

# Working with **NATIVE AMERICAN FATHERS**

## **A Spotlight on Three Ongoing Programs<sup>1</sup>**

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This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) brief discusses some of the key issues facing American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Indigenous<sup>2</sup> families in the United States—particularly fathers. The brief highlights three programs that are working with AI/AN fathers to strengthen their roles in Native families, includes an overview of each program, and provides a discussion of key takeaways to help other programs better serve AI/AN fathers and their families.

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<sup>2</sup> American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples/Communities, and Native and Native Peoples/Communities can be used interchangeably, but throughout this manuscript we use AI/AN.

# The National Picture of Indigenous Fathers and Families

Today's AI/AN families may look similar in structure to historical AI/AN families, but many of the roles of family members have changed over time. Traditionally, AI/AN families were highly inclusive, meaning that extended family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents) were considered core family members integral in supervising and rearing the children. Additionally, AI/AN culture emphasized the value of engaged and supportive fathers. For many tribes, the family structure was often egalitarian between husband and wife, where both were seen as equals and partners in the family (Burnette & Figley, 2016). Fathers provided significant financial support – many were farmers, sheep and cattle herders, and/or fishermen (depending on the region) – and cultural values often centered on connectedness to family members, nature, elders, and ancestors.

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Violence and crime, substance use, and economic instability did not historically characterize Native families. These issues are often seen as stemming from historical trauma and the cultural assimilation of Indigenous people into mainstream (non-Native) culture (Weaver, 2009). The removal of Indigenous people from their communities, relocation across the U.S., and assimilation into Western culture likely led to the loss of many Native Americans' traditions, culture, and sources of family support. These processes disrupted family environments, restricted economic opportunities, disconnected them from their culture, and severed ties with other Native American people (Deer, 2015; Richards et al., 2021; Weaver, 2009). These changes also made Native women more vulnerable to violence, victimization, and marginalization (Kuokkanen, 2008). Assimilation into Western culture may also have led to less egalitarian family structures in Native American communities (Weaver, 2009). These experiences likely underpin the problems that many Native Americans encounter today (Richards et al., 2023), as they can splinter or weaken family systems, bonds between family members, and the roles of fathers in Native families.

Specialized programming and services are needed to adequately address the concerns and issues faced by AI/AN families—particularly fathers—today. To learn more about services designed to address these issues, we spoke with leaders of three programs (Table 1) that work specifically with AI/AN fathers and are funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA). We asked program leaders of these three programs about how their services are structured, what culturally specific issues they focus on, and other important factors to consider when working with AI/AN fathers.

**Table 1: Featured Programs**

| Operating Organization                                                            | Program Name                                                                               | Target Population                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Association of Alaska School Boards in partnership with local schools.            | <a href="#">Alaska Strong</a>                                                              | Couples with children in Anchorage and other areas of Alaska.                                                        |
| Capacity Builders in partnership with the Navajo Nation Department of Corrections | <a href="#">Fatherhood Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (FIRE)</a> | Incarcerated fathers in Navajo Nation cities of Tuba City, Kayenta, and Chinle, Arizona, and Crownpoint, New Mexico. |
| Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health                                        | <a href="#">Azhe'é Bidziil (Strong Fathers)</a>                                            | Rural Native fathers and their families in Tuba City, Arizona and Chinle, Arizona.                                   |

## Overview of the Three Programs

|                     | Alaska Strong                                                                                                                                  | FIRE                                                                                                          | Strong Fathers                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goals</b>        | Deepen family relationships with schools and the community; link families to school staff; foster learning that happens at school and at home. | Prepare incarcerated fathers to be active in the lives of their families, children, communities, and society. | Increase economic stability of Native fathers and their families; reduce violence in rural Native communities; enhance healthy relationships and coparenting in Native communities.     |
| <b>Key Services</b> | Family participation incentives, child care, stipends for support and transportation.                                                          | Programming takes place in facilities with incarcerated people and in local communities.                      | Child care is provided during program sessions as well as financial incentives for participation.                                                                                       |
| <b>Curricula</b>    | Six-week Stronger Together curriculum. Weekly workshops with follow-up through family check-in calls.                                          | Various curricula, including Native Wellness, InsideOut Dad, Healthy Relationships, and Money Smart.          | Various sources to cover life skills; healthy relationships; parenting & coparenting skills; father involvement; impact on child development of domestic violence & child maltreatment. |
| <b>Focus</b>        | "Bringing back" the traditional and cultural meaning and importance of dads in families.                                                       | Strengthening positive father-child engagement; improving economic stability of fathers.                      | Utilizing evidence-based programming to teach skills and strengthen families.                                                                                                           |

