

# INITIAL ABORIGINAL EARLY YEARS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

*"Let us put our minds together and see what  
kind of life we can build for our children"*  
~Sitting Bull~

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## About the Authors:

### **Alison Gerlach, MSc, OT(C)**

In her journey as a Non-Aboriginal, independent consultant, Alison draws on 20 years of supporting and learning from families and children with special needs as an occupational therapist. Over the past 10 years, Alison has been privileged to have partnered with several First Nations and Aboriginal communities and agencies in B.C. on early intervention, school therapy, program development, cultural safety and community development. These experiences led to her writing 'Steps in the Right Direction: Connecting & Collaborating in Early Intervention Therapy with Aboriginal Families & Communities in B.C.'. Alison's ongoing learning of Aboriginal worldviews informs and enriches her personal life, including the raising of her two sons, and her professional commitment to building trust, partnerships and social justice.

### **Monique Gray Smith, Psychiatric Nurse**

Monique is a mixed heritage woman of Cree, Lakota, and Scottish descent, and at the time of writing this paper her twins were 4 years old. Her formal training is as a Psychiatric Nurse and her work experience has been in the areas of Aboriginal Education; with a focus on the Early Years; Stress and Trauma Recovery, and Staff Development. She is the owner of Little Drum Consulting and the author of the Aboriginal Infant Development Programs Policy & Procedure Manual and the Aboriginal Supported Child Development Handbook. Monique has had the privilege to work in and learn from numerous communities across Canada, as well as overseas. She has been sober and involved in her healing journey for over 17 years; and this year has embarked on a new aspect of her healing; learning her Cree language.

### **Joyce Schneider, MA**

I am a member of the *St'at'imx* Nation, granddaughter of *Kikya7*, and mother to 3 boys and one girl. I completed my master's degree in First Nations Studies at UNBC in April of 2007 with a GPA of 4.13. Since then I have instructed in an Aboriginal university preparation program and contributed to numerous Aboriginal early years curriculum research and development projects as a sub contractor for Little Drum Consulting. I am currently working on a curriculum Indigenization framework for the province of BC and developing curriculum that is relevant and appropriate for Aboriginal adult learners. In my private consultation work, I strive to offer my skills where they will best contribute to the continuing growth and development of strong, vibrant and healthy Aboriginal communities, particularly in the area of education.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Content</b>	<b>Page</b>
About the Authors	2
Framework At A Glance	4
Introduction	5
Aboriginal Early Years Landscape in British Columbia	5
Current Programs for Aboriginal Children and Families: On and Off Reserve	7
Why Develop an Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework	9
Vision	10
Principles	11
The 4 Goals	13
Diagram of the 4 Goals	16

## **Appendices:**

- Guide to Next Steps Document
- Aboriginal Early Years Framework Timeline
- Strategies for Improving Short Term Outcomes

# At A Glance: Initial Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework

## Vision

The Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework for British Columbia is rooted in a connection to the land, Aboriginal self determination, culture, spirituality and languages. It will ensure that all Aboriginal children and their families, regardless of where they live, have equal access to a range of co-ordinated, culturally safe programs and services that promote holistic child and family wellness. Aboriginal worldviews and the uniqueness of children, families and communities will be respected, honoured and celebrated.

## Principles

- ❖ Child & family are at the centre of all circles
- ❖ Community: Self-determination & capacity
- ❖ Programs and services will be rooted in Aboriginal worldviews, culture & language
- ❖ Aboriginal Worldviews: Culture & language
- ❖ Holistic wellness & strengths-based
- ❖ Programs and services are culturally safe, integrated & equitable
- ❖ Relationships are collaborative & respectful
- ❖ Shared accountability

## The 4 Goals

1. To foster Aboriginal child & family wellness.
2. To ensure all programs and services are culturally safe and integrated.
3. To ensure Aboriginal worldviews, culture & languages are integral in all programs and services.
4. To continue building capacity within Aboriginal families, communities, organizations and nations.

