



## Supporting Native Youth in Boys & Girls Clubs: Implications for the Social-Emotional Development Approach to Behavior Support

### Background

The social-emotional development approach to behavior support gives information and strategies on how to view and respond to behavior as an expression of social-emotional development, or how youth see themselves, feel, deal with conflict, make decisions and cope with stress. Native wellness is a way of life; a way of life by striving for balance between our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. This document provides a summary of implications for the development of the management and staff practices guides to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the diverse youth served by Boys & Girls Clubs, particularly Native youth and families.

### Implications for the Social-Emotional Development Approach to Behavior Support Practice Guides

Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country serve 120,000 American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and American Samoan youth with 205 Native Clubs in 138 tribal communities. As described on the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Native Services website, "These Clubs offer opportunities to provide Native youth with ongoing relationships with caring adult professionals, a safe place to learn and grow, life-enhancing programs, character development experiences and, most of all, hope and opportunity. Native Clubs strengthen their youth's cultural identity through programming that explicitly promotes positive youth growth and development along critical cultural, social, emotional, intellectual and physical dimensions through viable and sustainable organizations."<sup>1</sup>

1. **Native Boys & Girls Clubs have an opportunity to foster cultural connectedness within a rich cultural learning environment.**

Cultural connectedness is a protective factor for Native youth above and beyond more individualistic cultural ideas such as a positive sense of self. Taking this information into consideration in the practice guides, the sections that reference the four areas of social-emotional development (healthy relationship with self, healthy relationship with others, emotional regulation and responsible decision-making), need to specifically include cultural connectedness as an element of healthy relationship with self. There needs to be a clear explanation of how the degree to which individuals are embedded within their cultural group relates to a healthy sense of self, particularly for Native youth.

2. **Native Clubs provide opportunities for youth to explore their identity and develop social ties.**

Considering the historical trauma, personal trauma and pervasive inequities of Native youth, many Native youth may continue to experience messages that their culture is “less than” the dominant culture. Recognition of culture as a strength and protective factor is growing; however Native youth in traditional public schools and other social institutions may be encouraged to blend into the mainstream culture. The new Native teachers are teaching us much about what is important if they are to influence the movement away from ineffectual assimilationist systems of education toward indigenous models that will honor Native languages, culture, traditions, values and knowledge, along with improving academic outcomes for Native students. It is crucially important to include information in the practice guides on how the concepts of social-emotional development and behavior support can be adapted to avoid an assimilationist approach; wherein Native families are expected to accept the mainstream view of what social-emotional development means, and how behavior is interpreted from this lens.

3. **Social-emotional development for Native youth is grounded in the culture, language and traditions of their tribe.**

While each tribe has its own culture, language, traditions and community, there are similar values for family and community ties, respect for others, respect for elders, connectedness to one another, mother earth and relatedness, cooperation, responsibility and humility. Since these elements vary by tribe, the practice guides will include a section specifically for Native Clubs that will focus on how to develop an understanding of what social-emotional development means in collaboration with Native youth and families. For example, from a tribal and Native American professional perspective, the creation of lifelong learning environments and meaningful educational experiences for both youth and adults of a tribal community requires a language and cultural context that supports the traditions, knowledge and language(s) of the community as the starting place for learning new ideas and knowledge. There is a firm belief within many tribal communities and (among) Native educators that this cultural context is absolutely essential if one is to succeed academically and build meaningful lives as adults. Similar values should be used throughout the social-emotional development approach to behavior support to intentionally incorporate a collective way of being in addition to the dominant culture/individualistic view of the world.

**Cultural responsiveness is a core component of quality youth development programming**

Traditionally, Native people infuse their core cultural spiritual activities and rituals throughout daily life. Tribal culture was never something separable from everyday routines. Tribal culture was not meant to be dissected, studied and taught as “culture” classes and activities. Rather than including cultural responsiveness as a stand-alone section of the practice guides, it should be incorporated throughout to keep the youth’s personal and cultural lens at the forefront of how staff interpret and respond to behavior. The importance of incorporating youth, family and community voices in this process cannot be underestimated.

## Research and Information Supporting Implications for Social-Emotional Development Approach to Behavior

There are currently 573 federally recognized Native American tribes in 35 states. Each tribe is distinct with its own culture, traditions, language, community and power of self-government. Indian Country is defined as “land within an existing Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the U.S. government.” American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) have experienced historical trauma, ineffective government policies, and chronically underfunded federal programs, resulting in limited access to health care, education and law enforcement and disproportionate outcomes for AI/AN youth.<sup>ii</sup> The following points were used to arrive at the implications for the social-emotional development approach to behavior support practice guides described in the previous section.

