



# Native Adolescent Development

Implications for Juvenile Healing to Wellness (JHW) Courts & Programs



**Tribal Youth Resource Center**  
[www.TribalYouth.org](http://www.TribalYouth.org)

# ▶ BEFORE WE GET STARTED...

- *This project was supported by Grant #15PJDP-21-GK-04048-MUMU awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.*





## PRESENTERS



### **Erin Thin Elk**

TYRC JHWC T/TA Specialist

Tribal Youth Resource Center

[Erin@tlpi.org](mailto:Erin@tlpi.org)



### **Ashley Anderson**

TYRC JHWC T/TA Specialist

Tribal Youth Resource Center

[AshleyA@tlpi.org](mailto:AshleyA@tlpi.org)

# ▶ LEARNING OBJECTIVES

## Attendees will learn:

1. About adolescent brain development and decision-making;
2. How chronic stress and substance use influence adolescent decision-making processes;
3. That Juvenile Healing to Wellness (JHW) Courts and Programs may play a critical role in nurturing positive youth development; and
4. The ways that Tribes, Tribal Courts, communities, and families may better support youth in navigating challenges and building resilience.

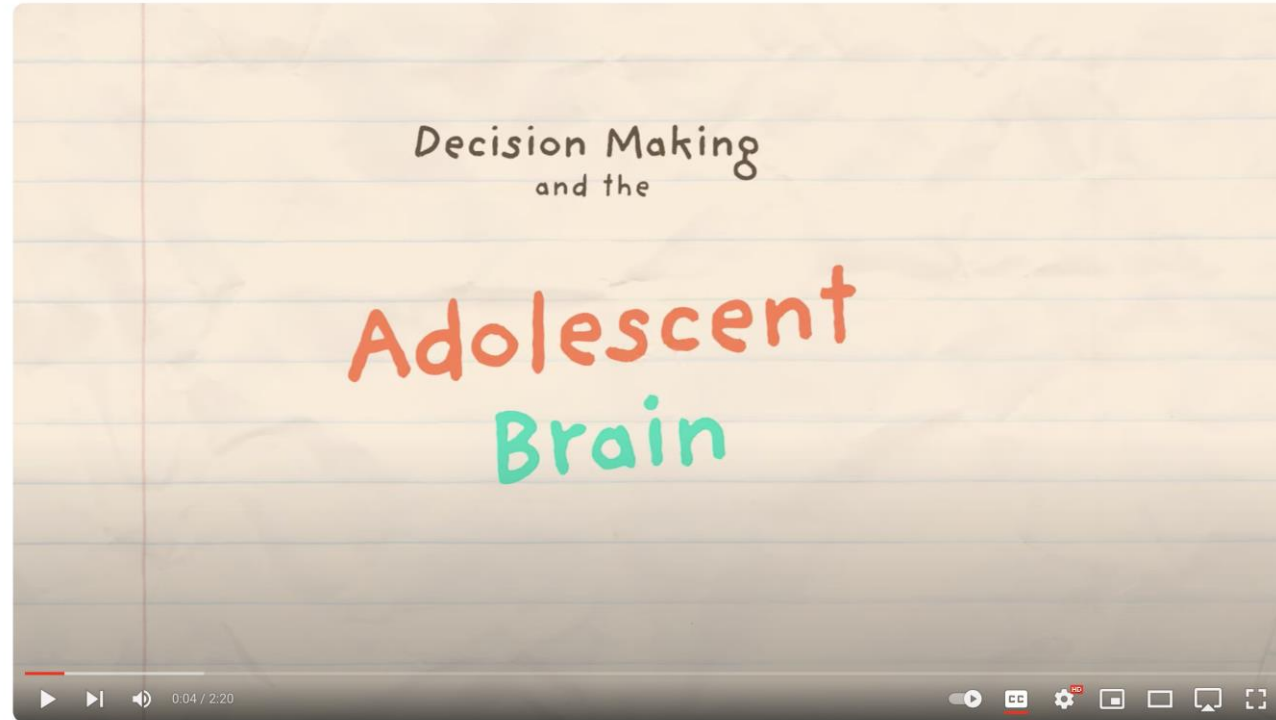


# Understanding Adolescent Brain Development and the Adolescent Decision-Making Processes





# UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND THE ADOLESCENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES



Decision making and the adolescent brain

A Program of OJDP



## UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND THE ADOLESCENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES (CONT.)

