Common FAQ's about Native American Families/Traditions

Q: What does "Indian Time" mean?

A: You may see jokes or comments about Indigenous families "running on Indian Time", which means they will be late or are often late. Ancestral Native Americans did not live by the constructs of Clocks/Time prior to colonial contact so although today we expect everyone to be on time or early, its something that remains to be a struggle for some.

Q: Why do Indians drink so much?

A: Prior to colonial contact, Native Americans did not have, produce, or consume alcohol. This was introduced to them through the process of trading and bartering of goods in exchange for the Native's knowledge and resources. It was a "poison" that Native's did not know about and is often called "Fire water" to Indigenous people of today.

Q: Does Sage or other plants smell like Marijuana or can they be confused easily?

A: There are many types of Sage and traditional plants that Native people of today use for various reasons (tobacco, sage, cedar, etc.), and the smells and look vary as well. Some Sage has been known to resemble the smell of Marijuana; however, it is typically distinguishable by others. Sage is usually burnt in a shell or a wooden bowl of some kind and is used to "smudge" or cleanse a home, person, place, or things.

Q: How do Native American funerals differ from typical funerals?

A: All tribes honor and hold ceremony for their deceased loved ones differently so none will be the same, however most tribes will have a 3- or 4-day ceremonial fire that is started as soon as a member has passed on. The fire must be tended to by a male in the family or community and has to be watched by at least one person at all times (24 hours/day, during all weather conditions) during those 3-4 days. Woman traditionally are the medicine gathers, but do not "feed" or keep the fire. You may have families that discuss the need to be at a fire, keeping the fire if a loved one has passed in their family; this is a normal process and should be respected and honored, if possible.

Q: Should I accept gifts from Native American families/and or youth I work with?

A: Food, offerings, and gifts are a way to show respect and thanks in Native traditions. If you are in a home and offered food/gift, consider kindly accepting to take some with you and eat it later and/or explain that you would love to accept, but cannot due to policy. Just know that this is a form or respect and honor to be offered something while in their presence. Many times, if Natives ask for something, they will give a gift in exchange for that request. Be sure to know your own agency policies on gifts.

Q: How can parenting differ from Native families to non-Native?

A: Because of colonial contact, trauma, and the boarding school experiences, the parenting practices can often look like **lack** of love, care, and/or nurturing. Parents and/or Grandparents who were removed and sent to boarding schools often endured abuse and were not taught or shown “love” or “affection” which has affected all generations after them. Some common differences are that parents are “tougher”, don’t embrace or hug often, they demand respect from their children, and rely on other family or friends to help to parent them.

Q: Why do Native families/youth have so many “aunties/cousins/grandma’s etc.”?

A: Native Americans/Indigenous families historically were raised by the tribe and community, not in a “nuclear” family. Natives today remain reliant on each other to help care for elders, youth, and each other. Its common to see many kids and people living in homes together, sharing food/meals, and stepping in whenever needed. To some this looks like chaos, but to Indigenous families, it works. You may hear youth call people aunties/uncles, etc. and they may not be blood relatives.

Q: Should we use the word “Native, Indian, or Indigenous”? What is correct?

A: This will vary by person/program. Most often, what is written in the law or statute is not changeable and although not always respected by individuals, we must use it on forms and on official paperwork. Its always best to ask clients and families how they prefer to be addressed or acknowledged and its okay to find out from them what they’d like to be called. This shows that you care.

Q: How can I better relate to or work with Native Families?

A: Think about what ways you can relate to them; through your own adversity, experiences, etc. Learn about their culture. Be okay asking questions to be respectful. Partner with the ICWA worker or connections to the tribe to get support. Ask about who you can connect to in the tribal community. If families or children show you their regalia, ribbon skirts, artwork, cultural items; express interest, learn more, and be teachable.

Q: How can I find or connect to cultural resources for youth and families?

A: If there is an Indian Child Welfare Worker for a specific tribe, reach out to them as a starting point if needed. Each of the 11 Federally Recognized Tribes in WI have a website, general contact information, and various programs that could possibly get youth connected to cultural teachings and resources. Refer to Department of Children and Families for ICWA contacts and find tribal websites online.

Q: Why is it important to ask youth if they are Native American (enrolled, descendant, 2nd line descendant, etc.)?

A: If they are willing and interested in sharing that they are Native American, its important to acknowledge that, show interest, and ask if they prefer to use tribal resources for things such as medical care, counseling services, AODA, as well as to get them connected to traditional healing and activities such as sweat lodges, beading classes, drumming, singing, traditional sports, and other youth opportunities. Many youths can benefit from accessing traditional practices and learning when helping them through youth justice supervision in WI.

***Disclaimer: the FAQ information is based off the presenters' lived experience, knowledge, and best practices. The values, opinions, and traditional practices of Indigenous people and tribal communities varies widely. It is important to learn and educate yourself on specific tribes, the individuals you work with, and the youth you serve to be effective in working with them.**