

# Nurturing the Good Mind

---

---

A discussion paper on  
Aboriginal Family Literacy &  
the Friendship Centre Movement

Produced by:

*The National Association of Friendship Centres with  
support from the National Literacy Secretariat*

*March 2006*



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
**FRIENDSHIP  
CENTRES**



Human Resources and  
Social Development Canada

Ressources humaines et  
Développement social Canada



# Table of Contents

---

---

<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>What is Family Literacy?</b> .....	5
<b>Current Friendship Centre Practices</b> .....	17
<b>Next Steps</b> .....	27
<b>Resources for Communities</b> .....	31
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	35

# Introduction

---

---

## National Association of Friendship Centres

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) is a national Aboriginal organization representing the concerns and interests of 117 cultural and community development organizations across Canada. The NAFC was established in 1972 to represent the growing number of Friendship Centres, as well as the clients they serve, at the national level. The mission statement of the NAFC is as follows:

*To improve the quality of life for Aboriginal Peoples in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society, and which respect and strengthen the increasing emphasis on Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.*

Friendship Centres deliver a wide spectrum of programs and services to Aboriginal people living in towns and cities across the country. Friendship Centres are community based and directed Aboriginal institutions serving the interests of urban Aboriginal Peoples in the areas of social, cultural, recreational, economic and community development. Friendship Centres provide and promote human resource development through a wide range of programs and services to a diverse and increasing urban Aboriginal community.

In the past year alone, Friendship Centres across Canada provided over 1,000,000 client services through over 1200 programs. All Friendship Centre programs are provided “status-blind”, that is, without consideration if a person is a status Indian, non-status Indian, Métis or Inuit.

## Friendship Centres and Family Literacy

The growth of urban Aboriginal populations highlights the urgency of improving success for Aboriginal people of all ages in urban educational settings. At the same time, there is general agreement that urban Aboriginal education should contribute to the recovery and retention of Aboriginal cultures. Friendship Centres across the country are important leaders and partners in developing services and strategies addressing these needs.

Family literacy programs are a promising way to develop Aboriginal cultural approaches to education. Many family literacy models stress the holistic nurturance of children and families, an approach also found in Aboriginal value systems. For example, the Haudenosaunee concept of the Good Mind emphasizes the wellbeing and cohesiveness of the whole family, community and environment, and a holistic approach to personal growth.

Family literacy programming can help people prepare for survival in broader Canadian society, but it could also be vital to cultural survival. A focus on supporting whole family learning could help offset institutional approaches that separate family members and put them in settings that may not reflect Aboriginal values, approaches and priorities.

Friendship Centres, with their broad range of closely linked cultural, educational, and family oriented programs, are in a position to provide leadership in developing family literacy strategies and models. Working closely with the family literacy movement could lead to successful cross-cultural models supporting both mainstream academic success and cultural retention for Aboriginal peoples.

Nurturing the Good Mind was developed to frame discussions on family literacy facilitated by the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC), and to support the development of family literacy strategies and models for the Friendship Centre movement. It is also hoped that discussions arising from this paper will inspire leaders in Friendship Centres to take steps in developing culturally relevant family literacy services. The main audiences for this document are: the NAFC Board and Youth Committee; Friendship Centre Executive Directors, board members, program managers and front line workers; and, other friends and partners outside the Friendship Centre Movement with an interest in Aboriginal Family literacy.



# What is Family Literacy?

---

## DEFINITIONS

### Literacy

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) defines literacy as *“the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”*

Literacy affects all aspects of community life, including health, employment, education, social welfare, and justice. The literacy movement in Canada and internationally generally places great value on the following principles:

**Life long Learning:** Literacy is an important part of a lifelong learning process, a skill that starts in infancy and continues to be built on throughout life.

**Learner-Centred:** It is essential to incorporate a learner’s life experiences and personal needs into the learning process.

**Whole Person Development:** Literacy involves more than reading, writing and math skills. Literacy helps an individual to participate more fully in life and improve their general well being as well as their economic status, and effective literacy programs require a holistic approach to successfully impart literacy skills.

### Family Literacy

Family literacy programs support literacy learning for the whole family, rather than only adults or children in isolation.

*“Family Literacy is an approach to literacy development that builds on family strengths and connections within the context of the communities and the culture in which families live and learn. Family Literacy programs provide models for positive interactions in the family and larger community. In doing so, Family Literacy programs provide assistance to whole families in developing skills to participate more fully in their communities.”<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Family Literacy, 2002, 1.1.3. This definition and some of the descriptions in this section are adapted from the Centre for Family Literacy Website ([www.familit.ca](http://www.familit.ca)) and from other sources listed in the bibliography.

## BASIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED

### **Why are Family Literacy Programs important?**

*Children's first and most important teachers are their parents and families.*

The most crucial years for learning take place in the home, before children enter the formal school system. The rate of growth that takes place in the first five years of life is never matched again. Children need stimulation to build connections in their brain and nerve cells. Literacy activities such as rhymes, songs, conversation and reading help form connections in the brain that will be critical later in life. If these activities are not part of the environment in the early years, the child may have a more difficult time catching up later on.

Support for reading and language development during these years sets the foundation for literacy. Children need partners in this learning process. The most important teachers in a child's life are parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members who are with the child everyday.

Families need to use literacy skills all the time, and opportunities for developing and practicing these skills arise regularly in family contexts - whether through direct reading and writing activities, or through other activities that help form foundation literacy skills. Parents and other relatives all have an opportunity to help children develop literacy skills on an everyday basis. Singing songs, playing board games, pointing out street signs, using recipes, counting the stairs, or helping with homework are just a few ways that literacy skills are used by families every day.

