

Supporting Dreams for a Child's Future

Headway's Family Spirit Program creates ripple effect in American Indian families



Photo: Johns Hopkins University

*By Nicole Gurneau, B.A.
Family Spirit Infant Parent Support Specialist*

After historic disruptions of parenting patterns, American Indian parents remain resilient and want to succeed in raising their children. Statistically, the odds have not been favorable. American Indian families face significant challenges, including poverty, struggles with addiction, incarceration, child displacement, reduced K-12 school engagement, a higher risk of diabetes and SIDS. Despite all of this, American Indian parents in Minneapolis and St. Paul are embracing Headway's Family Spirit Home Visiting Program in hopes of creating a positive ripple effect into future generations, starting with their own children.

Lacey is a 19-year-old American Indian mother. While expecting her first child, Lacey had dreams of a happy, healthy future for her son, but grappled with feelings of fear and concern. Lacey's boyfriend wasn't consistently in the picture; her parents were already helping her siblings raise their children; there have been struggles with addiction in her immediate family; and Lacey wondered if she would be a good mom.

Lacey's friend suggested she call Headway and check out a program she's enrolled in. After meeting Nicole Gurneau — a Headway parent support specialist who is also American Indian — Lacey enrolled in Headway's Family Spirit Home Visiting Program. Lacey is now meeting weekly with Nicole and working through the Family Spirit curriculum for pregnant or first-time parents.

Family Spirit is a voluntary home visiting program designed to serve American Indian families, that was developed by the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health in partnership with Navajo, White Mountain Apache, and San Carlos Apache Tribes. This effort enhances the early childhood system by leveraging cultural assets and an indigenous understanding of health.

Family Spirit's culturally-tailored intervention is delivered by specially trained community members as the core strategy to support young parents from pregnancy to age 3. It is a behaviorally-focused

intervention, responsive to parents' and children's needs, and it addresses intergenerational behavioral health problems by applying local cultural assets. Headway home visitors spend time getting to know families and invest in building trust between themselves and families to demonstrate a partnership of working toward the same goal: healthy outcomes for their children.

After going through the prenatal curriculum, Lacey delivered a healthy son and felt ready for her new role as mom. She couldn't wait to share her son's arrival with Nicole -- who has been a supportive and positive force in her life. Now that her son is here, Nicole provides Lacey guidance on child development tailored to her child's developmental stage and specific needs. This includes knowledge of the child's next developmental steps, so Lacey can anticipate the challenges, support her child in developing the necessary skills, and celebrate her child's accomplishments.

One of the goals is to help parents experience joy in their child and in being their child's parent. As parents gain skill at observing their child's cues, properly interpreting and responding to them, their confidence and delight can grow.

Headway's work with the Family Spirit model is built on more than 10 years of experience as a Healthy Families America Home Visiting Program under contract with Hennepin County. With generous funding support from the Otto Bremer Trust and a multi-year financial commitment from the Minnesota Department of Health, Headway is expanding its capacity to serve American Indian families in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metro area. Headway is also expanding its Healthy Families program, with an increased focus on its culturally appropriate home-visiting program serving East African immigrant families in Minneapolis.

To learn more about Headway's Healthy Families and/or Family Spirit programs, contact Erin Hansen at erin.hansen@headway.org.

About Nicole Gurneau, B.A.

Nicole joined Headway in February 2017. She has worked in the human services field since 2012 and with the Native American community since 2007. As an Infant Parent Support Specialist, she works with expectant mothers and first-time parents and their infants to offer encouragement and guidance to help promote strong parent/child bonds.

"Someday these little lives will lead and guide us," she says. "In turn, it is our duty to lead and guide them while they are small. Supporting parents on this journey is an honor."

When Nicole is not at work, she enjoys trying new recipes with her husband, making diaper cakes, creating art with her children and reading while sitting near her cats.