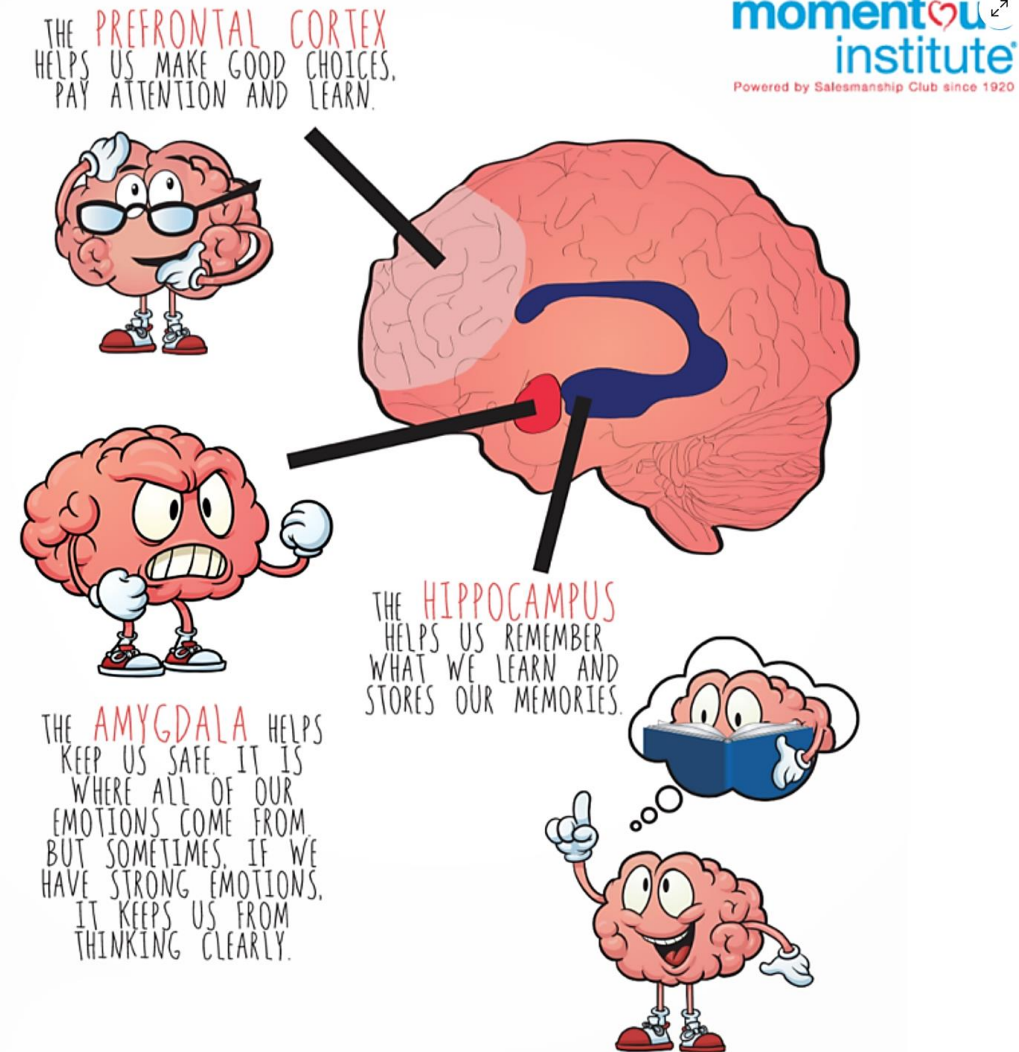
Video Recap: During adolescence, the brain like the body is growing. The amygdala or "emotional" part of the brain develops faster than the prefrontal cortex or "executive functioning" part of the brain.

Executive functioning guides decision making, planning, and the use of judgement. It helps youth to think about the consequences of their actions and to plan for long term goals. This "thinking" part of the brain does not fully develop until we reach our mid-20s.

