PREPARING TO IMPLEMENT THE NTI TRAINING

A GUIDE FOR TRIBAL NATIONS

National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services

CENTER FOR ADOPTION C.A.S.E. SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

nti National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative™

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Honoring the Voices That Shaped This Guide

With sincere gratitude to the Navajo Division for Children and Family Services for sharing their expertise, experiences, and perspectives to help ensure this resource reflects and respects the strengths of tribal communities.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the staff of the Navajo Division for Children and Family Services for their thoughtful contributions, valuable feedback, and meaningful engagement throughout the development of this guide. Their insights, reflections, and collaborative discussions help strengthen the connection between NTI training content and cultural practices, values, and approaches that guide work within tribal communities.

Their expertise and commitment were instrumental in shaping a resource that is more responsive, relevant, and effective for those serving children and families. We are deeply grateful for the time, acknowledgment, and perspectives they shared. Their contributions will help ensure that staff working in tribal communities can more fully benefit from the NTI training curriculum as they support the well–being, safety,
and the success of children and families.

PART ONE: Understanding the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI)

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

The NTI Training Is a National Training

The NTI training was developed for systems across the United States to build the capacity of the child welfare and mental health workforce to effectively address the mental health needs of children and their foster, adoptive, guardianship and kinship families. Some examples and language may reflect state child welfare systems; not all training content may align with tribal practices or individual systems.

What this means for you:

- Not all content will directly reflect Tribal systems or ways of being
- Some terms may feel unfamiliar or misaligned with tribal practices and priorities
- When the training refers to adoption, you may find it helpful to think of it as referring more broadly to permanency (e.g., guardianship, customary adoption, etc.)
- We encourage you to interpret and adapt the learning and concepts in ways that fit your community

NTI Training Curricula Overview

NTI training includes four training tracks designed for different roles:

- Child Welfare Professionals
- Child Welfare Supervisors
- Mental Health Professionals
- Educators and other key school personnel, including, but not limited to, school psychologists, counselors, nurses, teachers, principals, and other key staff who work with students

Each curriculum focuses on building knowledge, skills, and values to better support children and families experiencing separation, loss, and permanency transitions. For people working in related fields, such as juvenile justice, law enforcement, and other human services and child-serving areas, NTI training is also highly relevant and helpful. NTI training staff can help you determine which specific curriculum is most applicable to your role.

It's important to note that the references to specific roles (e.g., "child welfare professional," etc.) do not reflect any specific title, degree, or licensure. These roles for the curricula are meant to highlight for whom a specific curriculum is most relevant, such as distinguishing between staff doing more direct child welfare service and staff in supervisory or leadership roles in child welfare.

Reframing Key Concepts for Tribal Communities: From "Adoption Competence" to "Permanency Competence"

NTI training uses the term "adoption competence," which may not align with tribal practices. You may find it helpful to think of adoption competence as being more broadly referring to "permanency competence," which doesn't have to involve termination of parental rights or be limited to adoption as the only form of permanency.

Being adoption/permanency competent means a professional and/or child-serving system has the knowledge and skills to provide services that are responsive to the unique needs of children and families who experience the child welfare system. Permanency means more than placement. It means helping children and families build secure attachments, maintain healthy connections, and navigate challenges over time with understanding and compassion. Permanency thrives when systems and professionals work together to strengthen families through every stage.

In many tribal communities:

- Termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption may not be the primary or preferred path
- Guardianship, customary adoption, kinship care, and community-based permanency are central

As you engage with NTI training, consider this reframe:

Adoption Competence = Permanency Competence

This means:

- Supporting lifelong relationships and connections
- Honoring family, kinship, and community roles
- Prioritizing belonging, identity, and cultural continuity

NTI training concepts still apply, but they should be understood through tribal definitions of permanency. It is not meant to replace existing knowledge; it is meant to build on it.

You may consider how NTI training connects with existing or planned approaches in your community, such as:

- Tribal models of wellness
- Trauma-informed approaches already being used in practice
- Cross-system communication (e.g., Tribal Child Welfare, Tribal Behavioral/Mental Health, Tribal Law Enforcement, other state/federal agency partners, etc.)
- Staff development and coaching

Reframing Key Concepts for Tribal Communities: Expanding the meaning of "resources."

