



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Cultural and Linguistic  
Responsiveness



# The Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui Indigenous Peoples of Mexico

*This backgrounder provides general cultural information, while recognizing that every family is unique and that cultural practices will vary by household and by generation. This backgrounder is based on focus groups with Mixtec and Zapotec parents of young children and was produced in partnership with indigenous migrant community leaders and organizations and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs in California and Florida.*

*While this resource provides general information, it is best to get to know each family and learn their unique characteristics; wherever possible, ask members of the community about different cultural practices.*



## Background

Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui indigenous peoples are very closely related historically and geographically. They share a common origin several thousand years ago and belong to the same language group (Oto-Manguean). These cultures had reached a high degree of civilization by the time the Spanish colonizers arrived in Mexico in the 1500s. After providing brief histories for each group, this backgrounder focuses on cultural themes and experiences common to all three groups.

### Practice Tip:

It is important to note that, despite these similarities, each of these indigenous peoples represents a unique language, culture, and ancient history, of which they are justly proud.

Since the 1950s, there has been a steady migration of indigenous peoples from the Oaxaca area of Mexico to the United States, due to diminishing land, extreme poverty, and discrimination in their homeland. Many indigenous people become seasonal and migrant agricultural workers in the U.S., while some work in other industries and more are becoming highly educated professionals. In recent years, rather than migrant families regularly returning to their homes in Mexico, many have begun to establish permanent communities in the United States. In 2011, about 150,000 indigenous people from South-eastern Mexico, mostly Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui, lived in California, making up 20 percent of the agricultural labor force there. Other states with significant populations include New York, Florida, and U.S.-Mexico border cities, such as San Diego and Tucson. Recently, communities are becoming established in other states, such as North Carolina and Tennessee.

### Practice Tip:

Many people from the Oaxaca area speak only their indigenous languages and speak little or no Spanish. Their histories and cultures differ in important ways from the Mexican majority. Due to centuries of discrimination in Mexico, some indigenous people may not disclose their identity until a trusting relationship is formed. It is important that community service providers in the U.S. know about indigenous groups from Mexico and other areas of Latin America. Asking each person what language they prefer to speak is a good way to begin.

### Practice Tip:

Service providers should be aware that when a client nods and says "yes," it may not mean that they understand what the provider said. Indigenous people often nod or say "yes" out of politeness as well as fear, due to previous experiences with services in the U.S.

## Historical Background

The Mixtec moved from the north into the Oaxaca Valley as early as 1500 B.C. The Mixtec homeland is referred to as *La Mixteca* (the Mixtec region). It lies primarily in the Mexican state of Oaxaca and includes parts of the states of Guerrero and Puebla in Southeastern Mexico. There are three geographical Mixtec subdivisions in these states: highland (NE Guerrero and W Oaxaca), lowland (NW Oaxaca and SW Puebla), and coastal (Pacific slope of southern Oaxaca and Guerrero). In the 11th Century AD, the highland and lowland Mixtec were briefly united under a single ruler, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw. At the time of first contact with Europeans in 1521, the Mixtec population was about 1.5 million and was known for its high level of artisanship. The Mixtec refer to themselves as "the People of the Rain."

The Zapotec people are related historically and geographically to the Mixtec. Their homeland is primarily in the State of Oaxaca, to the immediate east and south of the Mixteca. The Zapotec are divided into four geographical subdivisions: Central Valleys (on the west bordering the Mixtec region); Mountain; the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; and Southern. The Zapotec called themselves "The People."

The Triqui are very closely related to the Mixtec. They live in *La Mixteca Baja* ("lowland Mixtec region"). Most of their population is centered in Oaxaca, south of the Mixtec. The Triqui represent a recently emerging ethnic group in their own right (since about the 1980s). The Triqui language is typically classified under the Mixtec language family.

