

Shared Knowledge

Early Childhood Educational Approach
in First Nations in Quebec



FIRST NATIONS OF QUEBEC
AND LABRADOR HEALTH
AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMISSION

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Authors

Sakakohe Deborah Delisle
Patricia Falope

Project managers

Jessica Grenier, FNQLHSSC
Patricia Mathias, FNQLHSSC

Collaborators

Eric Duchesneau, FNQLHSSC
Patrice Lacasse, FNQLHSSC
Christine Noël, FNQLHSSC
Médéric Sioui, FNQLHSSC
Chakda Yorn

Content revisers

Lori-Ann Paige, Coordinator of
Indigenous Childcare Programs,
Cégep de Saint-Félicien

Nathalie Goulet, Ph.D., Professor-
Researcher at Université du Québec
à Montréal

Graphic designer

Patricia Carignan

Illustrator

Kaia'tanó:ron Dumoulin

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First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission
250 Place Chef-Michel-Laveau, Suite 102
Wendake, Quebec G0A 4V0

info@cssspnql.com

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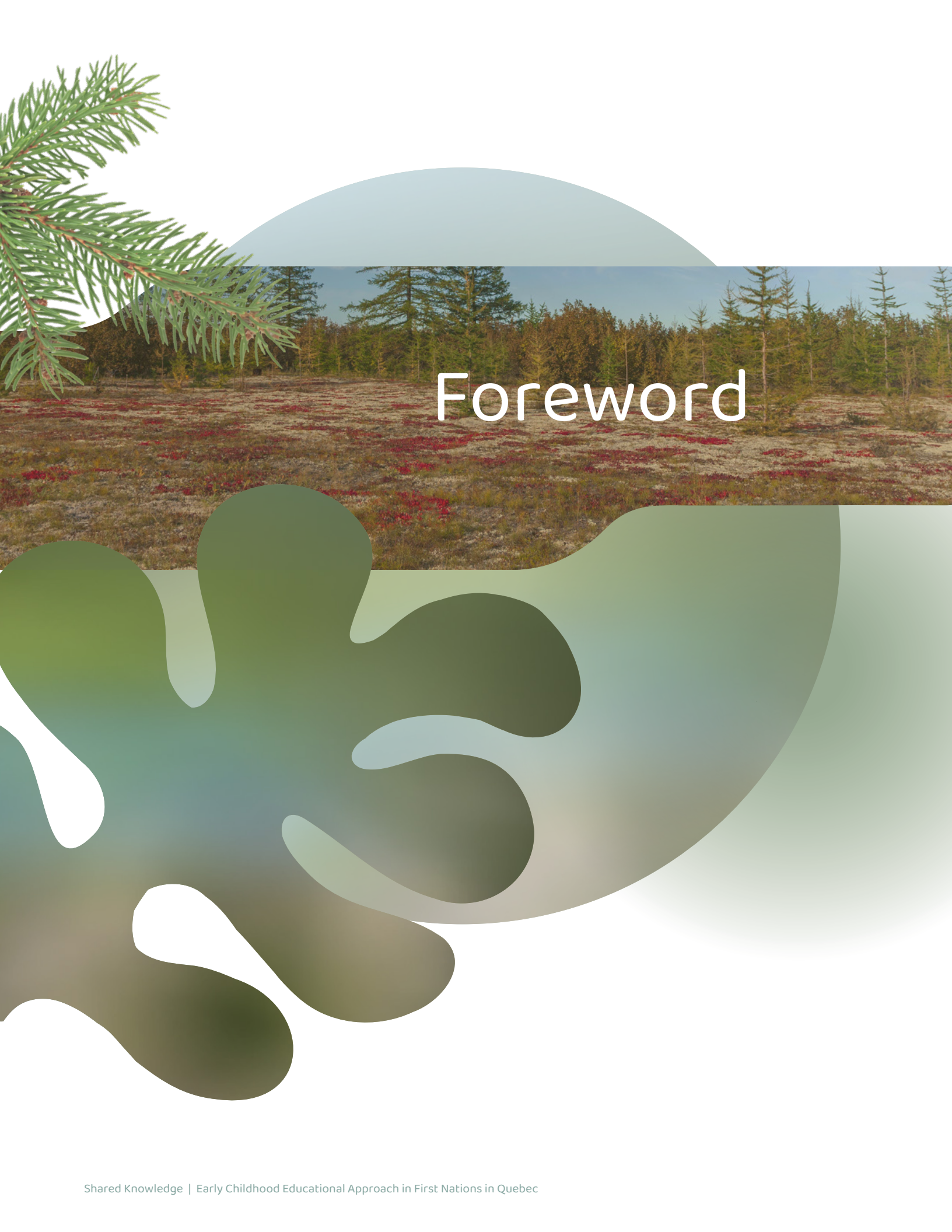
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Foreword

Kwe,



I was more than honoured when the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLSSC) asked me to write this foreword for the Framework for Early Childcare Programs for First Nations in Quebec and Labrador. As a proud mother and grandmother, I have always worked to advance the interests and wellness of our youth through the objectives of Pikogan's social policies. As such, I recognize the immense value of having a tool to help structure childcare programs for First Nations in Quebec and Labrador, and to ensure that the decisions we make prioritize the best interests of our children. Herein lies the importance of this framework.

Each and every one of our communities faces its share of social issues. No matter who they are, or where they come from, all children—whether First Nations, Quebecers, Canadians, or of other nationalities—have unique needs that are situated in their unique realities. And like all children, Indigenous children deserve to have their needs met. It is our duty to invest our energy and resources to put in place a program that meets these needs.

For several years now, our communities have experienced unparalleled demographic growth—a veritable Indigenous baby boom. I interpret this as the manifestation of our collective optimism for the future of our nations. Our children are what we hold to be most precious in our communities. They not only represent the promise of a better future, but they are also the vectors through which our communities can grow in keeping with our customs, our cultures, and our languages. It is now up to us to support them in their growth and development.

Once again, I would like to commend the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC) as well as all those who work hard to support our children and families, helping them grow and thrive within a context that is true to who they are and in a way that corresponds to their needs and realities.

Mikwetc!

Monik Kistabish
Conseil de la Première Nation Abitibiwinni



Introduction

First Nations have always regarded their children as revered gifts and beacons of strength. They carry forth our aspirations as well as the knowledge of our ancestors into the future. They are the beating hearts of our societies, uniting generations and acting as stewards for the preservation and continuity of our cultures, languages, and nations. It is therefore essential that they grow up immersed in our customs, traditions, and cultural environments, and that they are supported in all domains of development (physical and motor, cognitive, social and emotional, linguistic and spiritual). This holistic approach ensures that they grow up with a strong sense of identity and collective belonging, and with respect for their unique values, traditions, and skills. In other words, it provides the necessary foundation to thrive in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

We, as self-determining people, have set out to transform our practices in a way that speaks to our authentic identities. By drawing on the enduring strengths and resilience of our nations, we are weaving together our rich history and cultural values with the lessons learned from colonization in order to define our own place in the world. Inspired by the *Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children*,¹ we have developed our own early childhood educational approach, which aims to support the continuity of our nations by documenting our oral traditions and ensuring that our languages and cultures are preserved and passed on to our future generations.

Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children

1

All children are created with the inherent right to be safe, to be loved and nurtured, to be heard and believed, to engage in play and recreational activities, and to have adequate health care, nutrition, shelter and education in line with their culture and traditions.

4

Our children have the right to learn about and benefit from our history, culture, indigenous language, spiritual traditions and philosophy and to have positive adult role models in their lives.

¹ Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador. *Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children*. Wendake: 2015. https://files.cssspnql.com/s/7zWKXqMAx6Q39Lo?_gl=1*pxxlxz*_ga*ODU5NDcwMzAzLjE2OTE1MjM4MDE.*_ga_906VEPXQGV*czE3NjlyODY2O-DYkbzlxMyRnMSR0MTc2MjI4ODMyMyRqNjAkBDaKaDA.

Our children need to know who they are as First Nations people. To that end, we must foster environments that nurture and promote their language, identity, as well as cultural and ceremonial practices. These elements are critical building blocks for lifelong learning and holistic development. For us, learning happens through observation and experimentation, against a rich backdrop of context. By shaping this approach based on our values, we can empower our children both to carry our traditions into the future and to thrive in healthy relationships with themselves, their communities, and with the natural world.

This framework is a historical imperative. While it celebrates the resilience, endurance, and strength of our people, communities, and nations, it also acknowledges the painful legacy of colonization and systematic assimilation policies, such as residential schools, and the devastating impacts they've had and continue to have on our nations.

It is well documented that the arrival of European settlers in North America marked the beginning of profound disruptions for First Nations communities. These settlers forcibly displaced our people from their ancestral lands, imposed foreign governance structures, and changed traditional ways of life, as colonial powers sought to erode the social, spiritual, and educational foundations of our societies.

The Canadian residential school system was one of the key instruments for perpetrating what is considered to be one of the worst campaigns of genocide in Canada's history—one which was carried out for over 150 years. Through this system, our children were removed from their families and communities and placed in government-funded, Christian-operated residential schools, which were set up with the precise intent to expunge the children of our culture and assimilate them into Euro-Canadian culture and society. The residential schools forbade the use of our languages, suppressed our cultural practices, and forcefully indoctrinated our children with foreign values.² The trauma inflicted by these colonizing practices has had intergenerational impacts, contributing to the erosion of cultural knowledge and identity among many First Nations communities.

And yet, despite the devastating impacts of colonization and residential schools, our nations not only survived, but also sustained the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional capacity to build the fierce resistance required to assert their presence and regain self-determination. Our resilience as First Nations people is further evidenced in our ongoing efforts to reclaim and revitalize our cultures, languages, and traditions. Our people have either borne the weight of keeping our ways alive or taken on the tremendous responsibility of relearning our traditions, in anticipation of the time where we could revitalize our cultures and strengthen our nations. We build on and honour this work by maintaining and sharing this knowledge through everyday practices and ceremonies, as well as by researching, adopting, and adapting the teachings of the elders from various First Nations, in a way that is anchored in our traditions, but also deeply connected with the present.

² National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. (2024). Residential School History. Retrieved from: <https://nctr.ca/education/teaching-resources/residential-school-history/>

In alignment with these efforts and in response to requests from our nations, the FNQLHSSC has steered the development of this framework, working with our people to collect the valuable knowledge and practices to support the holistic development of our children. Following the establishment of the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative in 1995, various types of educational childcare services were set up within our communities. The idea of early childhood education was seen as a way to support the agency of our children and families and reaffirm their rightful place as members of the nation to which they belonged. However, due to cultural dissonance in the knowledge underpinning early childhood education, many of the standards and criteria contrasted with our cultural and traditional ways of knowing and being. Since then, our people have focused on developing their own standards and criteria for early childhood education.

This framework offers a general vision of the First Nations educational approach and is intended to serve as a reference framework in First Nations communities in Quebec and Labrador. It provides an adaptable framework rooted in a collective vision for the wellness of our children. It emphasizes a holistic approach, rather than specific methods, in order to support the communities in creating their own early childhood education program. It articulates a critical foundation for early learning that allows our children, families, and communities to access methods that respect our ways of doing things. The foundation of our early childhood education was built using teachings from the land, and the wisdom and knowledge of our own people; as such, it is our own knowledge, cultures, and languages that serve to bridge our proud past with a bright future, as we set out to shape tomorrow's leaders.





Educational Foundations

This chapter presents the educational foundations of learning among First Nations peoples. They are rooted in a holistic, relational, and community-oriented approach that honours tradition, adapts to the needs of the present, and promotes the wellness of individuals and the collective strength of the community. While there exists diversity in the First Nations cultures and traditions across Quebec and Labrador, we share a holistic worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the natural environment. In this worldview, the person as a whole is considered, so that wellness is achieved through a balance of a person's spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health, as well as their relationships with the land and others.³

The educational foundations of learning are shaped by core philosophies that hinge on the importance of fun and play, relationships and communal responsibility, experiential and land-based learning, and respect for the natural world. This framework guides not only how knowledge is acquired, but also the way that learning is organized and delivered. Among First Nations, education is not a siloed concept. Rather, it is continuous and integrated as part of daily life, emphasizing the importance of context, tradition, and collective wellness.

