

# Honoring Children - Mending the Circle: Adapting Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Treatment of Native American Child Trauma Victims

## Indian Country Child Trauma Center (ICCTC)

Established in 2003, ICCTC is a member of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, which is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. ICCTC is a Category II Intervention, Development and Evaluation Center whose main focus is to improve treatment services for American Indian and Alaska Native children and adolescents exposed to trauma. ICCTC has three objectives:

- Develop trauma-related treatment protocols based on current evidence-based trauma treatment models that have been adapted for use with Native populations.
- Provide training in the protocols and disseminate the developed materials throughout Indian Country, and
- Provide treatment providers with resources to intervene with Native children and their families exposed to various types of trauma.

The materials developed by ICCTC incorporate Native cultural perspectives and traditions while being sufficiently flexible to accommodate the substantial variability in cultural practices among Native people.

## American Indian/Alaska Native Population



- 4.1 million AI/AN in US; 1% of the population
- 562 federally recognized tribes, 225 Alaska Native entities
- Approximately 1.4 million AI/AN children under the age of 18 in the United States, 9% of the population is under the age of 5
- Trauma in Indian Country is experienced as:
  - A single event (e.g., a car accident)
  - A prolonged experience (e.g., home or community removal)
  - A cumulative effect (e.g., societal or family violence)
  - A historical event with prolonged impact (e.g., relocation)
  - A personal event that continues its impact over several generations (e.g., boarding school)

## Evidence-Based Treatment Adaptation for Indian Country

- Identification of core concepts of evidence-based treatments
- Collaboration with developers on the adaptation process
- Identification of Native traditional teachings and concepts
- Consultation with Native cultural consultants
- Team training
- On-going consultation with teams on implementation of treatment adaptations
- On-going treatment adaptation process



## Goals:

- Help the child to...
- Accurately identify a range of emotions in themselves and others
  - Talk comfortably about feelings
  - Identify differing levels of emotional intensity
  - Learn to regulate their emotional response
  - Develop strategies for safe and healthy emotional expression
- Help the parent to...
- Support the child and family in healthy emotional regulation and expression
  - Respond effectively to the child's emotional reactions
  - Provide appropriate boundaries and role modeling for emotional expression
  - Learn healthy methods for emotional expression within the family



Your life is built on the life of your ancestors and the gift you give to them is in doing for future generations. There is always someone in back of you and someone ahead. Everyone wants a record of what happened. Because we learn through the experiences of others, your story will benefit future generations. This is your own story... Your yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Dolores Subia BigFoot, PhD and Susan R. Schmidt, PhD  
 Indian Country Child Trauma Center  
 Center on Child Abuse and Neglect  
 University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

- ## Goals:
- Identify and bolster the child's support system
  - Enhance the child's emotional and physical safety
  - Strengthen the child's relationship to the natural and structural world
  - Provide systemic support and advocacy for the child
  - Strengthen the family relationship through educating caregivers in positive parenting skills
  - Ensure that therapeutic needs of family members are addressed
  - Establish necessary linkages to systemic supports (legal, medical, educational)

## Relational

When animals are hurt in the wild, sometimes they need to find safety and support to heal. Animals may not know how to adapt to unexpected changes in their environment or life. Some animals haven't been able to adapt, so people have helped them. Once they've healed, they're ready to return to the wild, to their circle of life. In the same way, sometimes we need help adapting to unexpected changes in our life. We have learned that to heal from trauma (to mend the circle) the path is easier when we lean on the strength and support of others – our family, tribal community, and other healers and helpers. With their guidance and support, we can heal and restart our path on the circle.

## Emotional

Our feelings are important tools that give us needed information about situations we encounter. For example, fear tells us to protect ourselves because danger is near and happiness tells us that we are safe and can relax. Sometimes when problems occur, one's feelings become confusing and overwhelming. When a person doesn't understand or is overwhelmed by their feelings, the feelings may no longer guide that person's thoughts and actions toward a good direction.

## Spiritual

- Spirituality is essential for life.
- Spirituality has a positive, strengthening effect on well-being.
- It is one of the foundations of AI/AN identity.
- It is a critical part of the healing process.

