

# Aboriginal Children and Their Learning

## Section One - Early Years Child Care Options for

### Aboriginal Children and their Parents

#### In Calgary

A Report Prepared for Upstart, United Way of Calgary and Area

Dariel Bateman, November 2012



**ABORIGINAL**  
Youth & Education Strategy

**upstart**   
Champions for Children and Youth 

## **Aboriginal Children and Their Learning**

### **Introduction to Learning Success – A Brief Overview**

Aboriginal students who are pregnant or parenting have extended families to help the young mother with child rearing responsibilities. Aunties, cousins, and grandmothers are called upon to help with child care while the young mother attends school. Is this really the case in Calgary and area? Could it be that one barrier for Aboriginal parents/students to achieve their educational goals is access to quality daycare? The scope of work of this review will provide relevant data as to the need for daycare, the costs involved and the usage of daycare by Aboriginal parents

For children in every culture around the world, the early years, encompassing conception to five years of age, are the critical years for brain development and hence their future physical, emotional, social and cognitive health. A child's early environment has a vital impact on the way their brains and bodies develop.

All children thrive in environments, including learning environments, which are marked by:

- Nurturing relationships with consistent, caring and attentive caregivers/parents
- Abundant social interactions described as 'serve and return' – baby yawns or gurgles, dad responds with coos and smiles; baby cries, mum responds with soft words and nourishment; child asks a question, child care provider explores the possible answers
- Caregivers/parents who are emotionally healthy and experiencing little stress
- Adequate nutrition and sleep
- Daily opportunities to play inside and out, both for physical development and social interactions with others
- Physical environments that are warm, dry and free of toxic contaminants
- Positive feedback
- Developmentally appropriate challenges wrapped in encouragement
- Being read to every day cuddled up to the reader
- Lots of laughter, singing and chanting

For Aboriginal children, the descriptions of environments where children thrive have far richer components:

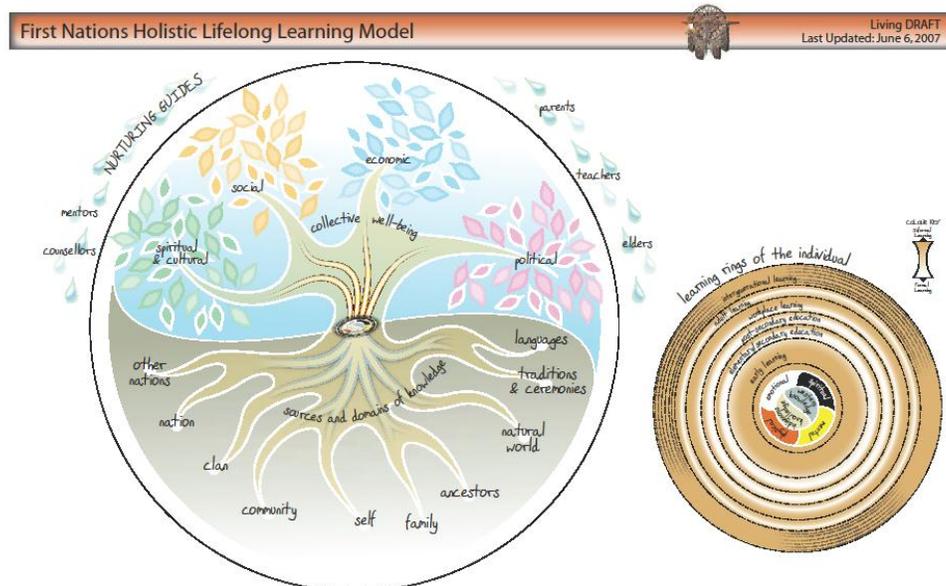
"First Nations, Inuit, and Métis have long advocated learning that affirms their own ways of knowing, cultural traditions and values..." Those ways of knowing have six key attributes, as outlined in the Canadian Council on Learning (2007):

- Learning is holistic – it engages and develops the whole individual (emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual) and the community, connecting all of life to the Creator.

- Learning is lifelong – from prior to birth to old age involving the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.
- Learning is experiential – the pedagogy of place is important, connecting to lived experiences through ceremonies, meditation, story telling and through observation and imitation.
- Learning is rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures – language helps make sense of things over time and generations
- Learning is spiritually oriented – with spiritual experiences (visions, quests, ceremonies, dreams) critical to learning.
- Learning is a communal activity – inclusive of elders, parents, family and community all of whom have roles and responsibilities.