³ Cull, I., Hancock, R. L., McKeown, S., Pidgeon, M., & Vedan, A. (2018). Pulling Together: A guide for front-line staff, student services and advisors. <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfrontlineworkers/chapter/indigenous-ways-of-knowing-and-being/>; Greenwood M. Children as citizens of First Nations: Linking Indigenous health to early childhood development. *Paediatr Child Health*. 2005 Nov;10(9):553-5. doi: 10.1093/pch/10.9.553. PMID: 19668689; PMCID: PMC2722642.

The content will be based on the following pillars.

1 Life education

The first pillar for educating our First Nations children is centred on recognizing and nurturing the inherent strengths, interests, and gifts of each child. Every child's experience is a learning opportunity. It lays the groundwork and prepares children to grow in harmony with themselves, their community, and their environment.

This pillar is upheld by the following principles:

a– Every child is a gift

Every single child is seen as a precious gift from creation. This belief underscores the sacred responsibility of families and communities to cherish and nurture children, and establish a safe, loving environment that is rich in cultural transmission. It ensures continuity between the ancestors and future generations. This mindset shapes a commitment to honour children's journeys and qualities, and to support them with patience, love, and respect as they grow and learn.

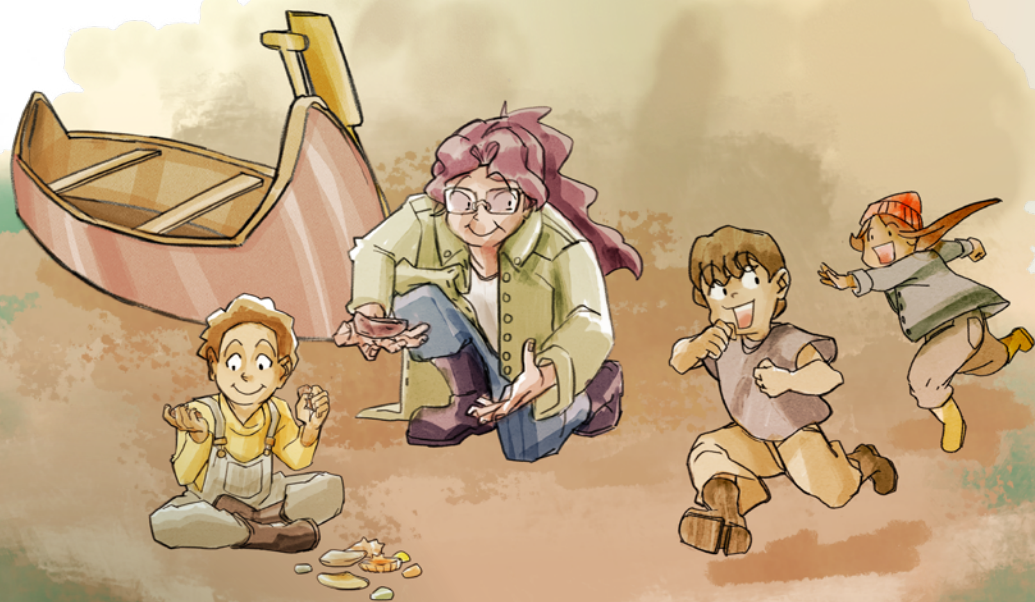
b– Every child has a gift

Beyond being a gift, we recognize that all children have unique gifts that they can offer to their community. Whether these are creativity, leadership, wisdom, or a strong connection to nature, the children's gifts are valued and encouraged. Early learning must not adopt a one-size-fits-all model, but it must rather be organized to adapt to children's unique abilities and passions. Learning is personalized, with educators and community members working to identify and nurture children's strengths. By focusing on what makes individual children special, the learning process helps them develop confidence and pride in who they are and what they can contribute to their people. In other words, the learning process connects children to their culture.

c– Every child has a fire that must be fed

This metaphor captures the essence of First Nations early learning. "Fire" may represent different connotations among various nations; however, in this document, it refers to the spirit, curiosity, and potential within each child. Just as a fire needs to be carefully tended and nurtured to grow, so too must a child's development be continuously supported with love, knowledge, and encouragement. The role of educators, families, and the community is to keep that fire burning brightly by providing the resources, guidance, and opportunities needed for the child to thrive.

This approach rejects rigid and standardized methods of delivering education. Instead, it aims to foster actions that adapt to the needs and rhythm of individual children, focusing on kindling their interest by sparking their curiosity and encouraging exploration in ways that are meaningful to each individual as they go through life. Learning is conceptualized as journeys of continuous growth, where children are supported in discovering their passions and deepening their connection to their language, culture, community, and territory, at their own pace.



2

Education about the land and the environment

This pillar of education recognizes that knowledge is inherently situational—tied to context and place. Whether through hunting, planting, gathering, storytelling, stories, or ceremonies, learning is experiential, holistic, and intergenerational. The learning context is not confined to classrooms or a structured setting. The territory itself becomes a source of learning, guiding the transmission of values, skills, and traditions that sustain the community. Children are supported in their learning by interacting directly with nature, and connecting with the land, waterways, plants, and animals in ways that reinforce their cultural identity and ties to their ancestors.

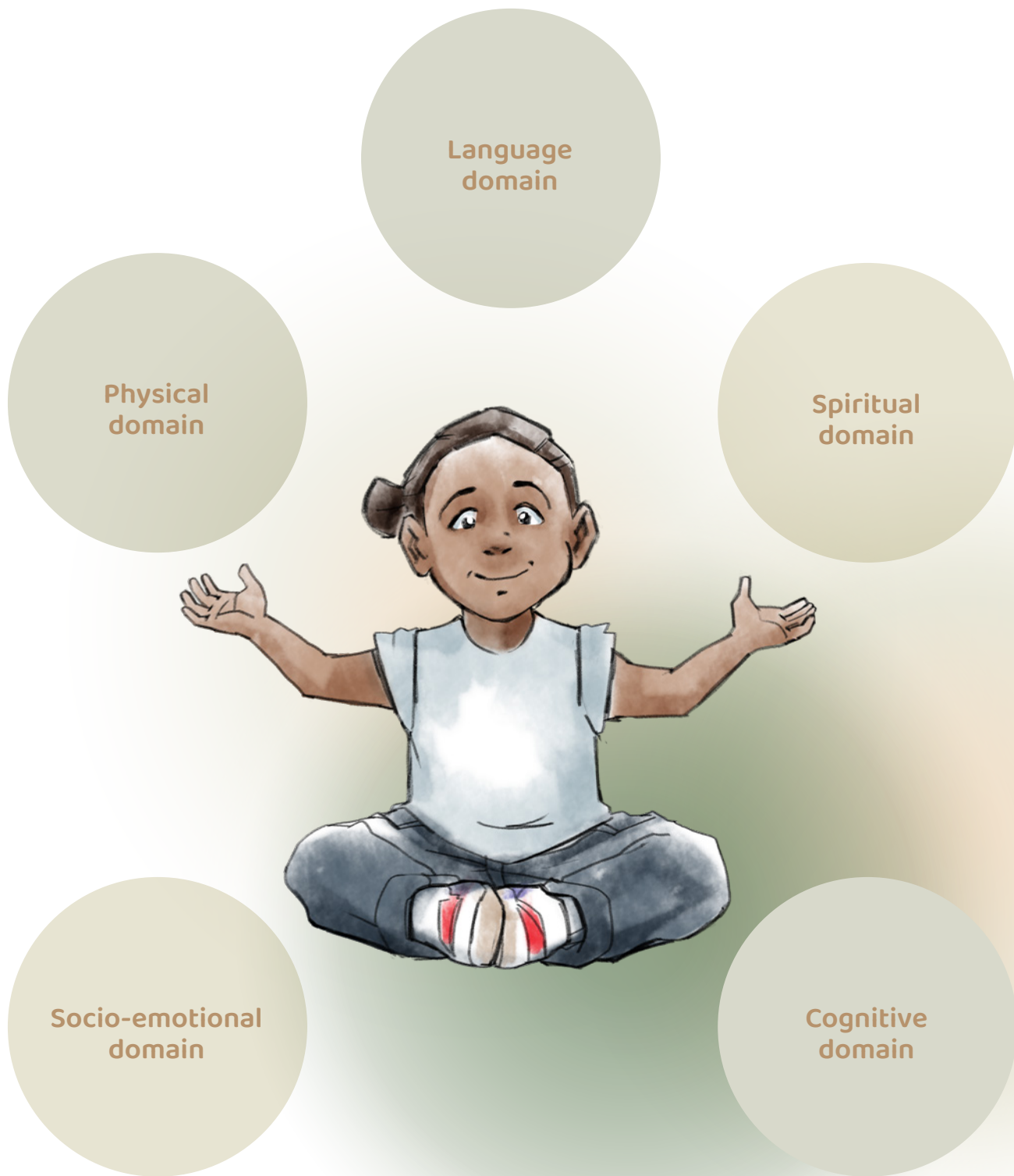
This approach is supported by the following principles:

a– Holistic and integrated education

Learning is inherently holistic and it integrates five domains of development: physical and motor, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and spiritual. Learning is viewed as a lifelong process that is not confined to formal educational settings but embedded in the everyday lives and experiences of individuals within the community. The focus is on the whole person; knowledge, skills, and values must be developed in balance to ensure overall wellness.

b– Learning through experimentation

The land is seen as a living entity that is integral to the transmission of our history, traditions, and wisdom across generations, and holds a central place in the organization of education. Learning is deeply experiential and land-based; the environment serves as both a teacher and an educational setting. Traditional practices are key to the learning process, allowing individuals to develop practical skills, cultural knowledge, and a strong sense of identity. This ensures that children develop a deep respect for their environment while gaining the wisdom needed to contribute to its sustainability and preserve it for future generations.



3

Community and intergenerational education

Community is recognized as central to children's growth and development, as learning is considered a communal process and collective responsibility to provide nurturing, while thinking of the impact for next generations. Everyone has a role to play. The community forms the social network that provides a rich tapestry of relationships and shared experiences that contribute to children's sense of belonging, identity, and purpose.

The community's involvement in education ensures that children are guided by the values and practices of their environment, allowing them to grow up in balance between tradition and modernity. Elders play a crucial role in passing down knowledge and wisdom, while other community members contribute by sharing their unique skills and experiences. This collective approach to education strengthens social cohesion, reinforces cultural identity, and ensures that children learn in a manner consistent with the values of their community. When multiple people actively participate in the educational process, they bring complementary perspectives, resources, and encouragement that enhance children's opportunities for anchoring their knowledge.

Through community engagement, children learn the importance of relationships, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. They understand that their actions have a direct impact on those around them, instilling a sense of accountability and collective wellness. The community is not just a support system, but also a vital source of learning that ensures children grow up with a strong foundation rooted in shared traditions, stories, and practices.

This pillar is upheld by the following principles:

a– Intergenerational transmission of knowledge and languages

The transmission of knowledge and languages is regarded as the collective responsibility of all community members to work together to support the development of each child. Elders and knowledge keepers play a key role as educators, safeguarding knowledge and language and ensuring its transmission across generations. Learning occurs through storytelling, observation, and participation in communal activities. Oral traditions are vital to convey the cultural teachings and values necessary for identity building.

b– Community-based learning

This communal approach to learning fosters a strong sense of belonging and mutual respect, where knowledge is shared and valued collectively rather than seen as an individual achievement. Education is organized around the needs and wellness of the community, with the aim of strengthening social bonds and preserving cultural practices.

c– Respect, reciprocity, and relationships

The principles of respect, reciprocity, and relationship underlie how learning is collated among our nations. They govern interactions with others, the land, and the spiritual world. Great value and respect are accorded to knowledge, the holders of knowledge, and the learning process itself. The concept of reciprocity recognizes that learning involves sharing in ways that benefit the community as a whole and that everyone's contribution is important. Relationships emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and highlights the importance of nurturing family and community connections within the learning process.



