

# Indigenous Early Care and Education Understandings and Perspectives

## World Forum Foundation Indigenous Peoples Action Group

*“Grandfather, what is the purpose of life?”*  
after a long time in thought, the old man looked up and said,  
*“Grandson, children are the purpose of life, we were once children and someone cared for us,  
and now it is our time to care.”*  
(Elder Eddie Bellerose, Cree)

### Preface

The following understandings have been gathered and summarized by the Indigenous Peoples Action Group of the World Forum Foundation. In doing so, members interviewed and gathered ideas and stories from Indigenous people all over the world. These insights, combined with our members’ early care and education foundations, provide the basis for this document.

We define first peoples, aboriginal peoples, or native peoples as ethnic groups who are the original inhabitants of a given region, collectively referred to here as Indigenous peoples. This group is further distinguished from groups that have settled, occupied, or colonized the area.

The Indigenous Peoples Action Group’s mission is “to contribute to a global awareness that values the engagement of Indigenous vision of education.” We are firm in our belief that essential to all children’s development are culturally responsive educational experiences. The following understandings have been written toward that outcome.

## Introduction

There are an estimated 370-500 million Indigenous people in the world, spread across 90 countries. They live in all geographic regions and represent 5,000 different cultures (United Nations Development Programme, January 2019). The historical impact of colonization on Indigenous cultures has been pervasive and has had immediate and long-term effects. Disease, inequity, enslavement, exploitation, loss of language and culture have been the shared experience. It is from this background and context that Indigenous people are nurturing and educating their young children.

Children are the conduit for the survival of cultures. Through generations immemorial, the ways of knowing and being of Indigenous people have been shared with our children in families, clans, tribes, and in collectives as diverse as the lands that shape our cultures, philosophies, and languages. Despite our diversity, Indigenous peoples have a shared experience in how colonialism, the practice of exerting political control over another territory or country, continues to impact our families and children.

This document introduces a set of understandings for individuals and programs to consider in the delivery of services for young Indigenous children. It also offers an opportunity for educators to consider when planning curriculum and experiences for all children, to respectfully teach about Indigenous cultures. These understandings privilege Indigenous people, their cultures and their knowledge(s). This does not, however, exclude other principles of children's development or developmentally appropriate practices of early childhood development, learning and care, but enhances our effectiveness to promote children's optimal development.

### (1) Colonialism and intergenerational trauma

In order to understand the context in which Indigenous peoples live today, we acknowledge the legacies of colonialism around the world, and the effects of historical, intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma occurs when trauma is transferred from one generation of trauma survivors to subsequent generations.

The specific colonial policies and processes, institutions, and intergenerational experiences of colonialism are varied, though the impacts on Indigenous people are similar. In some families and communities, the removal of multiple generations of young children from their family homes has resulted in losses of language and

## SEVERED FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TIES

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee investigated how colonial policies of the Canadian government to remove young Indigenous children from their families and place them in church- and state-run residential schools that were frequently abusive resulted in devastating cycles of trauma experienced by generations of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families. Similar policies throughout the histories of colonization in Australia, New Zealand and the United States subjected generations of young Indigenous children to trauma, severing family ties and community networks of support

culture, and breakdown in the healthy, well-supported networks of extended family within which Indigenous children are traditionally raised. Some families, communities and their children never regained the cultures, languages, and family connections they lost when they were removed from their families and placed in non-Indigenous foster care or adopted into non-Indigenous homes. In many Indigenous families, cycles of abuse that began in residential schools or foster homes rippled through generations, exacerbated by poverty, social exclusion, racism, and coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol use. A growing body of research shows that epigenetic effects of trauma experiences during pregnancy can alter the DNA of two generations—in both the mother and her forming child (Abour & Polanco, 2015).

The alternative is also true, that many individuals and families are survivors of attempted cultural genocide and have retained and perpetuated the strong cultural values that keep individuals, families, and communities whole and vibrant. Educators must not ever presume to know the history nor the current being state of an individual or culture.

