

First Nations Children's Early Language Development: Goals and Facilitation Strategies

TEAM

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Project Background

Indigenous leaders in Canada have argued, all too frequently, lack of services, as well as culturally inappropriate education, developmental screening and assessment, and early intervention services result in serious negative consequences for Indigenous children. Research in child and youth care and community psychology emphasizes the cultural context as a foundation for meaningful programs of support for children's development using family- and community-centred practice models.

In the field of speech and language services for young children, current approaches to delivering services tend to focus on the child within the family unit as the context for overall child development including language and communication. Little attention has been paid to developing models that also incorporate the cultural aspects of language socialization or the community context, including schools. Intervention strategies used in Canada have been developed in middle-class urban settings based on the values, beliefs and goals of families primarily of English language heritage. Alternatives need to be explored for adjusting expectations for language development, language facilitation and intervention strategies to match cultural values, beliefs, and the family's goals for children's development as well as their receptivity to various approaches.

Project Goal

This project has contributed to efforts to improve supports for First Nations children's development by generating knowledge of First Nations parents' and Elders' understandings and goals for children's development and by eliciting the lessons learned by speech-language pathologists who have served Indigenous children and families in Canada.

Completed Studies

Study 1. A questionnaire survey (on-line and face-to-face) obtained the self-reports of 70 registered speech-language pathologists in Canada who had experiences serving Indigenous children.

Study 2. Conversational interviews were conducted with 70 First Nations parents and Elders in four regions of Canada. This study has documented and shared knowledge of First Nations Elders and parents understandings of how children learn language, their goals for children's language development, their language facilitation strategies, and their perceptions of the potential roles of specialists in language development.

A consideration of findings from the two projects generated recommendations for a more collaborative, family-centred, population-based approach to professional practice with Indigenous children, families and communities. Implementation of recommended policies and practices would help to support Indigenous communities in their efforts to socialize and educate their children in ways that are consistent with their cultures, and help to avoid constructions of child-rearing and language differences as deficits.

Project Outcomes

- Gathered self-reports about practice experiences and recommendations from speech-language pathologists in Canada serving Indigenous children and families.
- Developed understandings of First Nations parents and Elders beliefs about how children learn language, their goals for children's language learning, and their needs with respect to programmatic efforts to support their children's language development.
- Advised policy makers, program funders and communities about how the services of speech-language pathologists and early childhood development practitioners could be used in partnerships with parents and community representations to support optimal development of Indigenous children's language development.

Remaining Objectives

- Create curriculum resource materials to increase cross cultural understandings and skills of language specialists to prepare them to work in partnerships with Indigenous families and communities.
- Create guides for families and communities on the kinds of supports for language development that can be provided by speech-language specialists and suggestions, derived from the completed research, on how communities and contracted specialists can work as partners to support young children's communication skill development.

Project Reports

Ball, J. (2008). Aboriginal young children's language and literacy development: Research evaluating progress, promising practices, and needs. Paper prepared for the Canadian

Language and Literacy Networked Centre of Excellence, National Literacy Strategy.
[PDF] (613 KB)

Ball, J. (2006). Talking points: Exploring needs and concepts for Aboriginal early childhood language facilitation and supports. Concept discussion paper prepared for the Public Health Agency of Canada, Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities. [PDF] (2 MB)

Ball, J. & Lewis, M. (2006). Partner roles in supporting early language development of First Nations children. Paper presented at The Early Years Conference: Child Development Practices: A Decade of Change. Vancouver, BC, February 2-4.

Ball, J., Lewis, M., & Warwyko, C. (2005). Supporting early language development of First Nations children: Views of speech-language pathologists, First Nations Elders and parents. Conference of the British Columbia Association of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, Richmond, BC, October 28-29.

Ball, J. & Lewis, M. (2005). Talking points: What can speech-language partners contribute to Aboriginal early childhood development? In J. Whitehead (Ed.), *Research Connections Canada: Supporting Children and Families*, Vol. 12, pp. 21-40. Ottawa: Canadian Child Care Federation. (Available at Aboriginal Children's Circle of Early Learning website.)

Ball, J. & Lewis, M. (2005). Using Indigenous parents' goals for children's language to guide speech-language practice and policy. Paper presented at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand, November 27 – December 1. [PDF] (312 KB)

Ball, J. & Lewis, M.M. (2005). First Nations Elders' and parents' views on supporting young children's language development. Report presented at the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, Regina, SK, May 6. [PDF] (805 KB)

Ball, J. & Lewis, M. (2004). Speech-language services to Indigenous children: Critical reflections and recommendations. Poster presented at the Early Childhood Development Forum: How Research Influences Public Policy, Vancouver, BC, September 7.

Ball, J., Lewis, M., & Peltier, S. (2004). Culturally appropriate practices for facilitating early language development of Indigenous children. The Early Years Conference. Vancouver, Canada, February 6-7. [PDF] (206 KB)

Ball, J. & Lewis, M. (2004). Culturally appropriate practices for facilitating early language development of Indigenous children: Recommendations from experienced practitioners. Paper presented at the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, Ottawa, ON, May 7. [PDF] (269 KB)

Ball, J. (2003). The challenge of creating an optimal learning environment in child care: Cross-cultural perspectives. In L. Girolametto & E. Weitzman (Eds.), *Enhancing caregiver language facilitation in child care settings* (pp. 1-12). Toronto, ON: Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network and The Hanen Centre. [PDF] (150 KB)

McIvor, O. (2005). The contribution of Indigenous heritage language immersion programs to healthy early childhood development. In J. Whitehead (Ed.), *Research Connections Canada: Supporting Children and Families*, Vol. 12, pp. 5-20. Ottawa: Canadian Child Care Federation. (Available at Aboriginal Children's Circle of Early Learning website.)

Funding

Funding for this project work was provided by the B. C. Ministry of Children and Family Development through the Human Early Learning Partnership: www.earlylearning.ubc.ca

Funding Needs

Funds are now being sought for dissemination of what has been learned through:

- (a) Short guide booklets for First Nations communities describing the profession of Speech Language Pathology and how communities can work as partners to ensure culturally appropriate, accessible, effective services;
- (b) Curriculum supplements for pre-service and in-service (continuing education) training of speech-language pathologists, educators, community health nurses, early childhood care practitioners, child and youth care practitioners, and others working with Indigenous families to support Indigenous children's language development;
- (c) Conferences/workshops.

Contact Us

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NEWS!

Sharla Peltier (Speech Language Specialist at Nipissing First Nation) with her sons Douglas and Vincent Peltier and Jessica Ball in front of the parliament buildings in Ottawa on December 5/06 to protest the Conservative government's broken promise of funding for protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages. About 200 people turned out in freezing temperatures, including representatives of communities on both coasts and everywhere in between. A number of Chiefs spoke, all beginning in their Mother Tongue, and a number of MPs (all NDP) spoke in support of reinstating the promised \$140 million for Indigenous Language protection and enhancement programs.

Many placards focused on the need to invest in Indigenous language nests and preschool programs.