



NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Child Maltreatment in Indian Country

A brief history of child abuse in Indian Country

Among many tribes, children were once viewed as the future of their people and the heart of the family structure. They were revered, and cared for by the extended family. Child abuse may not have been entirely unheard of, but for most families bringing harm to children was unthinkable.^{1,2}

During the late 1800's, the United States government began placing large numbers of Native American children in boarding schools. Here, the children traded a traditional family upbringing for life in an institution that was designed to strip Native culture and force assimilation to the dominant society. Basic family structure and values were lost, to be replaced by standardized institutional education and remote authority figures.³ Children also encountered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse on a level beyond anything they had experienced in their homes, which sometimes resulted in death by suicide or harsh punitive treatment. When the assimilated generation returned to the reservation, they came stripped of family structure, language, and cultural lifeways.^{1,3}

As the traditional family structure began to deteriorate, abuse became a major problem in Native American communities. From 1958 to 1967 the Indian Adoption Project removed an estimated 25-35 percent of Native American children from families accused of maltreatment.¹

In some cases the neglect and abuse reported by federal investigators was a failure to recognize traditional cultural norms. The traditional family tendency to share parenting responsibilities among the extended family may have been mistaken for neglect by child protection agents unfamiliar with Native American

What is child maltreatment?

Child maltreatment can take four basic forms

- **Emotional Abuse** - Acts that harm a child emotionally. This could include verbal abuse, or threats of physical or sexual abuse.⁵
- **Physical Abuse** - Acts that cause physical injury to a child. Hitting, shaking, or shoving a child are all physical abuse.⁵
- **Sexual Abuse** - Involvement of any person under 18 in sexual activity.⁵
- **Neglect** - The failure to provide basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, education, and medical care.⁵

The impact of maltreatment

Child maltreatment may lead to harmful levels of stress, which can cause damage that lasts well into adulthood.

- Undue stress can affect a child's developing brain, causing long lasting difficulties with memory and learning.⁴
- High stress levels can lead to increased risk of chronic health and mental issues like diabetes, heart disease, alcoholism, and depression.⁴
- Adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child show a greater tendency towards suicide.⁴

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culture. These forced adoptions further degraded trust in child protection services, and disconnected a second generation from cultural values and practices that formed the bedrock of their societies.²

The effect of family disruption on Native communities.

Once begun, the cycle of child abuse can be very difficult to break. Child abuse can lead to post traumatic stress, depression and anxiety disorders, illicit drug use, alcoholism, sex and food addictions, and suicide. Untreated, unhealthy coping behaviors can persist through adulthood and transfer to the next generation through unhealthy role modeling. The cycle renews, and inter-generational trauma results.^{1,4}

Abuse in Indian Country today

Native American children suffer higher rates of abuse than children in the general US population. A reported 14.2 in 1000 Native children experienced some type of abuse in 2007, compared with 9.1 White children⁵, but these statistics are likely skewed. Distrust of outside authorities combined with jurisdictional confusion and resentment that results when states perform federal duties on tribal lands may cause abuse to be under reported. In a 2003 study, researchers surveyed 57 tribes made up of more than 100,000 Native Americans across 21 states. Data retrieved from tribal and state authorities showed that no more than 62% of known child abuse cases within these tribes were reported to the federal government.²

What can be done?

We must educate Indian communities and leaders about the widespread and long term impacts of child abuse on children, adults, families, communities, na-

tions, and the survival of traditional cultures. We must raise awareness of the problem; build trust and cooperation in communities, and among the various tribal, federal, and state agencies responsible for protecting Native children; increase accurate reporting of, and appropriate responses to, abuse when it occurs; and promote healing in families.

The goals of the NACA

- Increase multi-disciplinary teams (MDT's) in Native American and Alaskan Native communities.
- Advocate for culturally appropriate prevention, response to and healing of child victims of maltreatment in Native American and Alaskan Native communities.

References

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