

# Many Voices, Common Cause

A report on the Aboriginal Leadership Forum  
on **Early Childhood  
Development**

March 10/11, 2003  
Vancouver, BC





# Many Voices, Common Cause

## Executive Summary

On March 10 and 11 more than 200 delegates from across BC came together at the Hyatt Regency for the first annual Aboriginal Leadership Forum on Early Childhood Development (ECD).

They came with a common cause: to hammer out a vision that would ensure the health of Aboriginal children and the future well being of Aboriginal communities in British Columbia.

They came at a time of change. Before 1995, there were few federally funded programs directed at on-reserve children and their families. On-reserve childcare and early childhood programs are relatively new, without the benefit of long history. The signing of the 2000 First Minister's agreement signaled a shift in government's approach to the care of children. It signaled a commitment to providing care in a coordinated, integrated way and to addressing the gaps in programs and support. The 2002 federal Aboriginal ECD strategy was developed to counter the inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, and also emphasized coordination of services and programs. The First Minister's agreement and the federal ECD strategy are complementary responses to the same concern. Together, they mark a new beginning.

So, delegates came with some urgency, armed with ideas on how best to use limited resources, given new government developments and the grave obstacles still facing many Aboriginal children—obstacles like poverty, malnutrition, learning disabilities and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). And given that those children are the key to the future well-being of Aboriginal communities as they enter a new age of self-governance.

It was an inaugural event, focused on building leadership and community awareness. It was the first of its kind to include multiple levels of government, leadership and community in the development of a strategic plan.

There were keynote addresses from a panel of dignitaries: Dr. Joseph Gosnell, from the Nisga'a Lisims Government; the honorable Jane Stewart, federal minister of human resources development; the honorable Linda Reid, BC minister of state for early childhood development; the honorable Gordon Hogg, BC minister of children and family development, and the University of BC's Dr. Jo-anne Archibald, winner of a 2000 National Aboriginal Achievement Award for her work in the area of Aboriginal education.

Delegates heard the latest research on early childhood development and the role of communities from Dr. Fraser Mustard, the founding president of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. And they listened to Dr. Clyde Hertzman, from the University of BC, discuss the relationship between early childcare and brain development. They also heard from people who are making a difference where it counts, in their communities: people like Chief Ed John, from the First Nations Summit in North Vancouver, who assured the audience they have the support of leadership, and that the conference was a critical first step toward implementation of a framework for early childhood development. They heard from people like Raymond Phillips, director of the Nzenman Child and Family Centre in Lytton; Chief Sophie Pierre, from the Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Tribal Council; Diana Elliott, Infant Development Consultant, from the T̓sewultun Health Centre in Duncan; and Elaine Isaac, from the Caring for Our Children Society in West Vancouver.

“To heal the whole person requires a knowledge of where we came from.”

Dr. Joseph Gosnell  
Nisga'a Lisims Government

Most importantly, in a series of breakout sessions, delegates themselves had an opportunity to be heard, and to brainstorm about the future of Aboriginal early childhood development programs in BC. There were some strong opinions and a diversity of viewpoints expressed over the two days of the Forum. There was also broad support for certain basic principles: universality, sustainability and cultural relevance among them. And driving the debate: a clear recognition of what's at stake and a common will to provide Aboriginal children with that which all children deserve—the brightest possible future.

What was accomplished is significant. Many of the delegates were from the front lines of early childcare: social workers, early childhood educators, daycare workers, and program managers and coordinators. They came from as far north as Atlin and Fort St. James; from tiny, isolated communities like Kincolith, Quathiaski Cove and Takla Landing; and from larger urban centres like Vancouver, Victoria and Surrey. At the very least, they gained a better understanding of the challenges particular to the early care of Aboriginal children—difficult challenges that have a lot to do with old attitudes, an entrenched and labyrinthine administrative process, and scarce resources—and clarified their resolve to overcome those challenges. Even better, they were able to identify specific goals and develop strategies for meeting those goals. They found a common ground for action. They will be able to take this deeper understanding, this new resolve, back to their communities, an initial step toward enhancing leadership awareness of early childhood development—and gaining crucial support.

In keeping with all that was accomplished during the Forum, this report is intended to be more than a reference for better understanding, although understanding is a necessary foundation for action. It is also a practical guide, a tool to help governments, communities and agencies achieve a better model for the early care of BC's Aboriginal children, whether those children live in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, on Cortes Island, or in the remote village of New Aiyansh. This is your guide, created with your input, reflecting your community and its priorities. Make it work for you.

