

# **Indian Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors, Together with Educational Considerations**

*(Compiled by Indian Educators for the California State Department of Education)*

## **1. Cooperation**

Cooperation is highly valued. The value placed on cooperation is strongly rooted in the past when cooperation was necessary for the survival of family and group. Because of strong feelings of group solidarity, competition within the group is rare. There is security in being a member of the group and in not being singled out and placed in a position above or below others. However, approved behavior includes improving on and competing with one's own past performance. The sense of cooperation is so strong in many tribal communities that democracy means consent by consensus, not by majority rule. Agreement and cooperation among tribal members are all important. This value is often at odds with the competitive spirit emphasized in the dominant society.

A common result of the disparity between cooperation and competition is that, under certain circumstances, when a fellow Indian student does not answer a question in class, some Indian children may state that they also do not know the answer, even though they might. This practice stems from their non-competitive culture and concern that other individuals do not lose face.

## **2. Group Harmony**

Indian values emphasize the group and the importance of maintaining harmony within the group. Most Indians have a low ego level and strive for anonymity. They stress the importance of personal cooperation (social harmony) rather than task orientation. The needs of the group are considered over those of the individual. This value is often at variance with the concept of rugged individualism.

One result of the difference between group and individual emphasis is that internal conflict may result since the accent in most schools is generally on work for personal gain, not on group work. The Indian child may choose not to forge ahead as an independent person and may prefer to work with and for the group. Some non-Indian educators incorrectly consider this to be behavior that should be discouraged and modified.

## **3. Modesty**

The value of modesty is emphasized. Even when one does well and achieves something, one must remain modest. Boasting and loud behavior that attracts attention to oneself are discouraged. Modesty regarding one's physical body is also common among most Indians.

Indian children and their parents may not speak freely of their various accomplishments (e.g. traditional Indian dancing, championships or rodeo-riding awards won, or even Olympic medals). Within the Indian community, grandparents and clan relatives may brag for an

individual, but that pride may often stay within the community. Therefore, non-Indians are generally unaware of special achievements. Regarding the matter of physical modesty, many Indian students experience difficulty and embarrassment in physical education and similar classes which require students to undress in front of others.

#### **4. Autonomy**

Value is placed on respect for an individual's dignity and personal autonomy. People are not meant to be controlled. One is taught not to interfere in the affairs of another. Children are accorded the same respect as adults. Indian parents generally practice noninterference regarding their child's vocation. Indians support the rights of an individual. One does not volunteer advice until it is asked for.

Conflict in these essential values is evident in circumstances in which Indians resist the involvement of outsiders in their affairs. They may resent non-Indian attempts to help and give advice, particularly in personal matters. Forcing opinions and advice on Indians about such things as careers only causes frustration.

#### **5. Placidity**

Placidity is valued, as is the ability to remain quiet and still. Silence is comfortable. Most Indians have few nervous mannerisms. Feelings of discomfort are frequently masked in silence to avoid embarrassment of self or others. When ill at ease, Indians observe in silence while inwardly determining what is expected of them. Indians are generally slow to demonstrate signs of anger or other strong emotions. This value may differ sharply from that of the dominant society, which often values action over inaction or emotional restraint behavior.

This conflict in values often results in Indian people being incorrectly viewed as shy, slow, or backward. The silence of some Indians can also be misconstrued as behavior that snubs, ignores, or appears to be sulking.

(Note: placidity may also manifest as contentment with an acceptable situation. Traditionally raised Indian people may not feel the need to have the newest car if their old one works well.

If your house is warm and protects you from the elements, is it really necessary to have a newer and bigger house just to impress your neighbors. Many Native Americans don't demonstrate the need for "more, more, more" acquisition of material things. This does not mean that Indians aren't ambitious (or that there aren't Indian millionaires), but many Native people may be more interested in cooperation or spiritual knowledge and contentment, rather than piling up material wealth).

#### **6. Patience**

Patience and the ability to wait quietly are considered a good quality among Indians. Evidence of this value is apparent in delicate, time-consuming works of art, such as beadwork, quillwork, or sand painting, and in activities such as storytelling or hunting and gathering resources. If you patiently listen to grandmother's story for the tenth time, you will

probably have that story to tell to your grandkids. Patience might not be as valued by others who may have been taught “never to allow grass to grow under one's feet.”