During adolescence, these two parts of the brain are not fully formed, nor are they fully connected.

The behavior we are more likely to see:

- Seeking excitement and engaging in risk-taking behavior
- Placing value on a potential reward
- Impulsivity, reactive choices
- Strong drive to be accepted by peers
- Hot and Cold situations



<https://momentousinstitute.org/events/brain-basics>





# TRAUMA AND CHRONIC STRESS

Trauma alters the adolescent developing brain.

Exposure to prolonged stress, diverts resources from the thinking part of the brain to its survival centers.

This deficient executive "thinking brain" causes dysregulated emotions and risky behaviors.

## This presents as:

- Irritability
- Impulsivity
- Poor focusing
- Academic challenges

## What we can do:

- Create a safety plan
- Practice active listening
- Hold Space
- Create a safe, warm environment
- Train your staff in trauma-informed care



## "ADD-itude"

How Trauma and Chronic Stress Affect Developing Brains

Cheryl Chase, Ph.D.

October 19, 2022

Trauma alters the developing brain, triggering behavioral and mental health issues.

<https://www.additudemag.com/how-does-trauma-affect-the-brain-chronic-stress-adhd/>

National Native Children's Trauma Center (NNCTC): <https://www.nnctc.org>





# ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

## Myelination

- occurs in adolescence as the brain is still in development.
- is a process in which a fatty sheath wraps around the axon of the neuron (brain cell) to increase the speed of communication.
- serves as an insulator and helps the brain to deliver messages from neuron to neuron (think of how electricity flows through telephone wires).
- begins at the base of the brain (most primitive) and concludes with the prefrontal cortex at the front of the brain.

*The myelination process and speed of the limbic region compared to the prefrontal cortex is one reason why adolescents may be more sensitive to rewards.*

*It is as if the part of the brain that says, "I want that; That feels good," is faster and louder than the part of the brain that says, "Maybe I should consider the potential consequences before I do that?"*

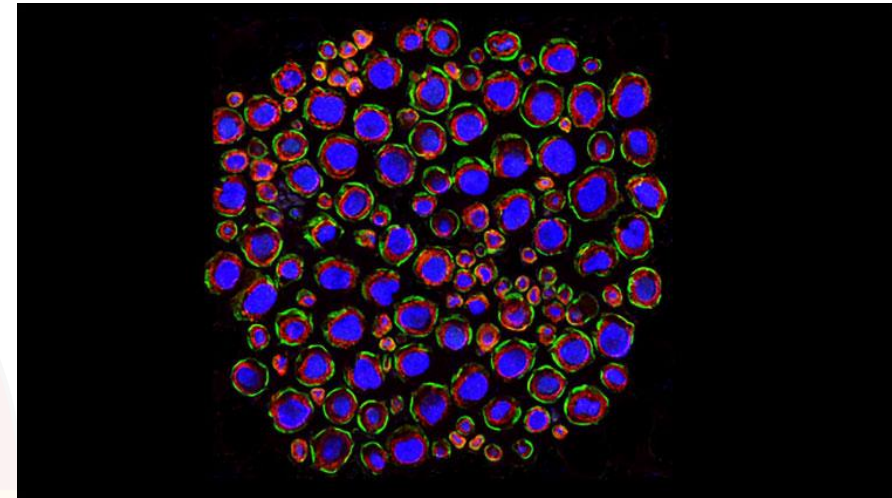
*-Psychology Today*

Source: Psychology Today

The Current State of Addictive Behaviors Among Adolescents. Learning from the unique perspective of school counselors.

Ray Parker, August 17, 2023

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-addiction/202308/the-current-state-of-addictive-behaviors-among-adolescents>



In this image of a cross-section of a mouse nerve, myelin, labelled in red, can be seen surrounding the individual nerve cells in blue. Sherman et al. The Journal of Neuroscience, 2012.

