

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE IN TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE DOCUMENTATION

Documentation is the case road map for each youth and family that is served by a tribal child welfare program and it begins the moment safety concerns are brought to the attention of the agency. Safety issues that bring youth to the attention of a tribal child welfare program are most often rooted in the complex trauma histories of the birthparent(s)/caregiver(s) and their respective tribe(s). Additionally, the experience of becoming involved in any child welfare system is inherently traumatic for youth and families. When documentation is trauma-informed and responsive to the individual trauma experiences of youth and families it can provide consistent insight and justification for decisions that support the healing and thriving of our relatives.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE TIPS FOR DOCUMENTATION

Trauma-informed care provides space for tribal child welfare professionals to realize how common trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences.

The programmatic and caseworker tips listed on the following pages align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION

CREATE SAFETY BY HONORING CONFIDENTIALITY

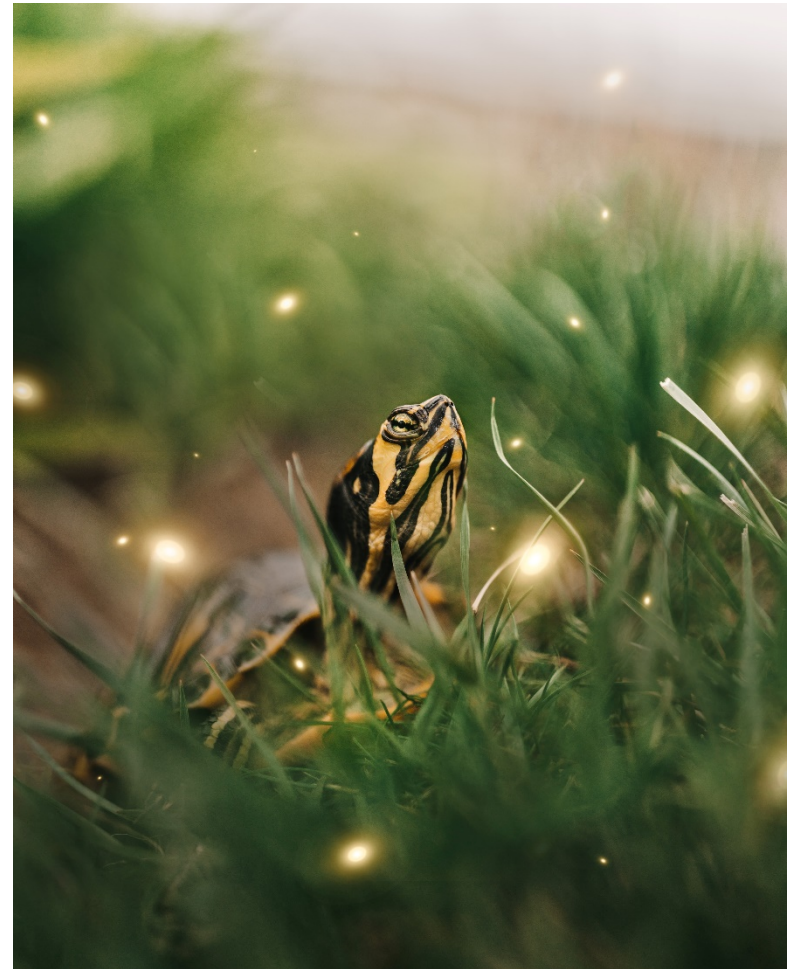
Every tribal child welfare program is unique in the policies, procedures and tribal codes that guide the services provided to youth and families. Local agency policy and code serve as a compass to tribal child welfare professionals as they navigate key issues related to documentation like information sharing and confidentiality. Having a thorough understanding of how to protect sensitive and confidential information is a trauma-informed practice that promotes the safety of youth and families.

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Review pertinent tribal code, federal regulations, and agency policy with new employees and as ongoing professional development learning.
- Ensure that all case files are secured and only those who need access will have access.
- Talk to families who have received services from the tribal child welfare program. Ask about their experiences in regards to documentation, what helped them and what could be improved upon to support the healing and thriving of youth and families involved in the tribal child welfare system.