### **Who are Family Literacy Programs for?**

*All Family Members Benefit!* Parents involved in family literacy programs can improve their own literacy skills while supporting the literacy development of their children. Adult clients of Family literacy programs often struggle with various issues related to poverty, including low literacy levels. Children with parents who have low literacy levels may have few early opportunities to gain literacy skills. Reading together builds confidence for parents who might otherwise be reluctant to read, provides a positive model of literacy to children, and fosters parent-child bonding. Family literacy programs improve intergenerational literacy by supporting adult literacy, early childhood education and parenting skills. Family literacy programs may also serve parents with higher literacy levels by providing them with information, skills and strategies supporting their children's learning.

## Who Provides Family Literacy Services?

Family literacy programs are usually based in community-oriented settings: libraries, family resource centres, day care centres, community based learning environments, health care centres and schools. Because family literacy programs focus across age categories, they are ideally very grassroots oriented, responding more to communities than to large educational institutions - although ultimately, they do relate back to schools and may even have a direct relationship with a school. They also tend to build in the resources of various community programs, which work together in partnership to address the needs of both parents and children.

## What do Family Literacy Programs do?

Family Literacy programs vary depending on community needs. Activities may include any combination of the broad categories below. These aspects of family literacy programming will be more or less emphasized depending on funding sources and the focus of the organization hosting the program.

### **Support Parent-Child interaction**

Interactive literacy and learning activities between parents and their children that are fun for both; role modeling and structured situations for positive parent-child interaction; modeling good book-sharing behaviour; helping parents share their existing knowledge and include books, stories, conversation, and reading in their everyday routines.

### **Provide Tools and Information**

Providing families with tools and information to help them provide enjoyable learning experiences for children: information on libraries, library programs, and other book and literacy resources in their community; help in selecting age appropriate books; literacy support for families of children with special needs; parent education and support groups where parents can share questions, concerns and strategies with peers and counselors; and, information on working with schools and participating in the community.

### **Adult Literacy**

Adult literacy and basic education, basic skills and life skills training are often provided through or linked with family literacy settings, with the aim of providing strong foundational learning experiences for parents, to help achieve their personal goals, increase motivation, skills and knowledge, and find work or prepare for further training. Family literacy programs are often the first steps to people becoming involved in Adult Literacy and Learning programs.

## Children's Literacy

Age-appropriate programs for children to prepare them for success in school and provide motivation for personal, academic and social success in school and throughout life; and, activities encouraging parents to create a learning culture in the home. Mostly focused on families with children from birth to about age 6, with some programs maintaining support for families with teens.

## BEST PRACTICES

### **Whole family learning, whole community engagement**

Family literacy programs ideally engage both parents and children and focus on supporting family cohesion and overall health. Family literacy isn't just about reading and writing; it's about developing strong relationships between parents and children, and getting parents involved in their kids' education, which in turn builds stronger families and healthy communities. In fact, many parents who attend family literacy programs go on to become more involved in their communities.

Family literacy programs are relevant to their clients because they ideally integrate and relate to various community resources and realities, and provide the tools for meeting diverse family needs outside of a narrow "education" arena.

### **Centre for Family Literacy Statements of Good Practice**

The Centre for Family Literacy has developed 10 Statements of Good Practice for Family Literacy Programs in Alberta. These statements could guide practitioners, funders, and policy makers of family literacy programs in Friendship Centres. As the Aboriginal family literacy field grows and changes, these statements can be examined and redefined.

- 1) **Intergenerational**  
Successful family literacy programs work with parents and children, directly or indirectly, to establish an intergenerational cycle of literacy achievement.
- 2) **Collaborative**  
Successful family literacy programs recognize the importance of collaboration, and are developed, delivered, and continually improved with participant and community input.

- 3) **Build on Strengths**  
Successful family literacy programs build on literacy behaviours and strengths already present in families, and introduce additional strategies to help further enrich literacy activities in the home.
- 4) **Responsive**  
Successful family literacy programs are flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the families who participate in them.
- 5) **Culturally Sensitive**  
Successful family literacy programs are culturally sensitive, and use resources that are appropriate for specific participant groups.
- 6) **Essence of family literacy**  
Successful family literacy programs offer activities that celebrate and emphasize the joy of learning.
- 7) **Sound methods**  
Successful family literacy programs follow sound educational practices, appropriate for the literacy development of children and adults. Practitioners select from a variety of research-based approaches according to the needs of each group.
- 8) **Staff qualifications**  
Successful family literacy programs have qualified and trained staff appropriate to the educational needs of children and adults and appropriate to the specific roles and responsibilities within a particular delivery model.
- 9) **Access**  
Successful family literacy programs are held in accessible, welcoming locations. Support is given to overcome barriers to participation, such as lack of childcare.
- 10) **Evaluation**  
Successful family literacy programs include an on-going, manageable evaluation process that produces information useful for program development and accountability.

## EXAMPLES OF PROGRAM MODELS

No one program is going to fit every community's needs. Careful adaptations of existing models need to be made for every group, community, and session, and for different cultural contexts.

There are many wonderful family literacy program models, so there's no need to "re-invent the wheel." Family literacy models have been developed in various places, often through creative links between grassroots settings and university researchers. Some successful models have been adapted and reproduced across the country. Few Aboriginal-specific program models have been developed, but with thoughtful consideration, components from any model can be adapted to Aboriginal communities.

A few of the models that have been adapted in various settings are listed below. Friendship Centres may want to consider these models and where and how they have been adapted to Aboriginal families. This is not a comprehensive list, and activities in any of the models may be similar to those of other models. Other names of family literacy models can be found across Canada and internationally (e.g., "Rhyme Time" or "Parent and Child Time"). None of these models is being recommended over any other, and there may be other models out there that should also be considered. The networks listed in the "Resources" section of this paper should be able to help connect with groups delivering these models.

### **Building Blocks**

Literacy worker shares strategies for language development, learning and reading with parents through a series of home visits, encouraging parents to take an active role in the development of their child's literacy skills. Offered in some Canadian provinces and territories as well as in some states.

### **Books for Babies**

Program encouraging parents of infants between birth and 12 months to share books with their babies. Supports families in developing early literacy and language experiences and promotes healthy family relationships.

