultural Responsibility
Abuse of Native Children Wheel

The 'Abuse of Native Children Wheel' serves as a comprehensive model that illustrates the impacts of colonization, colonial structures, systemic violence, genocide, and cultural extermination on Native children. This model elucidates the documented correlation between historical and intergenerational violence and abuse present within contemporary tribal communities. As such, it provides critical insights into the unique experiences of Native children, which are distinct from those encountered by non-Native children.

The experience of a Native child often involves polyvictimization, which refers to exposure to multiple forms of violence within relatively short intervals. For instance, a Native child may be subjected to domestic violence in her home environment while simultaneously experiencing maltreatment, sexual abuse, and various other forms of violence in her community.

The development of the wheel is crucial for structuring Safety plans through a culture-specific lens. While the Duluth 'Abuse of Children' Wheel illustrates a cycle of violence, the 'Abuse of Native Children' Wheel provides a cyclical lens for truth and reconciliation, which is critical for intervention and prevention of future abuse. For instance, the correlation between adoption and foster care highlights how suppressed identity can lead to manifestations of emotional abuse in tribal communities. This relationship offers valuable insights for healing the complexities of both individual and collective trauma.

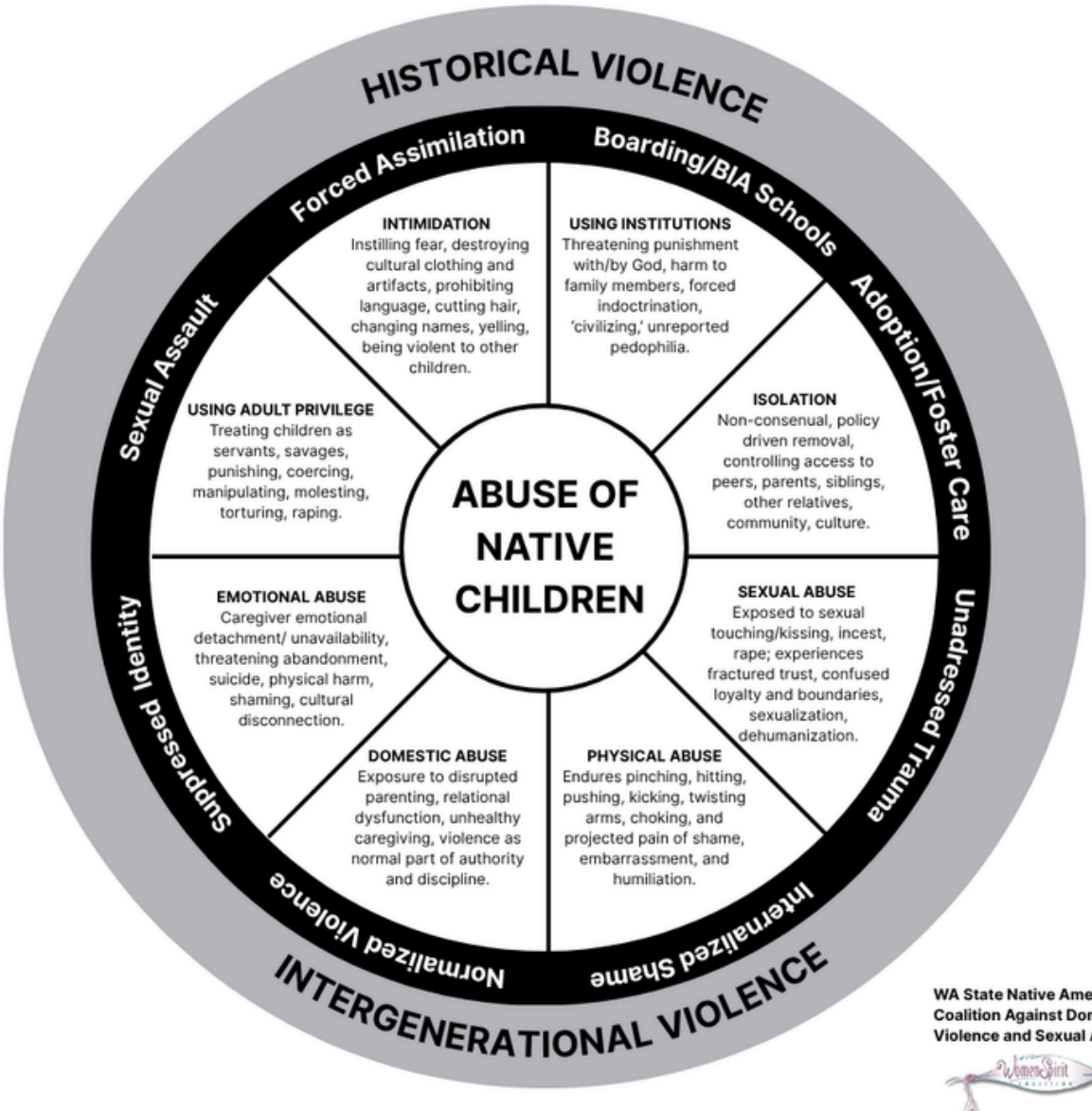
The adapted wheel is designed to address the grief and loss of the life world — land, relatives (human and non-human), language, traditions, ceremonies, spirituality, and culture — by integrating culture-specific language and content unique to tribal communities into a safety planning framework. This approach is both culturally responsive and ethically responsible.

The decision to conceptualize a culture-specific wheel stems from the objective of 'decolonizing' training, educational presentations, and advocacy. This objective is to transition from a pathologizing and prescriptive framework to one that emphasizes regeneration and reclamation, encompassing an Indigenous healing perspective aligned with the principles of liberation education.

Finally, the 'Abuse of Native Children' Wheel is appropriately and accurately labeled. We believe that Native communities will value the truth it symbolizes and honor the empowerment it represents, enabling them to create sovereignty-centered healing and ensuring that tribal communities have the autonomy to define and deliver their own support systems.

Abuse of Native Children Wheel

The Abuse of Native Children Wheel prioritizes Indigenous understanding of the world as framed through a relational or cyclical lens, reflecting the potential of promising practice that encompasses the balance of mind, body, spirit, and context. Consider how the historical violence perpetrated on Native children created the imbalances of intergenerational violence prevalant in tribal communities today.



