

Navajo (Diné) Cultural-Based Healing When Confronted with Grief Using the Familial/Kinship
Relations: Concepts of Ké

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Context

At present, I am employed as a Navajo (Diné) School Counselor (grades Kindergarten through 8th) with the Winslow Unified School District in the city of Winslow, Arizona.

As a school counselor, my counseling program will address the social and emotional needs of our students through a culturally responsive approach. This mission statement entails promoting a safe and nurturing student-centered learning environment where students have a sense of well-being about his/her cultural place in the world. Currently, I serve a student population that consists of grade levels kindergarten through 8. The enrollment at each school to which I am assigned is as follows:

Enrollment: 380 Jefferson Elementary School (K-2nd)

257 Bonnie Brennan Elementary School (3rd-4th)

264 Washington Elementary School (5th-6th)

329 Winslow Junior High School (7th-8th)

Fifty-seven percent of the students attending the above-listed schools are Indigenous of which the majority identify as members of Navajo (Diné) or Hopi Nation.

The city of Winslow, Arizona is a border town near the Navajo (Diné) and Hopi Reservations. Presently, Winslow has a population of nearly 9,000 residents, which includes approximately thirty-four percent of those residents self-identify as Indigenous. The surrounding tribal communities include: Leupp, Birdsprings, Dilcon, Seba Dalkai, Teesto, and Indian Wells. The majority of the students that come from these communities attend the Winslow Public Schools from grades K-12. School district-funded transportation is available for students who need transportation to and from school. Additionally, the U.S Bureau of Indian Education funds and operates a residential hall in Winslow for grades 8 through 12.

I was born and raised in Winslow, Arizona. I also attended the Winslow Public Schools for grades K-12. I graduated from Winslow High School in 1997. Although I moved away to attend Arizona State University to obtain my undergraduate degree, I returned to my small town of the Winslow community where I love and feel at home. I currently live in Leupp, Arizona within the Navajo Nation which is a nearby reservation community located within twenty-eight miles northwest of Winslow.

Rationale

Healing with grief through Navajo (Diné) kinship relationships (Ké) is a subject on which I chose to write a culturally-based responsive school counseling guidance curriculum (grades kindergarten through 8). Due to the high death rates of suicide, and alcoholism, and especially with the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Navajo reservation, I wanted to focus on this as the main topic. There was a high frequency of students that were needing grief support in a more culturally relevant way.

As a Navajo (Diné) school counselor, I provide my very best to make a specific type of connection with students whether it be culturally (i.e., being from a small community, adhering to and maintaining of Navajo (Diné) kinship norms and values, and identifying as an elder Navajo (Diné woman).

Students are aware that they can reach out to me at any time, to talk with me especially if it is on an urgent basis. They want to feel that they have strong support and connection at school because, at times, they do not have that at home. Especially when a death occurs, students are in shock and so are their families. The student will usually have an outburst at school or feel alone and isolated while the family is setting up funeral arrangements. In the Diné culture, this process takes place within four days. During these four days, families and kinship families come together to comfort one another as well as staying put remaining vigilant. Teachers and staff must take this into consideration that this process takes place. It is also common that a student will be absent for the entire week to be with the family as well as the kinship clan family.

In most instances, the student is not fully aware that they have been affected by the shocking news of losing a loved one and how it impacts them. For example, they are not able to focus on classroom lessons and could be triggered easily by running to the nearby restroom to cry and break down.

In Diné culture, we were raised with cultural narratives that gave us a sense of identity through kinship and clanship. We were also raised with cultural narratives of our elders that would teach us as children. These narratives were of importance because we knew where we came from and had a sense of interconnectedness with one another for support and comfort. When Diné people have this understanding, they know where they come from and it deters from feeling isolated. This also gives them a sense of identity. There is also a familial bonding that occurs within clanship relationships and traditional reasons.

As a young child at the age of ten, I experienced the first tragic death of a loved one. She was my aunt (Shimá yázhí). I was in the 5th grade at Jefferson Elementary School in Winslow, Arizona. I can still remember the details clearly. There was no strong emotional support at school. I tried my best to explain this to my teacher who did not fully understand the familial relationships within a Navajo family. She was a non-Navajo woman who just did not have that cultural understanding and therefore did not know how to respond to me. The person that I had lost was my Shimá yázhí (little mother-my mother's youngest sister). Due to cultural reasons, I missed the whole week of school to be with my family for four days.