In order to best support young Indigenous children, early childhood educators and programs are informed, compassionate, and equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources to deal with trauma and its intergenerational effects. Early childhood programs can be a place of support for young Indigenous children and their families who are on a healing journey as they deal with the impacts of intergenerational trauma.

Some ways that early childhood educators and programs can do this are to:

- Provide safe cultural spaces and culturally appropriate resources for learning and healing.
- Learn and understand the history of colonization specific to the location.
- Connect families with resources and community supports.
- Engage in trauma informed, culturally safe practice with Indigenous children and their families

Questions to think about:

- What are my cultural roots and experiences?
- What is my own experience with intergenerational trauma?
- Have you researched the history of Indigenous people in your community?

## **(2) Connections with the land and territory**

Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching are born of the land and territories. They are relational, emphasizing the connectedness and interdependency of all living and non-living beings, people, animals, water, sky and all things on earth and within the universe. We are part of the “oneness” and understand it does not belong to us. Indigenous people recognize the importance of maintaining the critical balance between all things. Traditionally, Indigenous peoples see ourselves as stewards of our lands, waters, and territories, maintaining harmony and equilibrium through ceremonial and practical relationships with and within this land. For example, we are taught to only use resources that are necessary, realizing there is reciprocity.

Children must first build relationships with the land and territory to become its stewards. These protocols, practices and traditions are customarily passed through the generations when young

Indigenous children hear the stories, experience their environment, participate in the ceremonies, practice food harvesting and preparation, and understand the languages. Many Indigenous children do not live in their traditional communities, territories or live in urban environments where access to the land and natural environment is more challenging or have not had the experience of traditional teachings. Regardless of this, connections to the land and area can be integrated into early childhood experiences in many ways including:

- Involving elders and community knowledge holders in the children’s curriculum experiences.
- Providing land and place-based learning opportunities for the children.
- Including in children’s programming – information about the local biodiversity, Indigenous names, uses for plants, information about and experience with living things found in the area.
- Teaching and encouraging stewardship for the land and area with children and their families.

Questions to think about:

- How can I show respect for the sky, the waters, and Mother Earth, on which I walk daily?
- Why is it important to protect Mother Earth?
- What does Mother Earth look like, smell like, sound like and feel like?
- How can I connect with Mother Earth daily?
- How can I encourage stewardship for the land with children and their families?

### **(3) Indigenous values and systems of knowledge**

Indigenous communities and nations have unique systems of knowledge that are exemplified in distinct philosophies evident in shared beliefs, values, traditions, protocols, and practices. These knowledge systems are a collective and individual consciousness that is shaped by the environment and the cultural norms that unfold within them. A foundational value is respect for creation and the Creator. Indigenous people are spiritual people and understand the universal principle of a higher power.

At the heart of many Indigenous knowledge(s) is the primacy of relationships. This importance of relationship is one of the first teachings for young children. Blackfoot elder, Leroy Little Bear (2000) writes that “the function of Aboriginal values and customs is to maintain the relationships that hold creation together” Without relationships, the community is fragmented and the interdependent ways that have ensured the survival of Indigenous peoples is endangered. Survival of Indigenous knowledge(s) is dependent upon the interrelationships. This learning of relationships begins with children and their teaching and learning. Part of children’s healthy identity is to feel pride and confidence in their worldview and the people in it. Values such as respect and honor, caring, sharing, honesty and generosity are fundamental to many Indigenous worldviews. Some knowledge is sacred and will not be shared outside the community. In many cases, due to past assimilation practices, parents have not had the opportunity to learn the shared values, beliefs, or practices from their elders. Given this reality, opportunities for adults to participate in children’s learning is equally important. Learning opportunities for children and families may be characterized by:

- Culture and values that are made visible.
- Members of the community who are able to share knowledge and practices are invited to participate in the teaching of children and families.
- Understanding and sharing the cultural and ceremonial ways of the community, respecting boundaries where sacred knowledge is concerned.