Educators may press Indian students or parents to make rapid responses and immediate decisions or may become impatient with their slow and deliberate discussions.

## **7. Generosity**

Generosity and sharing are highly valued. Most Indians freely exchange property and food. The most respected person is not one with large savings but rather one who gives generously. Individual ownership of material property exists but is sublimated. Avarice is strongly discouraged. While the concept of sharing is advanced by most cultures, it may come into conflict with the value placed by the dominant society on individual ownership and wealth accumulation.

Indian students often maintain good personal relations with their peers by sharing. Many educators often fail to recognize and utilize the Indian students' desire to share and thus lose an opportunity to promote harmony and learning in the classroom.

## **8. Indifference to Ownership**

Acquiring material goods merely for the sake of ownership or status is not as important as being a good person. This was a value held by many Indians for generations. The person who tried to accumulate goods was often viewed with suspicion or fear. Vestiges of this are still seen among Indians today who share what little they have, at times to their own detriment. Holding a 'give-away' at which blankets, shawls, and numerous other items, including money, are publicly given away to honor others is still a common occurrence, even in urban areas. Because of this traditional outlook, Indians tend not to be status-conscious in terms of material goods. Upward social mobility within the dominant non-Indian society may not actively sought by traditional raised Native people.

Non-Indians frequently have difficulty understanding and accepting the Indian's lack of interest in acquiring material goods. If the student's family has an unsteady or seemingly nonexistent income, educators may incorrectly assume that economic counseling is in order.

## **9. Indifference to Saving**

Traditionally, Indians have not sought to acquire savings accounts, life insurance policies, and the like. This attitude results from the past when nature's bounty provided all one's needs. Not all food could be saved, although any meat, fruit, or fish that could be preserved by salt curing or drying was saved. Most other needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, and land) were provided by nature in abundance, and little need existed to consider saving for the future. In Indian society, where sharing was a way of life, emphasis on saving for one's own benefit was unlikely to be present. This value may be at odds with the dominant culture, which teaches one to forgo present needs in exchange for greater satisfaction to come.

Emphasis on the European / Industrial viewpoint in most educational systems causes frustration and anxiety for the Indian student and parent since it conflicts sharply with so many other values honored by Indians (sharing, generosity, and so on).

### **10. Indifference to Work Ethic**

The Puritan work ethic is foreign to most Indians. In the past, with nature providing one's needs, little need existed to work just for the sake of working. Since material accumulation was not important, one worked to meet immediate, concrete needs. Adherence to a rigid work schedule was traditionally not an Indian practice.

Indians often became frustrated when the Puritan ethic of work for work's sake is strongly emphasized. The practice of assigning homework or in-class work just for the sake of work runs contrary to Indian values. It is important that Indians understand the value behind any work assigned, whether in school or on the job.

### **11. Moderation in Speech**

Talking for the sake of talking is discouraged. In the past in their own society, Indians found it unnecessary to say hello, good-bye, how are you, and so on. Even today, many Indians find such small talk unimportant. In social interactions, Indians emphasize the feeling or emotional component rather than the verbal. Ideas and feelings are conveyed through behavior rather than speech. Many Indians still cover the mouth with the hand while speaking as a sign of respect. Indians often speak slowly, quietly, and deliberately. The power of words is understood; therefore, one speaks carefully, choosing words judiciously.

The difference in the degree of verbosity may create a situation in which the Indian is not given a chance to talk at all. Due to our sense of courtesy and respect, many Native people may wait for another person to finish speaking, before they offer their ideas or opinions. This may also cause non-Indians to view Indians as shy, withdrawn, or disinterested. Indians tend to retreat when someone asks too many questions or presses a conversation. Because many Indians do not engage in small talk, non-Indians may often consider Indians to be unsociable.

### **12. Careful Listening**

Being a good listener is highly valued. Because Indians have developed listening skills, they have simultaneously developed a keen sense of perception that quickly detects insincerity. The listening skills are emphasized since Indian culture was traditionally passed on orally. Storytelling and oral recitations were important means of recounting tribal history and teaching lessons.

