

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

“Reconnecting with the Four Seasons” Aboriginal Best Start Enrichment Gathering

***A Cultural approach to creating inclusive community
collaboration among Best Start Networks***

***Apps Mill Facility
Brantford, Ontario
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Report Summary

Introduction

On June 7, 2007, a collective assembly of representatives/stakeholders from Best Start Networks and service agencies from across the Niagara Region, convened at the scenic Kiwanis Apps Mill Facility in Brantford to participate in the “**Reconnecting with the Four Seasons” Aboriginal Best Start Enrichment Gathering**. This rural location lent symbolic character to the occasion by providing connection to the scenic bounty of Mother Earth and an appropriate locale that would compliment the Aboriginal Framework of the Gathering, which was hosted in collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), the Brant Best Start Aboriginal Advisory Subcommittee and the Haldimand/Norfolk Best Start – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Subcommittee. Our objective was to cultivate a comprehensive understanding among our communities by targeting mutually specific issues/concerns as identified through our respective Best Start networks. Our goal was to establish a collective resolution process to determine next steps for our future generations who will ultimately benefit from the Best Start Initiative.

The day commenced with a traditional Opening Ceremony performed by Walter Cooke, Elder/Counselor of De dwa da dehs nye>s Aboriginal Health Centre of Hamilton. The ceremony included an opening prayer and “smudging”, a common cultural practice used by First Nations communities to connect our hearts and minds with the Creator and one another to achieve understanding and guidance through the context of the given agenda. Modified traditional teachings of the “History and Practices of Aboriginal Peoples” and “Healing for Seven Generations – Understanding the Significance of the Circle” - were then shared by our Elder to further enlighten and educate participants to the cultural practice of oral teaching formed among Aboriginal communities. The Morning Gathering Circle addressed two predefined topics by way of passage with the traditional “talking feather”. It was explained that the historical methodology of the feather signified proper autonomous practice by allowing each member of the circle an opportunity to address their concerns and/or ideas with respect to those issues that affect the community as a whole. Protocol of respect was also addressed to listen with open hearts and minds to the individual holding the talking feather. This practice proved instrumental in revealing the following concerns and sentiments to the topics that follow.

Morning Gathering Circle – Discussion Topics

Topic #1 - How do we promote a collective community healing/understanding to move forward with Best Start? – Working through misconceptions & assumptions.

To understand the premise of this subject, it must be initially explained that there are external issues beyond the scope of the Best Start mandate that limit the potential to reciprocate and maximize our competence with regard to Best Start service delivery. Specifically, it must be conversed that while our understanding of one another needs consistent nurturing, so too does our level of communication. The key stakeholders and agencies that service the communities of Brant County/Brantford, Haldimand/Norfolk and Six Nations agreed that we must foster this foundation of reciprocal understanding

with tenacity, conviction, and an integrity both worthy and deserving of all of our children – our future generations.

Ideas shared to accomplish this include:

- *Inclusion of children, parents and family members. This promotes self esteem and empowerment to those who feel isolated and/or void of available community services.*
- *Create a mutual awareness to the diversity of all communities and work together towards a common outcome.*
- *More front line support is needed to sustain an understanding of cultures and cultural programming.*
- *Maximize the potential of parents through community involvement/volunteer initiatives.*
- *Provide more Gatherings/Community Forums to identify changing needs/trends of communities.*
- *Adopt the teachings of the Medicine Wheel to nurture individual/community development.*
- ***Best Start is a vision – its approach needs to be a reflection of the communities to which it is delivered.***
- *Barriers and mistrust among communities need to be dissolved so expansion can occur.*
- *Create a stronger awareness within the Aboriginal community of our culture, history, and teachings to educate our children.*
- *Provide a comfortable, non-judgmental, supportive environment that educates and values our parents/families/children.*
- *Find courage within ourselves to admit to what we do not know/understand and conviction to overcome our barriers through education and awareness.*
- *Be patient to the process of rebuilding connectedness. Listen to heart and stories of Elders. Provide solutions, not silence, to cultural unbalance.*

Topic #2 – How do we strengthen the emphasis of cultural programming as a reflection of who we are rather than how it can be integrated in our communities?

