

# First Nations Elders' and Parents' Views on Supporting Children's Language Development

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**Project goal:** To expand knowledge and capacity for facilitating young Indigenous<sup>1</sup> children's language development.

## Background

The population of Indigenous children in Canada is growing at 1.5 times the rate of non-Indigenous children in Canada. The proportion of Indigenous children under five years of age is approximately 70% greater compared to the proportion of non-Aboriginal youngsters. Indigenous children are far more likely than non-Aboriginal children to live below the poverty line (52%), to live in single parent families (50%), to live in sub-standard housing, and to be placed in special learning classes soon after commencing school and to leave school without achieving a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2001). Many Indigenous groups in Canada are seeking to facilitate optimal development of children through high quality culturally guided early childhood care and development programs and services (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Indigenous children's health, social development, educational achievement, and social inclusion are a focus of considerable investments in community-based program and services.

Over the past decade, there has been an increasingly vocal call for programs to support Indigenous children's early language development, specifically. Difficulties with early language learning, and certain cultural mismatches between mainstream services provided by non-Indigenous practitioners have been observed to lead to ineffective actions and mis-interpretations of the sources, nature, and severity of Indigenous children's language development. Too often, language differences, and the cultural nature of raising children in Indigenous communities have been seen by outsiders as evidence of deficits and dysfunction, rather than of 'differences' that contribute to the identities, cultural continuity and sense of belonging of Indigenous children and families.

Negative effects of lack of services or ineffective and culturally discordant services to support optimal language development and to intervene early when language development is atypical have been noted repeatedly (e.g., B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, 1996). A recent study that surveyed speech-language pathologists across Canada who have experience serving Indigenous children overwhelmingly reported that an altogether different approach is needed when serving Indigenous children (Ball & Lewis, 2004)

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For updates on research about Indigenous children and families, and notice of research publications, please visit the website for Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships: [www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous people in Canada include approximately 1,319,890 First Nations, Inuit, and Metis descendents of original inhabitants of the land now called Canada. Half live in urban areas, while half live in rural, remote and isolated communities.

The study reported here set out to contribute knowledge about how to support early language development of young First Nations children in ways that are congruent with First Nations Elders and parents views and goals for their children's early language learning. The study yielded insights about how some First Nation's Elders and parents think about:

- how children learn language
- how to support children's learning of language
- the roles of Indigenous language and English in their children's learning

The study also identified what First Nations Elders and parents think are challenges to their children's language learning.

## **Method**

First Nations Elders and parents in four provinces in Canada were asked to participate in a one-hour individual conversational interview about:

- important learning during early childhood
- how children learn
- the relative importance of listening and talking
- parents' roles in helping their children learn
- children's learning in their Mother Tongue or English
- value and effectiveness of ECD and 'school readiness' programs
- non-Indigenous people working with their children
- helpful actions to support Indigenous people develop their own ways for supporting their children's learning

Interviewees were recruited using a convenience sampling, followed by a snowball sampling method through the interviewers who had long-standing and trusted relationships with First Nations people in the communities where they conducted the interviews. Three of the four interviewers were First Nations people themselves. Two of the four were speech-language pathologists.

