Healing Generations with Connection, Love, and Support
By Ashley K. Harding

Traditionally within many tribal communities, the responsibility of parenting relied heavily on an extensive kinship network that worked together to ensure the healthy development of children and each entity had a role in shaping the child. This kinship network involved not only the parents of the child or children, but grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, great-grandparents, spiritual leaders, and for some tribes, those connected by a direct clan kinship. The role of each of these care providers was to provide a stable structure to nurture, love, connect, role model, and instill important teachings. This still stands true for many tribal families across the nation. However, due to the impact of colonization and trauma related experiences (historical, intergenerational, and current trauma), this has disrupted the thriving environment in how tribal children and families connect.

What is trauma and how does it impact our families? According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

What does this look like for an American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) community? One well known example that has deeply rooted effects of trauma is the forcible removal of AI/AN children from their families in the 1860’s and required to attend Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding schools. Many of the boarding schools were located hundreds of miles from a child’s respective tribal community. What was the intention? In these schools children were not allowed to wear their traditional attire that signified the people they came from, they were not allowed to speak in their traditional language, there hair was cut short and they were placed in clothing that was foreign to them. While in these BIA boarding schools, there were little to no contact with family members. The environment of the BIA boarding schools was sterile, strict, abusive, hurtful, and deadly for some children. Think about this? Imagine being forcibly removed from everything you know. Never knowing when or if you will ever see your child or parent or family. What happens to the children? What happens to the parent? What happens to the family members? What happens to the community?


This disruption left tribal families with an inability to fully fulfill their role as nurturers, caregivers, providers to the generations that came after them. The impact of traumatic experiences and how it detrimentally shapes our world view is true not only for AI/AN communities, but for many culturally diverse communities, impoverished communities and those who are at higher risk for adverse life experiences.

The Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center’s Native Connections program, which is located on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) in Mission, Oregon, is focusing its efforts to re-member and revitalize the traditional tribal aspects of parenting through the implementation and cultural adaptation of the Conscious Discipline model for all ages, prenatal to elder. The program in the Umatilla language is called Pašá pattawaxša kwíkwit ki which translates to raising children in truth. In addition, Native Connections is proactively connecting with community and stakeholders to bridge gaps and break down barriers that might prevent the purposeful development of creating a health
As Yellowhawk has implemented Conscious Discipline, the power and skills in the model are deeply rooted components of traditional tribal practice of creating healthy connections, openly discussing what is causing emotions/feelings, establishing nurturing relationships, role modeling teaching to provide a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment for children, families and communities to thrive. In this work, Yellowhawk Native Connections is so thankful to be building partnerships and collaborations that will allow children in Eastern Oregon to thrive and be their best selves.

Ashley Harding is the Native Connection Project Manager at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, and is a partner with the Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub, which works to bridge early childhood resources and prepare children for kindergarten. For more information visit www.bluemountainearlylearninghub.org.