

2018

# Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years



## Each Child Brings a Special Gift: Nurturing Indigenous Identity and Belonging

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### Introduction

How can adults working with Indigenous children (aged 9–12 years) in the Canadian context foster a sense of self, belonging, and identity? What are the key elements of a quality experience for Indigenous children attending programs outside of the classroom? To begin answering these questions, we start with these facts:

- The term “Indigenous” refers to the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples of Canada.
- Indigenous children (aged 14 and under) represent 28 per cent of the total Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2017).

- Indigenous children, in comparison with non-Indigenous children, are twice as likely to live in a lone parent home or with grandparents (Statistics Canada, 2017).
- Thirty-four per cent of Indigenous children living in Ontario live in poverty, compared with 15 per cent of non-Indigenous children (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2017).
- In some Indigenous communities, the life stage of children aged 7 to 14 years is often called “The Fast Life”. This stage is ripe with growth, curiosity, and challenges (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a).

Adults working in programs in which Indigenous children are present must address these complexities in a comprehensive and respectful manner. This brief examines the latest research and provides strategies to nurture the Indigenous child in a holistic way.

Most Indigenous communities have teachings regarding the life stages of a human being. These teachings often include aspects of The Fast Life as described in this research brief.

## Research Findings

In 2014, the Ministry of Education released *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years*, which discusses concrete ways to enhance the learning experiences of children in the province. Several themes and key



components from this document align with Indigenous worldviews, pedagogies, and approaches to child development. Figure 1 is a representation of those key ideas infused within an Indigenous model of teaching and learning.

**Figure 1.**  
Holistic Continuum of Learning

The Holistic Continuum of Learning model builds upon the foundations for learning and development in *How Does Learning Happen?* and represents key elements of a quality experience for Indigenous children. This holistic continuum of learning has the child at the centre, where balance in the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains is the priority (Toulouse, 2011). Children are also surrounded by teachers – their families, their communities, educators,<sup>1</sup> and experiences with the natural world (“Mother Earth”) – that can affect that balance (Best Start Resource Centre, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Adults working with children in the middle years may be challenged by and gifted with characteristics and behaviours associated with this phase of development, called The Fast Life. This is a time to celebrate the rapid physical growth and changes that children will undergo. It is also a crucial time in children’s intellectual development, as their curiosity and love for learning can be strengthened (or broken) during this period (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a; Toulouse, 2011). As a child gets to the later stage of The Fast Life, emotional growth, maturation, and independence become front and centre. The Fast Life is truly the process of moving from being a child to becoming a respectful youth who is conscientious and aware. This is the time for discovering the gifts (i.e., skills, values, knowledge) that each child possesses and providing each child with opportunities to further explore those attributes. The core philosophy of The Fast Life is based upon the circle teachings, in which no one is to be left out and each child is to be valued and loved (Ball, 2012; Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a). Every teacher and influence in a child’s life contributes to the child’s development, as explored below.



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1. The term “educator” has been used throughout this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

## The Family

**The entire family represents the cultural dynamic of the child.** Meaningful programs recognize and support the role of the Indigenous child’s family as a conveyer of culture, language, and engagement. Adults working with children in the middle years need to understand the dynamics of Indigenous families. For example, most Indigenous children have significant people in their lives who are not related to them biologically (McCalman, Heyeres, Campbell, Bainbridge, Chamberlain, Strobel, & Ruben, 2017). Indigenous families are often extended groupings in which traditional clan members, Elders, or close friends take on a trusted familial role (e.g., auntie, uncle). Therefore it is important to really know the backgrounds of the children, including languages spoken at home. When planning activities with Indigenous children that involve print (e.g., instructions, books, digital media), educators should use a respectful, bilingual approach that recognizes that children may, as part of their everyday existence, speak non-standard English and/or French (also called FNMI dialects or English/French as a second dialect) (Ball, 2009; Toulouse, February 2013). The inclusion of mother languages in basic greetings is a good place to start (e.g., Anishinaabemowin, Haudenosaunee, Mushkegowuk, Michif, Inuktitut). Engagement with families is built upon time, trust, and understanding. Indigenous peoples value knowing who the educator is as a human being first, before that person’s credentials are presented. Relationships are at the core of engagement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

### Basic Greetings (similar to “hello”)

*Aanii* (Ojibwe)

*Shé:kon* (Mohawk)

*Waachiyaah* (Cree)

*Tanshi* (Michif)

*Ainngai* (Inuktitut)

## The Community

“Involved”, “valued”, and “connected” are words that illustrate the role of the community in authentic programs with Indigenous children. Nearly every urban centre in Ontario has an Indigenous Friendship Centre or Aboriginal Health Access Centre. These organizations can provide those community linkages to resources and events that are based in Indigenous traditions and needs (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011b). After-school programs in rural settings often have First Nations communities



located close by, and it is important for programs serving Indigenous children to make contact with cultural resource people in these communities. Each First Nation typically has an education department, or a cultural coordinator who has knowledge and skills that cannot be replicated. These types of experiences – learning with or from cultural resource people and participating in community events – are of value for all children. It is important that proper protocols are followed when connecting with communities (McCalman et al., 2017). The presentation of an appropriate gift begins the conversation for drawing upon the services and contributions of the community. To find out what the appropriate gift is, educators should contact the organizations or community and ask. The community is a teacher that fosters understanding and relationships between the children and the adults that work with them (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