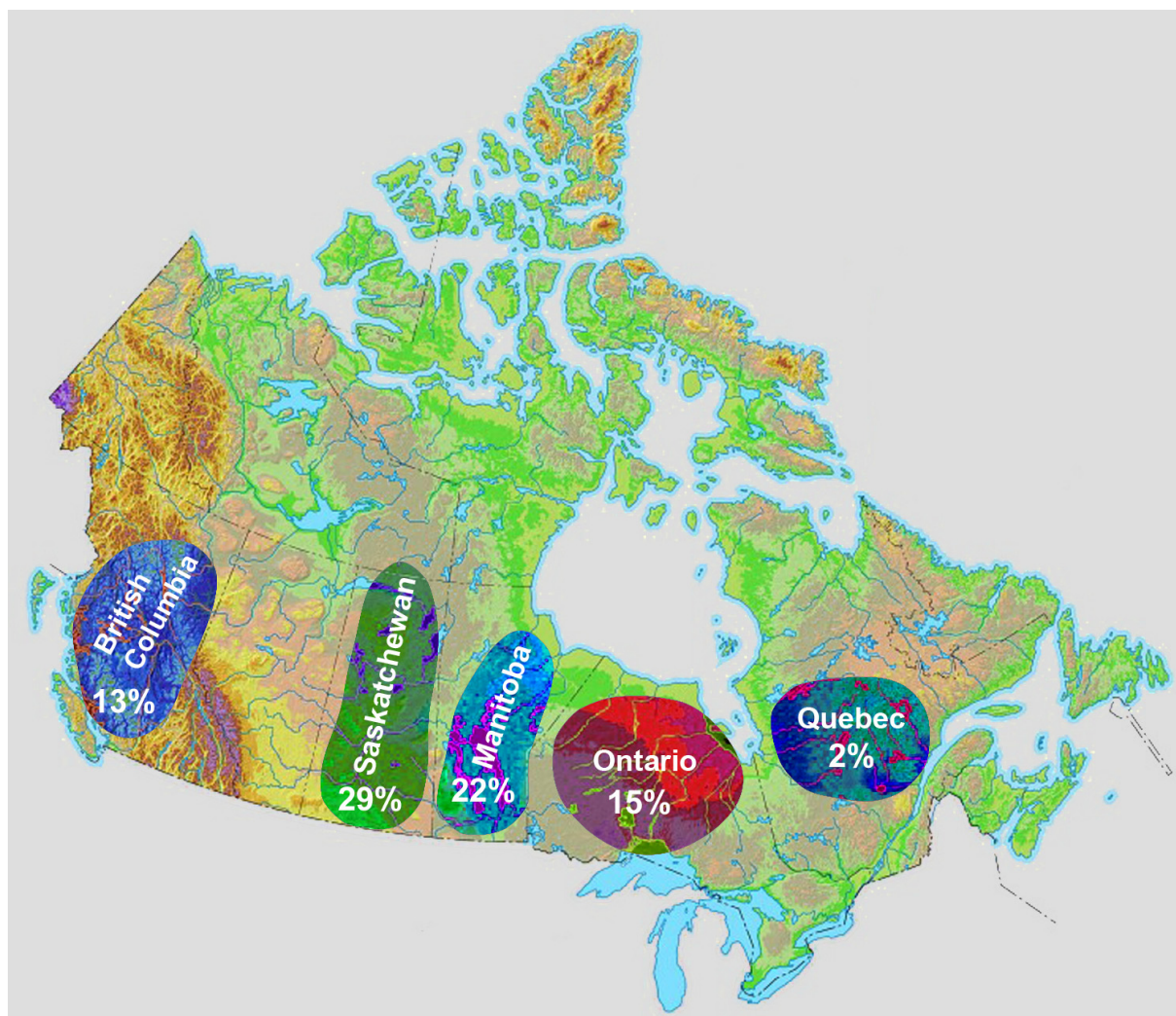
## **Participants**

Sixty-six Elders and parents were interviewed in four Canadian provinces (see Figure 1).

- 15% of the interviewees were Elders
- 20% were grandparents
- 65% were parents
- 67% lived in rural communities
- 33% lived in urban communities.

English was the predominant language used by 91% of the participants. Ninety-seven per cent of the interviewees reported that their children spoke English most of the time. Among the participants, 17 different Indigenous languages were reported as part of their ancestry. Dakota, Cree and Ojibway were the most common Indigenous languages reported (27%, 24% and 18% of interviewees, respectively). Nine per cent of the participants reported using Cree (4.5%) and Ojibway (4.5%) as their predominant language. Twenty-seven per cent of participants said that their children spoke an ancestral language as a second language. Of this grouping, children's use of Cree was most prevalent (12% ) followed by Dakota (6%), Ojibway (4.5%) and Cowichan, Dene and Hul'Quinum (4.5% in total).