1. **Inequities are well documented and profound** – AI/AN youth experience higher rates of depression and suicide, adverse health related behaviors such as substance abuse, higher rates of obesity and diabetes, overidentification in special education and overrepresentation in the prison system.
2. **Cultural connectedness is a protective factor** – cultural connectedness, or the degree to which individuals are embedded in their cultural group, has emerged as a protective factor for native youth. Cultural connectedness may serve as a unique protective factor for native youth over and above related notions of positive sense of self.<sup>iii</sup> Culture framed as an advantage serves as a counternarrative to deficit-based research and gives voice to the expertise of elders and other cultural sources.<sup>iv</sup> Native wellness is a way of life; a way of life by striving for balance between our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.
3. **Rich cultural learning environments** – embody the culturally based values, knowledge and practices of Native peoples and create climates that are truly living culturally.<sup>v</sup> In keeping with this worldview, the Native Services Unit encourages Boys & Girls Clubs of Indian Country to integrate cultural perspective and elements across the entire spectrum of activities for youth.
4. **Language and cultural revitalization efforts lead to a strong sense of identity** – with the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states that Indigenous people have a right to a culturally appropriate education that does not seek to eradicate Indigenous languages or cultures, there have been increased efforts to establish Indigenous language immersion schools with promising results. By teaching children their native tongues, a sense of identity and belonging is being instilled, simultaneously teaching them to accept and be proud of their heritage and upbringing. With a growing number of Native American language immersion programs in the US, there are two significant benefits emerging regarding:
  - a. An increasing number of Native American language speakers, which aids in saving and restoration of such ancient languages.
  - b. It allows many high-risk youth from difficult backgrounds to overcome their socioeconomic circumstances and excel.

5. **Social ties are important for positive Native youth development** – research has shown the connection between social and cultural connections and positive outcomes.<sup>vi</sup>
- AI/AN youth who report discussing problems with friends are less likely to report a suicide attempt.
  - One of the strongest protective factors associated with diminished violence for AI/AN youth is school connectedness.
  - AI/AN teens who participate in cultural activities such as traditional dance or sweat lodges report significantly higher connection to their ethnic identity than AI/AN teens who do not participate in such activities.
  - Involvement in community groups, with healthy adults/elders and with one’s traditional culture, is associated with positive developmental outcomes.
  - AI/AN youth need opportunities to contribute to village betterment to feel self-efficacy, or the belief they can make a difference in their community.

### **Cultural responsiveness is critically important for all youth development programs**

Cultural responsiveness considers the fluidity of cultural practices, beliefs and knowledge. It also conveys the dynamic relationship between staff and youth. Using the National Research Council’s eight features of positive youth development, Simpkins and colleagues (2017) proposed a set of culturally responsive practices for program structure and staff (see table on pages 7-9).<sup>vii</sup> The authors described key considerations for each of the eight features of positive youth development through the lens of cultural responsiveness.

**Feature 1) Physical and psychological safety:** when taking the culturally responsive point of view, this feature is focused on promoting positive intergroup relations, as well as preventing and addressing biases, power differentials and discrimination. To address these issues, staff need to talk with youth and families about their pressing safety concerns for youth and their communities and avoiding assumptions based on group status. Although some youth may have experienced racial profiling or experiences that left them feeling powerless or dismissed, it is not necessarily the experience of all youth within a cultural group.

**Feature 2) Appropriate structure:** described as the rules and regulations that govern behavioral expectations and how relationships and activities are arranged (e.g., individual versus collaborative), a developmentally appropriate structure creates predictability, enables effective monitoring and conveys a sense of safety. A culturally appropriate structure uses flexibility and traditional practices. Culturally appropriate structures consider the family and the communities’ culture and traditions and expectations of the youth in participation and attendance as well as how youth from collectivist and individualistic cultures might experience activities.

**Feature 3) Supportive relationships:** staff investments in relationships with youth take multiple forms, such as serving “cultural brokers,” showing an interest in youths’ lives and cultures, focusing on strengths, and sharing life experiences regarding navigating cultural identities. Staff should follow the youths’ lead in constructing relationships that may extend outside the professional realm because acceptable adult-youth relationship dynamics differ across cultural groups and youth comfort

level. One of the greatest defenses from risk factors, especially as it relates to educational achievements, is to provide supportive relationships. Research indicates that the majority of Native youth feel it is important to keep up with their culture. Helping youth while enabling them to retain their cultural identity can be a powerful way to ensure the community at large never loses touch with where it's from. When implementing youth development programs for Native youth, it is important to listen, understand and focus on the journey, inner wisdom and reflection of Club members in meaningful experiences.