In a Diné family, our maternal aunts are considered our mothers since they come from the same matrilineal clan. The kinship within Diné families is so close-knit. Our cousins are considered our brothers or sisters.

Currently, as a Navajo (Diné) School Counselor, I felt there was a strong need to support our Diné students with a curriculum that they can relate to by utilizing their kinship roles. As Diné people, we have four clans that are used to identify who we are and how we relate to one another. In strengthening those kinship roles, students will be able to identify with one on a personal level which will include comforting relationships and familial bonds.

Students will have a kinship understanding and will have more of a kinship outside support such as classmates, teachers, extended families, and friends. They will utilize kinship as a way to connect with their clan families during a time of grief and the healing process with togetherness.

Topic Summary

The term Ké is a Diné word that refers to the relationship through clanship. Ké refers to affective action and solidarity, including concepts of love, compassion, kindness, friendliness, generosity, and peacefulness. When a baby is born, he or she is born with four clans. The clanship system originated through our cultural narratives.

According to the Diné cultural narratives, Changing Woman created our people and rubbed off her skin into four pieces. She also gave the people the four original clans that represent the four directions (East, West, North and South) and four different stones (black jet, white shell, abalone shell, and turquoise (Calsoyas, 2022).

The Diné believed that there were many Holy People, or spirit beings and that Changing Woman was the most sacred of all. She helped to create the people of the earth, who were the ancestors of the Navajos...Changing Woman taught the people ways on to live in harmony with all things- the elements, the mountains, the plants, and the animals (Gridley, 1974).

The Diné is a matrilineal society. Therefore, the mother's clan is passed down to her children. The Diné people use the clans to identify with one another and to greet each other in a culturally appropriate manner, usually in an endearing way. "Ké is medicine and therefore it is therapeutic" (Walker, T. 2022).

It has natural powers that lead to healing." Ké is connected to everything which brings peace and harmony to the world. It is comprised of a social order that has tremendous cultural values and knowledge. This knowledge is our lifeways which identify behaviors and carry our hope, desires, and determination.

For example, the Navajo Wedding Basket, or "tsaa", is a representative model of this interconnectedness of all of the cultural narratives that have been our way of life since time immemorial.

In the design of the Navajo Wedding basket, there is a duality of humans which includes male and female. There are also north and south polarities. This representation is very powerful, especially at the very center. This includes Ké as well. (Walker, T. 2022).

Ké includes social identity which strengthens also bolsters identity within a tribal community. This is a very important and essential part of being a Navajo (Diné) person. Our Navajo (Diné) identity is never without value and gives meaning when we are able to let others know where we are from. We have a sense that we are never alone no matter where we go.

There will always be relatives through Ké. We will have access to many clan mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters. Every single day, we represent one or more of these roles. Ké also means balance, harmony, and peace. When we achieve this balance, we find peace within ourselves.

We as Diné are taught values by our parents and elders within our families or clan families. This includes spiritual information when involving a ceremony (Calsoyas, 2022).

When we are unified as a family, we are promoting Ké to a greater extent. Being kind and respecting one another is paramount.

When pertaining to grief, students at each level have experienced this from time to time. Since Covid-19 had hit the Navajo Nation disastrously, students were left feeling alone and without connection at a cultural level as well as emotionally. On March 11, 2020, the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus made an unceremonious entrance on the Navajo Nation in Chilchinbeto, AZ. Shortly thereafter, COVID-19 was named Dikos Ntsaaígíí- (“big cough”) in the Navajo language. In a span of 2 months, Navajo Nation surpassed all US states with the highest per capita infection rate. According to the Navajo Epidemiology Center, as of May 11, 2021, the Navajo Nation reached 30,578 positive cases of SARS-CoV2 infections and 1,283 confirmed deaths (Denetclaw et al, 2022).

These were unprecedented times that the Navajo Nation had experienced. During the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Navajo Nation President, Jonathan Nez, had ordered the Navajo Nation to go on a lockdown.

People were not to leave their homes except to haul water, gather necessities, or visit the hospital.

Curfews were enforced and the Navajo Nation offices were closed. Mask mandates were also enforced as well as temperature checks. Families were living in fear, because of such a time of uncertainty.

Families lost their loved ones to the Covid-19 virus and this forever impacted the lives of the Diné people as well as the rest of the world.

