



Sharing Our Lived Experiences: *22 Tips for Caring for Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ Youth in the Child Welfare System*

This resource is dedicated to Two-Spirit and American Indian/Alaska Native LGBTQ children and youth whose lives are impacted by the child welfare system, and to the child welfare professionals, foster and adoptive parents, caregivers, and community members who strive to support them.

Introduction

Two-Spirit is a Native American¹ term that is usually used to indicate a person whose body simultaneously houses a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit. Two-Spirit is generally a universal Native concept: Will Roscoe, author and activist, writes that Two-Spirit people have been "documented in over 130 tribes, in every region of North America, among every type of native culture." Different words are used for Two-Spirit people in different tribes, and the word Two-Spirit may have different meanings in different Native languages. Some tribes may not have a commonly known and used word for Two-Spirit people at this point in time. Historically and culturally, Two-Spirit people were respected and considered holy by their tribes. Their roles in the community included protecting children; being husbands and wives; helping in ceremonies; gathering food and medicine; caretaking; and serving as peacekeepers, name givers, and spiritual leaders. Largely due to oppression (including homophobia/transphobia) and Native American historical and intergenerational trauma, issues that may disproportionately impact Two-Spirit/Native LGBTQ people today include: loss of identity; loss of culture; alienation from family, friends, and community; substance abuse; hate crimes; unemployment; various forms of violence, including childhood physical abuse, childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assaults (often unreported); discrimination; suicide; HIV infection; and depression and other mental health issues. Today, Two-Spirit people are working to reclaim their roles and places in their tribal circles. The tips below are meant to support child welfare workers, foster and adoptive parents, and caregivers in working with and caring for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning)

¹ For the purposes of this document, the term Native American is interchangeable with American Indian and use of the terms Native and Indian can apply to both American Indians and Alaska Natives in general.

American Indian/Alaska Native children and youth involved with the child welfare system. These tips may also be helpful to tribal community members that wish to be allies to their young relatives.

22 Tips for Caring for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native Youth in the Child Welfare System

1. Promote acceptance and model respect toward differences, in general. For example, as a foster parent, be able to provide a home that is respectful, safe, and welcoming for everyone, knowing that each child has their own identity, feelings, and experiences. Do not push a particular (or any) faith, religion, or form of spirituality on children or youth. Allow them to find and explore their own spirituality (if they wish to do so).
2. Seek out the supports and resources that you need in order to work with or care for a Two-Spirit or LGBTQ Native youth in an effective and affirming manner. For a child welfare professional, this might mean accessing resources (practice tools, reading materials), supervision focused on this topic, training, etc. For a caregiver, this might mean accessing support from the caseworker, training, community-based resources for families of LGBTQ youth, etc.
3. Consider whether your personal or religious beliefs prevent you from carrying out your professional responsibilities to all youth, or providing a safe, supportive, and affirming home for all youth, including Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ youth. If you find that there is a deep conflict between your beliefs and responsibilities, this may not be the role for you.
4. Talk early, often, and openly about sexuality and development. Model that it is appropriate to talk about these topics and safe to ask questions. Use inclusive and respectful language. For example, specifically mention Two-Spirit and LGBTQ people.
5. Know that it may be difficult for youth to verbalize some of the ways they are feeling. Let them know that this is okay! It can take time to understand, process, and accept our experiences and/or identities. Normalize this and support them in this process over time. Again, modeling the use of inclusive language and talking about sexuality and development can be helpful by providing some options for terms.

Messages to Two-Spirit Youth in Foster Care

From Two-Spirit Adults Who Were in Foster Care as Youth

Child welfare workers and caregivers: Please consider sharing these messages with Two Spirit and Native LGBTQ youth!

- You are special. You are beautiful. You are valued.
- Don't be ashamed of who you are. Don't let somebody tell you that you're a bad person. Let your identity grow.
- You are not alone. We're here for you. People love you and care about you. Right now, there are other American Indian/Alaska Native youth who are experiencing similar thoughts and feelings related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and tribal identity.
- Reach out to others and develop trusting relationships with people who accept, support, and celebrate you.
- It is possible to recover and heal from the past.

