



Stereotypes and Indigenous Cultures

Some resources for parents and educators

Native Voices: New England Tribal Families was an exhibit project begun in 2010 at Boston Children's Museum. The goals of the exhibit are to dispel stereotypes and correct misinformation; to develop appreciation for the ways in which Indigenous people have sustained, transmitted, and adapted their cultural traditions; to build awareness of the vitality and diversity of tribal nations in the Northeast region; and to inspire appreciation and the desire to learn more about native traditions among Native and non-Native visitors. The exhibit and public programs were developed with advisors from all of the tribes represented.

Unfortunately, many stereotypes of Indigenous peoples continue to be perpetuated in books, movies, mascots for sports teams, holidays like Halloween, and elsewhere. Our goal in developing this exhibit and accompanying educational resources is to provide families with an authentic, contemporary view of five thriving New England tribes. Here are some ideas and resources we found helpful in addressing common stereotypes.

Indigenous Cultures are Contemporary Cultures

Many portrayals of Indigenous cultures focus only on traditions and the past, inadvertently reinforcing the myth of the vanished Indian. Links to traditions are important for everyone, but history did not stop for Indigenous peoples any more than it did for latter immigrant groups to this country.

Native Voices focuses on five contemporary Indigenous cultures. As you make your way through the exhibit, discuss what you are seeing. What are Indigenous people wearing? What activities are they participating in? Are there special occasions which you dress for?

Indigenous Cultures are Unique from Each Other

Many portrayals homogenize Indigenous cultures into a generic "Indian." Over 500 different Indigenous cultures exist today, each with their own distinct traditions, regalia, and lifestyles.

When your family comes across a uniform depiction of Indigenous peoples, discuss what you are seeing. What are Indigenous peoples wearing? What region of America does that outfit reflect? Does this portrayal accurately reflect a specific Indigenous community?

Indigenous Peoples are Individuals

There are a range of stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous people, but real people don't fall neatly into stereotypes. Indigenous peoples are people, living and working, bringing up kids, and being themselves.

When you watch a movie or read a book, think about how Indigenous people are represented. What stereotypes do you see? How are men represented? How are women represented?

Where can I learn more?

Visit the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI): <http://www.nmai.si.edu/>

This museum and website helps Indigenous communities speak accurately about themselves and their culture(s).

Books are a wonderful resource for parents and educators, but many contain imagery that does not align with the ways in which Indigenous people want to be portrayed. The online resource, Oyate reviews children's literature and advocates for Native Americans/American Indians to be portrayed with historical accuracy, cultural appropriateness and without anti-Indian bias and stereotypes: <http://oyate.org>

Adult Resources:

- *Do All Indians Live In Tipis?* by The National Museum of the American Indian
- *Playing Indian* by Philip J. Deloria
- Change the Mascot: <http://www.changethemascot.org>
- Students Teaching About Racism in Society (STARS): <https://www.ohio.edu/orgs/stars/Home.html>