

Strategies to Support Healthy Relationships for American Indian and Alaska Native Fathers

April Wilson*, Isabel Griffith*, Deana Around Him*, Andrea Vazzano*, Samantha Ciaravino*, Jennifer Richards**, Albert Pooley***, Mindy E. Scott*



► Introduction

Fathers, children, and families alike benefit when fathers have healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. Studies suggest that healthy relationships can improve fathers' well-being,¹ and that exposure to healthy, stable parental relationships can support a range of positive health and developmental outcomes for children.^{2,3} Given the importance of healthy relationships, many fatherhood programs address coparenting and romantic relationships in their programming and aim to improve skills for fathers that are applicable across different types of relationships, including communication, conflict management, and emotional self-regulation. In addition, coparenting and romantic relationships are shaped by a range of contextual factors, such as differing family structures, economic circumstances, and involvement with child welfare and justice systems.⁴ Fatherhood programs recognize that families have unique strengths and needs, and their programming often accounts for these contextual factors.

When fatherhood programs engage American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) fathers, it is important that they consider the diverse cultural traditions, histories, and unique political status of Tribes as sovereign nations. Many AIAN cultures have core teachings and ceremonies that emphasize the importance of respecting and honoring relationships with family (including extended family), community, and other aspects of one's environment (e.g., the land, animals).⁵ These aspects of AIAN cultures can serve as a strong foundation for supporting healthy coparenting and romantic relationships for AIAN fathers. At the same time, within Tribal communities, historical trauma has had an indelible impact on fathers' access to cultural teachings and fathers' strengths related to relationships and family functioning. These traumas have caused AIAN peoples, cultures, and traditions to suffer over time—for example, through poorer physical and emotional health outcomes, low self-esteem, a disruption of Tribal familial roles, and increased rates of domestic violence and substance abuse.⁶ In recent decades, many Tribal Nations have invested in programs and services that draw on their cultural strengths to address past and current traumas and promote positive outcomes. Given that these

^a Romantic relationships may or may not also be sexual relationships.

* Child Trends, Inc.; ** Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health; *** Native American Fatherhood & Families Association

Key Terms

Coparenting relationships are relationships between any two or more individuals as it relates to their shared responsibility for raising a child. The individuals may or may not be romantically involved.

Romantic relationships commonly referred to as intimate relationships, are relationships among two individuals who are dating, committed, or married. They may or may not have a shared responsibility for raising a child.^a

Healthy relationships refer to high-quality coparenting and romantic relationships, often characterized by qualities such as respectful communication, high levels of relationship satisfaction, or cooperation between coparents.

Historical trauma refers to multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial, or ethnic group related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people, such as the violent colonization of AIAN peoples.

contextual factors are critical in shaping AIAN fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships, a similar approach could be valuable in fatherhood programs that serve AIAN fathers.

This brief aims to provide practice-based, contextually relevant strategies that fatherhood programs serving AIAN fathers can use to support these fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. Additional resources are provided at the end of the brief.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families for supporting this brief. We would especially like to thank Nicole Constance and Kathleen McCoy for their leadership. This brief would not have been possible without the assistance of many colleagues at Child Trends, including Brent Franklin, Catherine Nichols, Lisa Kim, and Melissa Perez. Additionally, we would like to thank the three experts featured in the brief, including Mr. Mike Duncan, Dr. Jennifer Richards, and Mr. Albert Pooley, for sharing their time and critical perspectives on implementing and adapting fatherhood programs for AIAN populations and supporting AIAN fathers' healthy relationships. Finally, the team would like to thank all AIAN fathers and fatherhood program facilitators for their dedication to men's health and family wellness in AIAN communities.

► Methods

The strategies described in this brief are drawn from three sources:

1. In-depth interviews with three fathers and one staff member from a fatherhood program that predominantly serves AIAN fathers. These interviews were conducted as part of the broader Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) study, which is described in the box below.
2. Interviews with three experts in implementing and adapting fatherhood curricula and programs for AIAN populations:
 - Mike Duncan (Con-Cow/Wailaki/Wintun), founder and CEO of Native Dads Network
 - Albert Pooley (Navajo/Hopi), founder and president of Native American Fatherhood & Families Association (NAFFA)
 - Jennifer Richards (Diné/Lakota/Taos Pueblo), assistant scientist at the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health and program manager for the Azhe'é Bidziil (Strong Fathers) program
3. A scan of existing research studies and practice-based resources, including findings from the broader CHaRMED study, which supplemented information drawn from interviews.