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Learn and comply with the local tribal code and the tribal child welfare program's policies and procedures that pertain to documentation, confidentiality, and information sharing.
- Respect the privacy of Indigenous youth and families. Remember that youth and families have a right to know what information is being collected, how the information is used, and specifically how the information is relevant to the goal of reunification.
- Write down information with care and respect and assume that the youth and birthparent(s)/caregiver(s) will likely have an opportunity to read what has been written.



DOCUMENTATION AS A TOOL TO SUPPORT THE HEALING & THRIVING OF YOUTH & FAMILIES

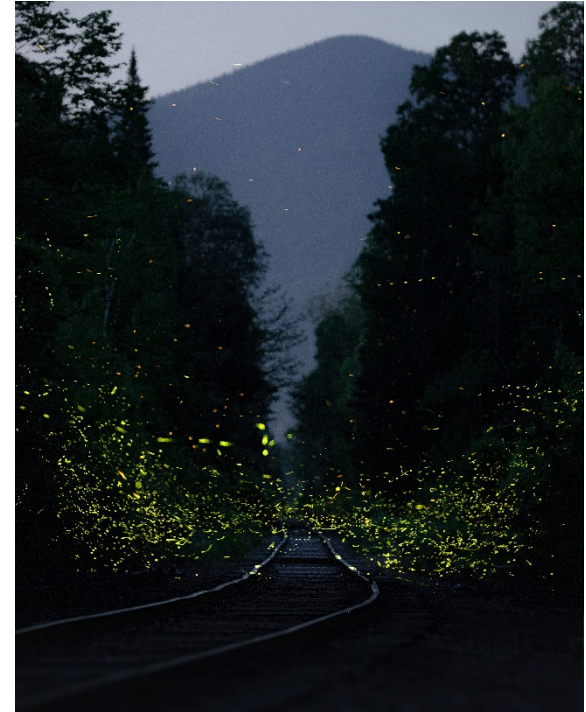
Trauma-informed documentation incorporates individual and family strengths as well as protective factors that are rooted in tribal culture and accessible community resources. The best way to find out about a family's strengths and protective factors is by actively seeking and prioritizing youth and family voices, choices, and opinions in every aspect of the case process. This collaborative process facilitates a shared responsibility in case outcomes and demonstrates the importance of "doing with" as opposed to "doing to".

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

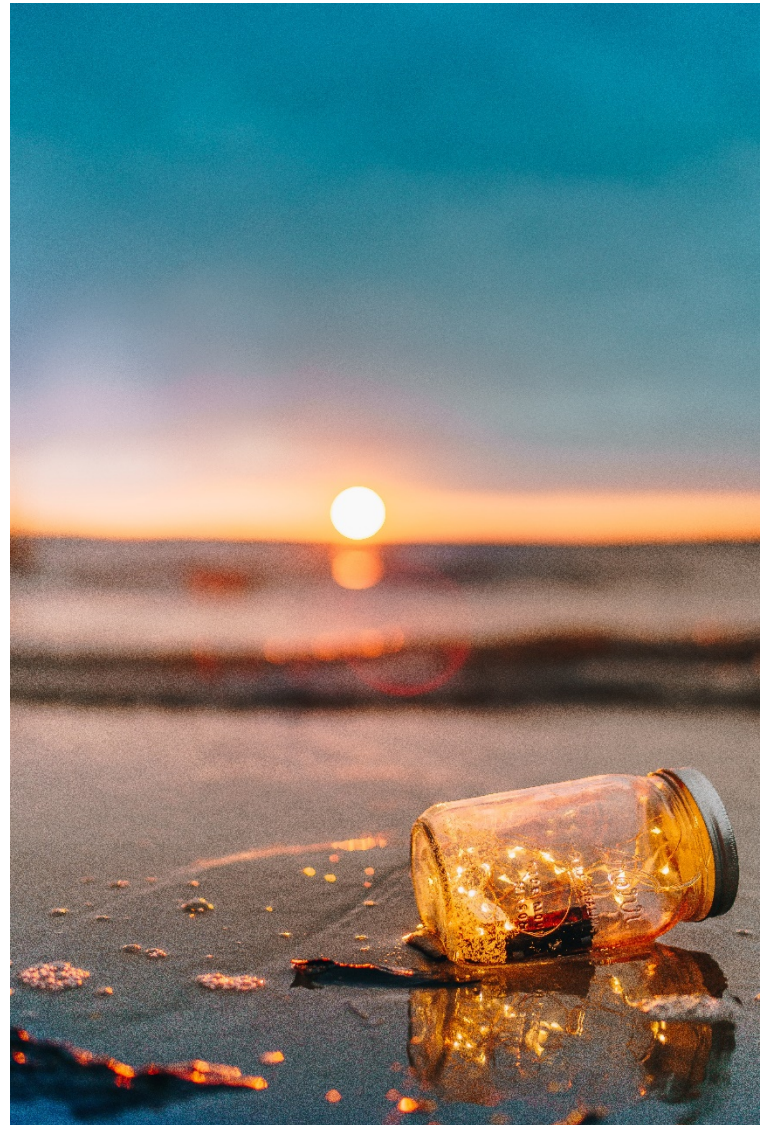
- Review policies and procedures to identify areas in which local tribal cultural practices, ceremonies, and healing can be added to available services for youth and families.
- Utilize input from Culture Preservation departments and/or elders in the community to enhance policies and procedures for congruence with the tribe(s)' values, culture and traditional ways.
- Offer continuous professional development training opportunities on topics related to recognizing the impact of trauma across the lifespan.

