

Y-INDIAN GUIDE PROGRAMS: RESPONSIBLE USE OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN THEME

Introduction and Background

Since the Y-Indian Guide program began in 1926, it has helped thousands of children and parents build strong relationships. The program was developed to support parent's vital role as teacher, counselor, and friend to their children. Harold S. Keltner organized the first tribe in Missouri with the inspiration and help of his good friend and fishing companion Joe Friday, an Ojibwa Indian. After a discussion of the differences in parenting between the Indian and Caucasian cultures (the Indian father raises his son and teaches him the meaning and purpose of life, while in other cultures the mother raises the sons), Keltner envisioned a father and son program based upon the strong characteristics of American Indian culture and life: dignity, patience, endurance, spirituality, feeling for the earth, and concern for the family.

Today, approximately one-third of YMCAs offer Y-Indian Guide programs. Y staff and participants tell countless stories of how the program has strengthened the bond between parent and child and changed lives. For example, a father ousted from a camp-out for violating the no-alcohol policy saw this event as a turning point; he sought help and returned to a camp-out a year later boasting months of sobriety. He credited Y-Indian Guides for motivating him to overcome his alcohol problems. Another man contacted the national office in search of an Indian Guide Medallion. His father, who had just died, had given him one when they were in the program together. The son wanted the YIG medallion set in his father's headstone.

While the Indian Guide program was designed to honor American Indian values and culture, some people have found the use of the theme inappropriate and offensive. After all, over the years, Native Americans have been the victims of stereotypes. This victimization has prompted them to become a more active voice and a stronger advocate for their rights and beliefs, and the need to counter any inaccurate portrayals.

In 1992 the Program Committee of the National Board of the YMCA of the USA reaffirmed its support of the Indian Guide Program. Committee members encouraged Ys to invite local American Indians to review the program, make suggestions, and serve on a committee to oversee the Y-Indian Guide program. The committee should ensure all aspects of the program are authentic and show respect toward the American Indian culture. If YMCAs were unable to continue the Native American theme, they were encouraged to explore alternative parent-child programs.

No Y-Indian Guide staff person, volunteer or participant intentionally sets out to mock or denigrate Native Americans and yet, due to a lack of understanding and guidance, some of these individuals have made mistakes. This paper raises the issues, defines appropriate and inappropriate use of the theme, and suggests tips to make Y-Indian Guide programs more sensitive and authentic to the Native American culture.

"You Just Don't Understand"

Y-Indian Guide Program participants may be surprised and defensive when someone criticizes their program. They may not be aware of any poor judgment calls on their part. Native Americans sometimes respond with "you just don't understand." Unlike Native Americans, Caucasians have not lived with years of racism and stereotypes through which to judge comments made about them. We have to trust that in spite of our good intentions, if others deem our actions inappropriate, we may need to change them.

It helps to understand why some actions have been labeled inappropriate.

- Some of us have portrayed Native Americans inaccurately. These portrayals often are based on historical images that no longer are applicable or, worse yet, on stereotypes, caricatures, and myths that never were accurate. For example, the Nobel Savage has existed only in literature, and perpetuating that myth only perpetuates stereotypic ideas. Romance is seldom reality.
- Problems can occur when we rely on written sources in which authors have not done their research, and if we fail to conduct our own thorough research. We may combine popular bits and pieces from several Native American cultures which doesn't yield a clear picture of any tribe and can result in stereotypical portrayals.
- Without a thorough understanding of the role religion plays in the lives of Native Americans, we tend to make light of some of their ceremonies and misuse props or paraphernalia that have a religious connotation. This behavior is viewed as sacrilegious and many Native Americans see it as grossly inappropriate.
- Using Indians as mascots, dressing up and playing Indian, and portraying an Indian inaccurately shapes images and reinforces stereotypes. Native Americans are insulted and for some, this negatively affects their self-image or self-esteem. "It's hard to have self-respect if you believe others don't respect you."

Why not eliminate the theme?

1. Part of the success of the Indian Guide program is attributed to its appeal to second- and-third generation participants. Men and women who took part in the program with their fathers and reaped the benefits of a strong bond want the same for their own children. They remember the activities, crafts, songs, and camp-outs and want to reexperience them.
2. The program was designed to glorify, celebrate, and emulate the Native American culture. The original goal of fathers using Native American values to teach their children patience, endurance, spirituality, a feeling for the earth, and concern for the family is still admirable and applicable today.

