



Harnessing the Healing Power of Shared Experience

Mentoring and Peer Programs

Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities Issue Brief 4

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In Brief: What are Mentoring and Peer Programs?

*Youth mentoring features a caring relationship between a young person and a nonparental adult figure who **supports, encourages, and guides the youth** (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). While there are a range of approaches to mentoring, formal youth mentoring is a relational intervention in which a young person is paired with a mentor, with the aim of cultivating a relationship that will foster the youth's positive development and wellbeing. Peer programs are structured initiatives that **harness the power of shared lived experiences** to support youth development and wellbeing. Youth take the lead in designing and implementing peer programs, fostering meaningful connections among peers with similar challenges and backgrounds (Collura et al, 2019).*

Mentoring and peer programs support positive youth development, leveraging the influence of mentors and the shared experiences of peers to address critical issues affecting young people, including substance use, antisocial behavior, mental health, academic performance, and justice system involvement. The relational nature of mentor and peer programs allows for genuine and relevant messages, which can be particularly effective in influencing teen behavior and attitudes (Weiler et al, 2015). For American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) youth, it is particularly important that mentoring and peer programs offer culturally responsive and accessible approaches that incorporate cultural values, address mistrust in mainstream systems, and provide tailored support.

ABOUT PROMISING JUSTICE PRACTICES

The *Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities* project invites representatives from Native communities to come together to share learnings about promising practices for youth involved in, or vulnerable to involvement with, the criminal justice system. Participants exchange knowledge on implementing culturally responsive practices, highlighting positive outcomes for participating youth, and considering how promising practices can be adapted and applied in their own communities. By sharing our learnings, we hope to grow our individual and collective capacities to support and nurture Native youth.

ABOUT FHI 360'S NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR WORK AND LEARNING

[FHI 360](#) is a global organization that mobilizes research, resources and relationships so people everywhere have access to the opportunities they need to lead full and healthy lives. With collaborations in over 60 countries, we work directly with local leaders to improve health and well-being, respond to humanitarian crises and strengthen community resilience. We share data-driven insights and scalable tools so communities can effectively address complex challenges, respond to shocks and achieve thriving futures.

FHI 360's [National Institute for Work and Learning](#) advances solutions in education and workforce systems. We focus on two key drivers of individual well-being – education and employment – to improve lives. NIWL seeks to strengthen the capacity of public and private organizations, providing information, resources, and support needed to make decisions, strengthen programs, and improve outcomes for individuals.

Supportive relationships with non-parental adults and peers from the same community or culture can serve as important protective factors for vulnerable youth.

Participating in organized prosocial activities, such as extracurricular programs, helps youth build broader social networks and supports positive academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes (Austin et al, 2020).

Creating opportunities for connection and encouraging help-seeking behavior are key ways in which formal mentoring and peer programs support lasting positive development in youth. (Sanchez et al, 2023).

Mentoring and peer programs can be effective and low-cost approaches to supporting AI/AN youth. These programs need to be culturally adapted and accessible to help overcome common barriers like mistrust, cost, and distance, particularly for youth from low-income backgrounds.

Grounding Youth through Social Connections

Supportive family relationships and strong social connections beyond the household are among the most critical immediate determinants of adolescent health and development (Austin et al, 2020). Childhood and adolescence are uniquely vulnerable periods marked by sensitivity to loneliness and alienation, which can have long-term negative effects well into adulthood (Keller et al, 2020). A longitudinal study on peer victimization, social support, and mental health during early adolescence shows that children between the ages of nine and 10 who experienced poor social relationships also experienced higher risk of developing symptoms of major depressive disorder and anxiety (Martinez et al, 2024).

Cultural values and traditions are a source of resilience for Native communities (Aschenbrener et al, 2019). Effective mentoring and peer programs for AI/AN youth should reflect Native values and promote holistic success, community connections, and traditional teachings; engaging families and communities in these programs deepens cultural alignment and strengthens youth participation and development.



Mentoring Programs

Mentoring through drumming offers a culturally relevant approach to healing and building deep connections among AI/AN youth. As a central element in many Native cultures, drumming is traditionally used in ceremonies, storytelling, and rites of passage. Among many AI/AN communities, drumming remains a source of healing and community cohesion, with studies also linking it to physical and psychological benefits (Dickerson et al, 2018). The **Friends of Children** chapter in South Dakota integrates drumming into mentoring not only to teach the instrument but also to create a safe space for youth to gradually open up, connect with their culture, and form meaningful relationships. The organization reports that 93% of mentees remain free from involvement with the juvenile justice system (Pfankuch, 2023).

Equine assisted therapy (EAP) or “horse therapy,” harnesses connections among youth, mentors, and horses to support positive relationships and a sense of achievement. Mentors facilitate structured sessions and provide unobtrusive guidance but let the horses do the teaching. Native youth develop responsibility and independence through horse care and riding, while adolescents demonstrate character and skill through horsemanship (White Plume, 2016). Based on the belief that horses possess an emotional sensitivity that reflects our own, horse therapy offers participants a unique opportunity to connect and attune their own emotions and spirituality with nature (Sloan, 2025). **Forward Stride**, a nonprofit in Oregon, supports Native youth in foster care who are at risk of substance use or involvement with the juvenile justice system by guiding them through healing and recovery with horse therapy (Forward Stride, n.d). Reflecting traditional practices for Native adolescents, mentees in this program not only groom and tend to the animals, but also participate in emotionally rich activities that promote healthy relationship-building and emotional expression (Spears, 2024).