Community: Refers to a sense of belonging together. It may refer to a group of people living together in one place or a group of people having religion, ethnicity, profession or other particular characteristics in common. In the context of First Nations, community constitutes a structure of support mechanisms that includes an individual's personal responsibility to the collective and, reciprocally, the collective's concern for individual existence. For First Nations, the concept of community often encompasses relationships in a very broad sense, that includes relationships of human, ecological and spiritual origins (CIHR, 2007). In Quebec, it is not uncommon that a First Nation belongs to more than one community, usually through family ties.

Life education

- Every child is a gift
- Every child has a gift
- Every child has a fire that must be fed

Education about the land and the environment

- Holistic and integrated education
- Learning through experimentation

Community and intergenerational education

- Knowledge and language intergenerational transmission
- Community-based learning
- Respect, reciprocity and relationships



Chapter 2

The Supported Child: The Environment

This chapter explores children's wellness and their place at the centre of their community, as well as the roles and responsibilities of parents, extended family, community members, educators, and childcare managers. It looks at the importance of collaboration and the role of harmonizing with other service agencies to build a network of support that nurtures the holistic development of children.

Emotional security is essential in the development of children's sense of identity, confidence, and overall wellness. Children who feel emotionally secure are more likely to explore, learn, and engage positively with others. In our First Nations communities, children's emotional security is cultivated by family, extended family, and community members through the historically placed responsibility of building strong, nurturing relationships with them. Their security is built on consistent care, trust, and a sense of belonging that emerges from the strength and safety of children's connections with the community. Everyone must work together to ensure that children are surrounded by love, acceptance, and encouragement. This approach also helps children gain the skills and resilience to navigate challenges.



Empowerment to celebrate every child's journey

To effectively support the interests and strengths of each child, it is essential for adults to engage in regular reflection and self-care. To develop the consistent compassion and patience required for providing care, it is critical that adults intentionally set aside time to stop, reflect, and process personal experiences—including their own childhood experiences—in order to cultivate resilience and maintain a balanced perspective.

Engaging with supportive community networks and incorporating culturally meaningful practices into daily routines also reinforces a sense of connection and belonging.

When caregivers recognize that each child is a precious gift, they are reminded that their own wellness directly influences their capacity to honour and support the child's journey.

The interconnected community network is a safety net that fosters an environment where children can thrive emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally. It contributes meaningfully to children's strong sense of belonging, identity, and resilience. The strength of this communal approach lies in the consistent, unified efforts of all who play a role in children's upbringings, ensuring that no children's needs are overlooked and that all children are empowered to reach their full potential.

Children's emotional security is achieved through the following elements:

1– Positive climate and positive interactions

Creating a positive climate within children's environment is critical for their emotional and social development. This is rooted in values of respect, kindness, and mutual support. Positive interactions are consistently modelled by parents, elders, peers, and community members, setting the tone for how children learn to interact with others. The use of positive reinforcement, encouragement, and culturally driven guidance, nurturing, and praise helps children develop positive self-esteem and a strong sense of identity. Additionally, the presence of elders and nurturing community members provide children with role models who demonstrate how to navigate life's challenges with grace, humility, and resilience. A positive climate is also supported by communal activities, storytelling, and traditions that reinforce the value of each person's contribution to the community's wellness. All these elements come together to foster the emotional security and resilience that children need to thrive.

2– Connection to the community

A child's connection to their community is one of the most significant factors in their development within our First Nations cultures. This connection is cultivated from an early age through deep, daily engagement with cultural practices, language, land-based activities, and community gatherings. Feeling connected to the community gives children a strong sense of identity and belonging; it grounds them in their cultural heritage and fosters pride in who they are. The community serves as an extended family, where every adult takes part in guiding, mentoring, and supporting children's growth. Through this connection, children learn their roles and responsibilities, as well as the values that sustain their people. They gain a strong sense of their place in the history of their people, and this helps ensure that cultural knowledge is passed on and preserved across generations.

3– Organization of community life

Our nations organize community life around collective wellness, interdependence, and cultural continuity. Multigenerational living practices promote cultural continuity, but also collective wellness by allowing each generation to share their skills. Community life is structured in a way that involves everyone, from the youngest child to the eldest member, in activities that promote shared values, mutual support, and cultural traditions. Daily life is organized around communal practices such as community meals, ceremonies, seasonal activities, and gatherings, which reinforce social bonds and ensure that cultural knowledge remains vibrant and alive. These roles and responsibilities within the community are clearly defined, allowing each member to contribute according to their strengths while also supporting others. For children, growing up in such a well-organized and cohesive environment means that they are constantly learning from a diverse range of community members, through observation and participation. This structure enfolds all children in a space of acceptance and love, and it ensures that their wellness remains a matter of central concern. The emotional development of children remains deeply embedded in the life and rhythm of the community.

4– Community integration and participation

Successful community integration and participation are the landmarks of children's sense of emotional security and sense of belonging within their community. Community integration is achieved by ensuring that children are actively engaged in communal life, understand their place and important role within the community, and participate in cultural practices, ceremonies, and traditions. This participation strengthens their sense of belonging and fosters a deep connection to their cultural identity as they find their unique place within the fabric of their community, guided by shared values and a collective sense of purpose.

Community network

Community members help build the critical pillar that nurtures the emotional security of children. They play different roles based on their abilities and they all participate in the children's development.

1– The roles and responsibilities of parents

Parents hold a foundational role in the nurturing and education of children within First Nations communities. They are the children's first teachers, instilling in them core values, cultural knowledge, and a sense of identity even before birth. Beyond providing for their basic needs, parents provide children daily guidance with patience, love, and respect, in a way that fosters their connection to their cultural heritage. They are also responsible for setting a strong foundation and modelling behaviours that align with the community's values. Parents are supported in their role by extended family and community members, who work together to prioritize the wellness of each child.

2– The role of the extended family

The extended family plays a crucial role in the development and upbringing of children. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings provide additional layers of support, guidance, and cultural transmission. Elders within the family are particularly revered as knowledge keepers, as they offer wisdom, stories, and teachings that connect children to their history and traditions. The extended family also extends the safety net, ensuring that children are always surrounded by love, care, and cultural teachings, even in the absence of parents. In this context, the extended family is an essential component of the child's learning environment.

3– The role of the community

The community is central to the upbringing and education of children, as it shares in the collective responsibility to ensure that children grow up in a safe, nurturing, and culturally enriching environment. This shared sense of responsibility means that children's wellness is everyone's concern. The community serves as a living, breathing teaching and learning environment, where children learn by participating in communal activities, ceremonies, and traditional practices. The community helps children learn the values of mutual respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility, which in turn contributes to fostering a strong sense of belonging and identity.

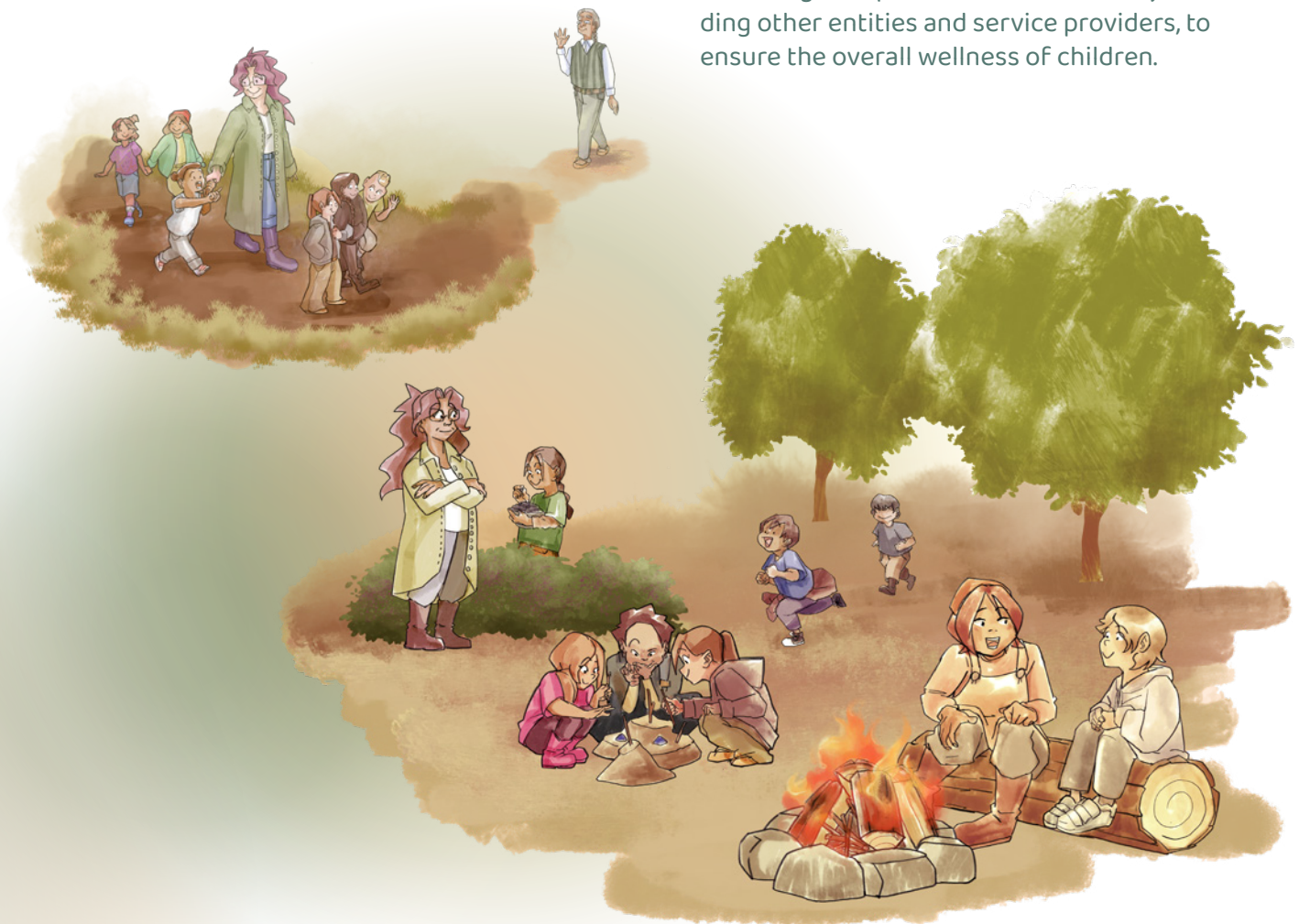


4– The role of educators and educational childcare managers

Educators and educational childcare managers, as community members who have important roles and responsibilities in their own right, also hold specialized roles within the broader framework of child development in our First Nations communities. They are responsible for creating learning environments that are culturally relevant, holistic, and responsive to the needs of children. These environments are designed to honour the cultural values and traditions of the community while supporting children’s mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual growth.

In the absence of parents, educators step into the parents’ roles to ensure children’s development, health, and wellness. Specifically, educators act as mentors, guides, and role models who work collaboratively with families and the community to ensure the well-rounded development of each child. As for educational childcare managers, they are crucial for organizing, overseeing, and aligning the educational programs with community values. They are responsible for integrating cultural practices, managing resources, and ensuring that the environment is inclusive and nurturing for all children.

In keeping with this framework, educators and educational childcare managers are an integral part of the larger network of care and early learning. They draw on the knowledge and support of parents, extended family, elders, knowledge keepers and the community, including other entities and service providers, to ensure the overall wellness of children.



