

# ...with Dad

Strengthening the Circle of Care

NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE  
FOR ABORIGINAL HEALTH



CENTRE DE COLLABORATION NATIONALE  
DE LA SANTÉ AUTOCHTONE

*Fathers may be the “greatest untapped resources in the lives of Indigenous children.”*

*Grand Chief Ed John, BC First Nations Summit*

## PROCEEDINGS SUMMARY



Fathers may be the “greatest untapped resources in the lives of Indigenous children,” in the words of Grand Chief Ed John of the BC First Nations Summit.<sup>1</sup> His statement points to the huge gap in the lives of children, families and communities in the post-residential school era, when dads are not included, as well as the profound difference dads can make in child health and well-being when there is understanding of their needs, support for their healing, and encouragement of their involvement.

*...with Dad: Showcase on Aboriginal Father Involvement* was hosted by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH) on February 23 and 24, 2011, and helped bring new attention to the role of fathers in the good care of children. The two-day gathering on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Peoples in Ottawa, Ontario, brought together more than 100 individuals from across the country, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis fathers of all ages, Elders, parents and caregivers. Also gathered were researchers and representatives from father involvement, parenting, early childhood development and child welfare programs, as well as key members of federal

and regional government agencies responsible for the funding and development of these programs.

As Margo Greenwood, academic leader of the NCCAH, said, “this event was a celebration of all the men and boys in each of our lives, including fathers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers. Their role is vital to raising children, who are at the centre of a circle of care extending from the immediate family to the whole community.”

Disruption of parenting across several generations in First Nations, Inuit and Métis families is a result of colonization, residential school systems, and policies of forced assimilation affecting languages, cultures, ties to land and families. As understanding of the connection between father involvement and the health of children grows, more and more people are asking: What do dads need in their journey as fathers? How can we support participation of fathers in family-centered services? What teachings are important for children to learn?

Participants at the event included dads like Leo Hébert, who learned in mid-life how to connect emotionally with his family; Elders like Rose Point, who shared insight into how she was raised as a child; and program leaders like Jakob Gearheard, who touched on radical social and cultural change for Inuit men in the Arctic. Together, the participants shared their wisdom, life experience and knowledge. Again and again, the message reverberated: fathers must be invited back into the family circle and they must be supported in their healing journeys – for the health of children, families, communities, and First Nations, Inuit and Métis nations.

This showcase summary provides highlights from guest speakers, panel guests and participants. It also includes illustrations created at the event by graphic artist Colleen Stephenson who captured key points with visuals, helping to enrich the information and ideas shared by all. Mike DeGagné of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, opened the event and set the tone for the gathering.

<sup>1</sup> Grand Chief Ed John, presentation to Aboriginal early childhood development leaders forum, April 27, 2004, as cited in Jessica Ball, “Indigenous Fathers’ Involvement in Reconstituting ‘Circles of Care.’” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, (2010) 45:124.



## Starting with a Healing Journey

Keynote address by Mike DeGagné,  
Aboriginal Healing Foundation

For Mike DeGagné, fatherhood is a healing journey. As executive director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which supports recovery from the trauma of the residential school system, he has seen the devastating impact on First Nations, Inuit and Métis fathers and their roles as teachers, guides, providers and guardians.

“Residential schools taught Aboriginal people to do as you are told, question your own core values and customs, become something else, which translated means: become something better. You were taught your parents have far less wisdom and authority than the people who run the institution – and that has had far-reaching consequences.”

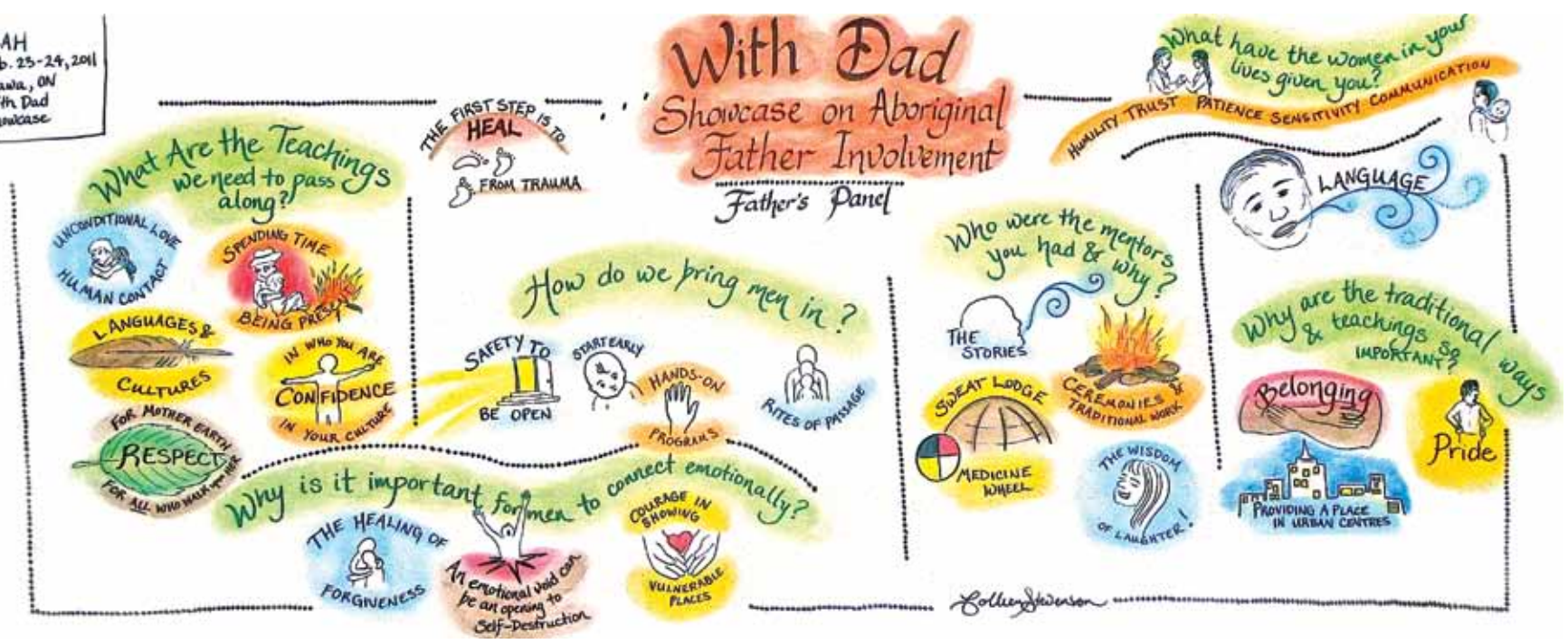
The biggest casualty for young men in particular was the ability to feel empathy. Surviving a history of colonialism meant learning that their feelings never mattered. As a result, many lost the ability to understand and enter into other people’s feelings, or to understand the feelings of their children. “Empathy is the key to developing relationships, and residential schools have had a profound effect on our relationships.”