## Introduction

On September 4<sup>th</sup>, a Day of Dialogue was held with key stakeholders in Aboriginal Early Years in the province of British Columbia (B.C.). This was an initial engagement, with plans for future opportunities for families, communities, service providers and organizations to share in the process of creating an Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework. It was agreed upon on this day that for the time being, there will be the development of two separate Early Years Frameworks; one for First Nations living on reserve and one for Aboriginal peoples living off reserve.

In writing the initial Discussion Paper, *Creating Pathways for the Dreams of our children-Aboriginal Early Childhood Development and Care* and this initial strategic framework outline on Aboriginal Early Years in B.C., the authors have used the term ‘Aboriginal’ to refer inclusively and collectively to all the Indigenous peoples of this province. However, the authors recognized that the First Nations Early Childhood Development Council have not yet had an opportunity to create a Discussion Paper or engage in this dialogue and planning process. It is the authors hopes that the two strategic frameworks can share a common vision and journey, one in which the diversity of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia is recognized and built upon to ‘*strengthen the dreams for all our children*’.

## Aboriginal Early Years Landscape in British Columbia

In response to increasing recognition of the unique history, strengths and needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities, the Aboriginal Early Years landscape in B.C. has undergone much change over the past 10 years. The following characteristics of this landscape are based on the above mentioned Discussion Paper and Day of Dialogue:

**Aboriginal Engagement** – The current Aboriginal Early Years landscape in B.C. continues to be dominated by an American/Euro-colonial perspective which influences all aspects of these programs and services. However, this landscape is slowly changing towards one in which Aboriginal knowledge on child and family wellness, traditional practices and languages are becoming integrated into some Aboriginal Early Years services and programs. Government policies and legislation that promote greater self-governance in relation to Aboriginal Early Years will ensure that Aboriginal peoples have a central voice in how these programs are designed, delivered and evaluated.

**Meeting Basic Needs** - The current rate of poverty in Aboriginal communities continues to be an ugly landmark in the B.C. landscape. Families who are wondering where their next meal is coming from are likely to be less inclined to consider their child’s educational, social and emotional development. For many, their work in Aboriginal Early Years programs involves supporting families to meet their basic needs for their children – safe water, enough food and adequate housing.

### *Aboriginal Early Years Landscape in BC (Continued)*

**Inventory** – A complete picture of the Aboriginal Early Years landscape has yet to be fully developed. To this end, in 2006 an Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Community Engagement Project was undertaken, and more recently an Inventory of Programs and Services for Aboriginal Children and Youth with Additional Support Needs is underway. A current and accurate inventory of programs and services for Aboriginal children and their families will assist in providing some of the base line data needed in order to build this framework.

**Aboriginal Early Childhood Education** – Aboriginal communities have voiced their preference to have Aboriginal Early Childhood Education (E.C.E.) service providers supporting their children and families. Several Aboriginal E.C.E. programs have been developed in recent years, with the latest being a distance education program. However, recruitment and retention of Aboriginal E.C.E.'s continues to be a challenge, particularly in more rural and remote areas, as the needs exceed the number of Aboriginal E.C.E.'s available. One of the key reasons for the retention challenge is a current lack of respectful pay for E.C.E.'s.

**Language Revitalization** – There are several language preservation, revitalization and capacity building initiatives underway: the B.C. Language Initiative, the New Relationship Language and Cultural Renewal Initiative, the First Nations Language Immersion Best Practices, First Nations Cultural Mapping, and the Métis Nation Language and Culture. Aboriginal Success By Six is also developing an Aboriginal language kit for families and caregivers. At a local level, language nests, language immersion preschool programs and the integration of language in Early Years programs has only just begun.

**Community Hub Model of Service Delivery** – Some Aboriginal communities and First Nations have developed the infrastructure for a 'hub' or 'family circle' model of service delivery. This approach provides community-based and more community-driven intergenerational programs in an integrated model in which health, child care, child development, education, community kitchen, gathering place may all be housed together. The design reflects local cultural traditions, protocols, strengths and needs.