Overview of the CHaRMED Study and Sample

Child Trends conducted the Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) study from March 2020 through December 2020. This qualitative study aimed to better understand:

- The approaches fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships
- Fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming
- Whether and how programs respond to those needs

To examine these objectives, Child Trends conducted interviews with 24 staff members, 36 fathers, and six coparents of fathers from nine fatherhood programs across the United States. Programs were selected for participation based on various characteristics, including geographic location, source of funding, and populations served. Study interviews explored a range of topics related to relationship programming and fathers' relationship needs.

The CHaRMED study was funded by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). For more information on study participants, methods, and publications, visit the [CHaRMED webpage](#).

To develop the key strategies described below, three Child Trends research team members reviewed the expert interview notes to identify key themes that support practice. They also reviewed the four interview transcripts from the larger CHaRMED study, and from key pieces in the literature, to ascertain whether there was additional support for the ideas mentioned by the experts. The research team included themes when at least two of the experts agreed. Experts, CHaRMED study participants, and the literature scan often shared different specific strategies under these themes. Experts also reviewed the outline and draft of this brief and provided input to ensure accuracy in the ideas presented.^b

The strategies described below have a few key features that limit the ability to understand their relevance across AIAN communities. First, the three fathers and one staff member interviewed were part of a larger study about coparenting and healthy relationships in fatherhood programs (see text box above) and were not asked directly for input on strategies to support coparenting and romantic relationships among AIAN populations. Instead, we drew on concepts specific to AIAN populations that arose naturally when the fathers and staff responded to general questions about healthy relationships and programming. Nevertheless, the concepts described by these study participants frequently aligned with strategies and concepts mentioned by the three experts who were interviewed specifically for the purpose of this brief. Second, we talked to only three experts, and the number of Tribal communities in the United States is diverse and large, with more than 570 federally recognized Tribes.⁷ Although this was not a comprehensive study of experts in AIAN fatherhood programming, the experts engaged in the study provided rich information and recommendations for programs to consider. Third, our scan of existing research studies and practice-based resources highlighted the limited amount of research currently available in the field that is focused specifically on healthy relationship content and fatherhood programming for AIAN fathers. Despite the compelling learnings derived from the efforts for this brief, these three limitations underscore the need for further focused inquiry that engages fathers from a broader range of communities to better capture the diversity of voices within AIAN populations, as well as additional investments in research to understand healthy relationships for fathers in Tribal communities.

^b Each expert was also offered to be listed as an author on the brief given that their substantive ideas and input were used throughout.

► Strategies for Promoting Healthy Relationships in Fatherhood Programs That Serve AIAN Fathers

The section below provides considerations for three distinct areas of program development and implementation:

1. Strategies to select or adapt curriculum content in fatherhood programs so that it is respectful and relevant to AIAN cultures
2. Strategies that enhance the structure or design of fatherhood programs to promote engagement of AIAN fathers
3. Strategies for integrating the broader community into fatherhood programs to deepen connections within the program and beyond

Some of these strategies serve to increase engagement and build trust for fatherhood programs that serve AIAN fathers broadly, which in turn will likely increase engagement in activities and content specific to coparenting and romantic relationships. Other strategies directly focus on supporting healthy relationships for AIAN fathers.

The applicability of these strategies may vary depending on the context of the fatherhood program. In deciding which strategies to implement, programs should consider the following:

- **What culturally appropriate practices align with the specific beliefs and practices of the fathers served by the fatherhood program?** Cultural beliefs, practices, and values can differ both within AIAN populations and between AIAN people and other racial and cultural groups.^{5,8}
- **Does the program serve fathers from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, including some who are AIAN? Does the program serve primarily AIAN fathers across a variety of Tribal identities, or are most of the AIAN fathers from one Tribal Nation?** Some strategies are most relevant for programs that serve fathers from different cultural backgrounds whereas others are more specific to programs that serve predominantly AIAN fathers or fathers with a shared Tribal culture.
- **What program resources are available to implement these strategies?** For example, programs may need additional resources to train staff, hire program facilitators, or supplement existing curricula.
- **What are the strengths and needs within the community where the fatherhood program resides?** Strategies are likely to be most successful when building upon community strengths and supporting needs identified by the community.





1. Strategies to select or adapt curricula content in fatherhood programs so that it is respectful and relevant to AIAN cultures

Programs should consider selecting or adapting existing curricula to ensure that the content is culturally respectful. The program content may be most useful to support healthy relationships for AIAN fathers if it includes a focus on the importance of the following: fathers, trauma and healing, supporting strained coparenting relationships, and broad relationship-skills training.

Include content that highlights and respects the cultures, heritages, beliefs, traditions, and histories of AIAN peoples.

When programs use a curriculum that is respectful and inclusive of AIAN cultures, they may be able to better engage AIAN fathers in activities or content that are specific to coparenting and romantic relationships. Interviews with experts and study participants revealed three strategies to promote this respect, which can be integrated into existing curricula. The scan of existing research and practice-based resources provided further support for these strategies.

