

Sioux YMCA Cultural Guide for Volunteers



**Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation
605-365-5232**

Important Factors to Note

Cultural differences: these are not just Lakota/white cultural differences, you will find cultural differences between rural/urban and poor/middle class relationships.

- Age is a significant aspect of Lakota culture, most children/youth will be taught to respect their elders.
 - Additionally, older children/youth will be taught to be responsible or to “look out” for younger siblings and cousins. For many of our older children/youth it is ok for him/her to act out against a younger sibling/family member if they are being rude or annoying while they are at home. It may be hard to break this habit while participating in Sioux YMCA programs. If an older child/youth acts out against someone younger make sure you get the full story, from both sides. Immediately siding with the younger child could isolate you from the older child. Telling the older child/youth that he/she should “know better” could be really hurtful to the older child/youth who thought he/she was doing the right thing by teaching their young sibling/cousin “a lesson”.
- Children raise children. Often older siblings will raise their younger siblings. They may bring their siblings to the Sioux YMCA for a break for themselves. This is why you may see older siblings hanging around but not really engaging in activities.
- Time is a relative construct; things get done when they need to. Don’t be surprised if you ask a child to do something and they don’t respond right away. They probably will not rush to do it; they will go in their own time.
- Shame is perhaps the most common form of discipline for Lakota families. When a child does something wrong or strange families will never use guilt, they shame or tease the child once and then move on.
- Trust may be a daily struggle. Volunteers, teachers, friends and family members come in and out of their life and home regularly. You cannot expect all children/youth to like you or trust you completely unless you prove to them that you will not lie and will be consistent. Frankly put, you need to prove your worth to them. This might mean talking to an unresponsive child on the bus or at a meal. They may not respond to you but they are listening and they will remember what you tell them. Eventually they will get more comfortable with you.
 - NEVER MAKE A PROMISE YOU CANNOT KEEP. If you don’t know something don’t make it up. Telling a child “I don’t know” or “Maybe” is perfectly acceptable.
- Authoritarian attitudes don’t really work. Most children respond better to rules and instructions when you explain “the why”. Assuming children will follow rules or directions because “you told them to” will probably not work.

Yelling never works. Many children/youth will be used to older family members speaking to them in stern voices but straight-out yelling will make them shut down.

Important Factors to Note

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), diagnosed and undiagnosed, exists among our program participants. FAS is a disorder that can occur to the embryo when a pregnant woman ingests alcohol repeatedly and excessively during pregnancy. FAS is permanent; damage has been done to the child's central nervous system, specifically the brain. Underdevelopment of brain cells that occurs because of exposure to alcohol during pregnancy leads to a variety of primary cognitive and functional disabilities.

FAS Symptoms include: growth deficiency, altered facial features (flat groove between the nose and upper lip, thin upper lip, and decreased eye width), and central nervous system damage. As a result of central nervous system and brain damage, children with FAS may exhibit the following: learning disabilities, poor anger management, poor impulse control, issues with personal boundaries and daily living skills, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder or similar symptoms and behaviors, slow cognitive processing, confusion under pressure, intellectual disability, poor judgment, language disorders, the inability to grasp the whole concept, lack of understanding of sarcasm and metaphors, poor short-term memory, inability to read nonverbal cues and "chatty" with no substance.

TO BE CLEAR: not every child/youth will have FAS and it is not our responsibility or duty to diagnose them. However, the following are appropriate strategies to keep in mind and will make programming more meaningful for children who may have FAS and those who do not.

- Allow the child to take short breaks when necessary
- Give the child extra time to prepare for the next activity. They will not do well when rushed
- Perform one task at a time; multi-step directions may be difficult for them to understand. Be sure to walk all children through a new activity.
- Punishment may not work with children who have FAS. They may not understand why they are being punished. Defuse the situation calmly and explain why his/her behavior is inappropriate.
- Use visual and concrete examples when explaining something.
- Encourage success and stress positive behavior with praise.

Violence and child abuse is found in communities around the world; Cheyenne River is no different. If a child exhibits signs of abuse, including but not limited to: aggression to show affection, has unexplained bruises or cuts, is reluctant to change clothes in front of others, is withdrawn, exhibits unusual sexual behavior or knowledge, wets the bed, shows signs of an eating disorder, or states "stories from home" that include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and/or neglect report the situation to Sioux YMCA staff immediately. Sioux YMCA staff will report the claim to his/her supervisor, who will report the claim to Child Protective Services. There is no *cultural* or *poverty-based* excuse for violence and abuse.

Lice. Like any school aged child, some of our children may have lice. It is recommended to keep long hair pulled back. You can buy Lice Shield Prevention shampoo at Walmart (in a lime green bottle) or add tea tree oil to your shampoo for prevention. Lice infestation products are available at the pharmacies in Eagle Butte and Faith. Google for more information.

Cultural Differences

One of the biggest hurdles for volunteers to overcome is learning to appreciate cultural differences. Functioning in a new culture can initially be very difficult but education and seeking understanding makes the transition much easier.

