

## Article 28

# Drawing From Native American Tradition in Counseling All Children

*Darline Hunter*

Many of our children feel disconnected from society and themselves. This sense of separateness is displayed in academic and legal difficulties, acting out behavior, and emotional disturbance. The Native American tradition teaches the harmonious coexistence of everything in our natural environment. This harmony can heal the disconnectedness that our children and adolescents feel and are acting out. The interrelatedness of this philosophy can be used to help our students reconnect to society and to themselves and to nature. The healing power of nature has long been attested to by poets and prophets, but it is more currently being reviewed in the literature of counseling under the various nomenclatures of animal-facilitated therapy, horticulture therapy, and natural environment therapy. Native American lore abounds with reference to and reverence for this special bond between people and nature. Contemporary writers assert that mental health may be directly related to this relationship.

The essence of American Indian spirituality is about feeling and connection. The feeling of connection is available to all beings and experienced in a variety of ways. In the Circle of Life, all things are connected, all things have purpose, and all things are worthy of respect and reverence. The circle symbolizes the cyclical nature of our world as evidenced in the cycle of seasons and the rhythms of the sun and moon. The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the cyclical nature of the world and of the self. All four basic directions, each representing an aspect of life, are necessary for a harmonious and functional way of life. In the Cherokee teachings, the north represents the mind; the south represents the natural environment; the east represents the spirit; and the west represents the body. All aspects of life must be in balance and in harmony. In this Native American philosophy, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, and everything in our natural environment coexists harmoniously. Likewise, the inner dimensions of mind, body, and heart are not separate parts, but connected dimensions flowing from one another. Since this interrelationship may be disrupted by discord, the challenge is to avoid conflict in order to balance this interrelationship of mind, body, and heart as a unified whole.

All things have an important and necessary purpose in the grand scheme. Relationships are primary to the Native American philosophy and are highly influential on individual growth. Axelson (1993) translated this philosophy into the following cultural values: Individuals may do as they please, but only if their actions are in harmony with nature. The person is valued for who he or she is rather than for his or her possessions. Child rearing emphasizes self-sufficiency, which is always in harmony with nature. Respect for the elderly is absolute. This ancient wisdom from the Native American Indian tradition provides a way of thinking and behaving, which facilitates the connection of the individual to him- or herself, others, his or her community, nature, and a great universal spirit. All of these points of connection aid the person in surviving and thriving physically, emotionally, and spiritually in a hostile environment, whether ancient or current.

Our children and adolescents of today often feel disconnected from themselves, their family, their peers, the school system, and society. They often have no sense of their place in society and feel lost, not only geographically but also emotionally. In order to reach these disconnected children, counselors must help them develop a sense of oneness with all beings. The wisdom of the Native American tradition can form a structure within which nature, pets, and the therapeutic relationship can heal the alienation that keeps our children on the edge of society and prevents them from fully functional and productive lives. This sense of connection can help them bridge the differences that divide them from others and society, whether those differences are based on culture, language, or disability.

The challenge for counselors, parents, and teachers is to find ways to reach these unreachable youth, by building confidence, self-esteem, and empathy. Animals, nature, and the values of giving, sharing, and cooperation, at the core of the American Indian spirituality, can open many of the closed doors of the lives of our alienated children and adolescents. Doors closed by language, discrimination, or disability can be opened by teaching our children that they are naturally an important part of the interconnection of all beings. Brendtro and Van Bockern (1998) and

Brokenleg (1996) proposed that when the four basic needs of all humans (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) are not met by the family, community, and other cultural institutions, children and adolescents become alienated and act out their sense of disconnectedness. They suggested that the unmet needs of belonging can be corrected through relationships of trust and intimacy. The unmet needs of mastery can be healed through involvement in a setting with opportunities for meaningful achievement. The unmet needs of independence can be addressed with opportunities to develop positive leadership and self-discipline skills and confidence. The unmet needs of generosity can be provided through experiencing the joy of helping others. These experiences can be provided within the counseling relationship and experience.

Cullinan (2002) advocated that the schools begin to use practices that follow a philosophical direction that will meet these basic needs. One such educational model, which is designed to address the unmet needs of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, is proposed by Brendtro and Van Bockern (1998). Their counseling model drew upon Native American Indian child-raising philosophy to create the theme for their circle of courage model, which works to reclaim the children.

Connected students feel more secure, survive crises better, and are less likely to see themselves as victims. They are more giving, and tend to think outside themselves. These connected children and adolescents access and express their feelings more easily; therefore, they act out less. With improved self-esteem, they move between cultures more easily, feel and act more calmly, and are more accepting of others. It is the use of the Native American philosophy of interconnectedness that can blend the techniques of pet therapy and nature therapy in teaching students to connect. There is a growing literature on the therapeutic use of the human-animal bond in education, psychology, and counseling. Nature has long been acknowledged as a source of healing, whether by the great spiritual traditions or by modern day psychiatric and medical facilities.

