



FOUNDED IN CULTURE:

Strategies To Promote Early Learning Among
First Nations Children In Ontario

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Approach.....	8
Background.....	9
Ontario's Aboriginal Population Statistics.....	9
Federal Policies and Initiatives.....	9
Provincial Policies and Initiatives.....	9
Early Learning Situation – Off-Reserve.....	10
Early Learning Situation – On-Reserve.....	11
Goals of Aboriginal Early Learning Programs.....	11
Aboriginal Daycares.....	12
The Early Learning Literature.....	12
Aboriginal Control of Education.....	13
Culturally Relevant Programming that Includes History and Language.....	14
Connections to Extended Family and The Community.....	14
Appropriate Teaching Methods Based on First Nations Learning Styles.....	15
Support Positive Self-Esteem among First Nations Children.....	16
Participation in Early Learning Programs Offers Improved School Success.....	16
Assessment of Child Development and Program Evaluation.....	16
The Key Informant Survey.....	17
Definition of Early Learning.....	17
Culture-Based Early Learning.....	19
Strategies to Guide Work with First Nations Parents.....	21
Understanding First Nations History, Culture and Social Contexts.....	21
Creating a Welcoming Environment.....	22
Building a Relationship With Parents and Families.....	22
Involving Parents in Decision-Making.....	23
Working from Strengths.....	24
Encouraging Learning at Home.....	25
Linking to the Community.....	26
Respecting Diverse Cultures.....	26
Supporting Children with Special Needs.....	28
Learning from and about the Land.....	30
Further Research.....	30
Additional Resources.....	31
References.....	35
Appendix A: Interview Questions.....	38

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this First Nations early learning report is to:

- review early learning policy and research that has been done with First Nations children (from birth to age 6) living in Ontario; and
- identify strategies to support early learning for service providers who work with First Nations parents/caregivers.

The review involved a scan of relevant literature and interviews with key informants.

Early learning is important because it forms the foundation for lifelong learning. Taking part in early learning programs has been shown to positively influence school success. The following key concepts and strategies emerged from the review:

How to define early learning

- Key informants define early learning as a developmental process that begins at conception and continues to age 6.
- Aboriginal early learning is holistic and includes developing the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person. Other components of early learning include self-awareness, language development, social skills, awareness of physical self, development of motor skills, empathy, understanding, individuality, self-esteem, physical activity, and good nutrition.
- A child's relationships with family, community, and the environment all influence early learning.

Aboriginal learning styles

- Aboriginal people are visual-spatial learners and prefer a holistic framework of understanding that is reflective and collaborative (Rasmussen et al., 2004; Toulouse, 2008).

Culture-based early learning and positive self-identity

- To foster a positive Aboriginal identity among children, culture must form the foundation of early learning experiences (Battiste, 2002; Toulouse, 2008).
- Culture is learned through language, ceremonies, gatherings, stories, music, games, arts and crafts, as well as land-based experiences. It is important for service providers to have a good understanding of their own cultural beliefs and to respect the diversity of cultural beliefs of the children and families they are working with. Elders and other resource people are considered the most important means for cultural knowledge to be transmitted to children and families.

Strategies to support early learning

Key informants identified 10 main strategies that they found successful in supporting early learning among Aboriginal children. Key informants also provided helpful suggestions to address those strategies. The 10 strategies are outlined below and discussed in more detail in the Key Informant Survey section of this report.

1) Understanding Aboriginal history, culture, and social contexts

When working with Aboriginal families, it is important to have an understanding of Aboriginal history, culture, and current social contexts because these factors impact parenting.

2) Creating a welcoming environment

Children and parents need to feel welcomed into an environment that reflects Aboriginal culture and is child-friendly. For example, the tradition of sharing belongings and sharing food is an important part of Aboriginal culture. This can be expressed by hosting feasts, which is a common practice among most Aboriginal people.

3) Building a relationship with parents and families and extended families

This is the most important strategy in supporting early learning. Family and extended family play a vital role in child care and the education of Aboriginal children.

4) Involving parents in making decisions

This is an effective way of empowering parents. At a family level, parents are involved in identifying their strengths and service needs. At a program level, it could mean involvement in a parent advisory committee.

There is a historic mistrust of the formal education system stemming from experiences with the residential school system. Allowing parents to make choices about what is best for their children is a powerful method of building a good working partnership with families. At a broader, societal level, the literature suggests that self-determination could see Aboriginal people having jurisdiction and control of their education (CCL, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007; NIB, 1972; Pascal, 2009).

5) Working from strengths

A strength-based approach considers the skills, knowledge, and resources that parents and families already have and builds upon them. Because every child and family is unique, programming should be customized for each child and the family's needs and goals.

6) Encouraging learning at home and extending learning into the child's whole environment

Early learning begins in the home environment when parents talk, read, and play with their children, and expands into the broader community and school environment. Aboriginal people know that effective learning takes place within a cultural and community context. By supporting this idea, the formal learning environment can be extended into all areas of a child's life and can support learning in a holistic way.

7) Linking to community

To have a sense of belonging and of identity as a First Nations person, it is important for children and families to be connected to their community. Many First Nations people still maintain strong ties to their home communities. Supporting these ties fosters good relations with the child and family in the long term.

8) Respecting the diversity of cultures

Accommodating the diversity of First Nations cultural groups can be challenging. Each cultural group has its own beliefs, customs, and practices that must be respected and supported. This is why it is important to involve Elders and other traditional people in early learning programs.

9) Supporting children with special needs

In mainstream environments, supporting children with special needs is important in making them feel accepted and that they belong. It also helps other children in these environments learn to accept differences. Early intervention is important. Having resources to support children with special needs is critical. A kind and respectful approach is needed to help parents recognize the challenges their child is facing. Any intervention deemed necessary by parents and educators should take place at the best time to meet the child's developmental needs.

10) Learning from and about the land

There were various suggestions on how to connect to the land and support early learning. These included learning traditional skills through activities such as camping, ceremonies, retreats, and picking berries and sweet grass.

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood years are considered critical to a child's physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual development. These years impact the rest of the child's life. Brain development is affected by the experiences and environments of early life which "sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health" (Mustard, 2006).

In its provincial role of providing support for prenatal and child health, the Best Start Resource Centre wanted to identify strategies that support early learning for service providers who work with parents/caregivers of First Nations children.

The purpose of this resource is to:

- review the areas of policy and research that have been undertaken for First Nations children (from birth to age 6) living in Ontario; and
- identify strategies that support early learning for service providers who work with parents/caregivers of First Nations children.

The resource was developed through:

- a scan of the early learning literature related to First Nations children in Ontario; and
- key informant interviews with experts working in education, Aboriginal organizations, Aboriginal child care facilities, and Aboriginal early learning programs in Ontario.



APPROACH

The theoretical framework for the development of this resource is based on an Aboriginal perspective that aims to transform the effects of colonization and offer an authentic representation of Aboriginal people (Battiste, 2000; Brant-Castellano, 2004). This was accomplished by:

- contracting Aboriginal researchers to facilitate the research process;
- forming an Aboriginal Advisory Committee; and
- interviewing experts in Aboriginal early learning.

The advisory committee met via teleconferencing to discuss the research approach and to suggest potential key informants and early learning references. Aboriginal staff at Health Nexus supported the advisory committee and research consultants.

A scan of the early learning literature pertaining to Aboriginal early learning in Ontario was completed. Government reports and other key documents were identified through a Web-based search. Journal articles on Aboriginal early learning were obtained through a library search using the following key words: Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, children, education, and early learning. Advisory committee members also provided references to literature.

The scan of early learning literature involved a review of articles, papers, research documents, and proceedings from government consultations and conferences. The purpose was to examine published literature for strategies to help parents, educators, and program developers support early learning for First Nations children. The literature came from a variety of Canadian sources plus a few American sources.

Key informant interviews were held with parents and experts in Aboriginal early learning. Experts were asked to identify early learning strategies that service providers could use to support parents/caregivers of First Nations children (see Appendix A for the interview questions).

The advisory committee identified key informants and asked them to suggest other key informants. Telephone interviews (between 45 and 60 minutes) were conducted with 14 respondents. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. One informant declined to be recorded and the researcher took notes instead.

Due to scheduling challenges, four respondents answered the questions by email.

Of the 23 potential key informants identified, 18 agreed to participate, resulting in a 78 percent response rate.

A content analysis of written transcripts helped identify themes and concepts in the data. Categories were determined inductively and were grounded to the data. As requested by the advisory committee, the resulting categories are presented along with direct quotes from the respondents so that the voices of the people are heard.