- Learning opportunities are authentic.
- Cultural curriculum resources are genuine and obtained from Indigenous peoples.
- Curriculum materials, equipment, environments and activities reflect the culture and locale of the people.

Questions to think about:

- What are the values within my community and how are they communicated?
- Who are the culture holders in my community and what are their systems of knowledge?
- Is local culture visible in my classroom?
- How do I ensure that I use authentic, local resources in a respectful manner?

#### **(4) Pedagogy, teaching methods and Indigenous children**

Children's identity development is ultimately tied to the perpetuation of cultures and the child's grounding within it. This cultural identity is anchored in Indigenous knowledge(s) that offer both content and processes for learning. Knowledge learned through experience allows children to "live" their teachings. Indigenous languages, stories and storytelling; ceremonies including feasting, songs, and dances; art and music; experiences through the senses; and revelations through dreams and visions are some of the processes through which children can come to know. Each of these elements of learning provides a tangible connection to the past, to the values and protocols of their cultures and knowledge systems. They also constitute the cultural markers that map the teachings and learning important for children to develop a strong cultural identity. Who is teaching and how children are taught is especially important considering the role of Indigenous knowledge in children's growth and development and their participation in early childhood settings. It is through valuing the children's home language and culture and incorporating appropriate elements into the classroom that ultimately value Indigenous children and their world view.

Early childhood settings focused on fostering the cultural identity of young Indigenous children require engagement with cultural knowledge holders. Elders, grandparents, and knowledge keepers are repositories of knowledge and play critical roles in the transfer of knowledge to children and their families. It is this transference through the generations that has ensured the survival of collective cultures and peoples. Children as individual members gain an important link to where they come from, and how they are connected and belong. Suggestions for consideration of pedagogy for Indigenous children include:

- Engaging elders, grandparents and knowledge keepers in the teaching of children.
- Employing proper protocols for inviting and compensating elders, grandparents and knowledge keepers.
- Providing opportunities for Indigenous children to learn through participation and observation.
- Promoting language and cultural immersion while ensuring all children have exposure to language and culture.
- Promoting land and place-based learning.
- Ensuring developmentally appropriate teaching is situated within the values, protocols and languages of the culture.
- Employing culturally respectful and safe teaching practices.
- Promoting assessments and assessors that are culturally and linguistically safe and appropriate.

Alongside knowledge holders in early childhood settings are staff that play an important role in teaching young Indigenous children. The following suggestions are targeted toward program staff:

- Encourage Indigenous people to participate in the program as staff and administrators.
- Provide opportunities for staff to learn alongside other staff and children of the program.
- Ensure program staff know the history and context of Indigenous people in the geographic area in which they work. Share this knowledge with children, even if there may not be Indigenous children in the classroom.
- Provide staff ongoing access to professional development with the obligation to pass on their learning to the children and staff as appropriate.
- Know the context of the local Indigenous community, whether or not Indigenous children are enrolled in the program.

Questions to think about:

- What do I want to know more about to feel more culturally competent in my teaching or programming for young children?
- What community connections are available to promote my own learning and development in this area?
- What are key protocols for connection with elders, grandparents and knowledge keepers? What actions can I take to make those connections?
- Am I intentionally seeking professional development opportunities to improve my knowledge of Indigenous culture and history?
- Does my organization employ Indigenous educators who can provide culture advice and link to community?