## Current Situation, Major Concerns

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During the two days of the Leadership Forum, one message rang loud and clear: that the answers to the future of early childhood development programs in BC's Aboriginal communities are rooted in the past. They lie in a past in which children are at the heart of Aboriginal culture, a sacred, communal responsibility and the key to the future well being of Aboriginal communities. They lie in a past in which children are treasured, a grave trust shared by parents, extended family and all members of the community.

Recent studies, two of which were presented at the Forum, have proven the wisdom of placing such high value on children. They have shown that support and nurturing in early childhood are critical factors in brain development, affecting a child's capacity to thrive for the rest of his or her life. Research has also shown that early exposure to a sense of community and cultural identity leads to resiliency—healthy, productive adults at the helm of healthy, productive families.

Sadly, it's also clear that the traditional way of rearing children, with the child at the centre of an entire community, has been seriously eroded by government programs—the residential schools of the early 1900s and through the 50 and 60s, and more recently, the removal of Aboriginal children from their families by the child welfare system.

Current government programs—a patchwork at best, fractured among various levels and departments of government, often inaccessible to those with the greatest need, and not reflective of Aboriginal values and culture—have done little to undo almost a century of damage. And while it is clear that more and more Aboriginal babies are born healthy and thrive into adulthood, it is also clear that too many still face the grave obstacles of poverty, malnutrition, high FAS rates, learning disabilities and substance abuse.

The signing of the September 2000 First Minister's Agreement signaled a change of attitude on the part of both federal and provincial governments toward the care of children. It confirmed a willingness to move away from the old child welfare system, toward one that recognizes the importance of the early years in human development, as well as the primary role of parents and families in the support and nurturing of children. The agreement has no doubt provided some of the recent impetus within the BC government to address Aboriginal ECD programming, including community capacity-building initiatives. In September 2002, the province also signed a Memorandum of Agreement with Aboriginal leadership, which commits both parties to a devolution of responsibility for child protection programs to Aboriginal authorities and appears to allow for a broader decision-making powers by these authorities.

Yes, there have been strides forward, but much, much more needs to be done to undo the damage of the past. Substantive changes at the administrative and service delivery levels must be made to correspond with the shift in philosophy. Delegates at the Forum identified the following major areas of concern within the current system:

### 1 Funding

There was almost universal agreement on the fact that there is not enough funding to match demand, let alone support a full spectrum of early childhood development services. Many delegates said there were children being left out, children with needs that just weren't being met.

“ In this time of treaty negotiations and land claims, we need strong people. Early childhood development is an investment now in the future well-being of our communities. ”

Chief Ian Campbell  
Squamish Nation

In addition to scarcity of funds, the funding process itself is a problem. Many delegates described the frustration of arbitrary divisions between age groups and the rigidity of funding requirements. One delegate described how capital funding was available for kindergartens in her community, but not for Early Childhood Development centres.

Delegates from the smaller, more isolated communities said they were being left behind because they didn't have the resources to compete for scarce funds in an onerous, proposal-driven process. Others said that even though they have the resources to compete for funds, the process is so lengthy it is difficult to provide services in a timely way. And once the funding is in place, it is inflexible, going not where it is needed most, but where it has been earmarked to go through rigid reporting requirements. Still others said the short-term funding they receive leads to programs that are not sustainable and a lack of continuity in service delivery.

## 2 Reporting

Many delegates said that current reporting requirements are so unwieldy as to be prohibitive. They said that reporting was time-consuming and laborious, taking valuable energy and resources away from service delivery. Others said to do it properly required a dedicated, full-time position, at substantial added cost.

Delegates also said that reporting requirements are often insensitive, and misguided. To be eligible for certain FAS funding for example, applicants must show need by asking clients if they drank when they were pregnant. Delegates pointed out that it's the wrong question, because women, naturally, do not want to acknowledge, even to themselves, that they did anything to hurt their babies.

## 3 Lack of Coordination

Many delegates talked about a system-wide lack of coordination, among the different levels of government, various agencies, and among the programs and departments. The result, they said, is a frustrating duplication of certain program mandates at the administrative level, inconsistent policies at the provincial and federal levels, and a waste of resources at the service level. Trying to coordinate provincial and federal resources, in particular, delegates said, is a massive undertaking.

## 4 Uneven Service Delivery

Delegates said that jurisdictional designations within federal departments and provincial ministries and agencies, such as on-reserve and off-reserve, status and non-status, have led to serious barriers to service for urban and non-status Aboriginals. They said that off-reserve and non-status children often remain invisible, their problems hidden, until they reach epidemic proportions.

