

Tribal member advocates for cradleboard acceptance

By Danielle Harrison

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Tribal member Valeria Atanacio has long wanted to see cradleboards become more accepted in child care settings, but was finding the lack of knowledge surrounding this traditional practice frustrating.

As the Tribal Affairs director for the Oregon Early Learning Division, she has encountered misunderstandings from pediatricians and others when cradleboards were brought up in meetings regarding their use and relevance in child care settings, particularly in facilities operated by Tribes or those that serve Indigenous communities.

So, she teamed up with Ai Binh Ho, a fellow with the American Council of Learned Societies who focuses on innovations in child care access at the Better Life Lab, to co-author an article discussing the benefits of cradleboard use in early learning environments.

The two recently published their article in *Early Learning Nation*, an independent early learning magazine.

“We started working on this to bring awareness regarding cradleboard use and acceptance,” Atanacio says. “We’ve had top-level people within state government and pediatrics associations who have not bought into the idea of supporting cradleboard use. We decided we needed to write this. There is a need of more awareness and advocacy for best practices and more policies that support Tribes teaching this.”

In the past, Atanacio has served as the Grand Ronde Tribe’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention coordinator and worked as an assistant preschool teacher for several years. Now



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal member Valeria Atanacio co-authored an article about the benefits of using cradleboards in early learning and child care environments. She is the Tribal Affairs director for the Oregon Department of Education Early Learning Division.

33, she has years of education and experience in child care settings, as well as lived experience of using cradleboards with her now 7- and 5-year-old daughters when they were infants.

She and her sister, Isabella Atanacio, shared a cradleboard when their eldest children were born approximately at the same time.

“The sensory sort of experience of the child is different in a cradleboard than it would be for a baby lying down in a bassinet and this definitely increases the child’s awareness and ability to kind of like learn what their body feels like in those moments of ... just like being held and comfortable in that way,” she says. “I think that’s important and one thing that it did for me as a parent was it allowed me to take some breaks because a lot of times

as a new parent you tend to hold your baby a lot and no one says put down your baby because then they will cry when you put them down. So it really did allow for me to put down my babies without that guilt. They were content. So it worked out and helped me.”

Atanacio spoke of this experience in the article:

“The cradleboard – its construction, movement among family members, and history – is a unique product that brings old and new family members together, rebuilding ties severed by boarding school. ... The cradleboard is much more than a sleeping apparatus; it is a rite of passage for Indigenous parents in my community. It is a journey home after generations of being forced out of our homes and away from our families.”

The article further explains that cradleboard use in most child care centers is only permitted through an exemption process that requires a pediatrician’s authorization.

“The exemption process signals to parents that their care practices are inferior, and demand the oversight of a pediatrician that positions the parents as ignorant, when, in reality, the majority of physicians are unfamiliar with cradleboards.”

The article points to several national and Tribal studies that conclude cradleboards are one of the safest

sleep surfaces to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS.

“The First Nations Health Authority, the National Institute for Children’s Health Quality, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development have all identified the cradleboard as ‘one of the safest alternative sleep surfaces’ that can prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDs). The National Institute of Health and Human Development-led Healthy Native Babies Project names cradleboards as a culturally appropriate infant sleep surface.”

As a member of the state Safe Sleep Coalition, Atanacio is advocating for cradleboard use as a culturally acceptable practice in SIDS prevention, despite some pushback.

“We heard from some more vocal personalities in the group that there wasn’t any research on this so they couldn’t endorse it,” she said. “Coming from an advocacy lens and knowing all the work that the nine Tribes are doing to bring culture back at the beginning of life, and recognizing their sovereignty, this was just always kind of like a dark cloud or something over it because as a state agency we oversee all of the licensing for child care and administration. Within our roles there is this really specific way of how infants and toddlers should sleep in programs and that hasn’t always been inclusive of different cultural communities.”

Since the article was published in late April, Atanacio said feedback has been positive.

“This is a platform where we could have an influence in this sector of work by sharing what we know,” she says. “I’ve gotten e-mails from our communities that we work with here in Oregon including the director from the Multnomah County Preschool for All, who shared and helped elevate the article.”

Atanacio says she plans to continue her advocacy regarding cradleboards.

“What is really important is helping the folks who are in the field, to help them understand what a cradleboard is and having a network of resources to point them to,” she says. ■

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