The following information is relative to understanding the context of this topic as it may be assumed that it would be a question best posed within First Nations Communities. To the contrary, it was viewed as an appropriate opportunity to accumulate inclusive feedback from a broader audience and incorporate those key suggestions within the framework of next steps and best practices.

In July of 2006, a community survey was conducted under the direction of the Brant Best Start Aboriginal Advisory Subcommittee to determine the current childcare needs of the urban Aboriginal population within Brantford/Brant County¹. The survey revealed that although many families had access to and/or secured some form of childcare, their children were not currently provided with **any** services that included Aboriginal specific *programming*. In fact, 87% of those surveyed stated they would access Aboriginal specific childcare and/or programs/services if made available to them. It is noteworthy to

¹ Brant County Aboriginal Best Start Community Survey & Needs Assessment conducted by consulting firm, Stevenato & Associates.

mention that the Pine Tree Native Friendship Centre of Brantford, an Aboriginal organization which housed and delivered related programs/services to this demographic for almost three decades, closed its doors in 2004 and there now exists a severe lack of access to culturally appropriate programs/services. This percentage was in part, the sustaining data that would support this committee's collective decision to implement a strategic planning process that would provide cultural programming through the Aboriginal Best Start Initiative. The survey was also the catalyst that opened discussion on a deeper level among committee members to understand the importance of preserving one's cultural identity and the magnitude of this challenge that still exists for many First Nations communities today.

It is with little explanation that response to this question echoed a familiar stream of shared sentiment and seemingly simple solutions. And the overall consensus would further validate the two most common denominators which are understanding through communication and a reciprocated effort to support each community to the best of our ability. Highlights of reaction include:

- *Integrate Aboriginal programming within the public school system i.e. language curriculum, history of Aboriginal cultures, etc.*
- *Strengthen programming within Aboriginal communities – restore languages, spirituality, customs and gain knowledge of clans, history, and protocol of traditional practices.*
- *Parents need to understand the significance of self identity and the importance of reclaiming their culture to instill within their children at an early age.*
- *Ask for more generational involvement to pass on knowledge.*
- *Recognize that healing comes from within and needs to continue in order to strengthen our Nations and our relations with others.*
- *Create partnerships to include programming with diverse/neighboring communities. This supports our children's inherent nature to nurture/respect one another.*
- *Promote positive learning practices – recognize that parents who were/are not exposed to their culture need the necessary foundation of knowledge to learn.*
- *Include parents/families when developing curriculums so they can understand the planning process. Make connections with parents to understand their family needs.*

Guest Speaker

A significant aspect to this Gathering was a unique presentation provided by Taunya Laslo, Executive Director, at Niwasa Aboriginal Head Start Preschool in Hamilton and Provincial Representative for the Hamilton Aboriginal Best Start Working Group. The Niwasa Aboriginal Head Start Initiative, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and successfully operating since 1995, provides Aboriginal children ages 2 ½ to 6 years of age, with culturally appropriate programming within an environment that fosters each child's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth. The presentation included an historical overview and previewed other Aboriginal initiatives housed under the Niwasa umbrella, such as the Stay in School Initiative, the Ontario Early Years Initiative, and the Aboriginal Best Start Initiative. It is this model that not only exemplifies this program's success, but resolutely establishes that Aboriginal specific curriculum should be accepted within the realm of normalcy of who we are as First Nations people. We need to proactively disengage the assumption that intermittent or "celebratory"

programming is not a sufficient foundational approach to ascertain the cultural identity of our children.

Afternoon Workshops – Discussion Topics

Our afternoon agenda addressed the following topics and participants were encouraged to provide their feedback/input to the dialogue process. At this point, there existed a collaborative accord and atmosphere of ease among the groups that revealed candid, yet sincere opinions/views to the workshop subject material.

