

5 Ways That Subsistence Practices Support Indigenous Child and Family Well-being

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In 2020, [more than 11 million Indigenous people](#) lived in the United States and United States territories, including 9.7 million who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) and 1.6 million who identify as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI). Unfortunately, a legacy of colonization and land theft has removed many Indigenous people from their traditional cultural practices, such as subsistence, that protect communities' and individuals' well-being.

Indigenous communities and families carry lasting [historical, cultural, and intergenerational traumas](#) as a result of colonization, which included [war, slavery, forced boarding schools, land theft, diseases, and racism](#). Issues resulting from colonization and trauma include [individual, family, and community disparities](#) (e.g., substance use, suicide, poverty). Colonization [continues today but often looks different](#) than its historical antecedents: For example, modern forms of colonization might include [federal and state land and water management](#) practices that [privilege economic ventures](#) and resource extraction, resulting in harm to the lands and waters that Indigenous Peoples rely on for [food security](#). Today, [90 to 98.9 percent](#) of lands [previously cared for by Indigenous Peoples](#) in the United States [sustainably for millennia](#) are now owned by the federal government, states, and territories. With increased non-Indigenous land and water management (which [differs considerably from Indigenous land and water care, nurturance, protection, and stewardship](#)), [more species and ecosystems have declined](#). Additionally, non-Indigenous land and water management practices threaten the well-being of Indigenous communities by diminishing 1) the ability of Indigenous children and families to practice subsistence, which is both a [protective](#) and [preventive](#) factor against [colonization](#) and [historical trauma](#); and 2) [Indigenous food security](#).

Broadly, Indigenous Peoples understand subsistence as the sacred way that they live in relationship with the natural world (although Indigenous languages typically do not have a word for subsistence and the English words [“food security” might be used instead](#)). In a very narrow sense—including, for example, how it is defined in legislation—subsistence can refer to the acts of hunting, fishing, and gathering food. However, an Alaskan Inuit community member explains that subsistence, as an Indigenous concept, [“encompasses everything. Everything we do from the time we wake up, to \[the time we\] sleep, from when we are born, to when we die.”](#) Indigenous Peoples understand subsistence as something that goes far beyond hunting, fishing, and gathering food. They [see subsistence](#) as a [way of life](#); a connection to their

Subsistence

Indigenous understandings of subsistence go far beyond hunting, fishing, and gathering food. [Indigenous Peoples see subsistence](#) as a [way of life](#), a connection to their ancestors, part of their [spirituality](#) and [ceremonies](#), an aspect of their relationality to the world and their role as protectors and caregivers to the earth, and a contributor to their overall [well-being](#).

Cultural Continuity

The act of Indigenous people passing on their [historic/present culture, identity, language, activities, beliefs, and resources](#) to future generations.

ancestors; part of their [spirituality](#) and [ceremonies](#); an aspect of their relationality to the world and [with nonhuman kin](#), and of their role as protectors and caregivers to the earth; and a contributor to their overall [well-being](#).

This resource draws on Indigenous Knowledge and research to explain five ways in which [practicing subsistence can support Indigenous children and family well-being](#).

1. Subsistence enculturates Indigenous children and youth.

[Enculturation](#) is the process by which children and youth learn about cultural practices, such as subsistence, from their cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, and Elders; these learnings, in turn, teach them about their culture and help them form their identities as Indigenous persons. Subsistence practices include such activities as attending [fish camp](#); going [berry picking](#); [harvesting wild rice](#); [harvesting whales](#); and [hunting](#) deer, elk, bear, moose, and other fauna. Subsistence is not only practiced to obtain food, but is an integral part of [Indigenous identity and culture](#). Its practice involves harvesting, processing, and sharing food; singing, dancing, and telling stories about subsistence practices; and feasting together within communities. Subsistence practices also increase [access to and knowledge of Native languages](#), as youth learn and use Indigenous terms for plants and animals.

Research demonstrates that enculturation through cultural continuity for Indigenous youth and people [promotes resilience](#) and serves as a protective factor against [substance use](#) and [mental health](#) issues. This protection happens through a developed sense of [pride in being Indigenous and a feeling of belonging](#) to a culture and community. Enculturation and identity are also tied to improved [educational outcomes](#). Finally, [learning Indigenous languages](#) can strengthen identities, build intergenerational connectedness, reduce substance use, and improve well-being.

