



## **Using Indigenous Parents' Goals for Children's Language to Guide Speech-Language Practice and Policy**

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**Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships  
School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria**

**Jessica Ball, M.P.H., Ph.D.  
Marlene Lewis, M.A., S-LP (C)**

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# Using Indigenous Parents' Goals for Children's Language to Guide Speech-Language Practice and Policy

Jessica Ball and Marlene Lewis<sup>1</sup>

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**Interview Question:** How do you think babies and young children learn to talk?  
*“They learn to talk by listening to people talk, having a chance to talk, and listening to books with pictures. If they listen and it makes sense you are helping them to learn without really trying, just exposing them to talking.....I know there are some babies who don't learn to talk at all or don't talk well, I guess some of them need help...”*

Cree Elder & Grandmother who is bilingual in English and Dene

Aboriginal families and communities in Canada<sup>2</sup> are seeking ways to ensure that their own goals for their children's development are what drives government and agency agendas and determines the allocation of resources for Aboriginal children. This is true for Aboriginal child development programs in general, and for programs to facilitate Aboriginal children's language development in particular.

## Why is support for early language development important?

1) Language development is central to how children learn to participate and grow within their cultures. In child development research, the importance of early language development for cognitive and social learning and school readiness has been well documented (Capute 1987; Kohlberg, Yaeger, & Hjertholm 1968; Myers & Permuter 1978; Rice & Kemper 1984; Saxe 1979; Stiles-Davis, Tada, & Whipple 1990). A child's successful use of evolving language skills helps him or her to get her/his needs met and to participate in her or his cultural milieu. If young children's potential language development within a family or community setting is not being fulfilled, then Aboriginal parents, caregivers, and community decision-makers should have access to specialized knowledge and services so they can better support that development.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors thank the participants in the two research studies that informed this presentation. This research was undertaken at the suggestion of First Nations communities in British Columbia, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal people in Canada include approximately 1,319,890 First Nations, Inuit, and Metis descendents of original inhabitants of the land now called Canada.

2) Early language development includes opportunities to practice evolving language skills in ways that are appropriate to the language practices of the child's culture (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Aboriginal patterns and values relating to language development (both Aboriginal mother tongue language and Aboriginal dialect-variations of English or French) are at the heart of how Aboriginal peoples' embody cultural values. All those who support Aboriginal children in their language development need to understand how to build on the strengths of their cultural values and to clarify what goals, supports, and language development activities are most appropriate.

For Aboriginal children, as for all children whose mother tongue is either a non-standard variant of English or French, or another language altogether, some kind of bridging or transition support is usually necessary to *prepare schools to receive them appropriately* and to *prepare them to succeed in schools* over time (Malcolm, Haig, Konigsberg, Rochecouste, Collard, Hill, & Cahill, 1999). This is particularly important for children whose mother culture may have values about talk or language usage that do not match the generalized mainstream language values embedded within most public schooling curricula (Walton, 1993). For example, children whose cultures value listening and observing as a major mode of language learning are likely to be marginalized in a school setting that places highest value on oral participation.

3) Aboriginal leaders in Canada have argued that the lack of services, as well as culturally inappropriate education, specialist services, and screening procedures, result in serious negative consequences for Aboriginal children (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). This has included over- and under-recognition of children with developmental challenges, undermining of cultural-driven goals for development, and failure to support developmental steps in Aboriginal language learning (e.g., B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, 1996).

Across Canada, there have been efforts to define and develop high quality early childhood care and development programs that are culturally-based and culturally reinforcing for young Aboriginal children and their families. It is within this context that work also needs to be done to bridge the gaps between specialist training, specialist services and the language support needs of young Aboriginal children.

## **Views from the field**

The 'talking points' offered in this paper were derived largely from two studies that were conducted in 2003-2004. These projects were conducted as part of a program of research and capacity building called the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships ([www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org)) housed in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada. The mission of this research program is to help ensure cultural continuity for Aboriginal children; to prevent the mislabelling of cultural difference as individual or group 'pathology'; and to strengthen family and community capacity for supporting Aboriginal children's development.

