



connections

Provincial Director's Message

By Lavonne Roloff

The AHVNA Aboriginal working group is interested in providing resources and educational information for staff and agencies regarding working with Aboriginal children and families. This issue of Connections provides a comprehensive article on the historical and intergenerational trauma and its effects on the Aboriginal community. As well there are articles on supporting Aboriginal families. On our website, we have a tool kit for members to access regarding resources they might find helpful.

In a survey that was done by the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) (<http://tinyurl.com/d48ogdf>), they found that 95.1% of Aboriginal children got along “very well” or “quite well” with the rest of their family. Two percent of the children were diagnosed with ADD/ADHD and 0.7% had been diagnosed with anxiety or depression. The survey was conducted across Canada with over 21,000 participants in 216 First Nations communities.

This past fall, AHVNA hosted two traditional parenting workshops in Calgary and Edmonton. Janet Fox presented information on teepee teachings, four cycles of life and virtues. As well she spoke about parenting practices such as the swing, moss bag, and belly button teaching. It was an opportunity to learn and share about this important part of our Canadian heritage.

One of the group exercises asked participants how we can bring back the traditions to our communities, families and schools. Participants had a number of

suggestions with many revolving around providing the opportunity for the traditional culture to be incorporated into the lives of Aboriginal children and families as well as the community.

All of us benefit from a greater understanding of cultural beliefs and traditions. It is interesting to note that regardless of the culture, we have many similar beliefs about children and families. We have many of the same desires in terms of the virtues and values that we hope to instill in our children—virtues such as being kind to one another, having respect, being happy, obeying, and having humility, love and faith are all part of being a good parent. Our desire is to have children that grow into healthy adults.

If we can work together, we can support each other in this important role of parenting. ■



Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.



Alberta Home Visitation
Network Association

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Aboriginal Families

Connecting

By Melinda Neufeld

The Aboriginal family in today's society looks much different than in generations past. Prior to the settlement of the European population, Aboriginal children were raised by parents, extended family and tribe in a kinship structure. Children were highly valued, and traditional families included maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, who all actively participated in child rearing. Grandparents were the primary teachers.

With the creation of residential schools in the 1870s, children were educated separately from main society, as well as apart from their culture. Children were taken from Aboriginal families and placed in facilities far from home. Family structure was destroyed when children were separated from their parents to attend residential schools. Children were not allowed to speak their native language while attending school. Doing so resulted in punishment. Thus, children lost their ability to communicate with their parents and families. Traditions, values and beliefs were passed down orally in the Aboriginal culture through story telling. This was lost due to lack of common language. The nurturing environment of the native culture was missing as children attending schools were not permitted to show, and did not receive, physical affection and loving affirmations.



As a home visitor to a family of Aboriginal decent, it is important to be aware of the effects history has had on their culture. As individuals reconnect with their culture to varying degrees, a home visitor needs to be sensitive to the unique family units that have formed. Many cultures have non-verbal interactions, such as not making direct eye contact as a sign of respect. Being aware of these, and having respect for the family's values will help the home visitor build a successful, trusting relationship. It is important to have an open and accepting approach, communicating in a non-threatening way and offering a supportive role to the entire family. Many Aboriginal families are hesitant to invite service workers into their home due to concerns of child welfare involvement, and potential placement of children in foster care. This process once again removes the child from their parents, thus repeating history. Many children are exposed to the cycle of abuse resulting from family having "grown" in the residential school environment.

The Aboriginal society has shown great resilience. There are many current movements to connect with past traditions and heritage. A home visitor has the opportunity to learn with the family in establishing healthy parenting practices with respect for their culture. Home visitors can encourage community connections and support families in learning about their heritage. As "growing" a child had traditionally been the responsibilities of extended family, the home visitor can learn and support the growth of new parents as they reconnect with their heritage. To become a new parent is challenging for each of us. Home visitors can support and empower Aboriginal families to reunite with their heritage and build strong, bonded families and communities. ■

Melinda Neufeld is a home visitor with Lacombe and District FCSS.

Working with Aboriginal Families

By Toni Lachance

Home visitation programs invite parents to share their needs and then support them to develop and use appropriate supports and resources. Respectful of the culture of the families, visitors might wonder if there is something to be added to their toolkit of skills and knowledge to better support Aboriginal families and children.

