

Understanding Indian Culture to Enhance the Delivery of Services to Indian Families with Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs: Communication, Beliefs and Religious Ceremonies

As we continue to work with many diverse families of children and youth with special health care needs, it is important to explore our own family cultures and become familiar with the cultures of others in order to better serve all families. We hope that the information, resources and tips we share will ultimately help families receive comprehensive, coordinated, culturally and linguistically competent, family-centered, community-based health care in their home communities.

As a sign of respect and an indication that you've taken time to learn about their culture, it is important in any group to acknowledge elders first. In most tribes elders are viewed as the keepers of knowledge. Direct eye contact with more traditional Indians is considered impolite and rude. Waiting for a break in conversation before you speak is the norm and considered a high form of respect for the individual or individuals speaking. It is customary to offer food or drink to all who come into a home in Indian country, and to refuse is considered disrespectful. It is alright to let your hostess know that you have just eaten and you will take what is offered with you when you leave. Traditional Indians often give subtle hints so as not to offend or disrespect any person. Indians have a tendency to shake their heads in a positive manner as a sign of respect to the person speaking; it is not necessarily an acknowledgement of agreement with what is being said. Indians will use their lips, chin or head movements as forms of acknowledgment, so don't misconstrue their meanings. With more traditional Indians it is not uncommon for them to wait to hear what everyone has to say before speaking or making comment. They may not comment for a few minutes or even until the next day after they have had time to comprehend the conversation and talk it over with family or another Indian. They will discuss with each other about the possible impacts of their suggestions or comments on their family, their people, or Indians in general.

Traditional Indians honor life experience and educational knowledge as equals and do not consider one better or higher than the other. For traditional Indians, being in harmony and having balance in mind, body and spirit is of greater importance. Mainstream disability labels are not considered disabilities among traditional members in some tribes. These traditional tribal members consider alcohol and drug abuse more of a disability, as you do not have the control to make informed decisions and open your self up to disharmony in the balance of your mind, body and spirit.

It is very important to know that asking questions about what our sacred and religious ceremonies are is not appropriate at any time. It is appropriate to ask when such an event might be taking place as not to interfere with scheduling of mainstream appointments either in or outside the home. It is important to know that they take place every year just like mainstream holidays and that every tribe as an "Indian Calendar" of sorts and the Indian Calendar for each tribe is not necessary the same. It is also important to know that the younger Indian generations and urban Indians (Indians who have not lived on a reservation) are more acculturated and some of the above may not apply; for example having direct eye contact is expected and they are comfortable breaking into conversation or discussion and will provide input and comment at the time of the conversation or discussion. Although both traditional and acculturated Indians expect information back in a timely manner regarding what, when, why, where, and how information they provided will be used. Acculturated Indians will more assertive in reminding you about your part in getting them their information.