



Listen and Learn

A Process for Initiating Collaboration between Tribal Communities and Children's Advocacy Centers



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The American Indian population in the United States has the highest rate of child abuse in the country. Native¹ children are 2.5 times more likely to experience trauma than their non-Native peers (BigFoot, Willmon-Haque, & Braden, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), there are 573 federally recognized tribes in the United States. Approximately 5.2 million people, or 2% of the population in the United States, identify as American Indian. While only 20% of American Indians live on Indian land, such as reservations or trust land, 78% live outside of Indian land in urban, suburban, and rural communities. The American Indian population has the highest rate of child abuse in the country at 14.2 cases per 1,000 children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). These staggering statistics alone pose a challenge for helping professionals in the response to and intervention of child abuse and neglect in Indian Country. Coupled with historical trauma, jurisdictional issues, and a lack of culturally sensitive resources, state and federal agencies, as well as non-profit organizations, often struggle making a connection with tribal communities when attempting to serve Native American families in a collaborative manner. While the Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC)/Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) model has been widely adopted throughout the United States as best practice in responding to child abuse, it has yet to be adopted in Indian Country.

¹ Different people have different preferences regarding terminology in this area. The name by which it is polite to call a group of people is sometimes in flux and changes over time as political and social perceptions change. American Indian and Native American are both accepted terms for referring to Indigenous peoples of North America and may be considered synonymous. Native American is a broader designation because the U.S. government includes Hawaiians and Samoans in this category. Some Indigenous people in the U.S. prefer American Indian to Native American. Whenever possible, if known, it’s best to use specific tribal affiliation, for example Navajo, Hopi, Cherokee, rather than a generic term (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Throughout the United States, there are now more than 1,000 CACs that served more than 300,000 children in 2018, and the CAC/MDT model has been implemented in more than 33 countries throughout the world (National Children’s Advocacy Center, 2019). A CAC is a child-friendly facility in which law enforcement, child protection, prosecution, mental health, medical, and victim advocacy professionals work together to investigate abuse, help children heal from abuse, and hold offenders accountable (www.nationalchildrensalliance.org). The MDT response is the foundation of the CAC model and ensures that the agencies involved in the investigation and treatment of child abuse work together to reduce trauma and provide healing and justice to children and families.

The “Listen and Learn” Concept

In an effort to address the disparity in services available to Native American children and families involved in cases of child abuse, the Southern Regional Children’s Advocacy Center (SRCAC), a project of the National Children’s Advocacy Center, and the Native American Children’s Alliance (NACA), an independent, non-profit organization committed to helping end child abuse and neglect in Indian Country, have been working together to implement “Listen and Learn” programs within the region served by SRCAC. The concept was developed by attorney Gina South, former State Director of the Alabama Network of Child Advocacy Centers (ANCAC) and current board member of NACA. The first Listen and Learn program was piloted in Alabama in July 2017, in collaboration with the Poarch Creek Band of Indians and the Alabama ANCAC. A second Listen and Learn took place in May 2018, in Wyandotte, Oklahoma, and was a collaborative effort among SRCAC, NACA, Wyandotte, Quapaw and Seneca-Cayuga Nations, and the Children’s Advocacy Centers of Oklahoma (CACOK).

The Purpose and Goals of a Listen and Learn

The purpose of the Listen and Learn program is to simply introduce the concept of the CAC/MDT model to tribal communities that do not have access to or utilize those resources at the local level. The value of Listen and Learns is that each program is tailored to incorporate the specific dynamics related to the tribe (or tribes) participating, in an effort to introduce the concept of collaborating with state, local, federal, and non-profit agencies through the multidisciplinary approach. This program can be delivered to communities where a CAC exists and has the capacity to expand services to support Indian populations within their service area, or in communities that lack CAC services but where Native Americans are interested in learning about the model.

If a CAC or a tribe expresses an interest in hosting a Listen and Learn, it is recommended that representatives from the Regional CAC, the state Chapter, and NACA form a “Listen and Learn team” and conduct a gap analysis to determine whether CAC services are being provided to Native American populations within the state. If there is an existing CAC in an underserved area that is able to expand

services, the Regional CAC, state Chapter, and NACA will work with that CAC to begin reaching out to local tribal communities to introduce the concept of the Listen and Learn.

The two primary goals of the Listen and Learn program include: 1) *Open the conversation*; and 2) *increase collaboration* among tribal officials, MDT members, and CAC staff to increase access to services to Native children and families.

How the Listen and Learn Concept Can Be Beneficial When Working with Tribes

An important premise of a Listen and Learn is the concept that underserved communities are also unheard communities. The amount of contact that exists between underserved communities and the dominant culture are often so few that the service providers are unaware of the needs, historical interactions, and societal structure of the underserved community. The term “Listen and Learn” comes from the idea that the dominant culture—once it has resolved to participate in providing investigative and healing services to the underserved community—pauses its own procedures for advancement, listens to the previously unheard voices, and learns about the culture before attempting to forge ahead with program development.

