

# Significance and Benefits of Indigenous Early Intervention and Inclusion

by Sue Sterling

If Indigenous early intervention programs are to successfully coexist and intersect with mainstream early intervention and we are to provide appropriate supports and services for Indigenous children, it is important for all stakeholders to fully understand the rationale for delivering Indigenous-specific early intervention programs, not only in name, but more importantly in nature. The rationale for Indigenous early intervention includes the following components.

**Meeting children's basic needs** is an extremely serious issue within Indigenous communities; many of the health and educational challenges for young children start with families buried under chronic cycles of poverty. This is the chronic stress within a family environment, the influence on healthy child development, and the capacity of the families to engage in early intervention programs. This would create a highly sensitive and complex content that would support the children and the families to meet the basic needs for their children: safe water, enough food, adequate clothing, and housing. Monique Grey-Smith quoted an Early Childhood Educator speaking to the importance of meeting the basic needs of their families in their community:

"There are multiple barriers for our families that focus on their basic needs — we have children coming into our

program very hungry, not dressed properly for the weather, and so on. We need to ensure that our programs take care of the whole child and their family, and this means the funding needs to make sure we can do this. How do the children learn if they are hungry?" (Little Drum, 2009).

**Indigenous specific determinants of health** include cultural knowledge, pride, and identity. Indigenous culture and language needs to be at the heart of the early intervention center that serves our families; culture cannot be just added on to a program, it needs to be fully immersed within. A grandparent states,

"We need to do a much better job of educating everyone that language and culture is so important for human development. . . . The mainstream world needs to be behind this and to see the benefits of Indigenous languages" (Little Drum, 2009).

The lack of Indigenous curricula and programming is a key factor to the lack of culturally safe and relevant child development evaluation tools; Indigenous policy and licensing requirements and the flexibility to hire whom we see fit for child care settings. If we do not recognize the importance of building capacity within Indigenous early intervention education and practice, it threatens to repeat assimilation. By supporting Indigenous Nations to create and implement their own curricula and programming we are

providing the best opportunities for Indigenous children and encouraging them to be emotionally and spiritually healthy to grow into healthy and productive adults.

There are many reasons why Indigenous families may experience cultural risk and/or marginalization when trying to access mainstream early intervention programs. Some of the contributing factors may be that the mainstream services are largely dominated by Western and Euro-American ideology; non-aboriginal service providers may have limited knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture and history, and the location of programs may not be easily accessible. When families do not feel safe they may delay appointments, which delays access to programming for their children. The lack of cultural com-

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petence of non-Indigenous service providers continues to be a significant barrier for children and families in accessing and fully using programs and services. All service providers need to fully understand, respect, and be sensitive to Indigenous protocols, knowledge, history and language. In particular, the inter-generational impacts of the Residential School System and the '60s Scoop with children being taken from their homes and communities and sent to homes where they had no access to their land, culture, language, or who they are. Trust is a big issue when you are providing a service; you must build a relationship to ensure the child and family are utilizing the program to its full potential.

We have a high percentage of Indigenous families that are in recovery from the process of colonization:

“We have to support families to care for their children in a much different way. If we ever want to end this legacy of other people caring for our children when they are at risk, then we have to provide much higher levels of support for those families” (Little Drum, 2009).

Service providers need to recognize the importance of approaching service delivery in a different form to support the families as needed.

Within the Interior Region of British Columbia, Canada, the Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Reference Group created the Aboriginal Child & Youth Support Program Framework, which was developed as a resource tool to promote the following key components that need to be included when creating and sustaining an early intervention program for Aboriginal children and families to:

- be community-based.
- be designed for the individual's needs and be flexible.
- be holistic and family focused.

- contain high-quality programming.
- have integrated service delivery without gaps and overlapping of service.
- have a continuum of service delivery.
- be culturally relevant.
- have qualified and trained staff providing the services (Sterling, 2008).

Building real and meaningful early intervention services within Indigenous communities must be supported by a long-term vision and capacity-building goals. We must build capacity to maintain stable and secure programs in a realistic and strategic way to ensure that Indigenous children have access to strong, secure, helpful, and respectful early intervention programs.

Based on Indigenous ways, we have been taught by our Elders that all children are gifts from the Creator and that each of them is here to teach us, the adults. When supporting children and families, there are many ways you can ensure quality-based services for inclusion. Being inclusive and supporting children with special needs in inclusive settings involves the following components:

- **Family focused:** The parent knows their child best and this process allows the child and his or her extended family, elders, and other natural supports to be involved in the well-being of the child and ensures the families are empowered to support their child.
- **Holistic service delivery:** Encompasses physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development.
- **Culturally-relevant supports:** Culture, language, and traditions are included in all services and programs. Elders are included. Programs are based on Indigenous values and beliefs such as Unity, Respect, and Inclusion.
- **Respect:** Appreciate and value each person and his input and contributions. You demonstrate openness, flexibility,

and support by listening and being non-judgmental and accepting; confidentiality is honored.

- **Community-based services** are designed for the needs of individual children, families, and communities. Policies and programs are designed to be flexible to meet identified needs.
- **Integrated services** are seamless and have no gaps or duplications. Service providers network and collaborate to provide services for families in a coordinated manner.
- **Quality programming** includes sufficient resourcing for staff to support children and families adequately.
- **Continuum of services:** Services are put in place for the child and family based on their needs. Supports are continued for the duration of time needed and linkages to other supports are provided.

Lastly, it is important to allow sufficient time to build a relationship with the child and their family in order to gain the trust needed to ensure appropriate services and supports. Indigenous peoples are all about relationships with one another, whether it is professionally or personally. Developing respectful and equal relationships is an essential part of creating a solid partnership to support the child.

## References

- Little Drum, C. (2009). *Community Engagement Report: Aboriginal Early Years Strategic Plan*. Victoria, BC: Little Drum Consulting.
- Sterling, C. (2008). *Child & Youth Support Program Framework & Transition Plan*. Okanagan Nation Alliance, Early Childhood Development. Merritt, BC: Sterling Consulting.