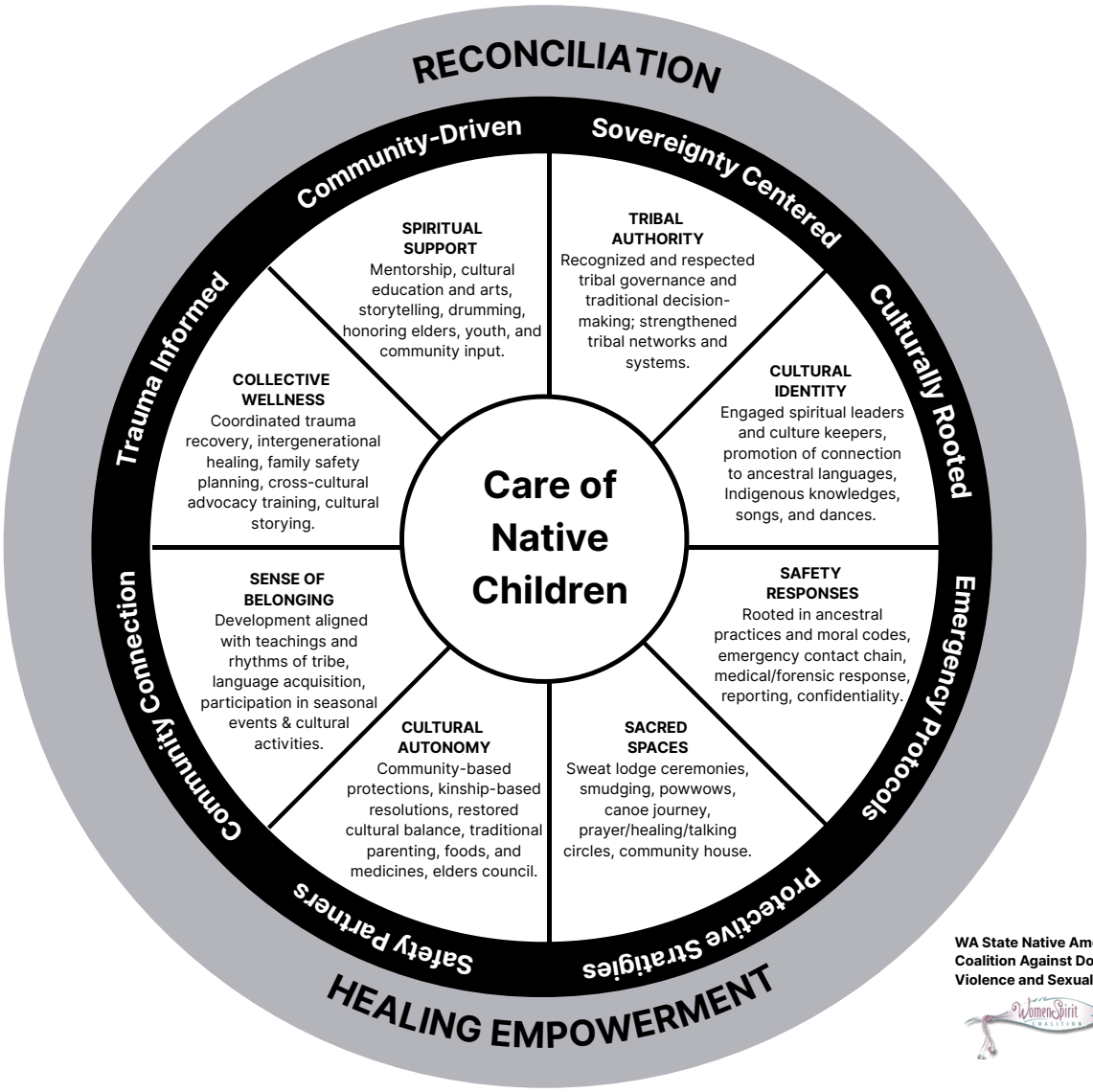
Abuse of Native Children Wheel

Note: Concept developed by Anna Mayes (2025) for WomenSpirit Coalition.

Cultural Sensitivity
Care of Native Children Wheel

Safety planning that centers the 'Care of Native Children' presents empowering opportunities for truth and reconciliation. Such initiatives extend beyond merely correcting historical injustices and their narratives; they aim to restore dignity, foster trust, and create safe, sacred, and sovereign spaces for community and collective healing empowerment.

Use the 'Care of Native Children Wheel' alongside the 'Abuse of Native Children Wheel' to understand the 'Framework for Harmonizing Imbalances.'



WA State Native American Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

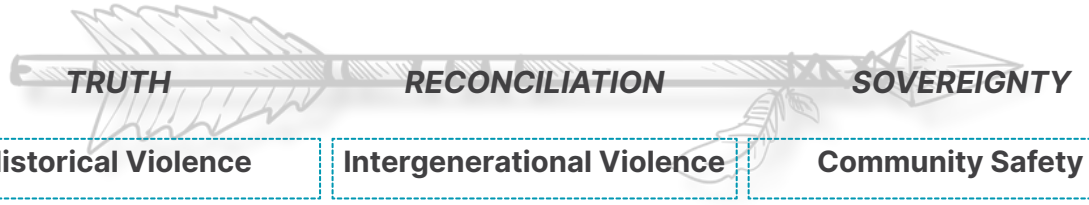
Care of Native Children Wheel

Note: Concept developed by Anna Mayes (2025) for WomenSpirit Coalition.

Culture-Specific Safety Planning
Framework for Harmonizing Imbalances

Creating a safety plan with a tribal community requires a framework grounded in Indigenous wisdom. This framework should incorporate trauma-healing informed approaches and community-driven strategies that honor the tribe's values while recognizing the connection between historical/intergenerational violence and historical/intergenerational trauma. At the very minimum, the primary objective of safety planning in a tribal community is to harmonize the imbalances of intergenerational violence.

Safety planning should function as a strategic roadmap aimed at reinstating health, harmony, and hope by incorporating elements of culture, community, and resilience. It must be designed in accordance with the goals of truth, reconciliation, and sovereignty to strengthen families by leveraging cultural strengths, fostering community connections, and promoting self-determination.