5– The importance of collaboration

Ensuring that children feel supported requires a unified approach where all responsible stakeholders work together for the best interest of children. Children’s wellness and needs are placed at the centre of this communal framework; to that end, all stakeholders must be on the same page and work together as one. This collaborative approach ensures that the educational experience is consistent with children’s cultural background and that the community’s values are reflected in the learning process. Collaboration hinges on effective communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility between all internal and external stakeholders.

Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children

7 Parents have the primary responsibility for providing their children with proper prenatal care, ongoing age-appropriate physical and emotional care, and emotional nurturing, adequate food, shelter, education and health care.

8 In order to encourage and sustain adult involvement to assist our children, youth and families and to support organizations pursuing such work, our Nations and communities, as well as other employers, shall provide paid release time when appropriate to employees while they volunteer for children and youth at schools and in the communities.

9 Parents have a fundamental responsibility to provide their children with a safe and healthy home and child care environments, to teach their children safety skills, and to provide appropriate supervision.

10 Our communities, Nations, governments and leaders also have the responsibility to ensure that our children benefit from a standard of health, nutrition, safety, education and nurturing necessary to promote healthy values and behaviours, which will in turn help them mature into healthy and productive members of our communities and Nations.

11 The treatment of children and their welfare in accordance with the rights set out in this Declaration is the responsibility of the entire community and Nation, and the responsibility extends to all children who reside in our communities, regardless of their membership or their length of residence, as well as to all of our members, wherever they may be.

13 The Chiefs in Assembly shall advocate for and promote the safety, dignity and well-being of our children in accordance with this Declaration, throughout Quebec, including with respect to all federal and provincial government, business, social service and educational legislation, policy, services and activities, and in all of the institutions of our Nations and communities.

Chapter 3

The Rooted Child: Pride and Commitment

This chapter explores children's development in relation to their sense of belonging as members of a community. It provides guidance for nurturing their blossoming identity and sense of pride, and helping them grow into confident, committed individuals. The chapter looks at the importance of creating opportunities for children to learn about themselves, explore their gifts, and feel safe as they grow up and come into their own within the community.

Identity formation in young children is a fundamental, dynamic process that shapes their sense of self, their sense of belonging, and their worldview. This process is informed by their first experiences of close relationships with caregivers, their community, their language, and their territory. Identity construction is further influenced by interactions with the wider community, participation in activities, and availability of support.⁴ For our First Nations children, this process is critically informed by cultural heritage, community values, and historical contexts.⁵ It is crucial for the holistic development of our children that they construct a strong, positive identity that is grounded in pride and cultural understanding.

4 Brooker, L. & Woodhead, M. (2008). Developing Positive Identities. *Early Childhood in Focus* 3. The Open University, United Kingdom; Reschke, K. (2020). Who am I? Developing a sense of self and belonging. *Zero to Three* 39 (3). <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/journal/who-am-i-developing-a-sense-of-self-and-belonging>.

5 Makokis, L., Bodor, R., Calhoun, A. & Tyler, S. (2020). Ohpikinâwasowin Growing A Child: Implementing Indigenous ways of knowing with Indigenous Families. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point, Nova Scotia B0J 1B0; Sun, J., Goforth, A.N., Nichols, L.M., Violante, A., Christopher, K., Howlett, R., Hogenson, D. & Graham N. (2022). Building a space to dream: Supporting indigenous children's survivance through community-engaged social and emotional learning. *Child development*, 93(3), 699–716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13786>.

The importance of identity in child development

Identity plays a critical role in fostering resilience and self-esteem in young children. For our children, while identity includes a sense of self, it also encompasses the understanding of one's place within the community and the broader world. Our children are a part of a whole, to which they are responsible for contributing their unique gifts. For our children, the development of identity is deeply embedded in the language, spirituality, traditional practices, and everyday experiences of our people, and must be nurtured with intentionality.

Children construct their identity by interacting with immediate family, being exposed to their language, traditions and territory, and by learning from community and knowledge holders, who pass on the cultural practices through everyday lived experiences. These relationships serve as the primary foundation for children's understanding of who they are and where they come from. When children build positive relationships with caregivers, they gain self-esteem, confidence, and resilience, which allows them to navigate the world successfully.⁶ Child who are taught their heritage, traditions, and values are more likely to develop a strong and positive sense of self, which in turn fosters emotional resilience and mental wellness.

The importance of providing daily opportunities for our children to be proud of who they are as First Nations and as contributing members of their community cannot be overemphasized. Our ancestors actively worked together to hold on to their identity; their resilience helped them to keep their languages and traditions alive, to be passed on to the next generations. This framework therefore places significant attention on the role of intentionality in supporting identity formation. The communities are invited to explore and apply contextual strategies, relevant to their own traditions, for supporting their children's identity. This effort is central to the holistic development of the children in the communities, as the sense of belonging and connection to their heritage provides a solid foundation from which they can engage with the world.⁷

6 World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), & World Bank Group. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development*. <https://nurturing-care.org/ncf-for-ecd>

7 Brooker, L. & Woodhead, M. (2008). Developing Positive Identities. *Early Childhood in Focus* 3. The Open University, United Kingdom.



The role of language in identity formation

Language is a key component in identity formation among our children; in fact, language and identity are two sides of the same coin. Language, through its connection with the land, is the medium through which we impart our culture, tradition, and worldview. Our ancestral languages transmit to our children the deep-seated values, beliefs, and spiritual worldview of their people; this connection in turn provides them with a deep sense of identity and belonging and fosters a sense of commitment both to who they are as First Nations people and to their communities. Self-confidence and self-esteem are built through their strong connection to their language, their territory, their history, and their cultural values.

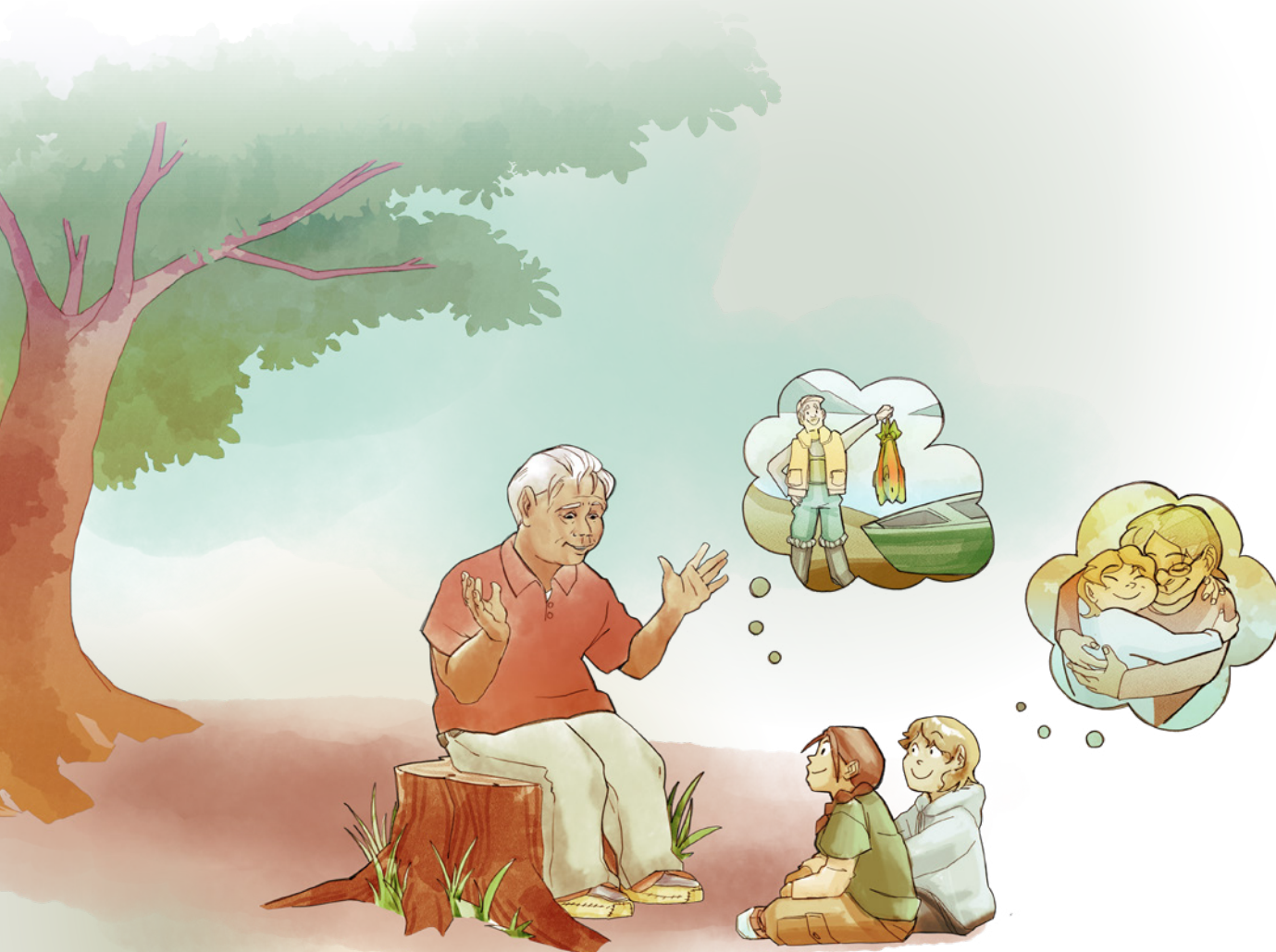
Many of the communities have prioritized language revitalization in order to provide critical learning opportunities and experiences for their children. Various initiatives have been implemented in educational childcare centres to help children learn their language. We recognize the profound impact of language acquisition on children's identity formation and overall wellness outcomes. Through community-based preservation and teaching of ancestral languages, our children stand to gain a profound connection with their cultural roots, which is essential for fostering their pride of identity and ensuring that they grow up with strong self-worth and a commitment to their community.

Communities are invited to undertake language revitalization strategies, as part of a community-wide collaborative agenda, to ensure that children have opportunities to engage with their language in their homes, in childcare centres, and across all spheres of their community. Language skills can be developed by participating in activities that are part of their daily routines, engaging with community members and knowledge holders, and taking part in cultural ceremonies and practices. To that end, communities are called upon to develop a community-wide strategy for supporting language-based practices in the educational childcare centres.

Community, elders, and knowledge holders as identity builders

The community, elders, and knowledge holders also have a role to play in strengthening the identity of our First Nations children. Our worldview is anchored in the primacy of relationships and the interconnectedness of all beings, including people, nature, the land, and the environment. In this framework, identity formation takes place in the community, within the context of relationships with all things.

The community as a whole further plays a very important role in creating and seizing opportunities for children to learn about themselves, explore their gifts, explore nature, and cultivate their focus and critical thinking while connecting with the wisdom of their ancestors. The community also serves to encourage and nurture each child's sense of autonomy and independent thinking.



Elders and knowledge holders play essential roles in passing down traditional knowledge, values, and spiritual teachings to the next generations. These teachings help children understand their place in the world and their responsibility to the community. This knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, traditional ceremonies, teachings, and everyday cultural activities. These experiences in turn help to shape children's moral and cultural identities, fostering a sense of pride, responsibility, and commitment to their community. The messages

conveyed through storytelling allow the child to cultivate their imagination, develop respect, and feel pride—not only towards the narrator, but also towards those who have accomplished great things. When planning their futures, they may find strength and inspiration in these heroic figures and their commitment to collective wellness. Relationships built in these contexts help give children a strong sense of their identity and pride of belonging, thus sustaining our First Nations worldview of interconnectedness.

