

How to Support a Mental Health Consultant Who Is New to Your Tribal Community



What Is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a prevention-based service that pairs a mental health consultant with families and adults who work with infants and young children in the different settings where they learn and grow, such as child care, preschool, and at home. IECMH consultants build adults' capacity to strengthen and support the healthy social and emotional development of children.

Purpose of This Tip Sheet

The strategies included in this tip sheet will benefit IECMH consultants who are working with tribal communities for the first time, as well as Native consultants who are unfamiliar with tribal communities other than their own. The tip sheet can also be used by programs or professionals who are starting IECMH services within a tribal community, whether the services are tribally funded or not.

This tip sheet includes recommendations related to the importance of doing the following:

- Help consultants who are new to the tribal community understand how tribal history affects present-day dynamics, risk factors, protective factors, and resiliency within families and communities
- Familiarize consultants with tribal governance and how services for children and families fit within the tribal organizational structure
- Connect consultants with a cultural guide or recognized cultural leader who can help them better understand the community, if appropriate
- Connect consultants to community and cultural resources (as appropriate) that will allow them to better support families

The specific strategies for welcoming new IECMH consultants to your tribal community will vary based on your community norms and practices, but here are some questions to consider:

- How can you help consultants who have never worked within your tribal community feel welcomed?
- What should consultants understand about your tribe's values and teachings?
- If your consultants work in an urban Indian Health Center or urban Indian organization with individuals from multiple tribes, how can you help them learn about various tribal norms or varied experiences?
- What is the role of tribal elders and cultural leaders in supporting new consultants?
- Is there a protocol or process for referral to traditional practitioners, and is it appropriate for consultants to do this?
- Who is able to serve as a cultural mentor to the consultants and to provide information about the community (e.g., tribal identification, varied experiences, cultural and spiritual practices), if needed?
- Does your community offer training on the culture, language, and/or history of the community that the consultant should attend?
- Does the term "mental health" carry certain stigmas in your community? If other terms might be more appropriate, how will you educate consultants about the use of these terms?

Strategies to Support IECMH Consultants Who Are New to Your Tribal Community

1. Provide relevant tribal history

Present-day dynamics within a tribal community are the direct result of historical events that shaped and continue to shape the lives of families. Within many communities, the transfer of healthy parenting practices from one generation to the next was lost when the U.S. government forcibly removed children from their tribal communities and sent them to boarding schools. A number of governmental policies resulted in the loss of tribal language and traditions.

Consultants who understand tribal history recognize the whole community as engaged in the process of rebuilding from traumatic experiences that affected their ancestors, often not many generations ago. Understanding the historical context for increased risk factors will help consultants respect the resiliency of the families they support.

When you think about how to help new consultants understand how tribal history affects the present-day community, consider the following questions:



- What will deepen a new consultant’s understanding of the interplay between historic factors and present-day family and community functioning?
- What are the sources of resiliency within your community?
- Are there particular stories or traditional teachings that a consultant should understand (e.g., creation story, child-rearing practices and ceremonies)?
- What U.S. federal and state policies (e.g., Indian Relocation Act, Indian Citizen Act of 1924, American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978) affect the tribal community?
- What tribal policies should the consultant be aware of (e.g., mandated reporting policies, collaborative agreements)?
- How do racism and implicit bias affect families in your community?
- What is the day-to-day lived experience of families? Are there disparities in incarceration rates, academic achievement, and hiring practices?
- If consultants will work within tribal lands with limited infrastructure (e.g., water, electricity, Internet, paved roads), what should they understand about how a lack of access to basic services affects young children and their families?
- Do young children and families have access to health care and related services (e.g., medical homes, dental services, developmental screenings)? Do families have access to healthy foods? Do families have access to any other resources trusted by the tribe?

2. Provide resources or information on the tribe’s values and teachings, as appropriate

Each tribe has values and traditions related to parenting and to interacting with one another and the world, and it may be helpful to share some of these core values with consultants, if appropriate. For example, many Native American cultures share the value of interconnectedness, of living in balance and harmony with the earth and with one another. The teachings and stories that convey this value are uniquely different for each tribe and tribal community, but the meaning is universally understood: We are all connected. This relational worldview serves as a holistic framework for understanding child well-being and is still practiced today by community members to make connections through family (clans, bands, etc.), colleagues, or locations (lands). Consultants may want to explore the following resources to learn more about the relational worldview:

- [Relational Worldview: A Tribal and Cultural Framework for Service Delivery and Program Development](#)
- [Strength-Based Well-Being Indicators for Indigenous Children and Families: A Literature Review of Indigenous Communities’ Identified Well-Being Indicators](#)



Many tribes also have a common community language to describe optimal health and wellness, such as “being in balance” or “walking a good road.” This language will be helpful for a consultant to be aware of and use instead of terms that may carry stigma, such as “mental health.”

3. Provide consultants with local and cultural resources, as appropriate

Consultants may play a role in linking families or programs with formal and informal resources within a community to support children’s and families’ well-being. For example, if a child would benefit from physical movement activities, a consultant could suggest that the child join a traditional dance group or participate in community gardening activities. Each community has their own traditional activities and protocol for how to connect families with traditional teachers and activities, so provide guidance to consultants on how to refer families appropriately.

Here are some strategies you can use to orient consultants to your community resources:

- Tour the community with consultants, and personally introduce them to providers and referral sources
- Develop a list of community and cultural resources that consultants can use to support children, families, and others they work with
- Help consultants understand the process for connecting families to a cultural resource

4. Connect consultants with mentors who can provide guidance on traditional cultural norms

Understanding cultural traditions (if appropriate) will help consultants better serve tribal community members. A mentor can help consultants recognize that the culture of the community holds the teachings that guide an individual’s or community’s return to health and wellness. Consultants will appreciate the opportunity to ask questions and clarify potential misunderstandings related to cultural norms and ways of being (e.g., the practice of using family relational descriptors [“auntie, uncle, cousin, baby”], the correct protocol for community gatherings or powwows).

5. Familiarize consultants with tribal governance structures

Tribal early care and education and childhood development programs are part of a larger tribal organizational structure that includes health, public safety, and social services, among other programs. Consultants will benefit from learning about tribal governance and how the program they work for fits within the tribal organizational structure. Consultants should also understand how tribes receive funding for programs for young children and their families.

Increase the consultants’ understanding of tribal governance structures:

- Provide a brief overview on U.S. government and tribal government relationships, sovereignty and treaty rights, and how any treaties or other documents affect the receipt of services

- Provide an overview of tribal governance, including the structure of a Tribal Council or Governing Board, and the influence this group may have on programs for young children and their families
- Provide an organizational chart, and highlight the placement of early care childhood development programs and relevant partners within the overall structure of the tribe
- Provide an overview of relevant partners, which may include state and county programs or services

These tips will help consultants working in tribal communities adopt a culturally sensitive approach that incorporates traditional knowledge and teachings when appropriate. For more about how consultants partner with tribal communities, visit the Center of Excellence's [Working With Tribal Communities](#) webpage.

