



**TWO-SPIRITED YOUTH:**  
SACRED GIFTS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE IN  
INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND YOUTH



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### LaVonne Fox, PhD, MOTR/L

Aniin, my name is LaVonne (Poitra) Fox. I was born and raised in the Turtle Mountains in North Dakota. There are other Indigenous Nations that claim their traditional territory is the heart of Turtle Island (North America), but with respect to my many relatives, we believe the heart of Turtle Island resides here in Dunseith, ND where I grew up. I spent 35 years living away from my homeland, but it never left me. I came home every couple of months just to reconnect and rejuvenate. There is so much to be said about a deep connection to the land and my relatives. I knew I would always return. I gained an education and valuable experience with the plans to return and give back to my community. When the opportunity came, I did just that.



### Thomasine Heitkamp, LCSW

I am Thomasine Heitkamp. I was born and raised in Mantador, ND, where my family of nine was one-tenth of the total population of the village. My Mom was a school cook and janitor and my Dad was a seasonal construction worker. My parents encouraged me, along with my six siblings, to enroll in college. My subsequent Bachelor's and Master's degrees in social work allowed me to work for many years in social work education at the University of North Dakota where I was mentored by tribal elders and students regarding the power of Indigenous traditions and customs. I am grateful for the kindness of many who guided, and continue to guide, my efforts as an Indigenous ally. My commitment to the contributions of this tool kit are in support of two-spirited youth and educators, administrators, and counselors that serve as role models in our schools.

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- Rachel Navarro, Co-Project Director MHTTC, Principal Investigator, Editor
- Casey Morton, Project Manager, Copy Editor MHTTC

# ARTWORK

## OJIBWE COVER ART

### Frankie Jo Morin

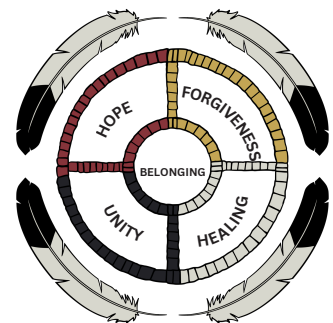
Frankie Jo Morin grew up in Belcourt, North Dakota, within the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians Reservation. Interested in art and storytelling her entire life, she hopes to become a professional comic book artist and/or writer, animator, or storyboard artist. Inspired by animated and written stories, she's become an autodidact of frame-by-frame 2D animation, comic-book making, storyboarding and illustration. She's spent many of her years researching and developing her own personal comics, stories and animated projects. While creating personal webcomics, animations, and illustrations, she's also had opportunities to create comics, art and animation for professional publication and distribution.

Through online communities and local art and comic conventions, Morin also takes commissions to hone her skills and share her art. Frankie's biggest dreams include the opportunity to create her own long-form comic book, write and illustrate Anishinaabe children's stories, and most importantly, combine her experiences and skills together to join the animation industry and tell authentic meaningful stories through the medium she's been endlessly inspired and amazed by. As a child, she was heavily influenced and inspired by Don Bluth's animated films, James Baxter' work, and her own friends. Currently, she is illustrating multiple comic book commissions to be published. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with all of her dogs, playing video games, and spending time with her family, friends, and partner. She also enjoys traveling when she can and trying different kinds of foods and learning about various cultures.

## MEDICINE WHEEL DESIGN

### Noah Ree Fox, Sahnish(Arikara) & Ojibwe Artist

Noah Fox was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. His favorite classes growing up were always art and music, as well as learning the alto saxophone, guitar, and violin. At UND, he went on to take music theory and art history classes while illustrating, painting, and writing music for his own personal projects. Inspired by filmmaking, writing, and directing, he's currently developing a graphic novel taking inspiration from his connections to his Ojibwe and Arikara heritage. In the summers, he likes to work on classic motorcycles and cars, traveling and attending art conventions and music festivals, and taking lots of pictures with his 35mm camera.





## DISCLAIMER

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The opinions expressed herein are the views of LaVonne Fox and Thomasine Heitkamp and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), or SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

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# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT STATEMENT

Truth and acknowledgment are critical to building mutual respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference. The authors are living on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe/ Ojibwe/Métis, Assiniboine, Yanktonai and Očeti Šakówin People. The territory expanded into areas now known as Canada, North Dakota, and Minnesota. We pay respect to these Indigenous Nation peoples past and present and their continuing presence in the homeland. By offering this Land Acknowledgement, we affirm Indigenous sovereignty.

“

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LAND, LAND IS WHO WE ARE. IT'S A MIXTURE OF OUR BLOOD, OUR PAST, OUR CURRENT, AND OUR FUTURE. WE CARRY OUR ANCESTORS IN US, AND THEY ARE AROUND US. AS YOU ALL DO.

-MARY LYONS, LEECH LAKE BAND OF OJIBWE

”



# LANGUAGE MATTERS

Throughout this toolkit, we refer to a Tribal Nation by the name used by its members. When speaking in general terms, this document will use the term Indigenous. The term Indigenous refers to the original inhabitants of a geographical region. Indigenous identity involves Indigenous presence, land relations, jurisdictional reach, and treaties/restitution for what was removed. The Indigenous identity is both individual and collective. The land relations are a deep sense of belonging to where our creation stories began. "Identity, however, connotes in total the beliefs, values and expressions that encompass the memories, experiences and relations that enable individuals as well as groups to construct themselves in the present" (Gonzales & Kertesz, 2020, p6. Gonzales and Kertesz also note that indigenous identity is not a genetic marker, rather, the focus is on the constructs of family, kinship and socio-cultural perspectives.

The terms American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) will be used when cited in quotations or referenced in a document. The United States Government uses AI/AN for members of federally recognized Indian Nations. We will use the terms "First Nations," "Inuit," or "Metis" when sharing information from our Indigenous relatives in Canada.





## INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is created for all supporting Two-Spirit youth



THE LONGEST JOURNEY WE WILL EVER MAKE AS HUMAN BEINGS IS THE JOURNEY FROM THE MIND TO THE HEART.

-INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE KEEPER  
CHIEF DARRELL BOB OF THE ST'AT'IMC NATION



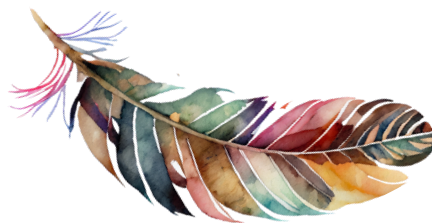
The aims of this toolkit are for the reader to:

1. Explore the culture and customs of various Indigenous populations through the perspective of children and youth who are Two-Spirited in school, families and communities.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of traditional perspectives on gender in Indigenous communities.
3. Define LGBTQ2S terms in both historical and current contexts.
4. Describe the impact of colonization on gender roles.
5. Identify and implement Indigenous strength-based strategies that support resilience and protective factors in school environments for LGBTQ2S students.

