



Sharing Our Lived Experiences: *Eight Tips for Understanding the Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Journey for Native Youth in the Child Welfare System*

This resource is dedicated to Two-Spirit and American Indian/Alaska Native¹ 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

This fact sheet is intended to assist and support Native youth who may be Two-Spirit² and/or LGBTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning). Native youth in child welfare placements can experience many challenges. These include feelings of abandonment, guilt, shame, disconnection from extended family, and many feelings related to unresolved grief and loss due to multi-generational historical traumas.

The goal of this document is to strengthen families in achieving wellness and stability by assisting youth in feeling connected to resources and communities. It is also meant to support healthy identity, healthy development, reduce the risks of suicide and substance abuse, and strengthen ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) compliance.

Historically, Two-Spirit people were respected and honored by their Tribes. However, not all tribes or tribal members are inclusive in their beliefs. Two-Spirit people are working to reclaim their roles and places in their Tribal circles. Therefore it is important for youth to speak up against discrimination based on their tribal or sexual identity. Additional historical information and resources are provided at the end of this fact sheet.

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

² The term Two-Spirit refers to Native American/Alaska Native lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/queer and/or questioning individuals. It came from the Anishinabe language and means having both male and female spirits in one person. It has a different meaning in different communities. <http://www.tribal-institute.org/2010/A3-EltonNaswoodPP.pdf>

Eight Tips for Understanding the Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Journey for Native Youth in the Child Welfare System

1. **You are not alone**; there are other American Indian/Alaska Native youth like you experiencing similar thoughts and feelings related to their sexuality, gender, and tribal identity.
2. **Remember that you are a gift to the community and meant to be a contributing member.** Although right now you may feel you don't belong or that no one understands. Over time this will change.
3. **Do not feel ashamed of being Native American or Alaska Native.** Being Native, you may experience strong feelings of connection toward the Earth, nature, and your environment that others do not feel. You may also experience deep feelings when you see injustice or learn about historical events. These feelings are natural and you should pay attention to them.
4. **Reach out to others and develop trusting relationships with those who accept and support you.** Try to maintain relationships with at least one or two close friends with whom you may share your worries and your successes in life. If you feel the need to seek or get counseling to cope with your feelings, this is okay.
5. **Understanding and accepting your sexual and gender identity can take time** and it is important to value yourself, your identity, and your unique heritage through this process. Take responsibility to protect yourself and others from sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and be aware of the risks involved in all sexual activities. There are many educational resources to assist you about healthy sexuality and there are accounts of current and past Natives who lived out healthy lives as Two-Spirit or LGBTQ individuals.

Resources for 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!

- *This document was created just for you. If you feel you are in an unsafe environment it is important to speak up and tell somebody you trust.*
- *There are digital stories of other Two-Spirit/LGBTQ youth that you can view at http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/two-spirit/.*
- *A similar fact sheet was created for parents and caregivers of Two-Spirit and LGBTQ youth. It can be found at <http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/wu/Two-SpiritTipsSheet.pdf>.*

6. **Be patient with your parents and caregivers**, remember they are also learning how to best support your experience and development. Be open to sharing your feelings and thoughts with them and other friends or family members you trust.
7. **If you ever have thoughts of suicide or find yourself unable to stop having self-destructive thoughts it is important to tell someone you trust.** Seek support and assistance to work through these feelings. If you feel you are in an unsafe environment it is important to speak up and tell somebody you trust. This document was created just for you.
8. **As a Native person you are encouraged to know who you are and where you are from.** You are encouraged to learn about your tribe, its history and culture. Participate in Native community events and remember to respect and acknowledge your elders. Observe how others act in community settings and offer to help and volunteer at events. Remember when another Native person asks 'where are you from?' they may also be asking 'what is your tribe?' When you speak and interact with others it is important to be careful with your words and actions.

Additional & Historical Information:

Two-Spirit is a Native American³ term that is usually used to indicate a person whose body simultaneously houses a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit. Two-Spirit is a Native concept: Will Roscoe 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 honored by their tribes. Their gender roles in the community included protecting children; being parental/partners; helping in ceremonies; gathering food and medicine; caretaking; and serving as peacekeepers, name givers, and spiritual leaders. Due to oppression (including homophobia/transphobia) and historical and intergenerational trauma there are issues that may disproportionately impact Two-Spirit/Native LGBTQ people today. These 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.

³ 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.

Selected Additional Resources

- **LGBTQ Native American Youth: It Gets Better**
This webpage links to a special “It Gets Better” video produced by the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center aimed at LGBTQ Native American Youth.
<http://www.care2.com/causes/lgbtq-native-american-youth-it-gets-better.html>
- **NativeOUT: Two Spirit Resource Center**
This website provides an array of Native American LGBT/Two-Spirit educational resources, multimedia, and news.
<http://nativeout.com/twospirit-rc/>
- **Native Youth Sexual Health Network**
<http://nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/>
- **Cultural Safety and Two Spirit Youth**
http://prezi.com/pjqiyaajmvr_n/cultural-safety-two-spirit-youth/
- **Healing Footsteps: Digital Stories from Two-Spirit/LGBTQ People**
http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/two-spirit/
- **Sharing Our Lived Experience: 22 Tips for Caring for Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ Youth in the Child Welfare System**
<http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/wu/Two-SpiritTipsSheet.pdf>
- **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/2013SpringLTTA_Final_001.pdf
- **Ensuring the Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Tribal Child Welfare Programs**
<http://www.nicwa.org/youthsuicidepreventiontoolkit/ysptoolkit.pdf>

Selected Additional Resources

- **Tribal Equity Toolkit 2.0**
Tribal Resolutions and Codes to Support Two-Spirit and LGBT Justice In Indian County
<https://graduate.lclark.edu/live/files/15810-tribal-equity-toolkit-20>
- **Tribal STAR (Successful Transitions for Adult Readiness)**
Training and Technical Assistance resources for collaboration and ICWA compliance.
<http://theacademy.sdsu.edu/TribalSTAR>

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!

Rev. 8/21/14

References

The following references informed the introduction of this resource:

Balsam, K.F., Huang, B., Fieland, K.C., Simoni, J.M., & Walters, K. (2004). Culture, trauma, and wellness: A comparison of heterosexual and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and two-spirit Native Americans. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*(3): 287-301.

Lahavot, K., Walters, K., & Simoni, J.M. (2009). Abuse, mastery, and health among lesbian, bisexual, and two-spirit American Indian and Alaska Native women. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*(3): 275-284.

Roscoe, W. (1991). *The Zuni man-woman*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Simoni, J.M., Balsam, K.F., & Meyers, S.B. Victimization, substance use, and HIV risk behaviors among gay/bisexual/two-spirit and heterosexual American Indian men in New York city. (2006). *American Journal of Public Health, 96*(12): 2240-2245.

Walters, K.L., Evans-Campbell, T., Simoni, J.M., Ronquillo, T., & Bhuyan, R. "My spirit in my heart": Identity experiences and challenges among American Indian two-spirit women. (2006). *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 10*(1-2): 125-149.

This tip sheet was developed collaboratively by the National Resource Center for Tribes (NRC4Tribes) and Tribal STAR, a program of the Academy for Professional Excellence SDSU School of Social Work.

It was authored by Tom Lidot, Tlingit and Lenny Hayes, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

The tips are based on conversations with Two-Spirit people who were formerly in foster care or adopted. We thank them for sharing their experience and knowledge!

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