



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

**Response to the Development of an Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care
Framework**

July 2017

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is a provincial Indigenous organization representing the collective interests of twenty-eight (28) member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout the Province of Ontario. The vision of the Indigenous Friendship Centre Movement is to improve the quality of life for Indigenous people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities that encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society and that respect Indigenous cultural distinctiveness.

The OFIFC administers a number of programs and initiatives that are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, health, family support, long term care, healing and wellness, and employment and training. Friendship Centres employ hundreds of program workers and support staff in urban communities across Ontario. As not-for-profit corporations, which are mandated to serve the needs of all Indigenous people regardless of legal definition, Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members seeking culture-based and culturally-appropriate services every day.

Urban Indigenous Communities in Ontario

Indigenous service delivery in Ontario is unique to other provinces with its high proportion of Indigenous people living off-reserve coupled with significant capacity and infrastructure in urban Indigenous communities across Ontario. The 2011 National Household Survey found that the vast majority of Indigenous people (84.1%) reside off-reserve in Ontario. Since the 1960's, organisations like Friendship Centres developed to respond to this significant and growing population. Indigenous organisations operate substantial social infrastructure located across the province and maintain a high level of capacity relative to other provinces. The Ontario Friendship Centre movement in particular represents the most significant off-reserve Indigenous social service infrastructure across Ontario and is dedicated to achieving greater participation of all urban Indigenous people in all facets of society.

Recognized for their longstanding expertise in social planning, Friendship Centres are often invited to participate in localised and regionalised system and community planning initiatives to ensure that needs and priorities of urban Indigenous people are included. Friendship Centres engage with local governments, mainstream agencies and not-for-profit service providers through innovative partnership agreements to co-locate health and social services in Friendship Centres. Local collaboration promotes the efficient use of community resources by increasing access to the urban Indigenous community in a cost-effective manner. Since child care is administered via local service system managers, strong local partnerships are an essential component of successfully delivery

of child care. Friendship Centres can leverage this vast network of partnerships to seamlessly develop and deliver child care programming.

While the ESDC completes the complex task of weighing feedback and analysis, the development of an Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCCF) that meets the needs of Indigenous communities will depend on strategic and deliberate engagement with Indigenous organisations, irrespective of jurisdiction. An effective engagement strategy is required to solicit proportionally representative feedback from organisations, which have a depth of understanding and demonstrated capacity to engage broadly on these issues.

The ESDC may also seek to learn from the Ontario Ministry of Education in terms of its engagement approach with urban and off-reserve Indigenous communities. To be clear, this is not only about ensuring meaningful and effective Indigenous engagement: it is also about ensuring that the outcome is informed by the expertise of relevant stakeholders, to achieve the IELCCF's goals. Without this input, the ESDC sets itself on an older, failed path that the Provincial and Federal governments have stated is no longer the way government operates with Indigenous partners.¹

Intergenerational Impacts on Child Care Practices

In order to successfully address the child care needs of Indigenous communities, it is essential to understand the ongoing impacts of colonialism and subsequent intergenerational trauma that have affected Indigenous communities for well over a century. Colonial structures such as the *Indian Act*, the reservation system, and residential schools were implemented with the explicit purpose of assimilating Indigenous peoples into mainstream society. The subsequent devaluation of women's communal roles; violence against Indigenous women; prohibition of Indigenous ceremonies; theft and destruction of lands, resources and sacred items; and other routine colonial injustices fragmented communities and inflicted trauma on community members, which ultimately disrupted the development pathways of Indigenous nations across Canada.

Much research has been done on how Indigenous child rearing and early learning practices have been disrupted vis-à-vis community, family, and individual traumas stemming from the residential school system² and the child welfare system.³

Understanding the disruption and looking for paths to reconnect children to culture is critical as more is understood about the capacity for culture-based approaches to act as preventative/protective models for Indigenous early learning and child care.

