

early CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT INTERCULTURAL  
PARTNERSHIPS  
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**Screening and Assessment of Indigenous Children**

**TEAM**

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**Collaborators and Assistants who have worked on various ECDIP projects about screening and assessment include:**

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**Collaborating Partners have included:**

B.C. First Nations Head Start Program, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch

Kermode Friendship Society, Terrace, B.C.

Laichwiltach Family Life Society, Campbell River, B.C.

Pqusnalhew Child Care Centre (Lil'wat Nation), Mount Currie, B.C.

Tla'Amin Community Health Services (Sliammon First Nation), Powell River, B.C.

**Research goals**

This project area addresses perennial concerns about the cross-cultural validity and utility of standardized screening and assessment tools and administration practices. The projects have gathered and synthesized information about screening and assessment processes, tools, outcomes, and experiences of children, parents and practitioners in Early Childhood Development programs in Indigenous communities primarily in British Columbia.

**Background**

For nearly half a century, there has been widespread concern about the possible cultural bias built into 'mainstream' tests and measures for assessing children's abilities and identifying children who are 'at risk' or are having difficulties/disorders. Indeed, nearly all tools that are used by professionals have been developed by Euro-Western trained

scientists and educators who have tested their approaches and gathered ‘normative’ information with relatively privileged, urban children in Euro-Western countries. Are the contents of these tools meaningful to children who are not relatively privileged or not from a Euro-Western culture of origin? Should different tools be developed, or normative data for scoring tests be used instead? Could standardized tools be adapted to make them more culturally meaningful and sensitive to differences in children’s experiences in different contexts?

Practitioners in early childhood programs that serve culturally diverse children are often concerned about the cultural validity and accuracy of standardized tools for screening and assessment.

Impetus for the suite of projects in ECDIP examining community experiences with screening and assessment arose from ongoing collaborations of ECDIP researchers with various Indigenous communities and organizations. Practitioners have been keen to develop skills to identify children who need a closer look, or who need extra supports. However, many have been critical of both the way that standardized assessment is done, and the content and scoring standards for many tools.

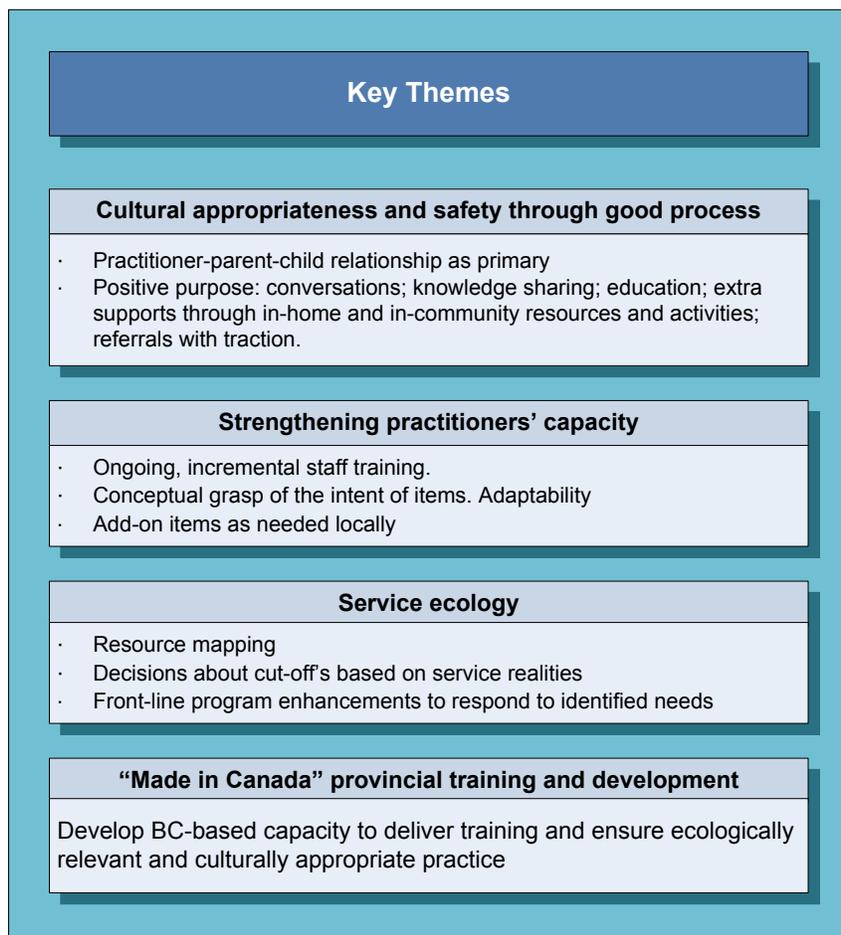
Early Childhood Development program managers in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and in the provincial and national offices of Aboriginal Head Start have asked questions that recognize the cultural nature of development such as: ‘What are developmental milestones for Aboriginal children?’ ‘How can we evaluate effects of Aboriginal ECD programs in culturally appropriate ways?’ ‘How can we prevent over-diagnosis of Aboriginal children as a result of experts using standardized tools?’ ‘How could population-based studies of Aboriginal children be done that recognize our cultural-specific goals for our children?’

