

TRAUMA-INFORMED YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE

Being mindful and aware of trauma experiences will help tribal child welfare programs decrease the negative effects youth may experience throughout the various transitions associated with removal, placement(s), and reunification. While a parent or caregiver might not directly say it, a multitude of emotions and feelings such as shame, fear, and sadness are present even if the parent or caregiver has been neglectful or abusive toward the youth. It is common for youth to absorb and internalize the feelings and emotions of their parent or caregiver. Youth often think they did something to cause their removal and that they could have protected their family if only they had been better, or not disclosed the abuse. No two youth are exactly the same but all youth bring their thoughts, feelings, and questions with them as they transition in, through, and out of foster care.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES DURING TRANSITIONS

Trauma-informed care provides space for tribal child welfare professionals to realize how common trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences.

The programmatic and caseworker practice strategies listed on the following pages align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION



SUPPORTING YOUTH AS THEY LEAVE THE HOME OF THEIR PARENT OR CAREGIVER

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Implement training within the new hire orientation process on the impacts of trauma, trauma responses, and strategies that build individual youth, parent/caregiver, and family resilience.
- Provide opportunities and encourage continued professional development that promotes trauma-informed casework.
- Establish trauma-informed policy and procedures to guide supervisors and caseworkers through expectations for removals, placements, and reunification.
- Develop effective partnerships with law enforcement by:
 - Collaborating and preparing on removal processes;
 - Establishing clear communication; and
 - Build cross-agency understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each investigative agency.
- Use teaming during removals so one caseworker can attend to the youth while the other caseworker supports the parent(s) or caregiver(s).



What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Prepare youth and families in advance whenever possible.
- Provide youth and parent(s) or caregiver(s) repeated opportunities to express their needs and ask questions.
- Engage in strengths-based approaches to build relationships with the youth and their family. Showing interest in the family and asking questions that engage the parent(s) or caregiver(s) ultimately supports the youth. Withhold judgment, feedback, and advice as you listen, but do provide reassurance and information.
 - Who are the youth's ancestors and relatives? How can connections with their aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, and other relatives be maintained and nourished?
 - What is the youth's band? Who are their clan family?
 - Who are elders or community members connected to the youth? The family?
 - What are the youth's connections to the larger community?
 - In what ways is the youth connected, and/or want to be connected, to their tribal culture and teachings?
 - What has the parent or caregiver found helpful in providing comfort to the youth when they are scared? What helps the youth calm down when they are upset?
 - What is the youth's typical schedule from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed?
 - What types of food/milk/formula/snacks does the youth enjoy?
 - Make it a priority to support breastfeeding mothers whenever and however possible.
 - Ask about the brand(s) of formula the infant consumes and the type/brand of the bottle and nipple they use.
 - Are there any favorite foods? Foods to avoid?
 - Does the youth nap? What are their sleep cues? How do you know they are ready for a nap? What does the routine typically look like? When, where, and for how long do they nap?
 - Show the youth that you care by engaging them in identifying ways to help them feel safe and connected to their family.
 - What helps them feel safe at home? What is something that they would like to bring with them such as a pillow, blanket, lovey, toy, picture, or stuffed animal?
 - What clothes would they like to bring with them?
 - Transport the youth's belongings with care and respect.
 - Before the youth and their parent(s) or caregiver(s) are separated, arrange a scheduled visitation so they know when they will see each other again.

PLACEMENT: SUPPORTING YOUTH AS THEY TRANSITION INTO A NEW HOME ENVIRONMENT

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Provide consistent and high-quality training and support for resource families. Training topics to support placement providers may include:
 - The impacts of family separation on youth
 - How to support kinship families, foster families, and youth when youth are reacting to their trauma experiences
 - Building relationships with birth families
 - The power of maintaining tribal and kinship connections for youth in care
- Create opportunities for kin and foster parents to connect with each other for peer support and co-learning.
- Establish policies and procedures that are trauma-informed to guide supervisors and caseworkers as they develop and monitor out-of-home safety plans.



