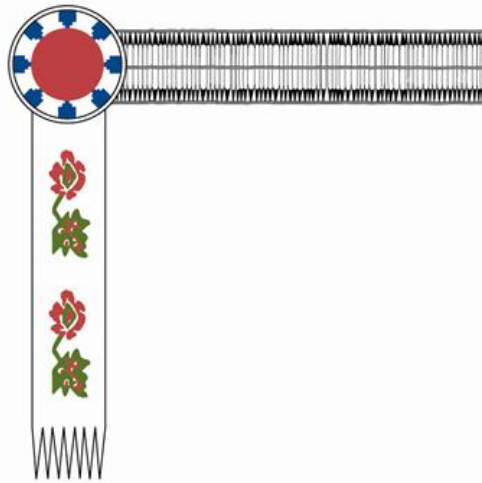




Best Practices in Aboriginal ECD/ELCD Programming

Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010.



**Native Women's
Association of Canada**

Best Practices in Aboriginal ECD/ELCD Programming

Infinity Consulting, a solely owned Métis company directed by Dr. Carrie Bourassa (Regina, SK), was contracted to develop a booklet outlining best practices in Aboriginal ECD/ELCD Programming. Dr. Bourassa contracted Calvin Racette, Sarah Longman and Dr. Shauneen Pete (all from Regina, SK). The study was also aided by a research assistant Chelsea Millman.

Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010
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Background

This booklet was based on a March 2009 report in that provided an overview of ECD/ELCD literature and best practices in Canada (NWAC, 2009). The literature review outlined specific best practices in relation to early learning. Themes which emerged in that study included: traditional values; supporting the development of the whole child, education and school readiness, health promotion and nutrition, Social support, and parental and community involvement. The literature review formed the foundation for developing the next phase of the overall study.

The next step was to identify a small sample of organizations that reflected Aboriginal organizations across Canada delivering Aboriginal Early Childhood Development and/or Early Learning Childhood Development programs (off-reserve).

This was followed by an undertaking of surveys with the objective to gather site information as to what they perceived to be their best practices and to identify the strengths of their programs. The intent of the survey was to collate the information and share this at a national level with Aboriginal Head Start programs and Friendship Centers across Canada.





Survey Tool Development

The literature review provided a foundation for determining the questions for the survey instrument design. The research team created three separate questionnaires for use with the directors, staff, and parents at selected early learning centers across Canada.


Further, the survey was made available in both the English and French languages. The on-line tool incorporated the use of Survey Monkey (online survey builder) to design the survey and collect the data

The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete, comments and survey responses were combined with all responses so that individuals or organizations responses cannot be attributed to any specific site.

The study was not designed to be comprehensive but rather was intended to provide a snapshot of responses from a representative sampling of the ECD/ECDL programs.

Response Rates

The aim was to engage twenty early learning centers in the survey process. The team identified programs through information provided by the National Head Start website from each province and territory.



“The community is becoming very aware of Aboriginal culture and is facilitating cultural activities on their own.”

- Respondent

Results of the Surveys

Although the target was 20 responses from centers across Canada, only 8 were obtained. Despite this, very interesting information was revealed from the survey results:

1. Most centers operate on Federal funding.
2. Employees are considered long-term (directors were employed for 7.8 yrs and staff for 5.7 yrs.).
3. Centers operated 10 months out of the year and served children between 4 and 5 yrs old.
4. Centers serve primarily First Nations communities (66.7%) and secondly Métis communities (33.3%); one centre served primarily Inuit families.
5. Most centers indicated there was a waiting list.
6. Directors reported it was important to improve parent/caregiver skills and inclusion in the program and social networking.
7. Important to improve parental access to resources, knowledge, skills and competencies.
8. Community engagement and awareness was important.
9. Culture, education and pride in the child's identity is extremely important.
10. A majority of centers have cross-cultural awareness Training.
11. Centers often act as advocates for parents.
12. Education and school readiness; traditional values; development of the whole child; health promotion; social supports and parental and community involvement appear to be key elements to all the programs at the centers who responded to the survey.

“We have a culture and language component to our program. Everything we do here has the Ojibwa language woven into it - visuals on the walls, staff speaking to children, culturally appropriate toys.”

- Respondent





Best Practices – An Overview

In early 2009 Infinity Consulting undertook an extensive literature review that revealed best practices in Aboriginal ECD/ELCD Programming.

Based on analysis of the literature, 6 key themes emerged:

- **Traditional Values**
- **Education and School Readiness**
- **Development of the Whole Child**
- **Health Promotion**
- **Social Supports**
- **Parental and Community Involvement**

One particularly excellent resource that all ECD/ELCD programs can benefit from is the Handbook of Best Practices in Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs published in 2003 by BC Aboriginal Child Care Society.

