

# Alcohol and Drug Prevention Among American Indian Families: The Family Circles Program

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**SUMMARY.** The goal of the Family Circles Program was the prevention or reduction of alcohol and drug abuse among American Indian High Risk Youth on the Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation through cultural enhancement of their family systems. The project was targeted toward families of high risk youth, ranging from four to eighteen years of age. A family systems approach was utilized involving the entire family, children, adolescents, parents, and grandparents. A culturally-oriented curriculum was developed which emphasized American Indian values, beliefs, and practices, relating them to contemporary life. Factors which positively impacted the implementation of the Family Circles Program included the development of interagency linkages, the retention of staff committed to the

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program philosophy, and the evolution of the project into a comprehensive and holistic system of services for the entire community. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworth.com](mailto:getinfo@haworth.com)]

## **INTRODUCTION**

American Indian people have been exposed to years of acculturation that have resulted in a damaged cultural self-esteem and feelings of apathy and helplessness. The unhealthy ways in which Indian families interact is directly related to self-perceptions, values, and self-esteem. Changing these feelings and behaviors begins with changing a basic sense of self-awareness. Traditional American Indian culture offers healthy alternatives to unhealthy acculturated behaviors, ideals, and values. The lives of American Indian families can be enhanced by providing them with the opportunity to learn how to replace dysfunctional ways of interacting with the nurturing ways of their traditional culture. Changing the unhealthy behaviors and self-concepts of American Indian families requires a holistic approach of nurturing the spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual selves. In spite of all the challenges Indian families have faced throughout history, there is still a strong family allegiance. This is a fundamental and enduring aspect of the American Indian family that can be built upon to foster and sustain healthy family lifestyles.

## **DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT**

The Family Circles Program sought to prevent or reduce alcohol and drug abuse among American Indian high risk youth on the Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation in Wisconsin through cultural enhancement of their family systems. A family systems approach was utilized involving the entire family: children, adolescents, parents, and grandparents. A comprehensive, coordinated, culturally-oriented program and curriculum were developed which related traditional Ojibwe values, beliefs, and traditions to contemporary life. Ojibwe language instruction, individual family outreach meetings, family cultural gatherings, support groups, and special family cultural celebrations were also a part of the project activities. The project approach was one of reinforcing and facilitating healthy family functioning through the constructive cultural teachings of traditional Ojibwe tribal values, beliefs, and practices which are inconsistent with alcohol and drug abuse.

### ***Parenting Education Class Component***

The Family Circles Program developed three different curricula to guide the weekly program classes: a 24-week program for adults (which was also adapted for adolescents), a 24-week children's curriculum, and an Ojibwe language curriculum. All of these curricula were developed in consultation with elders from Lac du Flambeau as well as other Ojibwe communities. The adult and children's curricula include information on Ojibwe culture and history, Lac du Flambeau history, development of the four aspects of self (physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual), development of communication and parenting skills, information on alcohol and other drug (AOD) abuse, and the dynamics of dysfunctional families.

A weekend retreat was held for the families before the start of each annual 24-week program cycle to introduce them to the basic philosophy of the program and engage in family-oriented cultural activities. Participants gathered each week thereafter at the Family Circles office to attend the two-hour parenting and cultural education classes that revolved around the cultural curriculum. These weekly classes provided for grandparents, parents, and youth were facilitated by Family Circles staff each week for 24 weeks. A Cultural Celebration was held for all families who completed the 24-week program.

Family Circles provided curriculum classes to 133 American Indian families over the five-year period, consisting of 217 adults and 227 youth ages 4-17 years. Families who completed the Family Circles curriculum attended an average of 16 classes. Drop-outs attended an average of nine classes, with 77 percent attending 12 classes or less.

### ***Ojibwe Language Component***

Family Circles Ojibwe Language Classes were provided to give participants a more formal and real sense of native and tribal identity, to empower them by providing the opportunity to achieve greater levels of self-expression, and to provide them with the skills to effectively communicate about their culture and teach it to future generations. The language curriculum developed by the program was used by instructors and program participants as part of the Family Circles classes. The weekly one-hour language classes provided for adults, adolescents, and children were taught by the Ojibwe Language Coordinator and other Family Circles staff for each of the 24 weeks.

The Ojibwe language component also included the Assistant Ojibwe Language Trainee Program which was designed to address the retention of the Ojibwe language for future generations. The trainees were young,

highly motivated, and showed a propensity for speaking the Ojibwe language. Each trainee received 12 hours of language training per week for 48 weeks each year.

