STRATEGY BRIEF

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September 2025

What roles can Elders play to help children thrive and prevent them from entering foster care?

This brief highlights the wisdom and reflections of Elders involved in Casey Family Programs' **Elder Connections Project**[1], and was developed in partnership with Jordan "Angun" Lewis (Aleut/Sugpiaq, Native Village of Naknek), director of research for the Center for One Health Research, and research professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, College of Indigenous Studies.

The respected role of Elders

Elders occupy a highly respected role in American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian cultures. They step into this role because of family and community recognition, not based on age or self-definition. Revered for their wisdom, Elders are referred to as the community's leaders, teachers, keepers of knowledge, and role models to all. Elders ensure the continuation of traditional native customs and pass those on to younger generations.

A group of grandmothers from the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota first conceived the forward-thinking policy changes incorporated into the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978. The core values and rights reflected in ICWA include active efforts that help children safely remain with (or return to) their families, and cultural humility in engagement with children's communities. Casey Family Programs recognizes ICWA as representing the gold standard of child welfare practice for *all* children and families.

A significant body of research confirms that connections between Elders and children— whether related by blood or not — protect and support the well-being of both groups. For children, benefits of these intergenerational connections include social-emotional gains, such as increased self-awareness, improved relationship skills, and better decision-making. Intergenerational connections also have been shown to contribute to greater academic success, better self-esteem and mood, and healthier habits.[2]

Positive relationships with grandparents and other elders are, in themselves, a protective factor for children and older youth.[3] Despite the fact that intergenerational connections benefit both Elders and children, very few child welfare programs include intergenerational services. Further, Elders themselves — particularly those who have not been involved previously in the child welfare system — are rarely asked about their viewpoints on child welfare practices or how children, older youth, and families could be supported earlier to prevent system involvement foster care.

In many ways, Elders are an untapped source of wisdom about strategies to support child and family well-being.

In 2022, Casey Family Programs undertook the Elder Connections Project to better understand how American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders' knowledge, experience, and observations are helpful in developing strategies, resources, and culturally safe and appropriate practices to prevent children from entering foster care. This brief offers a summary of those findings, which are applicable to children and families of all communities.

Elder Connections Project study

- Population: 30 American Indian/Alaska Native and 30 Native Hawaiian Elders, ages 50 to over 90; within the group, 57 were women and three were men.
- Data sources: 24-item survey within local focus groups; literature review
- Methodology:
  - Eight focus groups were held with Elders from Spirit Lake Nation (6 elders), Osage Nation (6), Pascua Yaqui Tribe (7), Tanana Chiefs Conference (5), Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (6), as well as two Native Hawaiian communities in Hilo (17) and two in Honolulu (13).
  - Communities identified their own participants. Each focus group met in its local community and answered 24 questions posed by Casey Family Programs.
- Consultant and project author: Jordan "Angun" Lewis, director of research for the Center for One Health Research, and research professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, College of Indigenous Studies.

> "Generational resilience is presence."
>
> — Elder focus group participant

Key project findings

The Elder Connections Project began with a scan and analysis of the research regarding the connection between Elders and children and formed focus groups of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders. Project leaders specifically recruited Elders without personal experience in child welfare systems.[4]

Focus group questions explored the following:

- What does "healthy and thriving" mean?
- What strategies do Elders use to stay healthy?

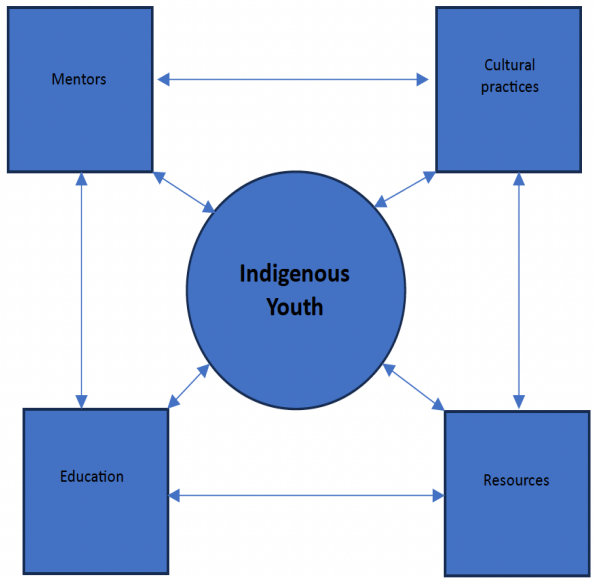
- What ways do Elders individually — and their communities as a whole — protect, support, and engage youth, and ensure youth have the resources they need?
- What traditional practices do Elders engage in and pass down?
- What are the benefits of children living in intergenerational households and/or spending time with Elders, both for children and Elders?
- What would Elders advise communities to do to build support for children, create activities for intergenerational connection, and keep children out of foster care?

> "Elders' wisdom and knowledge of raising their children and grandchildren can serve as the foundation for programs and services to support their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to grow up into healthy adults."
>
> — Dr. Jordan "Angun" Lewis, University of Alaska Fairbanks

A model of healthy Indigenous youth

The focus groups universally confirmed the importance of having Elders in the lives of children, whether in their family or community. Participants said the presence of an Elder indirectly and directly protects the life of an Indigenous youth. The interaction between generations and the unspoken bonds, relationships, stories, and power that exists between Elders and children help to keep both healthy in all aspects of their lives.