**Outreach Model of Service Delivery** – Remote and coastal Aboriginal communities and First Nations are dependent on an outreach model of service delivery, where typically specialized services, such as a speech language pathologist (S.L.P.) will provide evaluation and consultation on an infrequent basis.

**Diversity in Services** – At this time, there is no universal baseline of Aboriginal Early Years programs or services that are currently available to all Aboriginal children, regardless of where they live. This is due to a variety of reasons, including but not limited to: the often complex and competitive funding mechanisms, the challenges in staff recruitment and retention, and jurisdictional disputes.

### *Aboriginal Early Years Landscape in BC (Continued)*

**Cultural Safety** – This is still a relatively new concept and speaks to the need for all those who are supporting and working with Aboriginal children, families and communities to fully understand, respect and be sensitive to Aboriginal knowledge, languages, protocols and history, particularly the intergenerational impact of the Indian Residential School System. History, fears of child protection, and other related traumas continue to influence families' use of, and cultural safety in mainstream Early Years programs.

**Funding** – Funding for the current 43 Aboriginal ECD programs has had no increase since 2002. Over the past ten years, there has been a 45% increase in the Aboriginal population. In B.C. there are 16,195 Aboriginal children between birth and 4 years living in our province; totalling 8% of our Aboriginal population, compared to 5% of Non-Aboriginal children in the province. (Statistics Canada, 2008) Communities who have the resources to negotiate proposal writing and complex funding structures are rewarded with more programs and services, compared to communities who do not yet have this capacity. Short-term and one time only funding limits communities' ability to recruit and retain qualified staff and to develop long term visions for their programs and services. A consistent voice in our province has been the need for increased, stable, non-competitive and long term funding mechanisms.

**Jurisdiction** – A collaborative plan to implement Jordan's Principle in B.C. is under development. Currently, many early intervention therapists and some Aboriginal Early Years service providers are limited in their ability to provide community-based services and programs, due to jurisdiction. Geographical and social distances continue to impact if and/or how often families access such programs in nearby, or not so near, urban centres.

## **Current Programs for Aboriginal Children & Families: On and Off Reserve**

- 43 Aboriginal E.C.D. initiatives provide a range of services including prevention, early intervention and community outreach.
- 44 Aboriginal Infant Development Programs (A.I.D.P.) serve on and off reserve, urban and rural and remote Aboriginal communities. A provincial A.I.D.P advisor provides leadership, training and support to the program consultants.
- 13 Aboriginal Supported Child Development (A.S.C.D.) programs currently providing services. 55 new initiatives are in the early stages of development; conducting community needs assessments and beginning to build awareness of S.C.D. services. A.S.C.D. programs provide culturally appropriate support services to children with special needs. These services are provided in child care centres, homes and community environments.

### *Current Programs Continued*

- 6 of the 22 Community Hubs are Aboriginal.
- 20 of the 200 Family Resource Programs are identified as Aboriginal.
- 12 urban Aboriginal Head Start programs provide services to 480 children.
- 83 on Reserve Aboriginal Head Start Programs provide services to approximately 800 children.
- 15 Aboriginal Seeds of Empathy Programs (on & off reserve) as of 2008/09.
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (F.A.S.D.) program (On and Off Reserve) is focused on prevention and intervention.
- F.A.S.D. (On Reserve): Project based initiatives that target pregnant women and their babies in First Nation and Inuit communities.
- Language Revitalization Programs: Three year funding provided to First People Heritage Language & Culture Council to support communities to develop language nests. One time only grant given to Aboriginal Head Start Association of B.C. to fund language learning initiatives in a variety of early years settings.
- Major Capital Funding was awarded to 25 First Nation recipients between 2001 and 2006.
- 81 First Nations facilities are receiving Child Care Operating Funding. 2007/08
- The B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society is contracted to provide culturally relevant Aboriginal child care information and services to on-and off-reserve child care facilities, and to support local Child Care Resource and Referral Programs.
- 12 Maternal Child Health Programs (On Reserve): local, integrated and effective maternal child health system for First Nations women and families with infants and young children.
- Canada Prenatal and Nutrition Program (on Reserve and off reserve).
- First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (on reserve): Program is delivered and monitored by 10 First Nation Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreement holders in B.C.
- First Nations Child and Family Services Program (On Reserve).
- Kindergarten K4, K5 and Special Education (On Reserve).
- In 2006/2007, 1,215 Aboriginal children participated in full day K (out of a total of 5,113 children in full day K), in the B.C. public school system.



