

Culturally specific child care helps instil pride in indigenous kids ^[1]

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Source: Huffpost Canada

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Dec 2018

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Growing up, Dawn Westlands lived in an urban centre and because of the city environment, she didn't have a supportive cultural influence outside of her family and friends.

Now, she works at Eagle's Nest Aboriginal Head Start in Vancouver as the preschool program coordinator and feels inspired to be working in a place that can provide that support to urban Indigenous children and their families.

"There's all kinds of research that if you have a welcoming environment for families and culture and create a supportive space, that's just good for kids, Indigenous or otherwise," said Westlands.

This is especially important for Indigenous children because, historically, they haven't had that, she said.

"I've heard [Aboriginal Head Start] described as a program that strives to give back what residential schools took away," said Westlands.

A program that 'feels like home'

An Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a community-based program that focuses on early childhood development for First Nations, Inuit, Métis children and their families living off-reserve.

Westlands knew she wanted to work with young children from a young age. She was told it was her gift, but she didn't know she was going to work in an Aboriginal Head Start until she had children of her own.

While on maternity leave, she decided to go to school to become an early childhood educator. After several different work practicums, she was placed at the Surrey Aboriginal Head Start and knew it was where she belonged.

"It gives a lot to the children and families, but also gives a lot to the staff because we have a set of beliefs that are so similar when it comes to how we were raised and what we want to give back to our kids," she said. "It just ... it just felt like home."

While the Aboriginal Head Start Program differs from most early childhood education (ECE) programs when it comes to cultural programming, they share the same core values.

"Our kids are kids and they need things that all kids need, we're play based, we have a reading centre and circle time," said Westlands. "Our kids are special, but our kids are kids."

At Eagle's Nest AHS, they strive to have positive role models that the children can see themselves in. They do their best to employ Indigenous staff, who they then invite to share their cultural teachings with the children.

They also invite parents to come in and consider them to be their children's first and lifelong teachers. "Historically, parents weren't valued," said Westlands. "We put all our value on families and what we can do to support them."

This is something that happens at Nutsuma Lelum child daycare on Stz'uminus First Nation as well. Carey McRae is the child care manager there and she's been working with the community for over 15 years. While it isn't an AHS because it's on reserve, they do employ some similar teachings.

They teach Halq'eméylem and are an immersion program, so it's spoken in the classroom; they play CDs, sing songs and include the language wherever they can.

McRae said the kids have become accustomed to it and learn faster than the teachers.

"For us, it's trying to keep up," said McRae. "The more we give them, the more they take in and that is a challenge. It's hard sometimes to find those mentors who can give them more."

They have a dedicated Elder for the classroom who plays a huge role in helping the children understand who they are and where they come from. They also are able to provide traditional foods like elk and salmon.

Sue Sterling-Bur is currently doing her PhD and is looking at the Indigenous belief of giftedness in relation to working with children and youth with special needs. She's also been a board member for the B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society for more than 10 years because of her front-line perspective.

Most of the programs she's worked in have included traditional songs, dances, making clothing: cedar hats or bracelets if you're near the coast; or deer hide and moccasins while working in the interior.

Sterling-Bur's children went through culturally specific early childhood education, one at an AHS and one on-reserve. She said she can see a difference between her children and those who didn't get the same opportunity.

"My children know who they are and where they come from," said Sterling-Bur. "They can introduce themselves in the language, they know their clan system, they participate in potlatches and they know they belong."

She believes programs like these instil pride and a sense of belonging in the kids who go through them. Culturally appropriate ECEs ensure that Indigenous youth have access to their culture, to their language during a crucial part of their development.

"Their connection to themselves and understanding of who they are connects them to their family, their community and their land," said Sterling-Bur.

While programs like these are essential for Indigenous youth, there are certain challenges those in an urban setting face. In Vancouver, there are just two AHS and one in the neighbouring city of Surrey.

It's also a position that doesn't pay well, despite being so important for a child's development. Westlands says that's a problem they have when recruiting Indigenous educators.

"I think that early childhood education tends to be overlooked and undervalued, but our work is so important," said Westlands.

"We need to invest in our kids. If we want healthy communities, we need healthy kids."

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/01/culturally-specific-child-care-helps-instil-pride-indigenous-kids>

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