What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Prepare youth and temporary care providers in advance whenever possible.
- Prioritize identifying kinship placement options and increasing family connections.
- Prioritize the importance of sibling connections, including frequent and meaningful visits when siblings are not placed together.
- Ensure continuity where possible: neighborhood, school, primary care providers, after-school programs, child care, and behavioral health supports.
- Preserve connections to culture, spirituality, traditions, and language.
- Provide a book with pictures of who/what/where the youth is going to help minimize the experiences of trauma associated with transitions. Here are some examples of pictures to include:
 - The caseworker and any other providers in the youth's life
 - Kinship/Foster family
 - Animals in the new home
 - Youth's room and where they will sleep
 - The home/building/complex/area
- Anticipate questions and fears. Provide clear, age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate answers to questions that may or may not be verbalized:
 - Who are you (caseworker)?
 - Where am I going?
 - When will I get to see my parents? Siblings? Friends?
 - Why can't I stay here?
 - What did I do?
 - Who is going to take care of me?
 - Where will I go to school?
 - How will I talk to my family? Friends?
 - When will I get to go home?
 - When will I see you (caseworker) again?
- Maintain and build connections to support resilience.
 - Maintain existing relationships and broaden the youth's connections to healthy, supportive, and trustworthy adults.
 - Preserve connections to culture, spiritual practices, and extracurricular activities.
 - Create opportunities for healing through ceremony, elders, storytelling traditions, and mental health services.
 - Identify community resources that support a youth's connection to the tribe, the land, their community, and their family.

REUNIFICATION: SUPPORTING YOUTH AS THEY TRANSITION HOME

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Establish policy and procedures that are trauma-informed to guide caseworkers through the development and monitoring of in-home safety plans.
- Establish policy and procedures that are trauma-informed to guide birth parents, kinship/foster families, and youth through the process of reunification.
- Arrange for birth parents to have mentors who have successfully been reunified with their children.

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Prioritize and include youth voice and involvement in the transition plan as soon and as much as possible.
- Acknowledge mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension that youth may have about moving back home.
- Prepare youth, birth parents, caregivers, and kinship/foster parents about common trauma reactions each may experience.
- Create space to talk about and validate mixed feelings, emotions, thoughts, and questions that the youth and birth parent(s)/caregiver(s) may have.
- Connect youth and birth parent(s)/caregiver(s) with information and resources about cultural and resilience-promoting efforts in the community.
- Encourage and preserve any new connections the youth made to culture, spirituality, traditions, and language while in care.
- Review and practice self-regulation techniques that the youth and birth parent(s)/caregiver(s) found helpful before, during, and/or after visits.
- Communicate with the youth, birth parent(s), kinship/foster parent(s), and relevant caregivers/professionals about the transition process to ensure transparency, predictability, and opportunities for discussion. Be prepared to answer the who, what, when, where, why, and how of any actions being planned for the transition:
 - Who will be doing _____?
 - When will _____ be happening?
 - Where will _____ happen?
 - Why is _____ happening?
 - How will _____ happen?

- Anticipate unasked questions and known challenges that both the birth parent(s)/ caregiver(s) and youth may experience during reunification. For instance, youth make a lot of adjustments when going into care. Work collaboratively with the kinship/foster parent(s) and birth parent(s) to identify differences youth will be expected to adjust to when moving back home. Here are some common examples of differences that can be challenging for birth parent(s)/ caregiver(s) and youth to navigate, especially when left unaddressed:
 - House rules
 - Schedules
 - Expectations
 - Food/Meals
- Help youth maintain important, trusting relationships made while in care. Here are questions youth may have if they were placed in care outside of their home community:
 - Will I get to see my kinship/foster family again? When?
 - Will I get to see my friends again? When?
- Keep youth involved in their extracurricular activities whenever possible.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[How does investigation, removal, and placement cause trauma for children?](#)

This Issue Brief from Casey Family Services includes implications for tribal child welfare leadership.

[How can investigation, removal, and placement processes be more trauma-informed?](#)

This Issue Brief from Casey Family Programs describes several specific strategies in detail.

[Tribal Best Practices, Family Engagement Toolkit](#)

NICWA's toolkit provides engagement strategies and family advocate outreach techniques as well as the roles supervisors can play in family engagement and strategies for overcoming specific barriers.

[Partnering with Relatives to Promote Reunification](#)

This document from the Child Welfare Information Gateway's "Factsheets for Families" series provides parents who may be caring for a family member with tips on managing family dynamics, modeling positive parenting, and leaning on the caseworker and agency for support.

[Timely Permanency Through Reunification](#)

This report, part of the Breakthrough Collaborative Series from Casey Family Programs, features the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, highlighting promising practices, outcomes, and lessons learned.