## Why Develop an AEY Strategic Framework?

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008 history was made in our country with Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, making a public apology for the government's role in Indian Residential Schools. "On behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long," he said. "The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country."

Perhaps there has been no more critical time in history, than now so soon after the apology, to truly take stock of the investments the province of B.C. is making in our future as Aboriginal peoples; and specifically with our children and their families. To take time to truly look at the possibility of enhancing a system that serves Aboriginal children, families and communities. To impact positive changes that will facilitate *closing the gaps* that currently exists between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal British Columbians.

The Prime Minister's apology, the Transformative Accord, the Métis Nation Relationship Accord and the Strong Safe and Supported document all acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal communities being responsible for education, health, and care of Aboriginal children. The increasing momentum towards self-governance in B.C. provides the political framework to put decision-making, and the delivery of services and programs for our children and their families back into the hands and hearts of Aboriginal peoples.

The development of an '*Initial Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework*' in 2008 is the start of this process. It aims to rebalance the cultural nature of early years education and programs, away from its current American or Euro-colonial bias, and towards one which respects, honours and celebrates Aboriginal knowledge, cultures and languages. The development of an '*Initial Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework*' recognizes that Aboriginal peoples come with much knowledge and experience, particularly in regards to their children, families and communities. This knowledge and experience needs to be prevalent and relied upon within the work that is to be done. Failure to do so, risks a continuation of the status quo – whereby decision-making and strategic planning is controlled by the few, and Aboriginal families and communities are expected to "fit into" a mainstream model that inevitably does not work for them.

In 2002, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (M.C.F.D.) created an initiative for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development, focused on developing innovative, culturally responsive community-based approaches to supporting the development of Aboriginal children prenatal to age 6 and their families. A year later, in 2003 the province began to fund programs specifically designed for Aboriginal children and families.

## *Why Develop an AEY Framework Continued*

More recently, an Assistant Deputy Minister for Early Years has been appointed, the Premier has announced his government's full support for Jordan's Principle, and the development of an 'Initial Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework' and a 'First Nations Early Years Strategic Framework' are underway.

There will be many different paths taken by Aboriginal peoples in B.C. in their journey of realizing the dreams for their children and families. On this journey so far, common foundations for building successful pathways have emerged from:

- An initial discussion paper, '*Creating Pathways for the Dreams of our Children ~ Aboriginal Early Childhood Development and Care*' (Gerlach, Gray Smith, Schneider, 2008).
- A 'Day of Dialogue': Initial community engagement on September 4, 2008.
- Similar work and processes currently occurring with Aboriginal peoples and the province of B.C.

As we connect and continue building working relationships, based on mutual respect, recognition and reconciliation with the First Peoples of this province, Aboriginal organizations, and Government, it is hoped that the work done over these next months allows us to make a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal children, their families and the children yet to come. On this journey, pathways to strengthening the dreams for our Aboriginal children and families are built on the following vision and guiding principles:

### **Vision**

The Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Framework for British Columbia is rooted in connection to the land, Aboriginal self determination, culture, spirituality and languages and will ensure that all Aboriginal children and their families, regardless of where they live, have equal access to a range of co-ordinated, culturally safe programs and services that promote holistic child and family wellness. Aboriginal worldviews and the uniqueness of children, families and communities will be respected, honoured and celebrated.

# Principles

## **Child & Family are at the centre of all circles**

- The child will always be at the centre of all circles; family, organization, community, and nation.
- The child will always be understood and seen within the context of their extended family.
- The traditional role of the community in the raising up of a child will be situated prominently within all Aboriginal Early Years programs and models of service delivery, both on and off reserve.