The childcare centre as a place for identity formation

This framework is built upon our First Nations perspectives and worldviews to create opportunities in the childcare environment for children to take pride in their heritage and feel a sense of belonging. Educational childcare centres nurture children's emotional and social skills through active participation in community life and ceremonies, which teach empathy, cooperation, and respect for all living things. Educational childcare centres are well positioned to support children's identity formation and foster their sense of pride and commitment. Childcare centres support children in their everyday experiences and activities. In this way, they value and help children affirm their cultural identities, which is the first step in shaping proud and committed children.

Chapter 4

The Honoured Child: Recognized and Valued by the Community

This chapter outlines a holistic approach for nurturing the fundamental needs of being seen, heard, and valued. It leverages personal acknowledgement, cultural affirmation, and community involvement and inclusion to strengthen their self-esteem and emotional wellness.

First Nations children's sense of self-worth is deeply connected to their place within their community. Traditionally, every child is born deserving of respect and welcomed as a precious gift endowed with unique talents, potential, special qualities, and the capacity to contribute to the community.⁸ This strengths-based perspective of children is rooted in our ways of knowing and being and underpins the methods through which our children are seen, heard, and nurtured.

According to our ways, valuing children means treating them with reverence, patience, and understanding. It means working together, as a community, to create an environment in which our children's emotional needs are met through everyday experiences of meaningful relationships, in connection with the land and the environment.

Nurturing children's need to be seen, heard, and valued

Our ways emphasize the importance of listening to children and acknowledging their voices as vital contributors to the community. First Nations practices of engaging children in conversations, storytelling, and communal activities allow them to feel recognized and valued. Every life moment becomes an opportunity for learning. Our children's questions and curiosities are not dismissed; rather, they are encouraged and seen as signs of growth and cognitive engagement. This acceptance and recognition nurtures children's sense of agency and helps them in uncovering their gifts and their potential for making unique contributions.

8 Cajete, G. A. (2017). Children, myth and storytelling: An Indigenous perspective. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 7(2), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610617703832>; Greenwood, M. (2006). Children are a gift to us: Aboriginal-specific early childhood programs and services in Canada. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242270076_Children_Are_a_Gift_to_Us_Aboriginal-specific_Early_Childhood_Programs_and_Services_in_Canada

The land as a teacher, guide, and healer

The land is a vital source of knowledge and a living entity. To access this knowledge and learn to respect the natural world, children must develop a relationship with the land as they become increasingly aware of their self and their role within the community.

Past generations have always maintained this relationship of reciprocity with the land. As such, direct contact with nature and the land is a key aspect of our First Nations child-rearing practices. Our children's relationship with the land helps them learn to balance the different dimensions of wellness. These experiences also help them learn about their place in the world and the importance of contributing to it in their own way. Land is the foundation of our culture and central to the wellness, identity, and sense of shared communal responsibility. This approach is rooted in the belief that First Nations child development is deeply linked to their surroundings, and meaningful interaction with the land is a critical component of their health.⁹

Children are encouraged to explore and play freely on the land, in keeping with their interests and their needs. The territory is the best space to meet the different needs of children. Early childhood education studies about children with unique strengths and needs have shown the merits of nature-based activities, as they allow children to take the space and the time needed to experiment at their own pace. This is an integral component of First Nations childhood learning experiences. It is from the territory that children can develop values such as courage, mutual aid, respect, and strength. In nature, children also learn to respect their own limits, which contributes to a sense of competence and self-esteem. At the same time, given the wealth of natural resources, connecting with the land regularly promotes the acquisition of ancestral knowledge. For instance, although learning how to move on the land may appear simple, this knowledge is in fact key to survival. Connecting with the land also helps children grasp concepts and learn vocabulary from their ancestral language. All these benefits impact children's overall wellness.

9 Halseth, R. & Greenwood, M. (2019). Indigenous early childhood development in Canada: Current state of knowledge and future directions. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. <https://www.nccih.ca/docs/health/RPT-ECD-PHAC-Greenwood-Halseth-EN.pdf>

Relationships and recognition

As discussed in previous chapters, relationships are integral aspects of First Nations child-rearing practices. These everyday relationships implicitly communicate to our children the valued position that they hold, and this, in turn, becomes central to their emotional development. This approach to nurturing children provides a wrap-around community of care made up of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, peers, and community members, all of whom contribute to their upbringing and ensure that children feel important, valued, and connected. And it is precisely this collective recognition of the child by the community that fosters the sense of being valued, seen, and respected. In this way, relationships serve as an essential medium through which children's emotional needs for recognition are met.

One of the critical methods of recognition in First Nations communities is adults' willingness to share their time, knowledge, and wisdom with children. This sharing is a reciprocal process that involves openness, respect, and trust, and it forms the basis for much of the child's learning. This practice is seen in storytelling, where knowledge holders and elders (e.g., grandparents) share cultural narratives that convey values, teachings, and life lessons. This practice, which is common within our communities, affirms the importance and potential of children, and signals that their presence is valued and that they are worthy of receiving attention from elders, as well as sharing their own knowledge with elders.



Recognizing all children; supporting all children

Every child is acknowledged as having something to teach us (parents, community, the world). As such, differences are viewed as part of the natural diversity of gifts and teachings. All children, including those with unique strengths and needs, are included, supported and valued equitably.¹⁰ In fact, these children are often viewed, in First Nations perspectives, as bringing unique, purposeful gifts that contribute to the community.¹¹

This holistic lens fosters a sense of acceptance and respect for all children, focusing on strengths rather than deficits; there is no place for stigma or isolation. In the context of early childhood care, the responsibility of nurturing children with unique strengths and needs is shared by the whole community, as well as supported by culturally sensitive professional services. In keeping with that, the principle that “children need to be heard, seen, and valued” applies to all children, regardless of mainstream conceptions of needs. This does not mean that children with more needs do not receive appropriate support. Rather, it implies that in our worldview, all children are important, and all children will receive community support, namely through relationships and connection with the land, in a way that is unique to each child so that they can fulfill their purpose. Focus is placed on building and maintaining relationships that affirm each child's sense of value.

Educational childcare services must integrate our First Nations views, while supporting families and collaborating with professionals to ensure that services are structured in a way that recognizes the value of individual children within the context of community relationships and connection to the land. This recognition is the bedrock of children's sense of self-worth and emotional wellness, as it supports them in developing their capacities in relation to their culture and gifts.¹²

10 Ball, J. (2012). Identity and Knowledge in Indigenous Young Children's Experiences in Canada. *Childhood Education*, 88(5), 286–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2012.717866>; Bevan-Brown, J. (2012). Including people with disabilities: an indigenous perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(6), 571–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.694483>; Ineese-Nash, N., Bomberry, Y., Underwood, K. & Haché, A. (2023). Raising a Child with Early Childhood Dis-ability Supports Shakonehya:ra's ne shakoyen'okon:a G'chi-gshkewesiwad binoonhyag b'σd'ρ' Δσ Δσ b'σd'ρ' b'ΔσPqCb : Ga-Miinigoowozid Gikendaagoosowin Awaazigish, Ga-Miinigoowozid Ga-Izhichigetan. Toronto Metropolitan University. Journal contribution. <https://doi.org/10.32920/24150435.v1>; Velarde, M. R. (2018). Indigenous Perspectives of Disability. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(4). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i4.6114>.

11 McGill Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism. (2017). *Falling Through the Cracks: Canadian Indigenous Children with Disabilities*.

12 Armstrong E, Maypilama L, Fasoli L, Guyula A, Yunupinju M, Garrutju J, Gundjarranbuy R, Gapany D, Godwin-Thompson J, Lowell A. How do Yolngu recognise and understand their children's learning? Nhaltjan nuli ga Yolnuy nhäma ga märr-dharañan djamarrkujiw margithinyawuy? *PLoS One*. 2022 Aug 18;17(8):e0272455. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0272455. PMID: 35980955; PMCID: PMC9387850.

Chapter 5

Holistic Child Development

The holistic development of First Nations children provides the foundation for unifying all the components of the chapter. In order to establish basic standards and guidelines, this framework organizes practices that support child development into five key domains of development—physical and motor, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and spiritual—in keeping with their environment.

Our understanding of child development inherently emphasizes five domains of development (physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, spiritual) as part of a process that focuses on individual children in connection with their

family, community, and environment. Children's learning is deeply rooted in their direct exposure to language, the land, elders and knowledge holders, the community care provided by parents, extended family, and community members, as well as their active participation in community life. These hands-on experiences encourage them to use their five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Children use their senses to explore, understand, and integrate knowledge naturally and intuitively, effectively consolidating their learning. Contextualizing learning is therefore key.



Early childhood is a critical period for brain development. During this period, the foundational connections that shape a child's holistic developmental capacities are established. Neuroscience research has shown that in a child's early years, millions of neural connections are formed every second, shaping the architecture of the child's brain and laying the groundwork for lifelong learning, behaviour, and overall wellness.¹³ These early brain connections are influenced by more than just genetics: in fact, they are profoundly shaped by the environment in which children grow, the relationships they form, and the experiences they encounter. For children, the quality of these interactions and experiences directly impacts their developmental outcomes, influencing their ability to think, feel, and connect with the world around them. Play naturally unlocks emotional connections when children make sense of their experiences and gain lifelong skills through them.¹⁴ Every child is born with the ability to play—just think of how children naturally respond to puddles, leaves, and pinecones! Children are natural explorers and scientists who are born to gain mastery of their environment through ongoing play and positive interactions with it.

This framework supports cognitive development through playful, hands-on learning—an approach widely supported by research. It also reinforces identity formation, builds resilience, and strengthens the sense of belonging, all of which are necessary for holistic development. As mentioned earlier, each child is recognized as valuable and having unique gifts, and every child is included as a partner and an active player in their learning process. Adaptive practices are used to ensure that children can receive the attention they need for their own unique situations, in keeping with the following three elements:

13 Center on the Developing Child (n.d). Brain architecture. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture>; Grantham-McGregor, S., Cheung, Y. B., Cueto, S., Glewwe, P., Richter, L., and the International Child Development Steering group (2007). Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *The Lancet*, 369:60-70; *The Lancet* (2016). *Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale*. <https://www.thelancet.com/series/ECD2016>

14 André Sterne. <https://www.andrestern.com/en>

1– Learning through observation and participation

In this worldview, children grow by observing and participating in everyday activities alongside their peers, adults, and community members. This method emphasizes learning by doing, the presence of role models, and the role of nature. Value is placed on hands-on, experiential learning that is deeply contextualized within each child's environment. Adults act as role of model and guide children throughout their learning. Important skills are developed through everyday practices, which equip children for playing an active role within their community that aligns with who they are. As such, development is embedded in cultural practices, storytelling, ceremonies, and activities in nature. Children are encouraged to take on more responsibilities as

they gain greater understanding of themselves and the environment, and as they increase their ability to self-regulate, act with social competence, innovate, problem-solve, and use critical thinking skills sharpened through real-life experiences.

2– Interconnectedness

The value of relationships is central to early childhood learning. In this worldview, knowledge is gained through meaningful relationships with others, the land, and the community. Children learn to see the world through a lens of reciprocity, empathy, and collective wellness, which in turn informs their place of belonging, importance, and responsibility within their natural and social environments.



3– Spirituality

The understanding that we are each part of a continuous network of creation, ancestors, and nature underpins our ways of knowing and shapes our value for the sacredness of life. This sense, defined as spirituality, is passed down through generations, and ensures a sense of harmony and balance with creation. Spirituality is essential for our wellness, as it preserves identity and collective wellness, and fosters holistic development. This spirituality is nurtured through the richness and meaning embedded in our languages, as well as through participation in cultural activities.