Garrett and Crutchfield (1997) developed a unity model of group work, which is a synthesis of contemporary counseling techniques and traditional Native American wisdom. There is a comprehensive approach to developing self-esteem, self-determination, body awareness, and self-concept. Useful with all children, regardless of race or ethnicity, it emphasizes the universal characteristics of the need to feel a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The focus of this article builds upon the unity model of Garrett and Crutchfield with the additional components

of pet and nature therapy. This model is compatible with the Native American concepts of the harmonious coexistence of everything in our natural environment. The inner dimensions of mind, body, and heart are not separate parts, but connected dimensions flowing from one another, whose interrelation may be disrupted by dissonance or discord. The challenge is to balance the interrelation as a unified whole. All things have an important and necessary purpose in this greater scheme. Relationships and their influence on individual growth are accentuated. The cyclical nature of the world and self depend on harmony and balance. The four directions of the Medicine Wheel depict this harmony: the east stands for self-esteem; the south stands for self-determination; the west stands for body awareness; the north stands for self-concept. Likewise, the Medicine Wheel can be used to depict the four components of mind, body, spirit, and natural environment.

When the need for belonging is met, children become cooperative, friendly, affectionate, respectful, trusting, and sympathetic. The counselor can assist in the development of a positive attachment through the use of group activities, that incorporate Native American Indian activities and philosophies. The Talking Circle is a reminder of the interrelationships with one another and with the world. Coming together can develop respect and acceptance of self and others. The purposes of the Talking Circle are to bring people together in a respectful manner for sharing and for teaching to occur through listening and learning. All who are within the circle have an opportunity to talk with equal respect and no interruption. A member of the Talking Circle is not expected to talk unless he or she wants to do so. Those who choose to talk are encouraged to talk, not only from the mind but also from the heart, sharing innermost feelings. When all have spoken, the circle is closed with the reminder that all that is said in the Talking Circle is to remain within the circle and that identities and words are confidential. In this traditional way, there is a coming together to connect with each other and all living things in order to find strength and live harmoniously.

The Native American philosophy of being one with all beings ties in easily with the use of pet therapy, which helps the child form strong emotional bonds and develop empathy. Through interaction with animals, children learn to understand not only the feelings and needs of animals but also the feelings and needs of fellow human beings. Multiple studies have found that children owning pets feel more empathy toward other people, and that animal-based education relates to higher empathy scores. Interacting with animals gives children and adolescents the opportunity to learn to give and receive affection while pets substitute for human

attachment by reducing loneliness and providing love. Students deprived of positive, nurturing human affection and attachment can reduce loneliness by substituting the unconditional love given to and received from a pet. Taking care of animals within the counseling setting provides opportunities for the children to consider the needs of the animals and to feel the inner satisfaction of giving of themselves as they provide for the needs of the animals. The children can project their own feelings on to the animals, which facilitates expression of feelings. The unconditional acceptance and love of the animals for the children promotes a strong sense of connection and belonging.

Children develop a sense of mastery through opportunities for developing competence. Native American children are taught that someone with more competence is not a rival but a resource, and that achievement is sought for personal reasons, not for competition. The counselor, through the use of Native American art, literature, and dance, can build creativity and self-expression. The activity of making medicine shields addresses the need for mastery. The medicine shield is used as an expression of the unique gifts that the maker wishes to display about his or her current life journey. Every shield carries medicine, or powerful energy, through art and self-expression. Each shield demonstrates the lessons the maker learned from the four directions on the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the individual journey each person must take to find his or her own path. The circle represents the Circle of Life while the center of the circle represents the eternal fire. The eagle, flying toward the east, which is used on the medicine shield, is a symbol of strength, endurance, and vision, an excellent symbol of mastery for our children to adopt. The children may want to include some of the following on their shields: three personally important people, a place that provides security, two enjoyable activities, three words the child would like to have said about him or her, a personality trait of which the child is proud.

The use of pet therapy provides the opportunity for the students to build self-esteem and confidence by working with and caring for the animals. Research has indicated that there is a positive correlation between the presence of a dog in the lives of students and their success. Keeping pets in the classroom enhances self-esteem (Bergesen, 1989), and early adolescent self-esteem is enhanced by pet ownership (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). Learning to garden in nature therapy produces vegetables and flowers, which then can be shared. Both the skill of gardening and the internal reward of sharing the products of gardening are sources of pride for the student. Being able to identify and knowing the names of local birds is a

cognitive skill, which can be shared with others and bring self-esteem. The development of a child's confidence in his or her ability to interact competently with nature allows our modern students to acquire the mastery that their Native American peers were more able to achieve naturally.

The Native American Indian practice of encouraging children to make decisions, solve problems, and be responsible, by adults who model and teach responsible behavior, produces children who feel respected and powerful. Children who feel strong and independent have no need to disobey in order to demonstrate independence or to bully others for respect or to attain power. Counselors can provide for this need for independence by teaching self-management as well as the recognition and the management of emotions, behaviors, and thoughts. Group exercises in which the children can help decide on rules and group procedures impart a sense of self-management. The Native American practice of renaming the child with an animal name or name from nature, which denotes values of strength and courage, demonstrates respect for each child.