### ***Home Visit Component***

Bi-weekly family outreach meetings were held in the home of each participating family. The Outreach Coordinator made a pre-arranged home visit with each family as a follow-up to the weekly group meetings. These family outreach meetings facilitated retention of the families in the project by helping to meet any immediate needs they might have had. The home visit provided each family with an opportunity to clarify and discuss the material presented in the groups and to receive assistance with completion of outside assignments. The Outreach Coordinator also made observations of the family and assisted in referrals to AODA treatment, aftercare, financial counseling, family therapy, and medical services such as hearing testing and dentistry.

### ***Support Group Component***

The Support Group was offered immediately following the completion of the parenting classes to provide families with the opportunity to participate in sixteen weekly alcohol- and drug-free family-oriented cultural activities. Family Circles staff organized activities that provided families with the opportunity to discuss and elaborate on curriculum material from the class sessions, as well as address relevant issues brought up by group members. In addition, family-oriented cultural activities were offered such as sweat lodge, fry bread contest, summer feast, domestic abuse presentation, gathering wild rice, and making birch bark baskets.

### ***Elders Resource Council Component***

Tribal elders from the community were recruited to provide cultural guidance for the program and the families involved by serving on the Elders Resource Council. Family Circles staff nurtured the elders, strengthening both their ability and desire to take on the role of traditional cultural teachers. The elders provided language instruction, provided program staff with guidance on curriculum content at weekly staff meetings, conducted traditional ceremonies, and contributed additional cultural material not contained in the curriculum.

### ***Project Newsletter Component***

*Family Circles*, a 24-page newsletter, was developed and distributed each month during all five years of the project. Articles and news items

related to information about healthy lifestyles and strengthening the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual self. *Family Circles* included news of positive events in the community, historical information about Lac du Flambeau, highlighted community youth who were positive role models, and addressed prevention and recovery issues through articles on alcohol and drugs, domestic and sexual abuse, and other aspects of achieving a healthy lifestyle. The philosophy of the program and much of the information provided to program participants was made available to the community through the newsletter with the publication of excerpts from the Family Circles curriculum and exercises in Ojibwe language.

### ***Anishinabe Sports Program Component***

The Anishinabe Sports Program associated with Family Circles is a non-profit project funded through Billy Mills Running Strong for American Indian Youth and the Christian Relief Fund. This component addressed the development of the physical and emotional aspects of the self. It promoted family-oriented physical fitness activities that were open to all community members. Competitive runs and skiing events provided community youth with the opportunity to participate in competitive events in their own community, as well as to attract people from surrounding communities to Lac du Flambeau. These runs enabled individuals from outside Lac du Flambeau to learn about the community and helped to foster positive relationships between Lac du Flambeau and area communities.

### ***Other Project Services***

A wide variety of other AOD-free cultural activities were also sponsored by Family Circles on an ongoing basis. Project participants took part in weekly potluck feasts, dancing, singing, special traditional ceremonies, and story-telling. Sweat lodge ceremonies, traditional purification and meditation practices were also available for families each month. Family Circles also sponsored a New Year's Eve Sobriety pow-wow and a NiiJii Sobriety pow-wow each year. The project also conducted a series of Project and Curriculum workshops to disseminate information about Family Circles. The purpose of the workshops was to market the Family Circles curriculum and promote the program concept to other Wisconsin tribes. Project staff also conducted school presentations on cultural competence to area teachers each year in efforts to increase the cultural awareness of educators serving tribal youth.

Process data were used to address participant attrition, and modify and improve the program services provided. Family Circles staff responded to

the problem of attrition in a variety of ways. First, adequate time was made available for recruitment of families that demonstrated the strength to effectively participate in and complete the program. Second, additional families were recruited for participation as an added safeguard against attrition. Program staff also responded by modifying the scheduling and structure of Family Circles classes to accommodate cultural/seasonal events such as spearfishing, seasonal employment, and pow-wows. Classes were not held when there was a death in the community so that families could show respect for elders by attending funerals. Finally, staff responded to participant requests by scheduling more joint class activities for parents and youth to participate in *together*. Ojibwe language instruction also evolved over the course of the project. At first, written materials were emphasized, but the emphasis later shifted to development of oral communication and speaking skills. With the adults and children participating in language instruction together, new activities (such as games) were developed. Based on participant feedback, the focus of the support group sessions was changed from one emphasizing review of the 24-week curriculum with group discussion to one stressing participation in family-oriented cultural activities. The home visit component was also modified to better meet participant need. It quickly became apparent that some families needed fewer visits while some needed more, so the level of home visits was tailored to the needs of each specific family. It also became clear that the project needed to be sensitive to how many other community programs were doing in-home visits, and to limit Family Circles home visits accordingly.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Family Circles Program had a positive impact on the Lac du Flambeau community, its families, and its individuals. The project received national recognition for the development of its curriculum, and expanded its program services to involve the entire community. Family Circles played a vital role in the revival of Ojibwe language and culture on the reservation by significantly increasing the cultural and native language knowledge of participants. It reinforced positive feelings about being Indian and the importance of traditional family support systems, providing the community with the opportunity to participate in family-oriented alcohol- and drug-free activities.