BrainFacts.org

Hormones and the Brain: The End of Adolescence

Matthew Davis, January 14, 2026

<https://www.brainfacts.org/thinking-sensing-and-behaving/childhood-and-adolescence/2016/hormones-and-the-brain-the-end-of-adolescence-011416>

# ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS (CONT.) - 6-KEY AREAS

## Behavior

- Change in peer group, decline in academic performance, changes in eating or sleeping habits, missing class, changes in appearances and grooming habits.

## Physical Well-Being

- Substances effect the body and overtime begin to alter and destroy the body's organs over time.
- When the body gets to the state of needing alcohol to function “normally,” the individual has reached dependency.
- It can happen quickly.

## Feelings

- Substance use can increase the intensity of feelings and emotions which in turn effects their choices.

Source: Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts: Treatment Guidelines, 2nd Edition (2017)

<https://wellnesscourts.org/hwc-publication-series/>



Neuroscience News.com  
Cannabis and Alcohol Co-use Impacts  
Adolescent Brain and Behavior  
November 30, 2023

<https://neurosciencenews.com/aud-cud-neurodevelopment-25291/>

# ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS (CONT.) - 6-KEY AREAS (CONT.)

## Thinking

- Substance use negatively affects cognitive processes and can result in considerable bad decision making that leads to health, family/social, and legal consequences.

## Social Environment

- Youth who use substances invariably choose to be with peers or other people who also use substances.
- These associations take them away from positive healthy supports.

## Spiritual Sense

- People with addiction often think only of themselves and their own feelings and become very self-centered and uncaring of others.
- Their spirituality is relinquished.

Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts: Treatment Guidelines, 2nd Edition (2017), available at:

<https://wellnesscourts.org/hwc-publication-series/>



PsyPost

Cannabis use linked to reduced neurocognitive performance in adolescents

by Eric W. Dolan

February 6, 2024

<https://www.psypost.org/cannabis-use-linked-to-reduced-neurocognitive-performance-in-adolescents/>



# Implications for JHW Courts [and JHW Programs]



# TRIBAL KEY COMPONENTS SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

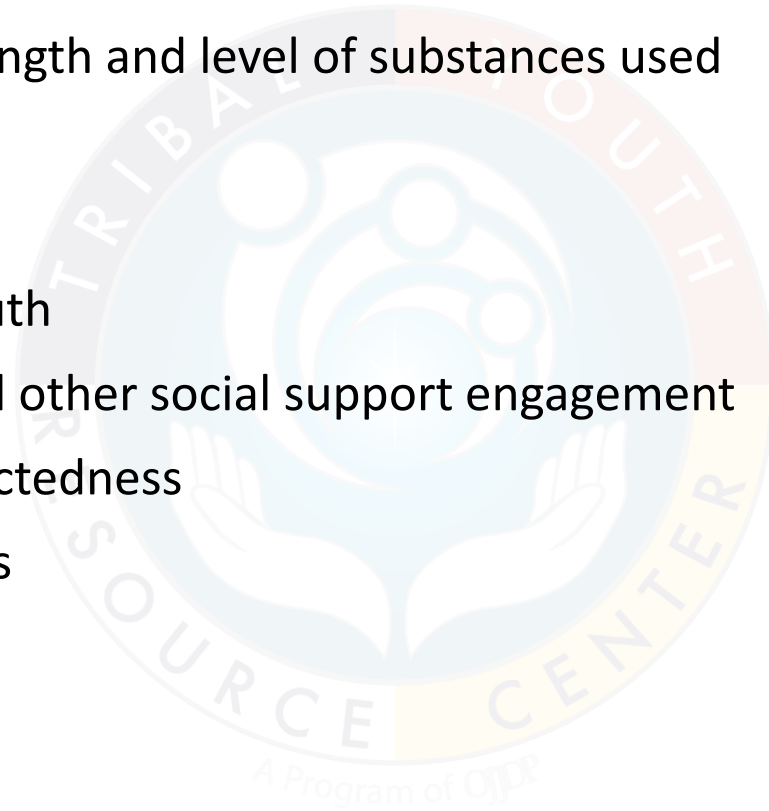
- **Integration of Services:** Providing coordinated care that includes substance abuse treatment, mental health services, education, life skills training, and case management supports holistic development and addresses multiple facets of an adolescent's well-being.
- **Non-Punitive Approach:** Helps adolescents feel more supported and less stigmatized, promoting better engagement in treatment and positive developmental outcomes.
- **Early Identification and Intervention:** Early identification of substance abuse issues and prompt intervention are crucial for adolescents, whose brains are still developing. Early support can prevent the escalation of substance abuse and related problems.
- **Coordinated Responses:** Using a consistent and coordinated approach to incentives and sanctions helps adolescents understand the consequences of their actions, reinforcing positive behavior and promoting self-regulation.
- **Ongoing Education:** Training for all involved on adolescent development and effective treatment approaches ensures that the program is informed by the latest research and best practices, enhancing its effectiveness.

