Through the speed of technology and social media we are instantly aware of the
cultural, social, and political conflicts happening anywhere in the world with the hit of
a button. Yet here in our own backyard centuries of conflict have left a legacy of
strained relations, disproportionality and disparities that impact child welfare today.

Efforts to build and strengthen trust between state child welfare agencies and tribes
require knowledge of and acknowledgement of bias in social work practice related to
the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) and past U.S. and California policies
detrimental to California’s Native Americans. Understanding the tribal narrative of
local history and interactions between tribes and child welfare agencies can assist
directors, managers and supervisors in navigating a collaborative path to safety,
permanency, and well-being for Native American children. Strategic teaming and
engagement with tribes and Native American communities can be achieved when
child welfare leaders operate as change agents working toward inclusive and
sustainable institutions and communities.

To be most effective, child welfare leaders need to lead by example and be aware of
privilege, power, humility, and social justice and embrace a growth mindset* that
seeks to understand the root causes of disproportionality and disparity related to
American Indian children in the child welfare system. For child welfare leaders who
are just beginning to team and engage with tribes and Native American communities
the American Indian Enhancement (AIE) Implementation Toolkit* provides a
framework for decision making and strategies for improving practice when working
with Native American families. The resources and recommendations within this
document support the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model and the 2016

**DEFINITIONS**

**Détente** (n) dé-tente \dē-ˈtänt\ 1. The relaxation of strained relations or tensions (as between nations). 2. A period of a détente. An ending of unfriendly or hostile relations between countries.

**Decorum** (n) de-co-rum \di-ˈkör-am\ 1. Literary and dramatic propriety; fitness. 2. Propriety and good taste in conduct or appearance. Correct or proper behaviors that show respect and good manners.
Reach out to tribal members and communities through existing networks

Work collaboratively with tribal networks in your region and create opportunities to learn about local tribal history. Seek input from tribal representatives and Native American community members who participate in local ICWA training, collaborative meetings, and ICWA roundtables. Engage with Native American elders and tribal members to ask for advice on how to open and conduct a meeting in a culturally responsive manner. Review the engagement and communication tools of the AIE Implementation Toolkit.

Prepare your team for engagement and discuss the concepts of decorum, détente, diplomacy and the need to understand the context of current relations (or lack thereof). Prepare and plan for tribal participation and create the opportunity for tribes and Native American community stakeholders to be at the table. Review document ICWA Guide for Tribal Leaders and Governments* and review the section “Be at the Table”.

When tribal representatives come to the table

- Provide for all the logistical details: a map and options for parking, state whether there are costs to participate in the meeting or event, provide beverages and a snack, and host the meeting to include having lunch together.
- Support awareness of and respect for tribal sovereignty at every level of interaction between child welfare staff, the courts, community partners, and Native American children and families.
- Be informed about ICWA related issues in your local area. Learn about the challenges Native children and families in your area may have to accessing county, state or federal-government resources.
- Learn about and acknowledge any past catalyzing events between your county child welfare staff and tribal social services that create challenges to collaboration.
- Maintain consistent and clear messaging of your intent to establish and build trust based relationships with tribes and Native American communities. State an intention to resolve these challenges and improve state-tribal relations.

Demonstrate commitment through outcomes

- Work to resolve real-time issues that are affecting Native American children and families during your discussions.
- Create person-to-person linkages to resources. Provide information about who to contact when tribal social services have concerns.
- Create opportunities to gather input from the Native community to strengthen and support CPM, CSA, SIP, CFSR, CCR, RFA, and other on-going initiatives in child welfare.
- Discuss best practices for ICWA implementation. Support implementation of tribal child welfare specialists, appointing ICWA liaisons, and creating ICWA units to provide the agency with infrastructure for on-going engagement and meaningful outcomes.
- Continue learning about best practices related to ICWA implementation, teaming and engagement. Learn from and connect with other county child welfare leaders who have implemented specialized ICWA liaisons and Indian Specialty units.
- Create a track record of following through on commitments.
Ensure succession planning for key individuals who have established positive relationships within the Native American communities in your county.

Engage the Native American community regularly (quarterly, semi-annually) to collaborate and resolve challenges faced by tribal communities and the county.

Participate in existing networks (Tribal consultation advisory board, State ICWA Workgroup, round tables, ICWA collaboratives, and others) and debrief with tribal representatives.

Consider the value of authentic engagement to address issues and challenges before they become reasons for tribal consultation related to ICWA compliance.