## 5 Lack of Trained Aboriginal Practitioners

Delegates said lack of training is a problem on two fronts. Smaller, remote communities have trouble attracting qualified people in the first place, forcing children to leave their communities to access the services they need. And in larger communities, almost all qualified early childhood development practitioners come from outside, and are less likely to understand cultural and community protocols.

## 6 Program Gaps

Despite recent funding commitments from the federal government targeting early childhood development, there was broad concern among delegates that the needs of Aboriginal families still far outweigh services. With the ratio of Aboriginal families headed by a single parent more than double that for all Canadians, many delegates expressed concern that there is not enough programming targeting single-parent families.

Likewise, delegates noted that with FAS rates 30 times higher among Aboriginals than the general population, preventive services are far from meeting the need.

Another area requiring attention, delegates said, is special needs. The rate of severe disability among Aboriginal children living on-reserve is much higher than those living off-reserve, and more than twice as high as non-Aboriginal children. And so far, federal funding for on-reserve special needs children has been earmarked for school-age children, despite the fact that the earlier developmental delays are identified, the less lasting impact they will have.

# Working Smarter: Towards a **New ECD Model** for BC's **Aboriginal Children**

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## A Set of Guiding Principles

While delegates at the Early Childhood Forum were joined by a common cause, diversity was a recurring theme: diversity of First Nations, diversity of communities and diversity of individuals. It was clear that no one vision would honor that diversity, nor would cookie-cutter approaches to programs and services. That said, there was universal agreement on the urgent need for more government resources, a higher level of coordination between federal and provincial agencies, and more clarity around the issue of decentralization. There was also broad support for certain fundamental principles, principles that form a solid foundation on which to build a new model for early childhood programs and services. These principles, delegates said, reflect the realities and needs of all Aboriginal children and their families. They are as follows:

- 1 Universality, accessibility and comprehensiveness**  
Early childcare programs and services should be accessible to every child, whether off reserve or on, whether living in a tiny, isolated community of no more than 100, or in large urban centres like Vancouver or Victoria. Geography and status should pose no barriers to the care and nurturing of Aboriginal children. As well, programs and services must create stable, nurturing environments for children at home, in their neighborhoods and in supportive care.
- 2 Sustainability**  
Funding for early childcare programs and services, both core and program, should be consistent over time, ensuring that specific programs and services are in place long enough to make a difference, and not there one year and gone the next.
- 3 Cultural relevance**  
Research shows that early exposure to a sense of community and cultural identity leads to resiliency, to healthy, productive adults who can fulfill the future of Aboriginal communities as they begin to self-govern. ECD should, therefore, be customized to fit specific communities. They should be culturally relevant and best designed at the community level, to ensure they reflect what it is to be a healthy Gitksan, a healthy Musqueam, or a healthy Nisga'a.
- 4 Elder participation**  
Traditional Aboriginal culture believes that healing the whole person requires knowledge of the past. Elders have an irreplaceable wealth of historical wisdom and learning, much of it passed down from one generation to the next. For communities to benefit from this vital source of wisdom, Elders once again need to be an integral part of early childcare. Early childhood development programs and services should both reflect Elder input, and promote enhanced interaction between the young and the old.
- 5 A holistic approach to care**  
Programs and services should reflect a holistic approach to early childhood development, in which health development involves the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical well being of children and families. Holistic also means incorporating teachings about the environment, and the child's relationship to it.

- 6 Communal responsibility**  
The care of a child does not happen in isolation. Early childhood development is about reconnecting the traditional bond between child and extended family, and between family and community. It means involving the entire community, from parents to Elders to decision makers to the people on the front lines—putting children back where they belong, at the centre of the community.
- 7 Integrated and holistic service delivery**  
An integrated approach to early childhood development is not about cost-cutting. As a guiding principle, it means that policy and service delivery are aligned, that they are based on strong relationships between practitioners and parents, characterized by trust, respect, and shared knowledge of cultural protocols and traditions. It also means that the family and extended family actively participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation process. The result is a seamless continuum of culturally relevant services targeting the specific needs of each community, each family and each child.
- 8 Accountability**  
No matter how many ECD services and programs are in place in the province, without a means for monitoring them, there is no assurance they are adequately meeting the needs of families. To ensure accountability, an overall measurement strategy is needed to identify gaps, overlaps and deficiencies.

