

MESSAGES FROM THE HEART :

A SHOWCASE ON ABORIGINAL CHILD REARING



NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE
FOR ABORIGINAL HEALTH



CENTRE DE COLLABORATION NATIONALE
DE LA SANTÉ AUTOCHTONE

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1.0 Opening the Way

First Nations, Inuit and Métis traditions are clear: children are a gift from the Creator, on loan to us from the spirit world. It is their birthright to inherit cultures whose central tenets for thousands of years focused on how best to nurture young ones physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In too many communities, that knowledge of how to raise whole children

has been interrupted by the fallout from residential schools and the lingering effects of colonization. Yet the underlying wisdom still exists, preserved in the memory banks and teachings of our elders. And so too does the yearning on the part of parents for the kinds of cultural underpinnings that will anchor them and their children as they navigate their way through different stages of the life cycle.



In March 2009, more than 100 parents, grandparents, practitioners, educators, elders, policy makers and other stakeholders from across Canada met for two days in Ottawa to take part in a showcase on Aboriginal child rearing. They had been invited by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health to share messages from the heart about how best to support Inuit, Métis and First Nations parents, guardians and families in caring for their children and youth. They gathered to exchange ideas and information about successful parenting and support programs, services and initiatives, to learn about other best practices, and to identify those elements in successful programs and services which were most relevant for Aboriginal peoples.

The opening speakers, Senator Landon Pearson and Senator Wilbert Keon, sounded certain themes which were picked up and extended by others during the course of the gathering. For Senator Pearson, who has spent a lifetime working on children's rights, a child-centred approach is crucial. Children require a number of things to flourish and one of the most essential is "having at least one person in their lives who is absolutely crazy about them". The most likely suppliers of that love are the family members closest to the children, so it becomes critically important, especially for young mothers and fathers, that they receive the supports they need so they, in turn, can supply the love and culture nutrients required for their children's optimal development.



Senator Wilbert Keon, Deputy Chair of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, shared background information on the Senate Population Health Study. In their investigations into the health status of Aboriginal peoples, the Committee realized

that the western biomedical model tends to concentrate almost exclusively on the physical dimension and defines children by their illnesses rather than opting for a whole-person approach. It was also clear that First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and their families have special

characteristics: Aboriginal children are more likely to have young parents, more likely to be part of a large family and more likely to be living in a single-parent family.

As Senator Keon pointed out, childhood might be the time of greatest vulnerability but it is also the time of greatest opportunity. Research shows that interaction and stimulation in early childhood can help compensate for biological deficits caused by stressful conditions during pregnancy. Moreover, the benefits from these initial interventions have a positive effect on people's health and well-being for the rest of their lives. Again, a crucial need is support – for children, families and communities. To be successful, the health, early learning and education programs and policies being developed must be community-based and sensitive to local needs.

In his opening remarks, facilitator Dan George had emphasized that dialogue

among participants was an essential element of the Showcase. He didn't have long to wait for that dialogue to begin. Questions and comments were quickly forthcoming after these first presentations. In particular, people reaffirmed that the answers about how to increase our children's well-being were to be found within the communities. That's why, according to Debbie Dedam Montour of the National Indian and Inuit Community Health Representatives Organization, developing training modules in the regions to support health workers is an essential step in building health capital at the local level. Ryan Calder from Métis Nation of Saskatchewan hoped to see a change in the current situation where most health services to Métis are provided by the mainstream rather than by the Métis themselves. And Norma Gould from We'koqma'q First Nation Health Centre in Nova Scotia stressed the health-creating importance of celebrating one's culture and making links with the elders.



2.0 The Elders Speak

One of the gathering's highlights was a fireside chat with elders Annie Smith St-Georges and Jan Longboat from Ontario, Rhoda Karetak from Nunavut and Noel Gould from Nova Scotia. With humour and passion, the elders shared their views about the traditional values that need to be revived in order to nurture our children in the present and strengthen them for the future.

The elders touched on a number of common elements that they consider crucial to the task of child-rearing: connection to the land, the benefits of learning traditional languages because of the way in which culture is embedded in those languages, and an “open door policy” of welcoming and caring for the community's children.

Elder St-Georges explained that it was part of Algonquin tradition to counsel pregnant women about self-care and to alert them to the ways in which their own thoughts, emotions and actions would influence the child growing within them.

For Elder Longboat, the clear delineation of roles and responsibilities was encapsulated in the language of the Longhouse people: “The women knew how to look after the men, the men knew how to look after the women and the women and men knew how to look after the children.” The glue that held relationships together, from the time a baby entered this world with its first breath until the time the last breath was exhaled to return to the Creator, was mutual caring and sharing.



Children revel in that extended web of relationships. In the time-honoured way of indigenous cultures, Inuk Elder Rhoda Karetak shared several stories which illustrated children's yearnings. One young girl in her community of Arviat asked eagerly when they might be having another funeral, because she enjoyed them so much. Taken aback at first, Rhoda realized that what moved the child was seeing everyone coming together and sharing love.

In a similar way, she was struck by her grandson's comment that he "just got bigger". She believed he meant that though he had grown physically, he did so without any cultural "mulch" to sustain him. He did not know the traditions: the songs, the stories and the skills of hunting or surviving on the land. That particular incident convinced her that the elders in the community had a responsibility to teach the young about the old ways. Elder Karetak also stressed the importance of

incorporating Inuit philosophy and child-rearing methods into the child-oriented programs that were being developed. As part of that philosophy, it was common knowledge that one could turn out three kinds of children: a fragile egg, a hard stone or a human being. The foundation for creating a human being was to spend the first three years of a child's life educating the heart. Only then could one move on to imparting specific skills.