# ORIGIN OF TWO-SPIRIT

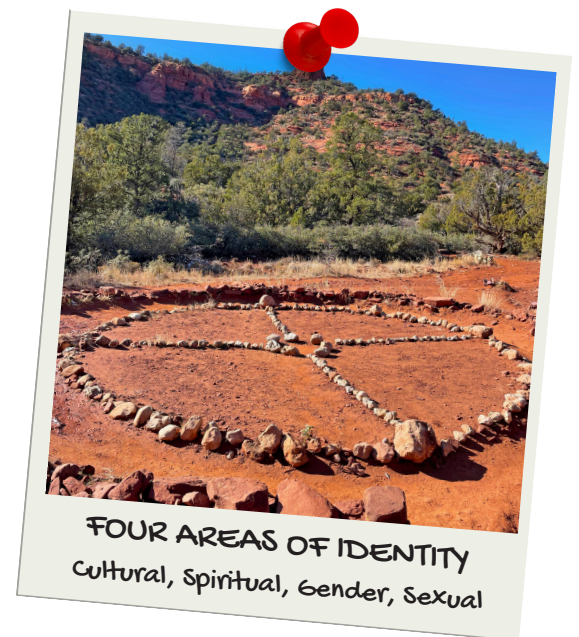
The acronym LGBTQIA2S+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and the countless ways in which people choose to identify. Two-Spirit is a contemporary umbrella term specific to the Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ community. It is not meant to be used to describe non-native members of the LGBTQ+ community. It is a direct translation of the Ojibwe term "Niizh manidoowag," meaning Two-Spirited or Two-Spirit.<sup>2</sup> It is often used to indicate that the person holds within a masculine and feminine spirit simultaneously, but it can also abstractly mean the presence of two contrasting human spirits, such as a warrior or clan mother. This term can also be used to identify a range of roles and identities which may span and even complicate distinctions between gender, sex, and sexuality.

There are more than 100 different Indigenous words that refer to Two-Spirit people”, with the Navajo referring to Two-Spirits as Nadleehf (one who is transformed), among the Lakota is Winkte (indicative of a male who has a compulsion to behave as a female), Hemaneh (half man, half woman) in Cheyenne, to name a few ([Native Center for Behavioral Health](#)). Since it was coined by Anishinaabe elder Mayra Laramée in 1990, at the 3rd Annual Spiritual Gathering of Indigenous LGBT peoples in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Two-Spirit umbrella has grown. It includes people working to reclaim and renew tribal knowledge, individuals who experience life along a spectrum of gendered identifications, and others who incorporate aspects of LGBTQ identity into their sense of self and place in community (Native Center for Behavioral Health). However, Two Spirit is not universal to all Indigenous communities or a part of all Indigenous worldviews, and not all LGBTQIA+ Indigenous peoples will identify as Two-Spirited. In this document, the acronym LGBTQIA2S+ will be used unless a source or citation uses a variation such as LGBTQ+.



# FOUR DIMENSIONS OF TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY

The Two-Spirit term embraces the complexity of identity by encompassing four interrelated areas, namely cultural, spiritual, gender and sexual dimensions. Understanding the multi-dimensionality of Two-Spirit identity is essential in effectively supporting and working with Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth as they navigate various aspects of their environment (e.g., home, school, community). Below are brief descriptions of cultural, spiritual, gender, and sexual identities as related to lived experiences of Two-Spirit youth.



## CULTURAL IDENTITY

Culture is a foundational element of every community, and cultural socialization plays a vital role in passing on values, beliefs, traditions, and ways of life from one generation to the next. Cultural identity refers to the ways individuals psychologically connect their sense of self to their cultural background and group affiliations, reflecting how identity develops through relationships with collective communities over time. In this sense, cultural identity includes an individual's sense of belonging and the value they place on shared beliefs, worldviews, norms, and practices within a cultural group. It shapes how people understand themselves, interact with others, and navigate the world around them. Indigenous identity is rooted in a deep sense of collective peoplehood that is inseparably tied to ancestral lands, sacred traditions, and shared histories. This identity is shaped by both specific Tribal Nations and broader pan-Indigenous experiences that foster shared values such as collectivism, holistic understandings of wellness, and strong kinship systems. Central to Indigenous identity are relationships to land, spirit, community, and Elders, all of which contribute to a relational understanding of health and belonging.

For Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth, connections to culture may differ depending on historical and present-day experiences of acceptance within their communities. Many Two-Spirit youth draw upon ancestral knowledge and cultural teachings as they work to integrate Indigenous understandings of identity and reclaim their sacred and respected roles within their Tribal Nations. This process is often part of a broader Two-Spirit movement focused on healing, restoration, and the affirmation of identity within both Indigenous and LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

## SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Like cultural identity, spiritual identity reflects the importance of one's inner relationship with self, others, the natural world, and the sacred. Spirituality involves how individuals understand meaning and purpose in their lives and how they experience connection to themselves, people around them, the environment, and a higher or spiritual presence. It is rooted within the individual while also extending beyond the self to something greater.

In Indigenous ways of knowing, spirituality is grounded in the understanding that land, animals, and objects carry their own spiritual presence. This reflects a sacred relationship between the human and non-human worlds that originates from the Creator. Spirituality is not separate from culture but deeply woven into daily living, values, and identity. Indigenous worldviews emphasize balance among the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of a person.

Spirituality also serves as an important protective factor for Indigenous peoples. In many tribal communities, Two-Spirit individuals have historically held essential spiritual roles, serving as knowledge keepers, ceremony leaders, and healers. Today, some Two-Spirit youth are reconnecting with these traditions and discovering their place within the spiritual life of their Nations.



*If you raise a healing person with love, care, and compassion, they will find their gifts and take their place for their people. This is what my grandfather told me. The belief in Kiskwekaniskwew [spiritual being] was not for nothing and Two-Spirit people who believe in this spirit as their Spirit Guide, (like him/her) have their ways of helping people. They have their own gifts and can help in their own special ways.*

*Leonard Saddleback, 46, Elder*



## GENDER IDENTITY

Gender is a term more broadly used to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female. Gender is a social construct so it varies from society to society and can change. This social construct defines gender roles and norms based on standards created by that society. Learning the roles and norms begins at birth and is reinforced by society. The Western view of gender identification is often binary (i.e., female vs male). An easy example of Western gender norms is dressing males in blue and females in pink. Another easy visual is the types of toys and games we believe are gender appropriate, such as boys playing with trucks and girls playing with dolls.

Gender identity reflects a person's internal sense of who they are, which may or may not align with their physical traits or the sex they were assigned at birth. These aspects of self—our gender and sexual identities—emerge from within rather than being chosen. For Two-Spirit youth, this may include feeling connected to both masculine and feminine energies or roles, which can align with identities such as gender-fluid or nonbinary. Some, however, identify simply as Two-Spirit or Two-Spirited, as this term more fully reflects their cultural and personal understanding of gender.

Unlike many Western frameworks that emphasize fixed categories and binary classifications, several Indigenous cultures understand identity through fluidity and relational balance rather than rigid labels. For example, in the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, located north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, there are no gender-specific pronouns. Instead of distinguishing between male and female, the language differentiates between animate and inanimate beings. In many Indigenous worldviews, anything that moves or carries life is understood to hold spirit. Cultural teachings and language grow from this understanding—that every being and force shaping our world carries meaning and purpose.

When parenting, teaching, or counseling Two-Spirit youth, it is essential to recognize and affirm their self-identified gender. Parents, educators, and counselors should honor and use the identity a youth identifies with. This includes respecting a youth's chosen name and pronouns in all settings, creating environments where youth feel seen, valued, and safe.