The handbook outlined 6 key areas that culminated in best practices:

- **Traditional Values**
- **Community Involvement**
- **Networking**
- **Policies and Procedures**
- **Assessment**
- **Evaluation**

Based on the analysis of the literature and the handbook, best practices that can be implemented by any Aboriginal ECD/ELCD program should contain the following elements:

Traditional Values

Incorporate cultural knowledge of the community into philosophy and curriculum of the centre.

Include cultural protocols and teachings into activities; establish a community garden; include Elders and community members into daily activities;

Hold community based celebrations that emphasize cultural knowledge, such as feasts, round dances, potlatches, pow wows; Incorporate traditional foods and the preparation of them into the program whenever possible;

Incorporate language as an immersion based program at the school or centre incorporating Elders as language instructors; create a language nest which is a place where members of the community can come and converse in their native language.

Ensure that staff members are culturally competent and that they are members of the community; staff training needs to be offered in the area of language acquisition and teaching; A curriculum that is environmental based can be used to assist in the transmission of traditional knowledge; Support culture camps lead by Elders.

Celebrate National Aboriginal Day and other key Aboriginal celebrations.

✓ Community Involvement

Provide transportation support to community members whenever possible.

Include, develop and teach traditional games and activities; include families in the planning of the activities and services; services should enhance community development and not create dependency.

Coordinate with public and private agencies to maximize services.

Hold parent gatherings and organize staff/parent luncheons or suppers; have a parent's advisory council and have parents on your board.

Involve community leaders into the programming and boards.

Host events that are recognitions of accomplishments, birthdays of children, etc. and include traditional recognition methods; Support community based training and events and perhaps your agency can provide some assistance with child care.

Have older children work with younger children and have them create community stories and publish them for use in the centre.





Networking

A resource list can be developed that identifies recognized community based resource people that can be accessed to deliver quality cultural programming.

A resource centre of books and activities that promote traditional stories, community values and community history could be developed.

Create a resource bibliography of relevant teaching resources; Contact Aboriginal publishing agencies for relevant literature donations and possible field test sites.

Policies and Procedures

Support services and flexible scheduling that will allow young parents to enhance and pursue their own personal education goals.

Partner and align your program with established funding organizations. Evolve your budget cycles and program criteria to fit in with their mandates;

Involve the parents in the original development of your policies and procedures; involve the parents and Community leaders in updates and revisions of your policies and procedures;

Ensure that political interfere is not present on front line programming.

Involve the staff with the policies and procedures and ensure that they are relevant and meet the needs of your program;

Ensure that there is a process to making new parents to the program aware of the policies and procedures.

Develop and enforce a code of ethics for staff and board members that reflects values of the program and guide decision making processes.

Ensure that all new employees undergo reference checks and Criminal record checks to protect the organization.

Hold staff lunches or retreats for team building purposes.

Create opportunities for evening training sessions for staff and community members that enhance cultural identity and Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Create flexible hours whenever possible; allow for staff to leave early if they work through breaks.

Use substitute or part time staff whenever possible to avoid burn out and stress related issues; ensure that staff are allowed to take their annual vacation and at a time when they can be with their family.

Post the centre rules in prominent areas and make them appealing; use positive reinforcement strategies with staff and students alike.

Support in-service training, especially courses that are directly related skill development.

Focus on restitution and community well-being as opposed to punishment; encourage the use of traditional values such as hugging and encouragement.

Have a quiet room for time out or minor illnesses; ensure that there is a process in place to deal with serious illness and parental pickup. Ensure that there is a policy on pickup requirements and who can pick up the students. Ensure that safety procedures on in place for pick up vehicles, i.e., Car seats or booster seats. Ensure that there are clearly defined pick up times. Maintain consistent hours of operation.

Ensure that legal custody arrangements are observed.

Foster a holistic approach and incorporate traditional teaching methods into the program.