Historical Violence	Intergenerational Violence	Community Safety
BOARDING/BIA SCHOOLS	Normalized Violence ⬇ Safety Partners	Tribal Authority + Cultural Autonomy
ADOPTION/FOSTER CARE	Suppressed Identity ⬇ Community Connection	Cultural Identity + Sense of Belonging
FORCED ASSIMILATION	Internalized Shame ⬇ Protection Strategies	Spiritual Support + Sacred Spaces
SEXUAL ASSAULT	Unaddressed Trauma ⬇ Emergency Protocols	Collective Wellness + Safety Responses

Culturally Aligned
Safety Network

To successfully implement a **'Framework for Harmonizing Imbalances,'** it's essential to engage and empower safety partners who truly reflect the tribe's rich cultural wisdom and kinship values. This approach ensures that the practices of protection and healing are rooted in tribal traditions, fostering intergenerational healing and delivering care that resonates with the community's needs and priorities. Begin with the partners on this list. Also consider local schools, educators, and first responders.

Partner	Cultural Role	Local Contribution
Elders & Cultural Advisors	Keepers of Wisdom & Tradition	Guide healing ceremonies, mediate family conflict, teach parenting practices
Aunties, Uncles, & Extended Kin	Traditional Caregivers & Protectors	Provide informal monitoring, emotional support, and cultural menotorship
Tribal Council & Governance	Sovereign Decision-Makers	Enact culturally grounded safety policies, fund family wellness programs
Spiritual Leaders & Medicine People	Healers and Ceremonial Guides	Lead sweat lodges, prayer circles, spiritual cleansing for survivors and families
Youth Mentors & Peer Advocates	Role Models and Future Leaders	Facilitate youth circles, cultural workshops, and peer led prevention programs
Community Safety Circles	Collective Protectors	Respond to crisis, offer safe spaces, uphold community accountability
Tribal Health & Wellness Teams	Holistic Care Providers	Provide trauma-informed services, integrate traditional and Western healing modalitiesl
Tribal Legal & Advocacy Services	Justice Facilitators	Uphold tribal law, support survivors, ensure culturally respectful legal services

Culturally Responsive
Tribal Family Safety Plan

After the initial alert is received, culturally aligned tribal safety partners respond during a crisis. This structure reflects relational accountability, tribal sovereignty, and coordinated action. Use the partners listed in your safety network.

Elders & Cultural Advisors

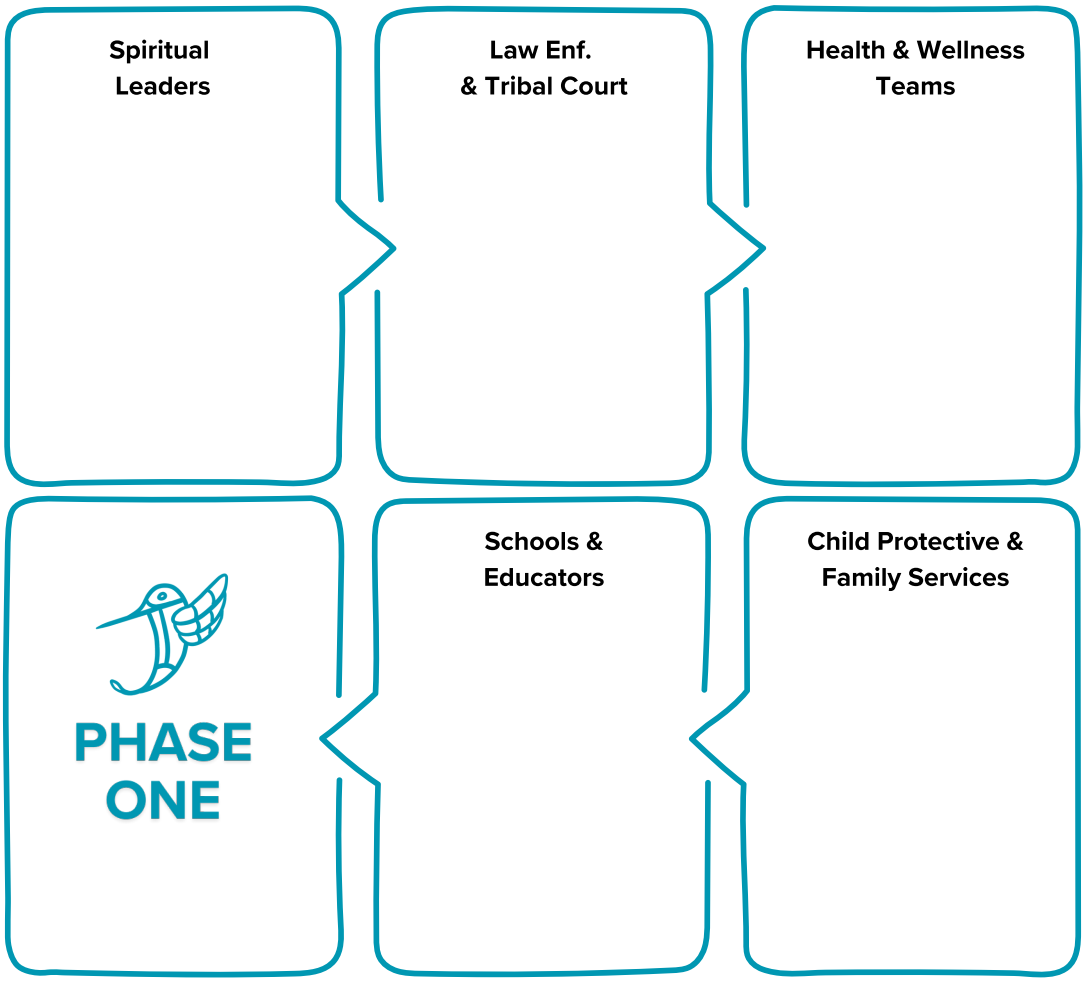
Who are the people you will consult for guidance?

Safety Advisory Team Notified

What policies and support protocols will you follow?