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Ensure all communication, case documentation, and forms are provided in the client's first language.
- Ensure transparency! As allowable by tribal code and agency policy, provide copies of documents, forms, and plans to youth, birthparent(s), and/or caregiver(s) that outline what the individual is responsible for or is required to do as part of the case plan.
- Share the power and support empowerment by incorporating the voices of youth and birth parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) in all aspects of case delivery including documentation. What are the youth's goals? The birthparent(s) and/or caregiver(s)?
- Write down needs and ideas that the youth, birthparent(s), and/or caregiver(s) identify.
- Identify local community resources and community-level supports that may be beneficial to the youth, birthparent(s), and/or caregivers. Some examples may include: ceremony, rites of passage, traditional healers, after-school programs, pow-wows, community feeds, clothing drives, church programs, etc. When culturally appropriate, document these supports including how a family can connect with them.



- Ask questions that support providing tailored and responsive services to the youth, birthparent(s), and/or caregiver(s). Write down their answers to support case plan development and service delivery. Here are some examples of questions to ask:
 - What helps you when feel upset or overwhelmed?
 - What is *not* helpful when you feel upset or overwhelmed?
 - Are there any triggers or situations that are stressful and/or overwhelming that remind you of past traumatic experiences?
 - How do you show you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed?
 - Who do you feel safe around and can go to for support?
 - Where can you go to when you need support or to feel safe?
- Incorporate and build upon individual and family strengths in the case planning process. Here are examples of domains that strengths fall under and are helpful to ask about and document:
 - Individual
 - Family
 - Cultural
 - Spiritual
 - Social
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Psychological
- Review strengths to identify which ones may also serve as protective factors to keep the youth safe. Revisit conversations about identifying strengths with the youth, birthparent(s), and/or caregiver(s) throughout the case process because needs and strengths continually develop and evolve.
- Co-develop safety plans with the youth and the birthparent(s)/caregiver(s) to address each of their immediate safety needs as well as anticipated or upcoming safety needs.