## Culture and Religion

The Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui today are predominantly Catholic and much of the religious and community structure remains dominated by the Church. However, many people still practice some aspects of traditional religion and maintain some of their traditional beliefs, legends, and myths. Catholicism and traditional indigenous beliefs have been practiced together for centuries. For example, some may participate in the festival of the local village's Catholic patron saint or parish Holy Week celebrations on one occasion, and make offerings to the rain god on another. In the past few decades, more people have become Protestants in some villages. Given the more recent nature of this change, there may be tensions between Catholics and other religions today.

Traditional indigenous religion does not distinguish physical and spiritual worlds. The religion is animistic, meaning that they pay homage to significant local places (mountains, canyons, caves, rivers, plants, crossroads, etc.) and to spiritual beings associated with aspects of nature (such as rain, lightning, clouds, wind, fire, and earth). They also have religious activities that define the cycle of life in the indigenous community and a tradition of showing respect to deceased ancestors. According to the traditional 260-day sacred calendar, days of the week also have spiritual significance and include rituals. Traditional beliefs also include *naguales* (guardian spirits), *brujos* (sorcerers), and *mal de ojo* (evil eye).

Important holidays include the following:

- Village Patron Saint Festivals (each village has a patron saint, such as San Andrés, San Sebastián, San Jose, San Juan, etc., whose special festival is celebrated on a special day each year.)
- New Year's Day (January 1)
- Feast of Epiphany/Three Kings Day (January 6)
- Holy Week (the week before Easter Sunday)

- Children's Day (April 30)
- Mother's Day (May 10)
- Mexican Independence Day (September 15-16)
- All Saints Day (November 1)
- Day of the Dead (November 2)
- Dia de la Virgen de Juquila (December 8)
- Dia de la Virgen de Guadalupe (December 12)
- Christmas (December 25)

### **Kinship and Family**

Traditionally, women typically go to live with their husbands' families. This means that parents, sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren will live together in a shared compound. It is common for small children to be cared for not only by their parents but by aunts, older sisters, and older female cousins. While extended family life is very important, each nuclear family provides for and prepares its own subsistence and lives in its own separate home or room.

In addition to blood kinship, social kinship is important. Through *compadrazgo* (godfather/godmother), a network of social ties is created on as many as nine ceremonial occasions. When people agree to sponsor someone during one of these ceremonies as *padrino* (godfather) and *madrina* (godmother), they accept the obligations that attend that position both to the child and to the parents. These obligations typically include substantial financial contributions at each ceremonial occasion. These social kin are treated as family.

Migration patterns often mean one parent leaves the family first to migrate to the U.S. However, it often takes far longer than expected to save enough money to bring children and other family members and reunite the family. These separations can be extremely painful and reunifications after several years can be both joyful and stressful for families after prolonged separations. An increasing number of families are migrating together, including with young children; some children have crossed the border alone or with the assistance of a smuggler, often to join family members who previously migrated to the U.S.

#### **Practice Tip:**

Service providers should be aware that, while young children are most likely born in the U.S., parents and older siblings may or may not have permanent legal status. Family members may also be located in different countries or U.S. states due to chain migration and the need for family members to work. In addition to physical distance, the migration process can fragment families, with some spouses finding new partners during the long wait for reunification. Adjustment for children can be challenging if they have a new step-parent or new siblings born in the U.S. whom they have never met.

### **Child-Rearing and Child Development**

As in many societies, women bear primary responsibility for raising children. Mothers typically carry babies throughout the day in a shawl that is tied around the neck and shoulders, which allows mothers to breastfeed their children while working. During the day, the baby will rest and sleep on its mother's back. The baby goes everywhere the mother goes. Children are often breastfed until 2-3 years of age and breastfeeding in public is considered normal. Girls of 7 or 8 years old often begin to imitate or help their mothers by carrying a younger sibling in a shawl on their backs. Co-sleeping, or children sleeping together with parents (often until age 12), older siblings, or grandparents at night, is common. Since migrant workers move frequently to different areas to follow the agricultural seasons, families often live together in temporary housing or may sleep together in their car, truck, or van.