## **(5) Children and Curriculum**

Children's programming or curriculum is comprised of elements that are meaningful and relevant to young Indigenous children and is intended to foster children's growth and development in ways that are respectful of their cultural backgrounds. Cultural knowledge is not intended to be an "add-on" but instead forms the backbone for what is taught. The following statements are considerations for creation of curriculum for Indigenous children:

- The curriculum demonstrates a thorough understanding of Indigenous knowledge(s) and includes the voices of Indigenous peoples.
- Elders and knowledge keepers are encouraged to guide the inclusion of language (including spelling, dialects and symbols), dance, songs, art, stories, and practices in the curriculum development.
- The curriculum is delivered to all children (as appropriate) — non-Indigenous and Indigenous. All children and their families have the right to learn about the ways of knowing and being of Indigenous peoples. Further, peoples from diverse cultures learning together can create an environment that recognizes and respects differences.
- Indigenous groups are not interchangeable; curriculum development will be unique to the place, the culture, the community, the families and the staff involved.

Questions to think about:

- What curriculum resources exist that could be utilized?
- What might I do that would encourage curriculum resource development?
- How can I engage elders, grandparents and knowledge keepers in curriculum planning?

### **(6) Language and language revitalization**

Indigenous cultures, values, relationships, traditions and practices are embedded in Indigenous languages. Language is how we are connected to our tribes, extended families and territories, and it is also our connection to spirit. As X'unei Lance Twitchell stated in his 2018 dissertation, For Our Little Grandchildren: Language Revitalization Among the Tlingit, "Our language is the path between all of us: past, present, and the future." It is the essence of a people and intertwined with cultural knowledge. Through the efforts of colonial governments which aimed to eradicate Indigenous identities and force assimilation, many languages have already been lost and many others are at risk. When place-based language disappears, the eons of multi-generational and -lineal knowledge of place: the science, ecological relationships between people and nature, and long-term sustainability of our species becomes at risk.

Indigenous peoples are resilient and powerful and continue to see a hopeful future for our upcoming generations. Language revitalization, the strengthening of language by bringing it to a new generation of language learners, is an important priority requiring resources for ongoing education for all ages. Early childhood programs can help in these efforts by:

- Ensuring that children's environments are rich with oral and written language.
- Seeking the involvement of elders and language speakers to ensure that languages (spoken and written), signs and symbols are used correctly and appropriately, and cultural practices and ceremonies are respected.
- Supporting staff, parents and family to engage language learning with children.
- Learning from the numerous global language revitalization efforts that offer networks of community support.
- Supporting community language immersion and revitalization efforts.

## LANGUAGE CONSTRUCTS

Speakers of Anishinaabemowin never had to be told to "respect women, respect elders, or respect children," because it is fundamental and built into the language itself. Ikwe or the word for woman is connected to Aki-earth. Both are life givers. The word for Old Woman, mindimooyehn actually breaks down to "one that holds it all together." The foundation of a family. Old Man – Akiwensii – literally means "earth caretaker". The word for Elder – Gichi ayaa'aa- means "great being." Our word for child – abinoojii – describes a spirit that was specifically placed here. The values are built into the language, and it is beautiful. George Lyndon

Questions to think about:

- What is my own language status?
- What words and phrases could I immediately begin using, every day, to convey my support of the community's language?
- What could I do to increase my awareness of the status of my community's language strength and viability?
- Who are the fluent language speakers in my community?
- What can I do to engage parents and children in language learning?

## Summary

*We are the seeds in their remains today. . .  
This is why you too, inside you feel how very valuable it is.  
This is why you are standing up for it even up to today."*  
(Elder Kaajaakwtí Walter Soboleff – Tlingit)

The multi-generational, centuries long force of colonialization has caused great harm to Indigenous people. Today it happens with such an undermining force that it seems invisible at times and insidious in that implosion sometimes comes from within. Creating an opening for understanding within our communities allows Indigenous people to heal and move forward in the journey to be Indigenous and whole. Let us begin with our children.

The understandings outlined here are not intended to be all encompassing, exclusive, or final. They are a beginning place. We encourage community discussion and put forth the following suggestions for their use:

- As a discussion guide to engage the community in developing culturally responsive and respectful schools.
- As a guide for teacher orientation and training.
- As a planning tool for designing culturally relevant learning environments for all children and their families.
- As a basis for reviewing practices, curriculum, and pedagogy.