BACKGROUND

This report provides background information on First Nation early learning in Ontario. It includes:

- population statistics;
- federal and provincial policy initiatives;
- statistics on factors affecting First Nation early learning (provided from two national surveys);
- general information on the goals of mainstream and First Nation early learning programs; and
- suggested strategies to support early learning.

Ontario's Aboriginal population

During the 2006 Canadian census, 242,490 people in Ontario identified as Aboriginal, or two percent of the province's total population. Of those, 158,400 identified themselves as North American Indian (now commonly termed First Nations), and the remainder either Métis, Inuit, or having more than one Aboriginal identity (Statistics Canada, 2006).

About 8 percent of Ontario's Aboriginal population was aged 0 to 4 years; and 8.7 percent were aged 5 to 9. The Aboriginal population is the fastest growing in Canada, and a large proportion of this population are children. Policy makers recognize this growth indicates a need for early childhood development programs (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Federal policies and initiatives

According to Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Ngaroimata Fraser (2007), the federal government began considering early childhood development and education in the late 1980s. Since that time, several federal initiatives for Aboriginal children were developed. These include the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative in 1994, the Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Initiative in 1995, and the Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve Initiative in 1997.

The Federal Strategy on Early Childhood Development for First Nations and Other Aboriginal Children was announced in 2002. It provided enhancements for the Aboriginal Head Start Initiative and the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative.

In 2004, the federal government sought to develop a national vision of early learning and child care, and in 2005, national Aboriginal organizations were asked to consult with their members on integrating early learning programming. Four major consultations took place. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) was identified as the lead agency in the merger of four federal child care programs.

Provincial policies and initiatives

At the provincial level, the Ontario government released a report on early learning in 1999 entitled *The Early Years Study - Reversing the Real Brain Drain*. The report's major finding was that early childhood experiences have a significant impact on learning, behaviour, and health through all stages of life. Subsequently, and as a result of the federal Early Childhood Development Initiative, Ontario began receiving transfer payments to fund Ontario early years programs in 2002 and 2003.

In 2004, the Best Start plan was started to implement the recommendations from the 1999 early years study. One of the programs that received funding was the Aboriginal Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Child Nutrition Program. The Aboriginal Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program provides support for healthy early childhood development.

Among other factors, opportunities for early learning are influenced by family situations, formal learning experiences, and exposure to language and culture.

The primary goal of mainstream early learning programs (i.e., programs not specifically designed for First Nations children) is to prepare children for school. Generally, a number of child development domains are considered for school readiness including:

- physical health and well-being;
- social competence – such as interactions with peers;
- emotional maturity – such as ability to regulate emotions and self-help;
- language and communication – communicating with others and story comprehension;
- math competencies – such as numeracy, patterns, concepts of time;
- cognitive and knowledge.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education released The Kindergarten Program Revised. This identified expectations in the following areas of learning:

- personal and social development;
- language and mathematics;
- science and technology;
- health and physical activity; and
- the arts.

After the 2006 revisions to the Kindergarten program, Dr. Charles Pascal did a major consultation on early learning in Ontario. He released a report in 2009 entitled *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, Report to the Premier by the Special Advisor on Early Learning.

This report identifies a curriculum and pedagogical framework called Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) to be used by Best Start Child and Family Centres, the Early Learning program, and the Extended Day Primary program. ELECT outlines a framework for all early childhood programs. It includes a Continuum of Development that identifies the sequence of skills children are expected to acquire from birth to age 8.

These expectations are set across broad developmental domains such as:

- physical;
- social;
- emotional;
- communication/language; and
- cognitive.

This report included recommendations for full day kindergarten for children in Ontario as well as before and after school programming.

Early learning situation – off-reserve

The Aboriginal Children's Survey was done in 2006 and 2007 with Aboriginal people living off-reserve in either urban or rural areas. Here are some selected findings from the survey for Ontario children reported as under age 6 and of First Nations identity:

- Extended families continue to be involved in raising First Nations children. Forty-four percent of grandparents were involved in raising children and 28 percent had an aunt, uncle, cousin, or sibling involved (Statistics Canada, 2008).
- Almost half (47 percent) were receiving regular child care and of those in regular child care, 24 percent were in situations that promoted cultural values. Fifteen percent of these child care situations used Aboriginal languages (Statistics Canada, 2008).
- Across Canada, 46 percent of First Nations children under age 6 took part in cultural activities such as singing, drumming, dancing, ceremonies, or gatherings. Similarly, 45 percent participated in other traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, or camping (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Early learning situation – on-reserve

In 2002 and 2003, the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS) was conducted in 29 First Nations communities in Ontario and 209 other First Nations communities across Canada.

Most respondents (64.7 percent) reported that their child care arrangements were in informal settings with extended family members either at home or in another persons' home. Only 27.9 percent of children were in formal child care settings such as a nursery, pre-school, daycare, or private home daycare. Attendance in the Aboriginal Head Start program was 38.8 percent. Participation in this program decreases the likelihood that a child will need to repeat a grade: 11.6 percent of those in Head Start needed to repeat versus 18.7 percent of those who were not in Head Start (RHS, 2007).

Traditional culture in children's lives was seen as very important or somewhat important by 83.2 percent of RHS respondents. Those parents/caregivers who viewed traditional culture as important also reported participation in activities such as singing, drumming, or dancing (31 percent) at least once per week. Data from the RHS states that 18.6 percent of children aged 3 to 5 understand an Aboriginal language, while 13.3 percent could speak fluently or relatively well.

Given the positive effects of taking part in a formal learning situation, one of the recommendations from the RHS states:

- "Given that children have multiple needs that may be met by different situations, a combination of quality child care arrangements that include time spent at home with family and time spent in more formal situations could be ideal for First Nations children" (RHS, 2007).

Children may benefit from formal child care situations, particularly if the home environment lacks stimulation.

This report included recommendations for full day kindergarten for children in Ontario as well as before and after school programming.

Goals of Aboriginal early learning programs

In Ontario, there are several Aboriginal early learning programs serving First Nations children both on and off reserve including:

- Aboriginal Head Start;
- Aboriginal Community Action Program for Children (CAPC);
- Aboriginal Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program; and
- Aboriginal daycares.

The Aboriginal Head Start Initiative began in 1995. It was conceived as the federal government's commitment to an early intervention program that would serve urban and northern Aboriginal people. A second program was announced in 1997 to serve the needs of on-reserve Aboriginal families. The core components of this initiative are:

- education and school-readiness;
- health promotion;
- nutrition;
- parental/family involvement;
- social support; and
- culture and language.

Ka:nen Our Children Our Future program (also known as the Brighter Futures Secretariat) governs about 90 off-reserve Aboriginal Community Action Programs for Children (CAPC) and off-reserve Aboriginal Canada Prenatal Nutrition Programs in Ontario. The Ka:nen Our Children Our Future program also assists in delivering culturally relevant programs that improve the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of children from birth to age 6 and their families.

The goal of the off-reserve Aboriginal CAPC program is to:

- strengthen families and communities; and
- support community development and healing.

CAPC aims to accomplish this goal by assisting organizations/groups to design and deliver community-based, culturally relevant programs that aim to improve the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of off-reserve Aboriginal children from birth to age 6 and their families.

Funded projects are expected to focus on one or more of the following:

- prenatal, infant and child nutrition and development;
- parenting skills/care giving skills;
- cultural development and retention; and
- community development and healing.

The Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program provides long-term funding to community groups to develop or enhance programs for vulnerable pregnant women.

The Ka:nen website (see: <http://kanen.on.ca>) offers resources for parents such as programming ideas, a fathering initiative, articles dealing with parenting issues, fun activities to do with children, and newsletters.

Aboriginal daycares

In 1965 the government of Canada entered into a financial cost-sharing agreement with the Government of Ontario to support child care service on-reserve. In the 1965 Memorandum of Agreement between Canada and the province of Ontario, Canada promised to reimburse Ontario for most of the program costs. The province then entered into service contracts with First Nations for delivery of the on-reserve daycare programs with the Day Nurseries Act providing the regulation of these daycares.

The Ontario Day Care program is targeted to children under age 6; however, after-school spaces for children to age 12 are also eligible. A small number of First Nations (about 51) are providing child care services under the 1965 agreement.

Ontario is responsible for the program management, monitoring, and licensing of the daycare programs; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) reimburses the provincial government for about 92 percent of the cost of the on-reserve daycare programs. Subsidies for low-income parents are sometimes available, where child care would help them access jobs and educational opportunities.

The most significant difference between Aboriginal early learning programs and mainstream programs is the incorporation of Aboriginal languages and cultures into the curriculum as well as the involvement of community resource people such as Elders.