From a holistic perspective, each activity makes it possible to target skills in each of these areas. Depending on children's needs, certain components will activate some areas more than others; however, each activity is designed to support and reinforce skills in all domains. For example, a moment for sharing stories helps to improve language skills, but it also stimulates cognitive reasoning, fosters socio-emotional understanding, supports self-regulation, strengthens cultural identity, and nurtures one's connection to spirituality.





a– Physical and motor development

In young children, physical development follows a predictable sequence, which is influenced by biological, environmental, and social factors. For example, most children will crawl before they stand, and toddle before walking. Physical development encompasses the successive acquisition of motor skills, body awareness, and physical coordination, and lays the foundation for overall musculoskeletal growth and functioning. In young children, physical development is categorized into the following skill areas:

Gross motor skills:

Gross motor skill development involves large muscle groups and includes abilities such as dancing, crawling, walking, running, and jumping. The development of gross motor skills is significantly influenced by early childhood brain development, the opportunities that children are given to engage in active play and exploration, and genetics. Social interaction—especially those with role models and supportive adults—play a critical role in structuring physical activities that aid in the development of gross motor skills.

Fine motor skills:

Fine motor skills rely on small muscle groups for precise movements, such as grasping, threading beads, sewing, holding writing instruments, drawing, etc. Fine motor skills develop through repeated practice. As such, the more children have opportunities to play and explore, the more they can improve their fine motor skills.

Healthy lifestyle habits foster an environment conducive for holistic development. Children should have opportunities to meet their physical needs: to move indoors and outdoors every day and to allow themselves periods of rest and relaxation. A balanced diet, ideally comprised of seasonal foods and based on children's needs, is essential to support their growth. In the context of our cultures, which emphasize a strong connection to the land, physical activities are rooted in traditional practices, such as harvesting, hunting, fishing, collecting maple water, and playing traditional games. These activities serve the dual purpose of building physical strength and coordination, while also instilling a deep respect for nature and the cycles of life, and in so doing supporting the other domains of development. In this framework, physical development is inseparable from the cultural knowledge and values imparted through direct interaction with the environment. Land—an extremely valuable teacher and host—holds the largest potential to supporting the physical development of children.



b– Cognitive development

For us, cognitive development is deeply tied to experiential learning, storytelling, and cultural practices, all of which foster a positive sense of identity. Research in developmental neuroscience shows that children's cognitive abilities are shaped by the formation of neural connections through active, multisensory experiences. Our methods are in alignment with these insights as we naturally emphasize the

interconnectedness of learning, culture, relationships, language, and the land, and prioritize holistic, community-centred approaches that support cognitive skills development. It is important to understand the meaning of our actions and their impact on our environment. By integrating traditional storytelling with hands-on exploration, we enable children to develop their cognitive skills.



c– Social and emotional development

Our ideologies emphasize the significance of socio-emotional health as part of overall wellness. In keeping with our ways of knowing, the framework for emotional development hinges on the interconnectedness of relationships, community, cultural practices, and the land and territory. Social and emotional growth is recognized as a communal process, rooted in balance and harmony within each child, the community, and the environment. This understanding is grounded in the idea of relationality, where emotions are not just personal, but also shared within the community. Children gain the knowledge and skills to understand and express their emotions through their relationships with family, peers, elders, and the environment. This approach cultivates empathy, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging.

A central principle in this worldview is the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in life. Socio-emotional development is seen as part of achieving this balance. It teaches children to regulate their emotions as they develop their skills in other domains. Traditional and everyday practices, language, and exposure to the territory and land are critical to nurture socio-emotional development, foster healing, and help children develop a sense of peace and resilience. Through these culturally rich and relational approaches, our philosophies around socio-emotional development provide the framework for fostering emotional wellness in children. A core focus is placed on creating environments where children feel safe, respected, and loved; where their identity is strengthened as a key foundation for positive self-esteem; and where they can express their emotions freely. Traditional teaching approaches facilitated by relationships, connections with the land and territory, and participation in everyday cultural experiences help our children to gain the skills they need to understand and manage their emotions, and to build resilience and empathy.



d– Language development

Language is more than a means of communication. It is the carrier of cultural identity, knowledge, and spirituality. Our languages—which are intricately tied to the land, territory, community, and family—are the vehicles through which the lessons from ancestors are conveyed. Our languages carry the stories, traditions, values, and wisdom of our communities, and connect children to their heritage and sense of self. Going beyond simply memorizing words, the development of language skills requires children to be engaged with the meanings embedded in their cultural context, worldview, and spirituality.

To this end, our approaches to fostering language development emphasize immersion in cultural practices, storytelling, and relationships with the community, the land, and the environment. Because language development occurs through active participation in daily life and relationships, opportunities are created for children to learn by immersion, observing and listening. Children are encouraged to develop their language skills by being immersed in their natural and cultural contexts. This also allows children to solidify their learnings and gain clear representations. Language development is also deeply embedded within socio-emotional development, as children imbibe the values and ways of being expressed through communication and growing grasp of the vocabulary of their ancestral language. Traditional methods of storytelling, songs, and oral teachings foster vocabulary building, comprehension, socio-emotional competence, and cultural values, supporting holistic development through language.

Our languages are vital tools for connecting with others, sharing cultural knowledge, and fostering a sense of belonging. For children, learning to communicate effectively means engaging with both traditional languages and the modern methods that surround them, including non-verbal communication. Ensuring that all children are supported in their communication needs, particularly in terms of learning their ancestral language, is essential for ensuring their inclusion in all aspects of community life. Children's daily connection with the land also helps them learn their ancestral language. The land and territory serve as a bridge to address language loss, transferring the memories, stories, traditions, and knowledge that are passed down through generations, as children play, interact and learn to care for the land.



e– Spiritual development

Spiritual development is a core aspect of our ideologies. It is regarded as an ongoing process. Grounded in the understanding that we are each part of a greater whole of creation comprising ancestors, nature, land, and territory, children are intentionally taught to understand their connection with the past, present, and future. Children benefit from time spent in nature and teachings that emphasize respect, gratitude, relationship, and the sacredness of life. Through these experiences, children are guided to recognize their ancestral legacies and inner strengths, as well as their shared roles and responsibilities to their families, community, and the land. This critical knowledge strengthens their sense of purpose, belonging, and identity, and provides children with a worldview that fosters their understanding of relationships, cultivates their values, and informs their decision-making processes.

Families, communities, language, and nature all play a critical role in nurturing children’s spiritual development. This occurs through activities that are grounded in traditional values and that harmonize the different aspects of life. This helps them achieve balance. Social relationships and connection to the land and territory help nurture children’s sense of spirituality, which in turn supports their overall development across all the other domains.



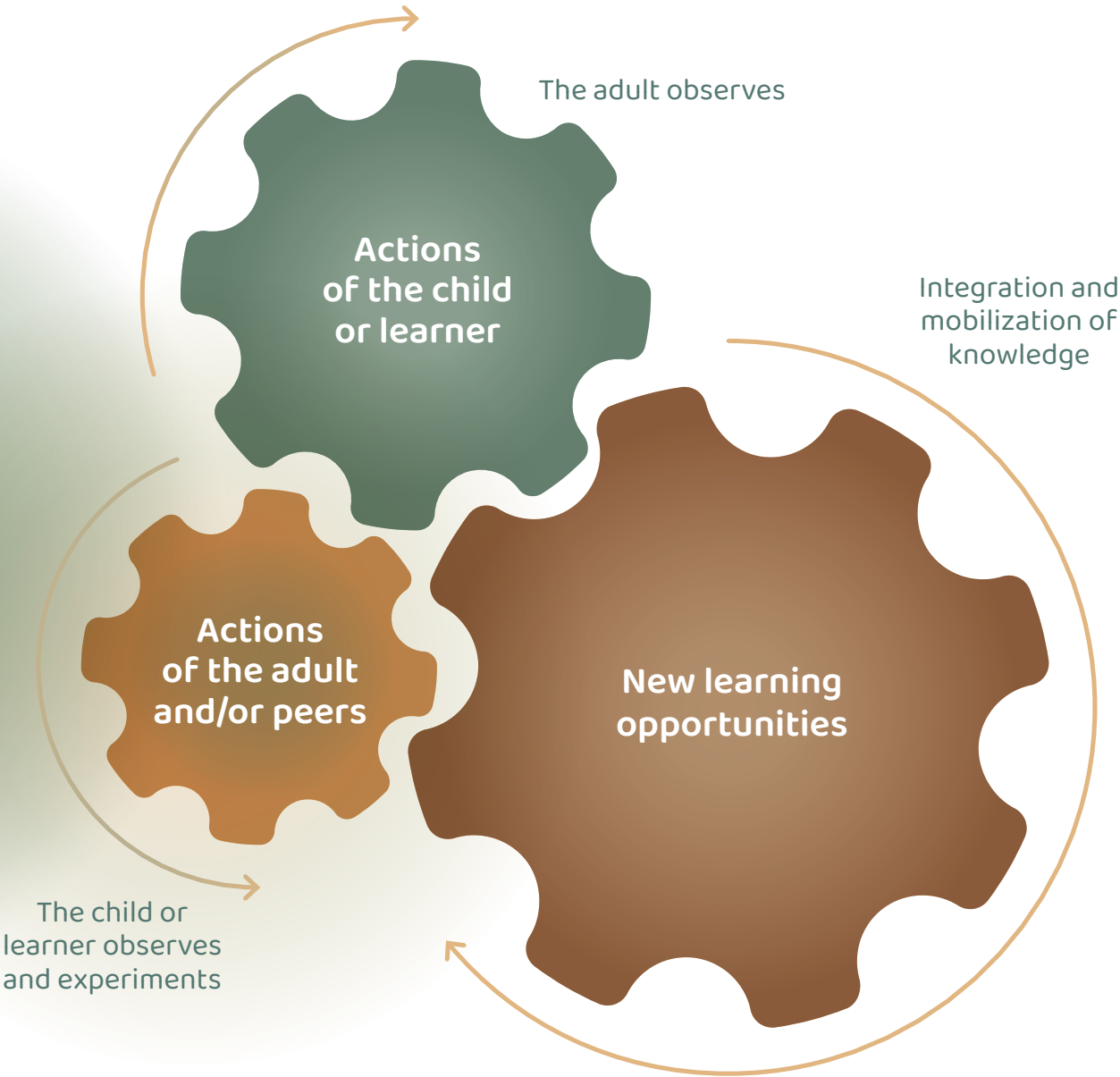
The Learning Process

This chapter focuses on the practices that underlie learning in the childcare setting and outlines the roles and responsibilities of adults and children in the process. It explores the role of stakeholders and partnerships in helping children reach their full potential, and it highlights different methods of putting in place additional support for children, as needed. The chapter provides guidance on navigating diverse learning and developmental paths and identifies strategies, accompaniment goals, resources, and support plans for addressing children's unique needs and overcoming barriers to learning and development.

As indicated in previous chapters, learning in many First Nations traditions is characterized by the primacy of relationships, community, and connection to language, land, and territory. In early childhood settings, educators facilitate this learning through a cycle that can be described as observation, planning and experimentation through play, and the observation of learning. This cycle accompanies children in their learning journey, in a way that respects each child's pace and gifts. Throughout this cycle, a partnership between educators, parents, and community members creates nurturing experiences that allow the community's children to explore and develop their emerging skills in a warm, loving, and accepting environment. As such, the development goals for each child are part and parcel of the community's goals for all its children.

The cycle of observation, planning and experimentation through play, and the observation of learning: Accompanying children along their learning journey

Learning process



The cycle of early childhood education can be explained as follows:

1– Observation

Traditionally, observation is the foundation of all learning. Watching children engage with their environment, family, and elders is an opportunity to identify strengths and help children hone them, particularly as it relates to the way they understand their place in, and contributions to, their home and community. In the same way, in the First Nations early childhood context, adults (e.g., parents, educators, elders, and community members) gain deep insights into children's learning, interests, and unique gifts by observing how they engage with their peers, materials, and environments. Observation is a moment when adults focus on children's achievements and interest in play. It can be spontaneous or planned, in keeping with specific objectives. Adults must then document their observations by taking notes, to later enrich their planning based on the children's interests and needs. Through careful, ongoing observation, adults can identify when they should offer more support and adapt the environment, activities and materials, or if children require additional support.

