

# American Indians and Alaska Natives

## BULLYING EMERGES AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR The Scourge of Suicides among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth

The suicide of a child or teenager is sad beyond words for any people. And multiple youth suicides send ripples of hopelessness and despair throughout the community in which it occurs. It cries out to adults: Something is terribly wrong here!

Activists and leaders in many American Indian and Alaska Native communities have heard those cries. And for good reason. Their children and teenagers are committing suicide at **more than three times** the rate of the overall youth population. Among American Indian and Alaska Native youth, suicide is the **second leading cause of death** behind accidental injuries. Increasingly, American Indian and Alaska Natives are taking measures to try to prevent youth suicides. (See *An Indian Life Skills Curriculum* and *Michigan Chippewa Tribe Tackles Bullying Problem*.)

What's more, some American Indian and Alaska Native activists and leaders are enlisting the support of allies outside of their communities to help them deal with the youth suicide epidemic. For example, the state of New Mexico recently enacted legislation aimed at preventing Indian youth suicides. The new law creates a statewide clearinghouse for suicide prevention and culturally-based prevention initiatives. It was sparked by a rash of youth suicides in the Navajo community of Thoreau and on the Mescalero Apache reservation.

### BULLYING REARS ITS UGLY HEAD

The high suicide rate among American Indian and Alaska Native youth was once labeled "a silent epidemic." But thanks to the work of Indian media outlets such as RezNet and Indian Country Today Media Network, as well as the Indian Health Service and the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, this problem is no longer a "silent" one. And

as more is learned about American Indian and Alaska Native youth suicides, bullying has emerged as a factor in these suicides. (Not *the* factor, but *a* factor.)

NEA thinks it's important that educators know about the link between bullying and suicide. The vast majority of American Indian and Alaska Native students attend our K-12 public schools. And as educators committed to the proposition that every student has the right to learn, grow and develop his or her full potential, we think it is critical that we address the bullying issue. Student-to-student bullying is wrong. It violates a student's basic human right to a quality education, and its impact on the bullied student can be severe, including increased absenteeism, lowered academic achievement, increased anxiety, loss of self-esteem and confidence, depression, deterioration of physical health, and suicidal thinking.

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### AN INDIAN STUDENT SPEAKS OUT

"I am here due to my past and I'm a survivor of teen suicide. It is my sincere hope that my words will inspire change and help address this serious situation... I come from a people whose pride runs deep, but I also understand that sometimes, pride can keep us from asking for help."—Coloradas Mangas, a 15-year-old sophomore at Ruidoso High School in Ruidoso, New Mexico who is a Chirachua Apache from the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation, in testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, March 25, 2010.



## THE WEB OF FACTORS

Social science researchers and medical health experts caution us not to oversimplify or over-generalize a complex problem such as youth suicide. They remind us what motivates a person to do something is usually not one factor but “a web of factors.” In the case of an American Indian or Alaska Native youth who commits suicide, that “web” might include one or more of the following vulnerability factors: high rates of poverty and unemployment, substance abuse, family breakdown, pressure to abandon their traditional culture, and a paucity of mental health providers and resources.

Another critical factor is “historical trauma”, psychological trauma occurring over generations that has negative and far-reaching effects on past, present and future generations.

However, studies suggest that American Indian and Alaska Native youth who are grounded in the traditional values and lifeways of their indigenous cultures are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as substance abuse and self-inflicted injuries, including suicide.

Numerous tribal and urban programs are incorporating culturally appropriate practices and activities into their anti-bullying and suicide prevention programs, as a way to overcome the marginalization of American Indians/Alaska Natives caused by the reservation system imposed decades ago.

## THE STRESS EVENT TRIGGER

Within the web of vulnerabilities described above, “a stress event” can trigger a suicide, according to researchers and public health professionals. One such stress event for American Indian and Alaska Native youth who have committed suicide is the loss of an adult who has been close to them—a parent, grandparent or some other family member—due to death, divorce or desertion. Another major stress event is the suicide of a friend or peer—hence the multiplier effect of suicide. Another is persistent and pernicious bullying.

Sioux and Assiniboine students at Fort Peck Middle School in northeastern Montana cited bullying and peer pressure as big factors in the deaths of several friends. One 14-year-old said: “Let’s say all your emotions are in a glass of water. When somebody bullies you, dump out a little bit... Eventually that glass of water is going to be empty and that’s kind of like your self-esteem. You’re going to be empty, so you’re going to try to commit suicide.”

As educators, we can do something about bullying. When we see it, we can intervene to stop it—or get help from other adults in the school to stop it. Bullying is an education issue. The research is clear. Bullying is not a trivial event. It is not a harmless rite of passage. And if a bullied student seeks us out for help, we need to take them seriously, listen and do what we can for them.