In his own journey as a father, Mr. DeGagné said he regularly travelled with his two sons back and forth to weekend lacrosse practices. “The beauty of that is when you have two guys with ten hours of time in a car, every once in a while they might say something that is on their minds. It helps that we were looking not at each other but out the window,” he laughed. Emotional connection is often associated with mothers and children, and for Mr. DeGagné, his commitment to sports was one way to keep the dialogue open.

While a lack of empathy and an inability to form relationships has had repercussions for families and communities, it has also affected First Nations, Inuit and Métis governance. That’s something Mr. DeGagné has seen firsthand.

“Twenty years ago we had a program – the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program. We had no problem getting the bricks and mortar up and the people at their desks. But we didn’t know how to govern ourselves. Many of us didn’t have the benefit of good parenting and now we had to parent an organization.” Today, Mr. DeGagné is pleased to note that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has one of the best boards in Canada – no small feat given the complex mix of representation at the table. Mr. DeGagné said it was an Elder from Vancouver Island who helped everyone to find common ground. How? The board spent three hours just talking, with

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each person highlighting something in their family life that had affected them in the last three months – from the arrival of a baby to the achievement of a degree.

“That gave us a sense of empathy and connectedness, we could inhabit each other’s feelings. It’s hard to be angry when you understand each other. We have had two or three board meetings a year and we have done it for 12 years.”

Mr. DeGagné’s experience at the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has convinced him that there is wisdom to be learned in healing therapies arising from addiction treatments, which offer a strong example of a way forward. People who had gone through therapy were more willing to open up, go back, and start again – an approach he said may be necessary to start the legacy of positive and healthy parenting.

### Breaking the Cycle: Fathers Share their Voices *Fathers Panel*

For many dads who are survivors of residential schools or who are the second generation of residential school survivors, raising children is something they feel they are doing blind, with no role models, few resources, and little support.<sup>ii</sup> For some fathers, the disruption in fatherhood can be linked to such issues as addiction, mental health, anger, alienation and isolation. At the gathering, a panel of five fathers of different ages and backgrounds spoke openly and honestly of their own journeys in breaking the cycle and making emotional connections with their families, while finding their greatest strengths lay in a reconnection with their cultures.

Elder George Giant was born at Saddle Lake Cree Nation in 1942. He said he emerged from 11 years of residential schooling a ‘violent young man’ and spoke of the pain he caused his children and family, a memory that he said “still hurts.” In a deeply felt moment he shared with participants, Elder Giant said it was only recently that he was, at last, able to look at his wife to say how sorry he was. “She said, ‘I forgave you a long time ago.’” He said it was the guidance of culture and spiritual teachings that helped him achieve peace and set him on a good path, leading to his work in adolescent programming at the Poundmakers Adolescent Treatment Centre in St. Paul, Alberta. In his current work as resident Elder at Blue Quills First Nations College, he emphasizes the importance of incorporating cultural teachings as key to the next generation’s identity and well-being. He especially supports the use of ceremonies in education to support

<sup>ii</sup> See: Candice Manahan and Jessica Ball, “Aboriginal Fathers Support Groups: Bridging the gap between Displacement and Family Balance,” *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, (2007) 3 (4): 42-49. Retrieved June 10, 2011 from [http://www.fncfcs.com/sites/default/files/online-journal/vol3num4/Manahan\\_Ball\\_page42.pdf](http://www.fncfcs.com/sites/default/files/online-journal/vol3num4/Manahan_Ball_page42.pdf)

understanding of roles, responsibilities and rites of passage for young people.

Dads William Aguiar and Leo Hébert both found emotional connection later in life. Mr. Aguiar calls his grandsons his “spiritual mentors” who gave him the opportunity to make up for past mistakes rooted in emotional disconnection. His mother was a residential school survivor and his father worked at a leper colony in Eastern Africa, serving the needs of the marginalized. Although a hard worker, Aguiar’s father was never emotionally present for his five sons. “As a father I behaved the same way,” said Mr. Aguiar, an instructor and counsellor at Blue Quills First Nations College in the intergenerational transmission of trauma. “I found it hard to say ‘I love you’ to my wife or my children. I have now learned to say it to my grandkids, and they’re the ones who taught me how.”

The journey to emotional reconnection was a similar theme for Mr. Hébert, a community developer whose mother is a residential school survivor from the Sawridge Band at Slave Lake in northern Alberta and whose father was from Cold Lake, Alberta. He found that “if you showed any vulnerability as a man, you were weak, you were picked on.” His father, a Second World War veteran, was emotionally distant and, as a result, Hébert said he found it difficult to say ‘I’m afraid’ or to show fear.

“It was only just before my dad passed away at 89 years old that he showed himself, the things that hurt him. It was only then that we got close.” Hébert, who has lived in Prince George, BC since 1967 with his extended family, also found he had lost all connection to his culture living in an urban community. In time, he came to know his maternal grandfather and Elders in the family who taught him traditional ways, and in particular, a sense of humour that has taught him not to take himself or life too seriously.

Without the ability to connect emotionally, dad Dion Metcalfe felt traumatized as a youth, lost to alcohol and

drugs until he discovered his Inuit roots thanks to the Wabano Aboriginal Health Centre in Ottawa. “Culture is about belonging. I had nowhere to belong as a young man. I got lost. When I found my culture, I sobered up, and I live a good life now.”

Mr. Metcalfe, who currently works with teenagers and has been recognized for his service by the United Way, has learned about smudging, sweet grass, and sweats; he goes to Inuktitut language classes with his children and is learning Inuktitut songs from them. His oldest son, 13, is a leader in training at a camp for boys and girls in Ontario; his younger children are involved in the Tumiralaat program and the Tukimut after-school program at the Ottawa Inuit Centre. “They have a place where they belong, where they can thrive and know who they are. So there is no need to turn to gangs or drugs or alcohol,” he said. The result is that his three children are growing up with confidence, and with the ability to express their emotions.

Dennis Steinhauer, a grief and loss specialist at Blue Quills First Nations College, said that in his community in Alberta, men are not absent from their

families or their communities by choice. “Trauma has been part of our being for many years. We have to help men see what that trauma is and address it, or it’s hard to be good parents. Once the healing begins, the doors open right up. It’s life changing, and only positive,” said Mr. Steinhauer. He said it is critical to have “places that are safe for our men, where it’s okay to be vulnerable, where we can get past the barriers and begin the healing journeys to being better fathers, husbands, mentors.”