THE EARLY LEARNING LITERATURE

A number of themes emerged from the scan, consistent with key informant interviews:

- Aboriginal control of education;
- culturally relevant programming that includes history and language;
- connections to extended family and the community;
- appropriate teaching methods based on Aboriginal learning styles;
- support for positive Aboriginal self-identity;
- participation in early learning programs to offer improved school success; and
- assessment and evaluation.



Each theme is described in the following sections.

Aboriginal control of education

The education climate is highly politicized. Recently, several reports have affirmed that Aboriginal early child education is a governance issue and belongs in the hands of Aboriginal people. These reports include:

- State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency (Canadian Council For Learning, 2007);
- Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (Ministry of Education, 2007); and
- With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario, Report to the Premier by the Special Advisor on Early Learning (Pascal, 2009).

For many years, Aboriginal people have asserted the right to control the education of Aboriginal children. Indian Control of Indian Education, released by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972, stated that education should be locally controlled and should have parental involvement.

As the importance of early learning was recognized in influencing lifelong learning, reports such as Children Are a Gift to Us: Aboriginal-Specific Early Childhood Programs and Services in Canada (Greenwood, 2006) include compelling arguments for Aboriginal-specific early childhood programs. Greenwood (2006) also connects Aboriginal students' poor academic achievement with the history of cultural oppression and colonialism in Canadian education policies.

Governments have only recently recognized, through the growing body of evidence, that the current education system does not meet the needs of Aboriginal children who are impacted by colonial practices such as residential schools. Local control of Aboriginal education both administratively and through pedagogy is seen as a way of improving academic performance.

Culturally relevant programming that includes history and language

Including First Nations culture, history, and language is central to recognizing the value of First Nations knowledge and placing it on an equal footing with the Western knowledge system. Overall, most documents reviewed consistently identified the inclusion of Aboriginal content in the curriculum as important. Greenwood et al (2007) emphasize the importance of culture and language in the curriculum that is specific to the child's community and nation. Additionally, the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society's Handbook of Best Practices in Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs identifies the vital importance of language and culture for educators of Aboriginal children.

Niles, Byers, and Krueger (2007) identify best practices that include concepts such as inclusiveness, mutual respect, and the unique contributions of Indigenous communities as the foundation for culturally appropriate measures. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that all schools, whether or not they serve mainly Aboriginal students, adopt curriculums that reflect Aboriginal cultures and realities. Also, Toulouse (2008) explains that strategies based on the living teachings of the Ojibwe people are key to Aboriginal student success. Further, she states, "Educators can either make or break the school experience of the Aboriginal student. This is why it is so important that the Aboriginal students see themselves (history, originals, culture) in the classroom." Clearly, there is consensus in the literature on the need for culturally relevant educational programming.

Connections to extended family and the community

The extended family continues to play an important role in the raising of Aboriginal children as evidenced in the Aboriginal Children's Survey. It found that extended family members are still very involved in raising Aboriginal children. This connection to extended family and the wider community is an important value in First Nations communities.

King (2009) identified the important role parents, family, and community have in Aboriginal children's education. Involving Elders in the learning environment is seen as important for content and for creating linkages between generations (Ball, 2004). This is echoed in the report by Pascal (2009) who commented on the practice of involving an Aboriginal Elder in the school, "The extension of parent involvement to include the wisdom and knowledge of grandparents is a promising practice from which all children can benefit."

The Handbook on Best Practices in Early Childhood Programs offers numerous suggestions on how to involve parents, extended family, and the community in early childhood education programs.

Some suggestions for involving parents and community include:

- asking parents what they expect their children to learn during registration;
- asking parents or grandparents if they would be willing to share songs, stories, and other cultural knowledge;
- hosting regular open houses to update parents on their children's progress;
- designating a staff member as family involvement worker who can do home visits to help families with their child's transition;
- producing a monthly newsletter and calendar for parents;
- providing a suggestion box for parents asking for specific ideas on how to incorporate culture into the program; and
- inviting community leadership to all events and ceremonies and keep them informed of new services.

These are only some of the ways in which community, family and extended family can get involved with children.

Appropriate teaching methods based on First Nations learning styles

Rasmussen, Baydala, and Sherman (2004) did an extensive literature review to determine whether Aboriginal learners had particular learning preferences. They found Aboriginal people tend to prefer more visual-spatial learning as opposed to the verbal learning style most common in Canadian classrooms. For example, many teachers are accustomed to giving oral instructions in the classroom which is appropriate for children who demonstrate strong auditory sequential processing. However, for a child who is a visual-spatial learner, oral instructions take extra time to process and resulting in a gap in understanding the information and instructions.

The authors also found that Aboriginal people seem to prefer holistic, observational, and experiential learning techniques.

Toulouse (2008) identifies four learning strategies that honour Aboriginal learning styles: holistic, visual, reflective, and collaborative. In general, it was found that children who demonstrate a strong visual-spatial learning style prefer using images, pictures, colours, and maps to organize information and communicate with others. They love to draw, scribble, doodle, and work with their hands. For these children, it is recommended that the teacher demonstrate to students what and how to do something.



Support positive self-esteem among First Nations children

Another important theme in the literature was the importance of fostering positive self-esteem among Aboriginal children. During the Canadian Teacher's Federation Symposium on Aboriginal Education (2002), Dr. Marie Battiste stated, "Without Aboriginal education, Aboriginal students are in a perpetual state of identity chaos and dependency. It affects their ability to succeed" (p. 16).

The symposium report acknowledges that there is considerable diversity among Aboriginal nations; however, it does identify values and beliefs considered largely universal. Of interest is the notion, "Each child/individual is beautiful, with special gifts. It is important to find the unique beauty of the individual and treat him/her with respect" (p. 2).

The report advises educators that it is their duty to find that gift and teach the child with respect. An education system that honours this concept will support the development of positive self-esteem among all children, not just Aboriginal children.

Further to this, Toulouse (2008) identifies the importance of positive self-esteem for Aboriginal student success in school. According to Toulouse, positive self-esteem comes from a balance of the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the self. She suggests, "An educational environment that honours the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal student is critical to this process" (p. 2).

Participation in early learning programs offers improved school success

Most studies agree that education is critical to improving the lives of Aboriginal people. There is some evidence to show the Aboriginal Head Start Program offers Aboriginal children opportunities to be successful in school. A Health Canada report (2000), *Aboriginal Head Start Initiative: Children Making a Community Whole: A Review of Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities*, notes that early intervention programs like Aboriginal Head Start increase a child's chances of success in school.

Mashford-Pringle's thesis (2008) on *The Impacts of Health and Education for Children and Families Enrolled in Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities in Ontario* found that children who took part in Aboriginal Head Start Programs had improved school-readiness, early learning skills, and improved health routines. In addition, parents and caregivers showed improvement in education attainment, employment, and social supports, and there was also an increase in cultural pride.

Assessment of child development and program evaluation

Both First Nations people and government have considerable interest in measuring the effectiveness of First Nations programs. By most traditional measurement standards, Aboriginal children fall well behind their mainstream Canadian counterparts. For example, in the Oral Language Project, assessment data showed Aboriginal students to be about 10 months behind in their receptive language in comparison to non-Aboriginal students at the ages of 5 and 6. The Oral Language Project came out of the Literacy Numeracy Secretariat that involved eight school boards in North Western Ontario and researched how oral language skills impact on literacy skills.

A new wave of thinking in Aboriginal education proposes that how Aboriginal learning is measured will directly impact student success. For example, *State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success* (2009) explores alternative ways to measure Aboriginal learning in Canada. Also, in *Aboriginal Learning: A Review of Current Metrics of Success*, Tunison (2007) notes that much of Aboriginal learning is not easily measurable with standard tools, but acknowledges there is value in identifying valid and meaningful success indicators.

In keeping with the Ministry of Education's general accountability commitments, the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework identifies accountability as one of its four main principles of implementation. Accountability can be gauged through an effective program evaluation.

KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

Given the varied experience of our experts within the field of Aboriginal early learning, the key informant interviews were a rich source of information. Informants were asked to:

- define early learning;
- identify how to incorporate culture into early learning activities; and
- identify culturally relevant strategies to support early learning – they identified nine such strategies, which are discussed next.

The informants suggested that culture should form the basis of early learning activities so that it is integrated and normalized.

Definition of early learning

When asked to define early learning, key informants described a developmental process that begins at conception and is directly connected to how a mother conducts herself. As one respondent said:

"Early learning starts at the prenatal stage. Once a person is conceived, a new person comes to this earth and they learn from the womb. That's one of the things we stress in our prenatal class, is whatever the mother is going through is also impacting the fetus."