On a personal level, my family had experienced a tremendous loss including my mother (Shiml) and my grandmother (Shi Masani), the matriarchs of my family. We felt the shock of these huge losses. Due to covid-19, they lost their lives. During this time, we were in denial which is one of the phases of grief. We as a family did not want to accept that this was happening. We had to limit our physical interactions with one another which was uncommon. We did not have physical contacts such as hugs or any type of physical contact due to it being in uncertain times. This has caused great stress upon us as a family unit. It was through various types of kinship-Ké that we were able to gain that connection with clan relatives. We were then able to receive emotional reciprocity. Two years have passed since our losses and we are still trying heal through the five stages of grief to achieve harmony, balance, and healing. There are five stages of grief. Which include: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Denial during the grieving process may include: believing that there has been a mistake and your loved one isn't actually gone or refusing to discuss your loss or acting like everything is okay. The next phase is anger which is a natural emotion. During your loss, we may feel overwhelming angry at why the incident occurred which may include the unfairness. The next phase is bargaining. This process takes in a form of trying to undo something we simply cannot undo. Depression is the sadness we feel from our grief. This can include: loss of interest in our future, feeling lost or confused about your life, difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Lastly, there is acceptance of the grief. This is where we no longer feel immobilized by our sadness or having an understanding that there is a finality of what has happened (Matthews et al., 2016).

Shortly after my family's deaths had occurred, I felt isolated. I was not able to visit my sisters, aunts, uncles, or cousins because we had been traumatized by covid-19. We were frightened and felt isolated during our grieving process. As time went on, I visited the grocery stores and run into people that knew my mother and grandmother. I wasn't aware that they knew me at all. They would come up to me and greet me as their granddaughter, daughter, sister, or nali. They also greeted me as "shi awee" (my baby in the Diné language) and "shi yazhi." Those were terms of endearment and just those simple words have such a comforting meaning.

I felt supported by my clan relatives in this way. I questioned it at first, but then realized that this was a familial connection that had and that I owned. I no longer felt isolated in my grief. I had clan relatives no matter where I went, there would be someone there to connect with.

Therefore, this sparked my topic for this culturally relevant guidance curriculum. I wanted to share this with my students since I had personal experience with this. I can make connections with my students who are experiencing this same type of isolation and grief. I strongly believe that this extended family support, Ké clanship, and extended connectedness had an important cultural role and that was, belonging to someone.

Isolation leads to depression. Social isolation and loneliness may reinforce one another via maladaptive appraisal and coping styles, and similarly, individuals with symptoms of depression may become withdrawn and isolate themselves, feeding back into feelings of loneliness; thus, the observed associations may be bidirectional in nature (Matthews et al, 2016).

Reciprocity is very common among the Navajo (Diné) people. When Navajo families come together, it is usually to support one another and to be there for relatives including clanship relatives. In most cases, they bring goods in the form of food, wood, water, ceremonial items, and most importantly, they invite family.

This is not limited to ceremonies or the death of a loved one during a time of grief. In this case, the Diné tradition of reciprocity is used between and/or among Navajo students in which culturally relevant information surrounding grief is exchanged.

The exchange of information may be in the form of oral, written, or visual communication. According to Navajo cultural norms, the mere act of exchanging cultural information about grief becomes an act within itself a form of emotional support. For example, at a time when a Diné

student is in the process of grieving, another student puts it upon herself or himself to create the dynamic of mutual exchange and support based on the Diné tradition of reciprocity. In doing this, students will have that added support system that goes far beyond what words can describe. (R. Walker, 2022).

Another integral term that relates to the importance of kinship (Ké) is solidarity. Solidarity in this case is when a student learns about Navajo (Diné) kinship, it will then create a sense of strong interconnection, interwoven, of relationship among them and which they can rely on as a support system in the educational setting.

Some of our Navajo (Diné) students did not have parents that lived within their immediate homes.

In such cases, these students were being raised by at least one grandparent either full-time or intermittently.

Unfortunately, we must teach these special connections with the students so they can move forward towards healing. As the healing starts to occur, students will begin to become more resilient in any given situation. Resiliency begins and students will perform better in school and have better relationships with their peers and perhaps their teachers. Students will feel as if they belong in the school setting or environment that they are nestled into (R. Walker, 2022).

Healing is needed culturally when teaching our students who are emotionally in pain.

When a student is on a healing journey, they must know that there is support within the school system. There are Diné teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and school counselors.