One study explored the beliefs, goals, needs and recommendations of 66 First Nations parents and Elders with regards to the language development of their young children. A second study explored the beliefs, goals, needs and recommendations of 70 Speech-Language Professionals (SLPs) across Canada who had experience providing services for First Nations and/or Inuit Children.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these studies were undertaken with encouragement of Aboriginal colleagues in Early Childhood Development and members of First Nations communities with whom the first author has partnered for various training and program initiatives. Conversational interviews were used to obtain the views of First Nations parents and Elders. A survey questionnaire was used to obtain the views of Speech-Language Pathologists. For both, First Nations community members, a First Nations SLP, and family researchers helped to formulate the questions.

Much of what emerged from the interviews with First Nations parents and Elders was a complex picture that underscored the diversity among First Nations in Canada (there are as many as 60 different distinct language and over 605 different registered Nations in Canada). The goals that First Nations parents and Elders set for their children vary across a wide spectrum: some want their young children exposed to bilingual and bicultural experiences; some want their toddlers to develop a solid grounding in their Aboriginal mother tongue exclusively before learning English or French as a second language in primary school or even later; others want their children to develop English first and foremost.

Many First Nations parents in the study recognized that programs delivered by support workers, child care workers, and early intervention specialists can help to ensure their children's optimal language development. However, as Sharla Peltier, one of only three self-identified Aboriginal speech and language professionals in Canada (out of 4000 speech-language professionals in Canada) has pointed out, most Aboriginal parents and grandparents are unaware of how specialists can support their children's language development. She has emphasized that, more than anything, Aboriginal caregivers and those who make decisions in Aboriginal communities regarding programs for children need to be given clear information about what speech-language specialists can do, and to partner with them to ensure that specialist services offered to Aboriginal families and communities are culturally appropriate and effective.

Much of what emerged from the survey of SLPS was a set of recommendations about how SLPs need to adapt and transform their professional behaviours in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Publicly funded SLP services for children, from birth to school entry, are delivered through various facilities throughout Canada. These include public health, hospitals, non-profit community-based child and family centres and, in a few instances, school districts. Provincial/territorial governments fund the regional and community-based organizations responsible for these facilities to provide a variety of early intervention programs, some of which include pre-school SLP services. SLP services are provided under legislation and policy directives of various provincial/territorial ministries across the country.

work appropriately and more effectively in partnership with Aboriginal communities. In fact, the acronym SLP, standing for ‘Speech-Language Pathologist,’ reflects an individual dysfunction-focus that the many SLP respondents in our study identified as problematic and rejected. How to transform the role of ‘Speech-Language Pathologist’ into the role of Speech-Language Partner may well be the crux of the issue of how to harness and make accessible the knowledge and skills of these professionals for supporting Aboriginal young children’s language development. With this in mind, we will think of SLPs as Speech-Language Partners within this article. Details of the findings of each study are reported elsewhere (see Ball & Lewis, 2003/2004). For this paper, a consideration of the findings of both studies has led to a set of observations and recommendations to help guide discussions about how speech language specialists and community members can work together to support young children’s language development.

### ***Cultural differences in language socialization and the value of talk***

Respondents in our study perceived a number of distinctive features in the apparent value of talk and social use of language by the Aboriginal children and families with whom they have worked. They noted, for example, that talk often appears to be reserved for important matters in social interactions involving Aboriginal children and adults. From the point of view of SLPs, a lot of talking, or ‘talkativeness’, on the part of both children and adults seemed to be discouraged. Yet, many First Nations parents stated that they value talking and even talkativeness in their children. They also value children being able to listen and observe without talking.

Indeed, both First Nations respondents and SLPs frequently noted that First Nations children learn through listening, observing, doing and being included in family and community activities, more than by talking about their experiences and asking children a lot of questions. Many noted that First Nations children respond well to interactions involving doing things with peers, and that they responded better to slower talk, with more pausing, more sharing of information back and forth, and storytelling.