The mother and her family are the first teachers of that new spirit. Respondents noted the importance of following cultural teachings during pregnancy:

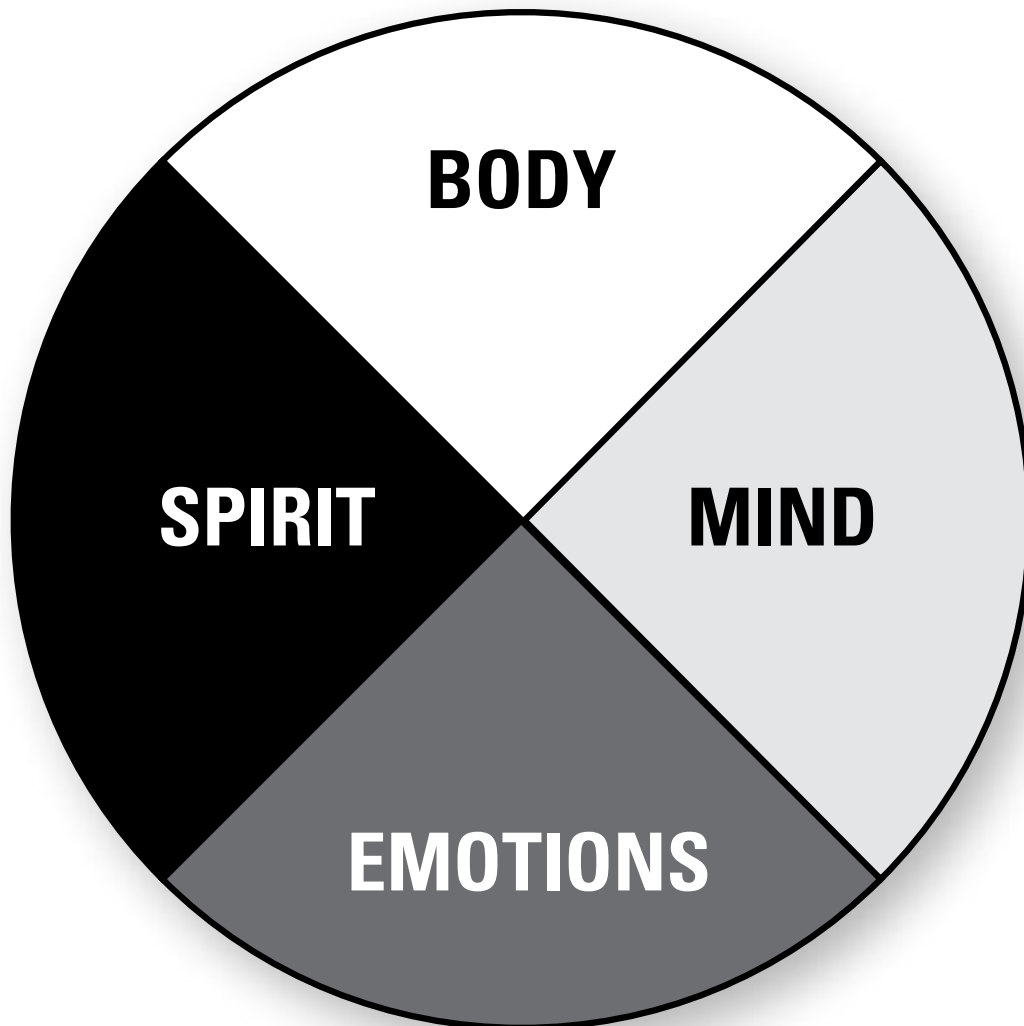
"When they're in utero – as soon as you become pregnant you're a teacher. You're already teaching your child certain things when they're in utero. When you look at the customs that we have about when you're pregnant – they're trying to make it clear through those teachings that you're a teacher. Your child is learning something when it's still in utero."

During their early years children begin to develop relationships with their family and community, as well as the natural world. They can also begin to understand their roles and responsibilities as a member of the community.

"The other critical issue is parenting and the importance of developing relationships with your child; the healthier your relationship with your child, the more secure they feel about developing relationships outside of their immediate family."

"For me and my children, it was ensuring that they understood from an early age their roles and responsibilities within the community and the natural environment. We teach them about respecting stuff when they're out in the woods. At 3, their only responsibility at community events is to be quiet and listen and not run around. That's part of their role, is to pay attention and listen. They're getting a sense of how to behave and not being disruptive. For me that's specific to Aboriginal culture – that sense of community and spirituality is part of our early learning. They're exposing their child to community so they get a sense of where they belong in a community, they have that sense of belonging to a community."

“Whether you’re Aboriginal or of another culture, you learn that during that early learning phase. You learn how to be a person; you learn the values and beliefs of your family and your community. If you’re not attached to a community and your parents feel like they’re not attached to a community, that’s going to have an effect on your learning. If you’re not socially attached at a younger age you’re not going to be attached at an older age. If you’re not socially attached, that’s when you start having problems in our communities.”



Key informants suggest that early learning is holistic and includes the four directions of the medicine wheel, namely the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. One respondent gave this definition:

“Early learning for Aboriginal children involves the holistic development and wellness of these young spirits. It includes the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the self. Early learning is a balance of these areas in the lives of Aboriginal children.”

The spiritual aspect of early learning was deemed important as illustrated by the following two comments:

“Early learning is about the building of your soul as a person. Development of who you’re going to be provides the foundation.”

“When you’re born a baby, you didn’t come as a physical person – it’s the spirit of love of two people that brought you into the world. The Great Spirit helped them to give you that spirit.”

Other suggested components of early learning include culture, awareness of self, cognitive skills, language development, social skills, awareness of physical self, development of motor skills, empathy, understanding, individuality, and self-esteem.

One respondent emphasized the importance of physical activity on early learning.

“There’s a lot of kids who don’t get up and move at all so they don’t have that sense of their body and we’re looking at childhood obesity in Aboriginal communities – it’s skyrocketing at the moment.”

Another respondent noted that nutrition has a significant influence on early learning.

“The other factor that impacts early learning is health and nutrition – we know that if children don’t eat, or aren’t properly fed, it shows in their behaviour and what they can learn. So they can focus if they’re not hungry.”

Thus, early learning begins at conception and includes mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects, as well as relationships with family, community, and the environment.

Culture-based early learning

All respondents recognized the importance of First Nations culture in early learning and the many ways of transmitting culture during early learning experiences. In fact, culture was deemed critical to early learning.

“It’s not an early learning opportunity, it’s not a teachable moment, it’s not an early learning experience – if culture is not included in it.”

Awareness of First Nations culture helps develop a strong foundation for identity as a First Nations person. The following responses illustrate:

“Way of being Indigenous is critical. The foundation needs to be established in the early years.”

“Early learning needs to include a positive sense of identity and connection with your culture, values and beliefs.”

“The priority is for kids to know who they are as an Aboriginal person, and they are rooted in their identity as an Aboriginal person, and they become proud of who they are. It matters that they’re good people and they’re proud of who they are. If they are happy and self-confident and have a strong sense of identity, it makes everything else in their life easier, including academics.”

The foundation for Aboriginal identity begins at conception, and cultural teachings can begin during pregnancy:

“It starts from the prenatal – making them aware that the spirit who has come to them, who chose them as parents, is special and needs to be honoured. While that spirit is in the womb, the first three months are really important. That’s when the brain is starting to develop, so whatever information you’re feeding it or whatever experiences you’re having, is going to impact the fetus. We teach them different things that they can do when they’re pregnant or when the baby is just born, some of the ceremonies they can participate in.”

Some of these early ceremonies can include a naming ceremony where a child is given a spirit name and welcomed into their clan, community and nation. Because of the diverse cultural and spiritual beliefs among families and communities, some parents may not be aware of traditional teachings specific to pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and early years. The following response illustrates this:

“But that depends on the individual. Not everybody believes in “cultural”. There is a whole spectrum of cultural beliefs ranging from traditional and non-traditional and everything in between. Respect where the individual is. If they’re interested then we share it, and if they’re not interested then we don’t go there.”

On the other hand, some people may be raised with cultural beliefs but this wasn’t perceived as a separate activity i.e., “Now we’re doing cultural activities.” It was just the way they were raised. Thus it’s important to explore what families are familiar with, and what they want to learn about.

Similarly, service providers working with Aboriginal children need to have an awareness, respect and understanding of Aboriginal cultures—in other words, have cultural competency. Ball (2004) suggests that those working with young children and families need to have strong cultural identity in order to help children understand their heritage, cultural traditions, and ceremonies.