Recognize the importance of spirituality for many AIAN cultures, while also understanding that spiritual beliefs can differ among Tribal communities. All three experts and many of the sample of participants interviewed discussed the importance of spirituality within AIAN cultures. Although religious practices are also important to many AIAN people,^c spirituality is broader and often differs from religion. For many AIAN cultures, spirituality is a way of looking at the world, including systems of values, understandings about the world and human action, and one's identity within and in relation to the world.⁸ In case studies reviewed by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, all effective programs and initiatives designed to strengthen Tribal families included a commitment to people's spiritual well-being, such as helping people be at peace with themselves and grow spiritually, and include the local community and its spiritual identity.⁹ While spirituality has a strong place in many AIAN cultural practices and beliefs, differences do exist. One should avoid assuming that all AIAN people are spiritual or share the same spiritual identity.⁹

Include traditional stories, talk about heritage, and describe traditional beliefs and behaviors.

Experts and study participants consistently shared the importance of making concepts more relevant to AIAN fathers by talking about ancestors and incorporating stories from the local community or Tribal population(s). One expert also noted the value of humor (and laughter) for many AIAN people. In some instances, AIAN people may "convey truths or difficult messages" using humor.⁹ Two experts also described the importance of talking about having a purpose-driven life, the Creator, life after death (when culturally appropriate), and the value of prayer. One expert described the importance of knowing that, even after you die, you will continue to be someone's father, which is why the role is so noble. At the same time, another expert noted that it is important to remember that, as with spirituality, not all AIAN people are religious, and that those who are religious may not practice the same religion. It is important for anyone who

^c Federal Responsible Fatherhood funding cannot be used for religious instruction. This brief focuses broadly on both federal and nonfederal fatherhood programming and includes some practices that are spiritual, not religious.

develops or implements fatherhood programs to learn the cultural values and norms within a Tribal community, including norms about what cultural information is okay to incorporate into programming (see section below on integrating fatherhood programs into the community). People’s cultural connection and the values within a Tribal culture can also change over time. One expert described the importance of avoiding judgment and acknowledging changes in traditional values and beliefs, such as changes in beliefs about gender norms.

Furthermore, policies and practices throughout U.S. history have created feelings of cultural shame and resulted in a loss of Tribal languages, cultural practices, and knowledge of Tribal histories.^{8,9} Two experts talked about the harm caused by this loss of cultural identity and by the messages AIAN people hear about how they are “bad,” “sick,” or “broken.” As one expert described, programs should instead let AIAN fathers know that they have been “misled, misguided, and misinformed.” Experts and previous research support the idea of using strengths-based practices and incorporating traditional AIAN values like reciprocity, respect, kindness, and fairness.^{8,10}

One expert talked extensively about the traditional value of kindness:

“Native people are a kind people. This message needs to be brought back to fathers.”

Use language that resonates with Tribal populations. Experts spoke about the need to use language that is both meaningful and respectful of AIAN fathers and traditional cultural beliefs. Meaningful language differs among Tribal populations, which again points to the importance of engaging Tribal leaders in programming (see section below on integrating fatherhood programs into the community). For instance, not all Tribal populations have the same definitions of family or marriage. In some Tribal cultures, the extended family, Tribal leaders, and/or nonbiological “brothers” can play a central role in caregiving,⁸ which is why one expert described the importance for programs to enroll both fathers and “father figures” in programming for AIAN fathers. Definitions of marriage can also differ. One expert explained that, in some Tribal cultures, if a man lives with a woman for an extended period, they are referred to as husband and wife (regardless of marital status according to state or federal law). The concept of “marriage” is also less culturally relevant to some Tribal cultures than “family.”¹¹ One expert also talked about the need to adapt the language used in curricula to be more respectful toward AIAN fathers. For example, one fatherhood program adapted lessons about domestic violence so that the content did not exclusively depict fathers as users of violence and acknowledged that fathers can also be survivors of violence. Other experts emphasized the importance of using words like “Creator” and “ancestor,” which are meaningful to many Tribal cultures.

Focus on the importance of fathers for child and family well-being before discussing other healthy relationship topics.