¹ Find quote from Ontario/Canada Agreement

² Truth and Reconciliation Canada. (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

³ Johnson, Patrick. (1983). Native Children and the Child Welfare System. Canadian Council on Social Development, Lorimer Press.

Friendship Centres: Culture-Based Approaches to Child Care

The OFIFC and its member Friendship Centres utilize culture-based approaches to programming, training, policy, research, and administration through their collective integration of culture-based frameworks, including the *USAI Research Framework*⁴ and *USAI Evaluation Path*,⁵ as well as a community-driven model for development and implementation. The OFIFC and its member Friendship Centres have practiced culture-based approaches to child well-being since their inceptions; one such program was The L'il Beavers Program (1974-1995) which focused on culture-based recreation/education programming for Indigenous children. It has been shown that health interventions rooted in the culture of a specific target group are up to four times more effective than general mainstream interventions.⁶ The OFIFC and Friendship Centers continue to prioritize culture-based approaches to child well-being through child-centered and family-integrative programs including Akwe:go, Aboriginal Healthy Babies Healthy Children, and Children Who Witness Violence.⁷

The OFIFC operationalizes evidenced-based approaches to child well-being by implementing rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis in research and evaluation. The OFIFC has completed several research projects related to child-centered programs in Friendship Centres.⁸⁹ For example, the OFIFC's *Akwe:go Wholistic Longitudinal Study* (AWLS) examines how children ages 6-10 participating in the Akwe:go program demonstrated strong cultural connections and sense of belonging. A key finding from the AWLS baseline report was that Friendship Centres support children by building the strength of the collective through the Akwe:go program. Friendship Centres are not only able to provide children with unique opportunities in community that reinforce their cultural identities and build a sense of belonging, but also contribute to the growing literature on the positive impacts of culture-based approaches for child-wellbeing.

Friendship Centres are ideally positioned to meet the child care needs of urban Indigenous communities. Friendship Centres deliver high quality, culturally reflective and wholistic programs and services across Ontario that promote the well-being of Indigenous children and families in urban settings resulting in improved outcomes over the long term. Child care should be made available in a community hub setting in which

⁴ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres. 2012. *USAI Research Framework*. Framework. Toronto: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

⁵ OFIFC. 2017. *USAI Evaluation Path*. Framework. Toronto: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

⁶ Derek Griner, and Timothy B. Smith. (2006). *Culturally adapted mental health interventions: A meta-analytic review*. (Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training. 43(4), 531-548).

⁷ However, it must be stressed that these child centred programs are geared to middle years and that there is comparatively little funding for early years.

⁸ OFIFC. 2014. *Akwe:go Wholistic Longitudinal Study: Phase 1 Baseline Report*. Akwe:go Wholistic Longitudinal Study. Report. Toronto: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres.

⁹ OFIFC. 2016. *We Are L'il Beavers: Reflecting on a Program that Created Safe and Culturally-Grounded Spaces for Indigenous Children and Youth*. Report. Toronto: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres.

parents have the opportunity to participate in child and family programming. Friendship Centres perform what has been termed as a hook and hub function, whereby parents and caregivers who bring their children in for specific services can get more comfortable with Friendship Centres and programming and eventually seek out services for themselves or utilize the space to increase their sense of community. Child and family programming in Friendship Centres provides many families and their children with a place to gather while also fostering positive sense of self, social connection, and cultural knowledge.

Timmins Native Friendship Centre (TNFC), for example, is a very successful model of a Friendship Centre utilizing culture-based approaches to early learning and child care. The TNFC was recognized in 2016 under Ontario's *Enabling & Celebrating Community Hubs: One Year Progress Update* for its innovative use of a public property to enhance its capacity and to respond to unique community needs. The TNFC houses many child-centered programs including its Oppekehawaso Wekamik centre-based daycare program, which has offered a unique wholistic child care environment that promotes Indigenous culture and language for over 10 years. Many Friendship Centres are now moving towards the provision of child care and child and family programming.