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### MICHIGAN CHIPPEWA TRIBE TACKLES BULLYING PROBLEM

The Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Watersmeet, Michigan recognized they had a bullying problem among their student population. They used the Colorado School Climate Survey and learned that 69 percent of students didn’t feel they had a caring school climate; and 77 percent of high school students reported that school lacked clear rules and consistent consequences for bullying and other negative behaviors.

They established the program: Creating Caring Communities Bullyproofing Your School. Their program instituted culturally responsive approaches to bullying prevention. Importantly, the program also included developing an inclusive school culture and climate. Within two years, they saw a significant decrease in physical and psychological bullying as reported by students in grades K-8, using the same school climate instrument.

The success of the Lac Vieux Desert school and community led to the spread of the Creating Caring Communities Bullyproofing Your School program to at least five other tribal communities: the Red Lake Band of Chippewa, MN; the Oneida Tribe, WI; the Stockbridge-Munsee Tribe, WI; the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, WI; and the Forest County Potawatomi Community, WI.



## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

- ✓ If a student comes to you with a complaint about being bullied, take that student and his or her complaint seriously and listen. No allegation about potential bullying should be ignored or taken lightly.
- ✓ If the bullied student is an American Indian or Alaska Native, keep in mind that student is likely a victim of racism. To learn about your responsibilities, go to [www2.ed.gov/ocr](http://www2.ed.gov/ocr), and read Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Russlyn Ali's October 26, 2010 letter to state departments of education and local school districts.
- ✓ Immediately report the student's complaint of bullying to the appropriate authority in your school. And check back with the student to see if she or he has been informed as to what steps the school system is taking.
- ✓ If a student seems to be in severe emotional or psychological distress, offer to help the student get in touch with a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist right away; be supportive, but don't give advice beyond your expertise. And if the student seems in imminent physical danger, alert the administration. The Indian Health Service now operates a suicide prevention lifeline: 1-800-277-TALK and [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org).
- ✓ [NEA.org/bullyfree](http://NEA.org/bullyfree) is a good go-to source for resources about how to help bullied students and how to prevent bullying in your school. We also recommend you take the NEA Bully Free: It Starts With Me pledge on our website.

### THE BULLYING-RACISM CONNECTION

When the student being bullied is an American Indian or Alaska Native, please keep this in mind: Research shows that often lurking beneath the bullying of American Indian or Alaska Native students is the poisonous toad of racism. That is, the student is being verbally and/or physically harassed or bullied because he or she is an Indian or Alaska Native. The slurs or attacks are racial. They include denigrating and stereotypical slurs about skin color, length of hair, language spoken, or religious beliefs.

School employees and school districts have a moral and legal obligation to put a stop to such harassment or bullying based on race (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). Moreover, school administrators must not only discipline the perpetrators, but they and the other school employees also have a responsibility to take steps to create a school environment in which such discriminatory harassment and bullying does not recur.

The Office for Civil Rights, United State Department of Education offers technical assistance to help schools achieve voluntary compliance with the civil rights laws and works with schools to develop creative approaches to preventing discrimination by bullying or harassment.

Contact <http://wdrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm>

### BULLYING IS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

There is an abundance of research pointing to the importance of a positive school climate; less bullying and more learning are by-products of such a climate. American Indian and Alaska Native students need culturally responsive approaches to bullying, including the development of an inclusive school culture. Indigenous students need to experience feelings of belonging and meaningful inclusion in the school.

Culturally responsive educators recognize that bullying is about the imbalance and abuse of power, and strive to examine ways in which gender, race, class, sexual identity, religion and ability position some students over others. They work to eliminate practices that privilege select students, causing other students to feel unsafe. Culturally responsive educators teach skills related to empathy and compassion, and establish social norms and rules that respect all students. American Indian and Alaska Native students attending culturally responsive and inclusive schools will feel connected, empowered and better prepared to address discriminatory bullying and harassment.



## AN INDIAN LIFE SKILLS CURRICULUM

On the Paiute Reservation in Bishop, California, the Toiyabe Indian Health Project has found a valuable resource for bullying *and* suicide prevention: **American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum** by Dr. Teresa D. LaFromboise. The author is a Turtle Mountains Chippewa from North Dakota and is an associate professor in the School of Education at Stanford University. She has worked with numerous tribes implementing the curriculum, which is designed to increase self-protective behaviors and resilience among American Indian adolescents, 14–19 years old.

The curriculum includes developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive and engaging lesson plans covering such topics as building self-esteem, identifying emotions and stress, increasing communication and problem-solving skills, recognizing and eliminating self-destructive behaviors, learning about suicide, role-playing around suicide prevention, and goal setting.

The American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum is a primary component in the Kiowa Tribe's Teen Suicide Prevention Program, which serves all youth, Indian and non-Indian, in southwestern Oklahoma. Adaptations of this high school curriculum also have been developed for middle school students of Sequoyah High School in Tahlequah, OK; at a boarding school on the Cherokee Nation reservation that serves students from numerous tribes; and for young women of the Blackfeet Tribe in MT.

The curriculum was reviewed in 2007 and remains on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

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