

# New Intertribal Parenting Group Offers Indigenous Families a Way to Reconnect With Tradition

By Alexa Peters

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When Kendra Aguilar was a child, her grandfather gifted her a Chia Pet. But rather than plant the chia seeds as the instructions described, she ate them.

Aguilar, a descendant of the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians, long told the story as an example of the funny, impulsive things kids do. Then, years later, she shared the memory with a Chumash friend and realized something deeper might be at work.

“I told him the story of how I ate my chia seeds from my Chia Pet and [said,] ‘Aren’t I a weirdo?’” Aguilar recalled. “And he just stared at me and he said, ‘Sis, you know why you did that, right? Those were meant for you. That’s one of your ancestral foods.’”

The experience was “transformational,” Aguilar says, and helped her feel closer to her heritage. “I just cried, because 30 years later, my grandfather had given me the gift of my culture without even realizing it.”

Today, Aguilar, who lives in the Leschi area in Seattle, works to help other Indigenous families share and reconnect with ancestral traditions. Late last year, she began bringing parents together online through a new program to share Indigenous customs and stories around childbirth and parenting.

Native Newborns+, organized through the nonprofit [Families of Color Seattle \(FOCS\)](#), is a parent group for Native families “who want to build healthy community relationships

and gain support in raising strong, culturally grounded children,” according to a program description. The group is free of charge and meets virtually in weekly sessions with Aguilar and co-facilitator Madeline Rider, a West Seattle resident and Algonquin Anishinaabeg.

Aguilar told the *Emerald* she was inspired to start the group after unexpectedly becoming a parent in 2019. The family decided it was important to raise their children in a way that celebrates their heritage.

“My husband and I, very suddenly, took in two little girls whose mother had been killed by police,” Aguilar explained. “My husband is Native American and Black, and also Caucasian, and so are the girls, so it was like, ‘OK, let’s make sure we’re honoring all of our cultures, all of our ancestors.’”

As it goes for nearly all Indigenous families, Aguilar’s background has been profoundly affected by the forced displacement and cultural erasure by the U.S. government. Notably, in the mid-20th century, Congress sought to end Native cultures entirely through so-called termination policies — disbanding tribes, selling off ancestral lands, and forcing Native communities to assimilate into government-designated urban areas, including Seattle.

The actions fractured families and severed ties to long-held cultural traditions. In Aguilar’s case, it even affected her sense of identity. Though her family is Luiseño, with roots in what’s now Southern California, her grandfather resettled in the Pacific Northwest in the 1930s, in search of better work and fairer treatment.

“The windows of all the shops along the streets would have signs that said ‘Indians need not apply,’” Aguilar explained, adding that her grandfather had already survived a U.S.-run boarding school aimed at assimilating Native youth. “He sought opportunity elsewhere.”

As a result of her grandfather’s relocation, Aguilar thought she was of Suquamish descent until she visited family in California for the first time. “We grew up around here in the Pacific Northwest, and we were really connected to the Coast Salish tribe,” she said. “I didn’t even realize that our tribe and our culture was from California until I was 11 years old.”

## **The Birth of Native Newborns+**

After welcoming children into her family, Aguilar was compelled to build a network of like-minded parents. So she approached Families of Color Seattle, a nonprofit founded in 2013 by one of Aguilar’s Leschi neighbors, Amy Pak.

Just as the parenting group got up and running, however, it hit an unforeseen roadblock. The outbreak of COVID-19 and the pandemic put an end to in-person services at FOCS, and the program was put on pause.

Eventually, the nonprofit moved its services online to Zoom and approached Aguilar to restart the Native Newborns+ group in a virtual format. Around the same time, Aguilar noticed a Facebook post from Madeline Rider, who would go on to become the group's co-facilitator.

"She was like, 'I'm pregnant again! And it's so isolating. It's so hard,'" Aguilar recalled. Rider asked: "How do I raise culturally grounded children when I can't be with community?"

Social distancing during COVID risked further disconnecting Indigenous communities that were already torn apart as the result of the termination era, Aguilar recognized. Even pre-pandemic, many urban-dwelling Native families had limited access to cultural knowledge and traditions.

"A lot of us here in the cities, we've been here for generations because of the termination era or the boarding schools, or we're seeking education or job opportunities," Aguilar said. "Whatever brought us to cities, we all feel that isolation. And then, of course, the pandemic on top of it, we just knew we needed a dedicated space to ... serve Native families."

With Rider as co-facilitator, Aguilar reimagined Native Newborns+ as an hourlong weekly online meeting, drawing together Native families to share parenting advice on how to incorporate more Indigenous practices into the process of raising of kids.