2. Subsistence supports Indigenous children’s and families’ health through the physical acts of traditional harvesting and eating nutritious foods.

Historically, Indigenous children and families came together to engage in subsistence as a [traditional activity](#) on lands and waters, as it has been practiced for millennia. Due to colonization, however, Indigenous peoples’ health has suffered as they have been moved off their traditional lands and waters and lost traditional subsistence practices tied to the plants and animals found in those places. Instead, they have been given [unhealthy commodity foods to sustain them in their new environments](#), which have resulted in [physical health issues like diabetes](#).

A renewed engagement in subsistence—an activity that provides food for families, Elders, and the whole community—can give children deeper knowledge of subsistence practices. This, in turn, helps them [build a sense of purpose](#) and develop skills in harvesting, leadership, self-discipline, self-esteem, and working together cooperatively. Promoting subsistence practices would also promote physical activity through [gathering natural foods and eating nutritious](#) unprocessed foods.

3. Subsistence builds people’s relationships with the lands and waters.

By hunting and gathering with their cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, and Elders—or through [culture camps](#)—Indigenous children and youth learn about [relationality](#) and the [kinship humans have with the](#)

[natural world](#) and its [animals, birds](#), and plants. They learn to [harvest sustainably and to ask permission before taking](#). This practice teaches children the history of Indigenous land and water care over millennia and explains the [sacred relationship](#) between humans and the environment. While many Indigenous Peoples have been [displaced through colonization](#), there are movements to return to growing traditional foods and rebuilding relationships with the land and waters to [help address health issues](#) that have resulted from commodity foods and to rekindle the relational approach to the land and water. These efforts [promote food sovereignty](#) through traditional foods, gardening, and animal husbandry, and [reconnect people to the land and waters for mental, emotional, and spiritual health benefits](#).

4. Subsistence creates intergenerational social connectedness between family members and the community.

The social impacts of subsistence include intergenerational relationships and a sense of being [connected to family and the community](#). Subsistence incorporates [intergenerational learning, the sharing of food with Elders](#), and the process through which [adults and Elders pass on Knowledge of food gathering and processing](#)—in short, subsistence helps Indigenous Peoples maintain relationships through food and giving. People also build memories together and [familial bonds](#), which enable mentorship and learning via [intergenerational teachings](#). These bonds lead to [responsibility and accountability](#) for the well-being of others. Indigenous [connectedness is closely tied to happiness, well-being, and healing from historical trauma](#): People not only hunt and gather together but engage in ceremonies and feasts around food, which [protects against mental health issues](#) and [substance use](#).

5. Subsistence engages Indigenous children and families in spirituality and ceremony.

Indigenous spirituality [organizes the world by explaining relationships](#) between people and the natural world. Indigenous children and youth engaging in subsistence learn about how traditional Indigenous [spirituality and ceremony](#) are tied to the relationality between people and the environment. Subsistence is critical to Indigenous Peoples maintaining their [millennia-long cultural and spiritual practices](#). Indigenous adults see subsistence not only as a part of their well-being but [of their spiritual fulfillment](#), and value passing these practices to children. Indigenous spirituality and the worldview of connectedness to the natural world in a circular and reciprocal process [promotes balance, protects from substance use, and supports family well-being](#).

Resources

This resource draws on the following articles and brief:

Gordon, H.S.J., & Zukowski, A. (2023). Indigenous Community-Developed and Community-Led Projects: Addressing Colonization through Using Culture as a Protective Factor. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 14(2). <https://10.18584/iipj.2023.14.2.14723>

Gordon, H.S.J. (2023). Current policy landscape prevents subsistence protections and practices necessary for Alaska Native children and families' well-being. *Child Trends*. <https://doi.org/10.56417/4514n241c>

Gordon, H. S. J. (2022). Alaska Native Subsistence Rights: Taking an Anti-Racist Decolonizing Approach to Land Management and Ownership for Our Children and Generations to Come. *Societies*, 12(3),72. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12030072>

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