These kinds of insights are helping inform research and programs in addressing the critical question of how to reach out to fathers, how to include them, and how to begin the healing journey.

## Research: Understanding the Barriers to Father Involvement

*Keynote address by Dr. Jessica Ball,  
University of Victoria*

Until recently, there have been no studies in Canada or the United States on the virtually invisible role of Indigenous fathers in their children’s lives.



Panel of Fathers Program: Mel Bazil, Andrew Bird, and Jakob Gearheard



Matriarchs Panel: Shirley Tagalik

“When we decided to launch a study we advertised in the Globe and Mail newspaper and the phones rang off the hook,” said Dr. Jessica Ball, of the Centre for Early Childhood Research and Policy at the University of Victoria. She led Canada’s first study on Indigenous father involvement as part of a national study of fatherhood that was launched in 2003 and completed in 2008. “Finally, somebody wanted to shed light on what men had to go through to stay connected with their children.”

Research suggests that nearly half of Aboriginal children in urban centres and 33% of Aboriginal children on reserves are growing up in lone-mother households. In addition, there are twice as many Aboriginal lone fathers as non-Aboriginal fathers raising children on their own. Dr. Ball’s research involved an Indigenous community-based research team who conducted interviews with more than 80 fathers in BC. “We asked where are Aboriginal fathers and what do they need? They were like ghosts as far as the existing programs were concerned.” Meanwhile,

family violence programs, correctional institutions, schools, early childhood programs like Aboriginal Head Start and others were beginning to ask for help in reaching fathers.

Dr. Ball said the data showed that Aboriginal men in Canada are among the most socially excluded populations in North American society, facing high rates of poverty, unemployment, suicide, incarceration and other issues, “conditions that make it very difficult for fathers to be connected to their children and to sustain their connections.” She said policy reforms and program supports must embrace multi-sectoral strategies to address the barriers and obstacles to sustained father involvement, from the need for housing and employment supports to support for education, personal coping skills and social networks.

In addition, the primary caregiving experience for Indigenous fathers is often significantly different from the traditional European nuclear family model. Excerpts from the film *Fatherhood: Indigenous Men’s*

*Journeys* were shown at the event and highlighted for participants the challenges and accomplishments of several Aboriginal lone-fathers, who felt overwhelmed with full-time work, were often overcoming addictions, were involved in complex family and living situations, and had few parenting resources to draw upon. The film reinforced the views shared by fathers on the panel: fatherhood and parenting are learned behaviors, and the experiences and values from residential schools were being transmitted to the children of the next generation.

“Aboriginal men were saying, ‘we need support to break the cycle.’ They overwhelmingly wanted to talk about the prolonged effects of residential schools and the barriers to loving and being loved. Fathers wanted to create a new legacy, and they wanted to be part of a turn-around generation,” said Dr. Ball.

She said positive steps must be taken to encourage involvement and sustain connections between fathers and children across changing circumstances. These include recognizing paternity by promoting registration on birth, health, school and child welfare records. Half of the children in care in BC are Aboriginal and the majority do not have a father’s name in the child welfare records.

Addressing the issue of paternity also means recognizing there is a “very high rate of pregnancy among Aboriginal teens in Canada,” said Dr. Ball. She added that Indigenous fathers could be trained to lead workshops in schools and community settings to help educate Aboriginal boys in middle and high school to postpone fatherhood and develop relationship skills.

She also suggested that programs can support father involvement workers, create father-friendly environments, and encourage cultural connections. Program representatives can be encouraged to ask who are the father figures in the lives of children in their care. “Currently, we are only reaching out to mothers,” Dr. Ball said.

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Jessica Ball  
& Brian Russell

# Pathways to Positive Aboriginal Fatherhood

# What's on the Ground?

## Some of the Key Issues

- \* Lack of support
- \* Loneliness
- \* Twice as many lone Aboriginal fathers
- \* Complex families & relationships
- \* Experience of Mothercentrism
- \* Inadequate Housing



## It comes back around

COLONIALIZATION  
FOSTER CARE  
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS  
RACISM

## What is my legacy?

How do I show my child I care?

How do I take accountability?



Ellen Stenerson

Positive media can also reflect good fatherhood role models. Dr. Ball and Brian Russell, provincial coordinator of the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network, said awareness of Aboriginal father issues in Canada was growing. The network, established in 1997, provides training and develops resources that provide practical tips and information about child rearing, as well as materials that present positive images of Indigenous men with children.

Dr. Ball said research shows that actively involved fathers can make a difference in their child's life – leading to improved health outcomes for children, improved academic achievements, healthy psychological and emotional outcomes, and stronger social-interaction skills. It's good for fathers too. They can show less distress, less substance abuse, improved marital stability and happiness, and greater capacity for attachment.

"The biggest message from the 80 fathers we interviewed in the study," said Dr. Ball, "was the sense of yearning to connect with family life."

## Supporting the Needs of Fathers Panel of Father Programs

Whether organizing a caribou hunt with dogteams in Clyde River, Nunavut or holding feasts in downtown Ottawa, programs are increasingly developing strategies to encourage the involvement of young men, fathers, and mentors. The theme of grounding supports, programs and initiatives in cultural practice and knowledge was fundamental to programs currently offered for First Nations, Inuit and Métis fathers in communities across Canada. Representatives on the Panel of Father Programs provided snapshot introductions to seven initiatives:

- *Skak Ha Dees T'iah – Children Are Precious*: Carrier Sekani Family Services, North Central British Columbia
- *Traditional Parenting Program*: Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon
- *Full Circle Support Program*: Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre Society, Smithers, British Columbia
- *Nēah Kee Papa – I Am Your Father*: Manitoba Métis Federation
- *Sivummut Inuit Father's Group*: Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre
- *Peguis Aboriginal Head Start Program*: Peguis First Nation, Manitoba
- *Fathers and Sons on the Land*: Ilisaqsivik Family Resource Centre, Clyde River, Nunavut

Together, they helped highlight themes that cross geographic, cultural and socio-economic differences,

for instance, by incorporating healing strategies, building on community strengths, hiring men in child and family programs, integrating activities on the land, and building on existing structures.

#### Healing Strategies in Parent Support Initiatives

Travis Holyk is director of research and policy development for Carrier Sekani Family Services serving First Nations people of the Carrier and Sekani territory in north central BC. He noted that 75% of children in care in northern BC are Aboriginal and remain in care longer, because social workers are unable to send children home to unhealthy relationships in the family. His organization recognized the lack of programming for men and began in 2001 to look at preventing abuse through strengthening the role of fathers. As a result, the *Skak Ha Dees T'iah – Children Are Precious* program was developed to address domestic violence, issues around residential schools, and skills such as anger management, effective communication, and healthy eating.

