



# Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Tribal Home Visiting

## Introduction

The physical health concerns of Indigenous children often stem from generations of discriminatory policies that forcibly separated Indigenous people from their traditional living places and sources of food. Tribal home visiting programs are increasingly building traditional food practices into their programs and curricula to connect families to healthy foods and, ultimately, strengthen child health. This act of resiliency is known as Indigenous food sovereignty.

Indigenous food sovereignty is a natural fit for tribal home visiting, which provides services across generations to promote improved outcomes for pregnant people, young children, and caregivers. Supporting and educating families during early childhood—and connecting them to Native foodways—are both effective and culturally appropriate strategies for supporting early childhood physical health and restoring Indigenous traditions. Initiatives emphasize community-based partnerships and collaborations (Gutierrez et al., 2023), ensuring that home visiting programs can incorporate practices regardless of their resource and organizational capacities.

The evidence base for such efforts is promising. Rosenstock et al. (2021) found that culturally appropriate Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives can have sustained effects on food consumption habits in early childhood. Miltenburg et al. (2022) found that Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives support the long-term health and cultural preservation of Indigenous families by increasing access to nutritious and culturally adapted foods in rural and urban contexts.

The NHVRC is a partnership of James Bell Associates and the Urban Institute. Support is provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.

Suggested citation: Nadler, A. T., Chavis, E., & Atukpawu-Tipton, G. (2024). *Indigenous food sovereignty in tribal home visiting*. National Home Visiting Resource Center Innovation Roundup Brief. James Bell Associates. <https://nhvrc.org/brief/indigenous-food-sovereignty-tribal-home-visiting/>

Other research suggests that consuming traditional foods supports the health of Indigenous people (Blanchet et al., 2021; Priadka et al., 2022) and that early exposure to diverse, healthy foods has long-term positive impacts on eating habits and physical health (Lioret et al., 2020).

This brief highlights three Indigenous food sovereignty partnerships that include home visiting programs and models to inform potential implementation of similar initiatives:

- ✔ Gikinawaabi curriculum
- ✔ Native American Professional Parent Resources (NAPPR) fresh produce initiative
- ✔ Family Spirit Nurture curriculum

### Defining Terms

**Indigenous food sovereignty:** The ability for tribal nations and communities to determine the quantity and quality of the food they consume by controlling how it is produced and distributed (Maudrie et al., 2021).

**Indigenous, Native, Native American, and tribal:** Peoples whose connections to place, modes of governance, and knowledge predate the colonization of what is commonly referred to as the United States (Salvador et al., 2024). The terms are used interchangeably in this brief.

**Native foodways:** Traditional ways of obtaining, preparing, and eating food (Lunsford et al., 2021).

## Gikinawaabi Curriculum

**About:** Gikinawaabi is a child early learning curriculum introduced in 2015 to help Anishinaabe children 3 to 5 years of age learn by observing their parents and caregivers. Gikinawaabi is culturally grounded, centering around the medicine wheel used by many Native American tribes to represent health and healing (Mashford-Pringle & Shawanda, 2023). The curriculum content incorporates Native language, the [Anishinaabe lunar calendar](#), and traditional food practices. Curriculum developers incorporated Indigenous food sovereignty as a guiding theme because of food's importance to families' daily lives and activities.

**Goals and Purpose:** Gikinawaabi is intended to strengthen and promote early language, literacy, and numeracy skills among Indigenous children. By embedding learning activities into food-focused activities, Gikinawaabi naturally weaves learning opportunities throughout a family's day.

**Who Is Involved:** Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan (ITCM) and Michigan State University (MSU) first developed Gikinawaabi in response to the ITCM Tribal Home Visiting Program needing a curriculum to support children aged 3–5. The evidence-based model they were using at the time only served families with children up to 3 years old. ITCM needed something that would work in a home-based education structure and could be delivered by multiple types of professionals or paraprofessionals such as nurses, social workers, and family health educators. Gikinawaabi also addressed a concern expressed by local Tribal Head Start programs that children entering their programs scored lower in literacy and numeracy skills than their peers—a disparity that could affect them into elementary school. By contrast, children’s expressive and receptive language skills were found to be above average when entering Tribal Head Start programs.

Home visitors played a role in developing, implementing, and updating the curriculum. ITCM and MSU also worked with an advisory team comprising members of the home visiting team, tribal members, tribal cultural departments, and Tribal Head Start staff.

**Notable Details:** Gikinawaabi was developed using the Making It Work framework, which supports early childhood education programs incorporating Indigenous language and culture into evidence-based curricula for Head Start programs. Each chapter includes developmental objectives from the PICCOLO (Roggman et al., 2013) and Lollipop (Chew & Morris, 1984) child development measures.

