



Early Childhood Development and First Nations, Inuit and Métis children

What is early childhood development, or ECD?

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the growth of a person from pre-conception to the age of six. These are the most critical years for brain development, as the most significant brain growth occurs in the first six years of life. A child's experiences within the first six years are crucial, as they have a great impact on the individual's identity and overall health and well-being throughout their lifetime.¹

ECD and First Nations, Inuit and Métis children

According to Statistics Canada's 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, off-reserve First Nations, Métis and Inuit children under six make up five per cent of all children under six in Canada.

This includes:

- 47,000 off-reserve First Nations
- 35,000 Métis
- 7,000 Inuit

Early childhood is an important stage of life in terms of culture and identity for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children. The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples described early childhood as the foundation on "which identity, self-worth, intellectual, and strengths are built."²

ECD and Language

Early childhood is the best time for children to learn language because they absorb information faster than in any other stage of life. Babies begin to acquire language within months of being born. By age five, they master the basic sound system structures and grammar of their native language.³

Learning one's ancestral language has many benefits. It can lead to:

- Development of a positive cultural identity.
- Pride and confidence in cultural identity.
- Increased sense of self-esteem, and security in knowing one's heritage and culture.⁴

Statistics Canada's 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS) defined



language as a broader determinant of health. It showed off-reserve First Nations and Métis children have low levels of access to childcare arrangements that promote Aboriginal language.

In 2006:

- 15 per cent of the off-reserve First Nations children, and six per cent of Métis children under six in childcare arrangements were in ones where Aboriginal languages were used.
- 59 per cent of Inuit children under six who were currently in child care were in arrangements where Inuit language is used.

ECD and Traditional and Cultural Values and Customs

Statistics Canada's ACS also defined traditional and cultural values and customs as a broader determinant of health. Similar to language, the ACS found low rates of access to traditional and cultural values and customs for off-

reserve First Nations and Métis children in child care arrangements. The rates were significantly higher for Inuit children.

In 2006:

- 24 per cent off-reserve First Nations and 14 per cent Métis children under six receiving child care were in arrangements that promoted traditional and cultural values and customs.
- 56 per cent Inuit children under six were in arrangements that promoted traditional and cultural values and customs.

Why is it important to have culturally-relevant resources on ECD?

Families and ECD providers play a vital role in raising children rich in health and culture. People who work in ECD programs in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities across Canada include child care workers, nutritionists, teachers, Elders, and parents.

For more information on ECD and First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, visit the Aboriginal Children's Circle on Early Learning Web site (ACCEL) at www.accel-capea.ca.



1 BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. (2009). Early Childhood Development. *BC Ministry of Children and Family Development*. Retrieved April 3, 2009 from http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/early_childhood/.

2 Royal Commission of Aboriginal peoples. (1996). *Gathering strength: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services.

3 McIvor, Onowa. (2005). The Contribution of Indigenous Heritage Language Immersion Programs to Healthy Early Childhood Development. *Research Connections Canada*, 12. Retrieved April 3, 2009 from http://www.accel-capea.ca/pdf/rc_eng12.pdf.

4 McIvor, Onowa. (2005). The Contribution of Indigenous Heritage Language Immersion Programs to Healthy Early Childhood Development. *Research Connections Canada*, 12. Retrieved April 3, 2009 from http://www.accel-capea.ca/pdf/rc_eng12.pdf.



National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)
Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)
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220 Laurier Ave. W. Suite 1200 Ottawa, ON K1P 5Z9

Phone: (613) 237-9462 | Toll Free: 877-602-4445 | Fax: (613) 237-1810 | E-mail: info@naho.ca | www.naho.ca