

Parents as Teachers: Partnering With American Indian and Alaska Native Families

Introduction

Parents as Teachers (PAT) provides evidence-based prevention and early intervention support to expectant parents and families of young children from before birth through kindergarten. A key characteristic of the PAT approach is that it is designed to meet the needs of individual families and, as a result, can address specific maternal, family and child outcomes in culturally responsive ways.

Research shows that PAT is an effective intervention for families in culturally diverse communities. In addition, specific cultural enhancements designed to further support families result in new parenting skills, more confidence in parenting, and stronger relationships with children. Evidence underscores that Parents as Teachers programs should intentionally engage families in culturally relevant ways to optimize positive child and family outcomes. As an organization, PAT is dedicated to seeking out diverse experiences and perspectives that continue to enrich our products, services, and supports. In 2021¹, more than 298,000 families in the US and its territories received evidence-based home visiting services during more than 3.2 million home visits. Approximately 25 percent of the families were Black, 29 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native; 19 percent spoke a language other than English. In 2021², Parents as Teachers reached almost 88,000 families across 48 states, territories and tribal areas during more than 967,000 home visits. Approximately 17 percent of families served by PAT were Black, 30 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were American Indian/Alaskan Native; 27 percent spoke a language other than English.

Statement of Purpose

This brief summarizes the existing Parents as Teachers model, curriculum, implementation, and research to address four questions:

1. What is PAT's approach to cultural considerations, specifically with American Indian and Alaska Native families?
2. How does research validate PAT's work with American Indian and Alaska Native families?
3. What experiences have parent educators shared?
4. What future steps must Parents as Teachers take to ensure that American Indian and Alaska Native families are served in a respectful, meaningful and authentic way?

What is PAT's approach to cultural considerations, specifically with American Indian and Alaska Native families?

Parents as Teachers has made a strong commitment to honor human diversity as a central part of our mission. It is the policy of PAT to work and provide services in a culturally competent manner.

As such, the PAT core curricula are regularly revised and enhanced to reflect this commitment, and to support parent educators in their work to provide all parents with the most current research-based information and strategies. For example, Parents as Teachers National Center relies on a diverse set of curriculum writers and reviewers to prioritize reducing disparities and driving equitable change. This process has increased our understanding, fluency, and practice related to addressing inequities in service delivery.

We continue to work towards improved communication and feedback loops in our curriculum development process. There is more to learn and continued changes ahead to challenge inherent biases. Parents as Teachers has provided information and practical approaches in human diversity that will fortify our responsive and respectful work with families of different races, ethnicities, diverse family configurations, and different economic backgrounds from a wide range of cultures both inside and outside of the United States.^{3,4}

Parents as Teachers trains parent educators that culture sets the scaffolding for parenting and raising children.

According to the PAT implementation framework, the key for parent educators to understand the values, customs and beliefs that are common to a group is to understand that they are often instilled when we are young and reinforced so often that they are not consciously recognized as a reflection of our own culture.^{5,6}

Research further describes the ways in which culture and child development are interrelated across several concepts important to supporting families. However, while research is a source of credibility, we acknowledge that research findings often communicate information—either directly or indirectly—about community conditions and can have policy, programmatic, and funding implications for communities. Even the most thoughtfully conducted research can be harmful if communicated poorly and subsequently misinterpreted. In that respect, PAT is committed to utilizing and conducting research with an equity lens.^{7,8}

- Child development outcomes are based both on individual experiences and group experiences in the child's family, community, culture, and society.^{9,10}
- The cultural rules children learn at home may be very different from the ones they are expected to know when they enter a childcare center or school.^{11,12}
- If adults (parent educators, teachers, and caregivers) don't understand the cultural rules and norms of a child's family, we may misread a child's developmental progress.¹³
- The clash between home culture and the cultures of childcare, schools, and parent education can result in children being regarded as having deficits.¹⁴
- When disagreements arise, rather than seeking to 'educate' the parents, parent educators should facilitate a mutual sharing of information.¹⁵
- It is important for adults to learn to recognize cultural information without stereotyping in order to accurately screen, evaluate, and understand a child's development.¹⁶