Source: Tribal Law & Policy Institute (TLPI), Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts: The Key Components (2014)

<https://www.home.tlpi.org/tribal-healing-to-wellness-courts>

# FACTORS THAT IMPACT PHASE PROGRESSION IN JHW COURTS

- Adolescent development (healthy and disrupted)
- Types of substances used; length and level of substances used
- Co-occurring disorders
- Trauma
- Level of jurisdiction over youth
- Family, peer, community and other social support engagement
- Cultural and Spiritual Connectedness
- Incentives and Opportunities
- Goal setting
- Hope for the future





# ▶ INSTEAD OF PUNISHMENT, SUPPORT HEALTHY BRAINS

*“The research is very clear – juvenile justice professionals (i.e., case managers, probation officers, judges, attorneys) should move away from punishment, over-surveillance, and deterrence as a means to affect recidivism or behavior change in youth.”*

- [Lipsey et al. \(2010\) Individualizing Responses: Motivation Behavior Change in Youth](#)

# Interventions to Support Youth (and their healthy brain development)



# ▶ TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

## Decrease Risk Factors:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug use
- Mood and anxiety disorders
- Access to lethal means

## What can we do?:

- Trauma-informed care training for all staff and offer to parents.
- Remind youth they aren't alone in making decisions. Who are their people?
- Be aware of upcoming youth events and activities that present youth with decision making that they may feel conflicted or anxious.
- Secure firearms, prescription medicines, alcohol from easy access.



# CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS

## Increase Protective Factors:

- Cultural connectedness
- Connectedness to family, community, and social institutions
- Problem-solving skills
- Contacts with caregivers
- Personal wellness
- Positive opportunities
- Self-efficacy
- Positive social norms

Source: Henson, Sabo, Trujillo, & Teufel-Shone, Identifying Protective Factors to Promote Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Adolescents: A Literature Review (2017)

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5313316/>



<https://www.akadventure.com/northwest-alaskan-subsistence-living-traditional-knowledge/>

### Child Trends

Current Policy Landscape Prevents Subsistence Protections and Practices Necessary for Alaska Native Children and Families' Well-being

Heather Sauyaq Jean Gordon, September 5, 2023

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/current-policy-landscape-prevents-subsistence-protections-and-practices-necessary-for-alaska-native-children-and-families-well-being>

# CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS (CONT.)

## What can we do?

- JHW Courts and JHW Programs can increase access to and engagement with appropriate Native cultural practices and activities.

**Positive mental health outcomes for Indigenous youth are consistently related to feelings of being connected to culture.\*\***

Peer youth mentoring programs where Indigenous youth are paired with each other in a school or community organization have been shown to increase feelings of cultural connectedness.\*\*\*

Protect factors positively influence adolescent alcohol, tobacco, and substance use; delinquent and violent behavior; emotional health including depression, suicide attempt; resilience; and academic success.



\*\*Source: National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), Cultural Connectedness and Indigenous Youth Well-Being Fact Sheet <https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-10-30-Cultural-Connectedness-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

\*\*\*Source: Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Burm, Lapointe, & Chiodo, Two Years of Relationship-Focused Mentoring for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Adolescents: Promoting Positive Mental Health (2017) [https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/docs/publications/Research\\_Snapshot\\_Positive\\_Mental\\_Health\\_for\\_FNMI\\_Youth.pdf](https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/docs/publications/Research_Snapshot_Positive_Mental_Health_for_FNMI_Youth.pdf)



# FOSTERING COMMUNICATION

- Encouraging positive relationships with parents, teachers, and mentors provides a stable support system.
  - These relationships offer guidance, support, and a sense of security.
- Foster an environment where adolescents feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment or punishment.
  - This can be achieved by setting clear ground rules for respectful communication in group settings.
- Teach adolescents techniques for resolving conflicts peacefully and constructively (Peacemaking Circles).
  - This includes understanding different perspectives, finding common ground, and negotiating solutions.