There are terms of endearment that can be a very powerful way of connecting with students. Our Diné elders had always greeted the younger generation in this manner which instills comfort and safety. Words such as Shi awé (my baby), Shi yazhi (my little one) are simple words in Navajo but hold so much meaning. Students will begin to feel this sense of belonging with other peers, teachers, and staff in the school environment. Healing will eventually take place due to the support of extended clanship families.

Native American individuals and communities have demonstrated a remarkable ability to overcome extraordinary conditions to thrive. Resiliency is the term proposed to describe the important factors and processes involved in resilient coping within Indigenous populations.

Resilience is an important concept in the field of mental health care delivery systems.

Researchers have generally defined it as the ability to overcome stress and regain mental health and well-being after experiencing (an) adversity. Recently, researchers have recognized that resilience is a more widespread phenomenon than previously thought, emphasizing it as the outcome of developmentally linked regulatory processes (e.g., coping skills, social support) that promote positive adaptation not only in extreme circumstances of adversity but also in everyday stress and strain (Layne et al., 2007).

Clans remind you that you are not alone. “By practicing the teaching of the medicine man and the elderly people, The People show respect for themselves. Knowing clanship, paternal grandparents, and all related kinsmen and greeting them as such, is to show that “we respect ourselves’ the People say. How does a Dine woman think of herself? If she knows what it means

to be a woman and what her responsibilities are, she will respect herself and others. Any man or other people will respect her, the same goes for a man. (Beck, 281).

Student Engagement

1. Students will learn where the four original Navajo (Diné) clans derived from. Students will learn about Diné cultural narratives. This lesson will be the foundation of the lesson plan.

In Diné culture, Changing Woman, a revered Navajo deity, created the Navajo people. When she was about to leave on her journey back to the West, she gifted them with four clans. She gifted them with canes (gish) for each clan. The Kinyaa'aanii clan group was given a white shell cane (gish) and was also given the bear (shash) as their protector. They are also given leadership qualities. The Honágháahnii clan group was given a turquoise cane (gish) as well as the cougar as their protector. These clan groups are spiritual leaders and healers. The Tódich'ii'nii clan group was given the abalone shell can (gish).

Their protector is the big snake and this clan group is often educators. The last clan group, Hashtl'ishnii was given the jet black can (gish). The porcupine is their protector to the The four original clans of the Navajo people are Kinyaa'aanii (The Towering House clan) to the East, Honágháahnii (One-walks-around clan) to the South, Tódich'ii'nii (Bitter Water clan) to the West and Hashtl'ishnii (Mud clan) to the North.

The clan system was Changing Woman's way of telling the Navajo people that this will allow them to be who they are. (Calsoyas, 2022). Today, there are more than 100 clans among the Navajo people. Each clan comes from different parts of the Navajo Nation, with its meaning and a story behind them.

I will provide grief support group services for the grades 5th through 8th grade. This will take place at two different schools.

2. Washington Elementary School includes grades 5th and 6th. The Winslow Junior High School includes grades 7th and 8th. At these schools, I will offer grief support groups which include about five students or fewer depending on the interest of the student. During these group counseling sessions, students will identify their four clans and fill out a chart (provided by their counselor) of their specific clans in Navajo (Diné Bizaad) and English. The student will learn about one another during grief groups or in the school environment with their peers or teachers/staff. Students will also learn how to greet one another using short Navajo phrases on proper greeting with related clans. This will take place for one of the six sessions, one group session per week which includes one hour of meeting time. In this way, students will understand that they will be grieving together with clanship/relationship (Ké).

Introduction in Navajo (Diné Bizaad)

Yá'át'ééh (*Hello*).

Shí éí (name) yinishyé (I am called ...)

Following the name, they introduce their four clans.

Mother's clan nishłı́

Father's clan bashishchiin

Maternal grandfather's clan dashicheii

Paternal grandfather's clan dashinalí

An English translation would be "I am (mother's clan), born for (father's clan), my maternal grandfather is (maternal grandfather's clan), my paternal grandfather's clan is (paternal grandfather's clan).

For example:

I would introduce myself in this manner.

Yá'át'ééh Shi ei ya, Lavinia Leann Cody yinish6. Áshį́hí nisli, Naakaii Diné baashishchin, Bį́įh Bitoodnii da shi chei, Honágháahnii da shi nali.

Hello, my name is Lavinia Leann Cody. I am Salt Clan born for Mexican People Clan. My maternal grandfather is Deer Water Springs Clan and my paternal father's clan are The Ones that Walk around Clan. Thank you.