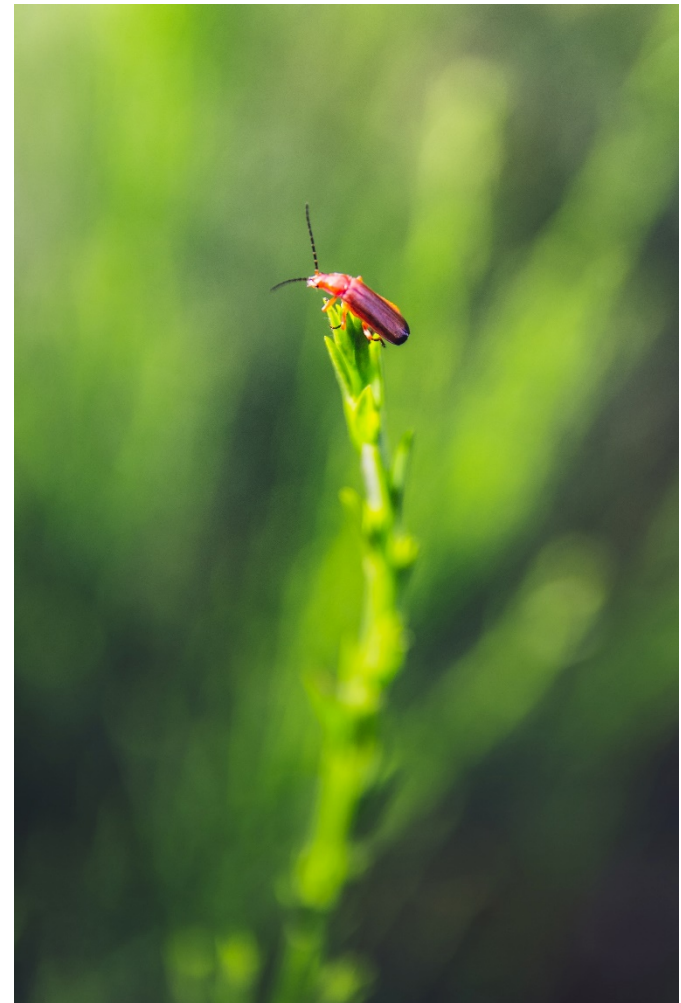
WAYS TO USE TRAUMA-INFORMED AND TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE LANGUAGE IN DOCUMENTATION

Trauma-informed and trauma-responsive language helps identify individualized needs for youth and families, and in turn helps us be responsive to the needs of our relatives. There are various ways to identify the individualized needs of our youth and families and it starts with utilizing person-first language, objective writing and communication, and focusing on the facts that are relevant to safety, family preservation, reunification and permanency.

Utilize Person-First Language

Every person has struggles. Every person has challenges. Every person is much more than the struggles and challenges they experience. The youth and families served by tribal child welfare programs are our relatives and are much more than the adversities they face. Person-first language puts our relatives first, as people, and then describes the challenges, struggles, or diagnoses they are dealing with. Person-first language reduces stigma and stereotyping labels.

Person-First Language	Stigmatizing and Labeling Language
Sam has bipolar disorder.	Sam is bipolar.
Morgan is experiencing homelessness.	Morgan is homeless.
Aiden has a substance use disorder.	Aiden is an addict.



Write Objectively and Focus on Facts

Objective Language:

Labels and buzzwords do not have universally agreed upon definitions. Stay objective in all documentation and communication by avoiding opinion-based language and focusing on describing the facts. Here are some examples to avoid of labels and common buzzwords often heard and seen in child welfare:

Examples of Opinion-based Labels	Examples of Child Welfare Buzzwords
Aggressive	Abuse
Angry	Addict
Belligerent	CPS history
Combative	Criminal
Crazy	Defiant
Dirty	Intoxicated
Drunk	Isolated
Explosive	Marginal
Hot-headed	Neglect
Hysterical	No resources
Lazy	Noncompliant
Mean	Out of control
Mischief	Scared
Nasty	Terrified
Runaway	Uncooperative
Troublemaker	Unfit
Weird	Violent

Facts:

Facts are collected and documented based on the purpose of whatever task or goal needs to be addressed or completed. For instance, if a supervisor or caseworker is documenting safety concerns to justify a removal, there needs to be as much relevant detail as possible to clearly communicate the safety risks. Documenting facts provides case continuity by offering clear explanations and justification for decision making, service delivery, and expectations of the youth, birth parent(s)/ caregiver(s) throughout the life of a case. Remember to describe facts using the five senses:

- What was seen, heard, tasted, smelled, touched/felt.