URBAN INDIGENOUS CHILD CARE PRIORITIES

The lack of access to child care in Ontario is a major barrier to the well-being of urban Indigenous communities. Improving accessibility hinges on a number of interrelated factors including: expanding Indigenous control, capacity and local decision making; social infrastructure investments; increasing affordable, culturally appropriate child care spaces; and greater outreach, engagement and coordination of services.

Indigenous Control, Capacity, Decision Making and Evaluation

It is important to understand the needs of urban Indigenous communities within the context of both the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and the Indigenous Early Learning and Children Care Framework. While the Canada-Ontario agreement sets out clear expectations for how the Province of Ontario will work to support the needs of Indigenous communities, including those living off-reserve, it must be understood that the needs of urban Indigenous communities must also be prioritized federally. This would include recognition and support for increased urban Indigenous control over services and programs for urban Indigenous children and their families within the IELCCF.

A significant policy framework that the Province of Ontario has committed to, in partnership with urban Indigenous communities, is the *Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy*. Key to this framework is the recognition of urban Indigenous communities and organizations having the authority to care for their own children.¹⁰ In

¹⁰ Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Ontario. 2016. *The Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy*. <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/professionals/indigenous/index.aspx>

order to ensure optimal results from any system of supports for Indigenous children and families, Indigenous control over the service and program continuum must remain within Indigenous communities and organizations. This would include control over the design, development, implementation and evaluation process for programs and services for and by Indigenous communities and organizations. It is absolutely vital that the IELCCF embed Indigenous control as a core principle.

Another important aspect to consider within the context of the Canada-Ontario agreement and its potential intersection with the IELCCF is the significant role Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs)/District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) have in child care planning and resourcing in Ontario. While the province is committed to working in partnership with urban Indigenous communities it must be understood that the prioritization of local urban Indigenous needs has not always been the case. Within Ontario's regionalized decision making structures, urban Indigenous communities have not received capacity development at the rate that other non-Indigenous communities have received and, subsequently, are not operating on an even playing field with other early learning and child care providers. The IELCCF should seek to build and enhance flexible, local capacity within urban Indigenous service delivery and should also require that the Canada-Ontario agreement be accountable to regional decision making that is driven by urban Indigenous communities to the fullest extent possible.

Given the key role of local stakeholders in the planning and implementation of early learning programming in Ontario, it must be a priority in the development of early years policy to ensure that local urban Indigenous communities have a representative voice in decision-making and the implementation of quality, culturally responsive child care. Co-development is a shared responsibility and requires extensive relationship development. Government must resource increased capacity of both urban Indigenous service providers and other local stakeholders. Local stakeholders must have necessary competency to develop strong working relationships with Indigenous partners. The IELCCF must support and build upon provincial processes already in place that are demonstrating results.

Social Infrastructure Investments

Friendship Centres have expressed that limited physical space and access to transportation are two key barriers to offering new child care programming and/or expanding existing child and family services and supports. The lack of sustained infrastructure support from all levels of government has not met the increased service demand of growing urban Indigenous communities and has limited the Friendship Centres' ability to grow its workforces and support all community members. The federal government has committed \$3.4B to social infrastructure, which will include spending on child care centres, and cultural and recreation infrastructure. Proposed infrastructure commitments must prioritize investments in Friendship Centres to enhance child-

centred service delivery that is informed by Indigenous community priorities and current service barriers.

Through various engagement methods with Friendship Centres over the past years, the OFIFC has heard a significant amount of first-hand evidence regarding the lack of adequate, reliable, affordable transportation services in urban Indigenous communities, and the role that this plays in accessing a range of crucial services. Locating child care in Friendship Centre allows for child care approaches that are tailored to community needs and could, with additional support, meet transportation needs through coordination with other Friendship Centre programming. However, social infrastructure spending must prioritize public transportation to ensure Indigenous families are able to access Indigenous child care centres. Additionally, child care investments must build in flexibility so that Centres can build in transportation services to clients.

