



Foster care or relative care can have long lasting implications for mental health. Guardianships and adoptions have lifelong and intergenerational impacts. Central to a child's experience is the almost universal experience of loss and grief associated with removal from birth parents that can complicate and exacerbate whatever attachment challenges a child brings into care.

When handled well, the negative consequences can be minimized. However, care providers are often left to wonder what strategies or tools they can use to reduce those negative consequences. One important strategy is supporting a healthy positive identity.

While promoting a positive identity matters for all children, those in foster or kinship care need specific and intentional efforts to support what is usually a process that unfolds without much direct attention. Additionally, children from oppressed cultures such as Native American, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander and Latinx, who experience stereotyping or negative prejudices, learn and internalize these negative stereotypes. They require and rely on their care providers and communities to teach them the value of what is strong and vibrant about their culture.

Identity formation is complex. Identity has elements of ethnicity, culture, class, gender but also of family, kin-

ship, school or community. Identity can also come from inclusion in activities, sports or clubs. For children whose identities have been shaken by family disruption, insecure attachments and/or trauma, their lived experience likely lacks many of those things that contribute to identity.

Fortunately, secure attachments can be built or rebuilt in a new family and with those attachments can come a new identity. However, developing a positive identity also means maintaining or reclaiming elements of identity the child has had since birth, especially those that will stay with them throughout their lives. For Native American children, identity extends to concepts of belonging to



# PROMOTING A POSITIVE IDENTITY

Helping children in care minimize the effects of loss and grief means building secure attachments, recognizing their uniqueness and respecting cultural origins, identity and their original family. Families who take children into their home are the best hope for healing their trauma.

By Terry L. Cross

family, kin, clan, tribe and place. It is a sense of belonging and connectedness that lasts over time and can extend beyond people. It is a source of strength and grounding that can help a child thrive despite experiencing loss and trauma.

By now, most people have learned about the development and health impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Studies conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control conclusively show that individuals who experience physical or emotional abuse, neglect, violence, loss, incarceration or a parents' mental illness also experience poor health and social outcomes. Less well known are several protective fac-

tors which can reduce the negative impacts of ACEs.

These protective factors, which are also known to support positive identity development, include relationships with supportive adults, connection with positive peers, involvement with school activities, engagement with relatives, connection with spirituality or religion, connection with elders, feeling safe in community and, for Native children, speaking their tribal language.

Children involved in their community have lower rates of depression and fewer anti-social behaviors. Children with a positive cultural identity have lower rates of substance abuse, less

suicidal ideation, greater success in school, higher self-esteem, increased resilience, and better mental, social and physical health. Children who have positive relationships with adults and elders have greater school and employment success, lower gang involvement, and fewer early pregnancies.

For children in foster care, relative care, guardianships or adoptions, these factors are even more important. They can't be left to chance. They must be sought out and intentionally structured into a child's life. And, while they are not a panacea and every child will be different, they are some of the best tools and strategies to which families have access.



Cultural identity formation for children of color in America tends to follow a pattern of five stages outlined in the book "Counseling the Culturally Different" by Derald Sue.

- **Conformity:** In stage 1 of Sue's theory, children begin their lives unaware of differences and conform to the mores of their family and peers.
- **Dissonance:** As children evolve into stage 2, they begin to observe differences between themselves, their family and peers that may not make sense or may seem uncomfortable. This stage is called dissonance.
- **Resistance, Immersion:** Children may deal with the discomfort they're experiencing in a variety of ways. They may resist feeling different and return to stage 1 (conformity) or they may embrace being different and even immerse themselves in their culture. Alternatively, they may reject both the mainstream culture and their culture of origin and escape into a third identity. A third identity may be positive, such as team sports, or it might be negative, such as a gang. Of these choices, embracing their culture is the safest and healthiest.
- **Introspection:** Resistance and rejection both lead to confusion and potential loss experiences. Those who emerge from this stage often spend time looking inward through a period of introspection.
- **Synergy:** In the final stage, a child questions and comes to terms with code switching, i.e., learning how to be themselves in different settings. As their comfort grows, their sense of self is deepened by a positive cultural identity and a feeling of stability known as synergy.

Parents and care providers can help their children grow through these stages by giving them enrichment activities, ensuring they have time in their culture to appreciate it, and making sure to teach children where they come from.

In positive identity formation, community matters. The more time children and youth spend in service to their community, the more likely they will feel a sense of connection to and feel as if they belong in that community. Spirituality, cultural and religious rituals and ceremonies matter as well, giving a sense of meaning and connection. Participation builds connection and taking on roles that help others build positive self-identity. Extended family matters as well as learning who you're related to, who you might be named for, who your ancestors are, or what your clan is, all bring a sense of meaning. Native American families are usually large kinship networks and despite birth parents who might have experienced difficulties parenting, there are always relatives who can be positive resources for identity development. Family trees, family photos or visiting with relatives all contribute to a child knowing more about who they are.