## Holistic Lifelong Learning Models

### *First Nation Holistic Lifelong Learning Model:*



*The First Nations learner dwells in a world of continual re-formation, where interactive cycles, rather than disconnected events, occur. In this world, nothing is simply a cause or an effect, but the expression of the interconnectedness of life. These relationships are circular, rather than linear, holistic, and cumulative rather than compartmentalized. The mode of learning for First Nations people reflects and honours this understanding.*

*Lifelong learning for First Nations peoples is grounded in experiences that embrace both indigenous and Western knowledge traditions, as depicted in the tree's root system, "Sources and Domains of Knowledge". Just as the tree draws nourishment through its roots, the First Nations person learns from and through the natural world, language, traditions and ceremonies, and the world of people (self, family, ancestors, clan, community, nation and other nations). Any uneven root growth can de-stabilize the learning system. The root system also depicts the intertwining presence of indigenous and Western knowledge, which forms the tree trunk's core, where learning develops.*

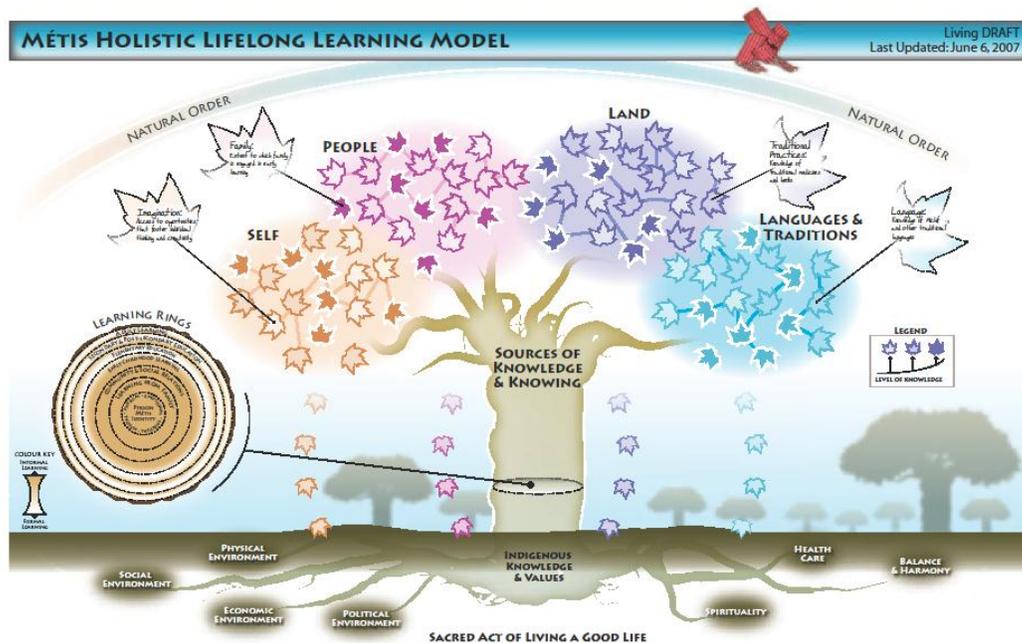
A cross-sectional view of the trunk reveals the “Learning Rings of the Individual”. At the ring’s core are the four dimensions of personal development—spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental—through which learning is experienced holistically. The tree’s rings portray how learning is a lifelong process that begins at birth and progresses through childhood, youth and adulthood.

Learning opportunities are available in all stages of First Nations life. They can occur in both informal and formal settings such as in the home, on the land, or in the school. The stages of learning begin with the early childhood phase and progress through elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, to adult skills training and employment. Intergenerational knowledge is transmitted to the individual from the sources within the roots.

The First Nations learner experiences the various relationships within indigenous and Western knowledge traditions through their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical dimensions. The tree’s extended branches, which represent the individual’s harmony and well-being, depict the development of these experiences. The individual’s well-being supports the cultural, social, political and economic “Collective Well-Being”, represented by the four clusters of leaves.

Just as leaves provide nourishment to the roots and support the tree’s foundation, the community’s collective well-being rejuvenates the individual’s learning cycle. Learning guides—mentors, counsellors, parents, teachers, and Elders—provide additional support and opportunities for individuals to learn throughout their lifespan.

### Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model:



The Métis learner, like the tree, is a complex, living entity that needs certain conditions for optimum growth. As conditions change throughout the natural cycle, so will the regenerative capacity of the tree. The health of the tree, or the Métis learner, impacts the future health of the root system and the “forest” of learners.

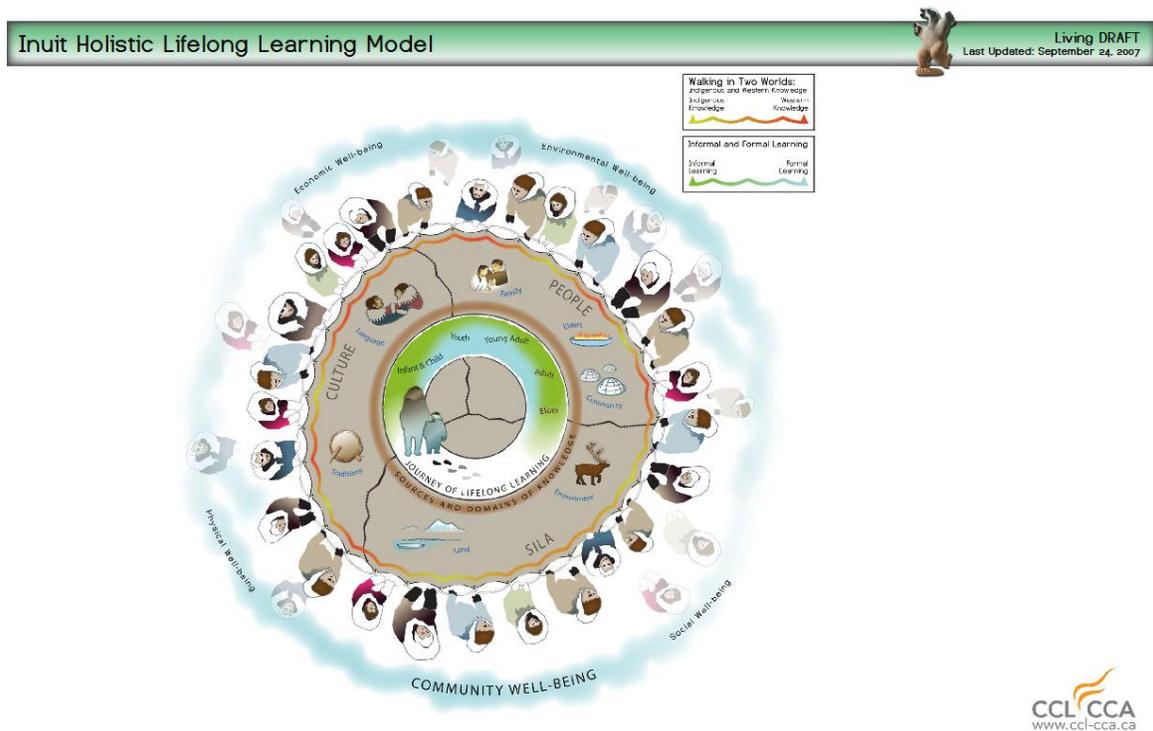
Métis people view lifelong learning as part of a regenerative, living system—the “Natural Order” that governs the passage of seasons and encompasses a community (or forest) of learners. Within this organic system, relationships are interconnected, and balance and harmony are maintained.

The tree's roots represent the individual's health and well-being (social, physical, economic, spiritual, etc.) and provide the conditions that nurture lifelong learning. The root base of the tree represents the indigenous knowledge and values that provide stability for the Métis learner.

A cross-sectional view of the trunk's "Learning Rings" depicts how learning occurs holistically across the individual's life cycle. At the trunk's core are the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental dimensions of the Métis self and identity. Intergenerational knowledge and values are transmitted through the processes that first influence the individual's development—learning from family, and learning from community and social relations (represented by the two rings surrounding the core). The four outer rings illustrate the stages of lifelong learning, from early childhood through to adulthood; they depict the dynamic interplay of informal and formal learning that occurs at different rates and stages, as represented by the extent of growth across each ring.