**Figure 1**  
**Geographic Distribution of Interviewees**



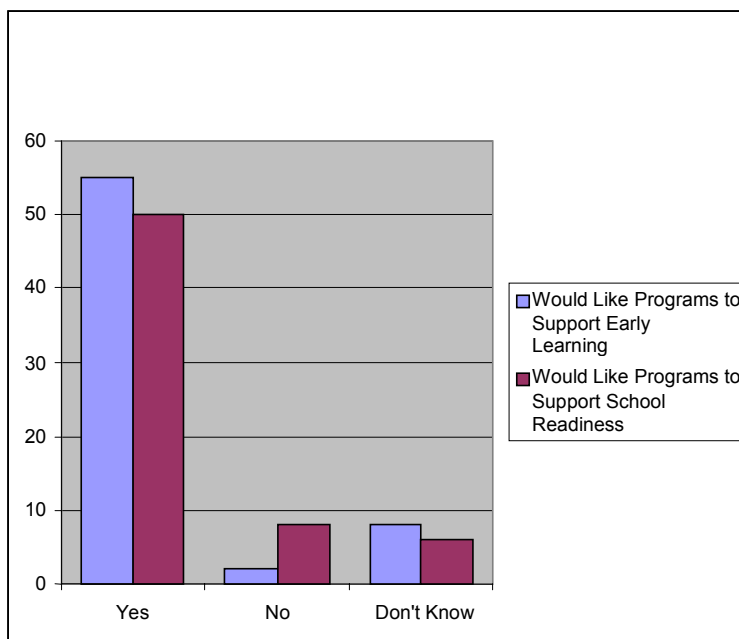
## Findings

Prevalent views that First Nations Elders and parents shared in this study are summarized in the following points.

1. Love, caring and support from within a child's family and community have the greatest influence on children's early learning. The best ways to help children learn include spending time together with the children, telling them what they need to know, showing them, letting them try doing what is being taught and then watch to see what they learned.
2. Children's learning in the early years is very important, particularly becoming socially interactive and learning language.

3. Elders and parents want programs to support children's early learning and school readiness (Figure 2). Several participants talked about needing to prepare their children for the significant cultural change their children face when they enter school.

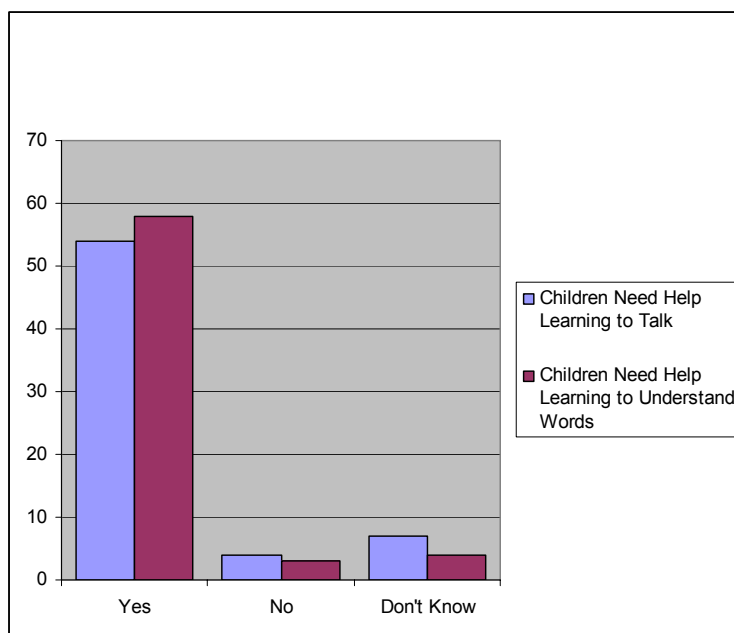
**Figure 2.**  
**Number of interviewees desiring early learning and school readiness programs**



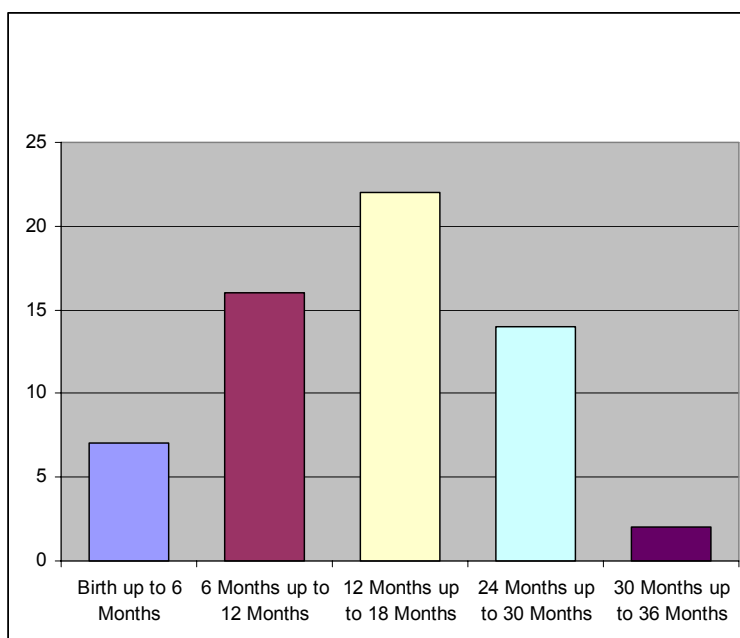
4. Existing programs in the community to support early child development need to be improved by having:
- more trained, caring and committed teachers;
  - more community commitment;
  - better accessibility, availability and information on programs;
  - more focus on family learning and participation; and
  - more support for ancestral language and cultural learning.
5. Children need help learning to understand words and learning to talk. Most Elders and parents would become concerned if a child was not talking in by four years of age (see Figures 3, 4 & 5 ).
6. Children learn to understand words and learn to talk through listening to parents, families, Elders, teachers and other children talking with them and with others and through families using various deliberate teaching methods.
7. Parents utilize various teaching methods to encourage children's learning of language. They said that children learn language from their parents, families, Elders, teachers and other children through listening, observing, talking and imitating and through the use of various teaching methods while talking with kids. Participants spoke of the importance of children learning to listen and observe, participating and being given opportunities to talk as well as encouraging their talking through one's response to them. They spoke of using many and varied teaching methods to help support children's language learning such as sharing stories and songs, drumming, clapping, playing games and using movement. They also spoke of the importance of talking with their kids, encouraging them to ask questions, explaining what something is and how to use it. Other methods used included teaching through a sequence of telling them/showing them/ helping them, combining activity with words, using all the senses (how things look, feel and sound), demonstrating, pointing to things they are

talking about, using facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and actions, being consistent, pausing and waiting for the child to speak, emphasizing certain sounds, using repetition to teach words and concepts and building word groupings gradually.

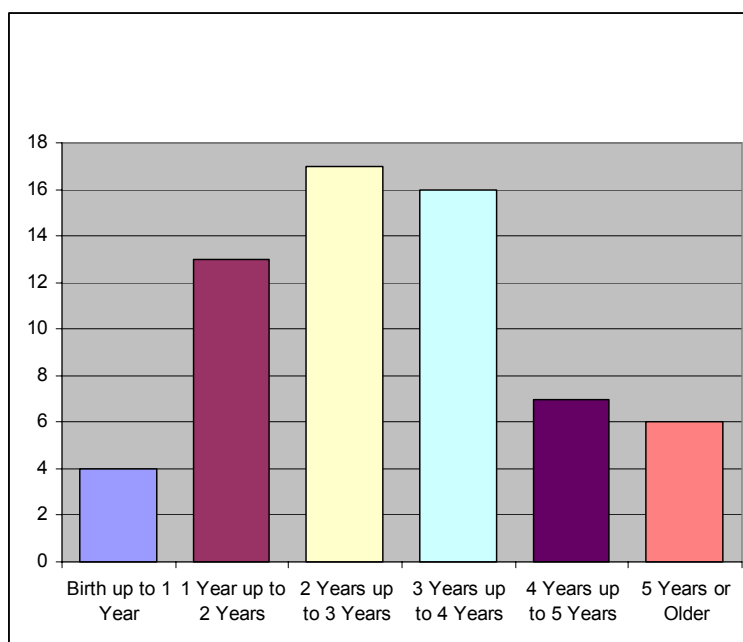
**Figure 3**  
Interviewees' Understanding of Children's Need for Assistance with Language Learning



**Figure 4**  
Interviewees' Understanding of When Children "Begin to Talk"

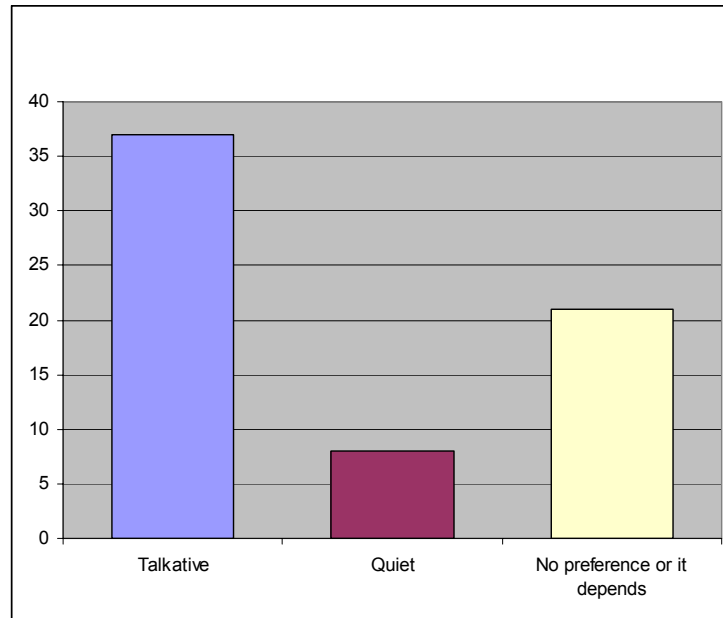


**Figure 5**  
**Age When Interviewees Become Concerned if Child Not Talking**

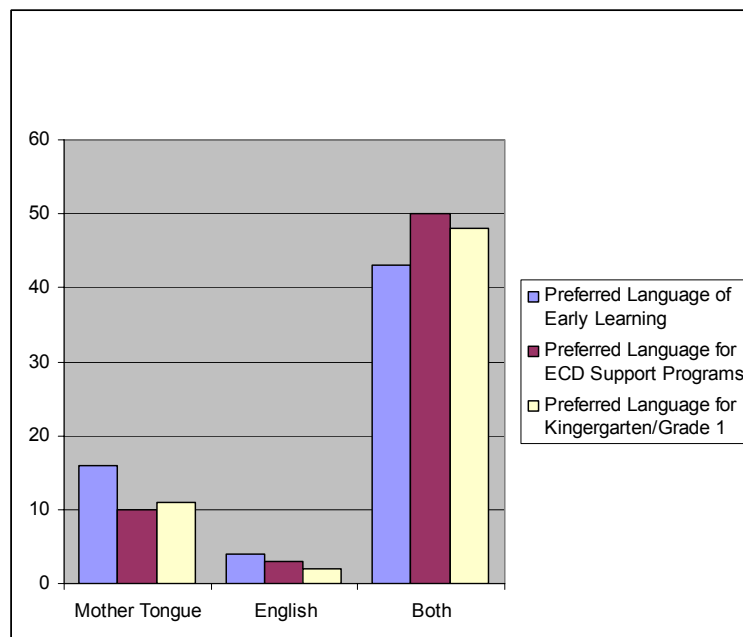


8. Most (77%) Elders and parents think it is important that parents are talkative with their children to support children's language learning. However it was noted that, traditionally, parents demonstrated. Participants also noted that it is important and traditional to be quiet at certain times, such as when Elders, adults, teachers or visitors are talking or at certain events such as ceremonies, prayers and feasts as it is important to observe, learn and show respect in those situations. Talking to children in ways that are meaningful to children, giving children time to talk as well as asking children questions and encouraging them to ask questions was considered useful. Teaching children when to talk and when to listen to the ideas, opinions and answers of others and to be observant was viewed as important.
9. It is important that children are able and willing to express their ideas, thoughts and questions verbally for their learning and self-esteem and for doing well in school and in life (see Figure 6).
10. It is very important that FN children are supported in learning their ancestral language and they need more opportunities for doing so in their early years, in ECD support programs and in early elementary school (see Figure 7).
11. Early learning experiences, including, instruction within early learning and elementary school programs should be conducted in the children's Indigenous language and in English. The predominant reasons given for this were that the children have to live and survive in a bi-lingual and non-traditional environment, especially school, but they need to know their heritage language to understand their identity and culture more deeply and for positive self-esteem. The early years were viewed as the most important and easiest time for children to learn multiple languages. Some participants thought it was important that their children's early occur only in their ancestral language to maintain their culture and identity as the true meanings cannot be translated into another language. Very few participants thought early learning should occur only in English.

**Figure 6**  
**Interviewees' Preference for "Talkative" or "Quiet" Child**



**Figure 7**  
**Language Preferences for Early Childhood Learning/Support**



12. A non-Indigenous person could support the language development of young First Nations (FN) children IF they were open-minded and willing to first learn and become knowledgeable about FN family systems, traditions, values, history and current issues. They would need to work together with a First Nations person and be very positive, respectful and encouraging toward the children. They would also need to support children's learning of their ancestral language but not try and teach the ancestral language. The non-Indigenous person would need to understand that First Nations culture is passed on through their language and that First Nations people view language as the basis of their identity and existence. However a number of participants (19%) stated that a non-Indigenous person couldn't support language development in children, as they don't know the values and beliefs that form the basis of language for First Nations people.
13. Elders and parents who recalled having had a non-Indigenous teacher who made a positive contribution in their life described what they valued and respected about that person using words such as patient, kind, caring, supportive of the student's interests, respectful, having a positive outlook, taking time to listen, being good-natured to all students, wanting to see the children succeed. Also many Elders and parents said that the teacher showed respect for the student's ancestral language and supported their learning of it.
14. Educating and training more First Nations workers and parents to help young children's learning, to teach their ancestral languages and to work together in a community in support of children's learning are viewed as useful strategies for helping First Nations people develop their own ways for supporting young children's learning.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the level of participation, the questions asked and methods used to gather the information seemed to allow Elders and parents to have sufficient trust in the project and the interviewers to share their views about how to support young children's language development in ways that they think are best.

The Elders and parents in this study expressed views that resemble in many ways those of non-First Nations parents, emphasizing the importance of early language learning, the need for adults to actively engage children in dialogue, promote talkativeness, and provide specific language stimulation and feedback. First Nations parents, like many cultural groups, stressed the equal importance of children learning their Indigenous mother tongue, concurrent with learning English. Elders and parents saw value in early childhood programs and in speech-language services, while emphasizing the primary roles of parents and other primary caregivers in home and community settings in facilitating early language development. Initiatives aimed at supporting First Nations children's early language development need to be developed in accordance with individual parental views with regards to language mediated interactions of infants and children as parents have differing views on the value and role of talk.

Indigenous language learning is a priority for First Nations Elders and parents, and should be supported through programs of support for bilingual language learning. Language is central to how children gain access to cultural knowledge and learn to participate and grow within their cultures. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) explained, fluent speakers of Indigenous languages believe that without their languages, their cultures will be lost, because it is impossible to translate the deeper meanings of words and concepts into the languages of other cultures. This concern was expressed by First Nations Elders in this study, who observed that younger generations know little of their heritage language, other than perhaps a few ceremonial prayers and songs. Promoting Aboriginal children's language development is one powerful way to engender their cultural identity, cultural knowledge, and connectedness with their cultural community.

The views expressed by Elders and parents can be used as a point of reference when developing activities to support early language development of First Nations young children. However there is much diversity across and within cultures, communities and families and assumptions cannot be made across or within each (Crago, 1992; Scieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Van Kleeck, 1994). Those working with children to support their language development must have the means to learn about each family's values, beliefs and priorities with regards to the language and communication development of their children. Questions such as the ones asked in the interviews for the current study can be used by those involved in supporting children's early language development to learn about the views of the particular families they are working with to help shape the services they provide. Two of the interviewers in this study were speech-language pathologists who had worked in the communities where they conducted interviews. Both of them stated that they were surprised by how much more they learned about the families that they



interviewed that would be useful to them in delivering better services. One of these two interviewers was herself a First Nations person and lived in the area where she conducted interviews. Notwithstanding this apparent familiarity, she found that a focused conversation about primary caregiver's beliefs, values and concerns about their children's language learning yielded new information and insights useful to guide her practice.

The findings of this study and the questions that were developed can inform work with First Nations families and communities to develop programs and services for supporting children's language development that fit individual needs and priorities.

### **Concurrent Early Childhood Development Inter-cultural Partnerships research**

1. A survey of speech-language pathologists across Canada, with experience serving Indigenous children, was conducted to learn from their reflections on helpful practice (Ball & Lewis, see [www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org)).
2. An exploratory project is examining the nature and prevalence of First Nations English Dialects and implications for supporting young children's early language development (Ball & Bernhardt, see [www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org)).