Several respondents said the foundation and philosophies of early learning programs should be culture-based.

“In Aboriginal early learning, cultural teaching should not be incorporated into early learning activities... rather early learning should be developed from core cultural beliefs and teachings. This would fundamentally change the structure and delivery of early learning programs for Aboriginal peoples and would likely result in a more culturally accurate program.”

“So you have to be able to understand the philosophy of the early childhood program – if it’s going to be a High/Scope or an emergent curriculum process, or Waldorf or Montessori, or whatever it’s going to be. If you understand that and you begin to understand the culture, you understand where it fits.”

“Co-generational with both the Indigenous and Western model. Theories and teachings come from Elders and families.”

“We need to start with our stuff first by going back to our own traditions and teachings, and frame it within a contemporary context. I don’t believe in taking a mainstream system and sticking feathers in it, so to speak.”

Respondents recommended ways of infusing early learning with culture. These included teaching First Nations languages, taking part in ceremonies like smudging, participating in cultural gatherings such as drumming socials, powwows, and community events, storytelling, playing music, creating arts and crafts, and playing games. Culture should be a normal part of the learning experience so that children feel comfortable drumming or smudging. As one respondent commented about smudging:

“I see when I go into a site, I know if children are used to smudging and things like that. And a lot of times they are taught that role by the Elders or workers in the project from the beginning, so that they’re helpers. So they will go and get the smudge bowl, so they know the routine. We gather in a circle and we do a smudge and thank the Creator. I think that’s helpful for the child to be able to do those things and learn those things and so they are already learning what the medicine wheel is about.”

Elders and other First Nations cultural teachers were seen as the best resource for transmitting knowledge. It was noted these individuals may need preparation on how to teach young children using different learning methods.

One respondent summarized the culture-based approach this way:

“Ensuring that the teachings (with permission) are in the learning resources and materials. Ensuring that the resources are credited to a Nation and that the language is used to reinforce the culture. Also by drawing upon Aboriginal cultural teachers and locations for support of these teachings.”

In summary, to foster positive First Nations identity among children, culture must form the foundation of early learning experiences. Culture can be taught through language, ceremonies, gatherings, stories, music, games, arts and crafts, as well as land-based experiences. It is important for service providers to have a good understanding of their own cultural beliefs and to respect the diversity of cultural beliefs of the children and families they’re working with. Elders and other resource people are considered the most important way to transmit cultural knowledge to children and families.

Strategies to guide work with First Nations parents

This section presents in detail 10 strategies for working with First Nations parents. Gleaned from key informant interviews, these strategies are:

- understanding First Nations history, culture, and social contexts;
- creating a welcoming environment;
- building a relationship with parents and families;
- involving parents in decision-making;
- working from strengths;
- encouraging learning at home;
- linking to community;
- respecting the diversity of cultures;
- supporting children with special needs; and
- learning from and about the land.

1. Understanding First Nations history, culture, and social contexts

When working with First Nations families, it is important to understand First Nations history, culture, and current social contexts, and how these factors impact parenting choices. Many people in Canadian society are not aware of the rich and diverse history of First Nations peoples. As one respondent noted:

“Educating teachers is a huge component of just understanding the history of First Nations people and the system of school. We have residential effects, we have lots of effects in our community right now. People don’t know the history, not because they’re neglectful but just because they don’t know.”

Cultural beliefs have a significant influence on how parents raise their children. For example, some First Nations parents allow their children to learn through experiences mainstream society might consider unsafe.

“Aboriginal people are trying to parent within a social context that other people may not understand. Aboriginal people tend to let their children experiment (i.e., jump off porches) and this is held up against other cultural values.”

The current social context is influenced by determinants of health. These include housing, family living arrangements, residential school history, health, income, employment, demographics, geography, and racism. According to a recent Canadian Council on Learning (2009) report, these determinants have a significant impact on Aboriginal learning opportunities. As two respondents said:

“The issues of poverty, discrimination, being invisible in society has had detrimental effects on the way we parent, so it’s something you have to be cognizant of.”

"They may be second or third generation survivors of residential schools. They may not even be aware of that and the impact it's having on them. We have to be sensitive to colonization and assimilation, that they may [be] demonstrating and not even aware of it or why."

Service providers must understand the social context of the community they are working with as this influences a family's ability to take advantage of learning opportunities.

Suggestions:

- Learn about the role First Nations people have played in Canadian history and talk to community leaders about your local First Nations history.
- Ask the family you're working with about their family history, for example, where they are from and their relatives.
- Learn about First Nations contributions and resiliency.

2. Creating a welcoming environment

When children and parents enter your work environment, they should feel welcomed and accepted. One strategy is to display posters with First Nations images and cultural items such as smudge bowls. One respondent noted:

"Providing the atmosphere is the first step in creating a safe and comfortable atmosphere for early learning..."

For various reasons, many First Nations parents take their infants and children with them wherever they go. Therefore, ensuring your office or building is child-friendly is important. As one respondent said:

"Also important to note is that my programs always include children/babies. I always encourage moms to put their babies in slings or whatever, so they can take part in our cooking or dancing/exercise classes."

Since sharing food is an important part of First Nations culture, another consideration is providing visitors with healthy food.

"They trust me when I cook for them and try to give them some healthy foods that can suit their diets."

In a welcoming environment, parents will feel more comfortable seeking assistance if their children are welcomed and fed too, they're more likely to return.

It is also important to provide a comfortable and supportive environment for mothers to breastfeed.

Suggestions:

- Create a First Nations presence in your building and office using cultural images and objects.
- Ensure that your reception area and office is child-friendly, with toys and books to keep children occupied.
- In First Nations culture, it's customary to offer food and drinks to guests. Have healthy snacks available or have meals integrated into your programs.
- Create a comfortable area for mothers to breastfeed in communal as well as private spaces.

3. Building a relationship with parents and families

Several respondents said building relationships was the most important strategy in working with parents, and being open and honest with them was seen as very important:

"I think you have to talk about your family and your own experiences and what's happened to you. That way you build up that relationship with that individual. All of our engagement is all about a relationship. Can I talk to you and tell you things and share my feelings? Or do you want it in the Western way? Which is, 'Here's the situation and bam, bam, bam.' The most effective thing you can do is create a relationship with the parents and the kids."

By being open and honest, parents and children may begin to trust you. If you're unable to establish a relationship with the parents, consider working with the extended family.

"The most effective practice is developing relationships. If you don't have a relationship with that particular parent but you have a strong relationship with their extended family or support system, it's more likely that they'll attend programming or whatever type of services you may have."

One respondent offered this advice on building relationships:

"Making time for the families and meeting on their ground. Being non-judgmental and actively listening to the family. Working at their pace and not at your perceived or desired pace for the family/child. Meeting parents and caregivers at their personal level."

Rather than being critical, treat parents with kindness and respect. One respondent said:

"But you don't want to be critical of mothers. Get them to bring their child in and watch their actions and say, 'Now see? This is what the baby is learning.' And she would say, 'Oh, I'm learning, too. I forgot all about that.' Do it in a nice way. You're asking to be a part of that."

Building a relationship with parents and family will take time. However, many respondents maintained this is the most important strategy in supporting early learning.

Suggestions:

- When building relationships, be willing to share your experiences with parents.
- Consider the extended family in your efforts to support early learning.
- Be patient, as it may take time for a parent to trust you.
- Be respectful and kind to parents. It takes courage for them to seek advice or assistance.
- Maintain regular positive contact with parents. Keep them informed of events and activities via newsletters and phone calls.

4. Involving parents in decision-making

Parental involvement in decision-making is an effective strategy. Parents are empowered when they can make choices about what is best for their children.

"From the get go, having one of the tenets of your philosophy is that the parents are involved. And I don't mean parents being involved just to say 'Yes' or 'No' but defining a role for them to play. All parents in the world want better for their children than they had themselves. If you take it from that perspective, you have to find out what it is that the family wants."

Decision-making can be at the family level, but can also include vehicles such as parent advisory committees. As one respondent said, one person can have a great influence:

"... once you get one person, either a First Nations or Métis parent on board, then they start bringing in more people. So a lot of it is word of mouth and it always goes back to respecting people and respecting the gifts they bring to the school. You might have a doctor or a lawyer sitting there (who might be native or Métis) but if you have a grandmother who's traditional to sit on your parent council, could she ever share a lot of teachings not only with your staff and other parents. Respecting everyone's gifts and what they bring to the table."

Present parents with options and let them make final decisions about their children.