**Feature 4) Opportunities to belong:** youth development programs offer an opportunity to meaningfully include cultural relevancy. This opportunity is unique, as many schools and other institutions adopt assimilationist ideologies, which seek to help youth more closely resemble the dominant culture. Native youth must manage walking in two worlds while maintaining their cultural identity and create identity in a purposeful way. Conflicting demands can lead to youth feeling that they do not belong in either culture. Culturally relevant activities should be structured so youth can feel comfortable expressing their cultural identities

**Feature 5) Positive social norms:** from a culturally responsive lens, the role of culture plays a central role in establishing social norms or the “way of doing things.” Although many cultures uphold similar moral values, there is often variability in expectations, habits and ways of doing things. The article makes the point that a central challenge to this work is being responsive to youth and families who hold different ideas concerning appropriate social norms. In practice, activity norms grounded in youth voice that are clearly documented are helpful in valuing diversity and respect while not privileging one group over others. Staff can help create positive social norms among diverse youth by being flexible, understanding of, and open to the array of social norms that youth bring to the activity.

**Feature 6) Support for efficacy and mattering:** this area is generally associated with activities that support youth in exercising autonomy, making a difference, building on strengths, and taking on leadership roles, which lead to meaningful experiences and positive identity. When we look through the culturally responsive lens, what is meaningful and how youth approach challenges can vary by cultural background. Providing opportunities in culturally relevant ways include things like working on service projects in communities, learning about ones cultural background, youth centered youth activities that connect youths everyday experiences is one way to foster efficacy. An example of this could be how reading stories written by Native authors foster Native youth engagement in an Boys & Girls Clubs or even a library filled with books written by Native authors.

**Feature 7) Opportunities for skill building:** activities not only develop skills in a topic such as reading or drawing, they also foster foundational life skills such as emotion regulation and teamwork. In addition, these youths need to make sense of a dominant world in which their own culture, cultural assets and identities are often marginalized, and members of their group are subject to discrimination. Activities

offer opportunities for minority youth to reconcile cultural differences and explore positive identities. Nonminority youth also gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences and expand their cultural skills. Culturally responsive activities can help youth with the emotion regulation and problem-solving skills needed to be culturally flexible with multiple cultural contexts, expand their sense of self, and successfully navigate beyond their own social and cultural comfort zones.

**Feature 8) Integration of family, school and community efforts:** activities skilled at coordinating family, school and community settings are better equipped to leverage resources to promote youth development. When it comes to culturally diverse families, there may be challenges related to speaking different languages, lack of trust in mainstream institutions, or little to no experience with organized activity settings. To engage families where these challenges are present, the article suggests using nontraditional means such as home visits or other community centers (e.g., churches or cultural centers).

Simpkins and colleagues' (2017) recommended culturally responsive practices based on the eight features of positive youth development are described in the following table:



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Category of positive youth development	Program structure recommendations	Staff practice recommendations
Physical and psychological safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have written policies and procedures about inclusivity that specify how the activity is welcoming to all youth and families</li> <li>• Provide clear structure and procedures for all youth to address safety concerns (e.g., racially motivated victimization, bullying) with staff and feel comfortable in doing so</li> <li>• Ensure that policies (e.g., paperwork, English-only policies) do not marginalize groups</li> <li>• Provide an environment that is safe, accessible and welcoming to youth and families of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds</li> <li>• Ensure all groups have equal status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of potential culturally based contributors to interpersonal conflict and manage conflict when it occurs</li> <li>• Promote constructive culturally based conflict resolution among youth and staff</li> <li>• Avoid use of language that is discriminatory, teases or makes fun of a particular group or furthers stereotypes</li> <li>• Positively counter practices degrading to particular groups, biases, stereotypes and discrimination</li> <li>• Address specific safety concerns of youth who are marginalized, victimized or have other safety concerns (e.g., lack citizenship documentation)</li> </ul>
Appropriate structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively seek input from all families and youth concerning culturally appropriate structure in the program</li> <li>• Ensure that all families and youth understand the program expectations and procedures</li> <li>• Balance autonomy and structure that are consistent with youth's cultural norms</li> <li>• Structure groups/relationships in ways that youth are accustomed to</li> <li>• Adapt rules to recognize youth responsibilities outside of the activity so that a particular group is not unduly penalized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use behavior strategies based on cultural norms concerning limit setting, rules and monitoring</li> <li>• Be flexible and adapt structural demands to align with youth's cultural background while maintaining overall structural integrity</li> <li>• Co-construct rules and decision-making processes, as well as the structure of youth-adult interactions</li> </ul>
Supportive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make all communication available in the languages and communication styles (e.g., email, level of eye contact) youth and families prefer</li> <li>• Have relationship-building activities for staff and youth to get to know one another, including daily "check-in" times and more formal opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have positive attitudes about all cultural groups</li> <li>• Focus and build on individuals' assets and strengths</li> <li>• Foster partnerships with youth where both culturally diverse youth and staff are viewed as skilled, knowledgeable individuals</li> <li>• Engage in culturally sensitive interactions with youth and families (e.g., sharing life experiences,</li> </ul>