The introduction is usually closed off with ahéhee', which translates to thank you or I am grateful.

3. Students will learn about how to identify their maternal clans as well as their paternal clan relationship. Students will learn how to properly identify relatives by maternal/paternal relatives. Ideally, the students gain this cultural knowledge because it is their identity and they will be able to carry this information forward. Students will also gain the confidence to speak their language and to encourage to keep practicing.

This is especially important because there is a formal way of addressing your family relations. This is how the Navajo (Diné) identify their paternal relatives and their maternal relatives. This will be a minimum of six group counseling sessions.

4. Students will learn and identify the five stages of grief. One session of six group support groups will be devoted to this lesson. Students will be verbally taught by giving students a topic worksheet that explains this.
5. Students will spend one session talking about their personal stories of grief. When all students have shared, we will complete a journaling session to assist in processing their grief.

Student Assessment

In assessing the group counseling students, there will be a journaling component. A journal prompt will be given after the first lesson is taught. Students will write about where the four original Navajo (Diné) clans derived from as well as the foundational lesson of Diné narratives. Writing prompts provide students with a clear goal as to what you expect them to write about. They also provide you with a way to evaluate what they're taking away from a particular lesson. You will be able to see which aspects of a lesson resonate with them, what they have remembered, and what they connected with. Journal prompts for six of the sessions will include: In your own words, what are the four original Navajo-Dine clans? What four clans did Changing Woman give to the Navajo-Dine people? What are your four clans? What are the stages of grief? What stage of grief are you currently in? What do you know about the process of grieving? What was your favorite lesson and why? These journal prompts will indicate if a student was engaged in the lesson that the counselor taught in the group counseling. The journaling will indicate if there was learning that was taking place, as well as if there was connections and relationships with one another being made on a cultural level.

The next assessment is giving the student worksheet titled: Introduction in Navajo Diné Bazaad. Students will be given a worksheet prior the lesson on how to introduce themselves properly in Navajo Bizaad. Some will have prior knowledge and some will not. For the ones that do not know their four clans, they will be asked to go home and ask their parents or caregivers to assist in identifying their student's clans. After obtaining their four clans, students will write them down and practice their clans. When the lesson is completed, pre and posttest will be given on the lesson to measure growth and to verify if they have a general understanding of the subject. The last assessment that will be given is to indicate whether or not the students are introducing themselves and relating to each other correctly. This can be assessed through a pre-test and post-test. Students will be given a worksheet on matching the correct paternal and maternal filling out a clan sheet on their own. After the six sessions of support group meetings, students will be given a post test on the same worksheet. This will measure growth in what they have learned over the duration of the support group sessions.

Introduction in Navajo Diné Bizaad

English Introduction:

Hello my relatives and my people. My name is _____.

I am _____ clan born for the _____ clan. My

maternal grandfather is _____.

My paternal grandfather is _____.

Navajo Introduction:

Ya'ah'eeh. Shí éí _____ yinishye. _____ nishłí.