### **L.A.P.S.**

Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS) is being delivered in various places across the country, and Aboriginal adaptations of LAPS (A-LAPS) are appearing in several provinces. Focus on literacy and parenting skills.

## **Story Sacks:**

A Story Sack is a large cloth bag with a quality children's book and lots of activities designed to bring reading to life and support parents in helping their children build strong literacy skills. Every province has a provincial trainer.

## **B.O.O.K.S.**

Books Offer Our Kids Success is offered in Alberta, although similar programs occur in other provinces. The program model combines reading, listening to stories and other activities. Aboriginal adaptations have been developed for Cree communities that build in craft-making, writing and Cree storytelling.

## **Parent-Child Mother Goose**

Focuses on learning and sharing stories and supporting oral learning, language development and positive parenting. Parents learn to enjoy rhymes, finger plays, songs, and stories with their children in a supportive peer group. Has programs and trainers across the country and is being applied in some Aboriginal communities.

## **PRINTS**

Parents Interacting with Teacher Support (PRINTS) is a research-based family literacy program based on a participatory adult education model, in which parents learn how to support their children's literacy development and communicate with teachers and school personnel. Has been offered across Canada and was recently modified to create an Aboriginal focus.

## **Rock & Read**

Innovative program developed through Bookmates in Manitoba. Parents and their children are exposed to the joys of rhyme, song, and book sharing through a variety of activities. An Aboriginal version, Tikanagan Rock & Read, was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal community in Manitoba.

## ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES

Aboriginal communities have many reasons for developing family literacy models, and Aboriginal literacy and education programs have a high level of interest in family literacy. The most comprehensive survey of Aboriginal literacy programs was conducted in a 1998 study titled “The Language of Literacy.” While most programs surveyed in the study focus on adults, many maintain strong links with learners of all ages. Literacy support for children and youth has become an irresistible part of many Aboriginal literacy programs, in spite of the fact that there are almost no funding supports in place for family literacy. Clearly, family literacy is already a priority for those working in settings where Aboriginal literacy is being addressed.

### **The Need for Cross-cultural Approaches**

In many ways, Aboriginal communities have natural connections to the modern literacy movement. This movement has generally recognized the need to address important factors in learning, such as different cultures and learning styles. These factors are also a concern for many Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, literacy programs are often created in response to the needs of disenfranchised peoples, including those experiencing poverty, family breakdown, high rates of incarceration and other forms of cultural distress. This has often made the literacy movement a natural ally with Aboriginal communities.

However, cross-cultural misunderstandings do exist. For example, while those in the broader literacy movement are generally sympathetic to Aboriginal communities, the emphasis in that movement on literacy as a “cause” can sometimes seem to conflict with Aboriginal social values, which are grounded in oral traditions. Associating literacy with “progress” may imply - without meaning to - that written systems are equated with intelligence and a higher evolution of society. Furthermore, literacy education may be seen by some Aboriginal people as a force of assimilation, a fear that has very real roots in the residential school experience. If Aboriginal literacy programs are to succeed, they need culturally specific curriculum content and methodologies that value Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural perspectives, and help families “translate” values from both.

Family literacy settings give excellent opportunities to embrace oral traditions and reinforce Aboriginal cultures. Best practices in Aboriginal family literacy programs include the celebration of language through storytelling, and an oral approach can form the basis of a good family literacy program. In the Parent Child Mother Goose model, for example, stories are told and retold orally, and no written material is provided until the last session.

## **Story Sacks:**

A Story Sack is a large cloth bag with a quality children's book and lots of activities designed to bring reading to life and support parents in helping their children build strong literacy skills. Every province has a provincial trainer.

## **B.O.O.K.S.**

Books Offer Our Kids Success is offered in Alberta, although similar programs occur in other provinces. The program model combines reading, listening to stories and other activities. Aboriginal adaptations have been developed for Cree communities that build in craft-making, writing and Cree storytelling.

## **Parent-Child Mother Goose**

Focuses on learning and sharing stories and supporting oral learning, language development and positive parenting. Parents learn to enjoy rhymes, finger plays, songs, and stories with their children in a supportive peer group. Has programs and trainers across the country and is being applied in some Aboriginal communities.

## **PRINTS**

Parents Interacting with Teacher Support (PRINTS) is a research-based family literacy program based on a participatory adult education model, in which parents learn how to support their children's literacy development and communicate with teachers and school personnel. Has been offered across Canada and was recently modified to create an Aboriginal focus.

## **Rock & Read**

Innovative program developed through Bookmates in Manitoba. Parents and their children are exposed to the joys of rhyme, song, and book sharing through a variety of activities. An Aboriginal version, Tikanagan Rock & Read, was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal community in Manitoba.

*“The great thing about many Aboriginal family literacy programs is the way they can impart richness from both cultures to families. From mainstream Canadian society, children are introduced to books and all of the wonder that books contain - knowledge, beautiful artwork, stories and ideas that are moving, humorous, informative. From their Aboriginal culture the children are introduced to an ancient oral tradition, to language, stories, knowledge and beliefs that are thousands of years old and that present the children with a very different way of looking at the world than the world view they get from the bustling, modern society in which they live. Seeing the world through both of these perspectives enriches them and benefits our society.”*

~ Colleen Crozier, Centre for Family Literacy ~

## Culture as a Basis for Family Literacy

Aboriginal cultural approaches to child-rearing and personal development can serve as a solid basis for family literacy models. For example, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) concept of the Good Mind provides a useful way of framing Aboriginal cultural approaches to family-based learning.<sup>2</sup> The idea of the *Good Mind* translates well across diverse Aboriginal communities, as similar value frameworks can be found in various Aboriginal languages and cultures, as with the Anishnabe concept of *Bimadiziwin*, or the Good Life.

To have a good mind is a life long work, and includes an attitude of thankfulness, respect, and love for all the other life forms that make up the world, as well an attitude that strives to bind people together in a healthy common attitude to their community and environment, based on recognizing and following their original instructions from the Creator. This is all achieved through developing an understanding and practice of the cultural ways that have been gifted to us.

