

Early childhood learning program with a First Nations approach proving popular ^[1]

'It's so amazing to see families connecting or reconnecting to the traditions'

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EXCERPTS

An early learning childhood program developed with a First Nations approach in Yukon is proving to be very popular.

The Early Years program helps Indigenous parents and caregivers navigate through the first five years of childhood development.

Launched in September 2021 in Whitehorse, Ross River, Pelly Crossing, Mayo and Old Crow, there are already 120 families in the program.

Developed by the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate, the program promotes early language skills, bonding, learning and playing together as a family unit.

Cultural awareness

Audrey-Ann Martin, the Early Years program manager, said Early Years staff or 'visitors' went through their own cultural awareness training before the program was offered to families.

"We all got a 60-hour training called 'Understanding the early years,' which is a course related to child development but with a cultural lens," she explained. "It's very specific training for this program."

She said the first thing they do is provide a family visit.

"During those visits, the Early Years visitors are there to provide cultural support, and emotional support to families. They're there to support the child development and bring different tools that they can use for their family."

Martin explained that during the visits, the families are introduced to 'toolbox cards.' Each card is related to different stages of development.

"For example, we have language matters. We have family wellbeing. Nurture and care," she said. "So they introduce those cards to families to show and enhance what they already do and show them the next steps."

Martin describes it as a strength-based program.

Some programming comes from families

Other activities offered through the Early Years program are weekly elder-guided sharing circles, beading classes, and cooking classes.

Martin said much of the programming is created from the ideas expressed by the families.

Another important part of the program is that its staff live in the communities they are supporting.

"The important thing is that they know the families. They're available not just once a month — they're there all the time," she said.

Martin said the program is available to all Indigenous families in the Yukon.

"We're there to help families realize that they have everything they need to give the best to their children," Martin said.

"It's so amazing to see families connecting or reconnecting to the traditions, to the land. To hearing from the elders and knowledge keepers and learning from them. This is what makes the program so unique and amazing."

Priscilla Shorty works with 13 families in the Early Years program in Ross River.

She said the feedback she has received from families has been positive.

"They really enjoy the group gatherings," she said.

"They enjoy learning new things. I did hold a two-week long workshop and I brought up two people from out of province that taught them different cultural and parenting skills and they really enjoyed that and wanted more."

Shorty said there are other early childhood development programs being offered in Ross River but she believes the Early Years program complements them instead of competing with them.

"I guess you could say the programs work together," she said.

"They do a good job. They help support each other. I see a lot of growth and development as well."

She said it's not only the new parents and caregivers that take something away from the program.

"I feel really great to be able to help and support a family in any situation that they need," Shorty said. "I feel that this was something that I was here to do."

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/cultural-competency> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/first-nations> [6]

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