



What **safety and risk assessment tools** are used in tribal child welfare?

“Child protection agencies, whether administered by the state or a tribal nation, are first and foremost charged with ensuring the safety of children who come to their attention. Validated and culturally appropriate risk and safety assessment tools are essential to understanding and meeting a child’s safety and permanency needs. We should take steps to ensure that the instruments and processes used to assess risk and safety sufficiently capture culturally-specific protective factors and attend to differences from a strengths-based perspective that reflects cultural humility.

— **DAVID SANDERS, PH.D.**,
EVP OF SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT,
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Effective solutions for improving the safety of children in indigenous communities are built on a respect for and responsiveness to the culture, values, and norms of American Indian and Alaska Native children and families.

Tribal child welfare agencies use a variety of methods to assess the safety and risk of children in their care. They customize standard assessments, validate

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instruments for a specific tribal population, adapt state assessments to reflect tribal culture, and expand knowledge of the assessments through staff and community training.

Casey Family Programs prepared this information packet in response to an inquiry from leaders of Casey's Indian Child Welfare Program team about how tribal child welfare agencies use different tools and processes to assess safety for the children who come to the attention of tribal child welfare agencies. The packet includes highlights of the findings from two recent reports supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families:

- National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes. (2011). *Findings from the national needs assessment of American Indian/Alaska Native child welfare programs*. West Hollywood, CA: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.nrc4tribes.org/files/NRCT%20Needs%20Assessment%20Findings_APPROVED.pdf
- Keating, K., Buckless, B., & Ahonen, P. (2016). *Child safety and risk assessments in American Indian and Alaska Native communities* (OPRE Report # 2016-48). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Retrieved from: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/safetyassessment-brief2016_b508.pdf

This summary may be of value to others interested in what safety and risk assessment tools tribal child welfare agencies use and how these agencies adapt tools for use in tribal communities.

This document defines safety and risk assessments, discusses findings from a national needs assessment survey, and highlights the way nine tribes address safety and risk assessment in their child welfare agencies. It concludes with considerations for adapting standardized tools that are widely used in other child welfare jurisdictions.

Safety and risk assessment instruments

Many child welfare agencies use safety or risk assessment instruments to help child protection staff assess families fairly and comprehensively. These structured tools can provide a framework for effectively assessing current and future harm to children.

- A safety assessment is the systematic collection of information about threatening family conditions and current, significant, and clearly observable threats to the safety of a child that determines the degree to which he or she is likely to suffer maltreatment in the immediate future.
- A risk assessment is the structured collection and analysis of information to determine the degree to which key factors that increase the likelihood of future harm to a child are present in a family situation.

Safety and risk assessment in tribal child welfare

Given the absence of child welfare instruments tailored to the tribal communities, tribal child welfare agencies have instead employed other approaches to assessment of child safety and risk, such as customizing a standard assessment with the assistance of the developer, validating an instrument for a specific tribal population, adapting a state assessment to reflect local tribal culture and values, and expanding assessment knowledge through staff and community training.

In 2011, the National Resource Center for Tribes conducted a national needs assessment survey to better understand the needs, priorities, and challenges facing tribes.¹ The survey asked respondents to rate whether they felt they needed support and technical assistance with the use of safety and risk assessments for decision making. The following feedback was provided by more than 100 tribes:

- 79% noted safety and risk assessments as an area of need: 37% rated it as a critical need area, and 42% rated it as a moderate need area.

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- About half of the tribes reported that they used standardized assessment tools, while half did not.
- A good number of the tribal participants felt comfortable relying on experience, common sense, and most importantly, experience with the family to make decisions rather than relying on standardized tools. A tribal child welfare director exemplifies how much staff relies on their relationships with the families they serve to make good decisions on behalf of the family: “First of all, I use my education and knowledge from all the trainings that I participated in. And I work very closely with the family — not only the family, but the children regarding safety. I mean, I would like to hope that my clients are able to tell me.”¹
- Tribes that reported using safety and risk assessment tools used standardized assessments from their states.
- Those tribes accessing training through their tribal/state contracts were more likely to adopt the state-wide assessment tools because the tribal child

welfare staff are being trained to use state protocols when conducting assessments.

- Although some tribes were satisfied with using statewide assessment tools, others reported that they had modified these tools to better meet the needs of families in their tribes. Still other tribal respondents expressed the desire to customize assessment tools to reflect their cultures and values, but noted that they did not have the staff time or expertise to do so. One of the tribal programs shared that it had started from scratch and developed its own safety and risk assessments.