## **Community: Self-Determination & Capacity**

- Those who will be most closely influenced by policies and actions – Aboriginal children, families and communities – will have a strong and ongoing voice in how their Early Years programs and services are designed and delivered.
- Aboriginal and community ‘voice’ will guide decision-making.
- Community driven programs will continue to build capacity of families, staff and community members; while always respecting local cultural protocols and the uniqueness of communities.
- Governance and funding models will be developed and supported by Aboriginal leaders and communities. This will be aligned with the continuing devolution of decision-making and service delivery planning through mechanisms such as Aboriginal Authorities and delegated agencies.

## **Programs and services will be rooted in Aboriginal worldviews, culture & language**

- All Aboriginal Early Years programs and services will be rooted in Aboriginal cultures, traditions, knowledge, values and practices.
- Cultural, social, linguistic and geographic diversity within and between Aboriginal children, families, communities and nations will be recognized and honoured.
- Aboriginal knowledge will be acknowledged as a valid way of knowing and understanding the world and integral in all programs and services.
- All Aboriginal Early Years programs will have funding and resources to promote the revitalization of Aboriginal languages.

## *Principles Continued*

### **Holistic Wellness & Strengths Based**

- All Aboriginal Early Years programs and services will encompass the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of the child, family and community. This holistic view of children and their families recognizes that all their needs are equally important and are inter-connected.
- All programs will focus on the strengths of the child, family and community, and continue to build on these.
- Although the present framework focuses on Aboriginal Early Years programs and services, it is recognized that the way forward will require an ongoing commitment to address the root causes of health inequities.

### **Programs and Services are Culturally Safe, Integrated & Equitable**

- All programs and services accessed by Aboriginal children and families will be culturally safe, and respectful of Aboriginal worldviews, knowledge, history, language and culture.
- An integrated model of service delivery will be promoted and guided by Aboriginal youth, Elders, families, community members, program designers, deliverers, and funders.
- All Aboriginal children and their families will have equitable access to a range of culturally relevant & respectful services and programs; regardless of jurisdiction, age and socio economics.

### **Relationships are collaborative & respectful**

- Equitable partnerships in the design, delivery, and evaluation of Aboriginal Early Years programs will be supported through informal and formal alliances; inclusive of all early years stakeholders, and supported with adequate funding and resources.
- Evaluating the success of Aboriginal Early Years programs and services will be a collaborative process, reflective of both Aboriginal and western forms of 'evidence'.

### **Shared Accountability**

- Accountability needs to be shared by all involved: government through policies and funding; programs and service providers through delivery of authentic, respectful services; families and communities through respectfully contributing at all stages of program design, delivery and evaluation.

# The 4 GOALS

The following 4 goals are based on the vision statement and guiding principles. Their success is dependent upon stable, equitable and non-competitive funding mechanisms that will support the design and delivery of culturally relevant and respectful services for all Aboriginal children and their families; regardless of jurisdiction, age and socio economics. The Aboriginal Child and their Family are at the centre of all circles.

- 1. To foster Aboriginal child & family wellness**
- 2. To ensure all programs and services are culturally safe and integrated**
- 3. To ensure Aboriginal worldviews, culture & languages are integral in all programs and services.**
- 4. To continue building capacity within Aboriginal families, communities, organizations and nations.**

On page 16 is a diagram that outlines the 4 goals with the Aboriginal Child and Family's circle imbedded within all 4 goals. The 4 goals overlap with each other, demonstrating the interconnectedness of everything and everyone and the need for the seamless care of Aboriginal children and their families.

## Detailed Description of the Goals

### **1. To foster Aboriginal child & family wellness**

- To ensure programs and services foster the wellness of the whole child and family; emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.
- To ensure programs and services are provided to vulnerable and high risk children and families.
- To enhance and fully resource programs and services identified as working well so they can provide services to more children and families.
- To ensure programs and services are adequately resourced.
- To ensure funding for programs and services is equitable and fair.
- To support and fund programs' abilities to actively develop innovative projects to address child poverty--- site food banks, community kitchens, clothes exchange, parent workplace skills training, Aboriginal models of community care and support, etc (unique to program family situations).
- To promote and support programs' abilities to increasingly connect with community health agencies (Health Authorities, doctors, nurses, dentists, etc) resulting in increased child and family access to and engagement with health services.