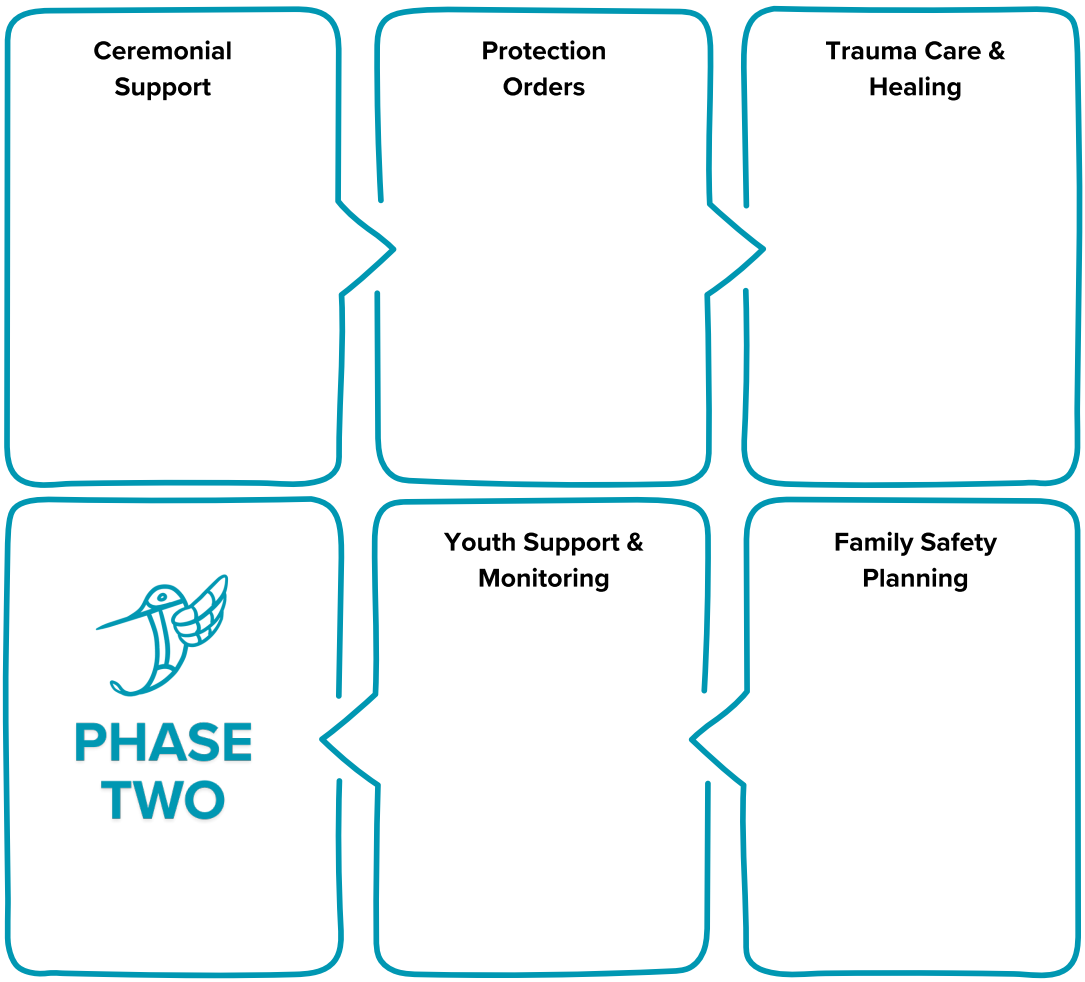
Activate Safety Partners

Who are the partners and their contact information in your first phase of action?



Activate Safety Partners

Who are the partners and their contact information in your second phase of action?



Mobilize Community Safety Circles & Extended Kin

Who are your recognized collective protectors and traditional caregivers?

Begin Emergency Protocols

What protective strategies will you deploy?

Safe Housing

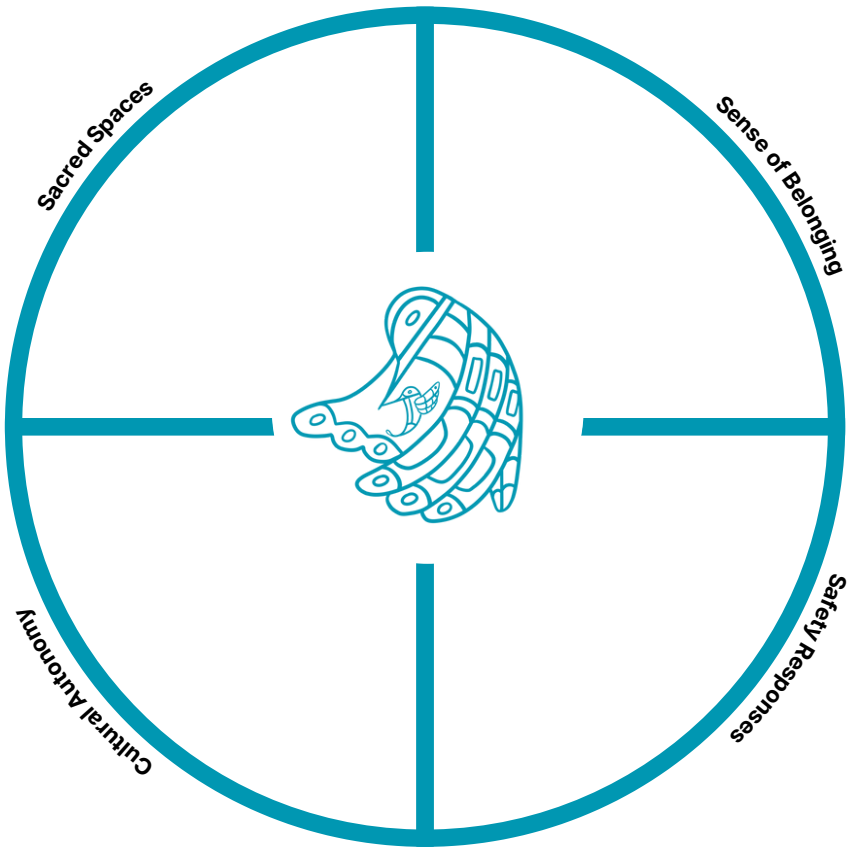
Legal/Medical Care

Transportation Plans & Communications

Ceremonial /Emotional Support

Healing Empowerment, Evaluation & Renewal

*Using the **'Care of Native Children' Wheel,** what recovery circles, youth mentorship, or storytelling practices would you include to harmonize the imbalances of the crisis? How would you use the wheel to gather community feedback for evaluation, improvement, and renewal?*



HOPE

Educational Approach

Tell me, what good is it to have all that money, or be the best at numbers or letters, if you are just going to harm other people, places, or things around you?