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## APPENDIX 1

### Elder and Parent Views on Language Development of Young Children

**Note: The purpose of this study is to learn about how to support language development of Indigenous preschool children in ways that Indigenous Peoples think is best. To do this we are seeking the views of Indigenous Elders and parents.**

*This type of study is important because it will provide a resource for use by Indigenous communities and others to know more about how Indigenous Elders and parents view their children's language development. It will lead to more understanding about how Indigenous Elders and parents think about:*

- *how children learn language*
- *how to support children's learning of language*
- *the role of the Mother Tongue and English in their children's learning.*
- *what Indigenous Elders and parents think are strengths and challenges to their children's language learning.*

*Overall, it will lead to greater understanding of what Indigenous Elders and parents think their children need to lay the groundwork for their later learning.*

#### Demographic information

1. How old are your children?
2. How old are your grandchildren?
3. What community do you live in?
4. Do you describe the community you live in as urban or rural?
5. Do you live more of your time on or off a reserve?
6. What is your Mother Tongue – that is the language of your ancestors?
7. What language(s) do you use most of the time?
8. What language(s) do your children use most of the time?

#### Views Regarding Language Development of Young Children

**Note:**

- ***The term 'young' refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old***
  - ***First language learning follows a developmental progression. The next set of questions have been written to learn about how Indigenous Elders and parents believe young children learn and develop their first language.***
  - ***Please think about the language most frequently used by your child or the children you are thinking about when answering these questions.***
9. Thinking about childhood, do you think children learn more from birth until they go to school, or more after they start going to school or both equally?
  10. What do you think are some of the most important kinds of learning that babies and young children do BEFORE they start going to school?
  11. What do you think are the most important things that influence whether babies and young children learn all they can before going to school?
  12. What do you think are the best ways to help young children to learn?

#### ***Learning to communicate with words is part of what babies and young children learn in their early years***

13. At what age do you think a child begins to talk?
14. Do you think that children need help learning to talk?
15. How do you think babies and young children learn to talk?
16. Is there any age when you would become concerned that a child is not talking at all?
17. If so, at what age?
18. How do you think babies and young children learn to understand words?
19. Do you think that young children need help learning to understand words?

*'Talkative' is defined as talking a lot when one is engaged with other people.*

*'Quiet' is defined as talking little when one is engaged with other people.*

20. Would you prefer that your child(ren) learn to be 'more on the side of talkative' or 'more on the side of quiet' or do you have any preference? Why?
21. Are there certain situations in which you would like your child(ren) to be talkative? If yes, what are they?
22. Are there certain situations in which you would like your child(ren) to be quiet? If yes, what are they?
23. As a parent, do you think it is your role to be talkative with your child and actively try to encourage your child to be talkative and learn lots of words, or do you think it is your role to be quieter and actively try to encourage your child to be observant without asking many questions or needing to talk a lot?

### **Views regarding young children's learning in their Mother Tongue and/or English**

*Note:*

- *The term 'young' refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old*
24. Do you think it is more important for young children's learning to occur in their Mother Tongue, English or both Mother Tongue and English (or something else)? Why?
  25. Would you like to see more opportunities to help young children's learning in their Mother Tongue? How might this be done?
  26. If there were programs to support young children's learning in your community, would you like them to be conducted only in your Mother Tongue, only English or both (or some other combination)? If another combination what is it?
  27. Do you think that the kindergarten and grade 1 classes where children in your community start school should include instruction only in your Mother Tongue, only English or both (or some other combination)? If another combination what is it?

### **Programs to support language development of young children in your community**

*Note: The term 'young' refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old*

28. Have you accessed any services around early childhood development?
29. If yes, what were the services
30. Were there some things that you liked about the services?
31. Were there some things you didn't like about them?
32. If you didn't access such services, why not?
33. Are there programs that you would like to have in your community to support young children's learning? What kinds of programs?
34. Are there programs you would like to have in your community specifically to get children ready to start school? What kinds of programs?
35. What would make you want to use those programs if they were available?
36. Do you think that programs in your community to give young children opportunities for learning need to be better?
37. What would make them better?
38. How can a non-Indigenous person work with Indigenous children to support language development of any language?
39. Can you think of a non-Indigenous teacher who you think made a positive contribution? What is it that made that person someone you valued and respected?
40. What actions would be most helpful in supporting Indigenous Peoples develop their own ways for supporting young children's learning?