“We saw the stressors in men’s lives and wanted to help provide a place where they could go,” said Mr. Holyk. The men meet twice a week, are provided with meals and are supported with a variety of services, including advocacy in the courts. The community now stages wellness conferences and is building relationships with service providers to better support parents and in particular, fathers.

Andrew Bird, whose Métis ancestry dates back to 1788, is coordinator of the *Nēāh Kee Papa* program offered through the Manitoba Métis Federation in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He said it was vital to get to know fathers in the program and to go back far enough “to get at the source of pain. The healing process really started from there.” Only then could men begin to go to work on other issues such as health, sexuality and healthy relationships. He said the program ensures follow-up and long term support. “Our clients are always clients and can come back two or three years later, as can any member of the family,” said Mr. Bird.

#### Building on Family and Community Strengths

Where the residential school system undermined parental authority and stigmatized traditional cultural systems, new initiatives are supporting the next generation by incorporating assets, talents and creativity within communities. In the Yukon, Elders are fundamental to the *Traditional Parenting Program* at the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, where an Elder is present at every workshop offered and where Elder wisdom is incorporated in all aspects of training in its traditional motherhood and fatherhood programs. In fact, it was an Elder who said in 1992 that programs were focusing exclusively on women, and asked “Where are the men? They are parents and they are responsible too.” The *Traditional Fatherhood Program* was created in response, said Joe Migwans, an Ojibway from Manitoulin Island who has worked at the Friendship Centre for 15 years.

Migwans is coordinator of the community action program for children, and a co-author of the *Traditional Parenting Program* facilitator manual. The manual supports a five-day training workshop once a year in Whitehorse, typically for Yukon First Nations members. They then return as trained facilitators to their communities or organizations to offer the traditional parenting workshops. As a result, the program is helping develop capacity of First Nations members with skills that are applicable to other areas of training.

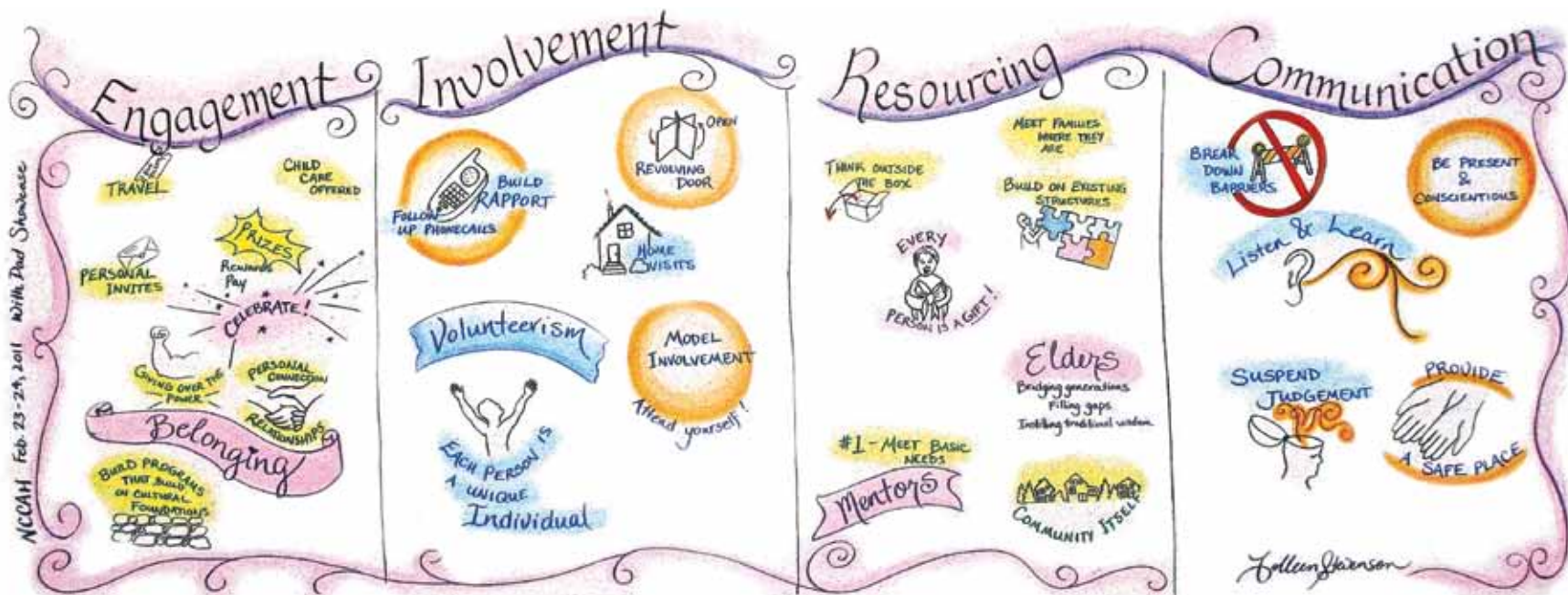
#### Including Men in the Care of Children

Peguis First Nation in Manitoba is breaking new ground in Canada by including men in all aspects of children’s programming. For instance, men comprise one quarter of the early childhood education staff. Peguis First Nation also sent the first all-male childcare group in Canada on an exchange through the *Aboriginal Head Start Program* to British Columbia in 2010 to share knowledge about best practices with the Klemtu First Nation on the northern coast. Program representative JR Olson told participants that the Peguis First Nation has worked hard to get fathers



The youngest attendees demonstrate throat singing, a traditional Inuit activity.





involved by incorporating such father-friendly activities such as setting up teepees, making bannock and staging summer barbecues, encouraging involvement in and commitment to the programs.

#### Integrating Activities on the Land

Four of the programs represented strongly emphasized the role of the environment and land in positive programming, offering land-based activities as a means of encouraging the participation of fathers, fostering relationships, and affirming cultural roots. Skookum Jim Friendship Centre holds fatherhood classes on the land, featuring traditional activities with children, parents and Elders in making fur hats, sewing, setting fish nets and snares, berry picking, tanning hides, and making jams.

“When you go out on the land, you learn your heritage, culture and traditions,” said Mr. Migwans. “It’s fun! Last week we had 55 people registered in our workshop and we could only accept ten. People just came anyway,” he laughed.