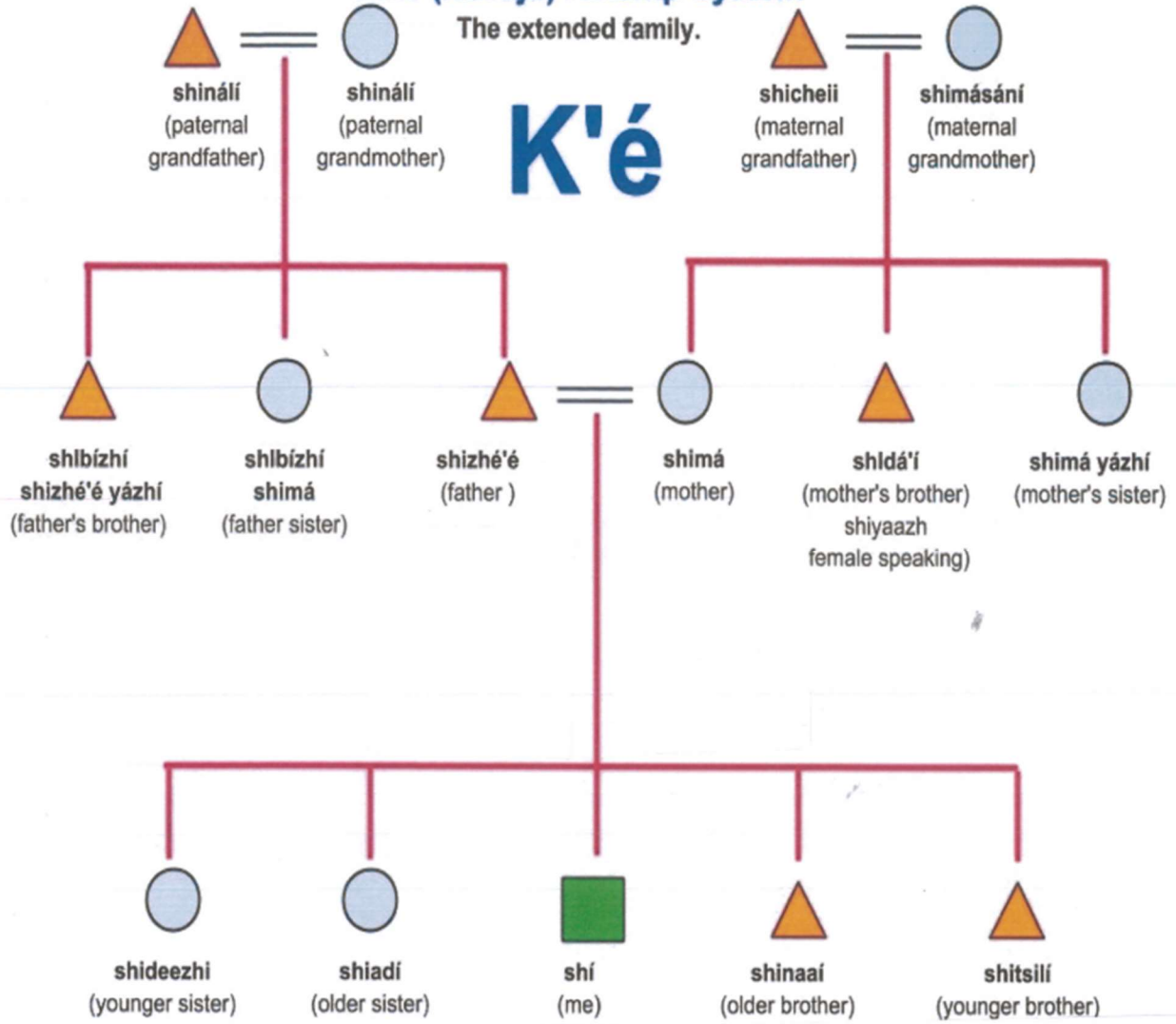
_____ bashishchiin. _____ dashicheii.






_____ dashinali.

Diné (Navajo) Kinship System

The extended family.

K'é



Legend Key				
				
male	female	no gender indicated	affinal (marriage tie)	consanguineal (blood) tie

	MALE	FEMALE
Father's Brother	shi zhe'f yázhí	shi zhe'f yázhí
Female Cousin	shi lah'	shik'is
Her son		
Her daughter		
Male Cousin	shik'is	shi lah'
His son		
His daughter		
Father's Sister	shi bízhí - shimá	shi bízhí - shimá
Female Cousin	shi zeedí	shi zeedí
Her son	shi ye'	shi yáázh
Her daughter	shi tsí	shi ch'éí
Male Cousin	shil naa'aash	shi zeedí
His son	shi ye' - shi da'	shi yáázh
His daughter	shi tsí - shimá yázhí	shi ch'éí
Mother's Brother	shi dá'f	shi yáázh
Female Cousin	shi zeedí	shi zeedí
Her son	shi ye'	shi yáázh
Her daughter	shi tsí	shi ch'éí
Male Cousin	shil naa'aash	shi zeedí
His son	shi ye'	shi yáázh
His daughter	shi tsí	shi ch'éí
Mother's Sister	shimá yázhí	shimá yázhí
Female Cousin	shádí - shi dezhi	shádí - shi dezhi
Her son	shi da'	shi yáázh
Her daughter	shimá yázhí	shi ch'éí
Male Cousin	shínaaf - shi tsilí	shínaaf - shi tsilí
His son	shi ye'	shi yáázh
His daughter	shi tsí	shi ch'éí
shilnaa'aash	alhxá jishchíín go olyé	
shik'a'f	hxa másááni biyáázh bit'sí' olyé	
shi chó	hxa másááni bimá olyé	

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