Introductions & Eye Contact

Don't expect formal introductions; just give a quiet and friendly smile. You don't have to be pushy for people to get to know you. Handshakes, generally, are not firm. Don't be surprised if people don't make eye contact when talking to you. Culturally speaking eye contact is considered rude.

Relationships & Interactions

Parents and children may not live together, be sensitive to that. More often than not, a child will live with their extended family rather than their nuclear family. If a man and woman are seen together it may be construed that they are married or "going together". Don't be surprised if adults/older youth of opposite genders don't interact directly - it makes many Lakota men and women uncomfortable to interact with people of the opposite sex if they aren't related.

Saying "No Thank You"

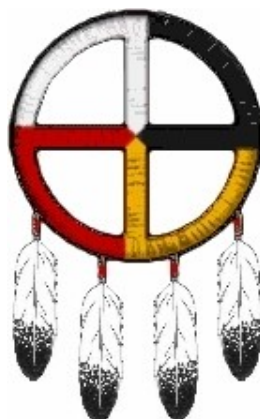
There's no Lakota word for "no thank you". Additionally any type of confrontation may make Native youth and adults uncomfortable. As a result, if you ask a youth/adult a question they will most likely say "yes" even if they don't want to do it. When asking someone to do something for you/for Sioux YMCA make sure to give them an easy out, just in case!

Being Nosey

Non-natives are often misconstrued as being nosey because they ask a lot of personal questions. To avoid this, don't ask too many personal questions about people you don't know or have just met.

Rumors

Rumors arise in small communities. Avoid getting involved with petty fights and community rumors - it will make life a lot easier.



Cultural Differences

Living in a Fishbowl

The communities you're working in are small. You will be very visible no matter what, and people will always be observing you. Embrace it.

Animals

While dogs are a sacred animal to the Lakota people, pets are treated much differently on the reservation than off. As you will notice, animals roam free here and may not be allowed in the house. There are always puppies around because dogs are often not spayed or neutered. While most dogs are harmless, be aware. If you run into issues with a dog, notify call the Tribal Game, Fish, and Parks Program (605-964-7812).



Rural Living

The reservation is rural and isolated and thus has many differences from more metropolitan areas. For example, hitchhiking is fairly common. Land lines are prevalent. The kids aren't tied to technology (yet).

Culture of Sharing

The Lakota may view material possessions differently than you. The traditional Lakota society was communal and it was necessary to rely on friends and family for survival. You will see kids sharing a lot of things, especially toys, food, and bikes. You may see bikes just thrown on the side of the road awaiting their "true" owner. Because ownership is not assigned to material possessions, be careful with leaving your phone around. It is a good idea to put a pass lock on your phone.

Joking Culture

The Lakota culture is a joking/mocking culture. Play along and you will fit right in.

Family

You will often hear people talking about how they are related to other people. Though they may be distantly related, a lot of family may still live on the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation. Because you may never know who is related to whom, be careful who you gossip with and about. Additionally, it is not uncommon to have extended family or multiple families living under one roof. Oftentimes, a teen or tween child may act as the head of their household. Because of this, some kids may have issues with authority. You may notice that parents may be less involved with their children's lives. Children are raised to be independent.

Cultural Differences

The Y is a Special Place

The Sioux YMCA and its employees are highly respected in the reservation communities. The YMCA acts as a second home for the kids. Relationships are very important in Lakota culture. Name dropping the Sioux YMCA or any of its employees may give you an "in".

Rough Play

The kids here may play more roughly than you're used to. They will play more physically, which is allowed to an extent.

Hitchhiking

You may see hitchhikers on the road. Hitchhiking is fairly common on the reservation as gas money is hard to come by for many. People here are less hesitant to pick up hitchhikers than you may be used to, but do not feel obligated to pick up hitchhikers.

Indian Time

You may find that members of the community are always "late" or take their time getting things done. Indian time is a stereotype that has roots in tradition. Kelly Gibson speaks on their experience with Indian time:

"When I began living and working in Indian country, I learned the origin of the phrase 'Indian Time.' I came to understand that traditionally Indian people were very good students of nature. They studied the seasons and the animals to learn how to live well in their environments. Given this, they learned that it's important to be patient and to act when circumstances did not support them. I have come to understand it's a Western idea that we can control most circumstances and that we should run our lives by the clock and calendar. The control we think we have over circumstances is frequently an illusion and can lead to a lot of wasted energy. Much can be gained by watching, listening, waiting and then acting when the time is right. 'Indian time' is really about respecting the 'timeliness' of an action. It makes more sense to plant crops when the weather is right than when the calendar says it is time. What a mistake it would be to take this traditional concept of timeliness and develop a misperception that contemporary Indian people are frequently late. I am one of the few non-Indian people working in my office and if someone is running late for a meeting, it's usually me."

--From *Stereotypes: "Indian Time"* <http://blog.nrcprograms.org/my-thoughts-on-stereotypes/>