“Many of our parents are young, single moms who are very disempowered. So we really take a very gentle approach. So the family is the expert on their child but we can guide you on your journey. You know some stuff, we know some stuff and we’re going to share this together and see if we can get to your goal. It’s very empowering.”

“Parents have a choice in how they parent their children. They can choose to be the brick wall – they can be authoritative where children are seen and not heard. Or they can choose to be the jellyfish and be very permissive where anything goes. Or they can be a more responsive, have a backbone and be flexible. You choose. Maybe you weren’t parented great but you get to choose how you bring your child up. It’s alright to ask for help. It’s going to make for a better world for your child.”

Decision-making should include parents in a meaningful, collaborative way, either on a family basis or at a program level.

Suggestions:

- Allow parents to identify their own needs and priorities and help them figure out ways to address the challenges they face.
- Present options to parents and let them take time to decide what is best for their child.
- Encourage parents to be involved in making decisions about programming.
- Invite parents to participate in activities such as field trips and fundraising.
- Keep parents informed by talking to them or through a newsletter. Don’t assume that all First Nations parents use email or the Internet.

5. Working from strengths

A strength-based approach means considering and building upon the skills, knowledge, and resources that parents and families already have.

“So rather than using an oppression model, we look at what their strengths are. So a family living in poverty with multiple caregivers and seems to be struggling – what that might translate to is that parent is able to engage with a multitude of support partners, whether that’s family, neighbours or community, to ensure that their child’s and their own needs get met. They’re living in poverty, however they’re accessing services so they have a lot of courage and determination. If they’re walking through your door and trying to engage with you and enroll their child in a program, it’s an indicator that trust is established to a certain extent and you have something to build upon. If their child is physically with them, there are significant qualities of attachment there. And perhaps, if the parenting skills aren’t there, that’s something to be developed.”

Because every child and family is unique, programming should be customized:

“We need to focus our teaching, our helping of families on a strengths-base. They all have something that’s good and so you start there. Recognize all the strengths that they have and then maybe they could focus on this because they don’t have... that’s what they’re lacking. Maybe they want cultural stuff for their children. How do we help them get access to that cultural part? It’s customizing or individualizing the help that you’re going to give parents. But start from their strengths. Don’t look at what they don’t have.”

“You just can’t walk in with a cookie-cutter approach and say, ‘This is what we’re going to do.’ The teachings that I’ve been told, how do you know what I need unless you ask me? You can’t suppose it. You’re looking at a difference of a dominant culture that says, ‘Oh, you need this.’ It’s a really dangerous precedent to set up. Although we have good intentions, although we’re well educated and we think we know everything, I think we always have to remember we’re going to learn something new every day.”

To build confidence, acknowledge a family’s strengths and the positive things they’re doing, rather than emphasizing weaknesses. Then you can assist them in areas they want to work on.

Suggestions:

- Find out whether they have support from extended family or friends.
- Explore what resources are available to them in their community.
- Find out whether they're connected to cultural activities or if they want to be.
- Facilitate the development of a customized plan for the child and family.

6. Encouraging learning at home

Early learning begins in the home environment as parents talk, read, and play with their children. As the following comments illustrate that communication skills such as listening and speaking begin when children are babies:

"As parents we really impact our child's literacy. [Emphasize] the importance of talking to your baby. A lot of times young moms don't talk to their babies. They take care of them but they're not interacting with their child. There's a lot of young moms who are home alone with their child all day, everyday."

"You're not just telling them how a baby learns, you have to prepare the mother to teach them. When the baby starts making sounds, well that's the time to teach them words... Learning should begin at home for at least two years. In that length of time the child should be able to listen to a story. The mother doesn't need to read a book – she can talk to that child and that child learns to talk."

Because the school environment focuses on literacy, it's important for children to enjoy reading. One informant discussed the importance of starting early:

"In Nova Scotia they have a program called Read to Me that gives new moms and dads in the hospital a bag of baby books and it helps parents to understand that you need to read to your baby from day one... My son is a voracious reader and was an early speaker with a big vocabulary, and I'm sure that a part of this came from being read to from his day of birth."

Playing with children is another important early learning opportunity. Children can have fun while learning many skills and build a relationship with their parents.

"Another effective practice is learning through play and engaging them through play. For the parents, teaching them how to play with their child. They know to read and the importance of screening television programs and limiting the amount of television, but they don't know how to engage in age-appropriate play."

Suggestions:

- Encourage parents to speak to their babies even if they feel awkward at first.
- Encourage families to read with their children every day. If a family's budget doesn't allow for buying books, promote library visits.
- Remind parents to play with their children no matter how busy they are.
- Suggest age-appropriate games for parents to play with their children.
- Support parents' efforts to provide an enriched learning environment for their child in family cultural practices such as hunting, fishing, or ceremonies.

7. Linking to the community

Whether working in an urban situation or a First Nations community, children, and families will only have a sense of belonging and of their First Nations identity if they are connected to their community.

“...I think the other piece is a positive sense of identity and the idea of connection with your community. Need a connection to where you live. It’s better to have an Aboriginal community for parents to be a part of because their children will have a chance to meet other Aboriginal children and see what it’s like to be in a setting with other Aboriginal people.”

“Children need to know their place in the world. It has to include community and teachings. Children need to believe in themselves and build self-esteem.”

Establishing connections within a First Nations community may be easier than in an urban setting. A First Nations community has well-defined geographical boundaries and extended family is usually present. However, it’s still important to ensure children and their parents can access and take part in community activities.

In urban settings, developing a sense of community may be more challenging because Aboriginal people are more dispersed within a multicultural environment.

“The urban setting is multicultural but children need to be grounded in who they are.”

In both the urban and reserve setting it is important to encourage parents to become involved in the daycare or school.

“The more that parents are involved in the daycare or school, the more it positively impacts their child. If the child sees the parent developing a relationship with the daycare or school, they see the school as a safe place. A lot of our parents and grandparents have had negative experiences at schools — assimilation, residential schools. Our history dictates that school was not a good place, and we need to show parents and their children that it’s a positive place. And I think that’s where the cultural part comes in.”

Suggestions:

- Keep families informed of upcoming events through flyers, posters, newsletters, email, and phone calls.
- Stress the importance of parental involvement in daycare and school activities.
- Connect Aboriginal families with community resources such as Elders, cultural teachers, and language speakers.
- Connect Aboriginal families with other Aboriginal families who share similar values, beliefs, spirituality, and culture.
- Refer Aboriginal families to agencies that can assist them.

8. Respecting diverse cultures

Within Ontario there are three main cultural groups:

- Haudenosaunee (Iroquois);
- Mushkegowuk (Cree); and
- Anishinaabek (Ojibwe).

There is typically one main cultural group in each First Nation community, which impacts approaches to accommodating diverse cultural groups. Children need to know there are other Aboriginal cultures and respect other non-Aboriginal nations.

Large urban settings such as Ottawa and Toronto feature more diverse cultural groups including Métis, Inuit, and First Nations cultures from across North America. Further mixing of cultural groups also appears (i.e., an individual is half Cree, half Ojibwe). One respondent spoke of the need to respect diverse cultures:

"We should be inclusive regardless of where they're from – whether they're status or non-status, whether they live on- or off-reserve. We are creating more boundaries for people to access services. We have to be more inclusive whether I'm from [a First Nation] and willing to share knowledge with each other regardless of race or colour. If we live by the Seven Grandfathers, then it wouldn't be an issue of cultural groups, it would just be 'embrace and accommodate' as much as we can."

This sentiment was echoed by several respondents. One commented:

"Although each nation is unique, there are similarities. We need to respect Indigenous world view, philosophy, and spirituality. There's a common thread throughout."

However, another respondent was concerned that a Pan-Indian approach dilutes distinct cultures and creates a new sub-culture.

"I think we have to remember our distinct cultures, our practices, and our customs within our own nation. I don't agree that we should be pulling this and pulling that and, in my mind, almost making a new sub-culture. All those things have to remain intact within their own individual nation... for an organization, that's how you base your Aboriginal content. It's based on whose territory you are in. That's understanding cultural protocol, and you base your work from there, whether it's the organization or your program. We start our socials or gatherings with the Thanksgiving Address because we're in Haudenosaunee territory. We respect and recognize others. We bring in resource people or connect them with and making it available to them. It's important not to have a grab and mishmash of cultures. We need to recognize whose culture it is. We might have a special session to talk about Ojibwe customs. It's about customizing and making sure we have a resource database and connecting specific nations to specific nations."