So much of Indigenous life is centered around in-person community gathering, Aguilar explained, and the birth of a new baby is no exception. Typically, community members show up to both welcome and protect mother and child.

"If my cousin had a baby, my dad was over the next day at their house, ready to receive them amongst all the aunts and uncles and grandparents," Kael Zayas, a Tlingit Alaskan Native living in Seattle, explained in an interview with the Emerald. "Everybody brings you gifts. People will come and help out. They just really want to celebrate it."

Zayas, who gave birth in April 2020, says the only way they could share their newborn with their extended community during the pandemic was to hold the baby up to the window of their home for people standing outside.

"We were really fortunate that we [live with my parents] and have [them] right here to help. All the other support from our extended friend network and our family [that] had planned to travel and stay nearby to help out in the early months ... they all ended up

having to cancel just to keep everybody safe,” said Zayas. “That was really sad and hard. We missed that help.”

Indigenous communities already experience disproportionately high rates of maternal and infant mortality within modern health care systems. Lacking the presence of a community support network can make the experience even more daunting.

“The trauma and the racism that are part of the health care system impact the chances of survival of babies and moms,” Aguilar said. “Normally, there’s generations there taking care of baby and mom and the family. Everyone has a sacred role they play and a responsibility. To have that disrupted or taken away, people are like, ‘What do we do now?’ So we really are filling in those roles for each other at this time.”

## **Grounded in Indigeneity**

Native Newborns+ participants say the group has also helped them collect and reconstruct pieces of cultural identity and knowledge that centuries of assimilation policy robbed from them.

Aguilar, who once ate the seeds from her Chia Pet, recently taught the group’s families how to make their own baby food using ancestral foods, such as wild rice, beans, squash, berries, nettles, and dried salmon sourced from local Native farms or community members. Native communities typically [experience limited access](#) to ancestral foods within cities due to their relocation and limited space in urban areas for activities like farming, hunting, and fishing.

Native Newborns+ also provides participants with various materials, such as grocery cards to allow parents to buy culturally appropriate foods, tribe-specific children’s books, and support from Camie Jae Goldhammer at [Hummingbird Indigenous Doulas](#), a culturally responsive doula program that provides free-of-cost services to Indigenous birthing moms in King County. And members share information on important cultural practices, such as traditional birthing ceremonies and regalia crafting.

With more than [574 federally recognized](#) and [63 State-recognized tribes](#) with distinct ways of welcoming and raising children, the group takes an intertribal approach that leaves space for differing customs among groups that came together in urban areas as the result of dislocation.

“We came to this group and everybody was really excited to come together and learn how to craft the regalia for all our different tribes,” said Zayas, who’s since begun learning how to sew Tlingit button blanket robes, which are worn and given as gifts at potlatches and other traditional celebrations.

Leanne Rye Brock, a mother who is Choctaw and a member of the Native Newborns+ group, says that part of the value of having access to Indigenous community throughout the birthing and parenting process comes from being able to consciously ground herself and her family in the culture of their ancestors rather than that of colonizers.

“I’m wanting to connect with other Indigenous moms who are going through similar things and, more importantly, wanting my daughter to be around other Indigenous peers. I want [indigeneity] to be a part of her life, not just an event for her,” said Rye Brock, a doula who found the Native Newborns+ group through Hummingbird Indigenous Doulas.

“This is the first time I’ve been able to be really grounded in an Indigenous space centered around moms and babies,” said Rye Brock. “And as a birth worker, in addition to being a mother of three, that is very important to me.”

## **Becoming Elders**

Members say Native Newborns+ has been a safe environment for the candid, vulnerable discussions they all need to become nurturing parents and strong members of the community.

“We always talk about the matriarchs, and we talk about being good ancestors and good elders,” Zayas said, “and now we are becoming those matriarchs and really just sitting with the power of that and the responsibility.”

Part of recognizing historical trauma, Zayas continues, is learning how to impart the history of violence and discrimination faced by Indigenous people without passing that trauma along to the next generation.

“How are we radically honest with these children? How do we heal that harm that’s happened in our past, and how do we help our children to live a better future?” she asked. “It’s different for every family. It’s different for every tribe. But there’s a lot that we can share and a lot we can help one another work through.”

*Editors’ Note: This article has been edited for clarity and to correct the spelling of Kael Zayas’ name and of Suquamish, to correct the name of one source’s tribe, and to reflect the fact that Leanne Rye Brock does not own Hummingbird Indigenous Doulas. The Emerald deeply regrets the errors.*

Read the article [online](#).