



Offering Technical Assistance to Native Families: Clues From a Focus Group

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This publication offers the results of an April, 2000 focus group on the technical assistance needs of Native families, held in conjunction with the annual conference of Portland State University's Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health in Portland, OR. The focus group, attended by representatives from twenty-two tribes, was the result of Federal funding to the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health who partnered with the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and B-C Family Productions.

The two-day focus group started in a hotel room with facilitators, flip charts, and a proposed agenda, but this process was quickly abandoned in order to favor a more traditional Native practice in which, "things happen when it is time, when all are one heart and mind" (p. 6). Learning from the discussion of the first day, the focus group organizers cancelled the hotel room for the second day, rented a bus, and took the participating families to the beach. As a result, "Mind, body, spirit and emotion were engaged in an environment of tremendous beauty and the mission was never lost" (p. 7). This kind of respect for Native practice and custom is consistent with Native technical assistance needs as a whole.

Native Families Need an Organization

An important result of this meeting was the culmination of work from two previous Native meetings, which identified Native families' need for a family-run organization to improve services and promote system change. Consequently, a new group called *InterTribal Voices of Children and Families* was created. One of the areas identified as critical to the success of this group is the provision of grant application information and, perhaps more importantly, a change in funding policies. Currently, many grants require recipients to be state-based and only award one family organization per state. Since many tribes are not defined by state boundaries and many Native families have dual-nationality, state-based funding is problematic.

Other needs to ensure the success and efficacy of *InterTribal Voices of Children and Families* are adequate funding, access to information, and opportunities for learning and understanding. Since members of *InterTribal Voices of Children and Families* include more than 20 tribes, spread across the United States from Alaska to Maine, funding to enable communication and information sharing is particularly important. This will require money for families to travel and meet face to face, a practice that is particularly important in Native culture.

Additionally, Native families need information from both accepted mainstream sources and traditional Native sources such as tribal elders, spiritual leaders, and spiritual healers. Mainstream information should be delivered in language that people can understand and with respect to tribal protocols.

Other Findings:

- Native families need individual support
- Native families need culturally sensitive terms
 - *Native families*, not Native American; *Children of a different way*, not Serious Emotional Disturbance
- Native families need to identify & coordinate their own technical assistance
- Native families need to select their technical assistance providers
- Native families need appropriate delivery of technical assistance including...
 - Adaptation of the use of agendas and facilitation to be congruent with Native practices
 - Careful choice of meeting environment in order to honor and respect the presence of every participant
 - Different approach to time

The article concludes by presenting stories that illustrate many Native families' difficulties in trusting mainstream policies, laws, and people. As a result, the author notes, "Perhaps we should consider respect, understanding, appropriate adaptation, and cultural sensitivity as prerequisites for success in building collaborative relationships for systems change with Native families" (p. 21).