In the screening projects, many practitioners described creative approaches they use to decide whether children are ‘on track’ developmentally or whether they need assessment or service referrals, instead of or in addition to using standardized tools. There was a lot of variability found across programs and communities with regards to which children are referred, based on what observations, and whether children who are referred actually receive services. This project compiled some of these community-based understandings and experiences.

The project findings underscored the need for community groups to work with educators, health workers, clinical specialists, and others to explore possibilities for mutually informing, re-constructing, or combining European-heritage concepts and methods for assessing child development with Indigenous knowledges’ of child development in order to achieve culturally relevant, useful approaches to characterizing Indigenous children’s development. It is important to reflect local conceptualizations and indicators in measures and interpretations of developmental ‘stage’, developmental milestones, school readiness, self concept, cultural identity, and various special needs.

## Project Outcomes

The projects have yielded insights about what approaches to screening and assessment are being used, and where they are being used, in terms of types of communities and types of programs. One of the most recurrent themes of studies done has been that it is not so much the content or scoring standards that are perceived by practitioners and parents as problematic; rather, it is the high-handed and seemingly secretive process that is often used, especially by professionals, in administering screening and diagnostic assessment tools with children.



## Safe process for families

The findings have emphasized the need for **cultural safety** in the way that practitioners and specialists interact with children and their caregivers, and the need to **obtain informed consent** before conducting screening or assessment. As well, there is a need to **'triangulate' observations** and impressions of a child's development, and especially to obtain reports from primary caregivers and/or others who know the child well and also know what is 'typical' for a child of that age in the particular community setting in which they are growing up.

Useful approaches have been identified to guide new training and program initiatives. Practitioners' recommendations about the content, structure and process of developmental assessment in Aboriginal early childhood programs have been reported at numerous conferences, workshops, and in community and program newsletters and websites.

### **Funding**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada: Major Collaborative Research Initiatives

First Nations Inuit Health Branch, Maternal & Child Health Branch

Human Early Learning Partnership

### **KEY RESOURCES**

#### **ECDIP Publications, Presentations, and Reports**

Ball, J., & Janyst, P. (2009). *Screening and Assessment of Indigenous Children Community-University Partnered Research Findings*. (5 page summary)

Ball, J. (2009). *Developmental Monitoring, Screening and Assessment: Issues and Guidelines from First Nations Perspectives - Key Points*.

Ball, J. (2008). Indigenous Child Project Policy Brief: Protocols for Developmental Monitoring, Screening and Assessment of Aboriginal Young Children [PDF] (185 KB)

Ball, J. (2008). *Culturally appropriate implementation of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire in Aboriginal Head Start Programs in BC: Findings and recommendations*. Report to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Ball, J. (2007). *Screening and Assessment Practices in Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs in British Columbia*. University of Victoria.