The horses taught me to be more honest with myself and others. They also taught me to be patient and that I am capable of doing more than I thought.”

-Mentee

The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe’s Zaagaate’ Mentoring Program offers **culturally relevant mentorship** focused on education. With the collaboration of higher education institutions and Isabella County school systems in Michigan, the Tribe seeks to keep Native youth in schools and get them ready for college and careers after high school (Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, n.d.). In response to the lasting impacts of historical trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and the growing social and personal pressures facing today’s Native youth, the tribe is taking meaningful action through mentoring. The Tribe believes

that early mentorship can equip Native youth with the tools and support they need to navigate and respond effectively to these challenges and still do well academically. The program connects Native youth with local Native college students who engage them in cultural, academic, and recreational activities. Through these connections, mentors help mentees focus on their future, introduce them to new experiences, offer the care and companionship of a trusted friend, support emotional and academic development, and foster a strong sense of confidence (Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, n.d.).



Peer Programs

Across the United States, AI/AN tribes are addressing juvenile crime through culturally distinct approaches shaped by tribal worldviews, values, and traditions that differ from mainstream justice systems (Melton, 2010). **Youth courts** are peer-led programs in which young people—referred by schools, law enforcement, or other authorities—are judged by their peers for minor, non-violent offenses such as theft, vandalism, minor assault, possession of drugs or alcohol, and truancy. These programs foster accountability while promoting personal growth, civic engagement, and the values of restorative justice (Bouchard & Wong, 2017). Youth courts provide an alternative approach to addressing minor offenses, allowing young people to avoid formal involvement with the juvenile justice system. At the same time, they offer peer participants valuable lessons in responsibility, justice, leadership, community service, and potential careers available in the justice system. The **Kake Tribal Youth Court** in Alaska, as an example, serves as a diversion program for youth under 18 to address misdemeanor offenses and uses a Circle Peacemaking model rooted in tribal values. Youth lead the circle sessions, supported by elders, family members, victims (when applicable), and community advocates. Participation is voluntary but youth must agree to a contract based on the circle's decisions, which are monitored for compliance by the Youth Court Coordinator (Tribal Access to Justice Innovation, n.d.).



The youth are the treasures of our Tribe and hope for the future. The purpose of the Kake Youth Circle Peacemaking is to encourage responsible behavior and choices among our youth."

- Kake District Court

Peer recovery support (PRS) programs are community-based initiatives that harness the power of lived experience to support individuals facing substance use. These programs are led by peer mentors—individuals who have navigated their own recovery journeys—who offer education, guidance, and encouragement (Kelley et al, 2021). For AI/AN youth, PRS programs help overcome common barriers to recovery, including stigma, mistrust of Western models, financial limitations, lack of local resources, and limited transportation (Kelley et al, 2021). Grounded in the understanding that recovery is a gradual process, PRS

programs emphasize culturally relevant, trauma-informed, respectful, and strengths-based principles (Bingham and Kelley, 2024). Peer mentors draw on their diverse experiences and tailor support to individual needs and interests, using strategies that range from culturally specific practices—such as talking circles, Wellbriety meetings, spiritual gatherings, and sweat lodges—to practical assistance with housing, food, education, employment, and transportation (Kelley et al, 2021).

Peer-led, school-based programs that focus primarily on mental health can also be important sources of support for youth. The National Alliance on Mental Illness notes that mental health challenges can be linked behaviors that can increase the risk of becoming involved with the justice system, with approximately two in five incarcerated individuals having a history of mental illness (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.). Culturally relevant, meaningful, and accessible resources can be transformative for AI/AN youth with mental health challenges. **Active Minds**, a school-based peer-to-peer mental health program for youth at risk of mental health challenges or suicide, incorporates content designed by and for AI/AN youth created by **WeRNative**. By centering storytelling and youth-driven perspectives, *Active Minds* helps Native youth navigate mental health challenges in ways that reflect and respect their cultural identity.



Indigenous peoples' mental health matters. Having culturally appropriate and relevant resources can be life-changing."

-Active Minds

Summing Up

Mentoring and peer-led programs play a critical role in supporting the well-being, identity, and futures of AI/AN youth. Whether grounded in cultural practices like drumming or horsemanship, or focused on mental health, accountability, and recovery, these initiatives offer more than appropriate services; they create spaces for belonging, resilience, and growth. When youth are connected to trusted mentors, their culture and values, and peer support networks, they are better equipped to navigate challenges, build confidence, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. These programs not only honor Native perspectives and healing but also foster positive long-term, intergenerational outcomes.