Participants were only too willing to act on these suggestions but wondered about the most effective ways to encourage more elder involvement in programming. Several suggestions were made, including taking the time to identify the 'teachers' in each community and then asking for their input. Also, since some elders are not particularly mobile, it can be more fruitful to bring the children to the elders' homes where the young ones might not only be able to listen and learn but also pitch in and help.



3.0 Young Parents' Voices

During the elders' fireside chat, Jan Longboat had pointed out that according to her culture's teachings, the future and past are both contained in the present. It was only fitting therefore that the discussion about traditional values and approaches to child rearing be complemented by a kitchen table conversation with several young parents about their current challenges and triumphs.

Sharing their stories were Jackie Talio from British Columbia, Thomas Howe from Nova Scotia, Vivian Scott from Manitoba and Holly Jarret and Dion Metcalfe, both originally from Labrador and currently living in Ottawa. Most had become parents while barely out of their teens. Dion Metcalfe claimed that his children had saved his life because wanting to do what was best for them had made

him turn his life around. Holly Jarret, in contrast, maintained that she had saved her own life, after having started down a dangerous road, but she was able to do that because of the support she received when she reached out.

Thomas Howe and Jackie Talio emphasized the importance of always being there for the children. It's not money to go on expensive outings that counts but the ongoing gift of adult presence and caring that gives young ones the stability that allows them to flourish.

In a sense, these parents and their children are the constituency that all the programs highlighted in the Showcase are aiming to reach. One question from the floor was how to get more fathers involved. Dion's response was immediate: try food. In the same vein, Vivian Scott

from Cross Lake, Manitoba shared that in their early childhood education centre, the most successful tactic was to ask the men to help with something that needed fixing, including light bulbs that the staff somehow couldn't manage to change on their own. Once the laughter had subsided, Dion went on to make a serious point: to encourage more men to attend programs, it is critical to create more male-friendly environments. Pastel colours and women's magazines are not going to make men feel at home nor are they comfortable coming to an event which is billed as being helpful for them. If however, there is a way to present a program or get-together as something that would benefit both them and their children, then they are far more likely to attend.

Echoing Landon Pearson's opening remarks, there was a call for further supports for young parents. What should they be? Dion Metcalfe stated that the

best way to find out was to ask the parents themselves since what they needed and wanted would vary, depending on their location and circumstances.

Jackie Talio made a heartfelt plea for funds for more cultural programming. Conscious of how the youth on her reserve are struggling with their identity, she spoke of her deep yearning as she listened to the wealth of traditional knowledge which the elders had shared with the group. "As a young parent, I want to be able to teach my children the culture. I want that back. "

It was clear from the young parents' comments that exposure to their cultural heritage was an integral part of the programs their children were attending. As Holly Jarret pointed out, "My little boy is four years old and after six months [in the Aboriginal Head Start program], he speaks Inuktitut, he knows his syllabic alphabet and he sings and performs."

4.0 Sampling the Options

An important part of the Showcase on Aboriginal Child Rearing was the opportunity for participants to learn about parenting programs in various First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities across the country. Presenters described a range of early childhood development models: some were grassroots and home-based non-profit programs while others were government programs and private models.



The Showcase on Aboriginal Child Rearing featured the following programs:

- » Nobody's Perfect Parenting Program – Moosonee, Ontario
- » Hippy (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters – Heiltsuk Nation, BC
- » Emotional Bonding Pilot Project – Eabametoong First Nation, Fort Hope, BC
- » Aboriginal Infant Development Program – Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, BC
- » Positive Indian Parenting – Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon
- » The Virtues Project – Sto:lo Nation
- » Aboriginal Head Start – Ottawa Inuit Centre
- » Attachment Focused Play Therapy – Okanagan Métis Children and Family Services
- » Ages and Stages Assessment tools – Iglulik, Nunavut
- » Roots of Empathy – Waycobah First Nation, Nova Scotia
- » Collaboration at Step by Step Child and Family Centre – Kahnawake Mohawk Territory
- » Triple P Parenting and Nurturing Programs – Elsipogtog First Nation, New Brunswick
- » Growing Great Kids, Inc – Westbank First Nation, BC

Vivian Scott, who was part of the young parents fireside chat, is in charge of a daycare centre and Aboriginal Head Start program at Cross Lake, Manitoba which received a Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education. It's clear the program is a

success. "I have people calling me on a daily basis," Vivian says, "so that shows that the community realizes the importance of early childhood education. But we just don't have the space. The programs are working – it's just that there aren't enough of them."



5.0 Moving Forward with the Shield of Culture

The intent of the Aboriginal Parenting Showcase was to explore our strengths, our resiliency, and our creativity when it comes to raising children and to build on those assets for the good of our young ones, our families and our communities. The goal, as Dan George reminded the participants, is collaboration, not just collaboration. People at the Showcase offered a succinct list of priorities: more programs in more communities, more outreach to discover what people in the communities see as their greatest needs, and more support for parents and for those delivering the programs

If there was one dominant theme that emerged during Messages from the

Heart, it was that cultural immersion will ground our children and youth in a vibrant sense of identity, belonging and cultural pride. Its importance cannot be overstated. As if to emphasize that fact, the last morning of the gathering was opened and closed by a mother and her five-year-old son. For Pat Makokis from Blue Quills First Nations College, watching that young boy drum and sing filled her heart with hope for the future and she was more than willing to explain why she felt that way. “That sense of culture and pride will help that little boy and he is going to realize how resilient he is. He will be bombarded with negativity that will come his way but that cultural shield will protect him.” What a gift to give to our children.

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