--Zhawin Gonzalez, White Earth Nation

Advocacy that Promotes 'The Way of The Village'

In 2020, a noteworthy study examined Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) within American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities (Giano, et al., 2020). The findings revealed an average ACE score of 2.32 among AI/AN populations, significantly surpassing the scores recorded for White individuals (1.53), Black individuals (1.66), and Hispanic individuals (1.63). The research underscored that ACEs within Indigenous populations are exacerbated by historical trauma, which includes the impacts of colonization, forced assimilation, and systemic oppression.

Another recent study investigated the relationship between prebirth household challenges and a child's ACEs score by the age of three, revealing a strong correlation (Rittman, Parish, & Lanier, 2020). The study concluded that addressing and mitigating household challenges during the prebirth period, utilizing multidisciplinary intervention strategies, may serve as a crucial preventative measure against ACEs.

Social and cultural integration is essential for the overall well-being of Indigenous people. Research indicates that strong connections and social support contribute to improved physical health. Additionally, participation in spiritual activities can significantly enhance mental wellness, even when accounting for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and demographic factors (Freeman and Ammerman, 2021).

Despite the significant and potentially debilitating health impacts of ACE exposure on Native communities, there is a growing body of evidence highlighting the benefits of using culturally relevant theories and frameworks to guide practice (Rides At The Door, 2023). Interventions and preventive measures that emphasize Indigenous protective factors and resilience offer particular benefits to Native children, families, and communities, promoting a sense of hope for the future.

Respecting
Tribal Protective Factors

Indigenous peoples perceive their environment as interconnected with the universe. The well-being of an individual community member is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the entire community, and vice versa. Within Indigenous traditions, children are educated to navigate two distinct worlds: the world into which they are born, over which they have limited control, and the world they actively create and shape.

To help their children, tribal communities exhibit a range of protective behaviors deeply rooted in their cultural and traditional practices, highlighting their remarkable resilience. These behaviors not only serve to protect against further harm but also facilitate healing and promote the overall well-being of the community. They aren't just protective—they're powerful expressions of survival, identity, strength, and hope.

Tribal protective factors are community-level strengths rooted in culture and traditions, while protective behaviors are individual actions influenced by these factors. Here is a graphic organizer to help visualize how they foster core strengths in children, their families, and community.

Protective Factors	Protective Behaviors	Core Strengths Fostered
Cultural & Spiritual Practices	PowWow, Sweat Lodge, Storytelling, Language Revitalization, Traditional Healing Practices	Cultural Identity, Spiritual Grounding, Intergenerational Wisdom
Family & Social Support	Guidance from Elders, Community Gatherings, Cultural Camps & Activities	Emotional Resilience, Sense of Belonging, Interconnectedness
Healing & Resilience Frameworks	White Bison, GONA, Healing of the Canoe, Relational Worldview Model	Trauma-Healing Informed Care, Personal Empowerment, Balance and Wellness
Sovereignty & Self Determination	Tribal governance of wellness programs, integration of Indigenous and Western approaches	Self-Governance, Holistic Health, Community Adaption

Visioning
Prevention Pathways

Use the graphic organizer to vision prevention pathways.

Choose a **protective factor** and align it with a **protective behavior**.
What is the **core strength** you desire to foster?

What protective factors would you use to support the development of a child's **core strength** of sense of belonging and interconnectedness?

What **Protective Behaviors** do **Protective Factors** like intergenerational teachings and storytelling encourage?

What **Healing and Resilience Frameworks** are available in your tribal community to support the development of a child's balance and wellness?

What are some ways you can promote **Positive (protective) Behaviors** shaped by your tribe's values?

Observing
The Story of the Uncle Spirit & the Nephew Spirit

Told By Doug Good Feather, Lakota

A young nephew spirit and an elder uncle spirit are sitting on a star, watching the earth. The elder is teaching his young nephew how to tune in to the frequency of the two-legged people. All of a sudden, the young spirit jumps up, holding his hands over his heart, yelling, “Uncle! I can feel them!

“Very good,” says the elder spirit. “Now hold that vibration and allow your eyes to loosely gaze on their planet.” The young spirit starts hopping up and down and pointing at the earth. “I can see something! I can see something!” The elder spirit asks, “Tell me, young one, what do you see?”

The youngster describes millions of orbs of light coming out of the atmosphere and floating into the universe. “Uncle, those orbs are all quite beautiful, but what are they?”

The elder replies, “Those are people’s prayers.” The young spirit watches for a bit longer, then asks, “Uncle, why are some orbs small and dim and others are big and bright?” The elder replies, “That’s people’s faith.”

Connecting
Symbols & Story

‘The Story of the Uncle Spirit and the Nephew Spirit’ can be interpreted as honoring spiritual sovereignty, trauma awareness, and cultural continuity. For example, in many Indigenous traditions, stars are sacred beings, guides, and messengers. The star they sit on could symbolize ancestral presence, spiritual watchfulness, or a connection to the Sky World. The variation in orb brightness beautifully aligns with the idea that spiritual power and belief manifest differently in each individual —resonating with the concept of personal medicine or spirit strength.

Indigenous storytelling mirrors the importance of kinship and oral tradition—elders as wisdom keepers, youth as carriers of the future. The teaching moment is rich in the Indigenous practice of transferring knowledge through storytelling, spiritual guidance, and presence.

The graphic organizer represents one way to explore how each symbol connects to an Indigenous resonance and it’s significance to Indigenous culture.

Story Symbol	Indigenous Resonance	Indigenous Culture(s)
Star	Ancestral Spirits/ Cosmic Guidance	Lakota, Diné (Navajo), Anishinaabe
Elder Figure	Teacher, Lineage Holder	Many-Cross Tribal Significance
Youthful Spirit	Curiosity, Continuation of Cultural Life Ways	Universal Among Native Nations
Earth Gazing	Honoring Mother Earth, Relational Worldview	All Indigenous Cosmologies
Orbs/Light	Prayers, Energy, Spiritual Communication	Hopi, Lakota, Coast Salish, and others

Connecting
Symbols & Story

Indigenous stories embody the rich essence of the Native worldview, particularly in their depiction of intergenerational wisdom, spiritual intuition, and reverence for the Earth. The elements within these stories are not merely poetic; they serve as profound healing tools when viewed through the lens of Indigenous wisdom and culturally grounded practices.

By integrating these fundamental story elements and acknowledging their profound cultural significance, we can develop a practice that is informed by healing and resonates effectively within tribal communities. This deliberate approach honors relational teachings that are essential for healing-informed and culturally responsive modalities.