It is also said that a Good Mind will help us fulfill our purpose as individuals and find our life path in a balanced manner, making choices based on a sense of responsibility for our actions. As we travel through our lives and learn, our Good Mind is connected to the development of our spiritual power. If developed in a healthy manner, this spiritual aspect improves our ability to work as a community, with “one heart, one mind, one head and one body.”

*So the ultimate power of the Great Law rests in how well the individual person develops their sense of self, but develops that sense in regard to the well-being of the others, in the clan, in the village, in the nation and in the Confederacy of the Six Nations.*

<sup>2</sup> Descriptions of the Good Mind here are adapted from the Haudenosaunee Home Page ([www.sixnations.org](http://www.sixnations.org)). To give proper respect to the concept of the Good Mind it should be acknowledged that it reflects a whole way of life given to the Haudenosaunee from the Creator, and cannot be fully described or understood through a paper such as this. However, ideas like the Good Mind can be a useful foundation for family literacy models.

Development of the Good Mind supports the capacity for family and community cohesiveness. Common cultural values are instilled in children and nurtured as part of a lifelong process. All of this is done in ways that address the holistic needs of the people (in their body, mind and spirit, emotionally, socially, economically, and so on). Good Mind needs to be fostered in settings that allow for healthy interaction across the generations, within whole family and community contexts.

It can be seen even from this brief description that the possibility for strong family literacy models exists within Aboriginal cultures. So, for example, the Haudenosaunee idea of using Good Mind in our interactions with people and the world around us can embrace and include the philosophy of many Family Literacy models, which focus on healthy interactions within the family and on content that helps families engage with their wider community and environment. As with the Good Mind concept, good family literacy practice addresses a person's holistic development, and helps individuals develop their sense of self in relation to the wellbeing of other people and the world around them. Indeed, participants in family literacy programs often develop community relationships with other families through the program, building support networks across their town or city.

For all these reasons, development of effective Aboriginal family literacy models may be best achieved in relation to the resurgence of Aboriginal cultures, which have the potential to form the basis of best Family Literacy practices, rather than simply being placed as token elements into programs. This culture-based approach reflects the principle expressed by the National Indian Brotherhood over 30 years ago, which stressed finding a place for education within culture, rather than putting culture into education.

## **Aboriginal Adaptations of Best Practice**

Programs grounded in Aboriginal cultures and community realities can adapt any family literacy model in meaningful ways for their particular community. One area that could be linked to family literacy is the recovery of traditional Aboriginal parenting skills. For example, the Red Road Healing Society in Edmonton offers an adaptation of the Rhymes That Bind program, which includes oral rhymes, songs, and stories for Aboriginal parents and their young children who are not yet in school. The program has been adapted to Cree teachings and perspectives on childbirth and child rearing. Activities include the making of a star blanket, a bag for the birth cord, and a moss bag (for holding the baby and as a natural, age old "diaper"). Elders also attend to share cultural knowledge and offer moral support to young parents.

The family and intergenerational focus on learning in both Aboriginal cultures as well as family literacy programs could also be critical to the survival and maintenance of Aboriginal languages. Language nest models pioneered in New Zealand, where children are placed with a speaker in a homelike immersion setting, could be another important consideration in developing Aboriginal family literacy models.

Ultimately, Aboriginal adaptations of best practices to local cultural contexts will help lay the foundations for cultural retention as the foundation for survival. After all, the family is the primary source for the retention and transmission of cultural knowledge, and Aboriginal education is traditionally family-centred.

*The family is the foundation for the retention  
and transmission of cultural knowledge.*

# Current Friendship Centre Practices

---

---

## FAMILY LITERACY ACTIVITIES

The snapshot provided here is not comprehensive, but gives an overview of the current state of family literacy as addressed in Friendship Centres. While circumstances differ somewhat from province to province, the regions profiled below are fairly representative of Aboriginal family literacy scenarios across the country.

Friendship Centre literacy workers generally agree that family literacy is a large and pressing area of need, and that Aboriginal cultural approaches are important. However, family literacy funds are even harder to find than money for adult literacy. Aboriginal community-based literacy programs tend to be small – usually run by one or two staff members – and time and energy is short. In some places, literacy workers are not aware of any family literacy funds, and where funding does exist, it tends to be small and sporadic. In some cases, non-Aboriginal programs are addressing family literacy, so the Friendship Centre isn't directly involved. To various degrees, a number of programs have shown interest and initiative in building closer ties between adult literacy and children's programs, in a way that shows promise for the development of Aboriginal family literacy models.

The situation in Manitoba is typical. Friendship Centres in Dauphin, The Pas, and Brandon, for example, all have adult literacy programs, but none of these are able to consistently address family literacy – although some attempts are made and awareness is definitely there. Literacy learners in Dauphin made story bags for family literacy day, while the Brandon program has also had some informal activity, and the doors of the program are certainly open to people with kids. The Head Start program in Brandon has also hosted a few family literacy events in the past.

Literacy program workers in Manitoba seem to want to provide family literacy but simply don't have the resources. The provincial government does fund some family literacy, but as one program worker put it, "We tend not to approach the province, because you have to prove you've been doing it already, which is hard to do, with only one or two staff, and too much work on our plate as it is. We would need to base it all on volunteers, and there are issues with space and funding." Some non-government support is also available for family literacy in Manitoba, notably the Winnipeg Foundation's Literacy for Life fund; however, the amounts given out through this fund are generally less than \$3,000 per year.

Family literacy, especially programs with a strong cultural base, are desperately needed in the far north. The Northwest Territories Literacy Council sees family literacy as a top priority for the region, and facilitates the provision of useful information supporting family literacy development activities. However, as with other areas of the country, funding for family literacy program delivery is minimal. For example, the Ingamo Hall Friendship Centre in Inuvik is currently funded to work with elders who have limited English and reading skills, informing them of their rights and helping them manage their CPP. Support for this activity – one time funding from Social Development Canada’s New Horizons for Seniors Program - is drying up after March 31. The centre has a Healthy Babies program for expectant moms, and UMACY dollars for the youth, but nothing specifically for families.