Extending from the trunk are the branches—"Sources of Knowledge and Knowing" such as self, people, land and language and traditions. The clusters of leaves on each branch represent the domains of knowledge. The intensity of their colour indicates the extent of individual understanding in any knowledge domain. The leaves of knowledge eventually fall to the ground, signifying how knowledge transmission enriches the foundations of learning and produces more knowledge (more vibrant leaves).

### *Inuit Holistic Lifelong Learning Model:*



Lifelong learning for Inuit is grounded in traditional "Inuit Values and Beliefs," as articulated in Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ). To illustrate the strength of IQ, the model depicts 38 family and community members "holding up" a learning blanket. Each of the 38 figures represents an IQ value and belief, and the inclusion of ancestors acknowledges the important role of "naming," a sacred Inuit tradition which fosters Inuk identity, kinship relations, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge.

Within the learning blanket are the "Sources and Domains of Knowledge" – culture, people, and sila (life force or essential energy) – as well as their sub-domains (languages, traditions, family, community, Elders, land, and the environment).

*The Inuk's lifelong learning journey is cyclical, as represented by the path that revolves within the centre of the learning blanket. As the Inuk progresses through each life stage of the learning journey – infant and child, youth, young adult, adult, and elder – he or she is presented with a range of learning opportunities.*

*During each learning journey, the Inuk experiences learning in both informal settings, such as in the home or on the land, and in formal settings, such as in the classroom or in the community. The Inuk is exposed to both Indigenous and Western knowledge and learning practices, as depicted by the two colours of stitching along the rim of the blanket.*

*The Inuk emerges from each learning opportunity with a deeper awareness of Inuit culture, people and sila (life force or essential energy), and with skills and knowledge that can contribute to the determinants of "Community Well-being" (identified as physical well-being, economic well-being, social well-being and environmental well-being). The Inuk returns to the learning path to continue his or her lifelong journey.*

<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/RedefiningSuccessInAboriginalLearning/RedefiningSuccessModels.html>

The Canadian Council on Learning goes on to say "...However, they also desire Western Education that can equip them with the knowledge they need to participate in Canadian society. First Nations, Inuit and Métis recognize that "two ways of knowing" will foster the necessary conditions for nurturing healthy, sustainable communities."

And herein lies the great challenge, the challenge of incorporating the "two ways of knowing" into the learning and home environments of Aboriginal children. An obvious place to start would be in examining the availability of programs that incorporate two ways of knowing available to Aboriginal children and their families who reside in the Calgary area.

### **Pre-School Options for Aboriginal Children and their Parents in Calgary**

At issue for the purposes of this section of **Aboriginal Children and Their Learning** is an investigation into the availability of pre-school and day care options with Aboriginal-specific programming in Calgary.

#### **Methodology**

- Site visits
- Literature survey
- Overview of curriculum programs
- Most of the information contained in this survey is of a narrative nature, collected through interviewing local expertise. Some data comes from Statistics Canada (2006), and from the City of Calgary Community and Neighborhood Services

#### **Definitions**

- The term 'Aboriginal' is inclusive of First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons

- The term 'Calgary' refers to persons living within the Calgary census metropolitan area (CMA)
- While the Tsuu T'ina Nation is within the CMA, their demographic data is not included as part of the CMA data
- The term 'pre-school' refers to a child's life from birth to four years of age
- The term 'daycare' for the purposes of this environmental scan refers to publicly available care for young children in their pre-school years in settings outside the home.

## **Demographics**

Statistics Canada remains the primary source of demographic information, with 2006 being the most recent data publicly available. In the demographic information that follows, it is important to note that the Aboriginal population is growing rapidly with the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative (CUAI) stating that it is the most rapidly growing population segment. Therefore, much of the demographic data that follows is considered to be an underestimate of the 2012 environment.

- Statistics Canada (2006) estimates that there are 26,575 Calgarians who identify themselves as Aboriginal.
  - 56% (14,770) were Métis
  - 41% (10,785) were First Nations with 9,010 reported as Treaty/registered Indian
  - 250 identified as Inuit
- 27% are 15 years of age or older.
- 8.5 % (3126) of the Aboriginal population in Calgary were preschoolers 0 – 4 years of age
- In 2006, almost half of the Aboriginal population in Calgary was under 25 years of age, with the median age being 27.
- More than 65% of children in foster care in this province are Aboriginal
- Early Development Inventory results across Canada indicate that a higher than average number of Aboriginal children are vulnerable in terms of preparation for school success as measured in the domains of physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge.