Programs may be more successful in engaging AIAN fathers in their efforts to support healthy coparenting and romantic relationships by first talking about the importance of being a father for their children’s and families’ well-being. This idea aligns with previous research and broader CHaRMED study findings suggesting that fathers primarily participate in fatherhood programming in hopes of promoting the best possible outcomes for their children.^{7,8,9} Experts agreed, with one stating that “all dads want to be better dads.” Another expert noted that the role of the father is important for one’s legacy and can promote the health and well-being of future generations. Furthermore, when fathers recognize the importance of their role, it can provide focus and purpose in their lives and heal their spirits. One expert described how the purpose of AIAN fathers today (and throughout history) has been to have a strong, healthy, happy, and safe family. This expert emphasized tying a father’s role to this larger purpose and helping fathers understand the importance of a good father for a healthy family:

“You have to make people feel to make them change. Make them understand that family is the heart of our people. What happens when the heart stops beating? They die. What happens when the family is broken? We are dead as a culture and as a people.”

Acknowledge historical and intergenerational trauma, and include an emphasis on healing.

Many experts and study participants agreed that a program promoting healthy coparenting and romantic relationships must acknowledge the historical trauma that pulled apart many AIAN families. For example, from the late 1800s until the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, many AIAN children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in federal boarding schools.^{10,15} These schools were designed to eradicate all traces of Tribal culture and assimilate AIAN people. Children in these schools were taught that their traditional cultures were shameful, and a large number experienced harsh punishment and violence while in attendance.^{10,16} One expert acknowledged that many of the fathers in their program were raised by someone who directly experienced this trauma.

While many experts, study participants, and other resources recognize the significant impact of historical trauma on AIAN families and communities, experts approached this topic in different ways. One expert noted the importance of acknowledging the existence of historical trauma but suggested focusing on what can be changed for one's family now and in the future. This expert stated that “we must be forward-thinking, forward-looking, and a forward-moving people. We must focus on what we can change, and that is the future.” Other experts and study participants discussed the need for programs to focus more explicitly on this topic in a variety of ways. For instance, they described how programs must address the ways in which trauma can be passed down, sometimes through violence. One expert talked about the importance of admitting that “hurt people hurt people” when describing how violence can be passed down. Healing from trauma begins by identifying, acknowledging, and sharing in mourning about the impact of historical and multigenerational trauma.^{10,17} Experts also described the need to invest in healing as a process—one part of which is having people share their lived experiences. Facilitators should avoid making harsh judgements against fathers, even if fathers share stories about using violence. This unbiased reaction creates trust between facilitators and fathers, which can empower fathers to share their stories, recognize when violence occurs in their relationships, understand how trauma affects their use of violence, and ultimately heal from trauma.

Include an intentional focus on supporting fathers with strained coparenting relationships who may face challenges navigating multiple legal systems.

One expert described how AIAN fathers who do not live with the mother of their children may need specific relationship supports related to coparenting; this is consistent with findings from across fatherhood programs in the CHARMED study.¹² In particular, some fathers experience a sense of helplessness and believe that mothers hold the power to allow fathers access to their children. Other research provides strategies for engaging coparents in fatherhood programs (or providing coparents with similar information that fathers receive) and for supporting fathers who must navigate legal and social systems.¹⁸ These strategies may be relevant to all fatherhood programs, including those that serve AIAN fathers. However, additional strategies may be needed to support AIAN fathers' coparenting relationships. AIAN fathers may need to navigate state legal systems as well as the legal systems and jurisdictions of Tribal Nations for issues related to custody, visitation, or child support. Additionally, each federally recognized Tribe has its own laws and processes. When coparents are enrolled citizens of different Tribal Nations or when only one parent is a Tribal Nation citizen, this can add complexity to navigating legal aspects of coparenting. One expert suggested including someone with expertise in relevant Tribal legal systems as part of a fatherhood program's working group (or advisory group).

Focus on relationship skills that are applicable across different types of relationships.

Experts consistently talked about the value of relationships, in general, in many AIAN cultures. Echoing findings from across fatherhood programs in the CHARMED study,¹² experts described how many relationship skills or lessons apply to all relationship types, including coparenting relationships, romantic relationships, and relationships with children. For instance, one expert talked about the importance of being kind, fair, and demonstrating appreciation for the other person in all close relationships. Because these types of skills are transferable, some experts suggested starting broader conversations about healthy relationships by highlighting the father-child relationship, the value of relationships in AIAN cultures, or family relationships before discussing any specifics related to coparenting or romantic relationships.



2. Strategies that enhance the structure or design of fatherhood programs to promote engagement of AIAN fathers

In addition to strategies that ensure that curriculum content used in fatherhood programs is culturally appropriate, programs should also consider implementation strategies related to the structure and design of fatherhood programs. For example, it is important to hire program facilitators that care about and identify with participants given facilitators' integral role in building trust and creating safe spaces for fathers to share their relationship experiences. Programs can also consider including leaders within the AIAN community to serve as guest speakers to strengthen lessons about healthy relationships.