## SEXUAL IDENTITY

Sexual orientation describes a person's patterns of physical attraction, romantic interest, and emotional connection to others, often influenced by another person's gender or sex characteristics. These attractions arise from biological and physiological processes rather than deliberate choice and include deep emotional experiences, such as forming attachment or falling in love. Sexual orientation identity refers to how an individual understands, names, and integrates these attractions into their sense of self. Neither sexual orientation nor sexual orientation identity is dependent on an individual's gender identity.

Sexual identity is broader than sexual orientation alone. It includes a person's sexual values and needs, their attractions, preferred forms of intimacy and expression, and the qualities they seek in relationships. Like all identities, sexual identity is shaped by social, cultural, and historical context and may evolve over time. Across many Indigenous Nations, diverse sexual identities and relationships have long existed as part of community life and cultural teachings.

Viewing sexual identity as multidimensional strengthens the ability of parents, educators, and counselors to support Two-Spirit youth and other Indigenous LGBTQIA+ youth as they navigate their identities across Tribal and broader social contexts.



## COMING IN - IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE

**Coming In** is an Indigenous-centered process through which Two-Spirit people develop pride, confidence, and empowerment across their cultural, spiritual, gender, and sexual identities (Driskill et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 1997; Walters et al., 2011). Rather than adopting mainstream LGBTQIA+ labels, many reclaim identities rooted in tribal teachings, ancestral roles, and community relationships.

Through this process, youth build supportive circles that affirm their full humanity. In some Nations, Coming In ceremonies provide cultural grounding and community recognition, strengthening identity, purpose, and well-being.

Many Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ individuals have also experienced exclusion due to identity-based discrimination tied to colonial influence rather than traditional values. Educators and mental health providers must understand how identity, history, and colonization intersect to shape youth experiences.

Effective support requires understanding how historical trauma, boarding school legacies, evangelization, and imported homophobia continue to shape the lives of Two-Spirit youth. Grounded in this awareness, schools, families, and care systems can foster culturally affirming and safe environments where youth can thrive.

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT: COLONIZATION & EVANGELIZATION

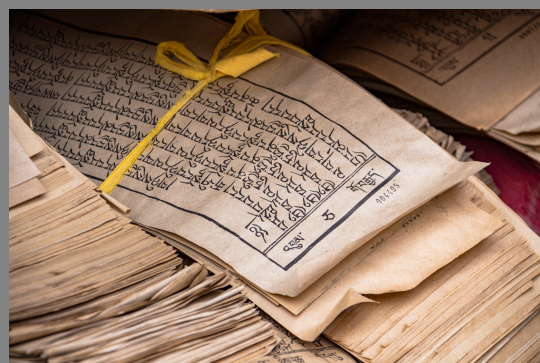
Understanding the historical relationship between Christianity and Indigenous peoples is essential to understanding the challenges Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth face today. Early colonizers targeted gender-diverse and Two-Spirit people as a way to control and disrupt Indigenous communities, punishing those who held traditional roles related to gender and sexuality.

These actions were reinforced by Church authority through the Doctrine of Discovery (1452), which gave religious and legal justification for the takeover of Indigenous lands, forced conversion, and suppression of Indigenous worldviews—including teachings about gender and identity. Much of the stigma Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth experience today comes from this colonial legacy, not from Indigenous cultures themselves.

The impact of this doctrine has extended into U.S. law and policy, shaping land loss, the termination of Tribal recognition, and forced relocation to urban areas. Efforts to erase gender diversity—sometimes described as “gendercide”—were part of broader genocide and ethnocide, disrupting families and kinship systems. Many Two-Spirit people were forced to hide their identities to survive, even as they protected cultural knowledge. Only in recent generations have communities begun reclaiming and restoring these traditions.

## DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

*In 2009, the Episcopal Church passed a resolution officially repudiating the doctrine. The United Church of Christ did the same in 2013. This has been supported by the Christian Reformed Church, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*



# GENOCIDE AND GENDERCIDE THROUGH BOARDING SCHOOLS

In 1860, the establishment of religious boarding schools, supported by U.S. government funding, was an overt approach to assimilating Indigenous children to white society resulting in cultural genocide. As infamously stated by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the goal of boarding schools was to 'kill the Indian and save the man' as people who are Indigenous would only be successful if they left behind their traditional ways ([Boardingschoolhealing.org,nd.](http://Boardingschoolhealing.org,nd.)). During the boarding school era (1860-1978), the majority of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools. Families who refused to send their children to such schools were faced with the U.S. government withholding food, clothing, and annuities. For most, this meant death by starvation. Treaties were established forcing the removal of children from their families. One such example occurred in 1894 when the U.S. cavalry arrested 19 Hopi parents for refusing to send their children to boarding school. As a result, these parents were incarcerated at Alcatraz Island for nine months (National Park Service, 2024)

A clear path to assimilation of Indigenous children was through decimating Indigenous spirituality and undermining Indigenous family structure and community kinship networks. After arriving at the boarding schools, Indigenous children's hair was cut, clothing changed, and a Christian name and an identification number was given to each. Knowing the important roles of Two-Spirit persons in Indigenous communities, boarding school curriculum and rules also included forced adherence to

western gender norms and banned all Indigenous traditions of gender fluidity. Acts of gendercide included implementing separate gender-based curriculum, assigning gender labels to Two-Spirit children, and punishing any attempts to reject prescribed gender labels, blend gender roles, or engage in opposite sex gender roles. Indeed, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse was present in many Indigenous children's daily lives, particularly Two-Spirit youth, at boarding schools.

Over the course of six generations, 500,000 Indigenous children have been directly linked to these boarding schools. Hundreds of children died. In some cases, the cemeteries are lost or the children are in unmarked graves. It is unknown the number of Two-Spirit youth harmed and/or killed during the boarding school era. The U.S. Department of the Interior is currently engaged in an investigation of the lives lost during this boarding school era and the lasting impact of Indian boarding schools.



A legacy of the boarding school era and its systemic abuse is reflected in enduring stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women and girls who have been dehumanized and portrayed as disposable or hypersexualized. These colonial narratives contribute to disproportionate rates of gender-based violence. National data indicate that Indigenous women are approximately 1.7 times more likely to experience violence, twice as likely to experience rape, and nearly three times more likely to be murdered than White women (Rosay, 2016). Two-Spirit individuals experience even higher rates of violence, with estimates suggesting that between 78% and 85% report experiencing sexual assault or physical violence in their lifetime.

In response to these racialized and gender-based harms, grassroots movements emerged in Canada and later in the United States to bring attention to the disappearances and murders of Indigenous women, girls, and relatives. This advocacy is widely known as the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Relatives (MMIWR) Movement.

Rosay, A. B. (2016). Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men. National Institute of Justice (NIJ), U.S. Department of Justice.

*In 2021, Deb Haaland, United States Secretary of the Interior, stated, “Nevertheless, the legacy of Indian boarding schools remains, manifesting itself in Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance, premature deaths, and other undocumented bodily and mental impacts.”*



MMIWR Movement to recognize the disappearance and murders of Indigenous woman/girls and relatives. Many in the movement also include Two-Spirit and Trans Persons.