Be proactive in introducing new staff who will have a key role in working with Native communities. Ensure that your new staff understands the history of your efforts, can demonstrate cultural humility, and are prepared to introduce themselves at meetings.

Work through resistance and challenges to build relationships

Authentic teaming and engagement with tribes is successful when the intention is clear about building a community of like-minded individuals who are committed to keeping families together and support cultural resilience. It is a slow process that requires cultural humility, especially during courageous conversations. Be aware of and support your staff to prepare for hearing difficult information and feedback, and not to take this information personally. Support and model self-care practices that acknowledge secondary exposure to historical, cultural, and family traumas.

Consider the benefits

Active and on-going engagement with tribes and Native American communities provides an opportunity for child welfare agencies to strengthen family finding, improve placement outcomes, and potentially reduce ICWA related appeals. The long-term benefits can result in improved child welfare practices, well-being of children, families, and communities and reduce agency and court costs.

Tribal representatives and Native American communities respond to individuals who demonstrate consistent behaviors over time and who understand the value of their actions to improve outcomes for their children and families. Child welfare leaders who work closely with tribes and tribal members can create communities of collaboration and restore social justice. Take the time to honor the contributions of stakeholders and successful outcomes and create a continuous pathway to cultivate champions within the agency and community. With decorum, détente, and diplomacy, child welfare leaders can achieve social justice and strengthen inclusiveness within their agency and community and thus benefit all families, Native and Non-Native.

Work with staff strengths

Some staff are better suited to engage Native American communities than others. Use a strength based approach to identify and grow champions who engage well with Native American families and communities. Be aware that some non-native individuals within our local communities often forget that at one time Native Americans were considered “problems” to society and local government. As time has progressed, some individuals who work within these systems interact with Native peoples thinking “they’ll have forgotten what has happened, and it’s in the past.” Yet the actions that created the rift in the first place may continue in the form of a bias that assumes Native people are still incapable of managing their affairs. Awareness and commitment to avoid re-traumatization of cultural and historic traumas is key to successful and on-going engagement.
These recommendations are derived from over a decade of training child welfare workers on how to improve outcomes for Native American children and families by Tribal STAR (Successful Transitions for Adult Readiness), a program of the Academy for Professional Excellence, SDSU School of Social Work. Tribal STAR participated in the California Breakthrough Series Collaborative to Reduce Disproportionality in Child Welfare in 2009 and, since 2004 has provided training and technical assistance to state child welfare agencies, the courts, and tribes, using a collaborative model. The Summit for directors, managers, and supervisors is a full day training designed to improve positive outcomes for Native American foster youth and integrates the information provided in this document. Beginning in 2017, Tribal STAR’s curriculum ICWA: Working with Native American Children and Families is required training as a part of the California Common Core curricula for all new hire social workers.

TRIBAL STAR

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References and Resources

American Indian Enhancement (AIE) Implementation Toolkit
calswec.berkeley.edu/toolkits/implementation-toolkit-american-indian-enhancement-project/implementation-toolkit-american-indian-enhancement-project


Resources for ICWA Specialist: theacademy.sdsu.edu/programs/tribal-star/resources-for-icwa-specialists/


Growth Mindset Developing a growth mindset youtube.com/watch?v=hiiEeMN7vbQ

ICWA Bias, Media, and Historical Context (60-90 minute eLearning) theacademy.sdsu.edu/elearning/icwa-elearning-bias-media-context/story_html5.html


Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda nned.net/NNED_content/news_announcement/tribal-behavioral-health-agenda-a-first-of-its-kind-collaborative-tribal-fe

Tribal Child Welfare Information Exchange tribalinformationexchange.org/

CREATED BY

Tom Lidot, Tlingit, Rose-Margaret Orantia, Yaqui, and Kathy Deserly in collaboration with the Casey Family Programs, Child and Family Policy Institute of California, and the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model. ICWA compliance and legal review by Kim Mettler, Three Affiliated Tribes.

For more information or if you have a question contact Tribal STAR at (619) 594-3158 or email tstar@mail.sdsu.edu.

ICWA is the Gold Standard in Child Welfare

Tribal STAR acknowledges the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 as the gold standard for best practices related to family reunification and placement in child welfare. It is the first trauma informed legislation for child welfare that was intended to be culturally responsive.

Since 2013 a partnership of organizations, led by Casey Family Programs, have pointed out that in the Indian Child Welfare Act, Congress adopted the gold standard for child welfare policies and practices that should be afforded to all children, and that it would create serious harm to child welfare programs nationwide to curtail the Act’s protections and standards.*