

THE INDIAN EXTENDED FAMILY CONCEPT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PARENTING

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Very few generalizations can correctly be made of Indians, but it is safe to say that in general most of the diverse Indian tribes have traditionally been organized around the concept of the "extended family," as opposed to the European white nuclear family.

One of the major factors impacting Indian child abuse and neglect has been the breakdown of the extended family network among Indian populations. As Indians have been relocated to urban areas (by the government, by necessity to seek jobs, or for whatever reasons), the extended family support system has broken down in terms of the physical proximity of other family members to assist in child-rearing.

Let us compare some of the ways Indian extended families have functioned in terms of child-rearing with the nuclear family practices of child-rearing prevalent in white society.

Within most Indian tribes, parents are not expected to take on the complete responsibility of rearing the child. A group of siblings or cousins live close together, in physical proximity, often under the same roof, or certainly within easy walking distance. Often grandparents live with their own grown children, and the grandparents, aunts, uncles, all share the task of child-rearing.

Sometimes it becomes necessary for economic reasons (or health) for children to move from one household to another, but all within the extended family network. Most tribal traditions respect the wish of the child in terms of which relatives he or she wants to live with. Within the extended family, young parents can expect to get as much help as needed to take care of their children, especially during times of crisis or emergency. Young parents are usually not expected to make ALL the decisions about their children all by themselves.

In contrast, the young white parents are expected by their families to be totally independent as soon as they marry, and self-sufficient in terms of raising their children. Grandparents may occasionally babysit, but seldom for more than a few hours at a time.

Young Indians often appear to have more respect for their elders than do young whites, and therefore usually listen to advice from elders about child-rearing. Most Indian elders do not expect a young Indian parent, with no experience in parenting, to be able to do the job all alone. In short, the responsibility for the children lies in a greater circle of adults than just the parents, and is sometimes even tribal in scope.

The expectations of the dominant white culture are in sharp contrast to the Indian tribal experience. In the dominant culture, young parents more frequently live long distances from THEIR parents. When the first baby is born, they usually take complete responsibility for the child, a responsibility which sometimes they are ill prepared to fulfill--especially if the parents are themselves still teenagers.

Often social workers see an Indian child being raised by someone other than their immediate parents and consider it a case of abandonment. This has led to many incidences of Indian children being removed legally from parental (and familial) custody with no just cause. Sometimes this separation of the Indian child from its extended family has been rationalized on the basis of the necessity to provide schooling for the child.

Such separations have been major factors in the breakdown of Indian family traditions that have maintained them over centuries. (See separate papers on the Relationship of Indian Culture to Child Abuse and Neglect, The Social Worker and the Indian Client, and the "Boarding School Syndrome"). This widespread destruction of Indian families cannot help but have critical effects on the Indian child, who is once again the victim of adult mismanagement.

There is a direct ratio between the breakdown of these traditional Indian support systems and practices of child-rearing and the rising incidence of Indian child abuse and neglect. Therefore we cannot refuse to consider this factor in attempting to address the issue of child abuse and neglect in the Indian community. Wherever the extended family has been broken up--by urban relocation, by attendance at boarding schools, and other institutionalization of Indian children--rates of abuse and neglect soar. Conversely, where the extended family still functions as a support system for young parents, abuse and neglect are minimal to non-existent, because the network of caring relatives acts as a buffer or a check against the other factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect.

Many urban Indians in cities where there are major Indian populations are realizing the importance of the extended family, and are creating new groupings in the urban areas that play the same role. Such communal support groups of close friends and possibly some blood relations very often serve on other levels than child-rearing issues, and may even be "living cooperatives" sharing gardens, automobiles, and other life-support systems.

As more and more non-Indian social workers become sensitized to the concept of the Indian extended family, they will be less likely to define a child as "abandoned" or "neglected" who has merely been left temporarily with some distant blood relative, and there will be less removal of Indian children from their primary extended family system. Such tendency can only result in a strengthening of the Indian family and community, and a reversal of the terrible history of virtual "kidnapping" of Indian children by white social workers.