The *Full Circle Support Program* in Smithers, BC, offered through Dze L K’ant Friendship Centre Society, encourages men and families to bring children and youth for a wide variety of outdoor activities, including paddling, martial arts, drumming, building war canoes and participating in men’s, women’s and youth camps. Mel Bazil is the program coordinator, a cultural knowledge holder, and a Gitksan-Wet’suwet’en father of two. He said family support at the centre is multi-faceted, focusing on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, the legacy of residential schools, and on mental health, while offering understanding and acceptance of fathers. Inherent in the stories and land-based activities for families are a thousand years of laws, concepts and ways of life integral to the various cultures of the region.

“We address the disenfranchisement each person feels from themselves, from each other and especially from the land. We practice our traditions on the land and we are part of it,” said Mr. Bazil.

The Iliasaqviq Family Resource Centre is a non-profit organization serving the predominantly Inuit population of Clyde River in Nunavut, located in Baffin Island. The centre is project funded, and offers a wide variety of positive programming for the community, with a growing focus on men and youth. “It’s just in the last few years that we started looking at reaching out to men, as we found they were not coming to healing programs or preschool programs,” said Jakob Gearheard, executive director of the society. As a result, several programs were initiated. These include summer hiking programs to traditional campsites that involve Elders talking about their history and taking on roles as mentors. A winter father-and-son hunting trip is typically followed by a community feast of seal and caribou, while yet another trip focuses on the use of dog teams, where young men learn land skills and dog handling skills, and in the evening are introduced to traditional social values.

“These trips provide opportunities for older men to create trusting relationships and mentoring relationships with young men,” said Mr. Gearheard. “You see a change immediately. You see older men, especially those who were born on the land, get their confidence back. You see them set appropriate boundaries with youth, which the youth understand. All of a sudden they are getting up at 5am and starting up the stove and filling up the water bottles....”

Mr. Gearheard said land-based programs were successful and important in helping Clyde River residents address the radical social and cultural change experienced in the course of a generation, particularly among men. He said Inuk men continued to be identified in government and media as having land skills, yet were unable to be on the land as necessary, given the constraints of economic demands and employment. “Men have been stripped of all the traditional roles and responsibilities they had. They are no longer the harvester, the provider, the protector. The skills they need now relate to a 9 to 5 job in the context of the larger social problems in our communities,” Mr. Gearheard said. “It is difficult to negotiate the crisis.”

In urban settings, land-based activities continue to be critical, stressed Fred Simpson, a teacher in early childhood education since 2002 at the *Sivummut Head Start Program* in Ottawa who also began the original father’s group at that time. The Ottawa Inuit Centre offers programs serving roughly 1200 Inuit in the city who have largely been raised on the land and who feel displaced in urban environments, said Mr. Simpson. “We have fathers who have come south and really miss their connection to the land. One father whose daughter was very ill and who came down here a lot provided a caribou to share with the community.”

Mr. Simpson said it’s a challenge to build relationships that can encourage fathers to join programs that support parenting skills, for instance in father and

child attachment. “We don’t have Elders here, and we don’t have a history of a community that has been here forever.” Social events such as barbecues, camping, fishing and even bowling were integral to creating a sense of relationship and safety. “Talking about the land was important,” Mr. Simpson said.

#### Building on Existing Structures and Networks

The needs of fathers are complex, and organizations are striving to build on existing resources to support them. The Manitoba Métis Federation has 16 departments with offices across the province. That means clients who are seeking parenting support can also be referred for legal assistance, employment, housing and other supports necessary to help strengthen their ability to address personal and healing issues. Mel Bazil said the Dze L K’ant Friendship Centre in Smithers draws together a whole variety of programs under the tent of family support, from drug and alcohol programs to support for residential schools survivors. As services are provided collaboratively, more experts and resources can be shared to offer more intense programming. Similarly, the Tungasuvvingat Inuit Centre supports Inuit in Ontario, offering housing, employment and counseling support among its many programs as well as a supportive environment that attempts to duplicate the community spirit and cultural surrounding of the Inuit homelands.

#### Family at the Heart of Cultural Identity

*Keynote address by Albert Pooley,  
Native American Fatherhood and Families Association*

Involving fathers in the care of children is critical not only to the health of families and communities, but to the identity of Aboriginal peoples as proud nations. Albert Pooley is of Navajo and Hopi heritage, a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and president of the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association in the United States. He shared his conviction that “family is the heart of Native American cultures.”



Keynote Speaker: Albert Pooley

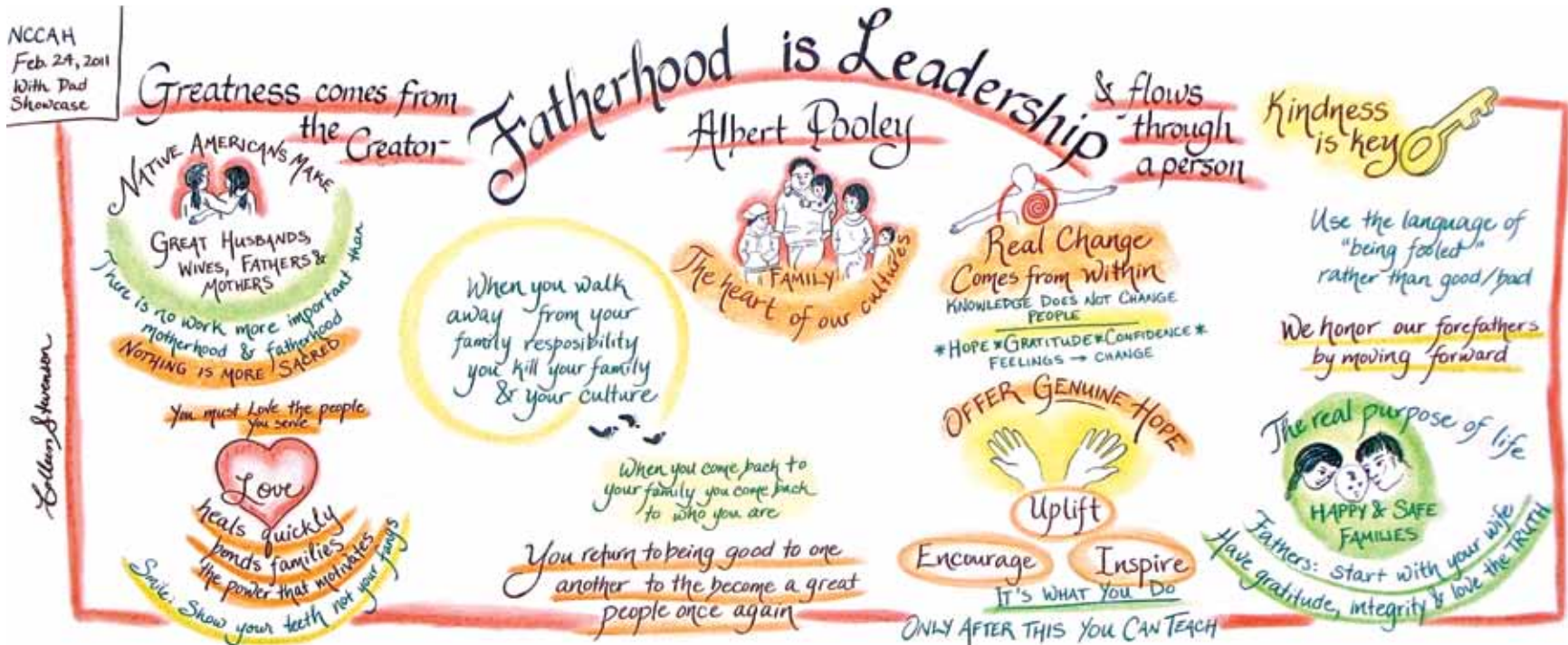
“It’s not the food. It’s not the language. It’s the family. When our families are gone, our cultures are gone....”

His *Fatherhood is Sacred*™ program helps create links between past and present generations and builds on principles of Native American heritage. The program has reached 6,000 men and women, including incarcerated fathers and men, and is used by 57 tribes throughout the United States.

Mr. Pooley encourages the fathers and men he encounters in his work, particularly in prisons where many are estranged from their heritage, to realize that when they begin to repair the relationships in their families, they are once again being ‘truly native.’

“When you walk away from your family responsibility, you kill your family and your culture. When you come back to your family, you come back to who you are.”

Mr. Pooley stressed that information, knowledge and programming did not change people. Men who



are addicted, violent or neglectful do not stop their behavior simply because they are told it is wrong. “They know that already. Knowledge does not change people; threatening does not change people; preaching does not change people.”

Instead, he tells Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in service professions who work with Indigenous families and communities to “truly love the people you serve.” Their first job is to uplift fathers, to help them feel welcome, wanted, needed and special. In offering hope, confidence and trust, caregivers and service providers can inspire a desire for change. Only then will support for opportunities, resources, or improved life skills be meaningful, he said.

Native Americans need to recognize past trauma but to also leave it behind. “Our forefathers have already paid

for this history. We honour them by moving forward,” Mr. Pooley said. His organization’s vision of safe and happy families is a call to men and fathers to assume their roles as leaders in an equal partnership with their wives that is forward-looking and brings meaning and direction to a man’s life, inspiring positive attitudes, self-control, and a return to the greatness at the heart of Indigenous culture and identity.

Mr. Pooley said while Native Americans are familiar with sacred symbols in rivers, mountains, burial grounds, “there is no work more important than motherhood and fatherhood.”

“We need to understand that the most sacred calling of all is the commitment to family.” His words of inspiration led to a standing ovation from grateful participants.

## Lessons from a Lifetime

### Matriarchs Panel

Three matriarchs shared First Nations, Inuit and Métis wisdom from a lifetime of parenting, reassuring fathers who are re-entering circles of care that there are rich sources of teachings to guide them.

Elder Rose Point has lived to see seven generations in her family, from a great-grandfather born in 1894 to a great-granddaughter born in 2007. Of Sto:lo and Thompson descent, Elder Point was born in 1933 and has spent a lifetime working in pre-schools and as a child care worker for the Vancouver School board. She is currently helping students at BC Institute of Technology to meet and cope with the challenges that face them each day.

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# Lessons from a Lifetime of Parenting



As a child, Elder Point learned many traditional rites and practices before she went to residential school at age 12, including puberty rites and attending a birth at age 11. Raised by extended family after her mother went to work in the shipyards, she has seen enormous pressures and upheavals experienced by her people. Despite the generational changes, Elder Point said she continues to draw upon her experience of parenting as a democratic process, and her understanding of parents as a team, where children are cherished at the centre of family life. She emphasized the rights of children to be safe, to enjoy good healthy living, and to protection of their innocence.

Shirley Tagalik has worked with Inuit Elders for the past 15 years in the documentation of Inuit worldview, helping to embed the Inuit way of being in the Nunavut education system and revitalize Inuit child nurturing practices. She shared the words and experiences of some of the Elders in her discussion of *Inunnguiniq* – the

process of creating an “able” human being, one who can secure the future. This process involves distinct roles for fathers, mothers and grandparents, with grandparents in particular responsible for filling the heart or “pouch” of each child from birth. If this is not done well, there is a risk of having the pouch fill up with other things. “There is a lot of feeling among the Elders that *Inunnguiniq* is critical to a living culture; that it is a lifelong learning process,” said Ms. Tagalik.

Having married into a family of 24 brothers and sisters, Ms. Tagalik said she received much wisdom and input from her relations, emphasizing that the teachings of the Elders were relevant still, despite profound changes in circumstances for Inuit peoples. Young people who were taught to respect and care for others would do well in both the traditional Inuit world and the contemporary one. She said men in particular had suffered severely from the effects of colonization, and for many, their sense of self had been taken. Ms. Tagalik

said she was heartened to hear the strong emphasis on family and traditional teachings as key to supporting fathers in taking on their role of being kind and committed leaders.

Harvesting medicine, setting snares, making moccasins, and singing and dancing were all part of the experience of Métis Elder Clara Dal Col growing up in the Métis community of Ile a la Crosse in northern Saskatchewan, and later in Hay River, Northwest Territories. Above all, she remembers the laughter and camaraderie of the community. Ms. Dal Sol did not speak English until she started school and her grandmother (Nohkom), a well-respected healer, taught her to be a strong and proud Métis woman. As one of 12 brothers and sisters and a broad extended family, she felt that the values of community were critical to the support of men in their journey to be better fathers, and were values she passed on to her own children.

## It's Never Too Late to be a Good Father – Concluding Notes

Conference facilitator Dan George summed up highlights of the gathering, noting above all that “it’s never too late to be a good father.” In workshop sessions at the event, participants explored the role and responsibility for healthy parenting at the individual, family, community and organization level. While it is important to address the larger social, economic and political barriers to greater involvement of fathers, there is also much that programs, communities and organizations can do. Suggestions included, for instance, to:

- start with opening doors to include fathers and men in circles of care in the community
- focus on building relationships with youth, young men and fathers of all ages
- support cultural transmission, including language
- integrate land-based activities, which are so integral to cultural identity
- involve Elders and mentors who can play important roles as guides and supports
- make fathers feel welcome through community feasts, hands-on activities and the offering of food
- ensure fathers and local communities have ownership of programs
- hold community, daycare and school events that are inclusive and non-judgmental
- celebrate strengths and the role of extended family in parenting
- give power back to the family to support healing together
- support culturally sensitive workers and gender-specific facilitators
- build in activities that bridge generations and include Elders and children
- provide a continuum of care, addressing basic family needs from housing and employment to counseling and legal advice

- collaborate with other partners, strengthen networks and share resources
- create an ‘asset map’ of the community to tap into strengths and conduct a needs assessment to identify priorities
- ensure adequate funding and resourcing
- engage media to highlight healthy father involvement
- involve leadership, such as tribal councils, for support.

