

# Reinforcing Resilience: How Parent Centers Can Support American Indian and Alaska Native Parents

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Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center

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**R**esilience is "... the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress...It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences."<sup>1</sup> Lakota researcher Martin Brokenleg offers a Native perspective: Resilience is "... being able to get up again when life knocks us down. That is what is required in order to live life well. Resiliency is being **strong on the inside**, having a courageous spirit."<sup>2</sup>

## Native Resilience, Historically

In past times, the word *resilience* was unknown, but the concept of it was very familiar to American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). Resilience was integral to their lives, especially to child-rearing.

There was a shared belief that all children—whether born with or without a disability—were gifts from the Creator. They were to be nurtured and lovingly taught how to be valuable contributors to their family and community. Parents, extended family members, and clan relatives had specific roles to play to make children strong and resilient.<sup>3</sup>



Since then, much has happened to AI/AN families to disrupt their traditional ways of life, including:

- displacement from sacred homelands;
- death from imported diseases;
- involuntary removal of their young to far-off boarding schools;
- pressures to give up remaining land and other rights; and
- daily exposure to negative stereotyping and racism.

## At A Glance

This brief describes the importance of resilience in Native communities and suggests ways that Parent Centers can share the skills that reinforce resilience with Native parents of youth with disabilities.

## There's Also a Brief for Youth!

Parent Centers can also share NAPTAC's *Resiliency* message written for youth, available at: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/native-resilience-youth/>

Such hardships gradually yet systematically eroded the individual and community resilience of Native people.

Fortunately, aspects of traditional values and behaviors have endured. Navajo sociologist Charlotte Goodluck identified 42 strengths of Native cultures, including tribal identity, extended family, language, traditions, humor, ritual, group orientation, stories, view of children, and spirituality.<sup>4</sup> These strengths have sustained AI/ANs through generations and must continue to be nurtured in youth, especially those with disabilities.

## Reinforcing Resilience, Today and Tomorrow

When we mindfully foster the resilience of our young people, they learn the skills that can turn life's adversities into strengths. Being resilient doesn't mean that a youth (or a parent!) won't still experience difficulties in life. It means they've learned the behaviors, thoughts, and skills to help them adapt to and rebound from a setback. All youth and adults can build on their innate resiliency: "... resilience does not come from rare and special qualities but from the **everyday magic** of ordinary human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and their communities."<sup>5</sup>

Being born with or acquiring a disability can be a stressor, whether the disability is visible to others or not. Reinforcing the resilience of Native parents and youth with disabilities makes it less likely that these youth will be overcome by the inevitable ups and downs of life.

### Resilience Builders

The most important factor that protects youth from adversity is **ONE caring adult** in their life. It can be a family member, clan relative, spiritual mentor, educator, coach, or any adult who gives unwavering support to a youth.

All caring adults need to be familiar with the 10 skills cited below, research-based builders of resilience in youth. Encourage Native youth to:

1. Expand their **relationships** with family/tribal members, friends, teams, and social causes.
2. Set personal, realistic **goals** related to academic or cultural studies and/or their hobbies.
3. Practice **problem solving** by facing problems not wishing them away. Learn to self-calm when stressed.
4. Persevere; **don't give up**. Focus on their unique strengths and accomplishments.
5. Develop **inner direction**—the internal ability to evaluate social situations. Use life skills, such as



communication skills, assertiveness, and impulse control.

6. Foster a sense of **humor** and use it appropriately, to help put things in perspective.
7. Remain **optimistic** and confident in their abilities and future. Advocate for themselves with assurance in IEP meetings.
8. Use **creativity** to express themselves and release feelings. Be adept at a cultural skill.
9. Manage their **feelings**, rather than being overwhelmed by them. *Talk* about their feelings.
10. Value **spirituality**. Believe in a higher power. Take up positive thinking, meditation, and/or Native rituals.

### Suggestions for Parent Centers

- Keep in mind the innate resilience of AI/ANs when outreaching to them. Signs of respect can build trust and result in lasting relationships.
- Provide trainings on resiliency to Native communities, including examples of how to enhance resilience among family members, especially AI/AN youth with disabilities.
- Share this brief at Parent Center exhibit booths in AI/AN communities to remind Native parents of the critical importance of reinforcing resilience in their youth with disabilities.
- Share with AI/AN families NAPTAC's separate *Resiliency* message written directly to Native youth.

### References

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4—Goodluck, C., & Willeto, A. (2009). [Seeing the protective rainbow: How families survive and thrive in the American](#)

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