Objective and Fact-based Language

The case worker noticed a strong smell of feces upon walking into the home around 3:45pm and visually observed soiled diapers with urine and feces left on the floor by the green couch where the 10-month-old infant, Yaz, was sitting in a soiled diaper and crying. The infant's fingers, hands, face, and knees were covered in dried feces. The infant's birthfather, Justin, was lying on the green couch with a blue prescription pill bottle in his left hand. The lid to the pill bottle was observed on the father's stomach as well as two oblong white pills on his chest. The father did not respond when the case worker verbally tried to wake him up. The case worker called emergency services for the birthfather due to the empty pill bottle and his unresponsiveness. The case worker picked up the crying infant and noticed how her skin felt cold to the touch. The case worker found clothes for the infant and could not find a clean diaper to change the infant.

Subjective and Opinion-based Language

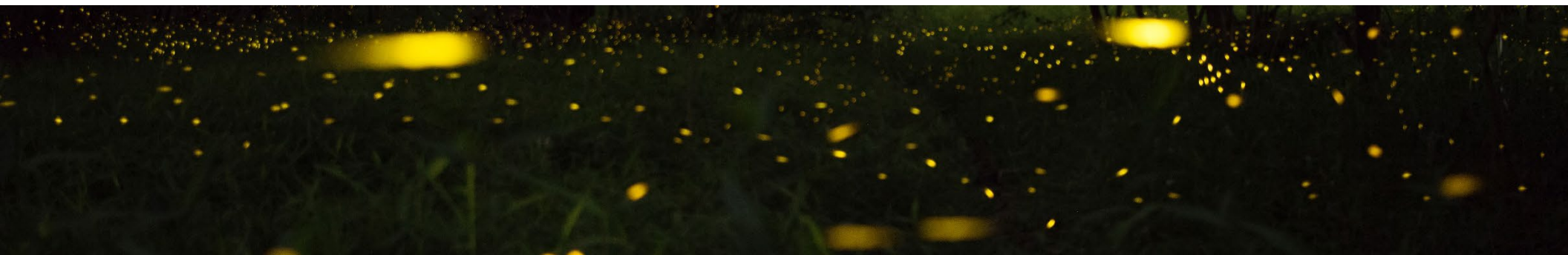
The house was a mess, the birthfather was passed out, and the baby was obviously neglected.

What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Ensure policies, procedures, and forms utilize person-first language.
- Provide continuous professional development opportunities for staff to practice writing objectively and focus on documenting facts throughout various parts of cases. Here are some examples of various documentation in tribal child welfare cases: investigation reports, incident reports, tribal court reports, permanency plans, case plans, treatment plans, service referrals, home visiting notes, supervised visit notes, etc.
- Review case files to provide constructive feedback to supervisors and staff on ways in which they can incorporate more person-first language, and objective, fact-based documentation.
- Utilize person-first, objective, fact-based language in every type of communication: conversations, emails, trainings, staff meetings, supervision, crisis debriefings, court, family decision-making meetings, etc.
- Meet with staff and supervisors to identify common stigmatizing label-focused and opinion-based language and buzzwords typically seen within the local tribal child welfare agency. Discuss alternatives that are person-first, objective, and fact-based.
- Explain the hazards of stigmatizing label-focused and opinion-based language, especially to children, young adults, and families who have experienced trauma.

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Increase your self-awareness by reflecting on common terms and descriptions you use within your own writing.
- Practice writing documentation details by describing information using the 5 senses.
- Utilize person-first language in every type of documentation and communication: conversations, emails, trainings, staff meetings, supervision, crisis debriefings, court reports, visit notes, case notes, case plans, treatment plans, home visits, service referrals, etc.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health: [How You Write Is as Important as What You Say: A Guide to Trauma-Informed Writing](#)
- Empower Mental Health: [Judgmental Language](#)
- U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution: [Non-Judgmental Language: Helpful Phrases Handout](#)
- National Council for Behavioral Health: [Language Matters Handout](#)
- A Long Journey Home: [A Guide for Creating Trauma-Informed Services for Mothers and Children Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- Trauma-Informed Organizational [Toolkit for homeless services](#)
- Relias Blog: [What is Trauma Sensitive Language?](#)