2– Planning and experimentation through play

Planning is informed by what is learned during observation. Adults work together to design experiences, learning situations, and environments that build on children's observed strengths, and provide additional support as needed. Planning should be based on children's interests, community life, and everyday activities, using local resources such as storytelling, land-based learning, and cultural events. For optimal planning, it is important to take the seasons into account, as the seasons influence the pace of life, allow specific activities, and determine available resources. In this approach, planning ensures relevance and meaning for the community's children, and framework development remains flexible, in a way that allows for real-time changes based on children's evolving needs and interests. Materials, experiences, resources, and conversations are gently geared to supporting children's emerging skills and providing repeated opportunities for practice through play.

3– Observation of learning: Accompanying children along their learning journey

In our childcare settings, it is important to create different learning opportunities for children. When supporting children's holistic development, the focus should be on the process rather than on the results. As such, learning is assessed by nurturing their progress and encouraging their actions and participation. This cycle recognizes that all children are unique and develop at their own pace. As such, it is up to the childcare setting to support their growth and development by identifying and building on these strengths, while also creating opportunities for play-based experiences in specific areas that need to be strengthened. This requires a collaborative approach that involves adults in the child's environment and, where appropriate, specialists to define the expectations and contextualize the developmental stages of each child. These expectations should be set by the community and take into account the individual pace of each child. Portfolios, anecdotal records, and community feedback all play a role in this reflective process, and they help ensure that adjustments to the learning environment or strategies remain culturally and developmentally appropriate.

In this implementation of the learning cycle, both adults and children have shared roles and responsibilities.

For the Atikamekw Nation, this is a friend who can counsel, and act as confidant. There is also **niwitcewakan**:

a friend, one who accompanies (Wemotaci); **Kamihorowet**:

a companion, one who goes with another, who walks beside, who looks after (Opitciwan); **Witcihiewin**: providing support, special assistance to someone (Manawan).

For the Mi'gmaq Nation, it is a person who walks along with another person, who walks in the footsteps of another person; it is a person who has the knowledge, experience: **apogonmuet**.

For the Innu Nation, this person gives strength, courage, provides comfort during difficult moments, **shutshiteieshkueu**. **Kanikante** is a person who guides.

For the Anishinabe Nation, this person gives courage, **widjiogodjin**, guides or sogodeckagodjin. The role of the person who accompanies is to help people and their families improve their quality of life.

For the Kanienkehaka Nation, this person is the caregiver, who takes care of someone, **teiakwatsaies**.

For the Abenaki Nation, this person is a guide: **odowinno**.

For the Naskapi Nation, this person guides another as they walk, **pimuuhtaahaaw**.

For the Wendat Nation, **yata'tanhk**, means I accompany someone along a path

Responsibility of adults

Adults in the early learning process act as active observers, role models, and guides. They highlight the value of play. In other words, adults are responsible for helping children learn as much as they can from what they already do naturally.

Adults act as observers by:

- Engaging in play and conversation with children in group settings
- Engaging in play and conversation with each child, individually
- Building a positive relationship with the children, notably by taking the time to get to know them
- Building trust with children through respectful play and communication and allowing children to lead the way according to their own interests
- Following the Observation component of the learning cycle
- Participating in moments of learning

Role model and guide:

Adults serve as role models and have an active role in learning. They help children have various experiences that emphasize the process, rather than the outcome. Learning situations involve a number of back-and-forth interactions between adults and children. Adults participate in the activity, and children are given the opportunity to provide their own feedback. This means children are more likely to try to make sense of what the adult is doing and follow the activity at their own pace. Adult role models follow the Planning component of the learning cycle to determine how often activities should be repeated and when additional materials and adaptations

are needed to help keep children interested to “observe the learning” of the activity over time. Adults also model important community values such as honesty, respect, and kindness, for the children to see and emulate.

As guides, adults nurture and expand upon children’s natural interests, while being careful not to dictate to them. This means offering ideas, asking questions that spark deeper thinking, or providing materials that invite new possibilities. In our way, adult guidance is gentle and supportive, so that children remain active decision-makers in their own learning, while feeling safe to explore, experiment, and discover.

Adults also act as partners who accompany children on their journey. When children show signs that they need additional support to achieve their goals, adults work collaboratively with partners to tailor approaches to each child’s unique strengths, gifts, and developmental needs. This includes adapting the materials and environment; providing gentle, individualized guidance; and ensuring partnerships are driven by the community, with consistent and knowledgeable care. By intervening thoughtfully, adults help overcome barriers to learning and foster an atmosphere where all children can thrive at their own pace and in a way that honours their full potential.

Participation of children

Children can participate in this cycle by:

- Playing an active role in their own learning
- Satisfying their curiosity to explore the environment and the materials
- Learning through trial and error
- Asking questions and expressing their ideas in their own ways
- Practising their emerging skills using the materials and tools on hand
- Learning to observe, listen, respect, and embody the values modelled

All children have rights, and the adults around them have the responsibility to play their roles to ensure that these rights are respected. Children also have responsibilities, which are to take care of their environment, treat their peers with kindness, and participate in activities in ways that honour themselves and others. For children to engage thoughtfully, gain listening skills, and learn to show respect to others, adults must diligently and consistently implement the rules governing appropriate behaviour and communication, while always acting with compassion.

Educational resources and support plans

Additional educational resources and support plans can be developed for children with unique strengths and needs—for instance, community-based tools designed to foster the holistic development of children and help them reach their full potential. Research emphasizes the importance of grounding support plans in children's unique cultural, social, and environmental contexts, as these factors profoundly shape development and learning.¹⁵ For First Nations communities, educational support plans must be aligned with community values, traditions, and ways of knowing in order to ensure their applicability and effectiveness. Existing support plans honour the strengths and gifts of each child while addressing barriers to learning and development in a manner that fosters their holistic wellness and recognizes children as valued and contributing members of their community.

¹⁵ Kowalski, M., & Albański, Ł. (2023). Disability as a process and social construct in the Canadian Indigenous experience. *Wychowanie w Rodzinie*, 30(1), 53–62. <https://doi.org/10.61905/wwr/175090>;



Indigenous-focused studies highlight the need for holistic and relational approaches to educational support plans. Critical studies in the area of educational inclusion reveal that the concept of disability is a social and colonial construction.¹⁶ These findings align with our perspectives regarding the value for, and recognition of, each child as a unique contributor to the community and society. Our approaches emphasize the interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual domains, and view each child as part of a broader ecosystem that includes their family, community, and environment. In order for educational support plans to be relevant, they must be developed from this holistic framework and guided by community knowledge and traditional practices. Educational support plans and methods that foster the wellness of First Nations children must draw on strategies that prioritize trust building and community collaboration. These resources must also be underpinned by community knowledge, traditional tools, and land-based practices to ensure that they resonate with each child's lived experiences and cultural heritage.¹⁷

Communities using this framework are invited to tailor the principles, strategies, and goals of the educational support plans to their unique contexts. This content is framed on First Nations methodologies and outlines community-driven practices for supporting children with diverse learning and developmental paths. It emphasizes the importance of community partnerships and traditional knowledge as drivers of planning. This ensures the holistic development of our children, while fostering their deep connection to their culture, environment, and identity.

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- 16 Connor, D., Valle, J.W., & Hale, C. (Eds.) (2015). *Practicing disability studies in education: Acting toward social change*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing; Eilers, Nicole. (2020). Critical disability studies and 'Inclusive' early childhood education: The ongoing divide. *Journal of Disability Studies in Education*. 1.1-26. [10.1163/25888803-00101004](https://doi.org/10.1163/25888803-00101004); Kress, M.M. (2017), "Reclaiming Disability through Pimatisiwin: Indigenous Ethics, Spatial Justice, and Gentle Teaching", *Ethics, Equity, and Inclusive Education (International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Vol. 9)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 23-57. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620170000009002>; Michalko, R., & Titchkosky, T. (2009). *Rethinking normalcy: a disability studies reader*. Canadian Scholars' Press.
- 17 Ineese-Nash, N. (2020). Disability as a Colonial Construct: The Missing Discourse of Culture in Conceptualizations of Disabled Indigenous Children. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 9(3), 28–51. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i3.645>; Kirmayer, L.J., Dandeneau, S., Marshall, E., Phillips, M.K., Williamson, K. J. (2011) Rethinking resilience from indigenous perspectives. *Can J Psychiatry*. 56(2): 84-91. doi: 10.1177/070674371105600203. PMID: 21333035; Simard, E., & Blight, S. (2011). Developing a culturally restorative approach to Aboriginal child and youth development: Transitions to adulthood. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 6(1), 28-55. Retrieved from <https://fpcf.com/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/104>;

Framework for individualized support plans

The framework for individualized support plans is guided by a First Nations vision that underscores the importance of traditional knowledge and community collaboration as central to ensuring children's needs; prioritizes adult role modelling; encourages repetition based on each child's pace and interests; and cultivates warm, favourable, and respectful environments.

Key principles of this framework are as follows:

1– Recognition of each child's uniqueness and gifts

Within our First Nations worldview, every child is seen as having a unique gift, role, and purpose. This is critical, as it provides the platform for developing and offering the range of learning experiences. Each child's gift is recognized and celebrated as part of the community's identity and strength. Resources and support plans should therefore focus on enhancing children's abilities rather than correcting perceived "developmental deficits." Such perceptions and practices, imposed by colonial structures, must be challenged and replaced with community-based knowledge that values all children. Childcare centres, families, and other partners must emphasize what each child can do, rather than what they cannot. In this way, support plans will foster self-confidence, cultural pride, and a sense of belonging.

Example:

Recognizing each child's gifts emphasizes that no two children develop the same way, and that each child contributes to their family and community in their own, unique way. This focus is important to enable childcare centres to work from a strengths-based position.



2– Holistic approach

Holistic development is the core element of our First Nations child development practices. In addition to being grounded in the five developmental domains, it also draws on the four wellness domains, namely the interconnected physical, socio-emotional, mental, and spiritual domains. Culturally appropriate support plans must consider all these dimensions to ensure that children grow in harmony with themselves, their community, and their environment.

Example of a relevant support plan:

A child struggling with communication skills may benefit from traditional storytelling—a cultural approach that not only enhances vocabulary and language, but also nurtures emotional expression and reinforces cultural identity. Storytelling, led by elders or community members, provides a rich, contextualized learning experience, and introduces children to the rhythms, metaphors, and meanings embedded in their ancestral language. Unlike word-use activities that convey less meaning, storytelling situates language within meaningful narratives, and fosters both linguistic competence and a deep connection to community values and traditions.

3– Adult role modelling and observation

In our traditions, adults transmit knowledge by modelling skills and encourage children to learn through observation and hands-on participation. In a learning situation, adults, with their reassuring presence, support children in engaging in the activity, and give them the space and time to do so. When needed, they demonstrate the process, while avoiding giving too many instructions. The focus is on the experimentation process, not the outcome. This process of mutual and respectful observation enables adults to thoughtfully adjust their approach to align with each child's natural pace and individual preference, fostering a supportive and responsive learning environment.

Example:

Repetition and practice are fundamental to skill development, allowing children to build confidence and competence over time. Knowledgeable adults create environments that offer repeated opportunities for experimentation and provide respectful and gentle encouragement, regardless of children's outcome with the activity. This fosters a supportive environment where growth is prioritized over immediate success and nurtures each child's interests and gifts.