Cultural competence is grounded in the belief that PAT's work with children and families should acknowledge, respect, and support the integrity and strengths of their cultures.¹⁷ While cultural competence is a process that is ongoing and developmental, the goal of individual and organizational cultural competence is outcome-based. The ultimate outcome is for personal and professional

behavior of PAT parent educators to be respectful of and compatible with the cultures of families so that parents can be the best possible first teachers of their children.¹⁸

The PAT core curricula support racial equity by outlining the best information and strategies to assist parents in understanding and closing the opportunity gap between children from different racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁹ Relying on data with a racial equity lens offers a structural analysis of how disparities are produced.²⁰ The parent educator resource *Racial Equity and School Readiness* describes these strategies and the research supporting them.

- Opportunity differences in “life chances” for many American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) families and children.²¹
- Differences between the norms and rules of the home culture and the culture of childcare settings and schools.²²
- Systemic racial prejudice and discrimination that can erode the strong identity of the family and child.²³
- Different standards, expectations and treatment of AIAN students in achievement, behavior, placement, and discipline in many childcare settings and schools.^{24,25,26}

PAT encourages parent educators to remain conscious of these structural factors to refrain from “blaming” the parent or child. The PAT curriculum is also prepared to help parents decrease the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on their children.²⁷ The importance of a stable home environment and a secure, attentive caretaker as moderators of ACE outcomes is widely acknowledged and much of the success of PAT is attributed to the abilities of PAT to impact the home environment and parental relationships with young children.²⁸

Parents as Teachers uniquely addresses the distinct challenges facing American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) families by leveraging strengths of their communities. PAT tribal affiliate programs are culturally specific, locally implemented and use community-based paraprofessionals, which support the local workforce development. The program honors cultural heritages, tribal teachings, practices, traditions, values, beliefs and incorporates diverse cultural strengths and language into every personal visit. Each Parents as Teachers tribal affiliate works with their tribal elders and leaders when starting-up and implementing a program. Programs are operated by Native staff and organizations. The PAT model program is often enhanced to use Native language, incorporating traditional arts crafts, storytelling and connecting families to tribal events.²⁹ This strengths-based approach makes PAT particularly effective in partnering with AIAN families.

How does research validate PAT’s work with AIAN families?

Parents as Teachers Research

An increasing body of studies examining PAT specifically also documents the efficacy of PAT with AIAN families.

Studies indicate that PAT’s culturally relevant program provides supports for families that predict school readiness and family well-being for AIAN children and families.

Research on PAT suggests that targeting parents' knowledge about child development and increasing positive parenting behaviors is an effective means of positively impacting child outcomes, especially as related to school readiness and academic achievement. PAT participation effects

specific forms of academic achievement such as reading and math abilities, as well as long term outcomes such as school absenteeism or suspensions. These results suggest that PAT can help shape the life course of both parents and children in AIAN families.

Family and Child Education (FACE) is a partnership, originated in 1990, between the federal Bureau of Indian Education, the National Center for Families Learning and Parents as Teachers National Center. FACE is a unique family program for American Indian families that matches highly trained, local, Native, professionals with families from pregnancy through their children's first years of life. Starting as early as pregnancy, FACE parent educators help assess family needs and community resources available to them, partner with parents to provide necessary tools to ensure the safety and the emotional and physical well-being of their children, connect families to community programs and resources that enhance stability. Three FACE impact studies form the primary sources for research on the FACE program.³⁰ The results of these studies indicate that a prenatal to kindergarten culturally relevant program predicts school readiness for participating children, particularly for children with special needs. The FACE program also has impacts on increased parent involvement, increased literacy resources in the home, and increased frequency of home literacy activity in the home.^{31,32}