Some of the issues participants said they would like to see addressed are the needs of men who are incarcerated, and those with mental health challenges. Others wanted to learn more about traditional Inuit fathers, and about young fathers. There is also a need for more resources that are culturally relevant for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Many of the three dozen attendants who participated in a formal survey following the event, conducted by the University of Northern BC Survey Research Centre, said they expected to return to their programs and communities with a new determination to invite men into circles of care. In fact, several people shared the information upon their return home almost immediately. “I work in ten communities so I can discuss what works and what doesn’t, and we can try new things as well.” Another shared materials and information with 20 parent-child coalitions and alerted funding bodies that “these are some of the things they should consider.”

Participants said after the event that they especially felt deep appreciation for the honesty and passion of the men on the father’s panel who shared their experiences, affirming the needs of fathers for healing and emotional connection. All of the respondents in the survey felt that attending had a positive impact on themselves and their organizations. “The message that fathers want to be involved and should not be forgotten was very effectively delivered...People left with good messages and solid information and passion to move forward,” said one respondent.

And more: at a personal level, many felt a renewed commitment to putting their own families back in the centre of their lives.

### Thank You...

**Elder Dorothy Meness**, an Anishinabkwe and member of the Kitgan Zibi Anishinabeg reserve, who welcomed participants to traditional Algonquin territory.

**Elder Paul Skanks**, a band member of the Mohawks of Khanawake Iroquois Confederacy, who offered prayers, insights, and wisdom throughout the event.

**Mr. Dan George**, of Four Directions Management Services, who facilitated the event and was recognized by participants for his respect, perception, humour and ability to synthesize and engage all involved.

**Ms. Colleen Stephenson**, a graphic artist whose posters visually captured words and insights as the event unfolded, and provided opportunities for participants to gather and share with each other.

**Ms. Arlene Moscovitch**, film-maker, and her crew, who have ‘told the story’ of the event with the creation of the DVD *...with Dad: Strengthening the Circle*.

The NCCAH would also like to acknowledge and thank our keynote speakers and all panelists for sharing their time, experience, insights and wisdom.

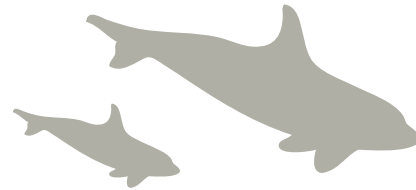
This event has been made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada. Funding support was also provided by Aboriginal ActNow BC.

For suggested resources and links to related information, please visit our website: [www.nccah.ca](http://www.nccah.ca) ([www.nccah.ca/245/With\\_Dad.nccah](http://www.nccah.ca/245/With_Dad.nccah)).

“It’s never too late to be a good father.”

Dan George, Conference Facilitator, *...with Dad: Showcase on Aboriginal Father Involvement*

# APPENDIX



## Program Descriptions & Contacts

### Fathers and Sons on the Land

Jakob Gearheard, Executive Director,  
Ilisaqsivik Family Resource Centre

In Clyde River, in Nunavut’s far north, young men are mentored in land-based cultural workshops and community hunts by dog team to traditional camps of historical and cultural importance. These projects, organized by the Ilisaqsivik Society, promote mental, spiritual, and physical well-being and validate and transfer *Inuit Quajimajatuqangit (IQ)* associated with Inuit societal values, hunting, traveling, working with dogs, camping, and being on the land. About 16 older ‘fathers’ and Elders, along with 16 ‘sons,’ including at-risk youth as well as young men in their early 20s, participated in the Ataata trip in summer 2010, and about 18 fathers and 18 sons are participating in the 2011 Qimmivut trip.

For Inuit men, significant cultural and social change within the recent past has drastically shaken the foundational beliefs of what it is to be a man in Inuit terms. In hunting, the reliance on snowmobiles which break down and are often in need of costly repairs has had major impact on the ability to hunt and work as necessary, and in being rightly related to the land. In many cases, these changes have been devastating, resulting in loss of identity, self esteem and positive male role models, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. On several levels, the roles of Inuit men in Clyde River are in transition, and it is essential for the wellness of the entire community that men successfully navigate this transition. The Qimmivut and Ataata trips affirm the role of land-based activities for Inuit men by providing the space, time and safe,

familiar and empowering environments and activities that Inuit men often need to feel well. Fish and other country foods gathered during the trips are shared with community members upon the group’s return, and workshops as the group travels reinforce skills, values, language and history.

The Ilisaqsivik Society is a non-profit health and wellness organization in Clyde River, home to about 830 people, providing family resources, healing and programs that develop the strengths of youth, Elders, parents and community members. Learn more at [www.ilisaqsivik.ca](http://www.ilisaqsivik.ca) or 1 867 924 6565.

### Full Circle Support Program

Mel Bazil, Program Coordinator,  
Dze L K’ant Friendship Centre Society

As a father friendly program, the *Full Circle Support Program* in Smithers, BC delivers family-centered programs and provides strategies for families and persons living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Attempts to begin a father involvement program in this small town involved a visit with one man at a time. In lieu of a direct father involvement program, the program delivers day to day general services and workshops in a family centered format but with father-friendly language. Fathers and men are supported and acknowledged, and father involvement research is applied in programs that address a multitude of root causes related to health, justice, and social issues. Healthy father involvement, along with supporting mothers and children, is promoted through positive messaging and recognition of healthy activities. Programs support fathers and diminish the stigmas

that can be associated with fathers facing barriers or separation. Learn more at [www.dzelkant.com](http://www.dzelkant.com) or 1 250 847 5211.

### Peguis Aboriginal Head Start Program: Early Childhood Education and Father Involvement

JR Olson, Peguis First Nation

Peguis First Nation in Manitoba is increasingly known for sharing one of its noted ‘best practices’ – the number of men who are currently working as early childhood educators in the community. In fact, the *Peguis Aboriginal Head Start Program* sent the first all-male childcare group on an exchange to British Columbia in 2010 to share knowledge about best practices in early childhood education with the Klemtu First Nation on the northern coast.

