Indigenous Children’s Early Language Development: 
Goals and Facilitation Strategies

TEAM

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*I used to think that language would lead us inexplicably to grace. I still do.*
Charles Wright, USA Poet Laureate, 2010, Sarabande Books

**Project Background**

Indigenous leaders in Canada have argued that lack of services, as well as culturally inappropriate pedagogies, developmental screening and assessment, and early intervention services result in serious negative consequences for Indigenous children – especially high levels of diagnosis of pathology. Research in child and youth care and community psychology emphasizes the socio-cultural context of children’s experiences as a source of information about what is typical and expected for children’s growth and development. Culture can be a cornerstone for meaningful programs of family and community-centred strategies to ensure children’s optimal development.

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. Recently, alternatives are being considered that involve adjusting expectations for language development and adapting language facilitation and intervention strategies to be congruent with families’ culturally based valued, beliefs, and socialization practices within families.
**Project Goals**

Projects on early language facilitation and culturally based goals for children’s communication skills have contributed significantly to recent efforts to improve the practice of speech and language pathologies when working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and families. In particular, the Speech-Language and Audiology Association of Canada (formerly known as CALPA) has made tremendous efforts since 2010 to prepare clinicians to work in a cultural safe, informed ways with Indigenous people.

Two important studies completed within the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships Program include:

(1) A national survey of speech-language pathologists’ experiences of working with Indigenous children and families, their perceptions of how well their clinical training prepared them, and their needs and goals to improve their self-assessed readiness and effectiveness.

(2) An exploration of how First Nations parents and Elders think about children’s early language development and their own goals for their children’s communication, including which language(s) they should learn first, how more proficient speakers should interact with young children to promote their language skills, how children should learn to regulate their speech depending on social situations, and how talkative children should be.

Both of these successful studies were published in the Journal of Speech Language Pathology and Audiology, presented at several conferences, disseminated in the form of policy briefs, and discussed in various public media.

Another project area, undertaken by Jessica Ball and Sharla Peltier, involves the creation of guides for parents and early childhood practitioners to promote early language development and identify children’s needs for extra supports. Sharla and Jessica have also provided training for early childhood program staff and for clinicians on strategies for facilitating children’s language development in ways that draw upon mainstream science of language acquisition and on cultural and local resources, knowledge, and forms of interaction.

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KEY RESOURCES

ECDIP Publications, Presentations, and Reports


