

# The Impact of Traditional Native Values on Transition Planning

*This brief explores how the values of American Indians and Alaska Natives can impact the transition planning process and offers suggestions to guide Parent Center work with Native youth and families planning for life after high school.*

For all young people, graduating from high school to the world of work and/or to post-secondary education means entering a new phase in their life journey. The new phase may be accompanied by excitement as well as uncertainty. If the young people in question also have a disability, the level of anxiety may far outweigh their excitement. For American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) teens with disabilities, the transition planning process required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may spark additional anxiety and concern, as detailed below.

The post-high school goal is detailed in the federal legislation.<sup>1</sup> In IDEA, the U.S. Congress referred to “our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, **independent living** and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.”<sup>2</sup> A key objective of IDEA is to prepare children with disabilities to “lead productive and **independent** adult lives, to the maximum extent possible”<sup>3</sup> (*emphasis added*).

The transition planning process... assumes that all youth with disabilities and their parents see independent living as a primary end-goal. That is not necessarily the case for all AI/AN parents and their youth with disabilities.

The transition planning process detailed in the law makes basic assumptions about all youth. It assumes that the goals inherent in the required transition plan are shared by all racial and ethnic groups. In particular, the process assumes that all youth with disabilities and their parents see independent living as a primary end-goal.<sup>4</sup> That is not necessarily the case for all AI/AN parents (which can include biological, foster, and adoptive parents or other relatives such as grandparents) and their youth with disabilities.

## Individual Orientation versus Group Orientation

IDEA’s terminology assumes that AI/AN parents agree that their children should strive to separate themselves from their family and community. In fact, such assumptions run counter to the values and belief systems of most Native families. Instead of valuing an individual orientation, one that prizes the individual’s needs above anyone else’s (what some might associate with the “Me Generation”), most AI/ANs still value a group orientation.<sup>5</sup> Individual Natives are considered always to be part of their extended family and tribe or village. This network of relationships offers mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

In historic times, members of American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages lived and worked together. Each member of the group—men, women, children, and elders—had a specific role to play that contributed to the survival and betterment of the tribe or village. Strong feelings of group loyalty and solidarity existed. After Native people were restricted by the U.S. Federal Government to reservations or villages with distinct boundaries, the sense of group identity and the need to persevere for the group’s survival were reinforced even more.

Most contemporary AI/AN adults and youth still experience a strong desire to remain members of their tribe or village and continue to exhibit concern for the welfare of their group and its culture. At the family level, the extended family is valued far more than the individualistic nuclear family. Many Native families continue to have multiple generations in the home. This reinforces relationships between children, parents, and grandparents. The elders, in particular, help members maintain the connection to their culture and Native identity.

### **Values Impact Transition Planning**

Given the group-oriented experiences over countless AI/AN generations, it should not come as a surprise when, during a transition planning meeting, contemporary AI/AN parents may not be automatically comfortable having to discuss how their teen with disabilities is expected to suddenly become independent of them after high school.

In fact, some Native parents may prefer to keep their youth with disabilities in their home and community where the youth is known and accepted, where extended family members provide support, and where the family is familiar with the type of services available for adults with disabilities. In many traditional reservations and pueblos, young people with disabilities may already have received training on traditional ceremonial practices and know their role during those rituals, a role no one in the family wants to eliminate or even diminish. A parent’s preference to keep the youth with disabilities in the home community should be respected.

Some Native parents may prefer to keep their youth with disabilities in their home and community where the youth is known and accepted, where extended family members provide support, and where the family is familiar with the type of services available for adults with disabilities.

In other instances, depending on the type of disability, American Indian and Alaska Native parents will be open to their youth with disabilities seeking a more independent path, knowing that the family’s definition of independence still includes strong extended family and tribal/village support. The decision to accept a youth’s move to “independence” is often influenced by the availability of needed services.

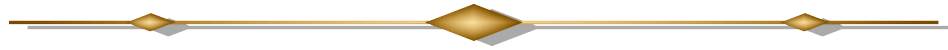
In general, the transition planning process can be an uncomfortable one for AI/AN parents and their teens with disabilities. The discomfort can be greater if the parents are unfamiliar with the other members of the IEP team. It is wise for professional staff to refrain from any immediate discussion of an independent living goal during initial planning sessions. Instead, start the

planning process by putting the parents at ease, then genuinely seeking out the parents' and teen's goals and aspirations, along with the culturally appropriate ways they envision achieving those goals and aspirations. Acknowledge that goals grounded in Native values and beliefs are valid for AI/AN parents and youth with disabilities.

### **Suggestions for Parent Center Staff and Others Involved in Helping Native Youth with Disabilities Plan for the Future**

Consider using the term *post-high school planning* or, simply, *future planning*.

1. Avoid using federal jargon when working with Native parents, especially the term *transition planning*. In common use among AI/AN communities, the word *transition* is used to refer to a person's passing on to the spirit world. Consider using the term *post-high school planning* or, simply, *future planning*. (In this brief, the word *transition* has been used since Parent Center staff are familiar with its IDEA-related meaning.)
2. When working with Native parents, introduce the idea of transition/future planning well before their youth reaches 16 years, the age at which such plans must be completed. With the concept introduced earlier, Native parents won't be surprised by the federal goal of independent living for their children with disabilities.
3. Inform Parent Center staff of the alternative values and beliefs held by Native families surrounding the federal goal of independent living for youth with disabilities. Remind them that IDEA allows for variability in planning for adulthood, just as it does in IEP planning. Moreover, the cultural responsiveness that service providers show is not only highly valued—it also can contribute significantly to the active participation of families and the success of any plan.
4. Provide training to AI/AN parents about what to expect in a transition meeting and prepare them for the topic of independent living. **Intentionally** suggest that parents and teens hold discussions of their own on future plans well in advance of the meeting.
5. Encourage school personnel with whom the Parent Center works to infuse cultural considerations into the school's transition planning process for Native youth.



*This brief has been written by Joann Sebastian Morris for the Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC).*

The brief 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 in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, the citation should be:

Morris, J.S. (2017). *The impact of traditional Native values on transition planning*. Albuquerque, NM: Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC). Available on the website of the Center for Parent Information and Resources, at: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/naptac-tier3-education-youth/>

## References

---

<sup>1</sup> Center for Parent Information and Resources. (2018, February). *Transition to adulthood*. Newark, NJ: Author. Online at: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/transitionadult/>

<sup>2</sup> 20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(1).

<sup>3</sup> 20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(5)(A)(ii).

<sup>4</sup> Leake, D.W., Black, R.S., & Roberts, K. (2003/2004). Assumptions in transition planning: Are they culturally sensitive? *Impact: Feature Issue on Achieving Secondary Education and Transition Results for Students with Disabilities*, 16(3), 1, 28-29. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. Online at: <http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/163/over1.html>

<sup>5</sup> Morris, J.S. (1990). Cultural values affecting American Indian/Alaska Native students. In *American Indian/Alaska Native Education: Quality in the Classroom*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.