Another set of studies evaluates PAT, enhanced and implemented in New Zealand, as Parents as First Teachers. The New Zealand PAFT pilot project implemented PAT with Māori and Pasifika families, indigenous populations of New Zealand and the Pacific Island nations. The foundational pilot evaluations find that children's cognitive and fine motor development and caregiver-child interactions improved.^{33,34,35} Later implementation of PAFT includes *Ahuru Mowai*, a Maori overlay of the PAFT program. Ahuru Mowai recognizes and reflects the strands of *Te Whariki*, the national early childhood curriculum for early childhood centers. It supports the principles of Whakamana (empowerment), Kotahitanga (holistic development), Whanau-tangata (family and community involvement), and Nga hononga (relationships). Ahuru Mowai is accompanied with a resource *Te Mahere Kaupapa Maori* that brings together information on Maori cultural understandings with suggestions for their practical application. A more recent evaluation of PAFT indicates higher participation in child health and development screenings and less need for referral or further assessment. Also, PAFT children are no more likely to have a finding of maltreatment, and families show improved knowledge, ability and confidence in parenting.³⁶

The compilation of research evidence supports Parents as Teachers as a home visiting model with positive outcomes for AIAN families and children. PATNC has made it a priority to continue to explore the evidence-based outcomes for AIAN families.

What experiences have parent educators shared?

As PAT parent educators tell their own stories, we see patterns emerge and problems uncovered, and that helps PAT assess community needs and evaluate the success of our intervention. Stories also help us provide a meaningful exchange for identifying new strategies and possibilities for improvement.

FACE families come together for Family Circles where children experience Social Dances, and they hear the language, they sing the songs, they dance the dances. They get to feel it. It's wonderful to see that.

Tanya Lopez-Martin is Pueblo of Pojoaque from northern New Mexico. She has worked for the Family and Child Education (FACE) home visiting program since 2003 and serves families of the Oneida

Tribe Indians of Wisconsin. Tanya, in talking about challenges in her community, said, "When I first started working for FACE one of the big problems we really had was teen pregnancy. But that has decreased so much in the last several years. The next thing that's come in the area is opioid use and we're seeing that lots of babies are being born addicted to drugs. It's an epidemic that's hitting hard there. We're constantly looking for ways to understand this epidemic and ways to help these children."

While PAT is not a treatment program, it can help connect parents struggling with addiction with recovery services. "I currently work with a mom that is close to 3 years sober with alcohol and opiates and I know that she appreciates the home visits because it helps her also work on her goals to stay clean and stay sober. She talks about that a lot in our visits, about how important it is to be able to want to be a parent and know how to take care of your children...and to know that her children are developmentally okay," said Tanya.

Tanya also talks about how culture is infused into PAT. "Part of the Family and Child Education program is providing language and culture inside the home visit. I've been in the Oneida community for 16 years, and I've been lucky enough to be embraced in the community and have learned a lot of language and culture which helps me to then go and talk to families and teach them, and sometimes it's them teaching me, too. So bringing all of that, cultural objects, or seeing them and encouraging them to go into the longhouse during ceremonies, trying to learn songs and teaching those songs in the language to the kids. Just being able to teach them about their own culture, about their own language is amazing."³⁷

Explicitly soliciting and responding to family and parent educator experiences, feedback, and needs has allowed PAT to keep pace with families' emerging needs and the changing home visiting field.

What future steps must Parents as Teachers take to ensure that AIAN families are served in a respectful, meaningful, and authentic way?

Taken together, there is mounting evidence that Parents as Teachers is both culturally relevant and efficacious for demonstrating positive outcomes for AIAN families. The research to date reinforces the policy of PAT to work and provide services in a flexible and culturally relevant manner. This flexibility can also be seen in the feedback loop wherein responsiveness to families prompts revisions to both the curriculum content and implementation strategies, which further enhance PAT's cultural relevance and efficacy for AIAN families. As Parents as Teachers continues to serve diverse families, it can take several steps to ensure that AIAN families are served in a respectful, meaningful, and authentic way.

- Partner with tribal governments to engage in and collaborate with research in ways that respect tribal sovereignty.
- Welcome and prioritize the voices of AIAN families and parent educators to inspire and inform the learning agenda around culturally relevant PAT delivery.
- Follow up on needs identified through the learning agenda to inform curriculum revisions and training.
- Apply a DEIA lens consistently to training, curriculum development, implementation, screening/surveillance, and outcomes assessment processes, recognizing the historical harm and inequity that has marred past research with AIAN families.
- Modify materials following equitable communication principles.³⁸

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