## IMPORTED HOMOPHOBIA

The relocation era, boarding schools, and the forced removal and adoption of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous homes disrupted families and severed children from their languages, cultures, and spiritual traditions. Western education systems, Christian conversion efforts, and forced assimilation into Euro-American culture taught Indigenous people not only new ways of living, but also how to internalize and reproduce the systems that oppressed them. As a result, Indigenous languages, values, and identities were deeply damaged. The introduction of homophobia into many Indigenous Nations is directly tied to this colonial history and was not rooted in traditional Indigenous teachings.

Although acceptance of Two-Spirit people varied across Nations, many Indigenous cultures recognized and honored individuals who embodied more than one gender. Oral histories describe Two-Spirit people as healers, caretakers, or spiritual leaders. Prior to colonization, many Nations understood gender not as a rigid binary, but as connected to roles, responsibilities, and relationships within the community.

Colonization reshaped every aspect of Indigenous life, including gender roles and social structures. Christian European settlers condemned gender diversity and same-sex relationships as immoral, forcing Two-Spirit people to hide or suppress who they were. As a result, many Two-Spirit traditions were driven underground, lost, or erased altogether.

These losses created deep cultural conflict between traditional teachings and imposed colonial values. The lingering impact of these beliefs continues today, as Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ people experience higher rates of discrimination and violence. According to a 2025 report by Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Indigenous and Two-Spirit people — especially transgender, nonbinary, and gender-diverse — continue to face disproportionate violence, homelessness, and systemic risks. Broader data show that violence against Indigenous people remains severely under-reported and under-documented. For instance, estimates for missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people are much higher than official numbers suggest.

# HISTORICAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Forced assimilation and imported homophobia have contributed to the historical and intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth today. Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional harm passed down across generations due to large-scale oppression and loss.

While Indigenous peoples have endured centuries of trauma and resistance, ongoing suffering is driven not only by the past, but by continuing systems of inequality and structural violence. As described by Kirmayer and colleagues, colonial harm began at the Nation level and continues to affect communities, families, and individuals through interconnected pathways. (Kirmayer, L. J., Brass, G. M., & Tait, C. L. (2000). The mental health of Aboriginal peoples: Transformations of identity and community. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 45(7), 607–616.)



# INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

Historical and intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth is deeply rooted in colonization. Colonization relies on the creation of harmful stereotypes and narratives of inferiority to justify domination and control. For Indigenous peoples, these narratives have included portrayals as “violent,” “passive,” “stoic,” “illiterate,” or “vanishing.” For Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ people, additional stereotypes depict them as “confused,” “unnatural,” or morally flawed.



Internalized oppression occurs when individuals absorb these false narratives and begin to believe them about themselves or their communities. It has been described as the process of “turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from racism and oppression in the broader society” (Pharr, 2003). Over time, repeated exposure to dehumanizing messages can lead youth to feel “unwanted,” “abnormal,” or “defective.”

These beliefs are not reflections of truth but consequences of sustained colonial harm. When reinforced through discrimination, exclusion, or silence, they can contribute to depression, anxiety, substance misuse, and disconnection from cultural identity. Importantly, internalized oppression is not an inherent weakness; it is a predictable response to systemic injustice.

Recognizing internalized oppression allows parents, educators, and counselors to interrupt these narratives and replace them with strength-based, culturally grounded affirmations that restore belonging, dignity, and identity. When left unaddressed, however, these layered experiences do not remain internal; they often manifest in school settings through disengagement, heightened stress responses, identity concealment, or difficulty forming trusting relationships.



## AT RISK

Risk must be understood within historical and structural context. Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth do not face elevated vulnerability because of who they are, but because systems have too often failed to provide safety, affirmation, and culturally grounded support.

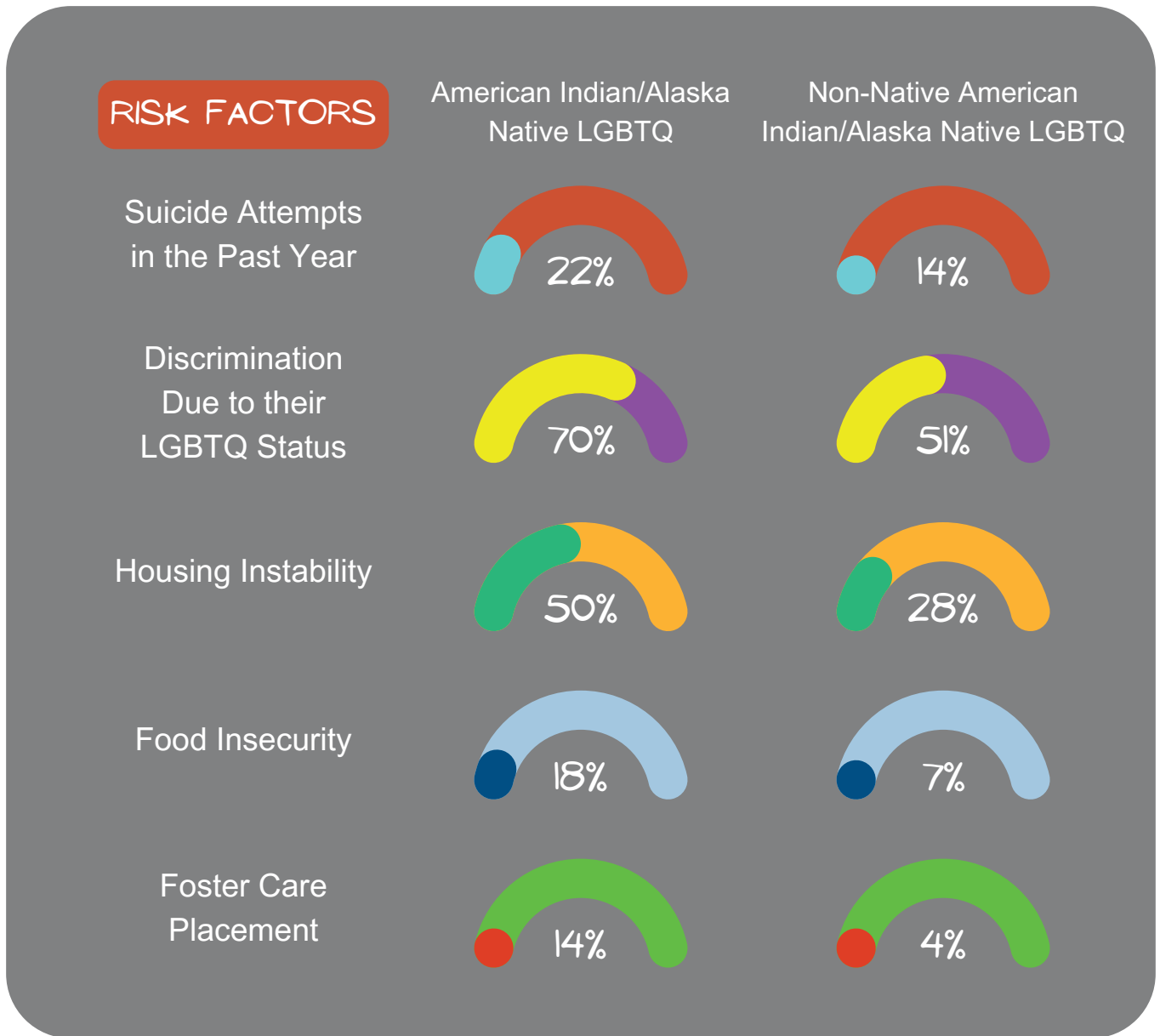
National data show that Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth experience disproportionately high rates of discrimination, bullying, housing instability, and violence. Victimization and family rejection significantly increase the likelihood of suicidal ideation and attempts. Indigenous sexual minority and Two-Spirit youth report substantially higher rates of suicide attempts compared to their heterosexual peers.