Hire program facilitators who genuinely care about fathers, have lived experiences similar to those of AIAN fathers, and who are willing to be open and vulnerable about their own lived experiences.

Study participants, previous research,¹⁹ and experts alike emphasized the important role of facilitators in creating safe spaces for fathers to share their relationship experiences. Many fathers who participated in the broader CHARMED study also noted that the fatherhood program was the first or only forum in which they felt comfortable discussing their experiences or challenges with relationships. These fathers spoke about the ways that facilitators modeled vulnerability and transparency by sharing personal stories and experiences, which created a welcoming, nonjudgmental environment. Cultivating a safe space can allow fathers to learn together about effective strategies to strengthen coparenting and romantic relationships.¹² In interviews for this brief, experts shared considerations for programs when hiring and building capacity with program facilitators. These facilitator experiences and characteristics can ultimately support building safe spaces for healthy relationship discussions during the program. Specifically, experts discussed the value of facilitators for whom one or more of the following is true:

- Have similar backgrounds (race, gender, culture, and/or language spoken, etc.) to participating fathers, and share similar goals and challenges
- Are members of the community, including those in respected roles, such as a local athletic icon or spiritual leader
- Represent community roles that many participants in the program also hold, like construction or seasonal workers
- Genuinely love and care about the fathers in their program; one expert shared the following:

“A facilitator must truly love the people they serve. It is a level of compassion to truly help another individual, by loving them as they would love themselves or another family member. Without this, trust cannot be earned.”

One expert and several study participants also discussed the importance of having facilitators who are willing to be open and vulnerable about their lived experiences, including sharing stories about trauma and healing. However, another expert noted that their program discourages facilitators from sharing sensitive, personal stories about trauma and healing. Instead, they train facilitators to practice boundaries with participants and to know when to refer participants to community resources (e.g., traditional healer, behavioral health specialist).

One expert mentioned a couple of strategies to support hiring and build facilitator capacity in these areas. For example, hiring staff can ask applicants to talk about how they relate to the fathers in the program and why they would excel at delivering programming to AIAN fathers, specifically. Among current facilitators, programs can build capacity in these areas by emphasizing the importance of shared experiences to strengthen the facilitator-participant relationship. For example, a facilitator might discuss how they went through similar budget exercises as those found in the curriculum to meet their own savings goals (e.g., saving for a family trip).

Build trust between fathers and with the facilitator before addressing topics like trauma and healthy relationships.

Trust is necessary for open conversations about topics that many consider sensitive, including trauma and challenging relationships.¹² In addition to hiring facilitators who can foster this trust, experts noted the importance of building rapport among participants before exploring sensitive topics. Experts suggested a range of strategies, including one-on-one check-ins with fathers and hosting fun group activities, such as barbecues, weightlifting, and basketball games. Fathers and staff who participated in the broader CHARMED study shared similar strategies for creating a sense of community and a safe environment in fatherhood programs, particularly at the onset of the program. For example, staff in the CHARMED study described having an in-depth intake process with multiple in-person or virtual touch points before the first program session, in addition to making personalized calls to fathers after receiving a referral.^{12,20} These strategies helped create a greater interest in and commitment to all areas of the fatherhood program, including healthy relationship content. Previous research supports the idea that a welcoming and comfortable environment can foster feelings of safety and acceptance and can lead to more engagement with sensitive topics.²¹

Identify leaders within the AIAN community to serve as role models or guest speakers in program sessions.

Within many AIAN cultures, there is deep respect for elders and for those who have survived—and gained wisdom from—adversity.²² Fatherhood programs supporting AIAN fathers can build on this respect for role models and the oral tradition of storytelling by bringing in guest speakers to share their lived experiences and model healthy romantic and coparenting relationships. Experts noted that guest speakers can provide a greater breadth of experience beyond program facilitators. Fatherhood programs that largely serve non-Tribal populations may also consider making connections to Tribal Nations, organizations, or leaders to provide support and mentorship to AIAN fathers in the program. This consideration aligns with the broader CHARMED study, in which some fathers expressed a desire for guest speakers who are “relatable, who share more of their story, show how they got there [where they are],” and can inspire fathers.¹² One expert also described the potential for using social media platforms, such as Facebook Live, to allow greater flexibility in finding role models and guest speakers in different communities to share their stories.



3. Strategies for integrating the broader community into fatherhood programs to deepen connections within the program and beyond

Fatherhood programs can also look beyond program content and implementation and consider the broader community context of the program for AIAN fathers to better engage fathers in healthy relationship programming. For instance, fatherhood programs can consider strategies to include key members of the community in the design and implementation of the program, and can use different methods for promoting connections among fathers outside of the fatherhood program.

Ensure that fatherhood programs engage community members in the design and implementation of programs.