A very diverse group

Recognize the broad diversity in Aboriginal people. The languages and traditions of Aboriginal people in Canada are as different as the basketry and totem poles of the West Coast are from the beadwork of the Plains. And Aboriginal families, who we once stuck close to their home base, are moving further afield. Think of the young mom who moved from a reserve in Ontario to be with the father of her daughter and ended up in Red Deer raising her child alone—her path is a complicated one.

Differing degrees of connection to tradition

Another challenge is that the Aboriginal world is shifting as are all cultures around the world. What was true for parents is not necessarily true for their children. Grandmother might have used a moss bag; her daughter might choose a moss bag OR a Snuggli®.

Who holds the knowledge?

We understand the importance of elders for support and guidance in Aboriginal communities, and that seemed like the one sure source of information. However, as one young mom shared when planning an Aboriginal preschool in Red Deer, the elders that knew her culture lived a province away. So, while she deferred to the wisdom of the local elders, she needed us to understand that there could not be one answer to the question of what the program should do to represent Aboriginal culture. For home visitors, the key source of information is the individual family they are working with. They are the only ones

that know what being Aboriginal means to them, and how it affects their lives.

Developing trust

Aboriginal families might have a very strong reluctance to let you know about their lives, in fear that the information could be used against them. Home visitors are accustomed to parents having negative connotations attached to government services, especially Children's Services. Imagine how much deeper this feels to people who have had a history of unfair treatment from the government. Many people are familiar with the history of residential schools, but may be unaware of other examples of marginalization. Aboriginal people were not given the right to vote in Canada until 1960, and in the past Aboriginal veterans have not received the benefits given to their white counterparts. There are many more examples to be found. So, a home visitor has to know that it is especially important for Aboriginal parents to be able to choose to align with resources they feel comfortable with and to not be surprised if it takes time to gain their trust.

Sources of support

Family and community ties can be very intertwined for Aboriginal families. You may be concerned that a parent has missed an important appointment to devote a week to a funeral. Or, she is spending her limited budget feeding a stream of relatives. Understand that if she does not do so, she may be viewed as turning her back on her own community and family.

Ask, listen and be open to what being Aboriginal means to a family and have faith that you will find the resources that fit the best.

Seek out a broad range of resources for a better chance of having one that fits: the Aboriginal Canada portal (www.Aboriginalcanada.gc.ca) provides a great starting point. ■

Toni Lachance is an instructor in the Early Learning Child Care (ELCC) program with Red Deer College. Red Deer College offers online coursework at the Early Learning Child Care diploma level, for individuals with ELCC certificates wishing to complete a diploma off-campus. Several courses (including Family Support, School Age Care and Aboriginal Children and Families) are open to students without certificates. For more information, contact the ELCC department at (403) 342.3226.

Historic Trauma and Supporting Aboriginal Families

By Dr. Patti LaBoucane-Benson



Many family service professionals provide support to Aboriginal families—they have front-line experience with Aboriginal children in care and the effects of historic trauma on the Aboriginal family system. I would like to share some of the findings of an ongoing research process begun in 1999 with Dr. Harold Cardinal. It comprises my doctoral work completed between 2001-2009, and the work of the Native Counselling Services of Alberta with Cree eldersⁱ over the past five years on two research projects to better understand the Cree world view and the doctrine of *wahkohtowin*. My intent is to help us to better understand “what happened” to Aboriginal people, and surface some strategies to help Aboriginal families.

Pre-Contact World View

A world view is the overall perspective from which one sees, experiences and interprets the world. The Creator gave the Cree people sacred gifts as a result of their sacred relationship. The first gifts were physical: people, land, animals and plants. The second gifts were metaphysical: rules and values that guide relationships.ⁱⁱ These rules include laws of nature and of the Creator, which govern relationships between all things (*wahkohtowin*) and direct us to have good relationships between people. Living

within the boundaries of these laws ensures the people will feel safe, secure and able to live “the good life.” The most common values are kindness, caring, sharing, respect, humility, honesty and freedom.