In the absence of culturally specific instruments, tribal child welfare agencies have used multiple means to assess child safety and risk, such as customizing a standard assessment with the assistance of the developer, validating an instrument for a specific tribal population, adapting a state assessment to reflect local tribal culture and values, and expanding assessment knowledge through staff and community training. The following is a snapshot of some of these efforts:

TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS^{2,3}

STATE	TRIBAL COMMUNITY	SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND RELATED CASEWORK APPROACH
Alaska	Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes	In 2012, the tribal council partnered with the developers of the Structural Decision Making (SDM) model to create a culturally responsive safety and risk assessment system. They adapted the model for use with families eligible for tribal TANF to identify levels of risk for harm within the next 18 to 24 months. The system includes a screening assessment, a strengths and needs assessment, and a reassessment to determine whether services should be continued. Clear ratings that specify degree of risk ratings have helped caseworkers prioritize families and manage their caseloads. At-risk families are referred to a program called Preserving Native Families for preventative and family support services. ⁴
Alaska	Cook Inlet Tribe	As part of its 2006 TANF–Child Welfare coordination grant, the council worked with an evaluator to validate the North Carolina Family Assessment Scales for use with Alaska Native (AN) families in and around Anchorage. Staff credited their ability to measure improvements in family safety and risk factors to local validation of the instrument. The project team demonstrated high inter-rater reliability in the family safety domain and improved scores in the areas of physical abuse, emotional abuse, child neglect, and domestic violence. High levels of agreement with case managers’ perspectives supported the predictive validity of the scales with AN families.

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TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS^{2,3}

STATE	TRIBAL COMMUNITY	SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND RELATED CASEWORK APPROACH
Arizona	Salt River Maricopa County Indian Community	The Salt River Maricopa County Indian Community uses SDM.
Minnesota	Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians	Through its participation in the SafeKids/SafeStreets evaluation, the tribe developed a program called Building Strong Native American Families. This program overhauled child welfare practice in the community and aimed to increase staff and community knowledge about child abuse and neglect. This included interdisciplinary provider training, mandated reporter training for all tribal employees, a brochure for providers, and training for community members. Demonstrated improvements include increased sensitivity of providers to the cultural backgrounds of children and families and improved recognition of abuse by professionals.
Montana	Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boys	Chippewa Cree of the Rocky Boys' Reservation of Montana was one of three tribes that participated in the Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative on safety and risk assessments in 2009. The collaborative engaged 200 providers from 21 public and tribal child welfare agencies in the development, modification, or reform of assessment practices over an 18-month period. The tribe incorporated its values into the state's safety assessment instruments using culturally responsive questions.
North Dakota	Spirit Lake Nation	Spirit Lake Nation uses North Dakota's 21-point assessment.
North Dakota	Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation	The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation uses the SDM tool.
North Dakota	Turtle Mountain Nation	Turtle Mountain Nation developed its own risk assessment.
South Dakota	Oglala Sioux Tribe	The tribe implemented culturally responsive training to prepare its child protection staff to make safety and risk decisions. The curriculum focuses on distinguishing roles and responsibilities of the tribal agencies that investigate and prosecute child maltreatment cases, providing definitions and indicators of child abuse and neglect, distinguishing levels of risk using community-oriented examples, and providing training on conducting risk assessment with families. The curriculum includes initial interview questions, safety questions, and questions to determine risk and family functioning. Materials include terminology in the Lakota language and case examples within the local tribal context.

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Key considerations

Keating, Buckless, and Ahonen provide three key issues to consider related to the use of standard tools for assessment of safety and risk in the tribal child welfare context:¹

1. Standardized tools were not developed for indigenous or other minority groups, which presents a significant challenge for tribal child welfare agencies. To be effective, actuarial assessments should be based on diverse cultural populations, and consensus-based assessments should be based on child development and family functioning in tribal contexts.
2. In the absence of culturally specific instruments, tribal child welfare agencies have used multiple means to assess child safety and risk. Tribal communities need safety and risk assessment

instruments that have been developed, validated, and normed for them. While several tribes have successfully adapted tools in collaboration with developers and researchers, these efforts require substantial investment of resources, time, and caseworker training. Developers and administrators must consider AI/AN tribal values and practices, such as the “intricate web of familial, kinship, tribal, and community relationships” that support the raising of children.

3. The science of safety and risk assessment is still imperfect. Many questions remain regarding the reliability and validity of structured assessments, both in general and in tribal communities. Further development, implementation, and study of assessment practices in tribal communities will inform effective prevention and intervention.

1 National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes. (2011). *Findings from the national needs assessment of American Indian/Alaska Native child welfare programs*. West Hollywood, CA: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.nrc4tribes.org/files/NRCT%20Needs%20Assessment%20Findings_APPROVED.pdf

2 Keating, K., Buckless, B., & Ahonen, P. (2016). *Child safety and risk assessments in American Indian and Alaska Native communities* (OPRE Report # 2016-48). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Retrieved from: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/safetyassessmentbrief2016_b508.pdf

3 In addition, Casey Family Programs' Knowledge Management team made outreach to our strategic consultants who work in states with large tribal populations. Fifteen jurisdictions were asked to provide information; to date, three sent information, which has been included here. As additional information becomes available, Casey Family Programs will update this table for the requestor.

4 For more information as to how the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska incorporated the tools, please explore the following documents: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/initial_findings_rprt_final.pdf and https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/uploaded_files/CCTHITA_-nh_20_md.pdf

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