An element critical to the success of this project was the quality and commitment of the project staff. This highly motivated group of local professionals was deeply dedicated to serving community individuals of

all ages. They viewed their efforts not simply as jobs, but as a way to improve the community in which they lived. They consistently practiced the traditional Ojibwe customs and served as role models, working toward community change through active involvement in committees, boards, etc. The lack of staff turnover also positively impacted the project. All of the project and evaluation staff involved at the start of the grant were still involved with the project when it ended. This consistency in staffing provided continuity in service provision and sent a message of stability to the community.

Interagency linkages were vital to successfully delivering services and achieving project goals. The support of the tribal organizational and governmental structure proved to be particularly important to implementation of the Family Circles Program. Establishing cooperative relationships with human service programs, health programs, schools, and tribal elders directly contributed to the success of the program. Tribal communities who seek to replicate Family Circles should build onto and coordinate with their own local programs.

The importance of developing a strong partnership between program and evaluation staff was also confirmed. The evolution of the evaluation of the Family Circles Program taught us that evaluations should incorporate an approach aimed at program improvement, staff ownership, and empowerment. American Indians have, historically, participated in research and evaluation endeavors in which they have provided information to outside evaluators and received very little benefit in return. We believe that a successful evaluation includes an effective *interactive* partnership among program staff, service providers, and evaluation staff. Projects of this type require an evaluator with both the expertise to provide the appropriate technical assistance and the cultural competence necessary to interact effectively with program staff. Although program staff were initially quite resistant to the idea of evaluating the program, the development of a trusting relationship with evaluators fostered an understanding of the benefits and uses of evaluation. Project and evaluation staff learned a great deal from each other, developing a partnership that both enhanced the implementation of the evaluation and allowed the evaluator to be part of the project team.

One of the most significant things demonstrated was the importance of retaining the flexibility to modify the program based on participant feedback. Evaluation data were used for program improvement in a variety of ways, and Family Circles was constantly modified to meet the changing needs of the participants. Program staff were extremely responsive to participant feedback regarding class scheduling, curriculum content, and

presentation format. Many of these modifications involved changes in class schedules to aid in participant recruitment and retention, while others improved the quality of the programming by making it more family-oriented. As a result, the program continued to grow and evolve over the course of the project.

Efforts to replicate this or similar projects should incorporate a culturally appropriate concept of "family" into the design of both the program and the evaluation prior to implementation. The definition of "family" is a fluid and broadly inclusive concept for this population. The concept of family is not necessarily limited to blood relationships or shared living situations, but is more often expanded to include friends, elders, clan affiliations, and the tribal community as a whole. This enhanced notion of "family" resulted in a high level of movement of individuals between family units (a more circumscribed definition of family imposed by funders and evaluators). The project experienced difficulties in communicating the implications of this concept to funders, particularly with regard to the appropriate number of "families" to serve each year and the development of project goals and objectives.

Family Circles impacted the entire Lac du Flambeau community, not just those who participated in the classroom curriculum. The project grew to become a *community* program, coordinating with other tribal service providers and reaching out to touch tribal families in myriad ways. Family Circles networked with sober parents through tribal Alcoholics Anonymous groups, Head Start, and local schools to coordinate activities. The project expanded to operate the Anishinabe Sports run/walk and cross-country ski programs. The monthly project newsletter and posters in community gathering places provided cultural and language information to the community at large. Project staff conducted school presentations on cultural competence to area teachers each year, and offered feasts, ceremonies, pow-wows, and dances that were open to the entire community. Staff and project elders were extremely active and visible in the community outside of their work roles, serving on committees, performing traditional ceremonies, and providing cultural expertise. The joint impact of these numerous efforts was one of a ripple effect—with repercussions that spread both formally and informally from one community member to the next. Family Circles grew to receive recognition and acceptance exceeding our expectations, sowing the seeds of a community-wide revival of traditional Ojibwe culture.