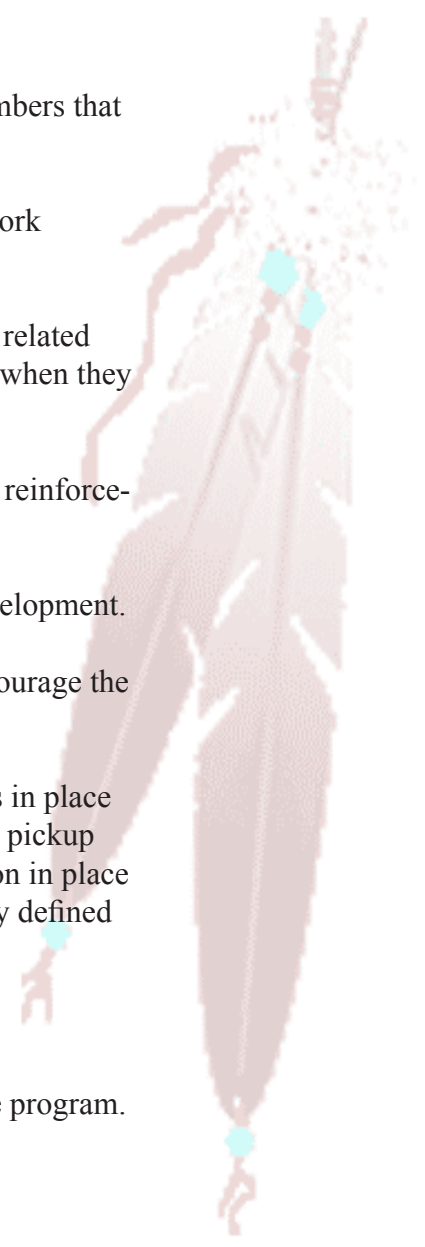
Ensure that all toys and equipment are regularly cleaned and sanitized.

Assessment

It is of value to teach whenever possible, the differences between western knowledge and traditional knowledge. In that way, students can learn to walk in both worlds.

Include traditional knowledge and values into assessment tools to evaluate cultural competence; Assign staff to specific students to ensure good home/school communication.

Record out of character situations in a log book and be prepared to discuss them with parents.





✓ Evaluation

Have staff do daily and weekly evaluations to assess program effectiveness:

Do student assessment at the beginning and end of year to gauge learning.

Include parents and board members in the evaluation process; include staff and students in the evaluation process; consult and include Elders in the evaluation, if possible.

Include outside professional agencies into the evaluation if they work with your centre (nurses, dentists, police officers, or firemen).

Do quarterly assessments in house to allow for changes; do an annual evaluation, using an outside source to ensure objectivity.

Create checklists and developmental screens to assist in the assessment and determining of growth; use a wide variety of assessment tools; use assessment tools that are recognized by industry standards.

Invite other professionals that interact with your students for assessment input; involve parents and Elders in assessments.

Develop personal profiles of each student and use it as discussion tool with parents.

Ensure that there is opportunity for diversity training for your staff and include community members, if possible.

Evaluations should be driven by goals and must focus on the program, not staffing.



✓ Additional Elements of Best Practice

In addition to these elements, four other common themes are helpful in strengthening an Aboriginal ECD/ELCD program:

- Development of the Whole Child
- Health Promotion
- Education and School Readiness
- Social Supports and
- Parental Community Involvement

The literature and survey results revealed that a holistic approach that encompasses a medicine wheel model that addresses the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of development are extremely important.

Recommendations

While the best practices outlined in this document are being addressed by many Aboriginal ECD/ELCD programs across Canada in some measure, it is difficult for all programs and centers to adequately address all of the areas identified as best practices. This is primarily because of under-funding, lack of capacity and pressure on existing staff.

It became clear in both the literature review and surveys of Aboriginal ECD/ELCD programs that many centers are overwhelmed and often operate in isolation. As a result, it is recommended NWAC take the lead in developing a network for all Aboriginal ECD/ELCD programs in Canada.

This can be achieved by:

- Hosting a national networking session that profiles “best practices” by Aboriginal ECD/ELCD centers. The session should focus not only on information sharing but help Aboriginal ECD/ELCD centers to document and share their best practices.
- Host a website that can be accessed by Aboriginal ECD/ELCD centers so that centers can share information and continue the networking with other centers. The website can also include updated contact information for all centers which was found to be dated during the survey process.
- Distribute quarterly newsletters to all Aboriginal ECD/ELCD centers with updates, news and helpful information.



Based on the analysis of the literature and the handbook, best practices that can be implemented by any Aboriginal ECD/ELCD program should contain the following elements:

- Traditional Values
- Community Involvement
- Networking
- Policies and Procedures
- Assessment
- Evaluation

Thank You!

Infinity Consulting would like to thank all of those agencies who took the time to complete the surveys. We truly value your time and appreciate your time and expertise. We would also like to recognize the hard work of all Aboriginal ECD/ELCD centers across Canada for the extremely important work you undertake day in and day out. We hope this booklet of best practices will assist you in the work you do and help you to start documenting your best practices so that others can learn from your success. We know there are far more successes to celebrate and we need your help to document and share them with others.