Gender-based violence further compounds these disparities. Research indicates that Indigenous women experience higher rates of violence, rape, and homicide than White women (Rosay, 2016). Two-Spirit and gender-diverse Indigenous individuals report even greater lifetime exposure to sexual assault and physical violence. These inequities reflect the enduring impact of colonization, racialized stereotypes, and limited access to culturally responsive services.

Importantly, risk is not destiny. Affirming schools, culturally grounded practices, and consistent adult support significantly reduce suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Strengthening protective relationships and cultural connection shifts outcomes from vulnerability toward resilience.

Despite these realities, Indigenous communities have sustained cultural knowledge, relational strength, and spiritual practices that continue to protect and uplift youth.

The Trevor Project identified the following risk factors that LGBTQ+2 American Indian/Alaska Native youth experience:



Victimization, bullying, violence, and family rejection increased the risk of suicidality for LGBTQ2S Indigenous youth. Higher rates of suicidal ideation, attempts, and death has been linked to poverty, intergenerational trauma, loss of culture, and identity. Compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority/Two-Spirit boys had higher odds of suicidal ideation since 1998, whereas sexual minority/Two-Spirit girls had higher odds of suicidal ideation since 2003. Sexual minority/Two-Spirit (vs. heterosexual) boys were approximately 4–7 times more likely to attempt suicide since 2008, whereas sexual-minority/Two-Spirit (vs. heterosexual) girls were approximately 3–4 times more likely to attempt suicide since 2003.

# IDENTIFY, BUILD AND STRENGTHEN PROTECTIVE FACTORS

While risk factors highlight systemic inequities, protective factors illuminate the conditions that foster resilience and thriving. For Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth, protection is not rooted in individual toughness alone, but in relationships, cultural continuity, and environments that affirm identity and belonging. Strengthening protective factors shifts the focus from vulnerability to possibility.

## CULTURAL FACTORS

- Indigenous identity
- Traditional culture and language
- Cultural Connectedness



- Indigenous spirituality
- Cultural participation

## INDIVIDUAL FACTORS (NURTURED WITHIN SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS)

- Healthy self-esteem
- Ability to walk in two worlds
- Well-being in physical, mental, emotional, and spirituality life domains
- Healthy eating and sleeping habits



- Social and life skills
- Self-compassion
- Self-determination
- Ethnic identity

## PEER RELATIONAL FACTORS

- Exposure to positive social opportunities
- Positive healthy relationships



- Engagement in healthy extracurricular activities
- Supportive, open-minded, accepting


## FAMILIAL FACTORS

- Stable home
  - Positive relationships with adults in the home
  - Parental engagement
  - Supportive and nurturing
- 

## COMMUNITY FACTORS

- Community support
  - Access to quality physical and mental health services
  - Community mentoring programs
  - Safe environments
  - Access to healthy options
  - Community resilience
  - Community activities
- 

## SCHOOL & INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- Safe school environment based on a strength-based approach
  - Attention to student's academic, social, and emotional needs
  - Interventions in bullying and discrimination in all forms as they happen
  - Affirmation of children's sexual and gender identities including using their chosen names and pronouns in the classroom
  - Access to school appropriate facilities and activities
  - Underscoring positive examples of LGBTQIA2S+ people in curricula
  - Ensuring that ALL children have the support they need
  - Inclusive sexual health education to include safe sex practices
  - Engaging parents in school activities, planning, and decision making
  - Enforcing policies that protect students from all forms of bullying and discrimination
- 

## LIFE EVENTS

- Presence of positive adults
  - Positive social connections
  - Trusting relationships
  - Access to Resources
- 

# HEALING OF INDIGENOUS TWO-SPIRIT YOUTH THROUGH SPIRITUAL CONNECTION & BUILDING A RESILIENT IDENTITY

“Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and grow when facing hardship, trauma, or significant stress. For Indigenous and Tribal communities, resilience is visible in the ways Indigenous peoples continue to survive, resist injustice, and advocate for their Nations despite lasting effects of historical and intergenerational trauma. Among Indigenous youth, resilience is closely connected to inner strength, hope, cultural identity, belonging, self-worth, and independence—each serving as powerful protective factors.

Resilience can also be strengthened and nurtured. For this reason, building resilience should be a central focus of efforts to support Indigenous LGBTQ2S youth. Effective programs must include training for educators and school staff so they can foster resilience in meaningful ways. While personal strengths matter, school environments play a critical role. When schools affirm students’ sexual and gender identities, rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among LGBTQ2S youth drop by more than half. A 2023 survey by The Trevor Project found that LGBTQ+ students in “affirming schools” — with supportive clubs, inclusive policies, and acceptance of gender identity — reported lower rates of suicide attempts than those in non-affirming environments. A review of school-based suicide-prevention efforts over 1994–2024 concluded that protective factors like supportive adults, inclusive policies, and safe school environments can help reduce suicidal thoughts and behaviors among LGBTQ youth (Stilwell, Scott, Murphy & Lee, 2025)

The goal of resilience-building intervention strategies is to decrease risk factors, build up the protective factors, and advocate for significant changes in the environments in which Indigenous LGBTQ+2S youth live. These intervention programs should include the development of long-term processes focusing on these youth’s strengths and building their protective factors. Recognizing the strengths of Native Americans, versus focusing on the deficits, is crucial to developing a program to achieve positive outcomes.

## Youth Resilience-Building Strategies

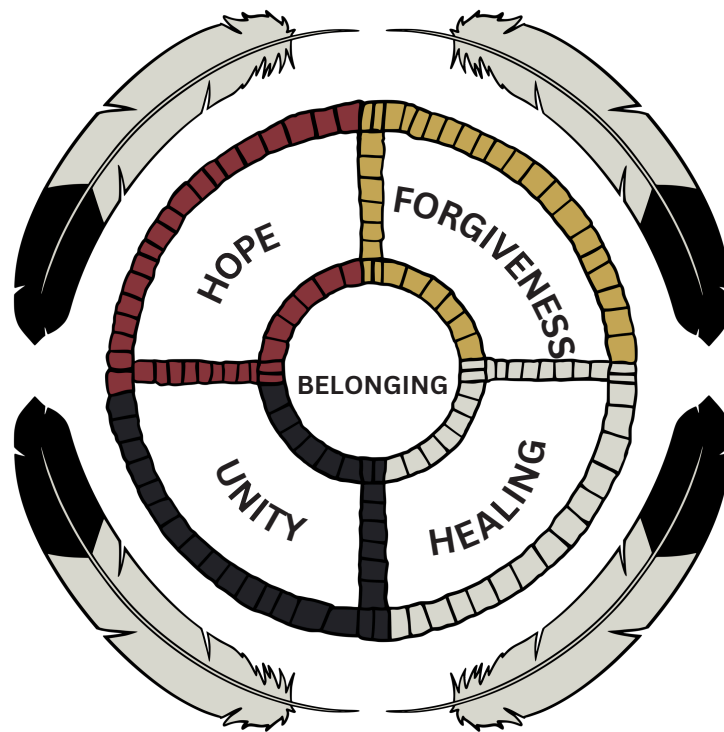
- Having a Future Orientation
- Cultural Pride
- Learning from the Natural World
- Interacting with Community Members
- Relationships with Elders
- Being in Community and On Land
- Indigenous Traditional Knowledge
- Cultural Continuity
- Seven Grandfather Teachings

# THE FOUR SACRED GIFTS

Many Indigenous nations understand life as cyclical rather than linear, often expressed through the symbolic importance of the number four—representing balance, seasons, and interconnectedness. In *The Four Sacred Gifts: Indigenous Wisdom for Modern Times*, Dr. Anita L. Sanchez describes four sacred gifts rooted in the Eagle Hoop Prophecy and the teachings of Indigenous Elders. These gifts offer guidance for meeting life’s challenges, releasing fear, and living with greater peace and harmony.