Spotlight

The TRAC Program’s Culturally Rooted Path to Recovery

Many existing recovery models are based on Western frameworks that often lack cultural competence for AI communities. Interventions that are rooted in AI/AN values and worldviews tap into community strengths to improve wellbeing for participants. The **Transitional Recovery and Culture (TRAC)** Program, developed in response to the disproportionate impact of substance use disorders among AI populations, is one such program.

TRAC is a **Peer Recovery Support (PRS)** program, implemented in both reservation and urban settings across Montana and Wyoming, in which peer mentors—elders, cultural leaders, spiritual teachers, and youth with lived experiences—offer culturally grounded support. The program defines recovery holistically, emphasizing harmony across mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Mentors offer a range of supports, from culturally specific practices like sweat lodges and talking circles to practical help with housing, education, employment, and transportation. TRAC's flexible model is facilitated by a tribal consortium.

A six-year evaluation study found that participants increased abstinence from drugs and alcohol, prosocial behaviors, social connectedness and stable housing while arrests decreased. TRAC has helped participants maintain sobriety, reach personal goals, and deepen their sense of purpose and connection to their communities. Participants described reconnecting with family, culture, and community, and found meaning through spiritual practices and peer mentorship. Their experiences illustrate how culturally grounded, peer-led support can empower AI/AN individuals to reclaim wellness and shape their own recovery journeys.

“We have been coming together as a community over the past few years to identify solutions to help those dealing with substance use disorders, homelessness, and behavioral health issues. We believe healing is possible through prevention, treatment and recovery support”

- Dyani Bingham, former Project Director



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Funding Opportunities for Mentoring and Peer Programs

The federal agencies and foundations listed below have offered grant opportunities in recent years that supported programs in Native communities. As the new presidential administration sets policy priorities, budget allocations and grant opportunities from federal agencies are likely to shift but some grant programs may continue. Some of the funding sources listed here may not be accepting current grant applications but typically open new opportunities periodically.

1. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Tribal Youth Programs

OJJDP provides grants to Tribes aiming to enhance their juvenile justice systems. These grants support prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies that benefit Native youth. The funding is designed to be flexible, accommodating the unique cultural and systemic needs of each Tribe.

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/tribal-youth-programs-and-services>

2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Youth Healing to Wellness Courts

The Youth Healing to Wellness Courts website provides information on funding opportunities aimed at supporting tribal communities in enhancing public safety and victim services.

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/youth-healing-to-wellness-court-program>

3. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Mentoring

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) champions youth mentoring—structured, positive relationships between adults or older peers and young people—as an evidence-backed strategy to boost self-esteem, academic success, peer relationships, and reduce substance misuse, aggression, depression, and delinquent behavior.

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/mentoring>

4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Native Connections

The Native Connections program is a five-year grant initiative assisting American Indian and Alaska Native communities in identifying and addressing the behavioral health needs of Native youth. It focuses on reducing substance misuse and suicide risk among youth up to age 24 by supporting the development of culturally relevant prevention and treatment strategies.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/native-connections>

5. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Tribal Behavioral Health Grant Program

A nationwide program offers up to \$250,000/year for five years to support Native-led suicide prevention, substance misuse prevention, and trauma-informed youth programs.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/SM-21-011>

6. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Circles of Care

SAMHSA's Circles of Care offers three-year discretionary grants to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribes, tribal organizations, Urban Indian entities, or tribal consortia to develop culturally and linguistically competent, community-based systems of care for youth at risk of mental health issues.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/circles-care>

7. Native Americans in Philanthropy – Native Youth Grantmakers

While not providing direct funding for peer programs, the Native Youth Grantmakers (NYG) program is a leadership initiative for Indigenous youth aged 18–24—urban, rural, or reservation-connected—to gain direct experience in philanthropy and community advocacy. NYG empowers youth through active roles—such as reviewing real grant applications via the Native Voices Rising collaborative—and fosters a culturally grounded network to amplify Native youth voices in decision-making and resource allocation.

Url: <https://nativephilanthropy.org/nyg>

8. Northwest Area Foundation

Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf) is dedicated to reducing poverty and advancing sustainable prosperity by investing in local leaders and organizations promoting racial, social, and economic justice. It prioritizes Native-led initiatives, Native CDFIs, rural communities, and justice-driven systems change through grants, impact investing, and long-term partnerships.

Url: <https://www.nwaf.org/>

9. Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company Foundation

Financial assistance for organizations that support the preservation, promotion, and advancement of American Indian self-sufficiency and culture in the United States. Focus areas include American Indian entrepreneurship, education, and cultural preservation.

Url: <https://www.reynoldsamerican.com/santa-fe-foundation/>

10. First Nations – Native Youth and Culture Fund

Provides grants between \$20,000–60,000 to strengthen youth leadership, intergenerational mentoring, cultural programs, and mental wellness across Native communities.

Url: <https://www.firstnations.org/projects/native-youth-and-culture-fund/>

11. Association on American Indian Affairs — Summer Camp Grants

Small seed grants support culture-based youth camps focused on wellness, language, mentoring, and community engagement.

Url: <https://www.indian-affairs.org/summercamps.html>