



How Values Impact Communication with American Indians and Alaska Natives

This brief explores the importance of cultural values in relationship building. As Parent Centers reach out to, and work with, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, they may find it helpful to know more about Native values that can influence communication. Several Native values and behaviors of note are described.

What Are Values?

According to the extensive international research conducted by Dr. Brian P. Hall, there are 125 human values common across all cultural groups. These include core values such as family and belonging, safety, and self-worth, and more complex and visionary ones such as presence, human dignity, wisdom, and justice.¹ However, each culture *prioritizes* these values in a different order. Hall offers the following conclusions.

Values are ideals that give significance to our lives, that are reflected through the priorities that we choose, and that we act on consistently and repeatedly.²

We are usually aware of what some of our beliefs are, but not what the values are that underpin them. We say therefore that our values are tacit or partly hidden. Yet at the same time our values drive our lives.³

Values are generally learned in an informal manner. Traditional Native societies continue to teach community-held values and accepted behavior through the time-honored tradition of storytelling by parents, elders, or community orators. Tribal/village youth are entertained and simultaneously instructed, and adult members are reminded. Some stories teach the importance of people working together, for example; while others relay lessons against being boastful or greedy. In this way, the behaviors reflected in these examples communicate and reinforce the values of cooperation, humility, and sharing.

The behaviors described in this brief illustrate core AI/AN values about which credible generalizations can be made. The brief does not attempt to depict Native values as superior to European-American values or vice-versa. The intent is to share a Native perspective on specific prioritized values that influence relationships with non-Natives. The goal is to enrich communication with and outreach to Native parents, youth, villages, and tribes.

How Do Values Influence American Indians and Alaska Natives?

Native cultures have experienced over 500 years of contact with European cultures and intense pressures to conform. Even so, Native communities continue to revere cultural traditions and to be resilient. In their daily lives, many AI/ANs choose a path of co-existence with mainstream America. This means that, while the majority of Native parents and youth appreciate the material conveniences of modern society, many also retain aspects of their traditional cultures that can set them apart from their non-Native neighbors.

Nonetheless, the values prioritized by and acted upon by AI/ANs were more prevalent in times past, when the elders held greater influence and when Native societies were more stable. Currently, AI/ANs live in a world of transition. The result is that some traditional Native values and their related behaviors have been influenced to varying degrees by mainstream society. This is more prevalent among the younger generation.

Traditional AI/AN values offer strength and a sense of one's identity within the Native community. However, because Native-prioritized values often conflict sharply with the prioritized values of the dominant society—and that is where most Natives live or work—frustration and confusion can result. Attempting to reconcile two polarized sets of values puts an enormous strain on Native parents and youth, which, in turn, affects their mental, physical, and spiritual wellness.⁴

Which Native Values and Behaviors Influence Communication Between Natives and Non-Natives? ⁵

Few values are more important to relationship building than the following AI/AN values and behaviors that can impact communication between Parent Center staff and Native communities.

Moderation in Speech. Talking for the sake of talking is discouraged among AI/ANs. In historical times, when Natives lived in their own societies and saw the same people daily, it was unnecessary to say hello, good-bye, and so on. Even today, such small talk is uncomfortable for many. Often AI/ANs speak slowly, quietly, and deliberately. The power of words is understood, so one chooses words carefully. In social settings, Natives tend to emphasize the emotional elements of an interaction, rather than the verbal—meaning, they sense a speaker's level of sincerity and the truth in the spoken word.

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Careful Listening. Being a good listener is highly valued by Native communities. There is a long tradition of AI/AN history and culture being transmitted orally by revered storytellers and orators. Those adults and youth who were present were expected to listen respectfully without interruption.

Careful Observation. Having lived in and with nature for centuries, AI/ANs developed keen observational skills and an eye for fine details. Likewise, nonverbal messages and signals, such

as facial expressions, gestures, or different tones of voice, are easily perceived. When in nature, one also learns to be still and quiet. Most Natives are comfortable with silence and have learned not to fill it with talk.

Indirect Eye Contact. Many Native people avoid prolonged, direct eye contact as a sign of respect. Among some tribes, one stares at another only when angry. Regrettably, Native youth are often admonished for not looking directly at their non-Native teachers, when the young person is actually looking down out of respect.

Personal Discretion. Due to negative historical experiences with outsiders, Natives use caution and discretion in personal encounters with non-Native educators, social service providers, and others. AI/ANs may retreat when a new acquaintance asks too many questions or presses for a conversation. Information about one's family, especially family problems, is not shared freely. In part, this is due to uncertainty about how family members will be perceived or if they will be blamed or shamed for the family's issues.

Suggestions for Parent Center Staff

1. Identify your own cultural values and behaviors that influence your interpretation of the values and behaviors of individuals from cultural groups different from your own.
2. Recognize that the differences in the way each culture prioritizes its values does not mean that one culture's priorities are superior to another's; they are simply different.
3. Be aware that the difference in the priority placed on speaking between Native and non-Native cultures can create a situation where the Native person has few opportunities to talk. Allow space for their voice to enter a conversation or interview.
4. Be careful not to misinterpret the lower priority Natives place on speaking as an indicator of their being shy, unsociable, withdrawn, or disinterested.
5. Honor the higher priority AI/ANs place on listening and silence by listening when they speak without interruption and by showing respect for their opinions and perspectives.
6. Understand that Natives are showing you respect when they don't look you directly in the eye. Avoid interpreting it as disrespectful or suspicious behavior.
7. Strive toward communication that is sincere and non-judgmental.
8. Become familiar with the specific AI/AN tribes and villages in your service area and recognize which hold to more traditional Native values, beliefs, and behaviors, so those values can be recognized and respected by Parent Center staff during interactions.

9. Share this brief with school personnel with whom the Parent Center works to enhance communication with Native parents and youth at the school level as well.

References

¹ Hall, Brian P. (2003). *The values advantage: Communities of practice inside out*. Presentation at the HP Seminar, April 25, 2003. Online at: www.valuestech.com/gui/ValuesAdvantage.pdf

² Mount St. Mary's College. (n.d.). *Introduction to values technology*. Los Angeles: CA: Author. Quotation from page 1. Online at: www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Intro%20to%20Values%20Technology.pdf

³ Hall, Brian P. (2003). *The values advantage: Communities of practice inside out*. Presentation at the HP Seminar, April 25, 2003. Quotation from page 9. Online at: www.valuestech.com/gui/ValuesAdvantage.pdf

⁴ Garrett, M.T., Rivera, E.T., Dixon, A.L., & Myers, J.E. (2009, Fall). Acculturation and wellness of Native American adolescents in the United States of North America. *Revista Perspectivas Sociales/Social Perspectives*, 11(1), 41-67. Online at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/3651010.pdf>

⁵ Two resources were particularly helpful in researching what values and behaviors to prioritize in this brief. They were:

California Department of Education. (1991). Some Indian values, attitudes and behaviors together with educational considerations. *The American Indian: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, A Handbook for Educators*. Sacramento, CA: Author.

Minnesota Department of Education. (n.d.). *American Indian history, culture and language: Teacher background information*. Minneapolis, MN: Author.

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for the Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC).*

This document was produced under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs No. H328R130012-14. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. This product is public domain. You are free to copy and share it, giving the citation as:

Morris, J.S. (2017). *How values impact communication with American Indians and Alaska Natives*. Albuquerque, NM: Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC). Available online at: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/naptac-tier1-culture/>