## Specific Goals and Objectives

Delegates from smaller, isolated communities often had different priorities than delegates from large urban centres. Remote service providers wrestled with the problem of how to attract qualified people, for example, when the alternative means traveling five hours by logging road to see a specialist in another community. On the other hand, delegates from the bigger towns and cities, struggled with how to access an almost invisible urban Aboriginal population. Despite the differences, there was consensus on certain specific objectives:

- 1 Promote healthy babies**  
With FAS rates in Aboriginal communities 30 times higher than in the general population, delegates were very clear about the importance of a full spectrum of preventive pre-natal and pregnancy support programs. And while federal and provincial programs such as the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, First Nations Head Start, Aboriginal Health Start, and National Child Benefit are making a difference, they are simply not enough given the extent of the problem. Delegates also talked about the sensitivities of the subject of FAS and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) among Aboriginal communities, how it has been stigmatized, resulting, in some communities, in an almost collective denial on the part of parents, extended families and leaders. Delegates agreed that for FAS/FAE programs and services to be as successful as they could be, they must take into account such sensitivities and de-stigmatize the problem, as well as prevent and treat it.
- 2 Teach positive parenting**  
The damage done by residential schools was a recurring theme during the two days of the Forum. Many of today's young parents are the children of parents who went to those schools, who did not have the benefit of parental observance, and as a result, lacked the skills necessary to effectively parent their own children. Delegates expressed the dire need to break this cycle through programs, such as the Pops and Tots program in Klemtu, that target young parents, both moms and dads, and that teach traditional ways of parenting.
- 3 Provide support for single-parent families**  
Many delegates talked about the increase in single-parent families in their communities. Indeed, the proportion of Aboriginal families headed by single parents is more than double that of the general population: 28 percent, compared to 13 percent for all Canadians. For Aboriginal people living in urban centres, that figure jumps to an astonishing 40 percent. Being a single parent, facing alone all the challenges and responsibilities of raising children, makes the job of parenting tougher, and increases the

need for supports, such as licensed daycares and quality preschool programming. Fifty-seven new facilities were built in the last couple of years, bringing the total to close to 100 around the province, about halfway to the target of 200. Progress is being made, but delegates said the number of current facilities is nowhere near enough to meet the very real needs of single-parent and two-parent families.

#### **4 Enhance the link between ECD programs and schools**

A number of reasons were cited by delegates for enhancing this link. First, it would strengthen the continuity of services from the client's perspective, to have daycare and after-school care linked. Many other delegates expressed concern about the increase in teen parents and talked about the need for daycares in schools so that these young moms and dads could continue their education, an important aspect of health according to traditional holistic approaches. Commit to long-term, sustainable funding.

#### **5 Capitalize on informal learning**

Delegates talked a lot about the wealth of informal learning in their communities, as high as 70 per cent according to some accounts, and how important this learning is, particularly for the transmission of traditional languages. This is non-degreed knowledge, however, unrecognized by funding agencies, and delegates agreed they need to find a way to get licensing agencies to recognize their communities' natural teachers.

#### **6 Encourage interaction between the young and the old**

There was a lot of discussion among delegates around the need to reconnect Elders and young children, to re-establish the traditional relationships between the young and old, so that each group can benefit the other. Many communities have already established programs to promote such relationships, programs such as the Elders' Tea, an initiative of the Nadleh Whuten Band near Fraser Lake, where the children serve tea to the grandparents, and which is so popular that some of the older men without children participate regularly. Cranbrook, too, has a language and culture program, in which Elders are learning valuable teaching skills. Still, such programs are too few and far between, delegates said, and more are needed to re-entrench Elders as central figures in the lives of young children.

#### **7 Increase the number of skilled Aboriginal practitioners in communities**

It takes skill and specialized learning to deal with FAS, FAE and other severe learning disabilities. Many delegates talked about the lack of trained people within their communities. The result, they said, was either that the children had to leave their communities to be treated, or that the care was not as effective as it could be. The problem is even more acute in smaller, remote communities. Some delegates talked about how it can be months before they see a dentist, or doctor. They also talked about the fact that people who leave the community to be trained don't always come back, representing a serious loss of knowledge and manpower. There was broad agreement on the need for more supports, such as practicums, and follow-up for people getting training, to prevent them "falling through the cracks," as well as more accessible training programs—distance education and outreach teaching programs—which would allow participants to get the training they need to serve their communities, without having to leave their communities. As an example, the Nzenman Child and Family Centre in Lytton negotiated a partnership with Simon Fraser University, in which educators came to the community to train staff. In the end, the centre went from having one trained person to 15, all from within the community.