The Harmony Circle, an activity suggested by Garrett and Crutchfield (1997), can be used to teach the blending of independence and belonging. In the Harmony Circle each child selects an instrument to play from among wood blocks, bells, sticks, plastic bottles, and rattles. The children then follow the leader who establishes a rhythm allowing the children to improvise a song. The concepts of cooperation and harmony can be discussed along with how important each person is to the creation of the whole song.

The Medicine Bag activity teaches the concept of each child having a special gift from Mother Earth. The child makes and decorates a cloth bag into which a symbol of his or her own special talents is placed. The child is told that these special gifts are their personal way of life, referred to as medicine by Native Americans.

Pet therapy provides the child with the opportunity to care for the animals in the counselor's office or in the child's own home, giving the child a sense of control and responsibility, as does allowing the child to take the leashed animal outside for a walk. Learning to appropriately set limits for the pet leads easily into lessons on how to set limits with peers. Children who have learned to manage pets can be more assertive with peers, thus developing feelings of self-respect and independence. Encouraging the child to decide what object of nature he or she will bring into the office to talk about at the next session, or decide where the counselor and child will walk outside as they talk, gives the child a sense of self-management and autonomy.

Native American Indian youth prove their own virtue by helping other people. Power and purpose is demonstrated by contributing to others' lives. The counselor can provide opportunities to build altruism, empathy, and caring. Group exercises such as passing the talking stick gives the child the opportunity to share listening and talking time. After taking a nature walk during which "a stick finds the group," each member contributes to the decoration of the stick. This activity builds trust, cooperation, and closeness within the group. The gift exercise teaches the generosity of the Earth. The children are asked to search outside for something special, any object that seems special to the child. The children bring the object into the group, talk about it and why it has special qualities. The children are then reminded to always thank Mother Earth for sharing this special gift with them, which also teaches the importance of environmental awareness.

The Native American practice of give away, as presented by McFadden (1999), can be used as a group activity to encourage children to honor others for their assistance and achievements and to promote the sharing of materials and self. The children are encouraged to make a token of their appreciation for another group member and to give it to the child as a demonstration that his or her efforts have been appreciated. With the use of pet therapy, children develop self-esteem when they give of themselves to animals that need care and love. The animals can be used as a vehicle to teach the art of sharing and taking turns as each child in the group hands over the animal to the next child in line. Sharing flowers or vegetables from a garden the child has planted and tended through the experience of nature therapy gives the child the opportunity to feel the internal benefits of being generous and to be verbally praised for sharing. Animals and nature can provide the opportunity for projects involving volunteering. The collection and pressing of leaves and flowers can provide supplies for crafts to be made to share with others. Note cards and bookmarks made with the pressed flowers make gifts to be presented to others. The generosity of the animals and nature can be emphasized as the animals and the earth give of themselves to the child and the people being visited. The children can plan an outing in which the counselor's pet is taken on visits to nursing homes or senior citizen centers. The Native American belief in the stewardship of nature can be emphasized as the children interact with nature and others who are in need.

The innate human need for connection is not only an emotional and social need but a need that is also deeply rooted neurologically in the human brain. The ancient wisdom of the Native American traditions can be used as a vehicle for the modern-day counselor to

assist in the healing of our children and adolescents who feel disconnected from society, themselves, and nature. The harmony inherent in the Native American philosophy can be a counseling vehicle to help heal the disconnectedness that our children and adolescents feel and are acting out. This interrelatedness has the potential to assist them in reconnecting to society and to aid in the reconnection of their fragmented selves. The use of pet therapy and nature therapy are natural adjuncts to the use of Native American philosophy and activities. The use of animals and nature activities are ways to make concrete the Native American wisdom, which teaches the interconnected condition of all beings.

## References

- Axelson, J. A. (1993). *Counseling and development in a multicultural society*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Bergesen, F. J. (1989). *The effects of pet-facilitated therapy on the self-esteem and socialization of primary school children*. Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Relationship Between Humans and Animals, Monaco.
- Brendtro, L. K., & Van Bockern, S. (1998). Courage for the discouraged: A psychoeducational approach to troubled and troubling children. In R. J. Whelan (Ed.), *Emotional and behavioral disorders: A 25-year focus* (pp. 229-252). Denver, CO: Love.
- Brokenleg, M. (1996). Unshackled by visions and values. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 5, 136-139.
- Covert, A. M., Whiren, A. P., Keith, J., & Nelson, D. (1985). Pets, early adolescents, and families. *Marriage and Family Review*, 8, 95-108.
- Cullinan, D. (2002). *Students with emotional and behavior disorders: An introduction for teachers and other helping professionals*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Garrett, M. T., & Crutchfield, L. B. (1997). Moving full circle: A unity model of group work with children. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 22(3), 175-188.
- McFadden, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Transcultural counseling*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.