Listening sessions ([Six Ways to Run a Listening Session](#)) are a typical, but often an overlooked step in improving relationships between members of dominant cultures and minority groups. Focused, active listening to minority voices allows dominant cultures to gain a better understanding of how the underserved community approaches societal relationships; how they address crime and punishment; and what their goals are for their children . . . their own future leaders. Listening to their voices and learning about their culture is vital when building strong relationships that will be the basis for future collaborative success.

Throughout history, tribes have had negative interactions with the dominant culture. From having their homes burned by settlers to being given blankets deliberately contaminated with smallpox, Native communities have faced hundreds of years of animosity and violence from both their neighbors and the ever-encroaching policies of the U.S. government. Unpleasant as it is to hear about, having knowledge of the federal policies of genocide, removal, re-education, relocation, and assimilation, will help CACs, MDTs, and other service providers appreciate the deep distrust that typically exists between Native populations and the communities that surround them (Wilkins & Lomawaima, 2001).

Because of this history, and the historical trauma that resulted from it, tribes are both accustomed to and skeptical of outside groups that come in from the dominant culture and offer goods, services, and assistance. Tribes are understandably skeptical when the dominant culture arrives on their doorstep with offers of help, simply because every other interaction with the dominant culture began in much the same way but ended badly. Furthermore, the groups offering assistance often don't take into consideration the culture and practices of Native people. In many cases, assistance is offered to “fix” an issue that is a perceived to be a problem based on the beliefs and practices of the dominant culture, but it may not actually be a problem at all for the Native community, hence, the “learn” portion of the “Listen and Learn” is a critical part of the process.

Native American Children's Alliance (NACA)

The use of an American Indian intermediary group, such as the Native American Children's Alliance (NACA), is an essential element of the Listen and Learn. NACA is composed of Native professionals who are committed to the concept of CACs, experienced in investigating and prosecuting crimes against children, and knowledgeable about Native issues. Deeply acculturated Natives, like NACA members, understand the inherent apprehension that tribes have toward outside organizations. Utilizing NACA to assist with setting up and executing the Listen and Learn can help overcome any apprehension that the tribe may have about the program. Additionally, NACA's involvement can help establish trust between the tribe and the CAC that will serve as a strong foundation for future collaboration.

With an understanding that every single tribe and Native community is different and that tribes are independent sovereign nations, NACA will assist with planning a program in a manner that is culturally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and dedicated to developing connections that will lay a foundation for the success of the multidisciplinary process.

Planning and Conducting a Listen and Learn

The preparation and planning stage for a Listen and Learn is the most critical part of the process for building a relationship between the representatives of the CAC (including the MDT) and the targeted tribal group. The Listen and Learn team will work together with the local CAC and tribe(s) to plan the event. A representative from NACA will begin the process by making the initial contact with the tribe. From that point, the Listen and Learn team will host joint conference calls or video conferences with representatives from the tribe and CAC to develop the plan and agenda for the Listen and Learn. Video conferences will cover initial introductions, program goals, program agenda, the program day, obstacles faced by the groups in the past, and any other issues of concern. For the purpose of future evaluation, it is recommended that the Listen and Learn team identify one person from the team to document the preparation and planning discussions, and that the team work with the tribe to develop a culturally sensitive process to create a workplan during the Listen and Learn event. After the Listen and Learn, a follow-up conference call should be scheduled to discuss what went well and what didn't, the results from the program survey, outcomes, and future relationship goals.

A typical program day includes the following:

Morning session

- Welcome statements from representatives of the tribe, CAC, and NACA
- An opening ceremony by the tribe
- Cultural presentation by the tribe
- Historical trauma by NACA
- Tribal government and structure by the tribe

Afternoon session

- Successes of the tribe
- Challenges faced by the tribe
- Circle (roundtable) discussion moderated by NACA
- Development of Listen and Learn workplan with achievable goals
- Identifying individuals who will participate in follow-up conference calls
- Scheduling the follow-up call

Cultural Considerations

When collaborating with various Indian nations and tribal entities, there are many cultural considerations that are helpful to take into account. Every single group is different, with its own unique history, language, style of dress, customs, governmental structure, and traditions. That said, there are a few commonalities that many Native people share. Among them are the concepts of Elders, time, and sacred locations.

Because they carry the history, wisdom, and knowledge of tribal customs, the Elders or the oldest members of the tribe, are held in high regard and are to be honored as living treasures of the tribal group ([Native American Beliefs, July 9, 2009](#)). The Elders are the group that provides leadership and historical reference and should always be treated with honor and respect. The Elder may be more or less involved in the Listen and Learn planning process, depending on the tribe. Tribal members are taught from childhood that Elders are to be consulted and listened to, due to the fact that most tribes pass knowledge of history, culture, and traditions down through storytelling and oral histories.

Time is an important factor to take into consideration. Directors and administrators are working on grant cycles and reporting deadlines, but most Native people will refer to “Indian time” as the schedule that guides them ([Indian Country Today, 2018](#)). Prior to colonization, tribes were guided by the sun, seasons, and weather. That concept carries over into the belief that things will happen when they should happen, based on all the unknown circumstances that exist.