## **Daycare options**

There are an abundance of daycare options available for Calgary's preschoolers – licensed and private daycare programs, licensed and unlicensed day homes, informal care arrangements within families and circles of friends, and children being cared for at home.

But in short, there are very few Aboriginal-specific daycare options available in Calgary.

## 1. Aboriginal Head Start

- The programs were first begun in 2000. At present, across Canada, there are 168 Aboriginal Head Start programs in 300 off-reserve communities serving 7000 children.
- There are two programs located in Calgary, one at St. Stephen's School and one located at Abbeydale School with a third one available on the Tsuu T'ina Reserve, limited to children living on reserve.
- The programs in Calgary, like those across Alberta, run on a half-day basis, four days per week. Fridays are set aside for home visits, parent consultations and meetings with formal and informal partners.
- The Calgary Head Start programs do not have a sponsoring agency or local program manager at the present time, unlike Edmonton programs which are sponsored by the Ben Calf Robe Society
- There are a total 80 spaces available in these two Calgary programs, 40 in the two and a half hour morning programs and 40 in the afternoon programs. In Calgary, not all spaces are used and there are some vacancies.
- Programs are limited to Aboriginal children 3 years and 3 months of age to 5 years of age.
- Further program restrictions occur in urban areas due to limited transportation service catchment boundaries. Families living outside the bus catchment areas are able to attend the program if parents provide transportation.
- Program operational funding comes from the federal government.
- Each Head Start Program has a Parent Advisory Committee that offers programming guidance to staff specific to cultural components.
- Parent involvement is strongly encouraged. Parents are asked to volunteer in the classroom. This is particularly challenging in Calgary's Head Start programs. However, parents do participate in school celebrations, feasts, graduation ceremonies.
- The challenge of parent involvement is reported to be related, in part, to parents being reluctant to receive feedback and suggestions about their parenting.
- Staff must have at least Level One certification with professional development options offered for additional Level Two and Three Certification, through accredited distance learning. There is an annual regional gathering of Head Start front line staff sponsored by the Alberta Aboriginal Head Start Committee for ongoing professional development.
- Most staff are Aboriginal.

## 2. Little Sundance Daycare (Métis Calgary Family Services)

- This is a full day program for children 19 months to 5 years of age.
- There are 80 spaces with a waiting list of 70.
- 80% of the children are Aboriginal, most being Métis.

- All staff have at least Level Two accreditation with 85 % at Level Three.
  - The monthly cost is \$795 for children 19 months to 36 months and \$755 for children 36 months to 5 years of age. The monthly fee covers the costs of staff, meals, programming.
  - 95% of the children receive subsidies through the Province of Alberta Human Services because of low family income and/or parental physical and mental health issues.
  - 20% of the Little Sundance children are coded and attend either Renfrew for three hours of their day with costs covered by PUFF grants to Renfrew, or with supportive child care dollars from Alberta Health Services. These children are identified by a supportive child care consultant who screens for behavior issues and/or physical and emotional concerns.
  - Programming is seen as totally culturally based.
  - There are 10 staff, 7 of whom are Aboriginal (3 treaty, 1 Inuit, and 3 Métis)
  - Parent involvement is encouraged and participation is through parent meetings, celebrations of children's work, and Triple P Parenting sessions.
  - Language training in Blackfoot and Michif (French Cree – a dying Métis language) is offered.
3. Medicine Wheel Early Learning Centres (Métis Calgary Family Services)
- These half-day programs are for children 3 ½ to 5 years of age and will expand this year to include availability at Catherine Nichols Gunn and Valley View Schools
  - Children will be able to transition easily to kindergartens at both schools.
  - The Medicine Wheel Early Learning Centres offer Aboriginal-specific programming that includes: Cree and Michif Language training, cultural ceremonies, and weekly participation by elders.
4. Little Turtle Preschool (Métis Calgary Family Services and Parent Link Centre in Erin Woods)
- This half day program is designed for children 3 and 1/2 to 5 years of age, 3 hours per day, and 4 days per week.
5. One World Child Development Centre (Calgary Urban Project Society)
- This program is for children 3 – 6 years of age, and operates Monday to Thursday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
  - There is no Aboriginal-specific programming except as it would occur as part of their generative curriculum philosophy and their exploration of the natural world.
  - About 20% of the children are Aboriginal.