Institutions, policies, and programs that aim to serve AIAN populations and support healthy relationships should reflect the cultural context and practices of AIAN communities.²³ Experts spoke about the importance of community involvement to understand the unique cultural context, strengths, and needs of the populations served by the program, including the context for healthy relationship supports. Furthermore, authentically incorporating the voices of key community members can help ensure that the community supports the establishment and implementation of the fatherhood program, which can, in turn, help with recruitment and engagement. For instance, one expert described how community leaders were excited about having a program that serves fathers in their community because previous programs often focused on mothers. Therefore, many of these leaders were committed to the success of the fatherhood program and helped establish a community workgroup. In this workgroup, community leaders from diverse backgrounds (e.g., diverse religious beliefs, Tribal affiliations, professional fields) provided insight into the design of the fatherhood program. This workgroup was also critical for facilitating buy-in for the program within the community and recruiting fathers to participate. The workgroup continues to meet regularly to support the program, and topical experts from the workgroup sometimes provide resources to fathers.

Support fathers' connections to each other outside of the fatherhood program.

Supporting relationships between participating fathers outside of the fatherhood program can foster trust and connection between participants during program sessions. As noted earlier, this trust is crucial for discussing topics like healthy relationships and can strengthen retention efforts. For example, one expert discussed the value of monthly optional activities outside of the program, such as a mechanics 101 class, a running group, a sweat lodge, fishing activities, and guest speakers who present on topics of interest to fathers. Experts indicated that fathers greatly value having a network of dads during and after participation in the fatherhood program. In the broader CHaRMED study, staff also mentioned using peer mentors to support fathers outside of the classroom.¹² Previous research also suggests that encouraging peer interactions and connections among fathers outside of the program can help fathers develop stronger social networks, which in turn can support their well-being and engagement with their children.^{24,25}

► Conclusions

The curriculum, program design, and community-based strategies described above are a starting place for fatherhood programs to support healthy coparenting and romantic relationships among AIAN fathers. More resources are provided in the section below. As described in this brief, programs should consider selecting or adapting existing curricula that are culturally respectful. Curricula should also focus on the role of fathers and families for child well-being, trauma and healing, supporting strained coparenting relationships, and broad relationship skill-building. In addition, programs should hire facilitators that care about and identify with participants and include leaders within the AIAN community to serve as guest speakers to strengthen lessons about healthy relationships. They should also build trust between fathers and program facilitators before addressing sensitive topics. Finally, fatherhood programs should include key members of the community in the design and implementation of the program and use different methods for promoting connections among fathers outside of the fatherhood program. Taken together, these strategies can bolster efforts to support healthy coparenting and romantic relationships in a way that is respectful of the unique cultural context, strengths, and needs of AIAN fathers.

At the same time, conversations with experts and a scan of existing research reveal a strong need for more focused attention to support fatherhood programs that serve AIAN populations. As mentioned, limited research focuses specifically on effective strategies to support healthy relationships or fatherhood programming for AIAN fathers. One expert also noted a need to support AIAN fathers dealing with additional life challenges, such as incarceration or being a teen father. Research and other resources are even more limited in these areas. In addition, another expert talked directly about the “invisibility” of AIAN people—how they are often ignored, or superficially addressed, in research, funding, and policies. Furthermore, multiple experts discussed the need for funding mechanisms that allow for culturally appropriate programming that honors storytelling, traditional teachings, and references to the Creator and the importance of prayer. By expanding the research base and creating more flexible funding for programs to ensure culturally relevant programming, fatherhood programs can become better equipped to provide meaningful support for AIAN fathers, children, and families.

► Resources

These resources provide information to support the strategies described above and provide additional strategies, policy suggestions, and other considerations for programs working with fathers and AIAN populations.

- [Reference Guide for Native American Family Preservation Programs](#): This guide offers resources, strategies, and lessons learned on topics relevant to family preservation, including implementing and delivering relationship education programming to youth and to married and unmarried adults. The appendices within this resource include tip sheets on cultural adaptations, along with recruitment and retention strategies for programs serving AIAN populations.
- [Tribal Marital Systems Research Brief](#): This brief includes an overview of cultural family norms and the impact of historical trauma on marriage and family formation within AIAN communities. The brief concludes with recommendations for developing and implementing culturally relevant family strengthening and marriage education programs.
- [The Context and Meaning of Family Strengthening in Indian America](#): This report includes several case studies on initiatives to improve family well-being in AIAN communities. Based on the information learned from the case studies, the authors present a framework for understanding family strengthening in AIAN communities, highlight observations on effective family strengthening approaches, and provide six recommendations for supporting family strengthening efforts.
- [Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the Traditional Strength of American Indian Boys and Men](#): This article summarizes historical trauma-informed interventions used with two Tribal groups and offers recommendations to use in planning and implementation of policy, research, and program development with American Indian boys and men.
- [Native American Fatherhood and Families Association \(NAFFA\)](#): The NAFFA website has several resources, including recorded workshop sessions and webinars that address coparenting (e.g., “[Parenting on the Same Page](#),” “[Mom Says No, Dad Says Yes](#)”) and romantic relationships (e.g., “[Linking Generations by Strengthening Relationships](#)”).
- [Tribal Best Practices](#): This toolkit, developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association, provides best practices, research, and resources for family engagement.
- [Recommendations for Developing and Maintaining Tribal Relationships](#): These slides offer guidance and engagement strategies for developing and maintaining relationships with local Tribal communities and organizations.