The concept of sacred locations is another important element. The Choctaw Tribe, for example, named their original mound “Nanah Waiya” or “mother land,” which is a reference to the concept that their people were born and died in a specific location (Lloyd, 2017). The blood of the people was connected to that location, and therefore, the spot was honored throughout history. The magnanimity of this concept can be sobering when considering that each one of the 573 federally recognized tribes currently in the United States had its own sacred locations prior to colonization.

Understanding the significance of Elders, time, and sacred locations to Native people will provide context to the significance of the following points:

- When planning an event with the tribe, the NACA representative should lead the discussion and ask how Elders can be included, keeping in mind that when talking to Elders, they are not to be rushed.
- Build extra time into your planning schedule when setting deadlines for planning the event.
- The Listen and Learn should be located on tribal property, if possible. Many tribes will have community centers, casinos with conference rooms, or specific locations for such events.
- Anticipate obstacles and be creative with solutions. Ask yourself, “What have I NOT tried?”
- If tribal members don’t return calls or seem difficult to connect with, try a different method and don’t take silence personally—keep trying to make contact. Silence does not indicate a lack of interest, rather, it can indicate that options are being considered, and key players are still being consulted.
- NACA, or Native individuals with connections to the tribe, will make initial contact with the tribe and will assess tribal capacity, strengths, and needs prior to an in-person meeting with the Listen and Learn team.
- The Listen and Learn team (NACA, the Regional CAC, and state Chapter) will schedule an in-person visit with the tribe prior to the program. This visit can occur at any time prior to the day-long program, but ideally should occur as soon as possible once the date is set for the event. When meeting with tribal leaders, consider offering the following statements:
 - We want to learn more about your tribe’s history and culture.
 - We would like to learn about your government.
 - We would like to meet your representatives.

Plan to take a small gift, a token of appreciation that will represent your organization. Once the Listen and Learn has been planned and scheduled, NACA will travel to the tribe a day early and will meet with representatives.

- Include a cultural demonstration of some type as part of the Listen and Learn, so that the tribe can “show” who they are, what they are about. This cultural demonstration could be a ceremony, song, prayer, storytelling session, or a game demonstration, like stickball, a traditional game played by many tribes. Ask if the demonstration could involve children, as this will provide perspective for the dominant group’s team members attending the event.
- See if the tribe, neighboring businesses, or the local CAC can sponsor lunch.
- Do not eliminate the end of the day circle (roundtable) discussion, as it serves as an important part of the process. In addition to a circle serving as an equalizer that enhances group discussions, it allows participants to get a feel for what types of issues are unresolved, express thankfulness to the other participants, and it is an opportunity to make professional connections. Furthermore, circles are a symbol of special significance to tribal members, demonstrating connections to each other, the past, and the future.
- If goals for future collaboration are shared in the circle discussion, this should be documented by a member of the Listen and Learn team.
- A plan for follow-up should be in place before the end of the session. This will allow for continued support and technical assistance for the tribe, CAC, MDT, and state and local agencies to ensure practices are implemented to better serve Native children and families.

Costs Associated with a Listen and Learn

Costs for a typical two-day Listen and Learn program with 30–60 participants will include travel expenses (airfare, ground transportation, meals, lodging) for one to three NACA representatives, as well as administrative and support costs for planning and implementation of the event. If you are using NACA to act as an intermediary with the tribe, there is an additional cost for one additional day and night of preparation immediately prior to the Listen and Learn.

Costs to host previous Listen and Learns have ranged between \$10,000–\$12,000, with some assistance from the tribes for conference space and administrative costs.

Summary

The beauty of the Listen and Learn concept is that it can be tailored to the needs of the community. NACA will work closely with the Regional CAC and the state Chapter to identify gaps in service, then will connect directly with local agencies and tribal communities to determine services that are in place, learn about strengths and challenges they are facing, and strategize how to move forward to work better together. Three of the Regional CACs (Southern, Western, and Northeast) plan to continue to promote Listen and Learn programs and partner with NACA when they take place within their respective regions.

A Listen and Learn can also provide the benefit of equipping tribally driven programs to build the skills and capacity necessary to respond effectively to child abuse within tribal communities, particularly given the limitations of existing data and evidence-based practices and with the large number (573) of federally recognized tribes in the United States. The Listen and Learn concept within tribal communities is new, but over time, the goal is to be able to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Hosting a Listen and Learn in Your Community

Team members would be happy to speak with you about hosting a Listen and Listen in your community. Below are their contact information:

- If you are a member of a tribe, contact Geri Wisner (geri_wisner@yahoo.com) from NACA.
- If you are from a CAC or state Chapter, contact the appropriate individual depending on where you are located:

Within the Northeast Region, contact Tony DeVincenzo (tony@nrcac.org).

Within the Southern Region, contact Jerri Sites (jsites@nationalcac.org).

Within the Western Region, contact Patty Terzian (pterzian@rchsd.org).

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