3. Y staff and volunteers attribute the program's success to its cultural theme which provides focus and direction. The American Indian cultural theme gives non-Indian parents a common interest and learning experience in working with young children. As parents and children learn about the use of Indian arts, crafts, games, songs, and stories, they gain a deeper appreciation for another culture's achievements. Understanding people who have a different way of life builds strength, tolerance, openness and wisdom.

4. While alternative themes have been successful in a few YMCAs, Y-Indian Guide Programs are still the preferred program. Instead of eliminating it, let's work together to authenticate programs, making them true to the original cultures customs and beliefs and sensitive to current-day Native Americans.

What can your YMCA do?

Because Y-Indian Guide Programs have drawn heavily on the culture and customs of American Indian tribes, YMCA volunteers and staff must represent accurately and positively the American Indians' contribution to the nation's history. YMCA leaders are urged to use these guidelines in YMCA parent-child programs policies and practices.

1. Raise these issues with volunteers and ask key leaders to discuss these topics. Work toward a consensus in which all participants agree to be respectful, sensitive and authentic in their use of the theme.
2. Review current materials such as flyers, brochures, training and orientation handbooks, activities, ceremonies, etc. Compare them to the suggestions made in this paper. If an item is questionable or clearly inappropriate, rework it or toss it out.
3. Meet with local Native Americans, or Native American advocacy groups to introduce your program. Request:
 - advice on how to keep your program true to today's American Indian.
 - help in identifying resources and gathering information for Y-Indian Guide study and events.
 - their participation in Indian Guide nation events.
 - that they provide the authentic dress, perform a dance, or lead a ceremony.
4. Monitor your program. Make sure the theme continues to be used appropriately in your program orientation, training, handbook and supervision.
5. Assign someone in each tribe to assume responsibility for the tribe's actions. He/she ensures the tribe is respectful to the Native American culture and monitors the authenticity of themes, stories, costumes, ceremonies, etc.

6. Become an advocate for the accurate portrayal of Native Americans. Incorporate a bit of Native American study into tribal meetings and nation events.

More than 6.5 million Native Americans live in the United States. Within the Native American race are numerous tribes, pueblos and bands. Variations are evident in the customs, beliefs and values of individual Native Americans (e.g., urban and reservation Indians, traditionalists, Christian and Native American church members, and full and mixed blood heritage); as is each Native American's personal need to be an advocate for their culture; therefore,

- don't assume Native Americans in your community approve of your program just because they do not openly oppose it. They may be busy dealing with their own issues and problems and although they have concerns, these issues may not be a priority.
- don't assume that Native Americans will want to get involved. They may not feel the same need to share their history as you feel in wanting to experience it. Taking time off from work, giving up a free evening and even accessing transportation to your event may be impossible. Many are cautious about their views being considered representative of all Native Americans. They often will say "I can't speak for all Native Americans on these issues, but this is what I was taught."
- don't expect a consensus, although most Native Americans will object if we are flippant about ideas and activities that are sacred and serious to them.
- don't initiate unwanted service efforts. Ask Native American groups and leaders what needs are real, how they may be met, and if you can help.

If Native Americans are interested, build and retain relationships with them. Make sure you don't appear to be befriending them solely to review your program or supply information.

As your program becomes more sensitive to Native Americans, you can extend your support to Native American causes. For example, several Y-Indian Guide Programs have been fundraising to support the efforts of the Sioux Indian YMCA in South Dakota.

We often continue with "business as usual" until someone explains why our actions/activities may not be appropriate and offers us an alternative. The following chart differentiates appropriate from inappropriate practices. It should not be viewed as comprehensive or cast in stone. Again, we encourage you to ask local Native Americans to review the list and add their comments.

DO

Stay focused on the program's main goals and objectives: to strengthen the relationship between one parent and one child.

If the Y-Indian Guide Program is too controversial for your YMCA, consider alternative parent-child programs.

Portray Native Americans as they are today. They have many of the same needs, successes and problems as the Caucasians and may be more similar to us than their ancestors. Children have no other frame of reference other than what we share with them. They need to know Native Americans are alive and well and living in their communities. Find a balance between the Native American of the past and Native Americans today.