Identifying and supporting children's developmental needs

Developmental milestones offer a framework to make sense of children's growth, and they serve as valuable tools for identifying children who may require additional help. Across our communities, various developmental tracking tools have been integrated to guide this identification process. These tools must be applied with flexibility, guided by the observations of educators, in partnership with families, and with the collaboration of the community. They should be applied in a way that begins and ends with a focus on cultural and contextual factors, so that they reflect the community's expectations for the child's development and respect each child's individual pace. This approach ensures that children are cared for and supported in a way that honours their unique developmental journey as well as their place within their community.

Within this framework, all children are entitled to individualized support plans that are tailored to their specific interests, gifts, and pace of development. When putting in place an educational support plan, it is crucial to ensure that the support plan integrates the relevant adult's concerns and careful observation of the child's progress, and that tools and approaches be grounded in the knowledge and values of the community. In this way, support plans respond to children's needs while also strengthening their identity and belonging within their community. Each community or nation, as relevant, should develop specific standards and guidelines that reflect their expectations of how their children should develop. In this way, child development is monitored using appropriate tools, children are supported to reach their full developmental potential, and children receive the support they need.

Strategies and goals

Individual educational support plans play a pivotal role in strengthening and expanding the support systems within community environments, including homes and educational childcare settings, to ensure that every child can thrive. These strategies are guided by community-informed approaches deeply rooted in First Nations values and traditions. Within this framework, the development of educational support plans will include the following elements:

1– Creating and maintaining a portrait of each child

Children's portraits offer a comprehensive and holistic view of their development by documenting their strengths, areas for growth, and learning over time. It serves as a collaborative tool to foster communication and ensure a common understanding between families, educators, and community members. Portraits are most effective when created in educational childcare centres, so that educators are empowered to act, with appropriate guidance, to adapt to children's individual needs. Childcare centres integrate curricula that emphasize respect for children, incorporate traditional tools and materials, support community-based activities, and operate with flexible schedules to ensure that children's gifts and interests are recognized and nurtured. Flexibility ensures that children can learn at their own pace, while being supported by activities that align with their interests and abilities.

2– Defining the process

Clear pathways for identifying and supporting children with unique strengths and needs are essential for reducing barriers and ensuring the timely delivery of services. Childcare centres serve as key advocates and help streamline processes by coordinating with families, community members, and community services. Educational childcare centres help navigate systems, ensure the cultural and contextual fit of support plans, and make certain that children and families feel supported, valued, and empowered throughout the process. This critical role is a determinant in the successful execution of each individual plan, as it ensures that every child receives services that continue to foster their identity and sense of belonging within their community.

3– Collaborating with community knowledge holders

Elders, knowledge holders, and community members bring invaluable insights into a child's needs, and whether support plans are sufficiently grounded in cultural practices and traditions. The benefits of anchoring activities to develop social skills in community contexts, for instance, include providing children with culturally meaningful opportunities to strengthen relational skills while retaining connection to their heritage and identity.

Collaborating with community knowledge holders—families, schools, health professionals, cultural organizations—is critical when developing networks to support children's needs holistically. Each community is invited to develop its own plan for supporting children's development in a way that reflects its values and priorities. These plans should be centred around traditional activities, nature-based learning, and partnerships with relevant local organizations, which can in turn connect you with provincial and out-of-community resources.

4– Engaging in everyday activities

Education support activities that are integrated in everyday routines in the home and community provide natural, meaningful opportunities to strengthen children's developmental skills. Activities such as cooking, baking, beading, sewing, fishing, net weaving, hunting and tracking, berry picking, leather tanning, and field dressing provide culturally relevant open-ended learning opportunities for fostering skills across all the developmental domains. For example, beading and sewing refine fine motor skills and cultivate concentration and creativity, while connecting children to cultural practices.

Activities involving the community provide opportunities for intergenerational learning, where elders and family members pass down knowledge, values, and traditions while also learning from their younger generation and building positive relationships.



Sample guide for the development of a community-based support plan

Creating a community-based support plan is a collaborative process that ensures that children receive relevant support rooted in their community's cultural, social, and environmental context. This sample guide provides a framework that communities can use to identify their aspirations for their children, leverage local strengths, and address areas where additional support

may be needed. The plan leverages traditional knowledge, land-based practices, and community partnerships, and encourages flexibility, adaptability, and continuous engagement with families, educators, and community members to support each child's unique developmental journey. Communities may adapt the plan to make it relevant to their needs and realities.

Key components for the collaborative development of a community-based support plan

1 Vision Definition of what the community or organization wants for children	2 Strengths Identification and celebration of each child's unique gifts (based on knowledge of the child that is drawn from close relationships and their portrait)	3 Next steps Identification of next steps based on observed needs	4 Partners Identification of community resources, other community services, and external agencies	5 Steps In collaboration with the partners, identification of actionable steps to implement the plan in all community settings, including at home and at the educational childcare centre	6 Follow-up Regular review of learning and adaptation of support as needed.
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Conclusion

A collective commitment to our children's future

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate the intention for this approach. Our children are our most precious gifts, and their learning journeys are sacred. Throughout this document, we have outlined an approach to early childhood education that is deeply rooted in our ways of knowing, being, and doing. We have emphasized the importance of relationships, environments, actions, and activities that support children's holistic development and wellness. This approach lays the foundation for the more complex tasks that children will face as they get older. Holistic development occurs by nurturing the mind, body, heart, and spirit of children in ways that honour their unique gifts, cultural identity, and deep connection to family, community, and territory. We have placed children at the heart of this approach, to be supported by a network of caregivers, educators, elders, and community members who share the responsibility of guiding them with love, patience, and respect.

Our ancestors left us with strong foundations. However, it is now our time to add our own stones to this path, linking the past to the future. It is up to all of us to take care of our children. Their growth, wellness, and future depend on our collective efforts. We know that education is not the work of any single individual or institution. Rather, it calls on the entire community to weave learning and teaching into everyday life, relationships, and cultural practices. Families, educators, knowledge keepers, community leaders, and partners must work together to ensure that every child has access to the resources they need to support their development and wellness.

The Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children is a powerful affirmation of our responsibility to protect, nurture, and uplift our youngest generations. It is important to put in place the tools and systems that uphold these rights, value and support each and every child, and give them the opportunity to thrive in environments that reflect their culture, language, and identity. There are endless opportunities that can be seized to help children learn, and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders—families, educators, leaders, and community members—to continue learning, gaining practical know-how, and deepening their understanding of each child's unique journey.

Our collaborative work supports our knowledge and collectively shapes our vision for our children's early learning and development. This framework invites each nation, each community, and each family to define their own goals that reflect their values, traditions, and aspirations for the future. At the heart of this work is a commitment to respecting the pace, interests, and needs of each child and community. As such, we uphold our inherent right to educate our children in a way that aligns with who we are. We stand on the wisdom of those who came before us, we take action in the here and now, as we lay the groundwork for generations to come.

Declaration of the Rights of First Nations Children

1

All children are created with the inherent right to be safe, to be loved and nurtured, to be heard and believed, to engage in play and recreational activities, and to have adequate health care, nutrition, shelter and education in line with their culture and traditions.

2

Every child has the right to be free of physical and emotional abuse, to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to be free from neglect, racism, discrimination and the demeaning or destructive acts of others.

3

Our children have the right to a name and their identity, the right to stay with and not to be separated from their birth parents and to know their extended family, community and Nation, all of which are important to their sense of belonging and to allowing them to thrive as contributing members, and to the survival of our peoples, Nations and cultures.

4

Our children have the right to learn about and benefit from our history, culture, indigenous language, spiritual traditions and philosophy and to have positive adult role models in their lives.

5

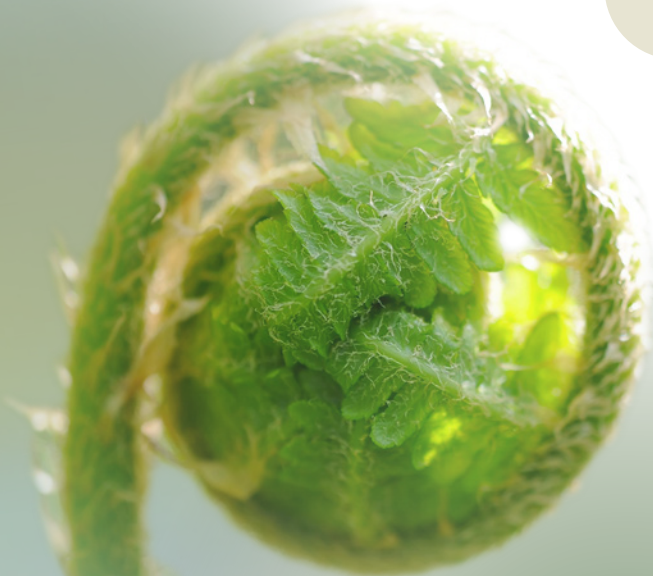
Our children have the right to be free from domestic violence, alcohol and other substance abuse, lack of supervision, inadequate medical care and physical or emotional neglect, all of which may have deep and traumatizing effects on a child's physical and emotional growth and development.

6

Children who have suffered maltreatment, neglect, parentlessness and trauma need and have the right to special care, treatment and support in a way that promotes their healing and safety, as well as their dignity, value and future well-being.

7

Parents have the primary responsibility for providing their children with proper prenatal care, ongoing age-appropriate physical and emotional care, and emotional nurturing, adequate food, shelter, education and health care.



8

In order to encourage and sustain adult involvement to assist our children, youth and families and to support organizations pursuing such work, our Nations and communities, as well as other employers, shall provide paid release time when appropriate to employees while they volunteer for children and youth at schools and in the communities.

9

Parents have a fundamental responsibility to provide their children with a safe and healthy home and child care environments, to teach their children safety skills, and to provide appropriate supervision.

10

Our communities, Nations, governments and leaders also have the responsibility to ensure that our children benefit from a standard of health, nutrition, safety, education and nurturing necessary to promote healthy values and behaviours, which will in turn help them mature into healthy and productive members of our communities and Nations.

11

The treatment of children and their welfare in accordance with the rights set out in this Declaration is the responsibility of the entire community and Nation, and the responsibility extends to all children who reside in our communities, regardless of their membership or their length of residence, as well as to all of our members, wherever they may be.

12

In commitment to our youth and our communities, and in the desire to keep children safe, all First Nation members have the duty to report any child abuse to the appropriate authorities, always provided that for our Nations, the interest of the child and respecting the child's needs and rights includes the interest of the family, of the community and of the Nation, and particularly emphasizes the protection of identity, culture, traditional activities and language.

13

The Chiefs in Assembly shall advocate for and promote the safety, dignity and well-being of our children in accordance with this Declaration, throughout Quebec, including with respect to all federal and provincial government, business, social service and educational legislation, policy, services and activities, and in all of the institutions of our Nations and communities.

14

The Chiefs in Assembly shall undertake such other efforts as may be deemed necessary to assure the on-going safety and protection of our children in accordance with this Declaration, including, but not limited to, monitoring the well-being of the children, encouraging parents to participate in services to remedy behaviours that place children at risk, and ensuring the placement of children with relatives or other community members by utilizing customary care or adoption when necessary for the health and welfare of the children.

15

The Chiefs in Assembly support Jordan's Principle and urge for its full implementation by the federal and provincial governments to ensure access to culturally adapted services for each First Nations child without hindrance or delay by reason of jurisdictional conflict and funding disputes.

16

Our children and families, and the Nations and communities that serve them, have the right to adequately funded, community and Nation controlled, institutions and services, including those providing health care, education, recreation and social services. Such funding may come from own-source revenues where the Nation or community has gained sufficient control of its lands and resources previously taken by Canada and Quebec to have a viable economy, or for the time being from Canada, Quebec and the resource and other enterprises operating on our territories.

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Vision

First Nations individuals, families and communities are healthy, have equitable access to quality care and services, and are self-determining and culturally empowered.

Mission

To accompany Quebec First Nations in achieving their health, wellness, culture and self-determination goals.



FIRST NATIONS OF QUEBEC
AND LABRADOR HEALTH
AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMISSION