



## Aboriginal Early Language Promotion and Early Intervention

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### Introduction

Aboriginal community representatives, practitioners, and investigators have long recognized the need for a strategy to ensure optimal language and literacy outcomes for young Aboriginal children. An effective strategy would include supports for early language facilitation in family and community care settings, resources for Indigenous language acquisition, and services to address speech-language difficulties before children start school (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Policy makers need to recognize language and literacy development as aspects of inter-generational family development that are relevant to a range of policy areas, including residential school healing programs, community development, adult education, employment, literacy, and social justice.

It is generally acknowledged that there are few peer-reviewed research reports about Aboriginal children's development and speech-language difficulties, which creates gaps in knowledge. This report identifies several areas where research is urgently needed. Until evidence is available, guidelines for innovative approaches to practice are offered in this report based largely on anecdotal insights from practitioners in the field, and community-level efforts reported in the literature about programs.

### Research Questions

- 1) Why is it important to ensure optimal development of Aboriginal children's potential for speech, language, and literacy?
- 2) What are Aboriginal children's needs, and what strategic interventions may be developed?
- 3) What are the language and literacy programs, parent-skills training, and speech-language interventions available to Aboriginal children and caregivers?
- 4) What other unique challenges do Aboriginal children face?

### Recent Research Results

#### ***Why is it important to ensure optimal development of Aboriginal children's potential for speech, language, and literacy?***

The importance of early language development is well understood among Aboriginal parents, Elders, and leaders (Battiste, 2000; Hebert, 2000; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Aboriginal community leaders are looking for resources to support parents, early learning and child care providers and teachers; as well as

strategies that avoid dependencies on professional services that are usually driven by goals and norms derived from European-heritage expectations for children's development. Aboriginal leaders have argued strongly that ways must be found to ensure that Aboriginal families' goals for their children's development are what drives government and agency agendas, including allocation of resources for the development of community capacity and for Aboriginal children (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Hughes, 1990).

Language development is central to how children gain access to cultural knowledge and learn to participate and grow within their cultures (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978; Heath, 1983). Early language learning contributes in primary ways to learning in all other domains, and makes learning at later ages more efficient, self-motivating, and improves the chances of continuing education (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The concept of 'multiliteracies' (Cazden et al., 1996) draws attention to multiple channels of communication and many domains of literacy that should be considered in understanding Aboriginal young children's language and literacy strengths and needs. Examples include acquisition of culturally-based meanings of symbols in the physical environment, reading social cues, and constructing meaning from written symbols.

### ***What are Aboriginal children's needs, and what strategic interventions may be developed?***

Low levels of speech, language, and literacy development can lead to problems with school success, opportunities for employment, and economic security through their connection with other factors such as social exclusion (Bird & Akerman, 2005). Reducing Aboriginal children's social exclusion through language and literacy initiatives requires new approaches (Hebert, 2000). Rather than being based on an assumption that European heritage languages and literacies are normative and ideal, new approaches must be based on Aboriginal languages, literacies, parenting styles, and pedagogies in order to produce optimal developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Programs in Canada for children who are vulnerable or who have special needs are least accessible to children and families living in rural, remote, and northern communities, where many Aboriginal children live (deLeeuw, Fiske, & Greenwood, 2002; Leitch, 2008).

### ***What are the language and literacy programs, parent-skills training, and speech-language interventions available to Aboriginal children and caregivers?***

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a national program funded by Health Canada that commenced in 1995. It is a half-day program intended for Aboriginal preschoolers between age 2 and 5 years, and prepares children for a successful transition from home to school learning environments in six key areas: culture and language; education and school readiness; health promotion; nutrition; social support; and parent/family involvement. More than 70% of AHS program practitioners are Aboriginal, who work with Elders, language specialists, traditional teachers and parents to enhance child development, cultural pride, and school readiness of young children. The inception of AHS has stimulated a movement in Canada to strengthen Aboriginal capacity to deliver early childhood programs in culturally fitting ways to children who need it most.

There are also several home-based literacy programs in Canada, but few reports indicating the extent to which young Aboriginal children participate, cultural adaptations that may have been explored, or program outcomes for Aboriginal participants. A few exceptions are noted here. The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) is currently being piloted in a small number of Aboriginal communities. This program uses home-visits to instruct the primary caregiver of preschool children on how to stimulate pre-literacy and language skills through 20 to 30 minutes of focused, daily activity in the home. Anecdotal feedback suggests that this program depends heavily on the selection of Aboriginal home-visitors who are well-prepared and supported for their home-visiting role in Aboriginal communities. The B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society (2006) offers a speech and language theme box for parents and early childhood educators, called 'Moe the Mouse.' This is a set of structured activities intended to stimulate age-appropriate conversations between Aboriginal preschool children and their family members in either the Indigenous language, the language of instruction in the preschool, or both. Demand for this resource in programs for Aboriginal young children in B.C. is high, suggesting a good match between the approach and the readiness of Aboriginal children, families, and preschool practitioners. Another made-in-B.C. approach that is currently being piloted is a 'Treasure Box' curriculum that uses First Nations toys and stories to enhance language development in children aged 3-5 years. Culturally-appropriate resources for family promotion of Indigenous language development, although critical, remain scarce, especially in Northern regions. Among the intervention programs distributed by the Hanen Centre, the program called *You Make the Difference* (Manolson, Ward, & Doddington, 1995) has been adapted for use with Aboriginal families. In this facilitated program, groups of parents or educators learn how to create opportunities to promote language development as part of children's everyday social interactions (e.g., during meals, baths, playtime). Anecdotal reports suggest that this approach has potential if used by culturally competent facilitators who are skilled in speech-language stimulation, adult education, and early childhood education.

### ***What other unique challenges do Aboriginal children face?***

The devastating effects of colonial policies on Aboriginal parents and grandparents are frequently said to have contributed to low language and literacy development of generations of Aboriginal children. In particular, policies and practices carried out through the Indian Residential Schools throughout the 1900s instilled a belief among many Aboriginal adults today that their languages were inferior and their cultures and ways of life were primitive (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smoleski, 2004). As a result, many parents who are survivors or secondary survivors of residential schools may not be comfortable engaging in the sort of social role-playing required in typical parent-child based language and literacy programs. Community-wide activities that involve singing, story-telling, and dramatic enactments of stories using role-playing or masks may be promising approaches in some communities (Roopnarine, Suppal, Shin, & Donovan, 1999).

Assisting Aboriginal children to learn their Indigenous language is an effective way to engender their cultural identity, cultural knowledge, and connectedness with their

cultural community (Crystal, 1997; Hebert, 2000; Ignace, 1998). The process of sustaining Aboriginal language transmission and cultural identity through Indigenous language learning has been a focus of program innovation for over a decade (Burnaby, 1996). Norris' (2006) review suggests that the best conditions for a child to learn an Aboriginal language as a first language occur within Aboriginal communities, among families where the language has a strong presence in the home, when either both parents or one parent has an Aboriginal mother tongue and in communities where Indigenous languages are flourishing.

Aboriginal children whose home language is an Indigenous language or a non-standard variant of English or French, or an Indigenous language, and/or whose early experiences emphasized learning through listening, observing, and doing rather than oral participation, will need transition support to prepare them to adjust socially and succeed in school (Heath, 1983; Philpott, 2004; Walton, 1993).

Ear infections are especially problematic in the north, and can directly affect speech and language development (World Health Organization/CIBA, 1996). An average of 67% of children in the High Arctic has suffered some hearing loss by the time they reach school-age (Bowd, 2005). Prevalent causes of these ear infections are thought to include hereditary and constitutional factors, infant feeding practices, sleeping position, and mold in poorly ventilated homes. Addressing the causes can prevent speech-language delays and deficits, and also limit secondary effects such as learning challenges, social and behavioral difficulties.

Supporting language and literacy development of Aboriginal children requires approaches that reflect cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of Aboriginal families. Van Kleeck (1994) recommends a thorough exploration of several key areas that may vary significantly from one family or social group to another, including: (1) aspects of social organization related to interaction; (2) the value of talk; (3) how status is handled in interaction; (4) beliefs about intentionality; and (5) beliefs about teaching language to children. Holistic and cultural perspectives help to draw attention to the complex and often delicate balance of elements in the child's ecology that must be understood in planning language and literacy interventions. Practitioners must have skills for working collaboratively with the community and not only with the child and his/her primary caregivers.

### **Future Research Directions**

There are no validated tools for assessing speech-language development of Aboriginal children. In a national survey of 70 speech-language pathologists (SLPs) conducted by Ball and Lewis (2004), over half of the SLPs perceived critical a need to develop new culturally appropriate assessment tools, specifically for Aboriginal children (Ball & Lewis, 2006).

Once identified, there are often no follow-up services delivered to children who have been identified to need them, due to a number of barriers, including: ineligibility for services to Status Indian children living on reserves; long wait lists for services in urban

centres; and inaccessible services for children living in rural and remote areas where distances are too great, transportation costs are not covered, there is no one to accompany a child, and so on. Recognizing the limited transportability of social knowledge and practice, many researchers, educators, and practitioners are encouraging a less expert-driven, more dialogical, open-ended approach to supporting children's development (Ball & Pence, 2006; Cole, 1989). Future research may show that dominant cultural theories, research, and practice models are generalizable across cultural groups, but these are probably not promising *starting points* for creating capacity for services that will resonate with and reach out effectively to Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

Future research should aim to:

- Establish baseline data on a few primary indicators of language development (e.g., data from the Aboriginal Children's Survey recently released by Statistics Canada are a new source);
- Collect baseline data on a more extensive representation of language development in a few contrasting communities (e.g., through community-university partnerships);
- Develop culturally appropriate screening and diagnostic assessment practices and valid, reliable screening and diagnostic assessment tools in relevant languages;
- Investigate English and French dialect learning in early childhood and implications for early language learning, assessment, and supports;
- Investigate culturally-based child-caring practices that are foundational to language acquisition;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing community-based interventions that may point the way to promising new approaches;
- Undertake controlled trials of adaptations of interventions that have proven effectiveness in other populations.

## Conclusions

This report has identified some key programs and major gaps in knowledge as well as supports for language and literacy development among young Aboriginal children in Canada. A funded program of applied research could clarify priorities and promising approaches to address barriers and meet needs. Supporting Aboriginal parents to achieve their goals for children's mother-tongue, bilingual, or mainstream language acquisition and emerging literacy will help to reduce Aboriginal children's educational struggles and social exclusion, lead to more satisfying participation in the labour force, and contribute toward carrying on the culture, language, and traditions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

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