By contrast European-heritage parents generally consider themselves to be effective parents if they use a lot of conversation and encourage their child to be talkative. They tend to encourage child-initiated conversation with adults to serve a variety of functions. Typical child assessment situations and classroom situations involve modes of questioning and response that appear to be much more common and familiar to European-heritage children than to many Aboriginal children. Some SLPs noted that the content, goals and fast-paced atmosphere in mainstream preschool and school settings seem mismatched with Aboriginal children’s experiences, understanding and expression. The specific cultural practices of Aboriginal children need to inform the nature and delivery of services to support all forms of learning by Aboriginal children.

First Nations parents and First Nations SLPS in both studies pointed out that residential school experiences have resulted in some parents facing unique challenges. For some, these experiences have resulted in limited parenting skills, such as not knowing how to play with their children, not seeing value in providing books or other pre-literacy materials in the home, overly permissive or authoritarian parenting styles,

and feelings of inadequacy that left them fearful of or intimidated by schools, teachers, and professionals. Parents who were not raised by their own parents and who experienced inadequate modeling or abuse from residential school caregivers may require specialized support.

## **What is a Speech Language Partner?**

SLPs assess and provide supports for learning in all aspects of language. This includes comprehension and expression of language content (meanings and application of meaning), form (structural organization of a language and fluency) and use of language (using language to serve various communicative intents).

SLPs have historically taken a therapeutic approach, working with individual children who do not follow the normative patterns of language development. Patterns of non-normative development typically addressed by SLPs are due to physical conditions, such as impaired hearing or neurological dysfunction, or socialization experiences such as inconsistent reinforcement for speaking and lack of opportunities for practicing their evolving language skills. In our study, most SLP respondents advocated broader based, family-centered and community-level approaches to supporting language development of Aboriginal children. Cross-cultural early language development work has motivated some SLPs to take a more proactive stance, rejecting an individual pathology or deficit model, and applying their knowledge about language stimulation and support to larger contexts based in families, institutions, or community programs. They have chosen to take on the role of speech-language partners, reinforcing culturally-based strengths and building language support capacity within the milieu of families, parenting programs, and early childhood programs.

However, when questioned about the circumstances surrounding their engagement with Aboriginal children and families, most respondents in our study reported that they were usually engaged in providing services as a result of referrals for individual children. However services earmarked for a specific child could be deployed in ways that strengthen the context and overall language support skills of the caregivers and significant people in that child's (and other children's) life.

SLP respondents were frank about the limitations of their professional training and in-service experiences. Less than half of SLPs reported feeling well prepared, even after 2 or more years of experience, to serve Aboriginal children and families effectively. They pointed out that in order to be more effective in supporting Aboriginal children's development, they needed more knowledge about the cultures, community structures, circumstances and community development goals of Aboriginal peoples. This needs to be provided during professional (pre-service) training and within continuing (in-service) education.

## **How can speech-language specialists support Aboriginal children's language development?**

SLP services can be a considerable resource for Aboriginal communities if they are appropriately engaged.

*“Practitioners, and agencies that structure practitioner’s services, need to have time to work WITH First Nations services (for example, child development workers hired by the band and who are members of the band). Practitioners need time to be a visitor or helper at First Nations preschools and daycares, to better understand and appreciate their way of being. Time to build relationships with band councils and Elders.” (JH)*

*“Practitioners can make an important contribution at the community level, building awareness and understanding of language development, how it progresses and why it matters. Practitioners need to engage in preventive programs that are not necessarily tied to specific children on the caseload. Caseload sizes need to be kept small so that practitioners can be more present and available to the community.” (DM)*

Successful use of specialized services depends on authentic collaboration between service providers, specialists and the families and communities they serve.

### **1) Working within the cultural context.**

Specialists need to learn cultural values specific to the Aboriginal families they serve. Cultural bias is a problem in the application of many models of early language facilitation, early intervention, and parent education. Leaders in SLP research have offered suggestions for culturally responsive practices (Van Kleeck, 1994; Warr-Leeper, 2001). With guidance from community members, SLPs and their community partners can design methods of language stimulation and support that are culturally appropriate and culturally appreciative. Methods that build on strengths in many Aboriginal communities include helping to organize frequent story-telling activities, and creating cross-age active learning situations where younger children can hear and use language in the context of action.