Dr. Sanchez explains that when we feel isolated or disconnected, we are “acting as if we have no relations.” This way of seeing ourselves can lead to despair, division, and loss of compassion. While many Western traditions emphasize individualism, Indigenous worldviews remind us that we are part of a greater whole—and that belonging is essential to well-being.

This principle of belonging shapes the assessment and intervention approaches we use today. Frameworks such as the Circle of Courage begin with the understanding that healing and growth are rooted in connection. When people experience belonging, they are better able to access their inner strengths—fostering resilience, mutual support, and healthier communities.



## The Four Sacred Gifts

The Four Sacred Gifts—Healing, Forgiveness, Unity, and Hope—are foundational principles in Indigenous cultures, representing deep wisdom and teachings passed down through generations. These gifts offer guidance on how to navigate life's challenges and emphasize the importance of community, connection, and personal growth. Sacred to Indigenous peoples, these gifts serve as a reminder of our shared humanity and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

1. Healing signifies the importance of restoring balance and well-being in both individuals and communities. It teaches us that healing is a collective journey, one that emphasizes support, understanding, and taking care of ourselves and one another.
2. Forgiveness is a powerful act that enables individuals to release burdens of anger and resentment. It allows for personal growth and creates space for renewed relationships, highlighting the importance of empathy and compassion in building stronger communities.
3. Unity symbolizes the strength found in togetherness. It speaks to the value of working collaboratively, recognizing that we are all part of a larger web of relationships. This unity fosters a sense of belonging and collective purpose that is essential for personal and communal resilience.
4. Hope is the light that guides us through difficult times. It inspires us to envision a brighter future and motivates us to strive for positive change. Hope is especially significant for youth, as it helps nurture resilience and a positive outlook on life.

Engaging in activities centered around these sacred gifts allows individuals to reflect on their own experiences, explore their connection to these teachings, and develop a deeper understanding of their importance in both personal and communal contexts. By actively participating in these activities, we honor the wisdom of Indigenous elders and the teachings that have helped shape and strengthen communities for generations. These gifts are not just concepts; they are practical tools for living a life filled with meaning, connection, and purpose.

# JOURNALING ACTIVITIES

## THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

Self-compassion and forgiveness are deeply interconnected and mentally reinforcing. Self-compassion involves being kind and understanding towards oneself, especially in times of suffering and failure. Forgiveness, both of oneself is a natural extension of self-compassion. Practicing self-compassion, allows acknowledgement of imperfections and treating ourselves with kindness. This attitude helps us to forgive past mistakes, reducing feelings of guilt and shame. By understanding our own struggles and being compassionate towards ourselves, makes it easier to extend that same compassion to others. The act of forgiving oneself or others can enhance self-compassion by freeing us from the burdens of resentment and self-criticism. Forgiveness creates emotional space for compassion to grow.

### Activity – Journaling

- Write down your feelings so you can learn to understand your emotions.
- Maybe begin with “I am ...”
- Do you feel that you are having to hide who you are?
- Do you do things you feel guilty about just to feel accepted or have a sense of belonging?
- What have you forgiven and why?
- Are there people you have yet to forgive or that you will never forgive? Why is that?
- What does forgiveness mean? What does it not include?

## THE GIFT OF HEALING

From an Indigenous perspective, healing is a process where we need to embrace those positive things that bring balance to our lives: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. We need to walk away from those people or things that shift us out of balance. We need to accept that what other people do is their choice and not because of you. Don't take on their emotional poisons, don't let it become yours.

### Activity – Journaling

- What are the positives in your life?
- What can you do to bring more positives in your life in the areas of: spirituality, mental/cognitive, emotional, and physical?
- How do you feel when someone else truly understands what you are going through?
- How have you been able to tell that someone understands what you have experienced or felt?
- List four ways you can treat yourself with kindness and compassion - *hint* - avoid being self-critical.

## THE GIFT OF UNITY

From an Indigenous perspective, unity is essential for creating harmony and balance within the community and oneself. Unity involves recognizing that healing is a collective journey. Two-Spirit youth can find strength and support within their communities, knowing that they are not alone in their struggles.

### Activity – Journaling

- What does unity mean to you? What does it not include? Has the meaning changed over time?
- What is your experience of unity? How do you experience yourself in relation to other people and beings?
- What have you experienced as the benefits or detriments of being in unity with others? For yourself, for the other, for the community?
- Are there people you distrust, have yet to trust, or will never trust? If so, how does that impact your life and work?
- What messages about separation or unity do you give yourself or receive from others?

## THE GIFT OF HOPE

From an Indigenous perspective, hope is a crucial gift that sustains us through difficult times. For Two-Spirit youth, the gift of hope is particularly important in fostering resilience and a positive future outlook. Hope is a vital component of the healing process. Two-Spirit youth who maintain hope can find the strength to seek healing and embrace positive changes in their lives. Forgiveness is easier to achieve when there is hope for the future. Two-Spirit youth, who believe in the possibility of positive change, are more likely to forgive others and themselves.

Unity strengthens hope. A united community provides a foundation of support and shared vision, giving Two-Spirit youth hope for collective progress and personal growth.

### Activity – Journaling

- How do you experience hope? What do you have hope for?
- What have you seen as the benefits or dangers of hoping or having a dream for something to get better?
- Have you experienced a personal or collective sense of hope in action? What happened?
- Where do you struggle to feel hopeful? What is the impact of that in your life?
- What has happened when your hope and trust in your vision or dream is different than what other people, or the facts, told you to believe?

# THE 4 GIFTS IN THE CLASSROOM

1

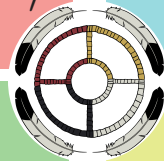
## Forgiveness

1. Help your students practice self-acceptance.
2. Encourage them to identify their strengths.
3. Encourage them to look at their areas for growth from a position of self-love. This means teaching them how to strengthen those areas without being overcritical.
4. Focus on small achievements and list them. Keep them handy.
5. Create safe spaces.
6. Work in an activity where they identify their gifts, traits & talents.
7. Praise publicly and provide constructive feedback privately.

## Healing

1. Check in with students even by asking them, how can I support you and your learning?
2. Empower them.
3. Work on creating calm transitions between classes or activities. Realize the most difficult areas are the breaks and lunch.
4. Focus on a no bullying environment.
5. Focus on the strength of words and what is not acceptable and what is acceptable.
6. Bring mindfulness to the classroom.