- A new program will begin later in the fall at CUPS' new centre that will serve children 19 months to 3 years
- There is no Aboriginal-specific programming in the daycares at Bow Valley College, Mount Royal University or the University of Calgary, and there is no daycare at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. Given the emphasis on post-secondary education as a means for economic self-sufficiency for Aboriginal people, this may seem unusually limiting.

### **Curriculums/Programs of Studies**

- In Alberta, there is no formalized curriculum document/Program of Studies for children in pre-school programs until the kindergarten year.
- This holds true for Aboriginal Head Start programs across Canada as well, although six components are emphasized: parent involvement, health promotion, nutrition, Aboriginal culture and language, education and school readiness and social support. In Alberta, the health priorities are obesity, mental health and injury prevention.
- The Province of Saskatchewan does have a Program of Studies for Aboriginal preschoolers registered in formal programs.

### **Success factors for Aboriginal Children**

During the information and knowledge-gathering period for this report, significant patterns of agreement emerged specific to success factors for Aboriginal children in their pre-school years. In short, the development of cultural identity was seen as the critical and most important factor in determining future success. The reasons included:

- Self-confidence and self respect
- Emerging pride in one's culture
- Courage to withstand systemic bullying
- A strong sense of belonging to a community

The various means for achieving cultural identity as identified both in the literature and in Calgary programs included:

- Meaningful engagement of the whole and extended family, and the participation of elders in early childhood learning
- Daily cultural immersion experiences including:
  - Story telling
  - Crafts
  - Chanting and drumming
  - Cooking
  - Tipi teaching
  - Smudging and other ceremonies

- Language teaching, vocabulary acquisition
- The importance of the eagle feather
- The Medicine Wheel in all its richnesses and ramifications and the attention it pays to the four elements of balanced physical, mental, spiritual and emotional well-being
- The seasons
- Regalia
- Prayers
- The lived experience of the Seven Sacred Teachings, what they are and how they are (and must be) part of daily life experiences
- English is the mother tongue of greater than 90 % of the Aboriginal population. Of the remaining 10%, most speak Blackfoot or Cree, and then with very limited capability
- Children renewing the identity of their parents

Of course, other success factors generalized from all populations of children include:

- Attachment and bonding
- Daily and frequent back and forth conversation and talk
- Daily experience in being read to
- Stable and adequate housing
- Adequate nutrition and sleep
- The value of structured routines
- Freedom from physical and emotional abuse
- Multiple opportunities for expressing personal knowledge and understanding

### **Conundrums and Challenges**

- Intergenerational trauma (and its multitude of causes) has had and is having a devastating impact on Aboriginal people which is affecting children. Some of the impact includes:
  - Parents who have not experienced bonding and attachment themselves and are therefore unsure of its importance or practice, leaves young children very vulnerable. Parents who are in survival mode have little leftover for bonding and attachment.
  - Large numbers of Aboriginal children are in foster care because of parental absence due to addictions/emotional and physical illness/incarceration. Foster care parent are rarely Aboriginal, or even knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture.
  - Some Aboriginal people are choosing to reject their heritage and escape into the 'mainstream', thereby limiting their children's opportunities to develop a pride in their heritage. Self-assimilation is considered by some to be possibly dangerous for the future.
  - Inconsistent availability of and commitment to employment training is a factor.