#### **8 Enhance partnerships within and between communities**

There was almost universal acceptance among delegates that stakeholders in early childhood development must collaborate more to achieve a more streamlined delivery of services. Delegates insisted that to be effective, there must be more liaison between band councils and early childcare providers, among various early child care agencies, and among communities. Not only will this kind of collaboration lead to valuable information sharing, and a higher level of coordination among service providers, but also to a critical foundation of support from key stakeholders.

“ Our problems must be solved within the context of our culture. Otherwise, we eradicate the culture. ”

Elaine Isaac  
Caring for Our Children  
West Vancouver

## Recommendations and Next Steps

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One of the goals of the Leadership Forum was for participants to leave with more than mere philosophy about early childhood development, although philosophy is always a good place from which to kick off a lively discussion. Consequently, on the second day of the breakout sessions, delegates were asked for specific, actionable steps that service providers, community leaders and government representatives could take once they arrived home, steps that would help meet the goals set out the day before. They provided plenty. Some of them are broad; some are narrow. Some can be taken in one day. Others will take weeks, months, even years to complete. Whatever the timeframe, they lead to the same place: safe, healthy communities for BC's Aboriginal children.

### As service providers:

#### Develop a range of funding sources

To alleviate some of the frustrations around funding, develop diverse funding sources, including private (organizations such as the United Way, for example) and partnership sources.

#### Be aggressive about funding particulars

To help ensure programs are sustainable, try to lock in funding for three or more years, enough time to give a program or service a good start. Then go back to the table and say, "We did this as intervention. This is what we need for prevention."

#### Tie funding and accountability to a community plan

To ensure resources are used where they are needed the most, develop a comprehensive community plan, with a clear vision and specific goals and objectives, with direct input from all segments of the community, including Elders, youth, parents and leadership. Build as much consensus as possible. Tie funding and accountability to this plan to avoid the restrictions of stove-piped programs. While it's important to satisfy the requirements of both levels of government, always ask the question, "Who are we accountable to really?" And always go back to the community plan to ensure programs and services are appropriate for your particular community.

#### Inform, and be informed

Information is power. Make sure important information goes to all stakeholders, in as many creative ways as possible. The burden is on you to make sure they get the message, not the other way around. By the same token, make it your responsibility to stay informed on the latest research, on what other agencies and communities are doing in the area of early childhood development, and on government initiatives and sources of funding. There's a wealth of information now easily accessible via the internet.

#### Network with other service providers and other communities

Two heads are better than one, and networking has huge advantages. There is no better way to raise the profile of your cause, share information, learn from the successes, and mistakes, of others, or to link with other agencies.

#### Be politically active

Get involved. Attend community meetings. Talk directly to Band Councillors and Elders. It is the only way to influence the political agenda and ensure young children are a priority at every level of government.

#### Identify and support champions within the community

Valuable partnerships are critical for shaping and implementing change. And successful collaborations rely on support from key stakeholders. Identify who your champions are and develop solid relationships with them through regular communication and contact.

#### Educate Key Stakeholders

Educate the Chiefs and Councillors who hold portfolios in education, social development and health. Educate them about ECD's relationship to their portfolios, and its importance to their communities. They are more likely to make it a priority and support it if they understand what's at stake. Be sure to stay on top of portfolio changes and re-educate newcomers as needed.

#### Consult Elders

Actively pursue Elder input and support. But first define how you see their role and be sure they agree to it. Then follow up with them to keep them involved. And keep in mind, an Elder can be 42, or 82. Being an Elder has more to do with what they know than how old they are.

#### Develop programs through community focus groups

To help ensure programs meet the specific needs of your community, hold community focus groups, in which Elders, leaders, young moms and dads, parents and single parents, youth and other stakeholders are all invited to the table to set goals and objectives.

#### Take every opportunity to provide input on framework

Fill in questionnaires and attend Forums and Round Tables. And don't wait to be asked: send letters, talk on the phone, distribute newsletters and information circulars. If you communicate loudly enough and often enough, you will be heard. Start by filling in the event evaluation form at the back of this report. Your feedback will help ensure that future Forums on early childhood development are effective.

#### Celebrate the successes

It's important when the task at hand is very large, when changes needed are both wide and deep, and the challenges are many, to have a sense of movement forward, of progress toward an achievable goal. Be aware of every success, large or small. And make a point of celebrating them. It will keep you inspired—and motivated to achieve further successes.