Mindy Sinclair, program coordinator for Aboriginal Head Start and Peguis Daycare, notes that men in mainstream ECE programs represent about 2% of staff, while in Peguis, they comprise about 25% of staff. Daniel Cook of the Peguis daycare said new parents are often surprised to see a man helping look after the kids. “There aren’t many men in childcare and I wish they knew what they were missing out on. Every man has an inner child they’re trying to let out, and children love it when you act like a child and play with them.” Sinclair, who is working on a research project called *Aboriginal Men in Early Childhood Education*, says men help provide a complete learning experience for children. Peguis is the largest First Nation community in Manitoba, with a population of approximately 7200 people of Ojibway and Cree descent. Learn more at [www.peguisfirstnation.ca](http://www.peguisfirstnation.ca) or 1 204 645 2359.

## Traditional Parenting Program

Joe Migwans, Skookum Jim Friendship Centre

The Yukon Traditional Parenting Program combines two pilot projects: *Traditional Motherhood* and *Traditional Fatherhood*. Since 1995 the Centre has supported Yukon communities interested in delivering the program, which uses a traditional parenting facilitator's manual developed by staff and approved by Yukon First Nations Elders. Three-day workshops are offered throughout the year and include a focus on fathers and children while incorporating traditional activities like setting fishnets and snares, berry picking, sewing and tanning hides. The program provides practical, culturally-specific training for parents, who explore values and attitudes expressed in traditional child-rearing practices and apply those values to modern skills in parenting. Also included are oral traditions, storytelling, the spiritual nature of child rearing, and the role of extended family. The *Traditional Parenting Program* at Skookum Jim provides a basis to support parents in finding strength in cultural traditions. Learn more at [www.skookumjim.com](http://www.skookumjim.com) or 1 867 633 7680.

## Sivummut Inuit Father's Group

Fred Simpson, Early Childhood Education Teacher, Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre

Ottawa is home to the largest southern Inuit community in Canada. The mission of the *Sivummut Head Start Program* in Ottawa is to provide each child and family with a supportive learning environment that promotes Inuit culture and language. One of the six components of *Aboriginal Head Start* programs for the *Sivummut Head Start* is the involvement of parents and guardians in the program. Parents and guardians are the child's primary teachers and they have the most important influence on their child's development. It is the parents' right and responsibility to be involved in all aspects of the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of the program. The *Father's Group* meets periodically throughout the year. Fathers are encouraged to participate in group activities, and to build a fun and trusting relationship through learning new skills and socializing together both with their children and a group of fathers. Learn more at [www.ottawainuitchildrens.com](http://www.ottawainuitchildrens.com) or 1 613 744 3133 (ext 232).

## Skak Ha Dees T'iah – Children Are Precious: Strengthening the Role of Carrier First Nations Fathers

Travis Holyk, Carrier Sekani Family Services

The *Children Are Precious* project works with young fathers to determine the role of Carrier men in child rearing, pre- and post-natal. The researchers recruited participants from member communities of Carrier Sekani Family Services, an agency responsible for health, social and legal services for eleven member First Nations in North Central

British Columbia. Fathers from a member Carrier First Nation who had a child born within the previous two years discussed some of the challenges and obstacles they faced with the birth of their child. These included stresses associated with their economic situation, lack of time for one's self, and personal pressure to be the family provider. The research project and results will be discussed in greater detail in the presentation. Learn more at [www.csfcs.org](http://www.csfcs.org) or 1 800 889 6855.

## Nēâh Kee Papa – I Am Your Father

Andrew Bird, Coordinator, Manitoba Métis Federation

The *Nēâh Kee Papa* (Michif Cree for "I am your father") parenting enhancement program in Manitoba supports the active involvement of fathers in their children's lives and the healthy development of children. When a father participates he can access counseling, peer resource groups, guest speakers on topics of interest, and links to resources and programs. While fathers may enroll in an eight-session program, they may also complete the program over a number of months in a flexible format. Components include sessions on a father's role, health and sexuality, effective communication, anger management, understanding rights as single parents and in custody relationships, and life skills. Partners and spouses of participants may also participate in several ways: in a separate program with a female facilitator, in a separate couples program, or by joining the men's group. The program has been running since 1999, and is free and open to any male and/or their partners. *Nēâh Kee Papa* aims to empower young fathers to provide positive emotional support to their children, enhance their parenting skills, and support healthy family relationships. Learn more at [www.mmf.mb.ca](http://www.mmf.mb.ca) or 1 204 586 8474.

## Keynote Speakers

### Dr. Jessica Ball

Dr. Jessica Ball is a professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada. She is a third generation Canadian of Irish and English descent. She is privileged to have grown up and raised a family on the traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples. Dr. Ball has consulted on a wide variety of projects around the world, mostly addressing the health and well-being of Indigenous children and families. She is the principal investigator of an interdisciplinary, grant funded program of research on the cultural nature of child and family development ([www.eedip.org](http://www.eedip.org)). Projects include father's involvement, Indigenous children's health, early language development, evaluation of quality child care and child development outcomes, early screening and intervention, and child care capacity building in rural and remote communities. Dr. Ball is a member of the Father Involvement Research Alliance

and was a co-principal investigator in the first national study of fatherhood, leading the Indigenous fathers component of the study. She has authored or co-authored of over 100 journal articles and book chapters and four books.

### Mike DeGagné

Mike DeGagné is the Executive Director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, a national Aboriginal organization dedicated to addressing the legacy of Canada's Indian Residential School System. He has worked in the field of addiction and mental health for the past 25 years, first as a community worker on-reserve in northern Ontario and later with the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF), the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA), and the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (NNADAP). Mr. DeGagné lectures nationally and internationally on issues of Aboriginal health, residential schools, reconciliation, and governance. He serves on a number of boards including Champlain Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), is currently the Chairman of the Child Welfare League of Canada, and past Chairman of Ottawa's Queensway Carleton Hospital. His PhD focuses on Aboriginal post secondary education.

### Brian Russell

Brian Russell is the Provincial Coordinator of the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network where he provides training and resource development for programs and communities in Ontario. He also delivers programs for dads in his community in Toronto.

### Albert Pooley

Albert Pooley is the President of the Native American Fatherhood & Families Association (NAFFA) in Mesa, Arizona. Born into the rich traditions of both Navajo and Hopi heritage, Mr. Pooley has been married to his wife Julia for 40 years, and has six children and ten grandchildren. Mr. Pooley is internationally recognized for his *Fatherhood is Sacred™* program, created specifically to meet the needs of Native Americans by building upon motivating principles of Native American heritage, promoting a deeper understanding of how to strengthen and unite families through responsible fatherhood and motherhood, and creating links between past and present generations. To date, the program has served over 3000 Native American fathers across the United States. These culturally sensitive curriculums are currently used by 42 tribes and seven urban centers.