# ▶ FOSTERING COMMUNICATION (CONT.)



# REITERATION

- Adolescents are still children
  - Progression varies
  - Changing the rhetoric
- Power of one person
  - ['Paper Tigers' Documentary](#)
- Support youth in navigating challenges and building resilience by:
  - Increase awareness on adolescent brain development
  - Integrating trauma-informed practices and to tailor effective services;
  - Explore strategies to assist staff, partners, parents, and youth in comprehending the impact of brain function on behavior
  - Foster effective communication between youth, families, and JHW Courts and Programs



**Children shouldn't just survive. They have the right to thrive!**

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION- SLOWING THE SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

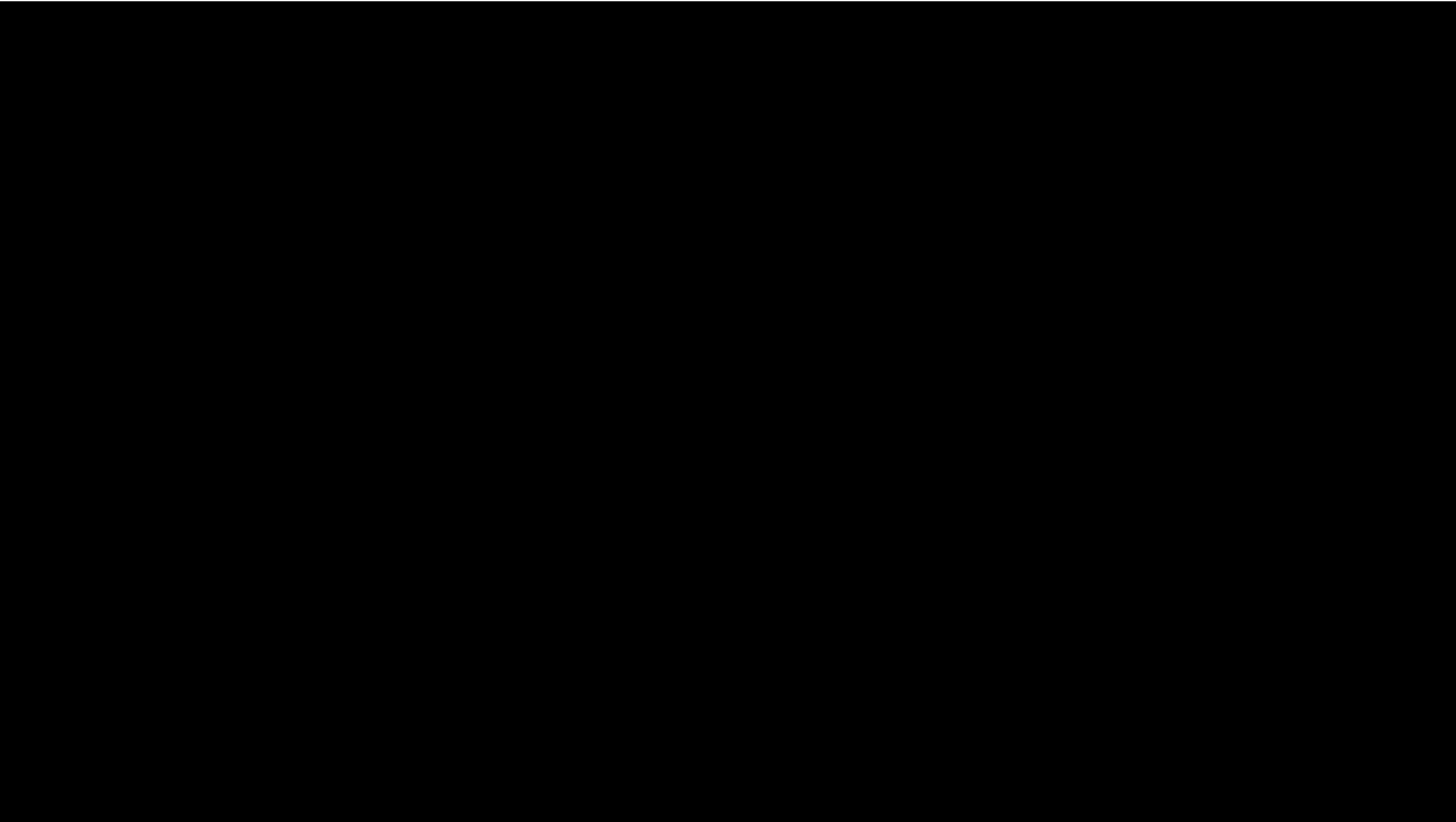
5-5-8  
EXERCISE



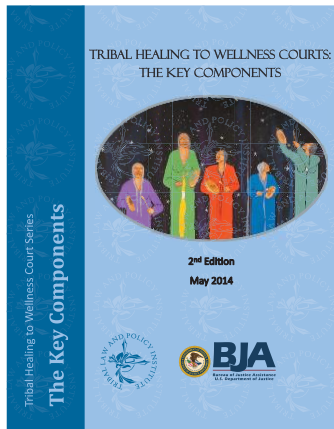


**Let's hear from four Office of Juvenile and Justice Department (OJJDP) funded Tribal Juvenile Healing to Wellness Courts and Programs and Tribal Youth Programs on how they are supporting healthy brain functioning and positive youth development.**



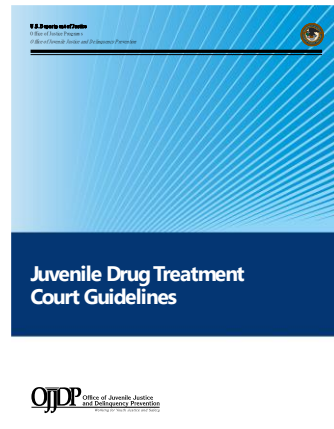