### Examples of Gifts

Tobacco  
(sacred medicine)

Your time  
(with a visit)

Food  
(traditional or contemporary)

Donation  
(to a community program or project)

## The Educator

“Informed”, “compassionate”, and “resourceful” are descriptors that encompass the character of the educator in relevant programs with Indigenous children. In these programs, the educator has many roles (e.g., teacher, counsellor, nurse, learner, mentor, event planner), and this by nature leads to a complex level of resourcefulness. Working with Indigenous children requires a clear plan for accessing Indigenous resources and connecting with the families and communities (Greenwood, 2016; Pearson, 2016). Being informed about the challenges that Indigenous children face and the strengths that they inherently possess is also key. Compassion is a fundamental part of the unwritten job description of an educator. Knowing and facilitating an educational environment in which the gifts of each child are nurtured is a highly valued skill (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017). This is especially important as Indigenous children in the middle years enter The Fast Life that is often imbued with awkwardness, curiosity, and change. The educator is part of the living story and development of identity essential for all children (Ball, 2012; Pearson, 2016).

## Mother Earth

Exploration, play, and inquiry are conditions that include planned (and unplanned) interactions with Mother Earth in programs in which Indigenous children are present. Respect for the earth and the concept of stewardship are teachings that Indigenous peoples share (Toulouse, 2011). Therefore, programs that Indigenous children attend must include connections to Mother Earth and her children (e.g., animals, plants, the elements, the seasons). Mother Earth is one of the greatest teachers that our children will have, and it is important that caring for her is part of the program (Ntelioglou & Peterson, 2017). Indigenous children who are in The Fast Life stage are at the peak of curiosity in their development and also possess the ability to make positive changes. They have the language and skills to be a part of projects that focus on taking care of Mother Earth (e.g., Water Walks, community gardens). Indigenous children need that time in nature to explore and play individually and with others (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). These types of experiences are at the core of their creativity and the fostering of their emotional or spiritual intelligence (Greenwood, 2016; Toulouse, 2011).

## Considerations

How can adults working with Indigenous children in the middle years foster in them a sense of self, belonging, and identity? The answer to this question is rooted in attaining a balance in the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of learning (Toulouse, 2011). The following considerations are critical to include in programs running outside of the regular classroom:

### **The Physical**

- learning spaces that have equipment, posters, messages, and symbols in the original languages and cultures of the child (even if they are not fluent in either)
- meals and snacks that are provided as part of the program in response to issues surrounding food security
- memos and communication with parents/guardians that are accessible and include original languages of the families (e.g., basic greetings as an introduction)
- acknowledgment of traditional Indigenous land (e.g., the Greater Toronto Area is the treaty territory of the Dish With One Spoon) at the beginning of the program

## The Emotional

- the presence of respectful humour as a way to establish that learning is the seamless integration of the informal and formal
- partnerships with parents/guardians and the communities in planning activities together (e.g., regular programs, special events, and field trips)
- celebrating of milestones in the child's life (e.g., retention or completion of program, traditional rites of passage, birthdays)
- educators' sharing of details of their life stories (e.g., their families, pets, hobbies, special memories) as a way to connect with the child and their family

## The Intellectual

- availability of videos, books, and other resources featuring Indigenous authors and voices
- on-going check-ins (informal and formal) with Indigenous children and families regarding the benefits and areas of growth for the program
- learning strategies that include hands-on experiences, time for reflection, and real-world connections
- fostering of curiosity, inquiry, and play by providing quality time and diverse experiences for the child

## The Spiritual

- presence of Elders, Métis Senators, and cultural resource people as part of the regular program
- site visits (real and virtual) to places of significance to Indigenous peoples in the area (i.e., land-based activities that reinforce cultural teachings)
- understanding of and compassion about the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and colonization on Indigenous children
- acceptance that the relationship between the educator and the child is a sacred one and that the effects of that relationship will be felt for many years to come



## Conclusion

Indigenous children in the middle years come from diverse societies that are rich in culture, language, and history. The adult who works with them is faced with The Fast Life, a stage of child development that has its challenges and strengths. It is crucial to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but the acceptance of time and commitment to forming relationships is key (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Each child brings a special gift to this world, and it is our shared responsibility to nurture this.

## Questions for Reflection

- What Indigenous considerations (e.g., physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual) does your program excel at or need to work on?
- How does The Fast Life stage affect the delivery of your program? What has it taught you and your team?
- What can you or your program do to focus more on time, trust, and building relationships with Indigenous children and families?

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## Author Biography

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Dr. Pamela Rose Toulouse is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Laurentian University. Originally from the community of Sagamok First Nation, she is a proud Ojibwe/Odawa woman who comes from a long line of educators. Dr. Toulouse is well known for her contributions in Indigenous education. She is the author of more than fifty resources, chairs various committees, works with a variety of school boards, presents regularly at conferences, and is active in her areas of research. She is a National 3M Teaching Excellence Award Fellow and has been cited in *Maclean's* magazine as one of the most popular professors at Laurentian University. Dr. Toulouse continues her life journey in the field of education by representing her Nation and profession in a respectful and meaningful way.

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