As part of a recent update to Gikinawaabi, members of the [Wiba Anung](#) partnership developed a 60-page companion book for parents with practical ideas for engaging children in developmentally appropriate food activities. It includes examples for integrating numeracy and literacy learning, such as counting pieces of fruit and vegetables or describing their shapes and colors. The companion book is rooted in Anishinaabe culture; customized versions exist for the Ojibwe and Potawatomi tribes.

**Accomplishments:** Eleven tribes and one urban Indian organization have received training to implement Gikinawaabi. An evaluation in 2018 conducted as part of ITCM’s Tribal Home Visiting Program found that using the curriculum likely contributed to increased school readiness skills in children. It also showed that parents exposed to Gikinawaabi had more specific suggestions for interacting with children to foster learning compared to parents who had not been exposed.

**Upcoming Activities:** ITCM and MSU plan to release the third edition of Gikinawaabi in 2024. The new edition will feature 22 lessons—compared to 13 in the original—including 2 new lessons on local foraging and harvesting. Other changes include simplifying lessons, aligning them more clearly with developmental objectives from the PICCOLO and Lollipop, adding more aspects from the medicine wheel, and incorporating graphics by a local Indigenous artist.

**For More Information:** Email any of the following contacts:

- ✔ Amanda Bahrou ([amanda@itcmi.org](mailto:amanda@itcmi.org)), department director, ITCM Maternal & Early Childhood Services Department
- ✔ Amanda Rinna ([amanda.rinna@itcmi.org](mailto:amanda.rinna@itcmi.org)), program coordinator, ITCM Home Visiting Program
- ✔ Jessica Barnes-Najor ([barnes33@msu.edu](mailto:barnes33@msu.edu)), director for community partnerships, MSU Office for Public Engagement and Scholarship

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*“It sounds so complex in creating this, but it's also actually such a simple idea, to take back your food rights, and to eat local, and to go into your backyard and harvest your dandelions. It's something that most people can do.” —Amanda Rinna*

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## NAPPR Fresh Produce Initiative

**About:** Since 2021, [NAPPR](#) has offered weekly fresh produce to New Mexico families receiving tribal home visiting services. Participants receive fresh, in-season produce for 22 weeks. The produce is provided by a local farm, the Indigenous Farm Hub, through its community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. CSA fees are paid by the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation to support opportunities for youth and leadership development in Indigenous agriculture.

**Goals and Purpose:** NAPPR provides the fresh produce in keeping with its mission to empower, educate, and provide supportive services to build healthy Native and non-Native children and families. The initiative seeks to reduce disparities in food access by connecting families, including prenatal and postpartum participants and their children, to fresh, nutrient-rich produce. Participating children are exposed to a wide variety of vegetables at an early age, which can increase their likelihood of eating nutrient-rich foods across their lifetimes (Grimm et al., 2014).

**Who Is Involved:** The Indigenous Farm Hub, the NB3 Foundation, and NAPPR all collaborate on the initiative, which was the idea of a parent—and previous home visiting participant—on the NAPPR Tribal Home Visiting Parent Advisory Group. The Indigenous Farm Hub grows and packages the food, NB3 Foundation pays for families' CSA shares, and NAPPR coordinates families' access to the produce.

**Notable Details:** Families can pick up their produce at NAPPR's main office or ask to receive it during a home visit within days of the produce being picked to maintain items' peak freshness. Each produce bundle contains a list and photo of that week's produce items, along with suggestions for using them in traditional food recipes or as side dishes to traditional main courses. NAPPR has also provided small greenhouse kits to families who have expressed an interest in growing vegetables.

**Accomplishments:** In August 2024, NAPPR used the fresh produce at a family group connection event, at which a local Indigenous chef prepared a meal using ingredients from that week's harvest.

**Upcoming Activities:** NAPPR plans to expand the ideas and recipes inspired by the fresh produce initiative into a cookbook containing traditional recipes from Indigenous families in the NAPPR Tribal Home Visiting Program.

**For More Information:** Contact Aliandra Maes ([AMaes@nappr.org](mailto:AMaes@nappr.org)), director of NAPPR's Dental Support Center and Tribal Home Visiting Program.