6. People identify in different ways. For example, some Native people may identify as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The term they identify with may change over time. In most cases, it is appropriate to “mirror” the term that the youth uses to describe themselves (unless they have “reclaimed” a term that is usually considered derogatory). Avoid making assumptions about anyone’s gender identity or sexual orientation or the terms or pronouns they use to describe themselves. Avoid pressuring a youth to label their identity.
7. Support and encourage Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth in exploring who they are. Learn about and offer available supports, groups, and social opportunities in the community, but do not force them to go – let them make these decisions. Many decisions are made for them by the system, and it is empowering for them to be able to decide whether and when to utilize supports or participate in these activities. You can also keep the option open by telling them, “This resource [or opportunity] is always available to you. I respect that it doesn’t feel right for you at this time, and if you change your mind, you can let me know.”
8. Be aware that well-intended efforts to support cultural connection may have a hurtful impact if they add to a sense of separation or feelings of difference. It may be helpful to connect the youth with a role model or mentor, particularly someone who is Two-Spirit or LGBTQ Native, Native, and/or has experience with the child welfare system. If the youth is not ready or interested in a mentor at this point in time, respect their choice. It is ok to offer this option to them again after some time has passed, as they may change their mind, and to keep the opportunity open (see tip #7).
9. Keep the information that a youth shares with you about their sexual orientation or gender identity private, unless it is necessary to disclose it for their best interest (i.e. a situation involving safety). If you do have to share information about a youth’s sexual orientation or gender identity in order to support them, engage the youth in a conversation prior to disclosing. Explain with whom you need to share the information and why, answer questions the youth may have, and engage the youth in problem-solving regarding any concerns they have about the disclosure.
10. Learn about the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on Native American and Alaska Native individuals, families, and communities and let this knowledge inform your work and/or the care you provide. Access information, resources, and training on trauma-informed care.
11. If you are not part of the youth’s tribe and/or are not Native American, learn as much as you can about the youth’s tribe and Native American culture. Discuss with the youth how they would feel about your participation in local tribal community events such as pow-wows, potlucks, and cultural gatherings. If the youth is open to your participation: participate as a family if possible; introduce yourself to the organizers; and, offer to bring a food dish to share.
12. Learn about the history of, and current issues impacting, Two-Spirit people. Be aware that a Two-Spirit youth may have experienced/may experience painful rejection from their tribe. Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ youth involved in the child welfare system may experience feelings of guilt, shame, abandonment, and/or disconnection from their family and/or tribe.

13. Be aware that Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth may experience bullying at school, in a group residence, or in the community. Be prepared to talk about and respond to bullying, and to advocate for the youth. Be careful to ensure that the youth is not blamed, and that issues are addressed appropriately.
14. Avoid viewing the youth exclusively as a victim. Recognize that each person has unique experiences and a unique identity. Recognize their strengths, talents and the ways in which they are resilient. Support them in building friendships and pursuing healthy activities that they enjoy.
15. If a child or youth is going through the tribal court process (or any court proceedings), provide them with age-appropriate information (before, during, and after the proceedings) and emotional support.
16. Be attentive to the needs that the youth identifies and areas they want to focus on. For example, therapy may need to focus on working through traumatic experiences, grief, and loss. The youth may not want to talk about identity, gender, or sexuality (or may not want to at a particular point in time). Addressing identity may not be their most pressing need.
17. Support Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ youth in accessing affirming and culturally competent health, mental health, and substance abuse services and treatment as needed.
18. Learn about suicide risk and how to respond to a youth who expresses suicidal ideation or plans, displays behaviors that indicate risk, or engages in self-harm.
19. Work to create visible roles for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ people in the community. Show them, and show the community, that they are important and valued. By supporting their involvement in the community, Tribal leaders and community members can support Two-Spirit people in reclaiming their place in the circle. For example, Tribal leaders can support Two-Spirit people in taking a visible role in pow-wows, perhaps encouraging their participation in singing, dancing, or a drum group. Encourage Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth to pursue their interests and participate in the way that works for them. Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth can also be encouraged to take on leadership roles in an agency or youth group or at school.
20. Historically and today, the extended family system in tribal communities is the core of the natural helping network that protects children and participates in their upbringing. Support Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth in creating and maintaining long-term, permanent relationships with their community.
21. Work to create a sense of responsibility and long-term commitment in the community for supporting and caring for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth in foster care. Again, be conscious of language – using terms like “young relatives” emphasizes connection and belonging (and that the community has a responsibility for its members). For example, instead of labeling youth as “aging out” of the system, one community honored their young relatives who turned 21 while in care with a respectful memorial ceremony.

22. Keep in mind the goal of permanency for all children and youth, including Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Native youth. Explore all available permanency options that are available, including reunification, kinship care, reinstatement of parental rights, guardianship, customary adoption, and adoption.

This tip sheet was developed collaboratively by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC) and the National Resource Center for Tribes (NRC4T).

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The tips are based on conversations with several Two-Spirit people who were formerly in foster care. The tips were also informed by conversations with Native people who were adopted from the child welfare system and/or have experience working with and caring for youth in the child welfare system. We thank them for sharing their experience and knowledge!

Listen to their Digital Stories at: http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/two-spirit/

Selected Additional Resources

- **Honoring Innovations Report (April 2013): Standards of care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex and two-spirit American Indian/Alaska Native youth**
http://www.nicwa.org/mental_health/SystemsOfCare/documents/2013SpringLTTAFinal_001.pdf
- **Ensuring the Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Tribal Child Welfare Programs**
<http://www.nicwa.org/youthsuicidepreventiontoolkit/ysptoolkit.pdf>

Check with your local Two-Spirit Society, Indian Health Service or Indian Child Welfare Act program, County Indian Unit of Child Welfare Services, LGBTQ Center, and Title VII Indian Education program to learn about resources that may be available to youth and caregivers in your community!

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References

The following references informed the introduction of this resource:

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