Workshop #1 – Pepper Lazore, Facilitator

How do we market our programs/services with cultural integrity?

Much like the morning Gathering Circle, this workshop was facilitated utilizing the popular education model to allow the circle of participants to engage in open discussion, while learning individual concepts/perceptions of “cultural integrity”. As stated previously, Aboriginal specific curriculum should be accepted within the realm of normalcy of who we are as First Nations people. We need to proactively disengage the assumption that intermittent or “celebratory” programming is not a sufficient foundational approach to ascertain the cultural identity of our children. Once the wheels of change are in motion, we need to give forethought to how we accomplish this promotion, while keeping our integrity intact. Responses/suggestions were as follows:

- Build relationships and know your clients needs
- Being a client liaison
- Put a face to promotional resources/materials that includes families/extended families
- Establish path of inclusiveness in promotional materials
- Why would communities want to explore the service being offered?
- What sets us apart? Why would we not access service being offered?
- Utilize different platforms of promotion
- Must bring services/program information **to** the community
- Emphasis on “Free” Services

Building relationships and know your clients needs. How?

- Community Forums, Focus Groups, Engagement activities
- Physical presence/continuity to build trust relationships in our communities
- Collectively explore common goals

Being a client liaison how?

- Proactive response in addressing identified needs
- Engaging parents in the promotional development process

Put a face to the promotional resources/materials that includes families/extended families. How?

- Initiate a marketing campaign which includes real families, settings, challenges, etc.

- Utilize culturally diverse imaging
- Use internet technology

What sets us apart? Why would communities access/not access services being offered?

- Use presentation models such as Niwasa AHS to highlight success/uniqueness
- Services may not be accessed if community feels that it is culturally exclusive
- We absolutely promote cultural/community inclusion

Service/Program Marketing & Promotion. How?

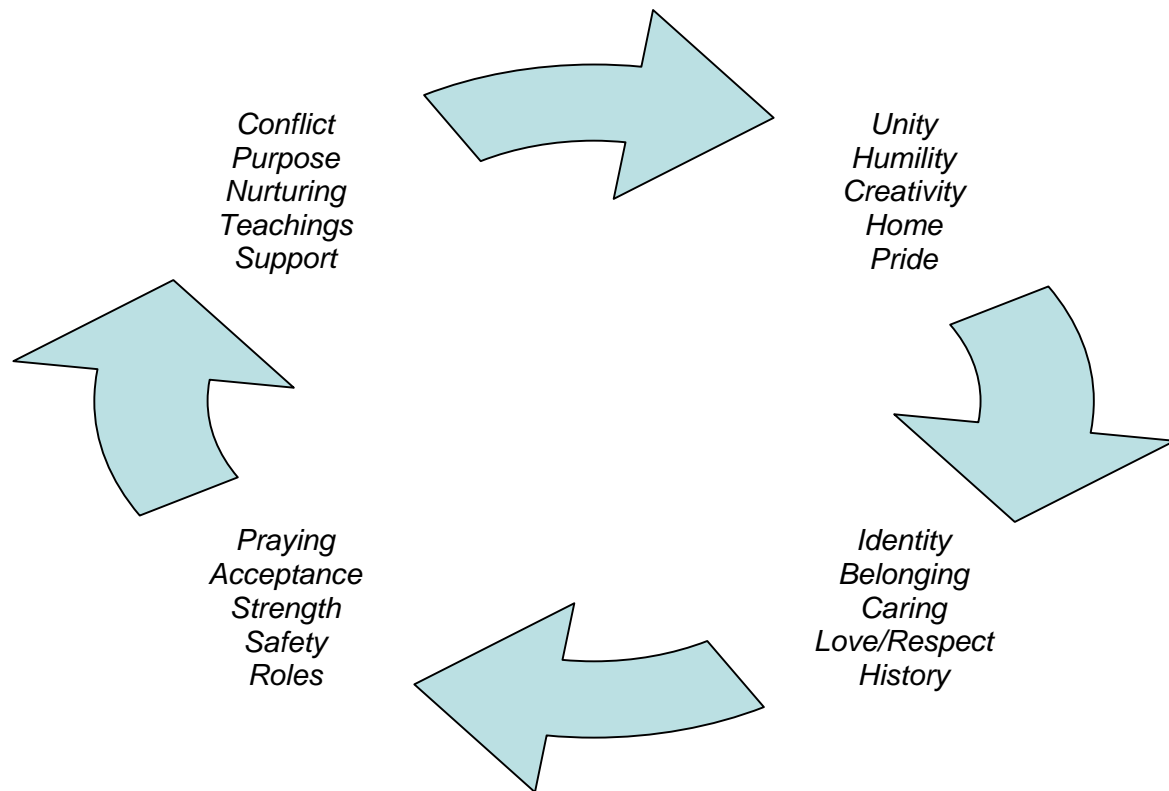
- Collaboration, Communications, Service Mapping
- Invite key Aboriginal Stakeholders to the Best Start tables
- Simplifying accessing of services and programs
- Need for branding to highlight specific programs/services
- Create partnerships for marketing and promotion
- Capacity building for future services (if available)