Problems may arise if Indian students are taught only in non-Indian ways. Their ability to

follow a traditional behavior of remaining quiet and actively listening to others may be negatively affected. This value may be at variance with teaching methods that emphasize speaking over listening and place importance on expressing one's opinion.

### **13. Careful Observation**

Most Indians have sharp observational skills and note fine details. Likewise, nonverbal messages and signals, such as facial expressions, gestures, or different tones of voice, are easily perceived. Indians tend to convey and perceive ideas and feelings through behavior.

The difference between the use of verbal and nonverbal communication may cause Indian students and parents to be labeled erroneously as being shy, backward, or disinterested. Their keen observational skills are rarely utilized or encouraged.

### **14. Permissive Child Rearing**

Traditional Indian child-rearing practices are labeled permissive in comparison with European standards. This misunderstanding occurs primarily because Indian child-rearing is self-exploratory rather than restrictive. Indian children are generally raised in an atmosphere of love. A great deal of attention is lavished on them by a large array of relatives, usually including many surrogate mothers and fathers. The child is usually with one or more relatives in all situations. Indian adults generally lower, rather than raise their voices when correcting a child. The Indian child may learn to be seen and not heard when adults are present.

In-school conflicts may arise since most educators are taught to value the outgoing child. While an Indian child may be showing respect by responding only when called upon, the teacher may interpret the behavior as backward, indifferent, or even sullen. Teachers may also misinterpret or fail to appreciate the Indian child's lack of need to draw attention, either positive or negative, upon him or herself.

### **15. View of Time as Relative**

Time is viewed as flowing; the past and future are seen as always being with us. Time is relative; clocks are not watched. Things are done as needed. Time is, therefore, relative and geared to the activity at hand. This attitude is rooted in the past when only the sun, moon and seasons were used to mark the passage of time. Many Indian languages may contain no word for time as well as no words to denote a future tense. This view of time is radically different from that of the dominant society, for which careful scheduling of activities is important. In that view, time is linear and moves at a fixed, measurable rate. Emphasis is placed on using every minute efficiently.

Because of the influence of the traditional view of time, some Indian students and parents

may clash with educators when they do not arrive at the appointed hour for class or meeting. Non-Indians may mistakenly interpret Indians' different attitude toward time as irresponsible. Things tend to be done as needed, rather than because a clock or calendar says so. For instance, a Powwow will probably begin when all participants are ready, rather than the exact hour announced on a flyer or schedule.

## **16. Orientation to the Present**

Indians are more oriented toward living in the present. There is a tendency toward an immediate - rather than postponed - gratification of desires. Living each day as it comes is emphasized. This value is closely tied to the philosophy that one should be more interested in being than in becoming. A Western medical student when asked what they are doing may say, "I'm going to be a doctor," while a Native student might say, "I'm studying medicine."

One result of the disparity between the Indian present orientation and the European future orientation is that frustration often results when Indian students are pressured to forgo present needs for vague future rewards.

## **17. Pragmatism**

Most American Indians are pragmatic. Indians tend to speak in terms of the concrete rather than the abstract or theoretical. In learning situations, educators frequently place primary emphasis on the memorization of abstract theories, concepts, formulas, and so on, and provide examples only to validate a particular theory. Indian students often learn more rapidly when there is a greater emphasis on concrete examples with a discussion of the abstract following. Many Native students may be more comfortable proceeding from the concrete to the abstract, rather than the other way around. Traditionally raised Indian students may have a practical, realistic, common sense orientation to life, with few illusions or pretensions.

## **18. Veneration of Age**

Indian people value age, believing that wisdom comes with age and experience. There is a recognition that older people may have gone through an experience you are having and that they may have solutions to problems you face. Tribal elders are treated with great respect. This stage of life is highly esteemed. It is not considered necessary to conceal white hair or other signs of age. To be old is synonymous with being wise. The talents of the elders are utilized for the continuance of the group. Hence, even today there is little evidence of a generation gap since each age group is afforded respect. The Indian view of aging is at odds with the emphasis on youthfulness and physical beauty evident in the dominant culture.

Conflict may result when Indians are influenced by non-Indians regarding youthfulness. A generation gap may result, causing a loss to Indian people of the wisdom and knowledge of the elders, who are the speakers of Native languages and the carriers of the culture in an oral

tradition society.