SLPs reported having much to learn about the value that language holds and the roles that language plays in the cultures of Aboriginal families and communities. From the perspective of SLPs, their training on cultural values has been inadequate, and they have had to learn cultural sensitivity, cultural protocols, and cultural aspects of parents language socialization practices on the job. They pointed out that for an SLP trained to work with European-heritage families, Aboriginal families do not appear so eager to engage actively in stimulating vocabulary development or frequent conversation with their children. However, rather than seeing this as a deficit, the SLP and the particular community need jointly to identify the values and styles of language interaction that culture holds as ideal and language facilitation strengths in the community upon which to build. For example, respondents mentioned working with communities with a preference

for quiet, observant children who are respectfully deferent towards older people and who can learn from watching and listening.

## **2) Working collaboratively.**

Specialists need to understand that the knowledge they bring is just part of a successful language support effort.

*“An altogether different approach is needed that would include taking the time to learn about the specific community, their values and hopes for their children, making the link between this information and the already known professional information, and figuring out how to effectively bridge the two in order to support the caregivers in the community to best facilitate language development that respects a desire to maintain first language as well as develop facility in the language of school or mainstream culture.” (CF)*

*“Non-helpful practices include telling the adults what to do...telling the adults you'll show them what to do, giving written handouts, or inviting the community to a lecture or presentation. It is not helpful to assume that you know what to do and by virtue of your knowledge you have the right to tell Aboriginal people how to communicate with, teach, or raise their children.” (AH)*

*“Check your assumptions at the door. Pragmatics in particular are a big issue. You need to learn about appropriate interaction patterns.” (MZ)*

Among the SLPs surveyed, 79% perceived an urgent need for an “altogether different approach” to serving Aboriginal children, compared to serving children of dominant cultural groups (e.g., European heritage). There was general consensus among the respondents that an ‘expert’ service orientation is ineffective. Family and community-driven practice that is consultative and collaborative is more culturally appropriate than professionally driven approaches. SLPs strongly emphasized the importance of working with Elders, community governing bodies, parents, and other trusted service providers and being responsive to expressed values and wishes. In their experience, these people can offer feedback about tools, methods, and messages that are likely to be accepted and effective in various families or community groups.

## **(3) A relationship approach.**

Specialists need to build trusting relationships with families and key individuals in the community.

*“It seems best to start by learning what is already being done, how and why and with what result. Make partnerships with the community. Get to know individual people by listening to them.” (AH)*

*“What worked for me was behaving as the “invited guest” – being quietly present, playing with children, chatting with Elders, parents, educators, etc. and asking what I could do – what kind of service they would like and then making a*



*plan together. I rarely pulled a child for “one on one.” I received many verbal compliments for that. Practices that are not helpful include trying to work quickly, telling them what you would like to do before they’ve stated their needs and requests; not taking time to build trust; removing children from a group.” (BD)*

Establishing positive and trusting relationships requires a consistent presence in the community, patience, time, flexibility, understanding and a desire to learn. Learning through listening and observing without asking a lot of questions are important interactive skills to use.

#### **4) Assessment that is acceptable to the community.**

Methods of evaluating children’s language need to fit the culture. Many First Nations parents, Elders, SLPs and early childhood care givers have expressed frustration about culturally inappropriate assessments that labelled their children deviant or deficient, when it was more likely that the assessment approach, tool, or norms were culturally biased and inappropriate. The very concept of “testing” and ranking the developmental levels of children, as practiced in many methods of child development assessment, is offensive to many Aboriginal parents. Assessment may be viewed as discordant with cultural values involving appreciating each child for who they are, accepting differences, and waiting until children are older before making attributions about them, and other elements of their value system.

Assessments that have been developed and validated with a European-heritage population are generally not appropriate for Aboriginal children, often in significant structural ways. Aboriginal communities need to help language specialists to sort through her/his toolkit to find ways of investigating what is going on with children’s language development, whether it is healthy and robust in terms of the culture, and how to support more effective language-strengthening activities.