Figure 1ⁱⁱⁱ shows a spiral symbolizing the interconnected Cree world view of the relationship between the people and all of the beings in their world.^{iv} The spiral is supported, and kept beautiful and whole, by the strength of the rules that govern the

FIGURE 1

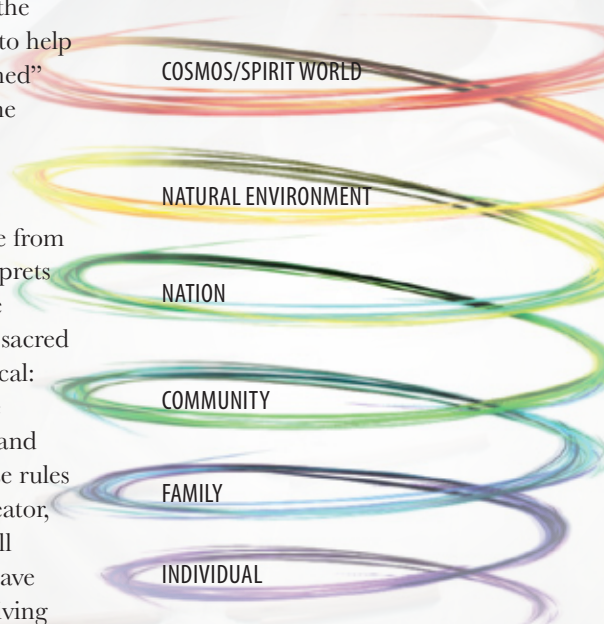


Illustration by: BearPaw Communications

relationships—represented by the spaces between the rungs. Observing the rules of *wahkohtowin* and natural laws ensures equality, harmony and balance in all relationships.

This spiral is the actualization of the best possible life we can attain. The on-going act of building, strengthening and renewing our relationships is the essence of the good life.

Colonial Policies of Domination and Assimilation

Colonial policies caused chaos in many Aboriginal communities and a disruption of the Cree teaching of *wahkohtowin*. The result has left Indigenous people feeling hopeless, helpless and powerless to self-determine their future.

Between 1763 and 1867, the notion of Indian Nations as autonomous political entities began to give way to legislation that focused on usurping the power to define who was Indian, who could live on Indian reserves, and the “civilization,” control and assimilation of the First Peoples. These included Acts of government that legislated the *inferior status* of Indian identity, an assault on the Aboriginal psyche. The legislation created an environment where only Indians who renounced their community, culture and language could gain the respect of colonial and Canadian society. At Confederation, the office of the Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs controlled all Aboriginal people and their lands.

In 1876, the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples^v concluded that: “While protection remained a policy goal, it was no longer collective Indian tribal autonomy that was protected; it was the individual Indian recast as a dependent ward—in effect, the child of the state.” The *Indian Act* was amended in 1884 to protect Indians from their own cultures^{vi}, prohibiting ceremonies such as the Potlatch ceremonies, Tamanawas dance and the Sun dance. The *Indian Act* was in no way a fair or equitable piece of legislation. Until the 1982 amendments to the Constitution, it was the most prominent reflection of the distinctive place of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Residential School Policy

With the 1867 constitution, the Department

of Indian Affairs adopted policies that aggressively promoted assimilation and conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity. The purpose was to separate Aboriginal people from their identity, culture, traditions and language, and transform them into a labouring class of British subjects. In 1920, while tabling a bill making it mandatory for all Indian children between the ages of 7 and 15 to attend residential schools, Duncan Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, stated: "I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this bill."^{vii}

Residential schools were funded by the federal Government and operated by church organizations of Canada. This proved to be the most powerful instrument in the government's goal to eventually be rid of Aboriginal identity, Aboriginal tribes and the "Indian Problem."^{viii}

Much evidence exists describing the mismanaged, underfunded and overcrowded conditions of residential schools, which resulted in pervasive hunger and a high death rate of students, mostly due to the quick spread of diseases,^{ix} including tuberculosis. Many students suffered physical and/or sexual abuse at the hands of their caregivers. The use of Aboriginal language was forbidden and the practice of Aboriginal spirituality and culture (deemed morally and ethically wrong) was also prohibited.^x As a result, if any of the children did go home, they were unable to communicate with their family and were unaware, suspicious or afraid of customs/rituals that had historically strengthened and reaffirmed relationships between family and community members. The disconnect created between children and their families was described in 1913 by Indian agents: people were stranded between communities, *without an identity*.^{xi}

