

## Youth Substance Use Prevention and Awareness in Native Communities

*When considering substance use and misuse, it is important to take into consideration the diversity of Native American and Alaska Native people and the implications it has for the development and implementation of prevention efforts. Due to increased exposure to historical trauma and other forms of trauma, Native youth are at increased risk of alcohol abuse and other risky behaviors. Substance abuse is also found to be associated with suicidal behavior. For example, a large study on reservation-based high school students found that urban Native girls were more than six times and boys were more than four times more likely to have attempted suicide if they reported past substance abuse than if they did not.*

### Facts and Statistics on Native Youth Substance Use:

- 28.2% of Native American & Alaska Native high school students reported drinking alcohol before age 13, compared to 18.6% of students overall. Note: alcohol abuse patterns vary by demographic group such as residence on a reservation, age, gender, and region.
- Substance initiation in Native communities typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 13, with the onset for some individuals beginning as early as 5 or 6 years of age.
- A study conducted by SAMHSA showed Tobacco to be of the most frequently used drugs by Native youth, with inhalants being one of the most commonly used first substances, preceding the use of alcohol.
- According to data for 12–17-year-olds from the last available NHSDA, 27.5% of Native Americans and Alaska Natives were current smokers, compared with 16.0% of Whites, 10.2% of Latinos, 8.4% of Asian Americans, and 6.1% of African Americans.

### Substance Use Prevention: Cultural Connectedness & Protective Factors

Current research suggests that prevention programs serving tribal communities should focus on protective factors and risk factors present in Native communities that help youth resist alcohol abuse, rather than exclusively focusing on risk factors. Furthermore, it suggests that existing prevention efforts may fall short due to their failing to address the cultural and social context associated with alcohol abuse. According to SAMHSA, categories of protective factors positively associated with health and social outcomes for Native American and Alaska Native youth include personal wellness, positive self-image, self-efficacy, familial and non-familial connectedness, positive opportunities, positive social norms, and cultural connectedness.

#### What is Cultural Connectedness?

Cultural Connectedness refers to “the degree to which an Indigenous person is integrated within his or her native culture.” According to the National Indian Child Welfare Association, “Fostering feelings of being connected to culture is important for youth well-being even if participation in specific practices may not be possible or of interest to an Indigenous youth.” Research has shown that positive connections to self, family, community, and the natural environment increase resiliency in Native communities. Strength-based and community-based approaches are particularly important in a Native American context because they enable Native communities to “reclaim and reaffirm Native ways of knowing and being.” Furthermore, research shows cultural identity and spirituality to be important issues for Native Americans and substance abuse prevention.

#### Four Key Protective Factors Contributing to Resiliency

1. Attachment
  - Research shows that Native youth are less likely to engage in substance use if they have positive relationships with and feel connected to their family.
2. Mastery and Self-Control
  - As youth develop mastery in a particular topic and are supported to cultivate newly found skills, they are more likely to make healthy choices, withstand external pressures to make poor choices, and participate in their own positive development as well as the development of their community.
3. Sense of Belonging (Social Connectedness)
  - Sense of belonging is shown to have a negative correlation with suicidal ideation and lower rates of substance abuse among Native communities and high school students.
4. Spirituality
  - A large study on reservation and urban youth highlighted: Youth are less likely to abuse substances when facing challenges related to peers and family if communities promote cultural pride/spiritual and religious affiliation.





## Promoting Cultural Connectedness in Youth

Research highlights several ways in which individuals can help youth to feel connected to their culture beyond participation in cultural events or practices within their community. Strategies on increasing feelings of cultural connectedness in Native youth include:

- Peer youth mentoring programs where Indigenous youth are paired with each other in a school or community organization
- Connecting with youth through virtual outreach, such as social media
- Discussing topics related to family and community such as traditional homelands, foods, medicines, tools, crafts, games, and spiritual practices
- Encouraging youth to access tribal resources online such as tribal language websites or apps, online videos, and other resources available from tribal websites, museums, and libraries
- If able to participate in cultural events and practices, talking to them about the deeper meaning of these practices and how they connect youth with their ancestors, community, and land can foster broader feelings of cultural connectedness

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## Programs and Resources for Substance Use Disorders Among Native Youth:

- Indian Health Service’s Youth Regional Treatment Centers (YRTC): <https://www.ihs.gov/yrtc/>
- Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program (ASAP): <https://www.ihs.gov/asap/>
- National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children: <https://www.nationaldec.org/>

**Programs developed for a specific Native community that can be tailored to the needs and strengths of the group being served**

- **Family Spirit** – a culturally tailored intervention for Native teenage mothers who are prone to substance abuse: <https://caih.jhu.edu/programs/family-spirit>
- **Project Venture** – an experiential program designed to build social and emotional competence to support Native youths’ resistance to using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs: <https://projectventure.org/>



- **Red Cliff Wellness School Curriculum** – a K-12 school-based curriculum based in Indigenous tradition and culture that seeks to reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors related to substance abuse: [https://www.redcliff-nsn.gov/divisions\\_services/education/wellness\\_curriculum.php](https://www.redcliff-nsn.gov/divisions_services/education/wellness_curriculum.php)
- **The Healing of the Canoe Project (HOC)** – a culturally based prevention and intervention life skills curriculum for Native youth that build on community strengths and resources: <https://healingofthecanoe.org>

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