## Physical

Animals have always been our teachers. They teach us when to stay and fight, to run, to fly, to form a circle, to become a herd, to escape danger. We have to be aware of what we see, think, feel, and how we respond. By understanding our body's reaction to a situation, we can understand that it's nature's Spirit's way of telling us how to care for ourselves in a safe way.

- ## Goals:
- Restore balance in physical well-being through the reinforcement of a healthy lifestyle
  - Explain the body's response to stress (e.g., shallow breathing, muscle tension, somatic responses)
  - Reduce physical reactions of stress and PTSD (e.g., sleep problems, anxiety reactions, hyperarousal)
  - Teach new therapeutic applications of traditional Native practices



## Goals:

- Teaching**
- Normalize child's and parent's reactions to severe stress
  - Provide information about trauma
  - Identify various factors that contribute to trauma for the child and family
  - Provide information about common emotional and physical responses to trauma and stress
  - Instill hope for child and family recovery
  - Educate family about the benefits of treatment and the treatment process
  - Provide information about the child's symptoms and diagnosis
- Coping**
- Teach youth methods for positive coping
  - Help children and parents understand the connections between thoughts, feelings and behaviors
  - Help children and parents view events in more accurate and helpful ways
  - Encourage parents to assist children in how they think about upsetting situations, and to use this in their own lives for managing feelings

## Mental

Trauma is a part of the circle of life. There is a long history of trauma in Native American families, communities, and nations. Healing means that the circle is whole again. One must know how to change one's thinking, feelings, and beliefs about a traumatic experience in order to regain balance or harmony.

## Adaptation of Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

TF-CBT is a model of psychotherapy which combines trauma-sensitive interventions with elements of cognitive behavioral therapy into a treatment designed to address the needs of children with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other problems related to traumatic life experiences. TF-CBT is the most rigorously tested treatment for traumatized children, with several randomized trials. Studies have found improved PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, shame and behavior problems compared to supportive treatments. TF-CBT also resulted in greater improvements in parental distress, parental support, and parental depression compared to supportive treatment.

## Honoring Children - Mending the Circle (HC-MC)

- HC-MC is based on an Indigenous orientation of well-being.
- The Circle of Life – The circle symbolizes equality that applies to all forms of life – no form of life is greater or lesser than any other form. We all share a common journey or "life on Earth." (Marshall III, "The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living")
- Wellness is considered balance within the Circle: the spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, and relational dimensions of a person.

HC-MC Components	TF-CBT Incorporated Components	Methods
Spiritual		Circle Theory (Medicine Wheel), Teaching, Incorporation of Family and Community Healers, Ceremony
Mental	Psychoeducation Cognitive Coping	Teaching, Storytelling
Physical	Relaxation	Teaching, Storytelling, Cognitive Triangle, Thought stopping, Positive Self-Talk, Thinking Errors, Problem-Solving
Emotional	Affect Regulation	Breathing Training, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Imagery, Traditional Calming Methods
Relational	Psychoeducation Parenting Skills Safety Skills Social Skills	Teach Feelings Identification and Expression
Mending the Circle	Trauma Narrative, Cognitive Processing Conjoint Parent-Child Sessions	For Child: Family-Child Relations, Safety Skills Training, Social Skills Training, Social Support System outreach, Sex Education For Caregivers: Behavior Management

- Unwellness results from disharmony within the Circle.
- When trauma occurs, a person's pathway may be hindered. If the trauma is not sufficiently addressed, an inadequate pathway and disharmony and imbalance may result.
- Healing occurs through re-integration of balance, harmony, respect, connectedness, and wellness.

## Contact Information

Indian Country Child Trauma Center  
 Center on Child Abuse and Neglect  
 University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center  
 PO Box 26901 CHO 3B3406  
 Oklahoma City, OK 73190  
 (405) 271-8858  
 (405) 271-2931 (fax)  
[www.icctc.org](http://www.icctc.org)  
[Doe-Bigfoot@ouhsc.edu](mailto:Doe-Bigfoot@ouhsc.edu) [Susan-Schmidt@ouhsc.edu](mailto:Susan-Schmidt@ouhsc.edu)

The ICCTC logo represents the mission of our center. The hummingbird represents devotion, permanence, and eternity. The braid of Sweetgrass represents healing, cleansing, and renewal. The circle represents life cycles.