NTI training materials may refer to "resources" in ways that focus on, or seem to suggest, formal services. It is helpful to think of this more broadly, beyond specific programs or service providers. For example, within tribal communities, resources also include:

- Extended family and kinship networks
- Elders and cultural knowledge keepers
- Traditional healing practices
- Community wisdom and lived experience
- Spiritual and ceremonial supports (when desired by families)
- Natural resources like cultural and subsistence (foods, shelter, clothing, and cultural/traditional practices). Land, timber, water, or energy resources that tribes manage or promote stewardship for future generations.
- Capital resources that can be supported in partnership among tribal programs and their partners through funding opportunities (e.g., outreach efforts to children and families who may share the same clientele)

When you hear references to "resources" within the NTI training modules, consider thinking broadly about all the ways support and strengths exist in your community.

Reframing "Providers" and "Helpers"

Within NTI training modules, you may hear references to therapists, clinicians, and doctors. In tribal communities, healing and support may also come from:

- Traditional healers
- Medicine people
- Spiritual leaders
- Community leaders and elders

Both systems of care can work together. We encourage you to consider how Western and traditional approaches can complement one another and to think about broader sources of healing and support in your community when NTI training mentions specific roles, such as doctors or therapists.

PREPARING FOR NTI TRAINING

Time Commitment and Pacing

- NTI training is a comprehensive training that includes multiple modules.
- Each module may take several hours to complete.

- NTI training has Pacing Guides that are intended to assist you in moving through each training within a set period of time. You may receive guidance from your leadership staff on expectations or requirements for completing NTI training within a specific timeframe.
- The actual time the training takes you will vary depending on your pace and reflection.
- Some participants may spend more time engaging with the material, particularly the Resource Section of each Module Lesson.
- Some material may cover challenging topics or bring up more intense emotions related to trauma, identity, loss, and grief, etc., so you may want to give yourself more time to reflect on the material and how it affects you. Seek any counseling or other support if needed.

Pre and Post Tests

- Each training module has a pre-test at the beginning and a quiz at the end.
- You must get at least 80% of the questions correct to pass each module post-test.
- You have multiple opportunities to achieve a passing percentage on the post-test.
- These post-tests are required for continuing education credit.

Continuing Education Credits

Continuing education credits are available for completing NTI training. NTI training is approved by the University of Connecticut School of Social Work https://www.socialworkers.org/ and the **National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC)** for continuing education credit, and again, you must pass the module post-tests at 80%.

Each curriculum has approved CEs at the following levels:

- Child Welfare Professionals: 17.5 Credit Hours
- Child Welfare Supervisors: 21.5 Credit Hours
- Mental Health Professionals: 27 Credit Hours
- School-Based Professionals: 17.5 Credit Hours

NTI training staff can address specific questions about the continuing education credits available for the NTI training curricula.

Helpful Tips

- Consider how the information can be translated when working in a tribal community or when having to apply any tribally specific knowledge.
- Your agency's leaders may create an environment that will support cultural knowledge or specific tribal work practices that serve children and families.
- Do not rush through the training
- Break it into smaller sessions
- Allow time between modules to reflect and process
- Consider having discussions with colleagues as you go through the training to support each other's learning and to share insights

Create a Supportive Learning Environment

- Choose a space where you feel comfortable and focused
- Minimize distractions when possible
- Have water, tea, or items that help you feel grounded

CARING FOR YOURSELF DURING NTI TRAINING

Acknowledge Lived Experience

Many topics in NTI training, such as trauma, separation, grief, and identity, may connect to:

- Your personal experiences
- Your family or community experiences
- The experiences of the children and families you serve

You may have emotional responses to the material. This is normal.

Practice Self-Awareness and Care

- Pause the training if needed
- Take breaks
- Step outside or move your body
- Engage in practices that help you feel grounded (e.g., seek out a traditional healer, do a smudge/spiritual cleansing of self/office space/office, etc.)

If needed, reach out to:

- A supervisor
- A colleague
- A trusted support person

Honor Cultural Ways of Processing

Healing and reflection can happen in many ways, including:

- Talking with others such as elders, traditional healers, and medicine person
- Spending time in nature,
- Engaging in cultural or spiritual practices
- Quiet reflection

We encourage you to process the learning and healing in ways that feel right for you.

APPLYING THE LEARNING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

As you move through NTI training, consider:

How does this apply to our community?

- How do these ideas align with our tribal values?
- How might the ideas need to be adapted or reframed to fit with our ways of being and our practices?

