

The Importance and Significance of Indigenous Hair

Understanding the significance of Indigenous hair requires acknowledging its deep cultural and spiritual roots. Long hair often represents a person's identity, strength, knowledge, and connection to their tribal heritage. Indigenous hair holds deep cultural, spiritual, and historical significance, varying across tribal cultures and traditions.

Spiritual and Cultural Significance

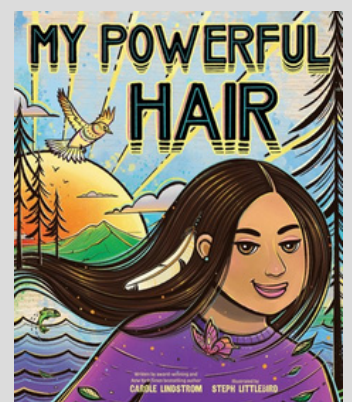
In many tribes, hair is considered sacred, embodying a person's life force, wisdom, and connection to the spiritual world. It is believed that hair holds memories, experiences, and a strong link to one's ancestors. Long hair is often seen as a sign of physical and spiritual strength. Cutting hair may be reserved for significant occasions like mourning or as a rite of passage, signifying a transition or change in life.

One of many things important to Indigenous people's cultural identity is their hair. Hair is considered sacred and significant to who they are as individuals, families, and communities.

Hairstyles and adornments also carry cultural meanings. Braids, feathers, beads, and other ornaments signify tribal affiliation, social status, or ceremony participation. How hair is worn and cared for can reflect respect for tradition and cultural identity.

In essence, hair care in tribal cultures is far more than just grooming. It's a sacred practice that reflects deep cultural and spiritual values. The historical trauma inflicted upon Indigenous people has profoundly impacted these traditions, but Indigenous communities' resilience is evident in their ongoing efforts to reclaim and celebrate their heritage.

An excerpt from "My Powerful Hair" by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Steph Littlebird. This book was inspired by Lindstrom's personal experience of uncovering intergenerational trauma in her family. You can find it in our [Resource Library](#).



"When I was a child, I wasn't allowed to have long hair because my mom said it was too wild, just a lot of bad connotations," Lindstrom said. "I think I didn't realize until (childhood) was over that it was because my grandmother was in boarding school, and her hair was made to be short, and so my mother's was short, and my mother also cut my hair short."

In many tribes, a person's long hair is believed to represent a strong cultural identity. This strong cultural identity promotes self-esteem, self-respect, a sense of belonging, and a healthy sense of pride. In preparation for ceremonies, great care is involved in grooming, styling, and ornamenting hair.

Historical Context

Historical events have profoundly impacted the significance of Indigenous hair. During the era of forced assimilation, Indigenous children were often taken from their families and sent to boarding schools where their hair was cut to strip them of their cultural identity. This practice was a traumatic experience for many, symbolizing the loss of connection to their cultural heritage and traditions.

Despite these historical challenges, many tribal members today are reclaiming their cultural traditions and embracing the significance of their hair. Growing long hair, practicing traditional hairstyles, and adorning hair with cultural symbols are acts of cultural revitalization and expressions of resilience.

Impact of the Federal Indian Boarding Schools

Between 1819 through the 1970s, the United States implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the nation. The purpose of federal Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children by forcibly removing them from their families, communities, languages, religions, and cultural beliefs.

Imagine being a child taken from your family and forced to live somewhere completely different. You're surrounded by people who don't understand your language or culture. Then, one of the first things they do is cut off your hair.

For many Indigenous children, this was a terrifying, confusing, and humiliating experience. Their hair often represented their connection to their family, tribe, and spirituality. Cutting their hair was a way to break that connection and force them to assimilate into a culture that wasn't their own.

The forced cutting of hair in boarding schools is a deeply painful and vital part of understanding why Indigenous hair is so significant today. It's not just about the hair itself, but what it represents.

By approaching this topic with respect, humility, and a willingness to learn, non-tribal individuals can gain a greater understanding and appreciation for Indigenous peoples' rich cultural heritage. It can be especially vital for foster parents to understand and respect this significance.

The Importance of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) underscores the importance of respecting tribal sovereignty and prioritizing the best interests of Indigenous children. This includes recognizing the cultural significance of their hair and ensuring that decisions are made in consultation with the child's tribe and family. Foster parents are responsible for upholding these rights and creating a nurturing environment that honors the child's cultural identity.

Respecting a tribal child's hair is not just a matter of cultural sensitivity; it's also a matter of legal and ethical obligation. Unilateral decisions to cut a child's hair can cause significant emotional distress and potentially violate ICWA. Building trust and open communication with the child, their family, and their tribe is essential.

Foster parents and other caregivers should actively seek to learn about the specific cultural practices of the child's tribe, including their beliefs about hair. They should always obtain explicit permission before changing the child's hairstyle. Supporting and respecting the child's cultural practices is vital to providing a safe and supportive foster care experience.

Respect and Understanding

It's essential to approach the topic of Indigenous hair with respect and understanding. Touching someone's hair without permission is generally considered disrespectful, as it is seen as a violation of personal and spiritual boundaries.

By learning about the significance of Indigenous hair, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the rich diversity of Indigenous cultures and the importance of respecting their traditions and beliefs.

Resources

Training From [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [7 Generations: A Look Back at American Indian Families](#)
- [Missing Threads, The Story of the Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act](#)
- [Impact of Historical Trauma on Indigenous Peoples: Building Resiliency Through Culture](#)

Additional Resources

- [My Powerful Hair Read Aloud](#)
- [Native American Hair and Its Cultural and Spiritual Importance](#)
- [Indigenous Hair Is Braided with Beauty, Power, and Resiliency—A Beauty Lesson In Native Culture](#)
- [My Son's Hair is Part of a Thousand-Year-Old Tribal Culture. His School Called it a 'Fad.'](#)
- [Honoring the Spiritual Legacy, Resiliency, & Healing Power of Our Ancestors Through Indigenous Customary Hair Traditions](#)
- [The Importance of Long Hair in Indigenous Culture](#)
- [The significance of hair in Indian Country](#)
- [The Significance of Long Hair in Native American Culture](#)