Healing-Informed Connections in Symbol and Story

Example: Intergenerational Dialogue (Uncle & Nephew Spirits)

Healing Significance: Honors relational teachings, a key feature in healing-informed and culturally responsive modalities. Elders transmit resilience, worldview, and emotional intelligence.

Cultural Practice: Reflects the value of interdependence and collective memory in Indigenous traditions.

Healing Informed Principle	Story Element	Impact
Safety Through Connection	Elder Spirit's Guidance	Fosters Trust and Relational Safety
Empowerment of Identity	Young Spirit's Awakening	Celebrates Spiritual Intuition and Voice
Honoring Culture and Ritual	Visualization of Prayers and Cosmic Gaze	Validates Sacred Ways of Knowing and Being
Trauma Awareness	Variations in Orbs Brightness	Symbolizes Different Healing Journeys
Strengths Based Approach	The Beauty of All Orbs	Affirms that All Prayers Matter, Even Faint Ones

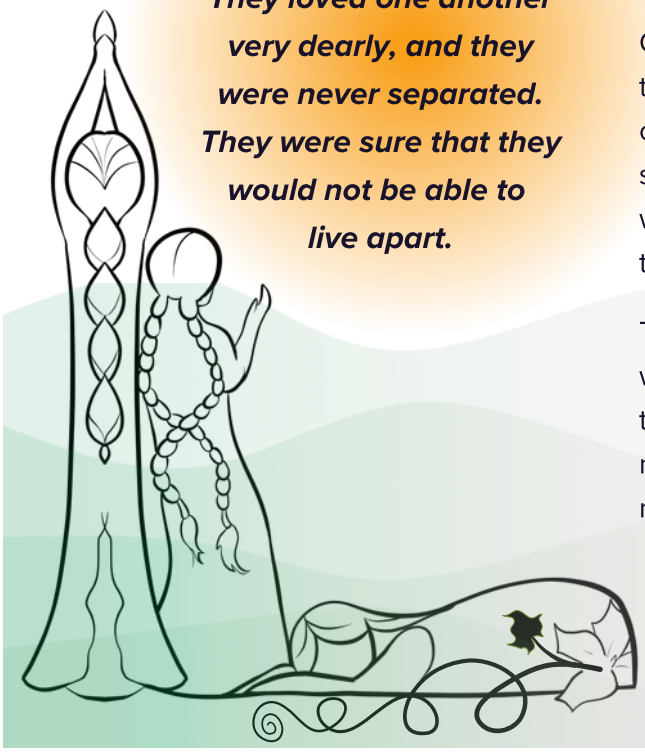
Integrating
The Three Sisters Story

A Mohawk Legend

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there were three sisters who lived together in a field.

These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and also in their way of dressing. One of the three was a little sister, so young that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second of the three wore a frock of bright yellow, and she had a way of running off by herself when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters and trying to guard them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breeze. There was only one way in which the three sisters were alike.

They loved one another very dearly, and they were never separated. They were sure that they would not be able to live apart.



After a while, a stranger came to the field of the three sisters, a little Indian boy. He was as straight as an arrow and as fearless as the eagle that circled the sky above his head. He knew the way of talking to the birds and the small brothers of the earth, the shrew, the chipmunk, and the young foxes. And the three sisters, the one who was just able to crawl, the one in the yellow frock, and the one with the flowing hair, were very much interested in the little Indian boy. They watched him fit his arrow in his bow, saw him carve a bowl with his stone knife, and wondered where he went at night.

Late in the summer of the first coming of the Indian boy in their field, one of the three sisters disappeared. This was the youngest sister in green, the sister who could only creep. She was scarcely able to stand alone in the field unless she had a stick to which she clung. Her sisters mourned for her until the fall, but she did not return.

Once more the Indian boy came to the field of the three sisters. He came to gather reeds at the edge of a stream nearby to make arrow shafts. The two sisters who were left watched him and gazed with wonder at the prints of his moccasins in the earth that marked his trail.

That night, the second of the sisters left, the one who was dressed in yellow and who always wanted to run away. She left no mark of her going, but it may have been that she set her feet in the moccasin tracks of the little Indian boy.

Now there was but one of the sisters left. Tall and straight, she stood in the field, not once bowing her head with sorrow, but it seemed to her that she could not live there alone. The days grew shorter and the nights were colder. Her green shawl faded and grew thin and old. Her hair, once long and golden, was tangled by the wind. Day and night, she sighed for her sisters to return to her, but they did not hear her. Her voice, when she tried to call to them, was low and plaintive like the wind.

But one day when it was the season of the harvest, the little Indian boy heard the crying of the third sister who had been left too mourn there in the field. He felt sorry for her, and he took her in his arms and carried her to the lodge of his father and mother. Oh what a surprise awaited her there! Her two lost sisters were there in the lodge of the little Indian boy, safe and very glad to see her. They had been curious about the Indian boy, and they had gone home with him to see how and where he lived. They had liked his warm cave so well that they had decided, now that winter was coming on, to stay with him. And they were doing all they could to be useful.

The little sister in green, now quite grown up, was helping to keep the dinner pot full. The sister in yellow sat on the shelf drying herself, for she planned to fill the dinner pot later. The third sister joined them, ready to grind meal for the Indian boy. And the three were never separated again.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

How did you feel when the sisters left one by one?

Is there anything significant about the order in which the sisters left?

Overview of the Traditional Story

In many Native American traditions, especially among the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), the Three Sisters—Corn, Beans, and Squash—are planted together because they support one another:

- **Corn** grows tall and strong, offering structure.
- **Beans** climb the corn, binding the sisters together.
- **Squash** spreads low, protecting the soil and roots.

Together, they thrive—symbolizing community, cooperation, and resilience.

What other ways does your tribe thrive together?

Why the Three Sisters Work in This Context

- **Symbolic Protection:** Squash shields the others—mirroring the need for safety.
- **Interdependence:** Beans rely on Corn—like children relying on trusted adults.
- **Growth and Healing:** The garden metaphor supports recovery and resilience.

What other ways does this story apply to our practice in tribal communities?