## As community leaders:

#### Be a positive role model

One of the most effective ways to lead is by example. Be a good parent to your own children. And show you care about the children in your community—show them you are fulfilling your communal responsibility—by supporting the services they need to thrive.

#### Make ECD a priority

If it's not a priority at the leadership level, no amount of effort on the front lines will effect the kinds of changes necessary to truly heal the damages of the past.

#### Be informed about ECD and best practices

Informed decisions are sound decisions. Make a point of learning what the key issues are around early childhood development (this report is a good place to start), particularly as they relate to your community, and what the best practices are. You will then know how far your community has come, and how far it has to go.

#### Support locally-based training

The need for skilled Aboriginal practitioners, particularly in the remote communities of BC, is dire. Aboriginal people who have to leave their communities to get training often do not return, representing a significant loss of skill and manpower. There are creative, economical ways—through outreach partnerships with educational institutions, for example, or through distance education—to secure training right in your community. Support these initiatives. Your investment will help build a highly skilled team of early child care practitioners, who are fully acquainted with community and cultural protocols.

#### Promote volunteerism

Promote volunteerism down through the ranks of youth, instilling its virtues at the youngest age possible. Not only do communities benefit from the contribution of volunteers, but volunteers themselves benefit. Kids who grow up volunteering gain a wealth of practical experience they might not otherwise have had access to. They also gain a sense of purpose and a sense place within a community.

#### Create a “Champion of Children” award

Awards have a number of values. They raise awareness of an issue. They are inspirational and motivational. And they reflect a value system; in this case, that children are a high priority in your community.

## As governments:

#### Consult with communities

Federal and provincial governments have made a commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal communities to better meet the needs of young children. Successful partnerships require a meeting of minds. That means developing relationships with Aboriginal communities, consulting with community leaders and talking to front-line workers on a regular basis. And it means asking the question: “What do you need?” and listening to the answers. Forums like this one, are one effective way to secure broad-based feedback, but they cannot be one-offs. Communication must be ongoing.

#### Be aware of international ECD standards

A tremendous amount of research is being done around the world within the field of Early Childhood Development. The research is driving fundamental shifts in attitude, particularly in the modern western world, away from the notion that a child’s upbringing is a private affair and that policies and services should focus on at-risk children, and toward the view that children of all ages are a shared responsibility. To ensure that policies and programming are aligned with the latest research findings, governments must be fully aware of this global context.

#### Streamline the funding process

Delegates expressed deep concerns about the funding process, how complicated and time-consuming it is, taking valuable resources and energy away from what really counts: service delivery. They suggested creating a database of funding sources, a one-stop shop of sources, easily accessible and clearly defined. They also suggested creating supports for communities in the form of templates for proposal writing. This will not only help individual applicants with what can seem an overwhelming task, it will help more of them meet the requirements for proposal writing and level the playing field among applicants, making it a more fair system. An added benefit: funding agencies will receive proposals that accord with standards and formats they have set.

#### Commit to long-term, sustainable funding

Delegates talked a good deal about the frustration of short-term funding, of working hard to develop a program custom-fit for their community, only to have its funding threatened before it really gets off the ground. For children and families to really benefit from ECD programs and services, they have to be in place over the long-term, and funding, delegates said, has to be sustainable.

“ In our communities we have amazing people who are working with children. Despite the good they do, they don’t recognize their own value.”

Chief Sophie Pierre  
Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Tribal Council

## Conclusion: Old Values, **New Attitude,** **Brighter** Future

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If one message rang louder and resonated more deeply than any other during the first annual Aboriginal Leadership Forum on Early Childhood Development, it was that the future well being of Aboriginal communities lies very much in the past. In a past where children thrived at the heart of Aboriginal culture. It is no coincidence that the basic principles, and many of the goals and objectives identified in this report, are based on traditional Aboriginal values around the raising of children.

While the central role of children is nothing new to Aboriginal communities, research is only recently confirming they were right to place such high value on the young. And the research is driving a gradual, but monumental shift on the part of governments and policy makers away from intervention to prevention.

Clearly, advocates of ECD are poised on the threshold of great change and great opportunity. Opportunity to shape a new, and much better model for the care of their very youngest citizens, one that will reconnect the bond between children and their extended families, reflect Aboriginal culture and values, and ultimately, heal the very real, and very deep, wounds of the past.

These are exciting times, tempered by the grave responsibility of forging a new path. It is encouraging that the new path is one that Aboriginal people have walked before. They know it leads in the right direction. Now, what remains is to take the journey.

