

# Honoring Indigenous Lifeways: For the Children

**NCA Accreditation Standard and  
Essential Components this brief addresses:**

Standard 2: Diversity, Equity, and Access  
Essential Components C, D, and E

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NCA Accreditation Standard 2 requires CACs to provide culturally responsive services premised on an understanding and consideration of the different cultural backgrounds of their clients. To fulfill this requirement in Tribal communities and among American Indian/Alaska Native populations, CACs must recognize the diversity of Tribal cultures and attempt to come to an understanding, not of Tribal cultures in general, but of the particular culture(s) of the communities they serve. Below, NCARC's Ethleen Iron Cloud-Two Dogs provides examples of what support for healthy child development looks like according to the cultural traditions of the Oglala Lakota people. We offer these examples of how one Tribal culture supports child well-being to encourage reflection about how CACs might incorporate traditional practices when working with children and families.

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My husband, Rick Two Dogs, is a spiritual leader among our Oglala Lakota people. Recently, as part of a ceremony he was conducting, three young Lakota mothers lined up with their infants for a *Wakanyeya Yutima Awic'ac'upi*, a Lakota concept and ceremony where newborn children are welcomed and brought into the sacred circle of the family and extended family. Behind each of the mothers stood the grandmothers, who took turns standing on a sacred buffalo robe and prayed to the six directions—west, north, east, south, sky, and earth—giving thanks for the blessing of the child, praying for good health for the baby, and acknowledging the commitment of and responsibility for ensuring that the child will be given every opportunity to have a healthy, happy life on their earth journey. While they did this, the others shared prayer songs, and the families and relatives of the babies sat in a circle around the sacred altar and prayed with the grandmothers, acknowledging their role and responsibility in the child's life. The purpose of this ceremony is to celebrate a gift of life but also to make a *wokicunze* (sacred vow) with all of creation, both human and non-human, as witnesses. Afterward, everyone marked the celebration by sharing a meal and gifts.



Historically, creating space and time to honor the gift of a child from the Creator was a focused and ongoing undertaking. The *Wakanyeya Yutima Awic'ac'upi* is one of multiple ceremonies that honor the blessing bestowed upon the family. Other ceremonies that mark the transition from the spirit world to the earth world include *Wakanyeya C'aswecatunpi*—the naming of the child's spirit—during which a spirit name is requested for the child from an Elder or through ceremony. The name often reflects an ancestor's character, qualities, strengths, and/or bravery in battle. It is believed that by carrying the name through life, the child carries the spiritual essence of the ancestor to guide and strengthen them throughout their journey on earth. Once the name is given to the child, there is a celebration, where the name is announced at a community gathering, songs are shared, prayers are offered, and a feast and giveaway are held. Again, the ceremony is meant to convey to the child and all witnesses how cherished the child is.

Another ceremony that is sponsored on behalf of the child is the spiritual marking of the ears. This involves an Elder woman marking the earlobes of the child with sacred red earth paint with the talon of an eagle claw, in preparation for when the child gets their ears pierced. The holes that are made in the earlobes signify the entrance to the spirit and heart for sacred teachings to pass through. The Elder woman prays, sings, and gives the child *wowahunkukeya* (ancestral teachings) so that through the ceremony, the child's spirit will retain the ancestral teachings related to honoring all of life's

creation, kinship, and self. Once again, the ceremony demonstrates love for the child.

The first word the child speaks and the first steps the child takes are cause for celebration, and often families sponsor a feast to show the child how proud they are of these accomplishments, an act of love that demonstrates to the child they are worthy, have a place and role in the circle of relatives, and deserve recognition.

The ceremonies and celebrations described above usually occur in the first stage of life according to Lakota worldview, a stage that includes pre-birth through the age of puberty, about age 11 to 13 years. The purpose of these ceremonies occurring in the first stage of life is to build a strong sense of self-esteem within the child so that they will have the confidence to try and achieve the goals they set out to accomplish. The child's mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being is a priority for the adult relatives, so child-rearing is seen as a collective and shared responsibility. The ceremonies and celebrations are carried out by the family and extended relatives of the child as a matter of spiritual obligation but mostly out of love for the child. The family and extended family understand that the pathway of the child's life is strengthened by the ceremonies and ongoing pervasive messaging that the child is treasured and cherished.

These and other ceremonies, once common among the Lakota people, have been devastatingly threatened by the traumatic collective traumas our people have experienced. Too many of our people have become disconnected from a way of life that

created a strong foundation from which all children grew and developed. Children who do not know their Lakota identity and ways of life float through life without a cultural anchor, vulnerable to harmful influences and traumatic experiences that often plunge them into despair, depression, and, tragically, suicide.

Incorporating programs and strategies to address the disconnection from cultural lifeways for children and youth is critical to reducing such risks. There are many ways to do this, and approaches should vary depending on specific Tribal teachings and cultures. One starting point is to implement a relational approach in which children, youth, and their families are viewed and treated as relatives in contrast to “clients” or “cases.” This approach can potentially lead to increased engagement and more positive interactions with children, youth, and their families. Another strategy is to engage Elders in planning and implementing any initiatives related to children, youth, and families. Elders, through their lived experience as cultural knowledge holders, are essential to developing a culturally relevant foundation for programming and/or education. Creating natural supports for children can include encouragement and blessings from Traditional and Spiritual Elders, for example, as part of the activities in a Tribal Children’s Healing Camp—an approach that we utilize in my community.

While I can only speak to specific approaches within my own culture, I hope that the examples I have provided of our beautiful Lakota ceremonies and their meanings will point a way forward toward greater understanding of how programs of all types,

including Child Advocacy Centers, may be able to promote and support the restoration of Indigenous lifeways for the sake of our children.



**Sina Ikikcu Win (Takes the Robe Woman), Ethleen Iron Cloud-Two Dogs** is an enrolled citizen of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and has Crow ancestry. She counts among her many

blessings: her cherished life companion, beloved family, and many precious relatives.

Ethleen has over thirty years of experience in the helping field. Currently, she provides training and technical assistance locally and nationally in youth, family, and community development; mental health; substance abuse; education; suicide prevention; juvenile justice; and cultural development. She serves on the Rosalyn Carter Mental Health Task Force, the Knife Chief Buffalo Nation Society Board of Directors, and the Anpo Wicahpi Owayawa (Morning Star School), Pine Ridge Girls School. She also volunteers her time directing Healing Camps for children, youth, and families who have experienced trauma or have been exposed to trauma.

Ethleen resides in Porcupine, SD on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

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