Adapting
Forensic Interviewing Practice

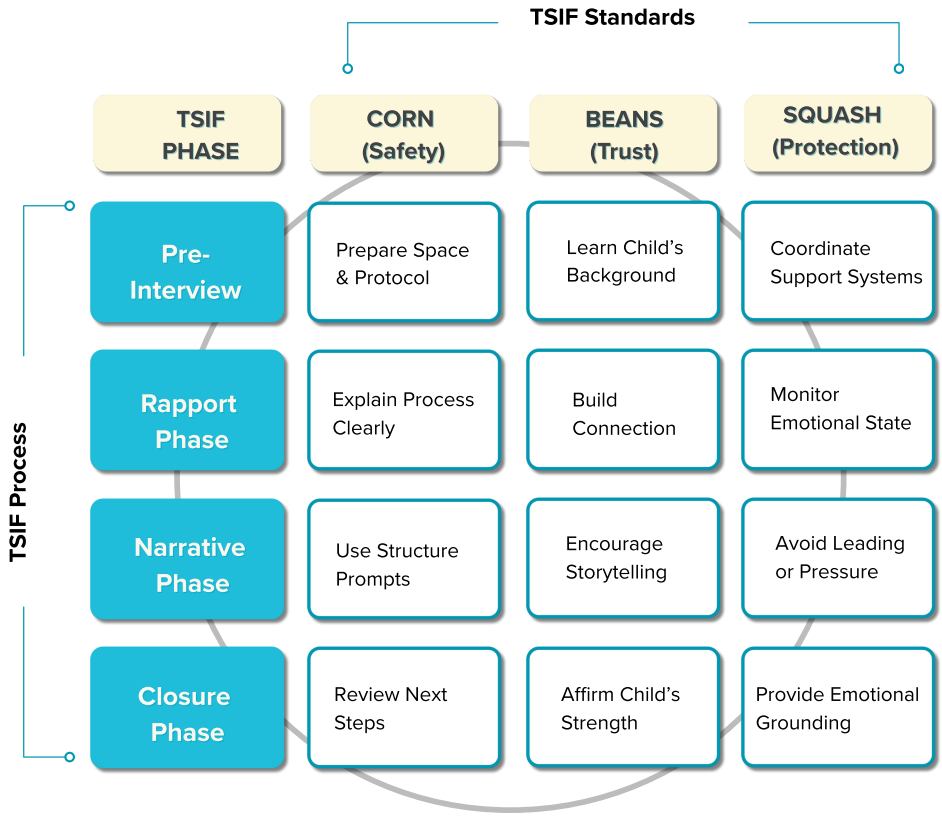
The narratives surrounding the Three Sisters are notably rich and diverse, illustrating the distinct perspectives of various Indigenous nations. For example, in Cherokee tradition, the tale centers on three remarkable women who united their strength, providing sustenance, water, and mutual support during the arduous Trail of Tears. For the Iroquois people, corn, beans, and squash serve as critical sustenance that nourishes both the body and the spirit.

The Three Sisters Story: A Cultural Framework for Forensic Interviewing

The adaptation of child forensic interviewing techniques for sexual assault cases, utilizing the Indigenous narrative of the Three Sisters provides a culturally sensitive and metaphor-rich framework that fosters a safe environment for children during the disclosure process. This traditional story, grounded in Indigenous agricultural wisdom, embodies themes of interdependence, protection, and nurturing—concepts that can be effectively integrated into trauma-informed interviewing practices. Such an approach not only respects cultural context but also enhances the overall efficacy of the interviewing process.

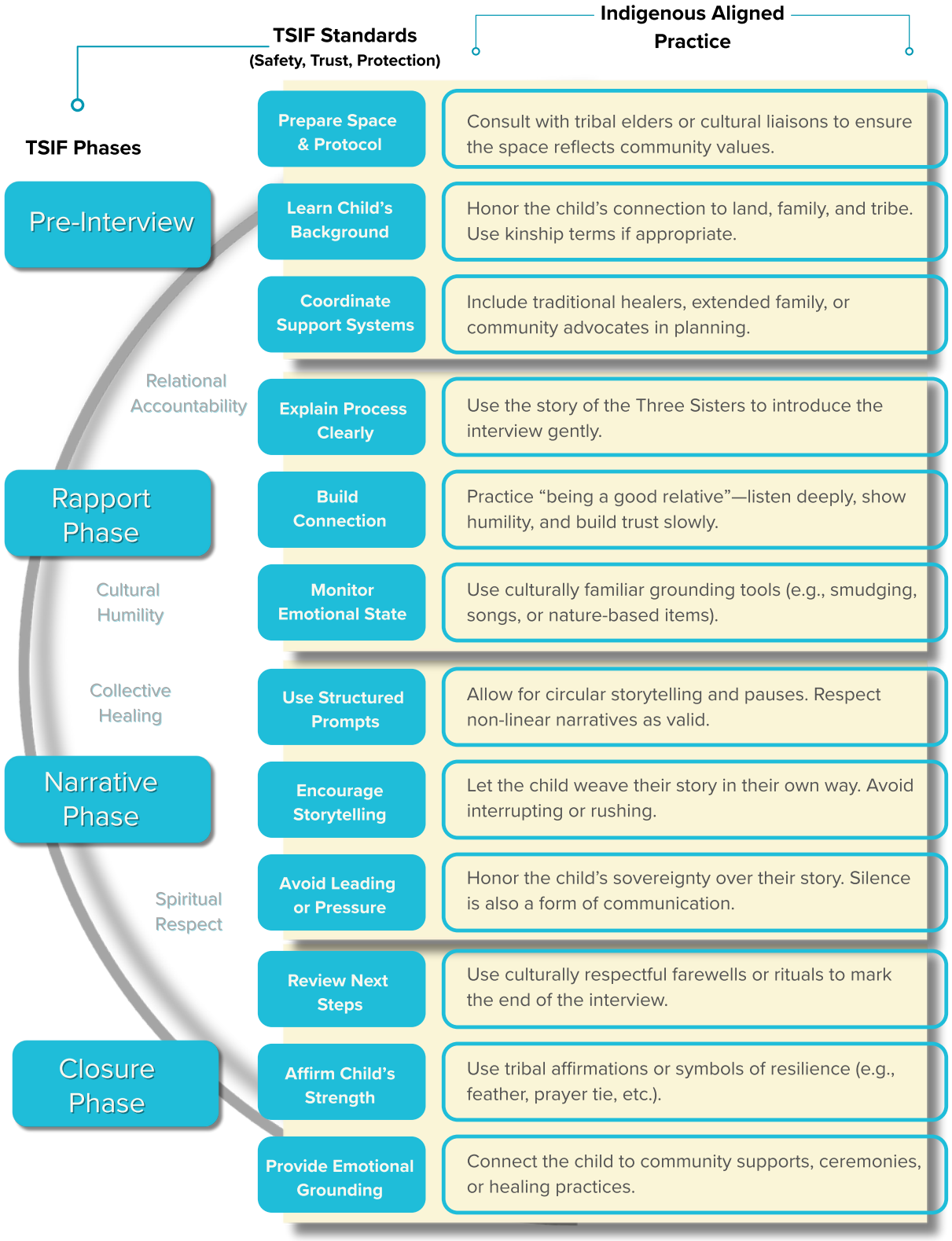
Three Sisters Interviewing Framework (TSIF)