- Aboriginal people experience ongoing poverty at a far greater rate than the average Canadian.
- Unstable housing with frequent moving and lack of consistency for children in their schooling is a prevailing concern.
- Rates of acute and chronic health problems are higher than average.
- Family violence and victimization is frequent.
- Systemic failure to understand the Aboriginal world view, the Aboriginal way of life, the Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal cognitive processing, and a collectivist rather than individual perspective
  - This uniqueness is rarely understood by educational/social services/health services/employers and therefore leave Aboriginal people in an ongoing disadvantaged position for economic and personal self-sufficiency
  - And if this uniqueness was understood, there are huge challenges in making systemic inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal people a universal reality
- Although not solely a problem with Aboriginal pre-school and day care programs, longitudinal evaluation data, with rare exceptions, is simply unavailable. Without close scrutiny of program success over time, very little is definitively known about what early years practices do make a difference in the academic and personal success specifically for Aboriginal children
- As noted above, there are very few Aboriginal-specific daycare/preschool options for Aboriginal children in Calgary. Factors that may explain this include, but are not limited, to:
  - Finding qualified Aboriginal staff
  - Keeping qualified staff in off-reserve programs when Aboriginal staff can teach on reserve tax free
  - Huge capital costs for building/maintaining day care programs
  - The costs of accreditation
  - Inadequate funding for transportation which, if in place, could increase the catchment areas
- Some aboriginal parents do not wish to be involved, or be obliged to work with staff on parenting and other issues.
- Ongoing jurisdictional issues with federal responsibility for reserves, and provincial responsibility for health and social services creates cracks in service offerings and challenges in navigating the various systems.
- The high birth rate to young mothers, many of who are single parents, leaves young children even more vulnerable.
- Defining success presents another significant conundrum. What is successful in the Aboriginal culture is not a Western way of defining success. (See recommendations below)
- There is some indication that band councils are investing in economic development but encouraging little investment in education/children/parenting

- Engagement is limited because of a huge fear of child welfare and the removal of children from their homes and families.

### **Recommendations/Questions** (in no particular order)

- Could there be an investment in longitudinal assessment research? It would be helpful in determining successful pre-school and daycare practices for Aboriginal children. For Aboriginal children. Organizing principles might include: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or Social Determinants of Health. But a possibly more powerful organizing principle could be around a connection between an Aboriginal world view.
- How could elders and family members be engaged in speech and language development practices in their homes?
- In order to support the many Aboriginal children in foster care in developing cultural resiliency, would it help if foster parents were more informed and/or engaged in Aboriginal ways of being?
- There are very few Aboriginal-sensitive childcare options in Calgary. Could community gathering centres be situated throughout Calgary potentially using the hook and hub model? The hook is child care facilities with early childhood care and development programs, and the hub being intersectoral services. Where this model has been successful social cohesion, cultural safety and transition to Aboriginal control have been outcomes and extended family access has become more available. Aboriginal people drive the well-being initiatives. Early childhood becomes the hook for community mobilization. Multiple entry points because of multiple locations improve coordinated services.
- Where Parent Link Centres operate in communities with large Aboriginal populations would it be wise to examine the efficacy of programs such as Triple P Parenting, In Sync, and Prime Time family coaches?
- Could there be increased Alberta Health Services support particularly in the areas of speech and language development and in Aboriginal child birthing classes?
- Would increased availability of Aboriginal-sensitive child care options help mothers return to the work force or move into educational opportunities?
- Could a cohort and then registry of Aboriginal day homes be created?
- Do impactful early intervention programs exist to help Aboriginal youth understand the lengthy commitment and necessary change in lifestyle when children come along in their lives?
- There is huge value in the many aspects of the Aboriginal World View – a holistic perspective, the interconnectedness of all living things, a connection to the land and the community, the dynamic nature of the world, and the strength that comes from 'power with'. Could this Aboriginal component be incorporated in the childcare option for all children, not just Aboriginal children, in their early years?

- What would need to happen so that Aboriginal parents were not consistently reluctant to have their children assessed? How could fear of 'Child Welfare' be reduced/alternatives found?
- What could be discovered by locating, learning from and celebrating Aboriginal parents who have developed resiliency regardless of intergenerational trauma and have knowledgeably helped their children to become resilient?

### **A final note**

For a population deeply impacted by intergenerational trauma, the restoration of family well-being that is grounded in an Aboriginal World View, at the same time providing Aboriginal children with what they need to survive successfully in an urban environment, becomes almost overwhelming. What will break the cycle? How long is a long view? For urban Aboriginal children what describes success? Do Aboriginal people need to abandon their Aboriginal identity in order to live successfully in an urban world?

Most surely, viewing the world and the immediate environment holistically, having a strong and multi-faceted identity, receiving sufficient bonding and attachment to become resilient, living with sufficient family income and housing, being read to and talked with on a daily basis, and knowing that we are connected with all living things are all achievable when we all become learners and teachers together, and when we understand and practice the concept of 'power with'. Neither Western culture nor the Aboriginal culture have all the answers to these huge conundrums and challenges. If we stay passionately focused on all our children, we can, together, become the change that we want to see.

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