Workshop #2 – Melodie Spencer, Facilitator

How do we plan for children who are raised among extended families i.e. aunts, uncles, and/or Grandparents?

Workshop Summary

Brainstorm “What is Family”? – Who, values, beliefs



Discussion Notes: Extended Families and Best Start Considerations:

- OK to have extended families involved (misconceptions of grand-parenting doing parenting-their role)
- Circle of family
- Extended family does not have to be through bloodline: Best Start Network the conduit for extended family; community is extended family (outside of traditional)
- Expected to listen to our Elders (does not need to be your auntie, cousin, etc.)
- Service providers can be intimidating
- “It takes a village”
- Experiences in school, community
- Develop relationships with extended families
- Create balance
- Understanding behavior – trust of others, care of children, different perspectives
- The roles of extended families
- Look at nature as our extended families – mother earth, clans, look after each other; pass on to next generation
- Realistic structure and approach
- Disproportionate challenges so don’t always expect consistency
- Respect the issues/support/understanding
- Absence is not lack of interest
- Perceptions of a ‘good mother’ and ‘supervision’; can build fear of doing what you normally do/believe

- Keep in mind the cycle of life and what happens at one part affects the other

The group divide into two groups and reviewed two case studies from “Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families: by Terrellyn Fern.² The groups were asked to review the case study, comment on the scenario and then indicate their approach based on an understanding of Aboriginal culture and the role of extended family.

Case Study #3

Chantal is a young Métis mother, who has recently given birth to a baby girl and has been deemed a high-risk mother because of her age (17). Chantal has taken good care of herself during her pregnancy and is excited about giving birth to her daughter. Children’s Aid became involved while she was in the hospital. Her physician referred her to a mainstream Healthy Babies Healthy Children program and her discharge plan included home visits and the expectation was she would attend a Nobody’s Perfect Parenting course once a week. During the first home visit, Chantal did not answer the door. The HBHC worker logged the visit as a ‘no show’ and tried again the next day. On the second visit, Chantal did not answer again and the worker logged as a no show again. CAS was notified of the ‘no shows’ and a social worker came to visit the home. Chantal did answer the door this time and the social worker threatened that if she did not follow through with the service plan that her child was at risk of being taken away.