"Generational Resilience is Presence"



Elders who participated in the study identified four interrelated elements that contribute to the ability of Indigenous youth to develop a healthy identity and avoid involvement in the child welfare system, as represented in the Model of Healthy Indigenous Youth:

- **Mentors** (Elders, family, peers)
- **Cultural practices** (native dances, arts and crafts, foods, music)
- **Education** (Indigenous and western)
- **Resources** (financial support, safe homes, therapy, housing, cultural and spiritual)

Focus group participants stressed that these different elements may be present at different times in a child's life, and need not all be present at the same time to offer benefits. (For example, Indigenous youth will benefit from interacting with Elders' mentorship even if they lack adequate resources in their family and community.)

Elders play an essential role in each of these elements:

- **Mentor** relationships between Elders and children empower both generations, offering a sense of purpose, acceptance, and support. Other benefits include better physical and mental health, increased social engagement, and stronger identity development. Elders emphasized that children

and older youth must trust Elders in order to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns, admitting their needs, and voicing their opinions.

- Elders share stories and pass down American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian **cultural practices**, traditions, and knowledge they learned from their own Elders. In these ways, they share the knowledge they used to help them live long enough to become an Elder. Examples include traditional foods, values, and how to walk in balance between traditional and western worlds.
- Elders convey the importance of **education** and how traditional values can complement western education. Several Elders were raised in boarding schools, attended college, and were employed, so they understand the importance of a western education. Elders want children and older youth to have a western education so they can be successful in life, but they believe it should be combined with — not in place of — a cultural education.
- Elders contribute **resources** to support children in their families and communities. These may include offering financial support, being a safe home in the community, or sharing their cultural resources, such as prayer, dancing, singing, or ceremonies. Elders emphasized the importance of knowing how to access resources, as well as making it known to others that the resources are available to anyone, especially those that support children and older youth.

Recommendations and considerations

When asked about specific programs or services that could support children and older youth, the Elders' primary focus was on **teaching personal and professional skills**, including how to live as a member of an American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian family and community, how to support and provide for one's family, and how to engage in meaningful activities.

Other recommendations to help children thrive and prevent them from entering foster care included:

- Teach where they came from, and the history of their family and community.
- Teach about substance misuse and its negative impacts on individual health and well-being, as well as on families and communities.
- Teach respect for Elders.
- Teach how to embrace and love themselves.
- Teach about available community resources and how to use them.

Elders also suggested:

- Daycare programs are important to a community.
- Elders can be engaged to plan activities and events with children in their family and community.
- More funding for substance use disorder aftercare and relapse prevention programs is needed.
- Housing issues in a community must be addressed.
- More parenting programs for men and women should be established.
- More programs and services are needed that focus on providing concrete supports and resources to parents, and also to Elders serving as caregivers.

> "Know your history, it gives you strength."
>
> — Elder focus group participant

Lessons learned

The Elders who participated in the focus groups proved to be a source of wisdom about the needs and potential of their communities' young people. **Their recommendations can be implemented in, or adapted to, any community context, tribal or otherwise.** The process of structured consultation with community Elders, in and of itself, could have tremendous benefits if replicated. Some of the lessons learned from implementation of this project include:

- The process of **creating safe spaces to bring Elders together** for these conversations had value — not only for the team gathering insights, but also for the participants. Participants shared many moments of genuine connection and strong emotion. Some focus groups noted they had not previously come together in this way. Some moved quickly to problem-solving within their own community. For example, when participants in one focus group learned about children who were about to enter the child welfare system, they said, "If they don't have a grandmother, we can step in and be their grandmother," and they began strategizing how they would do that.
- When child welfare systems seek insight from community members, there is often a focus on those who have direct, lived experience with the system. This project demonstrates that **a lot can be learned from families and Elders without prior interaction with the child welfare system**.
- The research team for this project was impressed by the **Elders' savvy about the impact of modern technology on families, culture, and tradition, and how it can be a powerful tool to bring generations together**. Elders also had unique perspectives on how to navigate the differences between traditional and western education, and ways to harness both to support young people.
- While possessing a realistic view of the significant challenges their families and communities face, Elder participants were **optimistic about the future and have a strong commitment to making a better world for young people**. One example of how this can be done involves creating communities and systems in which young people are able to walk "with a foot in both worlds" — receiving strong western education while also having a safe place to learn and practice their cultural values and traditions.

Sometimes in child welfare, failures of new programs are blamed wrongfully on a community — often for its supposed lack of sophistication to implement the program components successfully — when it should be attributed to the fact that the program model was developed by and for another community, and therefore may not fit all communities' values, needs, or goals.

This project highlighted the inherent wisdom that exists within individual communities and offered, instead of a program model, a process by which important but nevertheless neglected sources could be tapped and engaged to develop new community-specific models.

Conversations like those in the project focus groups should be facilitated in other communities, which will help expand this project's findings. This project was not intended to prescribe best practice but instead to open space for new possibilities, guided by three foundational girders inherent within community Elders: **wisdom**, **knowledge**, and **experience**.

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[1] This project is dedicated to Mary E. Bunn, the inspiration for the project, and to all the grandparents whose enduring prayers are a quiet force of hope, love, and protection for generations to come.
[2] Generations United. (2021). Fact Sheet: Intergenerational programs benefit everyone.
[3] Barnett, M. A., Scaramella, L. V., Neppl, T. K., Ontai, L. L., & Conger, R. D. (2010). Grandmother involvement as a protective factor for early childhood social adjustment. *Journal of family psychology : JFP : journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, *24*(5), 635–645.
[4] In the course of discussion in some groups, it was discovered that some participating Elders did in fact have past experience with child welfare systems.

Casey Family Programs

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