By 1956, federal government policy regarding residential schools changed, and many schools closed in the 1970s; the last school closed in 1996. As a result, the child welfare system became responsible for increasing numbers of Aboriginal

children. By the mid-1960s, one-third of all Aboriginal children were in government care.^{xii} Today, Aboriginal children make up 65% of the welfare caseload in Alberta.^{xiii}

Impact of Colonization - Historic Trauma

For the Cree, colonization has had devastating, pervasive and multi-dimensional affects. First, colonization has interfered with the creation of a positive Cree identity both individually and collectively. Many Aboriginal, First Nations and Métis children have been raised in environments that reinforce the inferior status of Aboriginal identity, creating a deep shame or denial of being an Aboriginal person. Many children live in impoverished families still burdened by the intergenerational transmission of family violence. Many parents, who are the third and fourth generation of survivors raised "in the system," have very little knowledge of how to be parents. The loss of connection and communication between children and their parents and grandparents severely damaged essential family relationships, blocking the transmission of cultural, ethical and normative knowledge between generations.

When the Cree people were prevented from teaching *wahkohtowin* and natural laws, their values, rules and way life, which ensured healthy, respectful relationships, were severely damaged, and critical relationship boundaries were transgressed. The spiral, for some families and communities has become a tangled, chaotic knot. The intergenerational effect of colonial policies is a pervasive loss of hope and empowerment. As a result, Aboriginal people remain over-represented in the child welfare, justice and correctional systems in Canada.

Programs to Promote Healing of Historic Trauma

Effective policies are important in untangling the chaotic spiral. Drawing on the Indigenous model of building family and community resilience, **the process must include three interconnected dimensions:** (1) reclaiming *wahkohtowin* (interconnected world view), (2) reconciling damaged relationships, and (3) repatriating power to respectfully self-determine. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

An Indigenous Model of Building Resilience

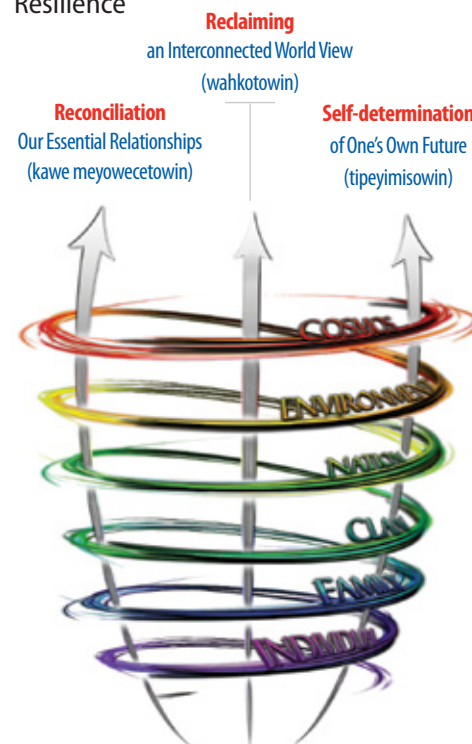


Illustration by: BearPaw Communications

Recovery

The cornerstone to recovering an interconnected world view is **reclaiming ceremonies as an educational instrument**. Elders' ceremonies comprise traditional teachings that are imparted through prayer and connection to the land and cosmos. Supporting the work of the elders in communities, and including it in our interventions is one of the most effective strategies to build a positive sense of Aboriginal identity and develop pro-social values in Aboriginal children and parents.

Further, **healing programs must deal specifically with historic trauma**.

When programs are developed in collaboration with, and grounded in the world view of, local Aboriginal people, and consider the effects of historic trauma, we can address core family issues. Only through dialogue and relationships can we transform the voicelessness and powerlessness of Aboriginal people. Common ground in our collective beliefs and goals can drive the development of programs to make a significant difference in the lives of Aboriginal families and children.