Another respondent offered this perspective on the Pan-Indian approach:

"I think the first step is to acknowledge what we can't do and be honest about it. Some call it 'Pan-Am', some call it 'Can-Am approach' – where we support you coming from an individual nation and including an urban background where you don't know anything about your nation. We will go out of our way to link with supports and resources from their own specific culture if that's what they're seeking... If there's not enough Cree people around here, then get in touch with the closest Cree people we know. And we will offer you supports like meeting space and give you skills on how you go about forming a circle of support for the specific cultural community. You don't presume to meet everyone's needs all the time. It's just not realistic. But showing that you care, that their needs are met, is significant. And being genuine about it."

Accommodating diverse cultural groups can be challenging. To help each group maintain its own beliefs, customs and practices, try the following.

Suggestions:

- Define effective approaches for each group and find commonalities. Emphasize the uniqueness of each culture and at the same time highlight how strategies and programs are inclusive of all Nations.
- Take a common theme and ask how a Nation would take this idea and make it their own.
- Ask the parents to share what they know about their culture.
- Offer specific programming for each cultural group but also have all-nation gatherings.
- Link parents/caregivers with resources from their own specific culture.

9. Supporting children with special needs

When respondents were asked how to accommodate children with special needs (such as learning disabilities or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), two recurring themes emerged from the interviews: every parent wants what is best for their child, and each child is unique:

“All our children are special and they all have different needs. We are under-resourced for some of the skills and expertise to be able to meet the needs of diagnosed and undiagnosed challenges. We have a gap in our capacity in lots of areas, but part of that is we need to make it culturally inclusive. We all need to take responsibility for that child. I have yet to see the ‘perfect’ child and I don’t know how one is more unique or special than the other.”

“What I’ve been taught is that our kids come to us with at least four gifts and we’re to watch for those gifts, and it’s our job as parents and aunties to help foster those gifts. We’re all gifted – we all have strengths and we all have limitations, or things that we find difficult... I try to make sure that those kids with exceptionalities know what their gifts are and know what they have special ways in which to contribute to their community or family.”

Respondents unanimously recommended that children with special needs should be included in mainstream early learning environments.



“Statistically, more services are required within the Aboriginal community, so it should be built into the programming rather than going out and having to seek support... Taking children out of the safety of their community and saying, ‘You have to go to this school because you need this program’ is really telling that child ‘You’re not good enough to be here.’ So we’re setting that child up to not feel good about himself.”

When we include children with special needs, other children also learn to respect differences and learn from one another.

“We need resources so that they have special supports within the large group, so they’re not segregated, because we are losing the opportunity for young children to accept differences. As children, ‘How do I help someone who is not as capable as me?’ That’s part of their gift and their role in society is to teach others who are more fortunate to be accepting of differences, to be able to accommodate differences. And we’re losing that by segregating them.”

Besides resources, it is also critical to provide early intervention for children with special needs. This requires assessment and diagnosis, however one respondent cautioned about labeling children, and the risk of misdiagnosis:

“We had a child in our early intervention program who was misdiagnosed as autistic. What was decided was an abrupt removal from the home because of severe alcoholism and spiritual, emotional, and physical abuse. What they found after the child was removed from the home, that it was trauma that caused the autistic behaviour, tendencies and characteristics.”

Getting parents onboard is critical because they know their child better than anyone else:

“They know an awful lot about that child that you don’t know because you only see that child in a group setting, whereas that family sees that child in multiple settings.”

However, if a parent does not recognize their child’s challenges, a multi-pronged approach may be necessary. One respondent said:

“Early intervention is important – making sure a referral is made for those parents and follow-up, making sure they went to see them. Often parents are in denial... If a number of service providers send the same message then eventually it hits home: ‘It’s not just me picking on you.’ But the more gentle you are – we do a screening and say ‘This is what a child is normally doing at this age and maybe your child is not meeting those yet or is in the range.’ We’ll bring information from external resources that they recognize as professionals who reiterate the issue. If they go see the health nurse will notice it, work closely with the nurse or CHR. And between the four of us we get the information to the parent. We let them know it doesn’t mean you’re a bad parent, sometimes things happen. But the earlier we can intervene, the more likely we can make accommodations to meet their needs. Because everyone wants the best for their child.”

However, parents’ denial can also be viewed as reasonable caution, given that historically, interventions have included residential schools and the Sixties Scoop when many Aboriginal children were taken from their parents. One respondent commented:

“Let’s think about families as being cautious rather than resistant because service providers are scary. It’s not too long ago that service providers came in to take children away.”

In summary, supporting children with special needs in mainstream environments helps them feel accepted and helps other children learn to accept differences. It is critical to offer early intervention and resources to support children. We must help parents to recognize their children’s challenges in a kind and gentle way.

Suggestions:

- Early intervention is very important. It is critical to meet with parents to discuss assessments and resources available to their child.
- Modify how a program is run to accommodate different learning styles and ways that children process information. This can include changing the room setup, working one-on-one, making transitions shorter, and smaller groups.
- High/Scope programming works well for children with special needs. Rather than focusing on a child's deficits, the focus is on broad cognitive, social, and physical abilities, which are important for all children.

10. Learning from and about the land

The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success, by the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), identifies learning from and about the land as one source and domain of Aboriginal knowledge. Several respondents also identified interactions with the natural environment as an effective early learning strategy:

"Getting them outside and doing real things that are meaningful and speaks to who they are as an Aboriginal person. I do a lot of outdoor environmental stuff because who we are as Indigenous people is found in the land. Our worldview is framed by the natural world. When kids are learning something fun or they're trying to walk in snowshoes or they're sitting by the fire making cedar tea, those kinds of things are different from what they get at other places."

"It's not just about the physical stuff like learning to walk and the Three R's. They have to focus on the other two parts of the wheel, that sense of community, that sense of belonging both to people but also with the natural environment and teaching about those relationships. ... Getting our children to refer to the moon as our grandmother. That's starting to teach them about a relationship to the natural environment."

Learning traditional skills through activities such as camping, ceremonies, retreats, picking berries and sweet grass, were seen as ways of connecting to the land and supporting early learning experiences.

Suggestions:

- Encourage parents to take their children outside to experience the natural environment.
- In urban settings, encourage families to visit parks and gardens. Children might take an interest in something as simple as a pinecone.
- If financially possible, take a field trip to a berry farm or maple sugar bush outside of the city.
- Make sure to take children out every day, even if it's cold or rainy. Encourage parents to provide their children with warm clothing to make outdoor play more suitable.

FURTHER RESEARCH

During interviews, respondents identified areas for further development and exploration:

- Do culturally appropriate evaluation research on early learning programs such as Head Start to determine their effectiveness and long-term impact. Ask Aboriginal people to determine what success looks like and identify appropriate indicators to assess outcomes.
- Develop culturally relevant assessment tools.
- Form a think tank to develop an overall provincial strategy on Aboriginal early learning needs. Include a broad spectrum of stakeholders (both on- and off-reserve).
- Form an Aboriginal Early Learning Society to share resources, best practices, and create links among those who work in Aboriginal early learning.
- Develop an Ontario Aboriginal early learning website to share information and promote online discussion.
- Explore the role of fathers in Aboriginal children's success and achievements.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Although there are numerous programs available to Canadian parents and their children, not all have been reviewed. Rather a sample of some of the most common ones are presented for consideration.

School's Cool Program

A school-readiness program for 3- to 5-year-olds providing 122 activities in five areas:

- Social – interactions with peers
- Psychological – regulating emotions and self-recognition (as an individual)
- Language – language and communication abilities such as story comprehension and communicating with others
- Self-help
- Math competencies – numeracy, patterns, concepts of time

High/Scope Perry Pre-school Program

A pre-school approach centered around several main curriculum content areas:

- approaches to learning
- language
- literacy and communication
- social and emotional development
- physical development, health, and well-being
- arts and sciences

Within these areas, 58 key developmental indicators or observable early childhood milestones, guide teachers as they plan learning experiences. Originally designed for low-income, children who are considered to be at risk, the High/Scope approach is now used in various settings.

Nipissing District Developmental Screen

A developmental screening tool available to health care or child care professionals working with infants and children to age 6. The screens are designed to identify problem areas in a child's development in the following areas: vision, hearing, speech, language, communication, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social/emotional, and self-help. For more information go to <http://ndds.ca/ontario/home.html>

Early Development Index

The Early Development Index (EDI) is a population-based tool used to measure school readiness in five domains of child development:

- physical and well-being
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive
- communication and knowledge

Ontario Early Years Centres

Ontario Early Years Centres are places where parents and caregivers can:

- take part with their children in a range of programs and activities;
- get answers to questions; get information about programs and services that are available for young children and their families; and
- talk to early years professionals, as well as other parents and caregivers in the community.