This Forum was one step on that journey. There are many more steps necessary to reach the final destination—a place with healthy children and healthy communities. Many of them you identified at this forum, and they are included in this report. They won't be easy steps to take. Most will require energy, perseverance and persistence. But they are yours for the taking—defined with your input, reflecting your values, and incorporating your priorities. Ultimately, they will lead you, and the children in your community, to a brighter future.



## Discussion paper provides focus for Forum

The first annual Leadership Forum on Early Childhood Development was ambitious in its aim: to create real-world strategies for delivering effective early childhood programs to Aboriginal communities around the province. Delegates had only two days to meet the goal. But meet it they did, because they came knowing first-hand what's at stake and they had a common will to find solutions. They also had a road map to help them stay on course.

Margo Greenwood's discussion paper, titled "BC First Nations Children: Our Families, Our Communities, Our Future" was made available to all delegates at the Forum, and it provided both a context and a focus for the breakout sessions. In it, Ms. Greenwood sets out current federal and provincial programs targeting Aboriginal pre-school children. She also explains certain key concepts involved in the effective care and education of Aboriginal children. The value of early childhood development is one, beginning with conception.

"The importance of early childhood development is at the heart of our communities (and indeed our very existence) as Aboriginal peoples. Early childhood development has been given considerable attention in the past two decades by contemporary early childhood researchers, though it remains at the core of the Aboriginal Elder's consideration of children."

And the care of children, no matter their age, is a communal or tribal responsibility, reports Ms. Greenwood.

"The belief that child rearing is a sacred responsibility has always been present for Aboriginal people. This belief is embodied in the customs and practices of childrearing as a communal (or tribal) practice done not only by parents and immediate family, but rather by the whole (and extended) community."

"... an Aboriginal child lives within a family, a community, a Nation, a province, and a country. In this context children develop their self-esteem and pride in their heritage and culture, which is needed to sustain them in their communities and nations as well as in broader society."

It is a communal responsibility that incorporates holistic values and principles.

"Our values and principles have also been integrated into the care and education of our children, specifically the inclusion of a sense of connection to the land and the people and a belief that time and life itself mirrors the cycles that are evident in Mother Earth."

Ms. Greenwood also introduces the concept of enculturation, a term coined by early childhood development researcher Carole Phillips, which means "the process by which families enable children to know and understand a culture and/or society's values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours." Ms. Greenwood emphasizes the value of this process:

“Enculturation is essential, not only to the survival of a culture and people, but also to the development of healthy individuals who will one day be active and participating members in their community and nation. This positive development of a child’s identity and esteem is particularly relevant for Aboriginal children given the experiences of Aboriginal people since Euro-colonial contact.”

The paper also underlines the importance of integrated and holistic service delivery, to ensure that services more effectively meet the needs of children and their families. Collaboration and partnerships, Ms. Greenwood writes, are keys to such holistic service delivery.

“[Carole James, Director of Child and Family Services for Carrier Sekani Family Services], states that partnerships within (and between) communities begin when stakeholders are brought together as a result of common challenges and realities. Once stakeholders come together, they work to identify challenges they face and ways to address those identified challenges.”

It is no coincidence that the key concepts discussed in Ms. Greenwood’s paper are reflected in the goals and objectives, and recommendations segment of this report. And the series of questions at the end of the paper, intended to guide delegates through the breakout sessions, were critical to the success of those sessions, ensuring they went beyond theory to practical strategies for implementation.

## Education expert champions children and the use of traditional knowledge and culture

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When it comes to education and culture, Dr. Jo-ann Archibald knows of what she speaks. Over the past three decades, she has been involved in the field in nearly every capacity, a dedication that recently earned her a National Aboriginal Achievement Award for her work in education.

A former elementary school teacher and curriculum developer at the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre, she is now an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of BC, where she has held positions as Director of the First Nations House of Learning and Supervisor of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program.

In her keynote address at the Aboriginal Leadership Forum on Early Childhood Development on March 10 and 11, Dr. Archibald began with four key concepts: respect, responsibility, reverence and reciprocity, all of which are key to positive learning, she said. She also talked about the importance of traditional approaches to education, such as the holistic approach, which puts children at the centre of an extended family, a larger community and a nation, and which recognizes four equally important areas of well being—intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical. In turn, she said, “we must put children at the centre of planning and evaluation of our programs. And we must listen with our three ears; one being the heart.”