## Programs for AI/AN Fathers

NRFC and Urban staff spoke at length with staff at each program to learn more about the issues their clients face and why, as well as how the programs respond to those needs. Together, the program staff highlighted three main issues that AI/AN fathers face, which in turn are emphasized in the services each program provides:

### **ALL PROGRAMS EMPHASIZED THE NEED TO:**

- 1 Address limited employment opportunities and enhance job skills.**
- 2 Understand the role of historical trauma in disconnecting fathers from their families and their traditional roles.**
- 3 Reconnect fathers to their traditional roles and values.**

In general, each program prioritizes the necessity of addressing employment and job security, noting that they view providing for the family as an important role of Native fathers. However, staff from all three programs also recognized that many Native fathers face limitations that affect their abilities to provide for their families. For example, fathers are hindered by limited employment opportunities on the reservation or lack of services to improve their job readiness skills for the “modern” workforce (as opposed to skills required for traditional jobs such as farming). The programs all offer job networking opportunities and resume and skill-building classes to help their participants prepare for new work opportunities.

A key theme of our conversations was the connection between fathers’ loss of traditional roles in Native families, associated problems such as violence or substance use, and the historical and generational trauma that many AI/AN people have experienced. Staff noted the ways in which historical trauma led to problems among subsequent generations by disconnecting fathers from their families, values, and cultural ways, and opening the door to maladaptive behaviors such as substance use, absenteeism, and even violence in some cases. Thus, an important component of each program is to talk with fathers about the connection between historical trauma and their current behaviors and situations.

Each program has a core focus on helping fathers reconnect with their cultural ways and values by emphasizing the traditional importance of harmony and peace between tribal members and with their native lands. Traditional Native language may also be important to strengthen a father’s cultural identity. Thus, reconnecting fathers with traditional Native culture and values is expected to lead to positive and protective behaviors for both fathers and their families. We expand upon all three of these themes below.

# 1

## Enhancing Job Skills and Addressing Limited Employment Opportunities

Perhaps most saliently, all program staff remarked on the importance of financial and economic stability and the role that AI/AN fathers have historically played in that regard. Today, however, AI/AN fathers face significant barriers to employment and economic stability. First, many of their traditional employment roles are no longer widely available. This situation is due to multiple factors, and certainly the rurality of many reservations plays a part. Similarly, educational opportunities can be limited on the reservation, and long commutes are a barrier to accessing higher education.

**According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), only 16 percent of Native Americans have received a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 36 percent of whites and 22 percent of African Americans.**

Leaders from Capacity Builders reflected that not many employment or educational opportunities for fathers exist on the reservation, and construction or other manual labor jobs have replaced many of the traditional ways of life for Native fathers who had served in roles such as fishermen or cattlemen. The rurality of the reservation limits employment opportunities and access to facilities, training, and other resources, so many AI/AN fathers must leave home for significant periods of time to travel to distant work sites for employment.

Leaders from the Capacity Builders FIRE program commented that many fathers in their service area are traveling construction workers, and similarly Strong Fathers management staff reported that

many fathers are “seasonal” workers, traveling construction workers, and welders. These occupations often lead to father absenteeism from the family and strained or reduced involvement in the daily lives of their families. Unsurprisingly, all programs emphasize local or



regional employment opportunities and provide job skills development as part of their services. Specific employment services include resume-building classes, how to network and connect to employment opportunities, and training for construction and labor-intensive jobs. The FIRE program provides training for welding and construction skills, and also offers programming to develop skills for entrepreneurial endeavors, such as gardening and landscaping education. These types of skills and educational services can lead directly to employment opportunities that offer financial security for families and jobs that are locally or regionally available.

- ✓ **Resume building classes**
- ✓ **Connections & networking with employers**
- ✓ **Skills training**

# 2

## Understanding the Role of Historical Trauma

Most program staff identified the impact of historical trauma and cultural assimilation as primary reasons why AI/AN fathers' roles have changed so drastically and why they face employment, lack of educational attainment, and substance use problems today. One staff member from the FIRE program reminds fathers that many of the problems they face today are not "their" issues, but instead, problems stemming from their ancestors' experiences. That is, the trauma their ancestors experienced, such as attending boarding schools<sup>3</sup> and forced removal from their homelands, impacted the experiences (family roles, traditions, employment opportunities, healthy relationships, and so forth) of subsequent generations. Indeed, AI/AN people have a higher rate of substance

abuse than any other racial/ethnic group (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019), as well as lower rates of education and higher rates of poverty.

**More Native Americans live at or BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL than whites or African Americans.**



**Native  
Americans**



**Whites**



**African  
Americans**

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).



<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the impact of boarding schools on many Native communities, see this 2023 article <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/30/us/native-american-boarding-schools.html>

All programs included curricula topics on developing life and employment skills (e.g., resume building and money management), along with parent-child relationships and engagement.