Continued pg 6

Continued

Finally, in all of our research, elders and knowledge keepers were united in their message: **we need to work together**. The essential relationship between cultures, nations and communities requires renewal and repair to move us forward. Clearly, the **development of meaningful, respectful relationships between government and the Aboriginal community** is important. And, we all should aim to commit to a relationship-based practice in work with families. Building, renewing and strengthening our relationships with the families we serve, and honouring their strengths is an essential component of reconciliation. ■

ENDNOTES

- i The elders are William Dreaver, Issac Chamacees, George Brertton and Fred Campiou.
- ii Cardinal H., & Hildebrant, W. (2000). *Treaty elders of Saskatchewan: our dream is that our peoples will one day be clearly recognized as nations*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
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- iv LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2009).
- v Canada. (1996c). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 1 Chapter 9: The Indian Act*. Ottawa: Libraxis: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples - Seven Generations, p. 255.
- vi Canada. (1996c), p.267.
- vii Leslie, J. (1978). *The historical development of the Indian Act*. Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Treaties and Historical Research Branch.
- viii Canada. (1996a).
- ix Canada. (1996a), pp. 329-330.
- x Canada (1996a). p. 316.
- xi Canada. (1996a). p. 357.
- xii Canada. (1996a). p. 322.
- xiii Alberta. (2010). Closing the gap between vision and reality: Strengthening accountability, adaptability and continuous improvement in Alberta's Child Intervention System. *Final Report of the Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel*. Retrieved on Nov. 15, 2012 from http://www.child.alberta.ca/home/documents/childintervention/CIS_Review_Report_for_web.pdf.

Fig. 1. LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2009)

Fig. 2. LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2009).

Dr. Patti LaBoucane-Benson is Director of Research, Training and Communication with Native Counseling Services of Alberta.

The Effects of Intergenerational Trauma

By Megan Pelletier

In Canada, historical injustice or oppression against Aboriginal groups began with contact with European settlers. It continued with the spread of disease that killed a large majority of the Aboriginal population, the stealing of land, the *Indian Act* of 1857 and most recently, the residential school experience, where children of Aboriginal descent were taken from their parents at a young age and sent to boarding schools in order to force assimilation and abolish Aboriginal cultures.¹ While attending these residential schools, policies prevented the students from speaking their language and practising their traditions.



School officials felt that in order for Aboriginals to adapt to white society, their own traditions would have to be forgotten. For most of the 20th century, that is how Indian residential schools operated. A phenomenon labelled **intergenerational trauma** (also known as historic trauma, collective trauma, trans-generational grief or historic grief) has been seen in the descendants of survivors who may not have experienced the trauma of abuse themselves.² Evans-Campbell defined intergenerational trauma as “a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation. It is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events.”³

This system of forced assimilation has had consequences evident in the Aboriginal population today. Many of those who went through the schools were denied an opportunity to develop parenting skills. They struggled with the destruction of their identities as Aboriginal people, and with the destruction of their cultures and languages. Generations of Aboriginal people today recall memories of trauma, neglect, shame and poverty.⁴ Negative outcomes of intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal peoples have been identified—for instance, establishing links between cultural discontinuity and mental health and violence in First Nations groups in Canada. As well “the response between historic trauma and substance abuse has been established through evidence that relatives of trauma survivors develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and may abuse substances.”⁵

Three pillars of healing

In 2006, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation released a report entitled, “Promising Healing Practices.”¹ This report outlined the three pillars of healing which are

1. legacy education
2. cultural interventions
3. therapeutic interventions

Legacy education seeks to raise awareness of the residential school (or other traumatic) experiences and consequences.

This builds an understanding of shared experiences, allows responses to trauma to be seen as a result of external forces, allows children to better understand the situation of their parents and generally uses awareness to facilitate understanding which in turn can motivate survivors and youth to pursue healing.

Cultural interventions generally appear to either take the form of traditional excursions, community or large-scale gatherings or programs which introduce youth to the practice of traditional diets, special ceremonies or other related activities. Therapeutic interventions are focused on a single issue, and the goal is to heal directly. Most common are substance abuse and some mental health issues.⁶

When providing in-home support to Aboriginal families, it is important to offer services that closely align with the pillars of healing. Seeking and sharing resources with families that offer legacy education and cultural interventions as well as **traditional parenting and understanding of the medicine wheel** will increase the home visitor's success in having a long-lasting positive impact on the families we work with. ■

Megan Pelletier is a program coordinator with Closer to Home in Calgary.

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6. *Intervention to address intergenerational trauma: Overcoming, resisting and preventing structural violence*. (Winter 2012). Report for Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth, YMCA Calgary and Family and Community Support Services, p. 10.