## **19. Respect for Nature**

Because nature cannot be regulated, Indians formed a cooperative way of life to function in balance with nature. If sickness occurs or food is lacking, the Indian believes that the necessary balance or harmony has somehow been destroyed. Nature is full of spirits and, hence, spiritual. Indians fashioned their way of life by living in harmony with nature. As a result, even today most Indians do not believe in progress at the expense of all else. Many Indians have also been taught to reject a strictly scientific explanation of the cosmos in favor of a supernatural one. Certain tribes adhere to restrictions against touching certain animals. The Indian respect for nature is in opposition to the value others place on the importance of controlling and asserting dominance over nature. Native Americans may see themselves as an equal part of nature, not separate, not superior (nor inferior) to any other part of nature.

Although the general public, including the school system, is becoming more conscious of ecology. The continuing emphasis on man's attempts to control nature runs contrary to what Indian students are taught by their people. In science classes, young Indians may also have difficulties because of their particular tribe's taboo against touching, let alone dissecting, frogs and other reptiles. In general, the practice of using animals in scientific experiments is met with revulsion by many Indians.

## **20. Spirituality as a Way of Life**

Indians hold to a contemplative rather than a utilitarian philosophy. Religious aspects are integrated into all areas of one's life. Much emphasis is placed on the mystical aspects of life. Religion is an integral part of each day; it is a way of life. There is no evidence that any Indian group ever imposed its system of religious beliefs on another group, nor were there separate denominations that sought to attract members.

The value Indian's place upon the spiritual is frequently misunderstood by non-Indians. Many Native people may have learned to see the spiritual dimension to acts and events in everyday life. Additional frustration may result when spirituality is avoided in most school discussions since it is not seen as being an integral part of a person's life. This practice ignores an aspect of life considered essential and natural to Indians.

## **21. No Harsh Discipline**

Indians believe that demeaning personal criticism and harsh discipline only damage a child's self-image and are thus to be avoided. Most Indian parents do not practice spanking. Corporal punishment, striking a child, is seen to destroy self esteem, which is an essential characteristic of a well adjusted, confident individual. Non-corporal means of discipline are preferred. Traditional forms of non-corporal punishment include frowning, ignoring, ridiculing, shaming, or scolding the individual or withholding all praise.



Sibling pressure and peer pressure are also an important means to control behavior. Also, among many Indian groups, relatives other than the natural parents are responsible for disciplining an Indian child (e.g., the mother's brother, an uncle or an aunt), thereby leaving the father and mother free for a closer, non-threatening, friendship relationship with the child. In addition, criticism of another is traditionally communicated indirectly through another family member, rather than directly, as in the dominant society. In general, Indians still use withdrawal as a form of disapproval.

The difference in attitude toward discipline frequently causes problems when educators and social service workers consider Indian parents to be unfit because they will not spank their children or otherwise punish them in public. In addition, since Indian children are sometimes disciplined by ridicule, they may fear making a mistake in class if they are not prepared adequately. Additional communication problems may arise when educators directly criticize an Indian student or parent, an act that is viewed by traditional Indian standards as rude and disrespectful.

## **22. Importance of Family**

The importance of and value placed on the Indian extended family cannot be underestimated. Aunts are often considered to be mothers, just as uncles may be considered fathers; and cousins may be considered brothers and sisters of the immediate family. Even clan members are considered relatives. Thus, Indian cultures consider many more individuals to be relatives than do non-Indian cultures. Such a large network of relatives provides much support and a strong sense of security. Occasionally, a grandparent, an aunt, or other relatives may actually raise the child. Since traditional Indian homes were small, family members became accustomed to being in close proximity to one another.

Educators and social service personnel often fail to understand the validity of various Indian relatives who function exactly as natural parents do and may consider the natural parents to be lax in their duties. Indian children sometimes live with relatives, even when there are no problems at home. When an Indian child resides (temporarily or permanently) with members of the extended family, this behavior should not be considered abnormal or indicative of problems.