If part of your program includes participants adopting Indian names, do so with the utmost respect. Be authentic and sensitive and make sure names are selected that reflect strong character and set goals. Make them meaningful instead of merely a nickname.

Indian costumes are symbolic. Today, Native Americans only use headdresses in ceremonies and always with great respect. If you use costumes, use them sparingly. A vest and headbands without feathers may be more appropriate.

Religion is sacred to Native Americans. To some tribes the key to the Indian's being is deep spirituality that permeates the whole life. It is the skein that binds the culture and makes life meaningful. YIG programs must respect the paraphernalia that is connected to religion or has a spiritual value. Using religious items out of context is inappropriate.

DON'T

Don't make the Indian theme the programs main focus.

Don't give up on building parent-child relationships by discarding the programs when they are challenged. Don't restrict the theme to the American Indian culture.

Don't focus only on Indians of the past. This tactic often reinforces inaccurate, offensive stereotypes.

Don't haphazardly select a name or choose one that mocks the individual or Native Americans. Don't choose a name that is funny, stereotypical or cute.

Don't make dressing up and "playing Indian" the focus of your activities and celebrations. This behavior often backfires, especially in parades and mall events.

Don't make light of or misuse items that have a strong spiritual or religious connotation such as totem poles, drums, tepees, gourds, medicine bags, medicine men, sacred masks, bear claws and teeth, tribal chants, or the white buffalo.

DO

Select authentic, respectful games and activities. Ask yourself "Does this honor or offend? Does it denigrate their culture? Is this a stereotype?"

Take time to research the Native American tribes you emulate in your program. Visit the library, museums, schools, and book stores, and go on-line to conduct research. Contact Native Americans or Native American advocacy groups for information.

If you use costume, dance, or ceremonies, make sure you've done your research and they are authentic and appropriate to the occasion. To often we mix tribal customs/ ceremonies and the end product is inaccurate and offensive.

Refer to campfire ceremonies as Y-Indian Guide ceremonies.

Be flexible. Make the program work for you.

DON'T

Avoid games and activities that Hollywood has stereotyped of Indians of days past: war whooping, tomahawk chops, war dances, war (face) paint, and games like "steal the scalp." Native Americans are no longer at war, and they never were savages or aggressors.

Don't fall back on stereotypical images, for example, refrain from speaking in broken English or using the words "ugh" or "how." Indians never spoke in such a way. Words or phrases including red skins (derogatory), restless natives, wild Indians, squaw and buck are never appropriate.

Don't combine the dress, traditions, rituals and ceremonies of different tribes. Select one tribe, research it and make sure that your portrayal is authentic.

Don't refer to ceremonies as "the Sioux nation (or other Indian name) ceremony." It is difficult to be totally authentic and is best not to suggest that the presentation is, in fact, a ceremony of that nation. For example, instead of a Dakota sweat lodge ceremony, just call it a sweat bath.

Don't feel compelled to run the program exactly as it's written in *Friends Always*. If your local Native Americans tell you terms like lodges are more appropriate than tribes, or elder is a more accurate reflection of leadership in a small group than a chief, feel free to make changes.

Conclusion:

YMCAs want to do the right thing. Adopting character development has inspired us to take a close look at ourselves and our programs to ensure our actions and attitudes are honest, caring, respectful and responsible. Reviewing, and if necessary revising, our Indian Guide Programs is just one way to do so. By making the changes suggested in this paper, we can ensure our programs remain viable and continue to strengthen parent-child relationships for years to come.

Resources:

American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children. Arlene B. Hirschfelder. 1982. Scarecrow Press. Metuchen, NJ.

Through Indian Eyes, The Native Experience in Books for Children. Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale. To order, call OYATE at 510-848-6700.

Keeper of the Earth. Keeper of the Animals. Keeper of the Light. Keeper of the Night. Contact Fulcrum Publishers at 800-992-2908.

Atlas of the Native American Indian. Carl Waldman, 1985. Facts on File Publications.

"Native American Heritage and Culture Week Resource Unit." To order, contact the New York City Board of Education, 234 West 109th Street, Room 507, New York, NY 10025.

Friends Always (pages 43-48). To order call the YMCA Program Store at 800-747-0089.

The National Advisory Council of Y-Indian Guides is available to provide information and support and to help you resolve these issues. Call 800-872-9622 for the names of volunteers and staff in your field who serve on this committee.