## *Goals Continued*

### **2. To ensure all programs and services are culturally safe and integrated.**

- To increase knowledge of the needs, availability and gaps in programs and services for Aboriginal children living on reserve, in remote areas and in urban centres.
- To increase the participation of Aboriginal youth, elders and family members in the design, delivery and evaluation of Aboriginal and mainstream programs and services.
- To promote non-competitive funding and financial support for existing communities who have few programs and/or low rate of program utilization to develop community engagement and build capacity.
- To increase knowledge, understanding and respect for Aboriginal history and knowledge; as it relates to child and family wellness, cultures and languages in all programs and services accessed by Aboriginal children and families. This would be inclusive of mainstream programs.
- To review how communities and organizations can build connections and partnerships with the goal of increasing seamless program access, co-ordination and efficacy. To review alternative models of service delivery for remote communities to increase cultural safety, program utilization and capacity building.
- To increase equitable access to community-based early intervention therapy services and programs.
- To review the mandates of all agencies providing early intervention therapy services to ensure equitable and culturally safe programs are available for all Aboriginal families within their geographical jurisdiction.
- To review and develop strategies for reducing existing wait lists for Aboriginal early learning, childcare programs and services.
- To support the development of a culturally safe and meaningful assessment tool that will provide baseline information in regards to programs serving Aboriginal children and families.
- To develop and implement a B.C. Aboriginal Languages Revitalization strategic plan. The plan could be based on research conducted on the efficacy of using Aboriginal languages to create cognitive excellence, to increase identity development, to promote emotional and spiritual growth and wellbeing of BC Aboriginal children, families and communities.

## *Goals Continued*

### **3. To ensure Aboriginal worldviews, culture & languages are integral in all programs and services**

- To provide training and funding resources to enable all E.C.D. curricula and learning environments to be increasingly more inclusive of Aboriginal worldviews, cultures and ways of knowing, being and doing.
- To ensure Aboriginal cultures, worldviews and history have a greater prominence within all E.C.D. educational programs in B.C.
- To prioritize sustainable funding for language nests and language programs within existing child and family wellness programs, including urban settings.
- To provide opportunities and funding for Aboriginal family members, youth and Elders to engage in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs and services being offered to their child.
- To foster the continued development of programs that are rooted in culture and language; thus evoking a sense of belonging, connectedness and family.
- To develop models of outcomes reflecting child, family and community perspectives of success.
- To ensure that all research and assessment done in Aboriginal communities, nations and programs be based on reciprocity, respect, relevance, and responsibility.

### **4. To continue building capacity within Aboriginal families, communities, organizations and nations.**

- To develop policies that enable communities with flexibility for hiring a community member, at an equitable salary, when qualified E.C.E. personnel cannot be hired.
- To provide opportunities and funding for Aboriginal early years professionals to host gatherings to build capacity in best practices and connections between agencies and service providers.
- To create and support opportunities for collaboration between communities/organizations that have capacity to support/mentor communities/organizations that are in the process of building their capacity.
- To increase the number of Aboriginal services devolved to Aboriginal agencies and delivered by Aboriginal workers.
- To increase the numbers of Aboriginal children who participate in an early years program before attending kindergarten.
- To ensure all curriculum and outcomes for Aboriginal Early Years programs and services, pre-service educators/support worker training, as well as on the job training, is rooted in and respectful of Aboriginal culture, language and ways of knowing, being and doing.

- *Goals Continued*

- To promote and support the delivery of cultural teachings and traditional languages by the community members.
- To build capacity by valuing what community members bring to programs and services. This can be through participation in reciprocal and respectful relationships. .
- To support and fund communities abilities to hold their own regular Gatherings to share and strengthen connections between all invested in the growth and development of the child/family

**Figure 1. Visual Summary of ‘The 4 Goals’**