- How can I assist with the cultural adaptability of the training concepts, if needed, to fit well in my community?

Considering Connections Between NTI's Training Concepts and Tribal Approaches to Relationships and Connections

- How is the child/youth connected to the familial/community relationship?
- What is the child/youth and family's cultural connectedness?
- How are traditional knowledge and values woven into a child and family?
- How do cultural practices support healing?
- How can culture support a child's permanency?

Once you begin the NTI training, you may find part two of this guide (below) helpful as you consider how to apply NTI training concepts and integrate them into your work.

For more information about NTI training, please visit www.adoptionsupport.org/nti.

If you are taking NTI training as part of receiving technical assistance (TA) from the National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services, reach out to your TA leads with any questions or to your NTI Implementation Specialist.

You may also send your questions to info@adoptionsupport.org.

PART TWO: TRIBAL COMPANION GUIDE FOR NTI TRAINING

INTEGRATING NTI TRAINING WITH TRIBAL PRACTICE

Moving from Training to Practice in Tribal Communities

NTI training is most meaningful when it is not just completed, but applied in ways that reflect tribal values, relationships, and ways of being. For tribal nations, this means using NTI training as a supporting framework rather than a replacement for existing knowledge, culture, or practice.

Start with What Already Exists

Tribal communities already have strong, time-tested approaches to supporting children and families. These may include:

- Kinship and extended family systems
- Cultural teachings about belonging, identity, and responsibility
- Community-based caregiving
- Traditional healing and spiritual practices
- Collective approaches to decision-making

NTI training should build on these strengths, not override them.

Practice Reflection:

- What do we already do that supports your children, families, permanency, and healing?
- How does this align with what NTI training is teaching?
- Utilization of staff with strong cultural traditional connections to support?

Align NTI Training with Tribal Definitions of Permanency

NTI training emphasizes permanency, but in many tribal communities, permanency is not defined by adoption or termination of parental rights.

Instead, permanency may mean:

- A child remaining connected to family, clan, and community
- Multiple caregivers sharing responsibility
- Lifelong relational ties, even when living arrangements change
- A child remaining connected with cultural and spiritual ways of being

This is where permanency competence becomes critical.

In Practice:

- When NTI training discusses “placement stability,” consider relational stability.
- When NTI training discusses “caregivers,” include all immediate/extended family and community caregivers.
- When NTI training discusses “permanency planning,” include guardianship, customary adoption, and kinship-based solutions

Integrate Cultural Identity into Practice

NTI training highlights identity development, but tribal communities bring a deeper understanding of identity as:

- Cultural
- Spiritual
- Relational
- Community-based

In Practice:

- Support children in maintaining connections to language, traditions, and community
- Recognize that identity is shaped by where a child comes from and who they belong to
- Support creativity in case planning for a child who is wanting or is richly grounded in language, traditions, and community. Example: build in rites-of-passage traditions so the child remains connected to tradition, family, and culture, with the family as the source for initiating, coordinating, planning, and implementing. If there are safety concerns, build in a safety plan to support the child while recognizing the child’s cultural milestone.
- Include cultural knowledge keepers and family members in conversations and planning or strategizing how identity can be accomplished

Expand Healing Beyond Clinical Models

NTI training includes references to clinical and therapeutic approaches to healing. These are valuable, but in tribal communities, healing is often broader in scope.

Healing approaches may include:

- Ceremony or traditional practices
- Guidance and support from elders, traditional healers, or medicine people
- Restore balance, connecting with land, storytelling, physical/spiritual health
- Connection to culture and community

Healing is not only individual but also often collective and relational.

In Practice:

- Ask children, youth, and their families what healing looks like for them.
- Offer both formal services and traditional supports when appropriate.
- Respect family choice in how they seek support.

Apply Trauma-Informed Practice Through a Tribal Lens

NTI training emphasizes trauma-informed care. In tribal communities, this includes:

- Understanding historical and intergenerational trauma
- Recognizing the impact of federal policies that disrupted families, communities, ways of being, and traditional practices
- Viewing behavior through a lens of survival, adaptation, and resilience

In Practice:

