

# Cultural Connectedness and Indigenous Youth Well-Being

## Fact Sheet

A publication of the National Indian Child Welfare Association

TRADITIONAL WISDOM OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES HAS LONG REFLECTED THAT FEELINGS OF BEING CONNECTED TO ONE ANOTHER, NATURE, AND CULTURE ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF WELL-BEING.

### CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS

In today's funding environment, developing data and an evidence base that shows the importance of connectedness can help with securing resources for health, wellness, and social services and programs. To build that evidence base, NICWA recently conducted a systematic synthesis of literature on cultural identity and Indigenous youth well-being in the U.S. and Canada (Sahota, 2019). We found that "cultural identity" is hard to measure, and different researchers define it in different ways. This makes it hard to combine results from many studies into one broader analysis.

Recently, more researchers are looking at a concept called "cultural connectedness." We found that across many studies, even when they defined "culture" or "identity" differently, **positive mental health outcomes for Indigenous youth are consistently related to feelings of being connected to culture.** This concept is known as *cultural connectedness*. It is different from participation in cultural events like powwows, ceremonies, drumming, and other traditional activities. This does not mean that participation in cultural events or practices is not helpful. It means that fostering feelings of being connected to culture is important for youth well-being even if participation in specific practices may not be possible or of interest to an Indigenous youth.



### FACILITATORS OF CONNECTEDNESS

There are different ways that service providers and community members can help youth to feel connected to their culture, even if participation in specific cultural events or practices is not possible, such as geographical distance, or if a youth is living outside of their community. Peer youth mentoring programs where Indigenous youth are paired with each other in a school or community organization have been shown to increase feelings of cultural connectedness (Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Burm, Lapointe, & Chiodo, 2017). Virtual outreach, like social media, to these youth could also be an effective strategy. Whether support is provided to youth virtually or in person, discussing topics related to family and community can help increase a sense of cultural connectedness. For example, specific topics covered in sessions with youth could include: traditional homelands, foods, medicines, tools, crafts, games, and spiritual practices. An example interactive activity to do with youth could be helping them to draw a family tree so that they can visualize their extended family and see their connection to them. Encouraging youth to access tribal resources online can also help to foster a sense of cultural connectedness. For example, tribal language websites or apps, online videos, and other resources available from tribal websites, museums, and libraries could be helpful tools. For youth who are able to participate in cultural events and practices, talking to them about the deeper meaning of these practices and how they connect youth with their ancestors, community, and land is important for fostering broader feelings of cultural connectedness.

#### YOUTH-PARTNERED ACTIVITIES

> Peer youth mentoring



> Family tree activity



> Online outreach



## MEASURING CONNECTEDNESS

Another consideration for service providers is measuring feelings of cultural connectedness as a data point or clinical marker. There are scales that recently have been developed with Indigenous youth in the U.S. and Canada that directly measure cultural connectedness. Two example scales are the Cultural Connectedness Scale from Canada (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015) and the Awareness of Connectedness Scale, developed in Alaska (Mohatt, Fok, Burket, Henry, & Allen, 2011). Sample scale items included on the Awareness of Connectedness Scale are “my community believes I am important” and “we come from the land and will return to the land” (Mohatt et al., 2011, p. 455). Sample items from the Cultural Connectedness Scale include: “I have a strong sense of belonging to my community or nation,” “I plan on trying to find out more about my [Indigenous] culture, such as its history, traditions, and customs,” and “I feel a strong attachment towards my community or nation” (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, and Hinson, 2017). These scales could be adapted by use in other communities, or communities could develop their own questionnaires/scales that measure cultural connectedness using local concepts.

For more information on NICWA's work on cultural connectedness, please contact our research team at [info@nicwa.org](mailto:info@nicwa.org).

### SAMPLE SCALE ITEMS

*“My community believes I am important.”*

*“We come from the land and will return to the land.”*

*\*Adapted from Awareness of Culture Scale*

### SAMPLE SCALE ITEMS

*“I have a strong sense of belonging to my community or nation.”*

*“I plan on trying to find out more about my [Indigenous] culture, such as its history, traditions, and customs.”*

*“I feel a strong attachment towards my community or nation.”*

*\*Adapted from Cultural Connectedness Scale*

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National Indian Child Welfare Association

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) works to support the safety, health, and spiritual strength of Native children along the broad continuum of their lives. We promote building tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect through positive systems change at the state, federal, and tribal levels.

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