Leaders from all programs agreed that the disconnect Native fathers have experienced from their traditional familial roles—which are protective against negative behaviors—can lead to maladies such as **substance use, violence,** and poor or nontraditional parenting practices. **Persistent poverty** can exacerbate these problems, which is likely another reason all three programs include curricula topics on developing life and employment skills (e.g., resume building and money management), *along* with emphasizing parent-child relationships and engagement. The FIRE program, for instance, specifically provides trauma-informed services and education related to the effects of historical trauma. Program leaders said many fathers in this program either had direct or indirect experiences with boarding schools; thus, program discussions often focus on how being forced into boarding schools may have impacted their ancestors' connections to their culture, connections to their families, and connections to their traditional familial values. Building on these discussions, the program helps fathers look at how this direct or indirect life experience of their ancestors may have impacted their own parenting practices, connections to others, and behaviors, including maladaptive behaviors such as substance use. Several program staff mentioned that they take time to help fathers get in touch with their feelings and learn skills for self-regulation. One staff member uses yoga as a way to heal fathers' trauma by helping them to connect with their feelings.

Although the Strong Fathers program was developed “from the ground up” in collaboration with Native community members (Navajo Nation, Apache), it is flexibly designed so that other tribes can use the program and include their own culturally centered topics (such as boarding school experiences or removal from homelands). In fact, all three programs use curricula resources that provide the flexibility to meaningfully engage with the fathers in their program. Leaders from Alaska Strong pointed out that Native cultures vary, even within Alaska, and emphasized that the program focuses on broad themes such as the importance of communication, reciprocity, and supporting families to ensure that they embrace and include various tribes and diverse cultural values in their programming.



# 3

## Reconnecting Fathers to Traditional Roles and Values

In various ways, all three programs are focused on the importance of reconnecting fathers to their traditional roles and values, as well as their larger tribal network. Re-establishing connection to others in a larger network, including elders and children, may help re-center Native fathers' roles within, connection with, and contributions to their families. Alaska Strong, for instance, incorporates cultural activities such as storytelling and fishing for salmon or foraging for berries. When possible, each program offers opportunities to learn from and/or speak to some of the elders of the tribe. A father from Alaska Strong stated: "I learned traditional values and became more aware of my own values that are important to pass on to my kids."

All three programs include curricula topics on healthy relationships with spouses, partners, and ex-partners as well as their children. Sub-topics include skills for nonviolent interactions; the importance of healthy and respectful communication; and the value of parental engagement with their children, their children's activities, and their children's school. All programs underscored the importance of "extended" families, or clan systems, where aunts, uncles, and grandparents are important, central members of the family. In fact, both fathers and "father figures" are invited to participate in these programs. Leaders from Alaska Strong stated that the AI/AN cultures in their region were more collectivist in nature, valuing contributions and roles from the whole system rather than individuals (e.g., fathers, mothers) within it.

Traditionally, many AI/AN family structures were non-nuclear, meaning that extended family members played central roles in the family system. While that remains largely true today, the reasons for extended family involvement may have changed—some fathers have to work remotely or larger systemic problems are at play, such as incarceration or justice system involvement.

- ✓ **Skills for nonviolent interactions**
- ✓ **Healthy and respectful communication**
- ✓ **Value of parental engagement with children**
- ✓ **Engagement with children's activities and school**



Unfortunately, AI/AN families experience justice system involvement at disproportionate rates. Native people are incarcerated at rates nearly 40 percent above the national average (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999) and Native children are placed in child welfare, child protection, and/or foster care settings at disproportionately higher rates than children of other races (Austin et al., 2019). Many Native fathers may also be involved in the court system over child support, parental, or visitation rights (Wildeman et al., 2020). All of these processes can lead families to rely on extended and non-incarcerated family members (e.g., aunts, grandparents) more heavily.

As a tribal group working with tribal correctional facilities on tribal lands, the FIRE program is highly sensitive to the needs of fathers who are or have been incarcerated. The program works collaboratively with the Navajo Nation Department of Corrections to provide needed programming both inside and outside of correctional facilities for these fathers. Regardless of the population involved, however, leaders of all three fatherhood programs we spoke with underscored the importance of reconnecting fathers to their traditional roles and values—whether they lived in Alaska, New Mexico, Arizona, or elsewhere—since traditional roles are protective and positive, and grounded by the importance of family.



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## Conclusion

Issues faced by AI/AN fathers today have shaped the focus of fatherhood programs that serve them. Currently, fatherhood programs designed for AI/AN fathers focus on developing economic skills and stability, fostering healthy relationships, addressing historical trauma, and re-connecting fathers to the traditional roles of their Native culture. Despite the problems they may face, AI/AN fathers’ traditional cultural ways and values are considered important facets of

resiliency and strength upon which to build. The three programs featured in this brief aim to foster positive relationships between fathers and their children and other family members by reconnecting fathers to their traditional roles, enhancing their employment skills and stability, and helping them better understand their ancestral history so that they can become the best version of themselves.