Category of positive youth development	Program structure recommendations	Staff practice recommendations
Supportive relationships (cont'd)		<p>culturally sensitive displays of emotions)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor youth on navigating their multicultural society and daily challenges that occur within and outside of the activity</li> </ul>
Opportunities to belong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide opportunities, including leadership roles and decision-making opportunities, for all youth regardless of background</li> <li>• Make activities a place where youth's multiple cultural and social identities are respected</li> <li>• Structure activities to foster a sense of community through collaboration toward a common goal rather than competition across groups</li> <li>• Structure the activities and groups to minimize marginalization or segregation among participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster positive interactions and shared ownership among youth from diverse cultural groups</li> <li>• Actively include diverse youth in all group-based activities</li> <li>• Co-construct activity projects and decision between youth and staff that places youth voice at the center</li> <li>• Assist youth in bridging cultural differences</li> <li>• Cultivate a shared activity identity while honoring youth's unique identities</li> </ul>
Positive social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish prosocial norms acceptable to all and do not privilege a particular group</li> <li>• Develop and cultivate program norms to integrate youth voice into the developing the list of norms</li> <li>• Have written expectations and discussions with staff, youth and families on positive social norms around cultural differences, diversity and integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage prosocial norms and behavior among staff and youth</li> <li>• Treat all participants, staff and families with equal respect and consideration</li> <li>• Promote youth respect and value of diversity</li> <li>• Have similar expectations for youth of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds</li> </ul>
Support for efficacy and mattering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include youth voice in identifying ways to make the program culturally meaningful (e.g., relevant issue they can address, materials, physical space, family events, how they are taught/how the group is structured)</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to connect programmatic content to their daily lives or the lives of those in their community in a culturally meaningful way so that they better understand the relevance of the activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage youth to express their needs, interests and opinions, and support them with respectful feedback</li> <li>• Do not avoid or dismiss youth questions about their culture or others' culture</li> <li>• Support adolescents as they explore their cultural identity and resolve issues concerning culture</li> </ul>
Opportunities for skill building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide opportunities for skill building (e.g., problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek teachable moments to discuss their culture and others' cultures,</li> </ul>



Category of positive youth development	Program structure recommendations	Staff practice recommendations
	<p>solving) that will help them successfully navigate multiple cultures and intergroup interactions as well as constructively handle bias</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach adolescents about the history, traditions, and beliefs of multiple cultures, including mainstream American culture, to enhance cultural knowledge</li> </ul>	<p>teach youth strategies to bridge cultural differences in a positive manner, and about cultural capital to succeed in U.S. schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of potential cultural differences in valued skills (e.g., assertiveness)</li> </ul>
Integration of family, school, and community efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide opportunities for all parents to be involved, get to know one another, and provide feedback on the program in ways that accommodate parents' schedules and ways of gathering</li> <li>• Consider youth's cultural events and familial obligations in the requirements and schedule</li> <li>• Capitalize on culturally diverse community resources (e.g., Asian American History Museum)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know about the diversity and lives of youth and families in the area</li> <li>• Provide outreach to families, especially for those that are "hard to reach"</li> <li>• Be sensitive to families' cultural values and work with families to bridge any cultural differences or conflicts with families</li> <li>• Actively seek out, and communicate with all families and other important people (e.g., teachers, religious leaders, <i>promotoras</i>) about youth's overall well-being</li> </ul>

<sup>i</sup> <http://naclubs.org/our-mission/>

<sup>ii</sup> Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute. (2012). Native American Youth 101: Information on the Historical Context and Current Status of Indian Country and Native American Youth, <http://www.cnay.org/docs/Native-American-Youth-101.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Crooks, C.V., Exner-Cortens, D., Burm, S., Lapointe, S., & Chiodo, D. (2017). Two years of relationship-focused mentoring for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit adolescents: Promoting positive mental health. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38, 87-104.

<sup>iv</sup> Lee, T.S. (2017). Where all children blossom: Cultural advantage, double win, and rich cultural learning environments. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54, 1, 340-343.

<sup>v</sup> Lee, T.S. (2017). Where all children blossom: Cultural advantage, double win, and rich cultural learning environments. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54, 1, 340-343.

<sup>vi</sup> Wexler, L.M., Dam, H.T., Silvius, K., Mazziotti J., & Bamikole, I. (2016). Protective factors of native youth: Findings from a self-report survey in rural Alaska. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19, 3, 358-373.

<sup>vii</sup> Simpkins, S.D., Riggs, N.R., Ngo, B., Ettekal, A.V., & Okamoto, D. (2017). Designing culturally responsive organized after-school activities. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 32, 1, 11-36.

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