# JHWC KEY COMPONENTS, GUIDELINES, & RESOURCES



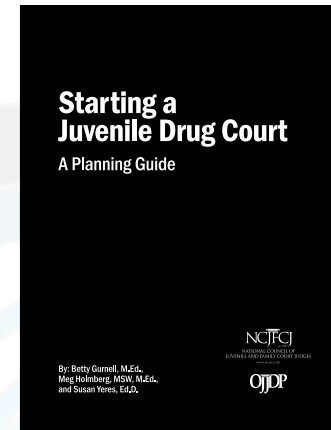
The Tribal Healing to Wellness Court Key Components

Available at:  
<https://www.home.tlpi.org/tribal-healing-to-wellness-courts>



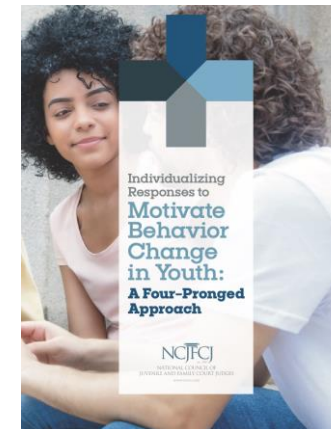
The Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Guidelines

Available at:  
<https://ojdp.ojp.gov/programs/juvenile-drug-treatment-court-guidelines>



Starting a Juvenile Drug Court: A Planning Guide

Available at:  
<https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/starting-a-juvenile-drug-court-a-planning-guide/>



This resource includes approaches to motivating behavior change in adolescents in Juvenile Drug Courts (how to apply incentives and sanctions)

Available at:  
<https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/individualizing-responses-to-motivate-behavior-change-in-youth-a-four-pronged-approach/>





# QUESTIONS?





**THANK YOU!**



**Tribal Youth Resource Center**

**[www.TribalYouth.org](http://www.TribalYouth.org)**

8229 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 201  
West Hollywood, CA 90046  
(323)650-5467 ~ fax: (323)650-8149