Considerations/Approach:

- Some families may prefer not to have an Aboriginal worker (may know them, privacy issues, personality conflicts)
- Age of mentors, religious backgrounds may influence response
- Criteria of age-does not reflect if you are a good parent or not
- Program titles; more attention to the negative messages it might send
- Could they have included a program of care that included the father
- Chantal needs to understand why she has been put in this program of care before it is implemented; she can’t take ownership
- Needs to be some education about what all the services are about, what they can/can not do; sense of power imbalance as Chantal is alone and this can create fear and anxiety
- Protocol from the beginning should identify the family’s network of support; current status

Case Scenario #2

An Ojibway grandmother has custody of her 3 grandchildren through custom adoption. All of the children are enrolled in school. The youngest child, age 5 has been increasingly getting into trouble in school and is exhibiting behaviors such as poor impulse control, inability to concentrate, and fine motor challenges. The teacher has

² A Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families – Written by Terrellyn Fern, Spirit Moon Consulting, 2006 Best Start: Ontario’s Maternal, Newborn, and Early Child Development Resource Centre

requested a meeting with the grandmother and the school psychologist. At the meeting the school psychologist recommends the child be assessed for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The psychologist continues to speak on what FASD is and how it can be treated. The grandmother is silent throughout the meeting and nods her head at the odd time. At the end of the meeting the psychologist tells the grandmother he will set up an appointment with a doctor who specializes in this area.

Considerations/Approach

- Teacher should meet with grandmother to discuss behavior, finding the positives in the child's living arrangements
- Previous meetings with grandmother considered but child young still
- Going straight to FASD investigation is making a cultural judgment
- Get someone in who is from Aboriginal Culture to assist teacher's comfort level in dealing with culture
- Need to ask grandmother if she understood the concern, what is acceptable
- Consider what is custom adoption
- Offer to make an appointment-don't assume and go ahead and make it for her
- Ensure complete medical review; physical, not just exploring one option

Overall Comments:

We as service providers need to be mindful of our actions. If we expect families to accept services then we need to respect their issues and ensure that those providing support are not also those that intervene during crisis.

Slow down and consider the options with each family. Every situation may be different, ask the family how best to *support them*.

"We do not inherit the earth; we borrow from our children."

Afternoon Gathering Circle – Next Steps for Best Start Networks

With a great deal of collaborative discussion and reflection already accomplished, the participants of the Gathering regrouped to discuss the highlights of the overall agenda and to plan next steps that would support our objective to cultivate a comprehensive understanding among our communities by targeting those mutually specific issues/concerns as identified by our respective Best Start networks. Through this objective we could structure the framework which will seek to achieve a thriving goal that will benefit the true Best Start Stakeholders – our children.

Next Steps Include:

1. Haldimand/Norfolk Best Start –

- *Lack of education on First Nations culture*
- *Agenda items once per month for purpose of consideration/understanding*
- *Educate staff – sensitivity, knowledge, awareness of First Nations communities issues/concerns*
- *Contact information for sharing*
- *Look for opportunities to build partnerships*

2. First Nations/Aboriginal Best Start –

- *Lack of education on mainstream considerations*

- *Need to develop ways to strengthen understanding from within our communities towards other communities*
 - *Need to implement further self identification processes to increase youth capacity*
 - *Need to widen cultural resource network i.e. language teachers, elders, historical teachings, etc.*
 - *Need to heal from within our communities to move forward for our children*
3. Overall Best Start Networks –
- *More mainstream and Aboriginal gatherings to connect/share information*
 - *Advocate through committee's for additional resources*
 - *Extended families do not always share same bloodline; see communities/families differently*
 - *Reduce Assumptions; educate yourself*
 - *Don't always worry about timelines/end result.*
 - *Know who we are/what we do (branding)*
 - *Share our resources, knowledge, and information*
 - *Push province for Aboriginal representation through development of consulting position within the Ministries.*
 - *Share minutes among networks*

Our Elder shared his thoughts about our future generations and how the connectedness that occurred among the participants during the course of our day had already achieved a balance within our communities through understanding of one another. He then closed with an Ojibway Prayer and as the entire group commented on how this unique day had inspired/moved them in some small and/or thought provoking way; the underlying hope and camaraderie that filled Kiwanis Apps Mill signified hope for a new beginning for Best Start.