#### **Practice Tip:**

Teachers or home visitors should be aware that parents often do not want to meet where they are living, but will instead prefer to meet at the center or school. Families may feel sensitive about the temporary nature of their accommodations, and may have no furnishings. Each family member may use a traditional woven, decorated bag to keep their own clothing and personal items. In addition, families may sleep on the floor on woven mats rather than using mattresses and bed frames.

Children ages 7-13 traditionally take on more responsibility at their age than in the United States. For example, when a younger child is weaned and begins to walk, older siblings begin to take an active role in their care, learning to feed, comfort, and clean them. Young children may be asked to gather firewood or fetch water before school starts. Young boys begin contributing to the household economy by accompanying their fathers to the agricultural fields.

By the time they are 14 or 15 years old, girls are considered eligible for marriage and may begin bearing their own children at this age. Boys tend to be older when they marry, from 17 to 21 years of age. These are often arranged marriages. Early marriage still takes place in the United States. Until they marry, young adults are classified as children.

#### **Practice Tip:**

Families should be made aware of the legal age of consent for marriage and sex in the state in which they currently reside, and the legal consequences of not following these laws.

Physical punishment is a generally accepted disciplinary practice for children. Parents may slap a hand or bottom for younger children and, for school-age children, use a belt or other object to punish a child. Some parents describe traditional disciplinary practices such as using chili to cause pain on sensitive areas of a child's body. It will be important to share information about child safety and protection requirements in the U.S.

#### **Practice Tip:**

Cultural differences regarding co-sleeping, children caring for younger siblings, the expectation that other adults in the community will look out for children, and some discipline practices may be interpreted as child abuse or neglect in the United States. It is important that families be informed about child protection laws in the U.S., as well as their rights within the child welfare system (for example, sometimes teenagers threaten to call "911," not due to abuse or neglect, but to punish their parents; parents will benefit from being able to explain to their children how reporting works and the consequences of making false reports).

#### **Practice Tip: (cont'd)**

Community agencies knowledgeable about indigenous culture can play a key role in educating child welfare agencies and in advocating for families and children if they become involved with the child welfare system. If parents are not U.S. citizens, the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations requires that the nearest embassy or consulate office of a parent's country of nationality be notified when families become involved with the U.S. child welfare or law enforcement systems. These offices can also play a key role in assisting their nationals.

### **School and Education**

The Mixtec, Zapotec, and other indigenous peoples in Mexico have an ancient and proud history of accomplishments in science, mathematics, and writing with codices, which represent objects, concepts, and symbols. Following the Spanish conquest, these traditions gradually became lost. Their languages currently do not have a standard written form and include many variations. For example, the Mixtec language includes over fifty variations and the Zapotec includes sixty variations. Due to ongoing discrimination, poverty, and isolation, indigenous peoples in Mexico still experience limited access to public education, primarily due to lack of schools and investment in quality education in rural areas and the prohibitive cost of pursuing private education elsewhere. This is particularly true for women. Currently most children study to the junior high school level and may pursue technical training as mechanics, electricians, plumbers, or barbers.

There have recently been efforts to improve access to education. The *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* has trained native teachers in bilingual education who are then sent to teach in the more remote areas. This means that many immigrants may be familiar with indigenous education. In recent years, some indigenous people have used education to move from agricultural workers to professionals, including doctors, university professors, and business women with international enterprises. However, the majority still have limited access to quality education in Mexico, resulting in fewer years of education and lower literacy rates among the indigenous than among the general Mexican population.



### Practice Tip:

The high value placed on education as a pathway to success means that parents will participate in early childhood education programs when they understand how important it is to their children's school readiness and success. At the same time, providers need to be supportive and sensitive to parent's many demands. This is particularly true for parents who are seasonal and migrant workers.

Despite positive values placed on education and economic success, the related changing roles of indigenous men, women, and children both in Mexico and in the United States can be a source of tension within families. For example, mothers who work for wages outside the home may still be expected to provide all child care and household work. Girls and boys often feel some pressure to tend to their traditional roles in addition to being successful in school. These are common tensions in societies undergoing changing values and for immigrants adapting to a new culture.

