

The Crisis Facing Native American Youth

Native American youth are facing a crisis. Removed from their homes and placed into the child welfare system at rates much higher than any other population served by Children's Administration, they also remain in out of home care significantly longer. Add to this the fact that these children are often placed in homes outside of their families, tribes and Indian culture and all this contributes to significant social problems.

The Legacy of Abuse

To best understand the plight of the Native American youth, you must first know the history of the generations which preceded them. The story of the Native American people is a complicated one marked by significant trauma and atrocities which resulted in the largest genocide of the 19th Century. Efforts to assimilate Indians into mainstream American society often involved the removal of Indian children from their homes on tribal land and then sending them to religious and BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) boarding schools. Fueled by Richard Henry Pratt's belief that Indians could be civilized through total immersion, these schools prohibited children from speaking their language or following their cultural practices or spiritual beliefs. The legacy of abuse which happened to these young and vulnerable children in many of these schools has resulted in overwhelming intergenerational trauma and unresolved grief. This trauma which interrupted the ability to parent has led directly to the most current social problems which plague Indian communities today including alcohol/drug abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse and parenting deficiencies. All of these problems have contributed to the break-down of the family unit, leading to the removal of large numbers of Native American youth from their families.

The Journey of Healing

Breaking the cycles which have been put in place by the historical trauma experienced by generations of Native Americans requires that the cultural identity for so long denied to these children be returned to them. The journey of healing begins when these children are given the compassionate support that they need to reconnect with their rich cultural heritage. The Indian Child Welfare Act passed in 1978 identified the needs that Native American youth face when removed from their families and placed in non-Indian foster and adoptive homes. In 2011, Washington State went even further and enacted the Washington State Indian Child Welfare Act which commits the state to finding a placement that reflects and honors the unique values of the child's tribal culture and is best able to assist the child in establishing, developing and maintaining a relationship with the child's tribe and tribal community.

The Call to Help these Children Reconnect with their Cultural Traditions

Native American youth have two distinct influences, that of their family of origin and that of their caregivers. When considering if you are able and willing to provide care to these children you should ask yourself if you are willing to help these children reconnect with their cultural traditions. Your participation in events helps to ensure that these children have positive connections to their culture which in turn helps nurture a positive sense of identification as a Native American. By being willing to do this, you can be a valuable part of the healing journey that will help strengthen this next generation of Native Americans and help them become the parents that their children will need them to be. For more information about being a caregiver to Native American youth, we encourage you to watch the video ["All My Relations"](#) or contact your local [Fostering Together liaison](#).