Access to Affordable, Culturally Appropriate Child Care

Many Indigenous families cannot afford child care and there are long wait lists for child care subsidies. Ontario has the highest child care costs in Canada.¹¹ Excessive child care fees disproportionately impact urban Indigenous communities who face unique socio-economic barriers and have unique family structures. Indigenous families, for example, have higher rates of unemployment¹² and earn less income than their non-Indigenous counterparts.¹³ Indigenous women are more likely to be teen parents,¹⁴ to be lone parents,¹⁵ and to have more children than non-Indigenous women.¹⁶ Indigenous families require targeted subsidies to support equitable access to child care.

In addition to affordability, the provision of culturally-appropriate child care is a major service gap in urban Indigenous communities. Culturally appropriate child care incorporates language and culture into curriculum, involves community members such as Elders, and fosters positive cultural identity in early years. Among off-reserve Indigenous children in child care, only 18% participated in culturally relevant child care environments.¹⁷ Indigenous communities want culturally appropriate services offered by their own community members. In fact, 91 percent of urban Indigenous people value

¹¹ David McDonald, They go up so fast: 2015 child care fees in Canadian cities (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015). <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/they-go-so-fast>

¹² Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement 2013-14 Annual Plan (Toronto: Queen's Publisher for Ontario, 2014).

http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/labmark/LMA_Plan2013_14.html

¹³ Statistics Canada. Aboriginal Income Disparity in Canada (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2013).

https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ-AI/STAGING/texte-text/rs_re_brief_incomedisparity-PDF_1378400531873_eng.pdf

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. First Nations, Inuit and Métis Women (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011).

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11442-eng.htm#a11>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Statistics Canada, Projections of the Aboriginal Population and Households in Canada, 2011 to 2036 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2015). <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-552-x/91-552-x2015001-eng.pdf>

¹⁷ Carolyn Ferns and Martha Friendly, *The state of early childhood education and care in Canada 2012* (Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2014).

<http://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/StateofECEC2012.pdf>

Indigenous-specific child care services.¹⁸ The IELCCF needs to support urban-based, culturally responsive child care systems by: increasing Indigenous early year's educators,¹⁹ training culturally competent early year's educators and administrators, creating space for Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and increasing urban Indigenous-focused early year's funding to Indigenous organisations.

Outreach, Engagement and Coordination of Services

The current Indigenous child care and child and family programming landscape in Ontario is convoluted and difficult for communities to navigate. Indigenous parents require integrated child and family programming that includes child care, before and after school programming, parent relief (and occasional/emergency child care) programs, and other types of services to support family well-being. The IELCCF must aim to establish federal, provincial and Indigenous partnerships to coordinate streamlined, easy-to-navigate, wraparound child care and child and family programming for Indigenous communities. Governments at all levels must work with Indigenous communities to develop outreach and engagement strategies that aim to inform families of child and family programming and policy. All Indigenous child care programs and policies must reflect the voice of Indigenous children, families and community members.

CONCLUSION

The IELCCF and federal investments in off-reserve Indigenous child care can play a critical role in improving the well-being of urban Indigenous communities. However, unless the IELCCF is grounded in the expertise of urban Indigenous communities and organisations, it will be stalled in fully reaching its potential. An effective IELCCF will be modelled on the principle of Indigenous control and will invest in building capacity in urban Indigenous communities. Meaningful engagement and involvement of Friendship Centres will assist in the development of culturally safe approaches to service delivery, which will improve access and maximise the impact of investment for urban Indigenous people.

¹⁸ Environics Institute, Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2010).

http://www.uaps.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/UAPS-Main-Report_Dec.pdf

¹⁹ Generally, the demand for ECEs in Ontario has risen sharply and there must be greater effort to attract and retain ECEs to the profession generally and to Indigenous organisations specifically.