The following resources, although not specific to fatherhood programs working with AIAN fathers, may provide useful guidance for supporting coparenting and romantic relationships:

- [Resources for Supporting Healthy Relationships in Fatherhood programs](#): This brief includes three resource sheets that offer strategies for fatherhood programs to better support fathers’ coparenting and romantic relationships. Specifically, the three resource sheets provide:
 - Considerations for tailoring romantic relationship services to fathers’ unique strengths and needs and increasing engagement in those services
 - Strategies for engaging coparents in relationship education and for addressing coparenting relationships when coparents cannot be engaged
 - Ways fatherhood programs can support fathers who are navigating legal and social systems that can affect their coparenting relationships
- [Trauma-Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs working with Fathers](#): This resource provides tips and considerations for providing trauma-informed services to fathers.

- [Promoting Positive Coparenting Relationships: Tips for Fatherhood Programs and Fathers:](#) This brief provides tips that fatherhood practitioners can use to promote and support high-quality coparenting relationships. It also provides tips for fathers—particularly those who do not currently live with their coparent(s).
- [Healing and Supporting Fathers: Principles, Practices, and Resources for Fatherhood Programs to Help Address and Prevent Domestic Violence:](#) This report provides resources that fatherhood programs may use to help address and prevent domestic violence in fathers' relationships. Specifically, the report contains three resource sheets:
 - Ten Ways to Engage Fathers in Addressing and Preventing Domestic Violence
 - Teachable Moments
 - Six Ways Fatherhood Programs Can Successfully Partner with Domestic Violence Programs and Battering Intervention Programs

► Endnotes

1. Norlin, D., & Broberg, M. (2013). Parents of children with and without intellectual disability: Couple relationship and individual well-being. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 57(6), 552-566. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2012.01564.x>
2. Fagan, J., & Palkovitz, R. (2011). Coparenting and relationship quality effects on father engagement: Variations by residence, romance. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73(3), 637-653. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2011.00834.x
3. Knox, V. & Fein, D. (2008). *Designing a marriage education demonstration and evaluation for low-income married couples*. MDRC. <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/designing-marriage-education-demonstration-and-evaluation-low-income-married-couples>
4. Feinberg, M. E. (2002). Coparenting and the transition to parenthood: A framework for prevention. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 5(3), 173-195. doi: 10.1023/a:1019695015110
5. Cross, T. *Relational Worldview Model*. National Indian Child Welfare Association. <https://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/Relational-Worldview-Model.pdf>
6. Brave Heart, M. Y. H., & DeBruyn, L. M. (1998). The American Indian Holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 8(2), 60-82. <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.0802.1998.60>
7. USA Government. (2022). *Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and Resources for Native Americans*. <https://www.usa.gov/tribes>
8. Besaw, A., Kalt, J. P., Lee, A., Sethi, J., Wilson, J. B., & Zemler, M. (2004). *The context and meaning of family strengthening in Indian America*. Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/harvard-ContextFamilyStrengtheningin_IndianAmerica-2004.pdf
9. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *A guide to build cultural awareness: American Indian and Alaska Native* (Report No. SMA 08-4354). <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma08-4354.pdf>
10. National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. (n.d.). *Reference guide for Native American family preservation programs*. Administration for Native Americans, Administration for Children and Families. https://calswec.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/reference_guide_for_native_american_family_preservation_programs.pdf
11. National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. (2007). *Overview and background of the Native American population*. <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research-policy/marriage-facts-and-research/marriage-and-divorce-statistics-by-culture/native-americans/>
12. Vazzano, A., Ciaravino, S., Scott, Mindy E., Wilson, A., Kim, L., Griffith, I., Tauseef, H., Briggs, S., Bradley, M., St. John, V., Bhatia, A., & Wasik, H. (2022). *Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED): Results from a qualitative study of staff and participant experiences in nine fatherhood programs* (Report No. 2021-196). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/coparenting-and-healthy-relationship-and-marriage-education-dads-charmed-results>
13. Dion, R., Holcomb, P., Zaveri, H., D'Angelo, A.V., Clary, E., Friend, D., & Baumgartner, S. (2018). *Parents and children together: The complex needs of low-income men and how Responsible Fatherhood programs address them* (Report No. 2018-18). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/pact_fatherhood_programs_022618_b508.pdf