## TIPS FOR OTHER FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

*Based on our discussions with program staff, we offer a few tips for other programs addressing fathers of AI/AN ancestry.*

Native fathers and their role in families should be valued and celebrated—most of these dads provide financial and emotional support to their partners and children. They also serve as important connections between younger and older generations. Fathers appear to be willing to sacrifice in many ways in order to continue providing for their families today. For example, they may have to travel for employment and forgo seeing their family for long periods of time. This kind of dedication can be used as an anchoring point for programs that serve AI/AN fathers.

Programs working with Native fathers should have strategies in place to remove barriers that impact Native fathers' ability to support and nurture their children. These strategies should be flexible with a variety of educational, skill-based, and emotional supports available. Offering "hard" skills training, such as welding, and GED courses will provide fathers with skills and education they can use in the workforce. Programs should develop father-inclusive policies and practices that best support Native fathers and provide staff training to ensure that all staff understand how to create father-friendly environments and recognize and understand that Native fathers may interact with their children differently than Native mothers.

Program planning and design should consider the emotional, spiritual, and/or cultural well-being of fathers because this holistic aspect of health goes hand-in-hand with overall well-being. Programming for trauma, substance use, violence, and other maladies should take a broad and historical view, perhaps "centering" on how cultural values, beliefs, and activities can play a protective role against problems faced by Native fathers. Programming might also include efforts to preserve and revitalize Native languages, as a way to continue to strengthen fathers' ties to their culture. As the program staff we

spoke with noted, violence, substance use, and other problems were not traditionally "Native" problems—and through programming, these issues can be ameliorated by reverting back to traditional ways, which are rooted in harmony and peace and can lead to stronger fathers and happier families.

### TIPS FOR PROGRAMS SERVING NATIVE FATHERS

- 1** Despite societal and cultural barriers, Native fathers are dedicated to serving in their traditional roles as fathers.
- 2** Helping Native fathers overcome the barriers that stand in their way can ease their burdens and lead to healthier and happier families.
- 3** Program strategies should be flexible with a variety of educational, skill-based, and emotional supports.
- 4** Programming should take a broad and historical view, perhaps "centering" on how cultural values, beliefs, and activities can play a protective role against problems faced by Native fathers.

## More Information on the Three Programs

### ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS

- **Alaska Strong: New Family Partnerships Framework for Alaskans.**  
<https://aasb.org/stronger-together-new-family-partnerships-framework-for-alaskans/>
- **Stronger Together: The Power of School and Family Partnership in Alaska.**  
[https://aasb.org/wp-content/uploads/20ELE\\_AASB\\_Digital\\_3E.pdf](https://aasb.org/wp-content/uploads/20ELE_AASB_Digital_3E.pdf)

### CAPACITY BUILDERS

- **Organization Overview:** <https://capacitybuilders.info/about-us>
- **Fatherhood Family-Focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (FIRE) Program:** <https://capacitybuilders.info/ff1>

### JOHNS HOPKINS CENTER FOR INDIGENOUS HEALTH

- **Strong Fathers:** <https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/strong-fathers/>
- **Strong Fathers Facebook: Azhe'e Bidziil Strong Fathers:** <https://www.facebook.com/people/Azhe%C3%A9-Bidziil-Strong-Fathers/100067122069420/>
- **Respecting the Circle of Life:** <https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/sexual-health-education-respecting-the-circle-of-life/>
- **Arrowhead Business Group:** <https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/youth-entrepreneurship-education-program-arrowhead-business-group/>

## Other Helpful Resources

- **American Indian and Alaska Native Culture Card: A Guide to Build Cultural Awareness.** A wallet-sized resource developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to enhance cultural competence for serving American Indian and Alaska Native communities.
- **Native American Fathers and Families Association (NAFFA).** A national organization located in Mesa, Arizona, which offers training, resources, conferences, and curricula such as Fatherhood is Sacred to help organizations strengthen the role of fathers in Native American families.
- **Native Wellness Institute.** A national organization located in Gresham, Oregon, that promotes the well-being of Native people through programs and trainings embracing the teachings and traditions of the ancestors.
- **Strategies to Support Healthy Relationships for American Indian and Alaska Native Fathers (Wilson, et al., 2022).** This brief provides practice-based, contextually relevant strategies that fatherhood programs serving AIAN fathers can use to support these fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. The brief was developed by staff at Child Trends and other subject experts as part of the [Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads \(CHaRMED\)](#) project.
- **Working with Native American Individuals, Couples, and Families.** A toolkit developed by the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families, which was funded by OFA from 2011 to 2020.

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