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*"In the process of researching the Indigenous Farm Hub, I came across all of these incredible projects that are already in the works. You don't have to reinvent the wheel or start from scratch; you can collaborate in a way that is mutually beneficial with other programs that have like-minded goals for the families they're working with. I think that makes a big difference." –Aliandra Maes*

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## Family Spirit Nurture Curriculum

**About:** Family Spirit Nurture is a home visiting curriculum designed for and with Native American families to promote healthy infant feeding and growth. The curriculum can be used on its own or incorporated into the [Family Spirit home visiting model](#). Each of the six lessons in the curriculum incorporates Native foodways and Indigenous foods tailored to caregivers' interests and needs. Topics include breastfeeding (when aligned with mothers' goals), infant-responsive feeding best practices, water consumption, moderation of sugar intake, connection to federal and local food sources, and healthy eating for the whole family.

**Goals and Purpose:** Family Spirit Nurture seeks to support healthy infant feeding from ages 3 to 6 months and to reduce early childhood obesity risk. It was developed in response to community requests for supporting healthy childhood physical development.

**Who Is Involved:** Family Spirit Nurture was designed for and with Indigenous caregivers with young children. The home visitors who implement Family Spirit Nurture are primarily Indigenous community health workers serving families in their home community. The idea for Family Spirit Nurture arose from Indigenous community advisory boards that requested culturally appropriate support for early childhood physical health. Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health developed the curriculum to supplement the Family Spirit model. Johns Hopkins and Navajo Nation institutional review boards reviewed and approved the evaluation study of the curriculum. Home visitors<sup>1</sup> implement Family Spirit Nurture with families during home visits.

**Notable Details:** Family Spirit Nurture is relational, crafted around home visitors getting to know caregivers and their interactions with food. Building relationships with families helps identify their traditional knowledge and positive experiences with food, both as a lifestyle and way to bring people together. Families are encouraged to reflect on what they find nurturing about food so that home visitors can help connect them to related foodways and food practices. For example, home visitors have connected families who live in food deserts to sites for fishing and wild rice distribution. Participating and interested families can sign up for automated text messages highlighting their children’s milestones and delivering inspirational messages.

**Accomplishments:** Family Spirit Nurture has been formally incorporated into the Family Spirit curriculum and has reached more than 700 families at 60 active sites. Rosenstock et al. (2021) conducted a randomized controlled trial of 134 mothers in the Shiprock, New Mexico, community on the Navajo Nation. Families who received Family Spirit Nurture reported that caregivers and children drank fewer sugary beverages, had better infant-responsive feeding practices, and breastfed their children longer than families who did not receive the curriculum. Outcomes were still present for some families 4 years after receiving the curriculum. Family Spirit Nurture is now used as the control condition in other research trials.

In 2023, Coursera began offering a [training course on Family Spirit Nurture as a standalone module](#). The public course is available at no cost. Those who wish to purchase the curriculum for use in their community will gain access to a private training course and additional implementation support.

**For More Information:** Email Amanda Harris ([aharr181@jhu.edu](mailto:aharr181@jhu.edu)) or Leonela Nelson ([lnelso32@jhu.edu](mailto:lnelso32@jhu.edu)), research associates at Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health.

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*“I ask moms, ‘What is it that you remember, what ties you to your grandma, what smells do you remember, what things remind you of home . . . connecting memories and how is it that those are things that make you smile. . . how do you want to have your child have those same memories?’” –Leonela Nelson*

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## Conclusion

Community engagement plays an essential role in the Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives highlighted in this brief. Efforts came together to address needs expressed by the community and/or were implemented in culturally informed ways with a variety of partners and resources. Representatives from each initiative described the need for a deep understanding of place to find innovative, yet traditional ways to encourage healthy living for families and children in their communities. Their guidance to others interested in establishing Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives includes the following:

- ✔ Begin with efforts that fall within your program's capacity for staffing and funding, with flexibility to change and grow over time
- ✔ Determine who is already working toward Indigenous food sovereignty in your community and explore opportunities to collaborate
- ✔ Include everyone who needs to be at the table in planning and implementation
- ✔ Recognize that it takes time to do this work in a meaningful, effective way
- ✔ Establish clear boundaries to communicate what will and will not work for your program

Indigenous ways of knowing come from specific places, leading to variation among communities. Reclaiming traditional foods and centering place empowers Indigenous communities to address health disparities resulting from historical traumas. Respecting tribal sovereignty and supporting communities in developing Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives can ensure such efforts are grounded in culture and place. Partnering with tribal community leaders supports the integration of traditional evidence-based practices into Indigenous communities to reduce child health disparities.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to Amanda Bahrou, Amanda Harris, Aliandra Maes, Amanda Rinna, Jessica Barnes-Najor, and Leonela Nelson for sharing information about their programs. Thank you to Allison Meisch, Joelle Ruben, and Jill Filene for shaping and editing the brief and to Kristine Neurauter for providing formatting support.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This brief focuses on home visiting delivery of the curriculum, rather than its potential use in clinic and group settings.

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