## **23. Importance of Cultural Pluralism**

Indians resist assimilation and instead emphasize the importance of cultural pluralism (allowing and valuing differences). Indian people desire to retain as much of their cultural heritage as possible. Because they leave the reservation to find city jobs and educational opportunities, it does not mean they want to stop being Indian. Indians avoid educators with reformist attitudes who strive to propel Indian students into the American mainstream. In reservation communities and even in urban areas where there are anti-Indian attitudes among the non-Indian population, Indians tend to stay among Indians and go into non-Indian areas only when necessary. Confusion and misunderstanding often result when Indians go through



the motions of assimilating outwardly (e.g. adapting the use of material items, clothing, and so on) when they have not internally accepted European-American values.

An attitude of respect is seen as essential to harmony between groups. People may be interested in what they can learn from other groups, but prosthetizing or converting someone to your religion or spirituality is a very foreign and uncomfortable concept.

#### **24. Avoidance of Eye Contact**

Most Indian people avoid prolonged direct eye contact as a sign of respect. Among some tribes, such as the Navajo, one stares at another only when angry. It is also a simple matter of being courteous to keep one's eyes cast downward.

Frequently and erroneously, non-Indians presume that Indians are disrespectful, are behaving in a suspicious manner, or are hiding something when they fail to look a person in the eye. Since educators consider direct eye contact as a measure of another's honesty and sincerity, they often become upset with Indian students and say, "Look at me when I speak to you!" when the student is looking down out of respect.

#### **25. Holistic Approach to Health**

Indians believe in a holistic approach to health. Sickness implies an imbalance within the individual and between the individual and his or her universe. The whole individual - mind, body, and spirit - must be treated, not merely one physical segment of the body. An Indian doctor may set a broken arm, but they may also ask what caused the break. Is there tension in the family that needs to be addressed? Is the patient in a spiritual conflict? Is the injury due to hazards in their environment that need to be addressed? Many Indians believe that healing on a spiritual level (e.g. in ceremony) will help produce or must precede healing on a physical level.

Many Indians still prefer being attended by an Indian medicine person rather than by, or in addition to, a non-Indian physician. The use of chemical prescriptions may be avoided. When counseling an Indian family on health concerns, educators or social service personnel must recognize the validity of Indian medicine.

#### **26. Importance of Bilingualism**

Language often cradles culture. It is important to Indians to retain their Native languages. Many cultural elements are contained within the context of a Native language. Certain words and concepts are not easily translatable into English. Each Indian language contains the key to that society's view of the universe. Being able to speak and utilize your ancient language, may make the concepts of your culture more easy to practice and to express.

Often, non-Indians become impatient with Indians who still speak their own language and whose grasp of English may not be as strong as or as fluent as the non-Indians would

prefer. The Indian parent and student may need a longer time to formulate a response, since they may be thinking in their Native language and must translate into English before verbalizing. Clear and accurate communication between Indians and non-Indians may be difficult, since words do not always translate identically in the other's language. Because the general population prefers that everyone speaks English, the importance of Native languages goes unrecognized.

## **27. Caution in Interpersonal Relations**

Indians use caution in personal encounters and are usually not open with others at first. Information about one's family is not freely shared, and personal or family problems are generally kept to oneself. Indians may have difficulty communicating their subjective reactions to situations. Some of this personal caution stems from hesitancy about how they will be accepted by others. Because of past experiences, Indians may fear that non-Indians will be embarrassed for, or ashamed of, Indian individuals, family, or friends. After a period when trust is established, Indians may feel more comfortable sharing information about family. This helps to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings because of differing values and beliefs.

Because the American ideal is to appear friendly and open, although one may be hiding one's true feelings, Indians and non-Indians may be uncomfortable with each other because of these different modes of behavior. While non-Indians may see Indians as aloof and reserved, Indians may see European Americans as superficial and therefore untrustworthy.

A second-grade Indian student may not tell his or her teacher that he lives with his 98-year-old grandmother. The teacher might feel compelled to report the situation to social services and the child might be taken away. What the teacher and social services might not see is that grandma and the child are surrounded by caring adults – a clan aunt and uncle, adult cousins who provide necessities and love. The Indian extended family may be very competent in taking care of the two individuals, but living nearby and supposedly un-related (in Western terms) to the child and grandmother, they may be invisible to non-Indians. As soon as trust is established and cross-cultural misunderstandings can be avoided, Native people open up to others in time.