- Use traditional and cultural ways of healing and creating balance. Sometimes, when we experience grief and loss, we as adults know the impact of losing a loved one, but we may not recognize how this affects a child/youth. For example, we can foster a prayer or a ceremony for a child and their family.
- Through a traumatic event that happens within the tribal community, perhaps through the support of supervisors and staff to have a program-wide debrief, offering prayers, and healing to aid secondary trauma, grief that may result from a loss of a loved one, whether a parent, family member, or child who was involved in the child welfare system.
- Shift from thinking in terms of “What’s wrong?” to “What has happened, and what traumatic events has the person experienced?”
- Recognize strengths alongside challenges.
- Recognize, identify, and nurture the ways that tribal people are resilient.
- Encourage those with lived experiences in child welfare-mental health to share their stories and promote healing for those individuals, as well as the staff who may have worked with them or who are/were a resource family for their own relative.
- Avoid pathologizing cultural differences

Strengthen Communication Across Systems

Many tribal staff work across multiple systems (e.g., child welfare, courts, behavioral health, law enforcement, community programs).

NTI training can support:

- Shared language and understanding about key concepts such as trauma, grief, and loss, and the impact on children and families
- Knowledge of the complexity of services that a child and family experience when a child/youth receives child welfare and mental health services.
- Better coordination between programs
- Stronger understanding of family context

In Practice:

- Share relevant information that supports safety and understanding (while respecting confidentiality)
- Collaborate across programs to support the whole child and family

- Use NTI training concepts to strengthen, not replace, existing communication and collaboration practices (e.g., multi-disciplinary teams, etc.)
- Cultivate cross-system collaboration that may work best (e.g., in-person, virtual, hybrid, etc.)

Support Families Through Grief and Loss

NTI training highlights grief and loss, and in tribal communities in particular, these experiences may be:

- Ongoing
- Shared across families and communities
- Connected to historical experiences

In Practice:

- Support children in understanding their story in a culturally respectful way
- Support parents, even when reunification is not possible
- Recognize grief in caregivers and staff as well
- Consider weaving in traditional/cultural ways of being to support the child, their family, and the resource family. Examples could include: developing a cultural and wellness plan that supports a child's visitation plan, cultural events that are critical for obtaining a traditional life's milestone (e.g., rites of passage, etc.), connections to seasons/land (e.g., first snow, food gatherings, first kill, name giving, introducing child/family back into the circle after mourning, etc.)

Integrate Tribal Models of Wellness

Where applicable, NTI training concepts can be aligned with existing models and frameworks of wellness that emphasize:

- Balance
- Harmony
- Relationships
- Holistic well-being

NTI training is one tool among many, meant to add to the rich knowledge that you already bring to your work, including:

- Your connection to community
- Your cultural understanding
- Your lived and professional experience

As you engage with NTI training, we encourage you to:

- Take what is helpful
- Adapt what is needed
- Ground your learning in the strengths of your people

In Practice:

- Map NTI training concepts to tribal wellness frameworks
- Explore and consider how current practice can be adapted to meet the needs of your children, families, and communities, especially from a tribal and trauma-informed approach.
- Reinforce that well-being includes emotional, spiritual, cultural, and relational health

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Integrating NTI training with Tribal practice means:

- Keeping culture at the center
- Expanding, not narrowing, definitions of permanency and healing
- Honoring lived experience and community knowledge
- Adapting concepts to reflect tribal realities
- Using NTI training as a tool, not a rulebook

Reflection Questions

- How does this training align with what I know about my community?
- What feels useful? What do I need to reframe to make it more useful to my community and my work?
- How can I adapt this knowledge to better serve children and families?
- Who in my community can help guide this work?

For Supervisors and Leadership: Using NTI Training as a Tool for Staff Growth

NTI training can help identify:

- Strengths in staff knowledge and practice
- Areas for continued growth
- Opportunities for coaching and support

In Practice:

- Use NTI training to guide supervision conversations
- Encourage reflection, not just completion of the training
- Connect staff to additional supports and resources
- Foster ways to continue informing child welfare and mental health practice
- Inspire cross-collaboration to support knowledge and practice among programs and agencies

Tribal nations are essential partners in advancing the National Center's mission, and your leadership, knowledge, and traditions continue to shape what meaningful, effective systems of care look like for children and families. As you engage with NTI training, we encourage you to

use it as a guide that offers tools, language, and perspectives to strengthen your work, while also remaining grounded in the cultural values, practices, and relationships that have always supported your communities. Your wisdom, lived experience, and connection to culture are not separate from this training. They are what make it meaningful. By embracing NTI training in a way that honors your traditions and uplifts your strengths, you are helping to build a future where all children and families experience true belonging, healing, and lifelong connection.