

Joy and laughter ring loud at Nshwaasnangong child care and family centre in London, Ont ^[1]

The Indigenous child-care and family centre caters to urban Indigenous people

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EXCERPTS

The first thing Dawn Redskye noticed when she walked into the Nshwaasnangong Child Care and Family Centre was the smell of smudge in the air.

"I almost cried the first time I smelled it. I thought, 'Oh my gosh. It just feels so nice to be able to bring my baby into this atmosphere where this is encouraged. He gets to be around people that understand where he's from and are able to help kindle that identity,'" said Redskye, whose dad was adopted into Bearskin Lake First Nation near Kenora, Ont.

"I want us to reconnect. There's a lot of displacement in our identity and I think that being able to really connect with the community here, especially on a child-care level, is really important."

Open for about eight months, Nshwaasnangong aims to rekindle Indigenous languages, honour teachings of ancestors, and allow families to thrive in a place where they can see themselves in children, educators and elders.

"I remember my dad specifically telling us not to tell people that we were Native because of how much trauma that inflicted on him growing up. He was trying to shield us from the same fate, trying to protect us," Redskye said after dropping off her one-year-old. "That's very different from what my children are experiencing."

There's Indigenous art all over the centre, including at an 88-spot daycare as well as a family centre that hosts meals, elder and knowledge-keeper events and community celebrations.

Cultural programming, ceremonies

Liam Sands is Plains Cree, Oneida and Ojibway, and was born and raised in London. He said working at the centre as an early childhood educator is a chance for him to pass on a love of family and children to others.

"As an Indigenous person, it's really exciting to be part of something like this," he said. "I've heard from parents and people in the community that this place is definitely special."

Part of that comes from the programming, which incorporates traditional ceremonies such as smudging as a daily part of life, said Andrew Vandenbusch, another educator, who's in one of the toddler rooms.

"I think it's a really wonderful place for everybody to feel comfortable and feel like they're welcome and have a sense of belonging. I love seeing our little ones being able to connect and to be returned with our language, our culture and traditions."

Overseeing rambunctious and curious toddlers has also given Vandenbusch, who is from Oneida Nation of the Thames, a chance to reconnect with his own culture, he said.

"I never thought in my life I'd be able to see an Indigenous-led child care centre, let alone be able to see just one Indigenous educator. But now I'm able to see 21 educators that are Indigenous, and I'm able to rekindle and go back to my language and culture, things that, unfortunately, we lost and were taken away."

'A sense of home'

Lorna Chrysler's son, Darry Wright, is five years old. He loves snacks, singing and drumming — as well as making the grownups around him laugh at his antics. He has also loved coming to Nshwaasnangong since it opened, Chrysler said.

"It's culturally appropriate for us as a family. We did live on the reserve and then coming into the urban setting, it's easier to integrate and to still have that sense of home," she said.

Her son thrives in the smaller setting where there's a routine and people he feels close to, Chrysler added.

"He does like the drumming and the singing, and even ceremonies that we go to outside of here, he's drawn to that, so the fact that he's able to do that, and to be able to smudge and just keep all of that tradition, those things from home, it's important."

Nshwaasnangong is the spirit name given to the centre in ceremony. It means "place of the eighth star" in Anishinaabemowin, which references the original eighth star in the Big Dipper that fell to Earth and became the Anishinaabe people, according to the centre's website.

Fundraising ongoing

Four staffers work at the EarlyON centre and there are 18 full-time child-care staff who support 68 Indigenous children, said Frances Elizabeth Moore, who is from Timiskaming First Nation and is the family centre's manager.

"We know that there are ongoing conversations about reconciliation in our community," she said. "The vision is to pass on generational knowledge here and to do ceremonies, such as naming ceremonies, walking out ceremonies, and just being able to connect with the elders' and knowledge keepers' wisdom."

Anyone wanting to donate to the Nshwaasnangong Child Care and Family Centre can go through the Canada Helps link on the centre's website or by writing a cheque to SOHAC, the centre's parent organization, and marking that it should go toward Nshwaasnangong.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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Aboriginal (indigenous) ^[5]

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