## Physical and Mental Health

As is true for many people, in addition to using Western medicine when they have access to it, indigenous people have their own values, beliefs and behaviors regarding illness and healing. They may not have the same unquestioning faith in Western medicine as U.S. health practitioners and will turn to their own health practitioners for health issues.

### Practice Tip:

For immigrant families, adaptation to a new culture is a complex and ongoing process. Acculturation is viewed as healthiest for children when family members can communicate about the changes they are experiencing and actively decide together which aspects of their traditional culture they wish to maintain and which values and practices of the new culture they wish to adopt.

For example, for the Mixtec, *yingua* (evil wind) is not only a physical reality but also has a spiritual essence and can cause illness. In many parts of Mexico and Latin America, traditional health beliefs include *brujeria* (witchcraft).

Many believe that witches can magically insert objects in a victim's body and this kind of illness can only be treated by a religious practitioner who specializes in magically removing those objects from the body. A traditional healer may also be used to reunite people with their guardian spirit.

Many people believe in *mal de ojo* (evil eye), which can intentionally or inadvertently cause illness. A common example is that when small children fall ill, it may be attributed to evil eye, either from someone paying too much attention to or being too complimentary toward the child. A person with evil intentions can also cause illness through evil eye. Individuals may also be sickened through *susto* (a strong fright) or may suffer from *tiricia* (sadness of the soul), among other illnesses.

A *practicante* or *curandero* (healer) may be used to cure such illnesses. Such local healers undergo long periods of intensive training by a mentor. Treatment of an illness depends on its perceived cause and may include such practices as the use of herbs and medicines, rubbing an egg over the body to cleanse it of the illness, or sacrificing animals, such as a black chicken, to cure it.

Disabilities in children may be attributed to witchcraft or simply accepted as the will of God. Children with disabilities are cared for at home and typically do not have the same opportunities outside the home as other children.

### Practice Tip:

Topics related to sexuality are considered quite sensitive and are not openly discussed within the family or with health care providers. Discussion of preventive care, including mammograms, PAP tests, prostate exams and discussion of sexually transmitted diseases should be done very respectfully, preferably with the assistance of an interpreter and cultural broker.

## Community and Leadership

For indigenous peoples living in southeastern Mexico, the local village is the most important community and is the focus of daily life and social activity. For example, being a native of Jamiltepec village may be more important to their daily lives than being Mixtec, Oaxacan, or Mexican. In Mexico, marriages are usually contracted between a man and a woman of the same village.

Within each village, there are community structures so important that those migrants who live in the U.S. remain involved in them and often return to their village at different times during the year to fulfill their responsibilities:

- *Cofradias* are brotherhoods, with women's auxiliaries, that support the village patron saints' festivals. Being part of a *cofradia* for men involves fundraising, preparing the church, and dressing their town's saint for the procession. The indigenous women support the festival by preparing special foods.
- The *mayordomia* is a hierarchical system of civil-religious positions that provide the village leadership structure. All adult males take turns filling these positions, known as *cargos* (burdens).
- The *tequio* is a system of mutual aid and reciprocal labor. Indigenous families may assist each other, for example, at the time of planting and harvesting their *milpa* (corn field). The *tequio* also provides labor for community projects such as cleaning and repairing village streets, building houses, and constructing and maintaining irrigation ditches. This system is so important that if indigenous families do not fulfill their responsibilities, they may lose their rights to their land and their ability to return home.

For several decades now, indigenous migrant workers have been forming associations and ethnic community-based organizations in the United States. In addition to advocating for their legal rights in the U.S., these associations often send money back to their home communities to support public works.

These ethnic organizations also make excellent partners for local health, education, and social services who serve indigenous peoples. Typically staffed by trusted community leaders, they can provide information about the cultures

and backgrounds of indigenous peoples; offer interpreters for indigenous languages; and assist with community outreach, education, and family engagement.

### Practice Tip:

Migrant associations and indigenous ethnic community-based organizations can make excellent partners for all Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and Early Head Start and Head Start programs in order to support culturally and linguistically responsive services to indigenous families.

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