2



## Unity

1. Provide opportunities for collaboration to bring unity to the classroom.
2. Show how much you care and encourage showing caring in the classroom. Student mentors, giving positives to each other on little cards or 'drops for your bucket' sheets.
3. A sense of belonging.

3

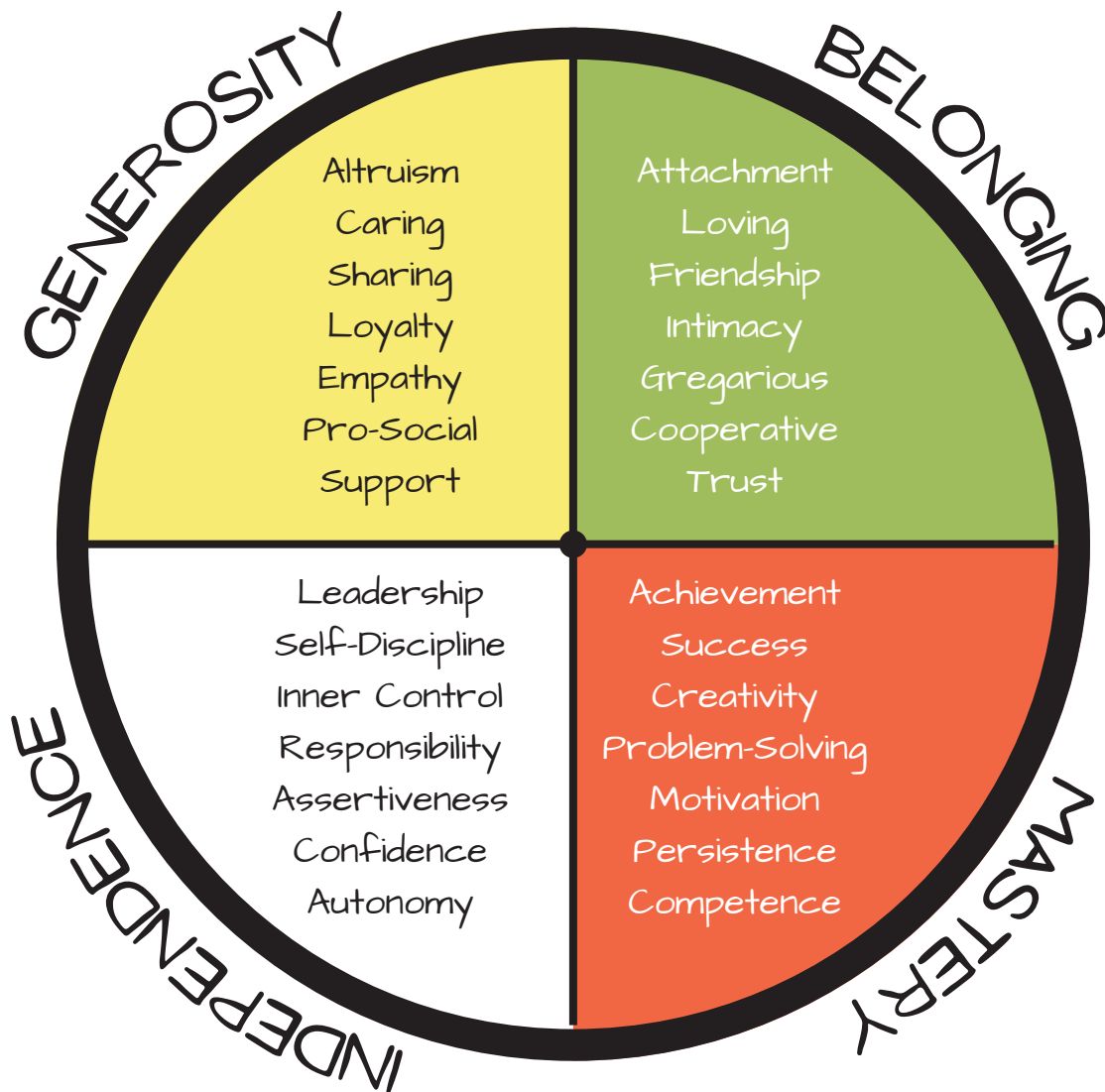
## Hope

1. Integrate opportunities to discuss hope - aspirations, what gives you hope etc.
2. Make a list of what is important and strengthen optimism.
3. Celebrate goal achievements.
4. Have them identify and prioritize their top goals.
5. Set realistic goals.
6. Have them practice problem solving by using positive solutions-oriented approach - learning from their work.
7. Teach them not to take things personally.

4

# THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE

The Circle of Courage is an excellent model that can be used in the classroom or as a whole school approach.



This model has been applied to the classroom for Indigenous youth, [Strengthening Resilience: Promoting Positive School Mental Health Among Indigenous Youth](#), modified by Fox, Nielsen & Heitkamp (2020) based on the Circle of Courage model by Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern (1990).

# EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

GLSEN issued a report using data from the 2017 National School Climate Survey. This report found that nearly “one-fifth of Indigenous LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school related to their race/ethnicity and nearly half were bullied or harassed based on their actual or perceived race/ethnicity.” Now add in their LGBTQ identity and the numbers are significantly higher with over three quarters feeling unsafe. Over eighty-percent report experiencing harassment and assault due to their sexual orientation. Southern Poverty Law Center through Teaching Tolerance recognizes that teachers may be hesitant to address LGBTQIA2S+ youth especially in states that do not treat LGBTQ as protected. LGBTQ2S feel unsafe in school but especially in areas where there is even less structure such as:



Students spend a large proportion of their time in the K-12 education system. This means the schools do play a significant role in supporting or undermining the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development of all students, including Indigenous LGBTQ+ youth. An assessment tool/process is essential to identify current policies, programs and practices that can contribute to developing a safe and inclusive environment for all youth.

## WEBSITES & ONLINE CONTENT

Remember, content can often be out of date so always ask yourself:

- When was the content published or last updated? Look for publication dates.
- Who is the author or organization behind the content? Research the authors qualifications & credibility.
- What is the purpose of the content? Is it to inform, persuade, entertain or sell something?
- Is the information supported by evidence? check for citations, references & data that back up the claims made in the content.
- Are there any biases present? Does it have a balanced view?
- Who is the intended

- What do other sources say? Cross-check information with other reliable sources to confirm accuracy.
- Is there a comments section or user feedback? Engage with community feedback and discussions, if available, for additional perspectives.



## ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND RESOURCES

### Organizational Self-Assessment

- This tool was adapted from The LGBTQ Access Project, a partnership between the Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence in King County and The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse.
  - This tool was designed to assist human service organizations in evaluating their current performance in serving LGBTQ people, particularly survivors of violence. The self-assessment is an examination of organizational policy and practice, based on 10 key areas of operation. While the tool is extensive, it is not intended to be comprehensive. This is a starting point for those interested in building capacity to increase LGBTQ access within a broader commitment to social justice.



### **LGBTQ Inclusivity in Schools: A Self-Assessment Tool**

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Nonpartisan and Objective Research Organization (NORC) at the University of Chicago partnered with LGBTQ+ health experts.
  - Its purpose is to help schools and district staff understand current policies, programs and practices that could contribute to providing a safe and inclusive environment where all youth succeed. It has five sections:
    - i. Assessment for all users
    - ii. Assessment for administrators
    - iii. Assessment for educators
    - iv. Assessment for school health services staff
    - v. Glossary of terms
  - Within each self-assessment area there are resources to learn more and/or get clarification. The tool becomes ineffective if it is not answered honestly. The more honest each person is, the more accurate you can identify and plan to improve.

