

Insights on safe infant sleep in Native communities

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Gathering Expert Insight

The Healthy Native Babies Project gathered insight from experts on safe infant sleep among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities

- What: Sixteen key informant interviews
- When: July 2020-May 2021
- Who: Program directors, healthcare and service providers, educators, and a spiritual elder working to address safe infant sleep in AI/AN communities
- Where: Based at tribal organizations, hospitals, the Indian Health Service (IHS), urban Indian programs, and university and state-based agencies serving AI/AN populations in eight IHS regions

Reflecting on Insights

- Consistent themes highlight systemic risk factors for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) in AI/AN communities
- Need policies that address persistent upstream challenges
- Recommended activities include:
 - Early and ongoing education with extended family
 - Training and support for providers and educators
 - Building on cultural strengths, such as traditional activities and culturally-specific care

*Expert Insight:
Barriers & Challenges*

Expert Insight: Systemic Factors

- **Need for policy-level approaches**

“There are challenges in the built environment. Living in multigenerational families. Living in homes where there is substandard housing. Babies may not have a place to sleep safely. Parents may struggle living with elders [when they try to] insist on, or demand smoke-free environments.”

Expert Insight: Resources



- **Lack of separate infant sleep spaces**

“People are limited based on what they can afford.”

“There are people who are couch surfing.”

“It’s a much harder conversation with families who don’t have the spaces to reinforce [safe sleep practices].”

Expert Insight: Housing Insecurity

- Multiple generations often live in one home

“I think for the young parents not having a home of their own, kind of going from home to home, whether it's the father's parents' home, or the mother's parents' home, moving temporarily from one location to the other. I think that's part of why cribs are not being used, besides the financial factor.”

Expert Insight: Barriers to Health Care

Barriers to health care including the need for:

- Access to care
- Time during visits to fully address safe infant sleep
- Continuity of care between systems and providers
- Health literacy
- Cultural sensitivity and racial congruence between provider and patient



Expert Insight: Provider Training Needs

- Recommended provider cultural sensitivity training

“When it’s coming from someone like me who is not Alaska Native—when I say let's get a bassinet and put the baby there—it can be taken as me saying the cultural practice is inadequate. It can come across as me challenging generational ways. It can come across as condescending and almost a form of cultural oppression.”

*Expert Insight:
Educational Approaches*

Expert Insight: Approaches

- Consider risk-reduction and patient-centered approaches

“My lessons learned really are lessons about the importance of a harm reduction approach. Not everyone will be able to meet all of the requirements that constitute a safe sleep environment. It is important to meet people where they are.”

“Making sure you can ask questions and have conversations without making people feel shame.”

Expert Insight: Timing for Education

- **Early and consistent education**

“Education should be provided by [obstetricians (OBs)] to give the moms time to think about it, look it up for themselves and create plans before baby ever comes.”

“We could be utilizing individuals that work with moms, our birth workers [like midwives, doulas, and groups who support women postpartum]. Those groups could be really solid places where we could talk more about harm reduction and supporting families.”



Expert Insight: Relatives

- Engage fathers and other relatives

“We really need to be creative in including the father. Everything's ‘mom, mom, mom,’ and fathers need to understand that they have a responsibility too. Including that father perspective, I think, would be helpful.”

“There are many people caring for an infant. It is really important that the education extend beyond the mom and the dad; bring in grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, the whole extended family.”

Expert Insight: Supporting Educators

- Support for educators and care providers
 - Collaborations across providers and organizations
 - Support forums for sharing lessons and ideas for mutual support
 - Provide ongoing professional development
 - Promote continuity of care with referrals

*Expert Insight:
Traditional and Cultural
Protective Factors*

Expert Insight: Social Support

- **Strength of the extended family and community**

“Many family members take an active role in helping to raise these children. Really, the community helps raise them.”

- **Community events and support groups**

“When families are connected to community, and to other people in the same phase of life, that can support each other, those are places where safe sleep messaging and harm reduction could really be happening.”



Expert Insight: Traditional and Cultural Practices

- Opportunities to build on a strengths-based approach to education
- Traditional belief that children are a sacred gift
- Incorporate education about safe infant sleep
- High level of interest in and use of cradleboards

Expert Insight: Culturally-Specific Care

- Culturally-specific care

“There are over 500 tribes in the U.S., and they all have things that are very unique to them. It makes it challenging, but [Native] people want that connection, and people outside of Native community work and cultures may not understand at all how important that is.”

Expert Insight: Diverse Communities

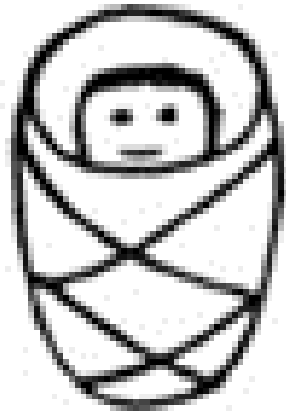
- Tailor efforts to communities and individuals

“We have far more strengths in our communities, within our cultures, within our languages, and within our ceremonies—we have far more strengths than we have barriers or challenges; and to draw on those is really important and connect those to whatever we are trying to affect change in, is really important.”

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