These understandings are developed to encourage local discussions, to engage the community, to reflect in one's self towards the outcome of creating early care and education learning environments that reflect and hold up Indigenous children, their families and communities.



## Resources

### General

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>
- First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Policy Framework <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-early-learning/2018-framework.html>
- Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>
- Marrung – Aboriginal Education Plan – 2016-2026 [https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung\\_Aboriginal\\_Education\\_Plan\\_2016-2026.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf)
- Head Start Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Resource Catalogue <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/resource-catalogue-main-book-4.pdf>

### Colonialism and intergenerational trauma

- Reconciliation Australia – Share Our Pride <http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/sections/our-shared-history/>
- Epigenetics and Trauma - <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/trauma-may-be-woven-into-dna-of-native-americans-CbiAxpzar0WkMALhjrGvQ/>
- The Healing Foundation <https://youtu.be/zDN7R6qRpUg>
- **Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and Recommendations** [https://librarianship.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CFLA\\_TRC\\_Report.pdf](https://librarianship.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CFLA_TRC_Report.pdf)

### Connections with the land and territory

- Uncle Bob Randall- The Land Owns Us <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0sWIVR1hXw>
- <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/forest-nature-outdoor-daycare-program-northern-manitoba-1.4460990>
- Over 250 Indigenous Specific Resources National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [www.nccah-ccsna.ca](http://www.nccah-ccsna.ca)

### Indigenous values and systems of knowledge

Indigenous values and systems of knowledge are deeply imbedded in community and tightly interwoven with cultural and spiritual beliefs. For this reason we have chosen not to include resources. We will leave this up to the individual to discover, as connections are made with elders and knowledge-keepers.

### Pedagogy, teaching methods and Indigenous children

- Te whatu pokeka - <https://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/teaching-and-learning/assessment-for-learning/te-whatu-pokeka-english/>

- The eight-way framework of Aboriginal Pedagogy <https://vickidrozdowski.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/individual-investigation-of-a-learning-theory-aboriginal-pedagogy.pdf> video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhQU-RxU8U>
- Sacred Little Ones - <https://www.wkcf.org/what-we-do/featured-work/creating-stronger-connections-for-early-education-to-elementary-success-for-native-american-children>
- Making it Work: Implementing Cultural Learning Experiences in American Indian and Alaskan Native Early Learning Settings for Children ages Birth to 5 <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/making-it-work-implementing-cultural-learning-experiences-american-indian>

### **Children and Curriculum**

- Te Whariki – Early Childhood Curriculum <https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/>
- The Koori Curriculum - <https://kooricurriculum.com/collections>
- Foundations for Success - <http://www.foundationsforsuccess.qld.edu.au/resources/videos>
- BC Aboriginal Child Care Society Curriculum Kits - Please contact [library@acc-society.bc.ca](mailto:library@acc-society.bc.ca) for availability.
- Honoring our Elders -: A guide to Elder Participation in AHS Programs - <https://www.ahsabc.com/copy-of-resources>
- The Gift of Elders - <https://www.ahsabc.com/copy-of-resources>
- Downie, H. Ferguson, C. LaRiviere, R. & School of Health Sciences and Community Services Red River College (2018). *The Early Years*. Maskwacis, AB: The Early Years - A Martin Family Initiative.

### **Language and Language Revitalization**

- United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages - <https://en.iyil2019.org/>
- X'unei Lance Twitchell (2018 dissertation), *For Our Little Grandchildren: Language Revitalization Among the Tlingit*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNnWk7W0eUs>.
- 'Aha Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian language immersion schools), <http://www.ahapunanaleo.org/>
- State Library's Indigenous Languages Project <https://aiatsis.gov.au/IYIL2019>

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