### **The District and School Transgender and Gender Diverse Readiness Assessment Form (DSTGDRA)**

- An environmental scan tool intended to assess a district and a school's current capabilities to include and to support transgender and gender diverse students.

### **Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence**

- Organizational Assessment Tool for LGBT Cultural Competency

### **American Institute for Research**

- This synthesis recommends publicly available resources that can support workforce development in child-, youth-, and family-serving systems (e.g., schools, healthcare, child welfare, homelessness, juvenile justice). The resources in this synthesis align with 10 standards of care described in Improving Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes for LGBT Youth: A Guide for Professionals. These standards provide a framework for improving outcomes and the wellbeing of LGBTQ young people. The second resource in the synthesis, a strategic planning tool, provides an overview of standards in these ten areas

## CREATE SAFE SPACES

- [Safe and Caring Schools for Two-Spirited Youth](#) First Nations and Inuit Health Branch Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities. This resource provides a brief but informative window into the challenges that many Two Spirit students face within educational settings as well as contributes practical suggestions that teachers can use to begin addressing these multi-layered issues.
- [Creating Safer Spaces Toolkit](#) - This Toolkit has been developed to assist individuals, community-based organizations, providers, healthcare staff, educators, and others that see the value of incorporating key safer space components into their organizations so that young people survive and thrive. Recommendations serve as a guide and should be tailored to each individual young person and organizational setting.
- The Montana Two-Spirited Society provides Cultural Expression, Education and Awareness of LGBT and Two Spirited and an Annual Event Native for First Nations, and Indigenous Two-Spirit people, A red hand over the mouth has become the symbol of the growing movement of MMIW representing all the missing sisters who voices are not heard including the silence of the media and law enforcement.
- [Project 10](#) works with other LGBT organizations to ensure that all public schools are in accordance to federal legislation that support LGBTQ students. They provide resources for educators, school administrations, scholarships for students and other information for school staff.
- [The Trevor Project](#) is a non-profit organization that works to end suicide in the LGBTQ population. They offer a 24/7 hotline, crisis counseling, educational resources and advocacy to help reduce risk factors for suicidal youth.
- [Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#) is an organization that conducts research, partners with decision makers and other educational organizations to improve the school climate for LGBTQ students. They provide year-round programs, educator resources, and information on current policies. [A Guide to Supporting LGBT Students in your School](#).
- [Guide to Being an Ally](#)
- [Family Acceptance Project \(FAP\)](#) is a research initiative that helps support the mental wellbeing of LGBTQ youth, parents, and families. This site offers training, up-to-date information, and publications to help students of different cultures and religions.
- [Breaking the Prejudice Habit](#) is dedicated to breaking the habit of prejudice and discrimination. We are working together to overcome these social issues by spreading awareness of the problem, establishing harmony between groups, and promoting acceptance of differences.
- [GSAFE](#) - Creating just schools for LGBTQ+ youth.
- [Tribal Equity Toolkit 3.0](#): Tribal Resolutions and Codes to Support Two Spirit & LGBTQ Justice in Indian Country
- [I Know Mine](#) - All our relations: Growing Community Health through Safe Spaces.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Provide professional development for school staff that addresses the intersections of identities and experiences of Native and Indigenous LGBTQ students. Increase student access to curriculum resources that include:

- [Understanding LGBTQ+ Identity: A Toolkit for Educators](#) offers a series of digital media resources to help teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and other educators understand and effectively address the complex and difficult issues faced by LGBTQ students.
- [Paths \(Re\)membered Project](#). The Paths (Re)Membered Project centers the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ community—its strengths, resiliencies, and histories—in our movement toward health equity. Through community engagement, research, and advocacy, we work toward a liberated 2SLGBTQ+ future, which includes the memories of Two Spirit ancestors, the wisdom of our elders, and the creativity of our young people.
- [GSA Network \(Nd\) Two-Spirit Initiative](#) has resources and curriculum relevant to issues that Two-Spirit youth are navigating in their education and communities.
- [Two-Spirit | Health Resources](#) (Indian Health Service)
- [The American Academy of Pediatrics](#) provides support and resources for families of gender diverse youth
- [EduGuides](#) are here to help you introduce our best stories to your classroom or GSA group. Each EduGuide comes with discussion questions, fun activities, and even complete lesson plans that make for an engaging presentation.
- Documentaries:
  - [Two-Spirits documentary](#) - “Fred Martinez was nádleehí, a male-bodied person with a feminine nature, a special gift according to his ancient Navajo culture. But the place where two discriminations meet is a dangerous place to live, and Fred became one of the youngest hate-crime victims in modern history when he was brutally murdered at sixteen. Between tradition and controversy, sex and spirit, and freedom and fear, lives the truth—the bravest choice you can make is to be yourself.”
  - [“Two Soft Things, Two Hard Things” documentary](#) - “As a small group in Nunavut, Canada prepares for a seminal LGBTQ Pride celebration in the Arctic, the film explores how colonization and religion have shamed and erased traditional Inuit beliefs about sexuality and family structure and how, 60 years later, a new generation of Inuit are actively ‘unshaming’ their past.”
- [Continuous Portrait Series by Jenny Irene Miller on being LGBTQ2S+ & Indigenous in Alaska](#)
- [Interview with Ma-Nee Chacaby on Two Spirit Identities](#)
- [Lecture from Harlan Pruden titled, Two Spirit People, Then and Now](#)

## STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH

Indigenous people have been dealing with and fighting against a pathological identity that developed based on colonial narratives. This pathological identity is based on deficits wherever they turn. Taking into consideration much of the information and data in this resource identifies the deficits and risks as well because that is the narrative that has been developed, but, it cannot be the narrative that continues.

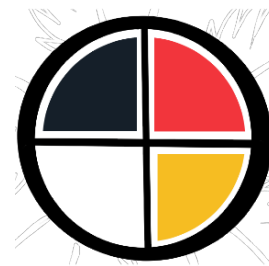


## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- [Alberta Regional Consortia - Cultures of Belonging](#): The history of the Two-Spirit provides an opportunity to teach students not only about the Two Spirit but about Indigenous language, colonization, geography, language, and roles using existing materials that are described in this document.
- [An Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary and Emergent Issues](#): This resource from the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) introduces the diversity of Two-Spirit roles and identities; provides an overview of the impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples' gender and sexual identities; and discusses the social determinants of health for Two-Spirit people.
- [Celebrating our Magic. Resources for American Indian/Alaska Native transgender and Two-Spirit youth, their relatives and families and their healthcare providers.](#)
- [National Head Start Association DEI resources](#) - supporting LGBTQ+ families.
- [Indigenizing Love. A Toolkit for Native Youth to build Inclusion.](#) [Westernstatescenter.org](http://Westernstatescenter.org)

## SUICIDE PREVENTION

- [Suicide Prevention and Two-spirited People](#)
- [LGBTQ2S Toolkit](#) - Making it better now for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness.
- [Zero Suicide Toolkit](#) - Lead Indian Country
- [The Trevor Project](#) - Talking about Suicide



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