*For assessment, it would be helpful for the practitioner and community members to sit together and discuss: What skills does the child need to communicate effectively at home, school and in the community? How close is the child coming to accomplishing those? What bridges can be built to support the child in meeting the demands of educational language in the school? How should the curriculum be changed at preschool and school to respond to the information obtained?” (LD)*

First Nations interviewees recommended that more relevant education/intervention strategies and tools for teaching would include visuals such as pictures of First Nations people and familiar rural community themes. They would also include story and legend re-telling activities. Crafts using local clay and leather, followed by group discussion for re-telling the steps involved, would be helpful. Also recommended were community outings with photos to use for re-telling later. One First Nation respondent emphasized that new screening measures would take into account language development differences (e.g., pronouns, prepositions) and speech dialect differences.

### **5) Community capacity-building approach.**

Strengthening community capacity is a goal of many Aboriginal communities. Whenever possible, language specialists need to engage with community members to strengthen their understanding about SLP services, their capacity to identify developmental concerns, to advocate, and to partner in service delivery.

Two First Nations language specialists participating in our studies offered the following specific suggestions:

- The whole family, including the extended family, should be involved in service planning in possible.
- Older siblings may make excellent mediators of communication programming, as they are often responsible for the younger children.
- Frequent consultation sessions and short assessment sessions work best.
- SLPs can be employed to act as indirect mediators whose role is the education of other agency workers and support for parents' language facilitation efforts.
- Standardized testing or use of lengthy questionnaires early on is not helpful.
- If attendance is an issue, it is important to problem-solve and possibly change the service delivery model - connect with other services, community workers and/or family members. Terminating services is not useful.
- Referrals to other agencies outside of the community should be postponed until rapport is established. Attendance at referrals is more likely if the referring individual mediates.

### **6) A population-based approach.**

Speech and language issues need to be addressed in context and not as isolated needs. Yet many early intervention strategies still heavily used by SLPs in Canada are based on individual deficit models that have been developed largely in middle-class urban settings based on the values, beliefs and goals of families primarily of European descent. In cultures that have been disrupted and individuals have been displaced, as has happened to all Aboriginal peoples in Canada, individuals often experience problems that are in part contextual or communal, rather than strictly personal. In these situations, contextual and communal responses can help tremendously. Cultural context is an important foundation for meaningful programs of support for children's development, using family- and community-centred practice models (Ball, 2002; Crago, 1992; Heath, 1983; Johnston & Wong, 2002; van Kleeck, 1994).

### **7) Support for Indigenous mother tongue and local dialects.**

The majority of First Nations Elders and parents preferred that their children learn both their Mother Tongue and English or only their Mother Tongue in the preschool and school years. Most SLPs, expressed their belief that children's primary caregivers should be encouraged to maintain their dominant language used at home. This is consistent with professional practice guidelines and directions for SLPs working in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural context (CASLPA, 2002; ASHA, 2004; Genesee, Paradis, & Crago., 2004). Some SLP respondents cited the positive contributions that learning the Indigenous mother tongue or local dialect of English, French or an

Indigenous language can make to a child's sense of connection to community and to self-esteem.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

- 1. The values and priorities of Aboriginal families and communities should inform the goals and mode of delivery of SLP services.**
- 2. Prepare SLPs to engage in cross-cultural partnerships rather than in isolation as experts.**
- 3. Increase professional training of Aboriginal people in speech and language facilitation.**
- 4. Dialogue and partner with Aboriginal community leaders to build awareness and understanding of language development and appropriate supports.**
- 5. Target funding to increase speech-language services to Aboriginal young children.**
- 6. Fund positions for Aboriginal advisors to government on speech-language development programs serving Aboriginal young children**

## **Conclusion**

New ways of forming partnerships between early language specialists, parents, Elders, and community-based child care programs need to be explored to adjust language support and intervention strategies to match the historical realities, and present cultural and community conditions of Aboriginal children. These strategies need to take into account not only the goals for individual children's development, but also the family's or community's receptivity to various approaches

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