PURPOSE: To provide a culturally grounded, trauma-healing informed structure for conducting forensic interviews with children, inspired by the Native American story of the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash. This framework emphasizes safety, trust, and protection, aligning with best practices in child advocacy and Indigenous values.



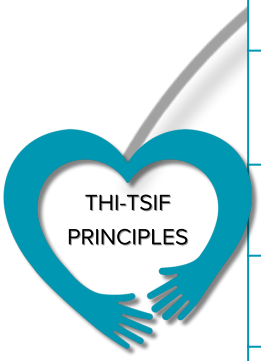
Aligned TSIF Standards & Phases with Indigenous Practice

To align the Three Sisters Interviewing Framework (TSIF) with Indigenous values, we can integrate principles from Indigenous evaluation strategies and culturally grounded practices. The core values are **relational accountability, cultural humility, collective healing, and spiritual respect.**



Trauma-Healing Informed & Three Sisters Interviewing Framework (THI-TSIF)

The Three Sisters Interviewing Framework (TSIF) can be further developed into a trauma-healing informed model for conducting child forensic interviews. This enhanced approach is designed to guide forensic interviewers in executing trauma-sensitive and culturally informed interviews with children. It integrates the principles of trauma-informed care and healing-centered engagement, while simultaneously preserving the cultural metaphor associated with the Three Sisters in practice.



Principle	Application in THI-TSIF
Safety	Physical and emotional safety through structure
Trustworthiness	Consistency, transparency, and cultural respect
Empowerment	Child-led choices and voice in the process
Collaboration	Work with caregivers, cultural liaisons, MDTs
Cultural Humility	Honor diverse traditions and healing practices

SISTER 1 (Safety & Structure)	SISTER 2 (Trust & Connection)	SISTER 3 (Protection & Healing)
CORN	**BEANS**	**SQUASH**
Trauma-Healing Focus: Provides the foundation—a safe, predictable, and culturally respectful space where healing can begin.	**Trauma-Healing Focus:** Represents the relational bond—the trust that grows when the interviewer is attuned, respectful, and emotionally present.	**Trauma-Healing Focus:** Shields the child emotionally and spiritually, allowing the interview to be a step toward healing—not just information gathering.
Practices: • *Create Psychological Safety:* Use calming tones, predictable routines, and clear explanations to reduce fear and anxiety. • *Cultural Grounding:* Incorporate familiar symbols, stories, or rituals to help the child feel anchored. • *Empowerment Through Choice:* Offer choices (e.g., seating, breaks, how to start) to restore a sense of control.	**Practices:** • *Relational Attunement:* Mirror the child's pace and emotional state; validate their feelings without judgment. • *Narrative Empowerment:* Encourage storytelling in the child's own words, honoring nonlinear or fragmented memories. • *Cultural Humility:* Approach each child's background with openness and curiosity, not assumptions.	**Practices:** • *Minimize Retraumatization:* Avoid leading questions, pressure, or repeated probing. • *Healing-Centered Closure:* End with affirmations, grounding activities, or culturally meaningful gestures. • *Post-Interview Support:* Ensure the child is connected to advocates, caregivers, or community healers for ongoing care.

Creating
A Safe, Sacred, & Sovereign Space

Here's a gentle, story-based script tailored for younger children in tribal communities, using the Three Sisters as a metaphor to guide the forensic interview process. It's written in simple, comforting language that could be read aloud or shared with the child before or during the interview.

INTERVIEW SCRIPT - FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

THE THREE SISTERS STORY: A SAFE SPACE TO SHARE

A GENTLE STORY TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT TODAY IS ABOUT.

SISTER CORN – THE TALL SISTER WHO KEEPS YOU SAFE

Corn stands tall and strong. She helps her sisters grow by giving them something to lean on.

"Today, Corn is like this room we're in. It's a safe space. I'm here to listen to you. You can ask questions anytime. You don't have to be scared—Corn is standing tall beside you."

You can sit where you feel comfy. You can take breaks. You're in charge of your story.

SISTER BEANS – THE CLIMBING SISTER WHO TRUSTS

Beans wrap around Corn. She grows slowly, gently, and always finds her way.

"Beans remind us that it's okay to take your time. You can talk in your own way. You don't have to remember everything perfectly. Just like Beans, your story might twist and turn—and that's okay."

You can say what you want. You can stop anytime. I'll listen carefully.

SISTER SQUASH – THE WIDE SISTER WHO PROTECTS

Squash spreads out and covers the ground. She keeps her sisters safe from weeds and harm.

"Squash is here to protect you. When we're done, you'll still be surrounded by people who care. You are strong, and you are not alone."

You did something brave by being here. Your voice matters.

Would You Like a Closing Ritual?

"Some kids like to end with something special. Would you like to draw something? Hold a soft object? Hear a short story from your tribe?"

You get to choose what feels right for you.

You Are Like the Three Sisters

Strong like Corn
Brave like Beans
Protected like Squash

"You are part of a story that's still growing. And today, you helped it bloom."

Please utilize the template below to develop your Interview Script based on the Three Sisters Story and the Trauma-Healing Informed Three Sisters Interview Framework (THI-TSIF).

THE THREE SISTERS STORY: A SAFE SPACE TO SHARE

A GENTLE STORY TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT TODAY IS ABOUT.

SISTER CORN – THE TALL SISTER WHO KEEPS YOU SAFE

SISTER BEANS – THE CLIMBING SISTER WHO TRUSTS

SISTER SQUASH – THE WIDE SISTER WHO PROTECTS

Would You Like a Closing Ritual?

You Are Like the Three Sisters

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