Additional Resources

"Children are gifts sent from the Creator. Every child, regardless of age or disability has gifts and teaches us lessons. They are all unique and should be respected."¹

A Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families is a resource manual useful for working with Aboriginal families. It was published for the Ontario Best Start program to help service providers. While some of the statistics are specific to Ontario, the cultural information and ways of being with families will be transferable. Always keep in mind that specific tribes will have variations on some of the cultural beliefs and traditions and may call something by a different name: a cradleboard, moss bag or wrapping baby in a cocoon are all ways of keeping baby feeling safe and secure.

This resource covers a number of topics regarding practice. The authors use the directions of the Medicine Wheel, a significant symbol in many Aboriginal cultures. The manual applies the concept of the four directions to reflect the learning process. The East represents understanding; the South represents seeking; the West represents listening; and the North represents practising. This is the wheel of support with the service provider at the centre.

"Because children are so sacred, it is everyone's responsibility to nurture them and keep them safe and to provide them with unconditional love and attention so they will know they are wanted and hold a special place in the circle."¹

The manual also provides practical suggestions, tips and cultural beliefs related to health, traditional parenting, and prenatal teachings. Some of the suggested approaches include

- be gentle
- validate people as human beings
- give families the power of choice
- provide a strength-based approach
- ask families how they would like to be supported
- allow families to take ownership of their situation

There are case scenarios to identify helpful strategies when working with families. A glossary and extensive list of resources is also included. This resource is posted on the AHVNA website in the Working with Families tool kit at www.ahvna.org.

Another resource that you might want to consider checking is the VON Aboriginal Home Visiting Resource at <http://www.von.ca/nahi>. ■

1. *A Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families*. Best Start Ontario. Retrieved on Dec. 17, 2012 from <http://beststart.org/resources>.

Submitted by Lavonne Roloff

Traditional Birthing Practices: The Blackfoot Moss Bag By Trina Schuyler

When a child was to be born, the women in the Aboriginal clan would erect a teepee specifically for the birth of the child. Three women were chosen to assist the mother-to-be throughout her labour. The afterbirth was wrapped in hide and buried under a young tree that would grow up strong and healthy like the child.

In our clans, everyone had a responsibility to care for all the children. The women took care of the newborns, and the elders determined a name. The Blackfoot moss-bag was made from hide or cloth and filled with dry, soft clean moss and crumbled wood. It was very absorbent for the baby's discharge, and was changed once dirtied. A small blanket was placed inside the moss bag. In winter, the bag was lined with animal hair for warmth. Hide laces were used to secure the bag so that only the face of the child was seen. Beads and coloured porcupine quills were often used to ornament the bag. Babies were kept in a moss bag latched to a U-shaped cradle board that a mother wore on her back to allow her to continue her work. Once the baby was taken back into the teepee, it was often placed in a hammock or *aawah'piisska*.

Children were held in the highest regard and considered the greatest gift from the Creator. A whole family would be involved in making the moss bag, and often it would be passed from generation to generation. All babies were held in a moss bag. ■

I have assisted two clients regain their children after they have gone PGO (Permanent Guardianship Order). It was the greatest feeling. Being part of the process of bringing a mother and child back together again is the best feeling. These experiences are intrinsically rewarding, and it is so sweet that I am getting paid to do this.

Trina Schuyler is a family visitor with the Blood First Nations.

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on **Healthy Parenting Strategies-Discipline**. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by **January 25, 2013**.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, by phone at 780.429.4787 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

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Cherish Me for I Am a Child

Comfort me when I cry – I need to feel you close

Give me hugs and kisses – show me that I make you happy

Wonder what I'm thinking – I want you to understand me

Be a good role model – I want to follow the right path

Answer me when I talk – I will learn to communicate

Teach me about my family – I need to know I belong

Play with me – I can show you how to have fun

Give me your guidance – I need to know my limits

Give me quiet time – I need time to rest and think

Read to me – it will help me learn

Talk and sing to me – I will learn to speak

Watch over me – keep me safe from harm

Smile at me – let me know I am your joy

Be patient with me – I have a lot to learn

Cherish me always – I need to feel loved

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute

To grow up safe, healthy and happy, children need to be protected, cared for and loved by the adults in their lives.

Submitted by Janet Fox, Mahkesis Consulting



Alberta Home Visitation
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