In Ontario, the bulk of literacy activity is funded through the provincial Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program, which doesn’t support family literacy as a core service. Programs in Ontario feel the pressure to address family literacy, and are doing so in spite of the fact that these activities aren’t recognized or funded. The Literacy program at the United Native Friendship Centre in Fort Frances offers some family literacy activity, but only after hours, outside of the LBS program. Several times a year, families are invited in for supper as a way of involving parents in the program, an event that draws a good crowd. The program also works closely with six single moms several times a week, to upgrade skills they can pass on to their kids. Sault Ste. Marie has one of the longest-running literacy programs in Ontario, but family literacy is not a direct function of the program, again due to LBS program funding restrictions. The program tries to share literacy resources and passes out promo material on family literacy day, and communicates with other programs about family literacy, especially those offering family support. The Timmins Friendship Centre has a breakfast program, Books for Brunch, which is run by the kid’s program, and a few of the LBS students have read books to the kids. On Family Literacy Day, the program made information on family literacy available to community members.

While Friendship Centres in other provinces not mentioned here may or may not have literacy programs, there are family literacy activities in Aboriginal community settings in various locations across the country. A survey of national Aboriginal family literacy activity would be useful in helping Friendship Centres network and choose appropriate models for their own communities. Potential partners and resources that could support such a survey are mentioned in the final section of this paper.

## LITERACY AND ADULT EDUCATION

Adult Literacy is generally addressed in Friendship Centres in one of two ways, usually as a result of funding criteria that are defined from outside of Aboriginal communities (e.g., by ministries of education or training):

- Programs designated specifically for low level literacy learners (generally defined as those having less than a grade 8 or 9 level of literacy);
- Programs designated for high school upgrading (whether through alternative youth or adult education programs), which are often faced with learners who have technically completed some degree of high school, but who are actually operating at a more basic literacy level.

In some cases, these two program areas co-exist and work together, and in the best case, they are able to be flexible and learner-centred in helping the client.

Different provinces have slightly different ways of defining what constitutes basic, intermediate and higher levels, although the distinction between levels does correspond in a very general way across the provinces.

As with the non-Aboriginal literacy movement, many Aboriginal literacy programs struggle with low funding levels and funding guidelines that may not always fit community realities. However, many Aboriginal programs have found creative ways to build community based and culturally relevant content and methodologies into their services.

Aboriginal literacy programs work with learners of all ages, although funding tends to be limited to adults or youth who are out of the school system.

## PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Various kinds of Friendship Centre programs serving families and children should be considered in the development of family literacy models, including:

- Pre-Natal and Parenting Programs
- Early Childhood programs (e.g., Aboriginal Head Start)
- Provincial Health and wellness programs focused on kids

## OTHER RELATED PROGRAMS

Various other programs provided through Friendship Centres could have some bearing on Aboriginal family literacy models. A few examples of the kinds of programs that could be linked with family literacy are:

- Cultural programming (Aboriginal language, visiting Elders programs, drumming/ singing, etc.)
- Youth programs (UMAYC, Homework clubs, young parents' programs)
- Health Programs (Personal healing/ Counselling, addictions, etc.)
- Justice programs (Courtworker programs, sentencing circles, etc.)

## COMMUNITY EXAMPLES

### **Tillicum Leelum**

The Tillicum Leelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Nanaimo, B.C. is a good example of how family literacy is addressed in a Friendship Centre setting. While there is no significant funding source supporting whole family literacy, there is awareness in the community that literacy is increasingly a priority, and family literacy has naturally arisen as a necessary approach. To some extent, the various programs in the centre are able to coordinate awareness and efforts around family literacy, with different program workers accommodating each other wherever possible.

Tillicum Leelum has two buildings: a Health Centre, where most of the programs are hosted, including programs for families and children, and the Administration building, which also hosts adult education and computer and business classes. Both program areas address issues related to family literacy.

### **Health Centre Programs for Families with Young Children**

Programs addressing the needs of young children and their families are hosted in the Health Care Centre. The children's program at Tillicum gets a lot of referrals from the Child Development Centre in Nanaimo. Often the hope is to get exposure to literature and get families talking inside the home. There are also referrals from the school district for families having problems.

Two of the Children's programs specifically address family literacy. These are the Treasure Box and Mother Goose programs, which have been running at the Centre for a few years.

In the Mother Goose program, families with small children come to the centre in groups and sing rhymes and songs, and the families are then given booklets with the songs to take home at the end of the program. The Treasure Box program goes right into family homes with about 20 books in a bin to promote story time reading in the family environment. Books are left with the families until the program worker returns the next week with another bin of books. Bringing the program into the home respects that families are more comfortable there, and that many parents can't get around easily, either because of transportation costs or the difficulty of coordinating activities for all family members. The laid-back approach of the program also breaks down barriers to literacy learning and helps families to overcome apprehensions, while supporting the goal of making kids love books by having fun with them. The workers aim to make it easy for families to participate, supporting an atmosphere of closeness within the family and gearing materials and approaches to specific family interests.

The Health Centre also offers parenting classes through the Building Better Babies and Creating Healthy Families programs. Building Better Babies focuses on pregnant moms and babies under 6 months old. Creating Healthy Families focuses on parents with kids over 6 months old. Both programs bring families together and provide parenting workshops, speakers and information addressing issues based on a survey of client needs. Another family program at the Centre is Traditional Family Night, which features an open drop in with supper and different programs, such as cultural activities (drum making, speakers, dancers), swimming and movie night.

