

Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

COMMUNITY OF LEARNING ON INDIGENOUS EARLY RELATIONAL WELLBEING

TRC Brief | June 2024



PURPOSE AND SHARED GOALS

The [Tribal Early Childhood Research Center's](#) (TRC) Indigenous Early Relational Wellbeing Community of Learning was established in summer 2021 and is comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies who are Tribal early childhood program and community partners, early childhood researchers, practitioners, and federal staff. This Community of Learning was formed to address the need for culturally responsive frameworks to understand and measure positive development and relational wellbeing among young children in Indigenous communities and contexts. Collective goals of this CoL are to understand and describe Indigenous early relational wellbeing, identify key drivers and indicators of this construct, and co-create a conceptual model and measure to guide future research, practice, and policy.



STEPS ALONG THE WAY

Formative Research on Caregiver-Child Interaction and Relationships

Prior to establishing this CoL, a TRC study team sought out to assess how well existing measures of parent-child interaction work with Indigenous families and Tribal early childhood programs. To begin, we conducted an extensive literature review on caregiver-child relationships within Indigenous contexts and worldviews. This formative research, combined with early conversations with the TRC's Leadership Team and Steering Committee, led to recognition that existing measures of caregiver-child interaction are valuable but do not adequately consider the cultural context, values, and relationships in Indigenous families and communities.

Shift to Relational Frameworks of Indigenous Child Development

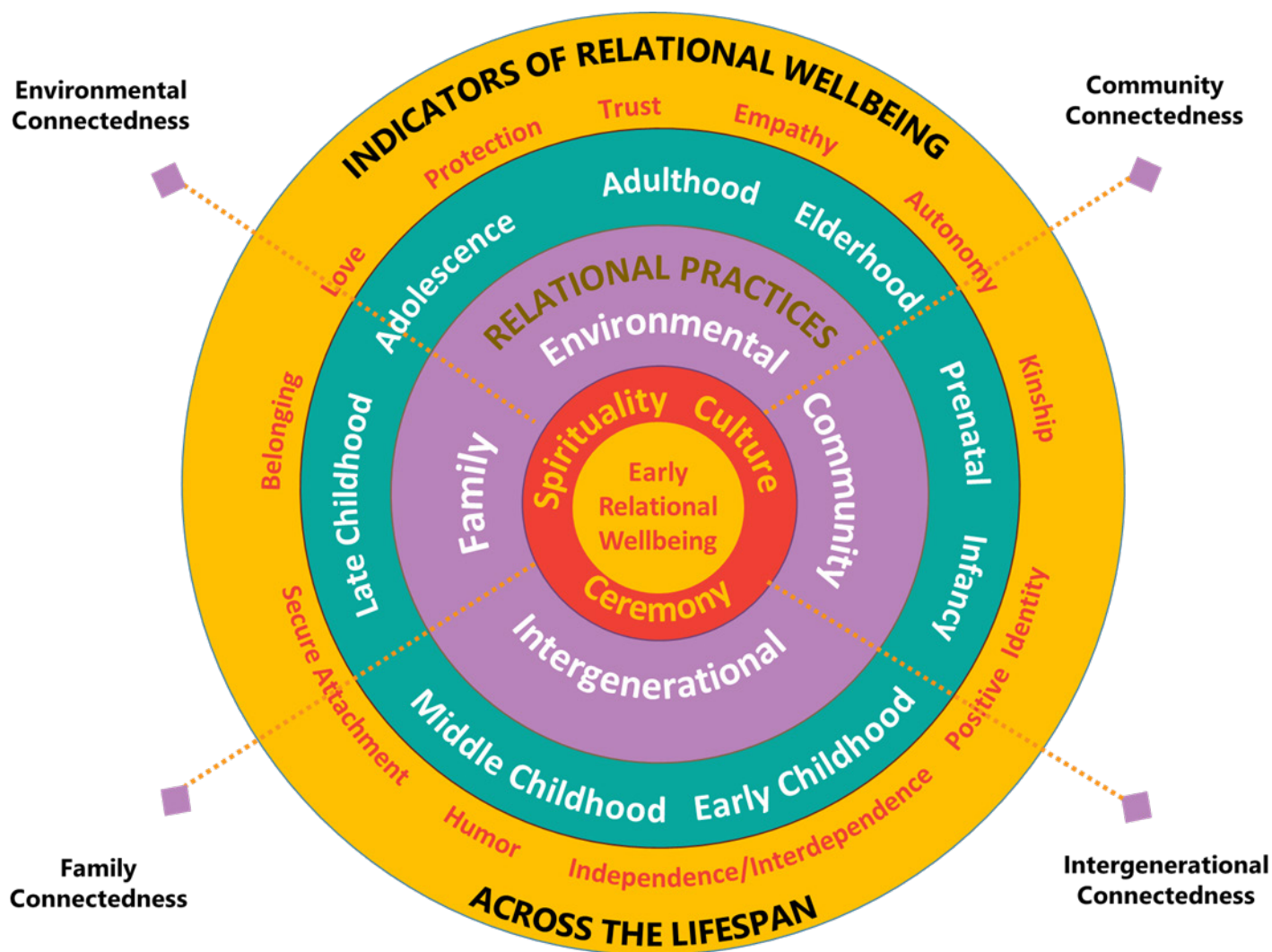
With this recognition of going beyond the caregiver-child dyad, we expanded the literature review to include relational frameworks of Indigenous child development and were inspired by an existing Indigenous connectedness framework of a child's relational identity (Ullrich, 2019). Shortly after, we established a CoL and began having conversations about the formative research and how to apply the Indigenous connectedness framework to early childhood. It was through these early conversations that