She talked about the importance of Indigenous principles and benchmarks in the design and implementation of childcare programs and services, and cited the Maori example, in which attempts to revitalize the Indigenous language took off in the early 80s when Maoris themselves began to use their own techniques of childcare and learning. As a result, the Maori language movement spread dramatically from early childhood facilities to universities, and is now becoming “the language of the young.”

The same kind of success can be achieved by Aboriginal communities in Canada, she said, ending her presentation with a simple, but critical piece of advice: “Always go back to putting children at the centre,” she advised policy makers, program designers and educators alike.

## Leading researchers confirm importance of early childhood experience

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At the first annual Aboriginal Leadership Forum on Early Childhood Development, held on March 10 and 11 in Vancouver, Jane Stewart, the federal minister of human resources development, emphasized in her keynote address that public policy is based on sound research. "Research has been pivotal in focusing governments on children's early years," she said to the audience of more than 200.

Indeed, more than a decade of research linking conditions in early childhood to well being throughout life, and more broadly, to the well being of society, is driving a recent, and monumental, shift in focus on the part of both federal and provincial governments.

Dr. Clyde Hertzman, a leading epidemiologist at the University of British Columbia, and Dr. Fraser Mustard, founder of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, have been instrumental in much of that research, and the Forum was fortunate to feature both as speakers.

Dr. Mustard began his address by pointing out that Aboriginal communities in BC are setting an example for other provinces by galvanizing attention on the early years of child development. He described how the research demonstrates that the most critical period of brain development happens in the first six years of a child's life, and how a child's development during these early years will shape their learning, behavior and health for years to come. "Children spending their early years in unstimulating, unsupportive environments will face lifelong consequences," he said. More specifically, he talked about the effects on school performance, pointing out that while special programs for children who have had a poor start can help some overcome the challenges, the gains are never what could be achieved if the children had the necessary supports in the first place.

Dr. Mustard ended by calling for major systemic changes, a retirement of the Ministry of Education, for example, and the creation, instead, of a Ministry of Human Development, in which schools and Early Childhood Development programs would meld.

Dr. Clyde Hertzman also called for institutional change. "We need to reshape our communities so that children develop in three ways," he said, "physically, cognitively and socially." Each area is linked to the other, he explained, and each area influences well being later on in life. Unfortunately, Dr. Hertzman said, western countries have not addressed well the social aspect of development, focusing instead on physical and cognitive skills. He outlined six environmental aspects critical for healthy development in children: encouragement and exploration; mentoring in basic skills; celebration of developmental advances; guided rehearsal and extension of new skills; protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment; and a rich and responsive language environment. All six factors are mobile (they can be applied anywhere), universal, and can be applied to all cultures.

Much of Dr. Hertzman's address focused on his early childhood development mapping work in BC. One study, which looked at the relationship between income and delayed vocabulary development in children, showed a significant five-fold difference in risk across the social spectrum. Another showed substantial variations in infant mortality rates among status Indians, from one Aboriginal community to another, ranging from as low 4.9 per 1000 births in the Thompson health region, to a high of 18.5 in the Upper Island/Central Coast region. "The core question," said Dr. Hertzman, "is, What is it that allows some Aboriginal communities to do better than others?"

In an attempt to answer the question, he cited a study on teen suicide rates in Aboriginal communities. It showed that, on average, suicide rates were high, but in communities where cultural values were strong, the rates were significantly lower.

Dr. Hertzman also talked about the Early Development Instrument, a tool for testing vulnerability in certain areas of development, such as social competence, emotional maturity, and cognitive development. He found huge neighborhood-to-neighborhood differences in Vancouver and throughout BC. On a social scale, for example, he found a lower number of vulnerable kids in central and West Coast Vancouver Island communities, than in Vancouver. “Those communities were doing something to buffer those kids,” he said, adding that the less vulnerable kids showed strong relationships within the community.

Interestingly, Dr. Hertzman said that the stereotype of Aboriginal kids being at risk is not supported by the data. In fact, he pointed out, in some communities, they are doing much better than others. And they show less vulnerability in certain areas of development. Aboriginal kids seem to be doing quite well on the emotional and social scales, for example, but not so well in the areas of physical health and language. “What we need to do,” he said, “is reduce the inequalities, and deliver to the schools more kids who are less vulnerable. To do that, we need the full range of access to early childhood development programs.” Some Aboriginal communities are very good at doing that already, he said. “We just need more of them.”

Dr. Hertzman ended his address with some words of encouragement. “Communities must be the ones to push for early childhood development. Then comes the political will. The challenge is to get communities together and share the vision. Speak loudly enough and clearly enough to put children first.”



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