## **Adult basic Education**

The Adult Basic Education program, accredited through the local university college, is mandated to work with students 19 years old and over, although some students are as young as 16. There are two broad levels of instruction: basic and intermediate, which takes students up to a grade 10 level. A lot of students work at around a grade six level. Some steps have been taken to begin preparing more advanced students for the GED. The program gets a lot of referrals, and has been in operation for over 30 years. Most of the participants have done well, with a typical student moving two to three grade levels during a seven-month program.

The program includes a four-month college-accredited program component, which focuses on math, English and computer studies. The other three months of programming is devoted to rounding out a holistic learning experience, with Life Skills and personal empowerment activities. These are important program components, since many clients struggle with a variety of personal issues. Often the biggest step is getting them in the door, since there are so many barriers supporting the movement to personal growth and learning. Life Skills program components include personal empowerment training, True Colours, First Aid and two one-week workshops on healing through art and drama.

The academic program takes a whole language approach, and stresses having reading materials and writing exercises that will be of interest to the students by relating to their lives. Students are getting younger and younger, and it's hard work to keep them engaged and excited about the learning process. In fact, Tillicum Leelum workers see the need for a program for early teens addressing academic and life skills needs from an Aboriginal cultural approach.

Curriculum topics in the program include: parenting, money, food, personal development, and material with an Aboriginal focus. Age-relevant literacy materials are limited, since most early reading books are for kids. However, program workers have noticed more Adult literacy materials appearing in the last few years. It's even more of a challenge to find suitable adult literacy materials that have an Aboriginal focus, although program instructors have recently been able to find more of these materials as well. Staff in the program develop curriculum using culturally relevant materials such as *Black Elk Speaks* and *April Raintree*, which the students enjoy. Texts include books and magazines found in various places, such as local stores, as well as more formalized texts, such as the Landgren series. The instructor also tries to generate material from students through activities like watching and writing about a video, and using the material to learn about sentence structure, parts of speech, and so on. As she says, "We can take any topic in English class and work with it."

## **Linking Adult and Children's Programming**

Workers in the Adult Basic Education and children's programs at Tillicum Leelum are motivated to link adults with children in addressing the literacy needs of families, and have taken some steps to this end. Adult basic education program workers have noticed that clients are scoring lower and lower in literacy assessments when they enter the program, especially the students who are very young. They feel that one of their biggest successes is when the parents go home and read at night. One of the instructors notes, "If the kids miss out, they'll be in here 4 or 5 years after their parents."

A love of their children often motivates parents to attend Family Literacy programs (and other literacy programs). A lot of the Adult Education students have children, and quite a few of these are under the age of six. Many of these children are in daycare. Significantly, about one in four students have kids in foster care, and a number of the younger students are mandated through the courts to attend parenting programs as a condition of getting their children back. There are many interrelated issues for such parents to deal with, including poverty, loss of kids, and the need to find a job. The parenting classes may be offered through Tillicum Leelum, the Nanaimo band, or through the community. The high proportion of basic education students involved in parenting programs means there is a huge need for community based research and development of materials and methodologies related to Aboriginal parenting.

A lot of student parents are motivated by a desire to help their kids with school. Building family literacy activities into the program for adults with kids in school is difficult, since most of the students' kids are in school from 9 to 3, which means the cooperation of the school district is required. However, Tillicum Leelum programs make opportunities as they arise. For example, when a school strike was on, parents brought their kids into the program. The program also tried connecting with the school system and taking students to school and have them read to kids. It wasn't easy to do, but program workers see great potential in working to involve the parents more in the school system. Workers in both programs see the value of relating to the schools; for example, bringing kids under six to school to read to them helps prepare the child for academic success and fosters a sense of community continuity.

The adult and children's programs work together wherever possible. For example, adult education and children's program workers arranged for the adult students to participate in the Creating Healthy Families program for a day. One of the coordinators at the Health Care building has been making efforts to relate the Early Start Program for kids to the adult basic education program. This year the Treasure box program brought the children into the Literacy program, where the students spent time learning how to sit and work with the kids. Both programs try to generate awareness among young parents of how the foundations of literacy are laid before the age of six, and how kids need exposure to books and reading before kindergarten.

Staff members at Tillicum Leelum see great value in coordinating activities across programs. They all agree with the principle that taking one person in the family and exposing them to literacy education affects the whole family and the wider community, and see themselves as all working together on different aspects of the whole family picture. Such efforts are a way of building and supporting a holistic approach to learning and family literacy.

*“When you take one person in the family and expose them to literacy education, that affects the whole family.”*

## Moosonee Native Friendship Centre

The Literacy Program at the Moosonee Native Friendship Centre in Northern Ontario is funded through the province's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. While the LBS program does not fund children's literacy, the program is definitely finding ways to address family literacy through parents in the community.

Many of the Cree people and communities of the James Bay region are struggling with an overall lack of resources in the schools and community. Substandard housing and school buildings, frozen pipes, toxic water, and other structural problems have plagued the region. In one community, the High School and elementary schools just reopened after a period of school closures and sharing portables on a staggered schedule. The elementary school is still in the portables, and supports aren't in place for developing proper structures.

The LBS coordinator estimates that literacy levels are low for kids in the elementary and high schools, although part of this may be related to bias in the curriculum. For example, items like a pineapple will commonly appear in class content, but many of the kids may never have seen a pineapple. A lot of people in the community (around 60%) don't have a high school diploma, and even those with a diploma may have lower literacy levels that don't correspond to their formal level of education.

Many clients and potential clients in the LBS program are young people with lots of kids. For example, two participants in the LBS program have five kids under age six, and one of these parents is only twenty-four years old herself. At the same time, there are many adults in the past generation or two that didn't have parental support and who have limited skills themselves to teach their children.