our focus shifted from understanding caregiver-child interaction within Indigenous contexts to identifying and conceptualizing a more holistic construct of relationships and connectedness in early childhood. This construct evolved into what our CoL named Indigenous early relational wellbeing (ERW), which is grounded in Indigenous worldviews and values around nurturing belonging, relational identity, and wellbeing among young children.

Developing a Conceptual Model

Between fall 2021 and spring 2023, our CoL developed a model of Indigenous ERW that applies the Indigenous connectedness framework (Ullrich, 2019) to early childhood within Indigenous families and contexts. The model is illustrated in Figure 1 and highlights relational practices as the heart of connection and relational wellbeing. At the center of the model are spirituality, culture, and ceremony, which are foundational to nurturing Indigenous ERW. From that center are relational practices that nurture connectedness and interdependence within and across the family, multiple generations, community, and the environment. The model also includes the development of relational wellbeing across the lifespan and potential indicators of Indigenous ERW, such as love, belonging, secure attachment, humor, and trust.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of Indigenous early relational wellbeing, an application of the Indigenous connectedness framework (Ullrich, 2019)



Developing a Measure

Our model of Indigenous ERW is informing the creation of a measure to understand the origins of relational wellbeing among Indigenous children and families and its relationship to positive development. Between late 2022 and summer 2023, we conducted a group concept mapping (GCM) study to systematically gather perspectives of relational practices that promote ERW among Indigenous children prenatal to age 5. GCM is used to develop theory and new measures or scales, plan programs and interventions, and evaluate programs (Kane & Trochim, 2009; Kane et al., 2017; Rosas & Kane, 2012; Rosas & Ridings, 2017) and is increasingly used within Indigenous communities to address

complex public health issues (Cargo et al., 2019; Firestone et al., 2022; Kading et al., 2019; Kane & Rosas, 2017; McBeath et al., 2021; Sommerfeld et al., 2021). The process includes brainstorming, idea sorting and rating, and interpretation of the relationships between clusters by participants (Everitt, 1980; Kane & Trochim, 2009; Kane et al., 2017; Kruskal & Wish, 1978; Rosas & Kane, 2012; Rosas & Ridings, 2017).

Findings from this study identified meaningful dimensions of Indigenous ERW and more than 120 relational practices or items to include in the new measure. We are in the process of using those results to refine and pilot a measure of Indigenous ERW with Tribal early childhood programs in culturally and regionally diverse

communities. The pilot study is planned to begin in fall 2024 and will inform a future validation study with a larger developmental sample.

SUMMARY

Our CoL approach ensures relational worldviews, lived experiences, and Indigenous knowledge about raising young children and are woven into every step of our work – from conceptualization to dissemination. This collaborative research contributes foundational knowledge of Indigenous ERW pathways and will result in a culturally grounded conceptual model and measure that could be used widely within and across Indigenous early childhood practice, research, and policy. Ultimately, this research will set the stage for the development of early childhood interventions that promote Indigenous child and family wellbeing through connectedness to family, multiple generations, community, and the environment.

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