For more information on Ontario Early Years Centres go to www.ontario.ca/children

Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network (FII-ON)

FII-ON's roots go back to 1997 when Health Canada commissioned a literature review aimed at developing an action plan to promote Father Involvement in Ontario. It had become clear at that time that fatherlessness presented a challenge in relation to healthy child development and resiliency.

The website has useful tips, information, resources, and downloadable booklets for dads, for moms, for organizations, for communities, and for anyone interested in learning more about father involvement. Go to <http://www.cfii.ca/>.

Community Access Program for Children (CAPC) and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP)

CAPC provides long-term funding to community coalitions to deliver programs that address the health and development of children (0-6 years) who are living in conditions of risk. It recognizes that communities have the ability to identify and respond to the needs of children and places a strong emphasis on partnerships and community capacity building. One of the service targets for CAPC is First Nations children living off-reserve. Ka:nen Our Children Our Future administers the Ontario off-reserve Aboriginal CAPC projects as well as the off-reserve Aboriginal CPNP services. For more information on Ka:nen go to www.kanen.on.ca.

Aboriginal Healthy Babies Healthy Children

The Aboriginal Healthy Babies Healthy Children program is a provincial program funded through the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy. It provides culturally appropriate early intervention services for families with children from birth to age 6.



The goal of the program is to improve the long term prospects of children. For more information go to www.ahwsontario.ca/programs/ahbhc/ahbhc_top.html.

Aboriginal Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Child Nutrition Program

The Aboriginal Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Child Nutrition Program is a program offered by Aboriginal organizations across the province for families with children and youth who may have been affected by alcohol before birth. For a list of organizations offering these two programs go to <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/aboriginal/fasd.aspx>.

Teacher and Curriculum Development

“Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World: Considerations for Teacher Development and Curriculum Development” by Dr. Lorna Williams, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning.

Lorna Williams is a member of the Lil’wat First Nation of Mount Currie, BC. She is the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning, an Assistant Professor in Aboriginal Education and Linguistics, and Program Director of Aboriginal Education at the University of Victoria. This video seminar explores the challenges and opportunities of making space, finding place and locating Indigenous knowledge in teacher preparation programs, teacher development, curriculum, and program development. For the video link go to <http://ierg.net/seminar-items/indigenous-education-seminar/>.

Triple P – Positive Parenting Program

Triple P is a parenting and family support strategy that aims to prevent severe behavioural, emotional, and developmental problems in children by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents. Triple P is founded on over 30 years of clinical and empirical research. For more information go to <http://www27.triplep.net/?pid=59>.

From Lullabies to Literacy: Building Foundations for Learning

The Macaulay Child Development Centre developed a family literacy curriculum called From Lullabies to Literacy: Building Foundations for Learning. This curriculum for adults and children promotes the development of literacy readiness skills in children 0 to 5 years. The curriculum can be used with individuals or groups. It may be delivered as a multi-week program or individually as single session workshops. For more information go to http://www.macaulaycentre.org/famlit_train.html.

You Make the Difference

You Make The Difference was designed to support parents of children, birth to 5 years, who would like to learn more about fostering and enriching their child’s early language, social, and literacy development during positive everyday interactions. It can also provide support to vulnerable families whose children’s learning may be at risk due to environmental and/or societal challenges. For parents who have limited communication skills or who may feel isolated and have limited social networks, You Make the Difference helps parents connect with other families and resources in their community. For more information go to <http://www.hanen.org/>.

Roots of Empathy

Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom program; its mission is to build caring, peaceful, and civil societies – child by child – through the development of empathy in children. At the heart of the program are classroom visits by an infant and parent. Through guided observations of this loving relationship, children learn to identify and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and those of others (empathy). Independent evaluations consistently show children who receive Roots of Empathy experience dramatic and lasting effects in terms of increased pro-social behaviour (sharing, helping and including) and decreased aggression. Roots of Empathy also has a sibling program, www.seedsofempathy.org. Seeds of Empathy is designed for early childhood settings. For more information go to <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/>.

Oral Language Project - Northern Ontario Education Leaders

This project involves all eight school boards in North Western Ontario and is looking at how oral language skills impact on literacy skills. Aboriginal students appear to be 10 months behind in their receptive language in comparison to non-Aboriginal students. Teachers are being introduced to two very powerful strategies that they can use in their classrooms to help develop the expressive language of their students. For more information on this project go to <http://www.noelonline.ca/index.php?pid=39>.

Ciimaan Language Learning Community

Ciimaan (chee-maun) in Ojibwe means canoe, and the Ciimaan Anishinaabemowin learning community is a vehicle for allowing participants to become skilled bi-cultural navigators in an urban environment. The Ciimaan Language Learning Community is a partnership between the Center for Aboriginal Initiatives and Miziwe Bik Aboriginal Employment and Training Agency. Ciimaan works with local language Elder and University of Toronto professor Alex McKay, Jackman Humanities Fellow Maya Chacaby, as well as fluent speakers from many communities including Nawash First Nation and Kichinamaykosib Ininuwuk. The Ciimaan Language Learning Community is rooted in the belief that First Nation's people cannot relearn their languages in isolation. For more information go to <http://www.ciimaan.org/home.html>.

Learning Early by Dorothy Einon

With Learning Early, child development expert Dorothy Einon gives parents and caregivers a simple, easy-to-use guide for instilling a sense of discovery in their children during the critical learning years from birth to age six. In a format that is straightforward and visually pleasing, parents will find complete information about activities that have specific benefits for nourishing their child's curiosity and self-confidence. Dorothy Einon has worked with children from all over the world.

Shki-maaajtaawin E-nmok Curriculum Project

The Shki-maaajtaawin E-nmok project is a progressive initiative involving the partnership between Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, and the Rainbow District School Board to develop culturally inclusive curriculum from elementary to secondary school levels. The goal is to provide teachers, parents, and schools with a curriculum that includes and reflects Anishinaabe values, content, and knowledge, so all our children, Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe, can learn about the people and the traditions of this land.

Good Minds Online Bookstore

Good Minds is an online bookstore with educational resources for Native American Studies, First Nations Studies, Indigenous studies, and Aboriginal studies. Go to www.goodminds.com.

Ontario's Aboriginal Education Strategy

This strategy will help more First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students achieve their full potential. The strategy includes initiatives that support learning and achievement for Aboriginal students. It will also help raise awareness about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives in schools. For more information go to <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/>.

Aboriginal Children's Circle of Early Learning

This is a bilingual web-based clearinghouse and network about the early childhood development of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. The website aims to provide opportunities for early childhood service providers in these communities to access information on best and promising practices and on research and to identify and respond to the emerging needs of their children and families with timely, culturally-sensitive solutions. It has recently been updated with many new practical resources for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Go to http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/pdf/accel_release_en.pdf.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In which way do you work in early learning or with Aboriginal people?

How would you define early learning? What do you think early learning should include?

What strategies have you found to be effective in working with Aboriginal children from birth to age 6? What are some promising practices?

What strategies have you found to be effective in engaging parents/caregivers of Aboriginal children in early learning? What are some promising practices?

Are there any special considerations that affect early learning for those living on-reserve?

Are there any special considerations that affect early learning for those living in an urban setting?

How can the three main cultural groups in Ontario be included and accommodated (Haudenosaunee, Mushkegowuk, and Anishinaabek)? Have you successfully accommodated all three? How did you accomplish this?

How can cultural teachings be incorporated into early learning activities?

Can you suggest some resources that provide effective early learning strategies that use cultural beliefs and teachings?

How can children with special needs be accommodated? (Special needs might include learning disabilities, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.)

Are you aware of any other programs that have provided effective early learning strategies?

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS REPORT

Section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Indian, Inuit, and Métis. Many Aboriginal peoples believe that 'Indian' is a misnomer and prefer the term 'First Nations.' While this report focuses on early learning strategies for First Nations children in Ontario, some of the literature reviewed did not distinguish among the three groups, thus the term 'Aboriginal' is also used in the report. Furthermore, key informants sometimes used the term and identify themselves as 'Aboriginal.'

The Aboriginal population may be undercounted for several reasons including incompletely enumerated reserves and the exclusion of institutions such as hospitals and senior citizens' homes. Furthermore, only 20% of off-reserve households receive Form 2B (or the long form of the census questionnaire) which has questions on Aboriginal identification.

Child care refers to someone other than the parent taking care of the child and could include daycare, nursery, preschool, Head Start, and care by a relative or other caregiver.

NOTES

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