The program has been finding creative ways to support family literacy. For example, they have a family game night, focused on fun activities. As the coordinator says, "Games are about literacy." The Friendship Centre had a family literacy event over the March break called Outdoor Survival Skills, which provided one day in class and one day in the bush. There has also been programming where older children and parents come for help with the children's schoolwork, as well as activities for kids over sixteen who have dropped out. However, there is a need for a lot more support to help parents communicate with their kids' classroom teachers. Parents are often intimidated by the school system, and many have had bad experiences themselves with schooling. Teachers are often from outside the community, and some cross-cultural barriers exist. For example, teachers may assume a high level of English fluency and literacy in their communications with parents. Furthermore, the education system doesn't recognize the importance of Native languages. When asked if they felt comfortable going to parent/ teacher interviews, many of the local parents said they felt so uncomfortable with the prospect that they didn't go at all.

In response to this urgent area of need, the Literacy Centre has started a program called “Parents Roles Interacting with Teacher Support” (PRINTS). The program has been run successfully in nearby Moose Factory for a few years by a grass roots organization called Association for Caring for Tomorrow. PRINTS was developed through Memorial University in Newfoundland with the participation of the University of Regina. The model has also been adapted to Aboriginal communities in Saskatchewan through the Regina University.

PRINTS empowers parents by recognizing them as the first teachers. The program helps parents support their children’s success at school, and emphasizes the interaction of parents and children. The program works with teachers so there’s a more positive environment for parents to approach the schools as partners in the learning process. PRINTS will be provided in Moosonee in partnership with the Wawenewin Learning Centre Head Start program (Wawenewin translates from Cree as “Getting ready to learn”). The program also has plans to work with the high school, since some of the learners have kids in high school. There are hopes that the parents will volunteer their time in the school system as a way of developing a healthy relationship between the school and the community.

The LBS Program has been finding ways to integrate Aboriginal cultural knowledge into the curriculum. Areas that are being used or considered for use in the program include:

- The Cree Cycle of Life calendar, a six-season calendar based on traditional Cree knowledge, using resources developed through the Ojibwe-Cree Cultural Centre in Timmins.
- Aboriginal approaches to Parenting.
- Combining the sharing of local Cree legends through oral storytelling (validating local culture) with the use of books. The program emphasizes the similarity between reading a book and storytelling, and that all books originated in oral tradition.
- Building in attendance at cultural events such as the Great Moon Gathering in Attawapiskat, which is a conference and celebration of the Cree New Year that has been held annually for the past six years.



# Next Steps

---

---

## PROGRAMMING CONSIDERATIONS

While developing and delivering Family literacy models may be a priority for many Friendship Centres, very little funding exists to support ongoing family literacy programming. Groups lobbying for family literacy already exist, such as the Action for Family Literacy Ontario Working Group of the Ontario Literacy Coalition, or the Movement for Canadian Literacy. In the longer term, these groups may be effective in improving support levels for family literacy, and the Friendship Centre Movement could play a role in these lobbying efforts. At any rate, a longer-term strategy to improve the provision of resources for family literacy is not the focus of this paper.

In the meantime, it is possible to take immediate steps to build family literacy strategies into Friendship Centre environments - even with the resources currently available - and these strategies can support or even contribute to a situation where more direct funding might become available in the future. Considering the areas below can help Friendship Centres develop, deliver and share effective family literacy models and strategies, whether through projects, partnerships or other creative ways of coordinating Friendship Centre activities and other community services. Of course, the considerations below may or may not apply locally, depending on Friendship Centre contexts and priorities.

### **Access Literacy Networks**

Consult key players already involved in Literacy Development and networking, to help coordinate resources and link the development of Urban Aboriginal family literacy models. Examples of national networks that could be helpful include the National Indigenous Literacy Association and the Movement for Canadian Literacy (see the “Resources” section below). These networks should be useful in helping to address some of the other considerations listed here.

### **Use Existing Family Literacy Supports**

Many regions of Canada have literacy networks and services that focus on supporting local family literacy development, and many of these groups already have a history of working with Aboriginal communities. Using their services while maintaining control of the process from an Aboriginal perspective can lead to innovations in family literacy from their point of view as well as for the local Aboriginal community. The Movement for Canadian Literacy website ([www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca)) has a list of literacy coalitions in every province and territory, and these coalitions should be able to put you in touch with local family literacy services. The extent of involvement of these outside agencies depends on your community needs, and could range from upfront consultations to delivery partnerships to research projects (or no involvement at all).

## **Involve Other Urban Services**

It is important to keep in mind that “it takes a whole village to raise a child.” Friendship Centres aren’t the only urban places where Aboriginal family literacy is an issue. For example, Child and Family service and other cultural agencies may have a role to play in developing Aboriginal Family literacy approaches. What organizations other than Friendship Centres could be involved in developing urban Aboriginal Family Literacy networks and models? How could they be encouraged to participate by seeing value for their own clients?

## **Consider Reserve-based Models**

It makes sense to coordinate and share knowledge and awareness of successful methods developed on reserves. What are First Nations education authorities and other reserve-based bodies in your region doing to address family literacy, and how could these approaches be shared and adapted? Linking with regional reserve-based resources where good models have been developed makes sense in appealing to urban Aboriginal families that have migrated from those First Nations, since many cultural and linguistic characteristics will be shared.

## **Consider International Models**

There is no reason to limit the exploration of models to Canada. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Center for Family Literacy in the U.S. have worked with other American agencies to develop a model called Family and Child Education (FACE), which weaves culture and native language into its program design, and serves families with children from birth through grade three. FACE is delivered at 39 American Indian Schools across the U.S. Some communities may want to explore the Language Nest models developed in New Zealand. The National Indigenous Literacy Association may be able to help trace and connect with international models like these, as part of the services they provide.

## **Support Cultural Recovery and Retention**

How can family literacy models help address the threat to Aboriginal languages and cultural knowledge that comes with living in urban centres? Can we respectfully use concepts like the Good Mind or Bimadziwin to develop family literacy models? If so, how can we do this? Where and how are we, or others in our community, doing this already? How can cultural programs support family literacy, and what can such programs do to partner in the development of culturally relevant curriculum and teaching approaches?