14. Karberg, E., Parekh, J., Scott, M.E., Areán, J.C., Kim, L., Laureore, J., Hanft, S., Huz, I., Wasik, H., Davis, L., Solomon, B., Whitfield, B., & Bair-Merritt, M. (2020). *Preventing and Addressing Intimate Violence when Engaging Dads (PAIVED): Challenges, successes, and promising practices from Responsible Fatherhood programs* (Report No. 2020-22). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/paived_challenges_successes_promising_practices_mar_2020.pdf
15. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Tips for disaster responders: Understanding historical trauma when responding to an event in Indian Country* (Report No. SMA-14-4866). <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4866.pdf>
16. Brun, M, and Evered, B. (n.d.). *Indian Child Welfare Act & Title IV-E at a glance including information on northern Minnesota & Wisconsin Tribal welfare programs*. University of Wisconsin Superior. <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/79280/Indian%20Child%20Welfare%20Act%20%26%20Title%20IV-E%20at%20a%20Glance%20Including%20Information%20on%20Northern%20Minnesota%20%26%20Wisconsin%20Tribal%20Welfare%20Programs.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>
17. Witko, T. M. (2006). *Mental health care for urban Indians: Clinical insights from Native practitioners*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11422-000>
18. Ciaravino, S., Karberg, E., Kim, L., Bradley, M., Scott, M., Wilson, A., & Vazzano, A. (2022). *Resources for supporting healthy relationships in fatherhood programs* (Report No. 2022-115). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/resources-supporting-healthy-relationships-fatherhood-programs>
19. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. (n.d.). *Staffing: From hiring to training to retention*. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/for-programs/staffing-hiring-training-retention>
20. Vazzano, A., Wilson, A., Scott, M., Ciaravino, S., Tauseef, H., & Briggs, S. (2022). *Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for supporting fathers' relationships in fatherhood programs* (Report No. 2021-259). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/lessons-learned-covid-19-pandemic-supporting-fathers-relationships-fatherhood-programs>
21. Menschner, C., & Maul, A. (2016). *Key ingredients for successful trauma-informed care implementation*. Center for Health Care Strategies, Incorporated. <https://www.chcs.org/resource/key-ingredients-for-successful-trauma-informed-care-implementation/>
22. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Behavioral Health Services for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 67*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 18- 5070EXSUMM. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/tip_61_aian_full_document_020419_0.pdf
23. National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. (n.d.). *Reference guide for Native American family preservation programs*. Administration for Native Americans, Administration for Children and Families. https://calswec.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/reference_guide_for_native_american_family_preservation_programs.pdf
24. Baumgartner, S., Friend, D., Holcomb, P., Clary, E., Zaveri, H., & Overcash, A. (2020). *Pathways-to-outcomes: How Responsible Fatherhood program activities may lead to intended outcomes* (Report No. 2020-58). Mathematica Policy Research. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/pathways-outcomes-how-responsible-fatherhood-program-activities-may-lead-intended>
25. Coates, E. E., and Phares, V. Predictors of paternal involvement among nonresidential, Black fathers from low-income neighborhoods. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 15(2), 138-151. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032790>

This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under contract number HHSP2332015000341.

Nicole Constance, Project Officer
Kathleen McCoy, Project Advisor
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.acf.hhs.gov/opre

Mindy E. Scott, Co-Principal Investigator
April Wilson, Co-Principal Investigator
Child Trends
7315 Wisconsin Ave, Suite 1200W
Bethesda, MD 20814

Suggested citation: Wilson, April, Griffith, Isabel, Around Him, Deana, Vazzano, Andrea, Ciaravino, Samantha, Richards, Jennifer, Pooley, Albert, Scott, Mindy E. (2022). *Strategies to support healthy relationships for American Indian and Alaska Native fathers*. OPRE Report #2022-96, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

[Sign-up for OPRE News](#)

 Follow OPRE
on Twitter
[@OPRE_ACF](https://twitter.com/OPRE_ACF)

 Like OPRE's
page on
Facebook
[OPRE.ACF](https://www.facebook.com/OPRE.ACF)

 Follow OPRE
on Instagram
[@opre_acf](https://www.instagram.com/opre_acf)

 Connect
on LinkedIn
[company/opreacf](https://www.linkedin.com/company/opreacf)

