

Delivering Marriage and Relationship Education Programs in Native American Communities

The Native American population is quite diverse, but there are some common themes that marriage educators can address when serving this population.

There are a number of areas that marriage and relationship education program providers must address when designing and implementing a program for Native American communities. There have been a number of lessons learned from Native American cultural experts and program practitioners who have developed culturally relevant marriage education programs. These services can be effective for Native Americans living on reservations and for those who are not.

There is great diversity within the Native American community. The various tribes have distinct traditions, customs and languages. This Tip Sheet was designed for program administrators and managers to highlight common themes to consider when delivering marriage/relationship education services to Native American couples and individuals.



Successful programs are those in which the tribal community is engaged in every aspect of the program, from conception to implementation.

Collaborate with the tribal community

Cultural experts believe that for institutions, policies and programs to improve the lives of Native American children and families, they must have *legitimacy*. This means services must reflect the individual cultural practices of Native American communities. Therefore, successful programs are those in which the tribal community is engaged in every aspect of the program, from conception to implementation.

Collaboration with tribal leaders and Native American community leaders is essential to appropriately address marriage and family relationships. Native Americans generally value traditional beliefs concerning interconnectedness, harmony, balance, spirituality and wellness, which are relevant to healthy relationships. However, the meaning or importance of “marriage” may vary by community. Definitions of family also vary by tribe/community, which further emphasizes the need for Native communities to decide for themselves and/or participate in the decision-making process regarding the strategies to employ when creating programs.

Understanding the hierarchy in a Native American community is important to effective collaboration. Program providers must first identify who to speak with in order to gain the support of tribal and community leaders.

Incorporate cultural nuances

Strengths-based Native American concepts

Ensure that your practitioners are emphasizing strengths-based Native American concepts such as cultural sovereignty, native language, religion and other practices. Over the past few decades many tribes have resumed important cultural practices to instill a sense of identity and pride. Native American practitioners agree that traditional ceremonies and other practices of spirituality should be incorporated into relationship education programs to make them more relevant to participants.

One report by the American Indian Policy Institute suggests that while differences among tribes exist, Native American practices such as oral teachings, learning by observing, and learning through experience are universal. Because of this, all classes and workshops should incorporate these techniques into the teaching style.

One report by the American Indian Policy Institute suggests that while differences among tribes exist, Native American practices such as oral teachings, learning by observing, and learning through experience are universal. Because of this, all classes and workshops should incorporate these techniques into the teaching style.

Historical trauma

Native Americans have experienced significant historical traumas including land theft, forced relocation and cultural subjugation laws. Experts emphasize that the historical trauma experienced by Native Americans has had a destructive impact on relationships. Addressing these experiences in relationship education programs can be accomplished by practicing the Native American concepts of “sharing and mourning” to help the healing process. Practitioners should be familiar with ways to create an atmosphere of awareness of multigenerational trauma on the individual, family and community.

Intermarriage

Intermarriage is commonplace among Native Americans; 56 percent of Native American marriages involve spouses from other racial or ethnic groups.

Interracial and inter-tribal marriages are complex because they often incorporate differing views of child-rearing and family relations. Practitioners are advised to explicitly acknowledge these differences as couple conflicts can occur when those differences have not been effectively discussed.

Extended family

There is a range of people in the Native American community commonly involved in a couple's marital life. This can include relatives, friends, teachers, elders, siblings, traditional healers and professional providers. Roles and relationships among tribal members can be interchangeable. For example, it is common to describe an older sister or aunt as a mother. Practitioners working with a Native American

couple should be aware of who in their life comprises this extended system of care, their influence, and ways in which extended family may need to be incorporated into the program.

Topics to be Covered in MRE

Years of economic disenfranchisement have resulted in Native American communities/tribes experiencing low levels of business activity, low home ownership rates, and families who have limited knowledge of sound money management practices. In addition to economic instability, research shows that alcohol abuse, substance abuse, diabetes, suicide and gambling addiction pose significant threats to Native American communities. These personal and environmental stressors can strain couple and family relationships. Although a marriage and relationship education program cannot address all these issues, practitioners should be aware of the impact these challenges place on couples and the services that may be available to them in the community.

Partner with other organizations

Strong tribal, inter-tribal and Native American community organization partnerships can support recruitment, referral and program sustainability efforts. Connecting with organizations that are respected and trusted in the community is important to recruitment. Some practitioners working with the Native American community rely on churches to actively advocate for their programs.

It's important to understand social service programs that are operating on reservations, available to Native Americans, and culturally appropriate. Establish links with these social service systems to offer access to economic assistance programs such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), parenting supports such as Head Start, and those that offer job training

to connect families with needed resources. Work with partner organizations to include marriage/relationship education as a part of a spectrum of holistic services designed to strengthen individuals, couples and communities.

Program providers must ensure that input from the tribal community is integrated into program design and implementation for it to be effective. Further, curricula and teaching styles must be compliant with Native American tradition. Forming partnerships with other service agencies is necessary for recruitment, referrals and ultimately, sustainability.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Jane Koppelman, MPA, of the Resource Center for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR and Jeanette Hercik, PhD and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.