## **Communicate with your Community**

If the model you develop needs a high profile, you may want to find ways to engage the wider community. The issue of family literacy is connected to many issues, so it is important to identify and prioritize the key community stakeholders. Who are the people, organizations and programs most likely to have the greatest effect in supporting urban Aboriginal family literacy? How do we speak with them? What are our key messages, and what media should we use? How can program workers in adult literacy, cultural, and children's programs work together to "get the message out" in a non-threatening way? Consider linking any campaign to already existing initiatives and resources, like Family Literacy Day and community powwows.

## **Think About Research**

Every community has valuable resource people with a passionate interest in a specific area related to family literacy. Can these people be linked with ethical research projects that respect community values? For example, there may be people with a passion for language preservation. Could your Friendship Centre develop an Aboriginal Family Literacy/ Language Nest Model that uses the expertise of specific language speakers? Could such a model be developed through a research project looking at the positive effects of Aboriginal language programs on children's overall linguistic/ literacy ability? See section below ("Funding Resources") for hints on ways to connect with project supports.

## **Challenge Governments to Work Together**

Because family literacy affects so many areas of our lives, it is possible to challenge various levels of government to support family literacy. Friendship Centres are leaders in urban Aboriginal development, and natural partners to work with the National Literacy Secretariat and other federal, provincial and municipal government departments that have a stake in urban Aboriginal family literacy.



# Resources for Communities

---

---

The following organizations are involved with family literacy development at a national or regional level, and may be able to support the development of urban Aboriginal family literacy models, whether through advice, funding support or strategic partnerships.

## LITERACY NETWORKS

### **National Indigenous Literacy Association**

NILA serves as the eyes, ears and voice of Aboriginal literacy in Canada, and reflects the spirit and values of Aboriginal peoples and nations in all of its work. NILA supports the development of holistic approaches to literacy education, and partnerships and links with quality Indigenous education initiatives wherever they are found. NILA is based in Winnipeg ([www.nila.ca](http://www.nila.ca)).

### **Movement for Canadian Literacy**

MCL is a national non-profit organization based in Ottawa, representing literacy coalitions, organizations, and individuals from every province and territory. MCL's mission is to be a national voice for literacy for every Canadian through networking, research, government liaison, learner development, communication, collaboration and building the capacity to support the people and organizations involved with adult literacy education. ([www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca)).

### **National Adult Literacy Database**

NALD is a comprehensive online database of literacy resources (projects, reports, etc.), a digital library that links diverse players and builds a united literacy community; NALD provides complete, full text documents and books, as well as a resource catalogue; designs and hosts websites for literacy organizations; researches and organizes educational material found elsewhere on the web; connects partners with experts in the field; and publicizes literacy-related activities and events. NALD services are free. [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca).

## POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

### **National Literacy Secretariat (NLS)**

The NLS works in partnership with the provinces and territories, other government departments, business and labour, the voluntary sector and non-governmental organizations to build capacity for literacy opportunities across Canada. The NLS does this by funding literacy development projects and supporting the development and dissemination of information on literacy issues to increase awareness and understanding. It is important to keep in mind that the NLS is a research and development resource, and not a place to find any kind of ongoing (core) funding for literacy activities.

[http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top\\_nav/program/nls.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top_nav/program/nls.shtml)

### **Regional Funding Sources**

While funding is limited, there is a fairly diverse range of resources for family literacy. Family literacy funds may come from a variety of ministries, including ministries of education and training and ministries responsible for child and family health and wellness, for example. Urban foundations, such as the Winnipeg or the Vancouver Foundation, are also a possible source of support, and a new National Aboriginal Literacy Foundation is currently in development stages. For more information on these possible funding sources, see the “Literacy Networks” section above, especially NILA and MCL’s membership of provincial and territorial literacy coalitions.

### **Curriculum Sources**

The sources below offer Aboriginal-specific literacy resources that could be used in family literacy programs. The list is not comprehensive, but provides a good starting point for those considering family literacy activities. For family literacy resources that are not Aboriginal specific, consult with your regional literacy network (see “Literacy Networks” above).

### **Ningwakwe Learning Press**

The NLP develops and publishes Aboriginal literacy materials and provides an online catalogue. An Ontario agency, it has increasingly been gaining a national profile.

[www.ningwakwe.on.ca](http://www.ningwakwe.on.ca)

## **Pemmican Publications**

Métis cultural and educational publishing house. Pemmican promotes Aboriginal culture and history through its publications, many of which depict traditional lifestyle, the art of oral storytelling, living in harmony with nature and the environment, and the rich and living heritage of the Métis of Manitoba. The oral tradition of passing on knowledge from generation to generation comes alive in Pemmican's stories of the special bond between children and their families.

[www.pemmican.mb.ca](http://www.pemmican.mb.ca)

## **Great Minds**

Native-owned and operated business located on the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario. Educational Resources for Aboriginal Studies, First Nations Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Native American Studies. On-line catalogue of Aboriginal Educational Resources for schools and the general public.

[www.goodminds.com](http://www.goodminds.com)



# Bibliography

---

Adult Learning – From Theory to Practice,

L. Herod, 2002,

National Adult Literacy Database

Building the Fire: Aboriginal Family Literacy,

Katherine Guillion, 1996.

Full text available online at [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca)

Haudenosaunee Home Page,

[www.sixnations.org](http://www.sixnations.org)

The official source of news and information from the Haudenosaunee, comprised of the traditional leadership of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora Nations.

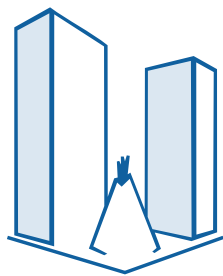
Literacy, Economy and Society, 1995.

Family Literacy in Ontario: Putting it On The Map!,

2006, Ontario Literacy Coalition.







NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
**FRIENDSHIP  
CENTRES**

275 MacLaren Street

Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0L9

T. : 613.563.4844

F. : 613.594.3428

[nafcgen@nafc.ca](mailto:nafcgen@nafc.ca)

[www.nafc.ca](http://www.nafc.ca)