Most importantly, foster parents, guardians, relative care providers or adoptive parents must let their identities shift with their child's identity. You become a family of color if you have a child who is a person of color. Learning how to embrace that with pride and strength can give a sense of safety to your child. For example, parents should learn to be observant of how people react to their children of color and talk to their children about the biases that may occur in everyday interactions. This

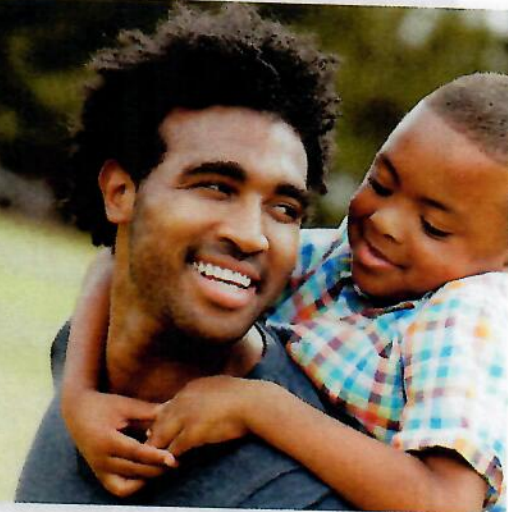
often requires the parent to courageously examine their own biases. By doing so, the parent can walk in their child's shoes and help them develop resilience. Additionally, parents can find cultural guides or brokers, that is people from the child's culture to help the parent engage in genuine interaction and avoid the potential traps of superficially mimicking the child's culture. Parents of children of color serve their children well when they are active and intentional learners, good observers, and willing partners with their children's identity formation.

"Felt safety" matters. "Felt safety" is a term from research which means that a child has a sense of safety in their environment. Children need to feel respected for their cultural identity and their birth family identity. They need to feel acceptance and a sense of feeling seen, both as a member of their care family, and of their birth family. Children and youth need to be able to choose what elements of their identity they wish to embrace and exhibit because testing and experiencing is part of the developmental process. They need to know they have a place of refuge within their care family if and when identity issues get ugly, and they need to know they can trust their family to provide the needed social support while they explore connections to birth family and culture. Finally, they need time to process. It's never a one and done proposition. It is always a series of experiences and testing new territory, checking in, getting comfortable and then exploring more.

Relative placements, sometimes called kinship care, or grandfamilies, have both unique challenges and tremendous advantages in helping



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children develop a positive identity. Most children placed with relatives get to know their families and those from extended family cultures often have a rich nurturing network to connect with. These connections help build identity as part of a family and often as part of a culture. However, relationships with birth parents can be complicated and what people say about relatives and how they say it can positively or negatively influence a child's identity. Both children and their caregivers may feel stress associated with navigating such issues.

Additionally, grandfamilies may especially have challenges with obtaining documentation to support legal, health or educational decisions. Even small, supposedly simple life tasks can become far too complicated, including the decision to become a licensed care provider versus an informal placement can be a difficult choice. These common challenges can take precious energy away from enrichment activities when supports are lacking.

Families often need guidance to support health and positive identity formation or related issues. Help is

available through many organizations. Generations United offers programs supporting kinship and grandfamilies, including its new Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network. The National Indian Child Welfare Association is available to help families understand the importance of the Indian Child Welfare Act in helping American Indian and Alaska Native children maintain a positive cultural identity and lifelong connections with their tribe and culture.

Families who take children into their care are the best hope for healing any traumas children may bring with them. While many children need and benefit from seeing a therapist, most of the healing actually happens within the family providing the day-to-day care. Families can use culture to connect with children by meeting cultural needs, restoring or initiating positive interactions such as learning about culture together. Parents and children can grow together by claiming cultural knowledge or behaviors such as celebrating cultural events, incorporating their child's extended family members into their family tree, or participating in ceremonies or rituals

that might be practiced in their child's extended family.

Culture promotes attachment to groups. Elders and mentors can help shape positive behavior. Cultural activities provide structure for self-regulation, including clear expectations, values and norms that say, "we do it this way." Cultural activities can build competencies in an identity of shared doing through ritual, music, dance, language, art and crafts.

When identity is embraced and nurtured, it gives back many times over. Families can use all the help and tools they can get with the tough tasks of helping heal their child's trauma. Using culture as a resource to help build identity is one of those tools. •

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