

The Sudbury CAS Urban Aboriginal Children's Cultural Program

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The Aboriginal Children's Cultural Program began as a one-year pilot project funded by the National Crime Prevention Strategy in 2005. The program is facilitated through the Children's Aid Society of the Districts of Sudbury and Manitoulin, and is managed by the Aboriginal Cultural Coordinator under the supervision of Brenda Robinson, of Specialized Support Services.

The goals of the program are to provide urban Aboriginal children and youth in care of the Children's Aid Society of the Districts of Sudbury & Manitoulin an opportunity to learn cultural traditions and spiritual practices. These cultural traditions are important in child development, as increased self-awareness and esteem become protective factors, thereby decreasing the probability of future problem behaviours. By providing these children with the opportunity to learn about their culture while engaging in pro-social activities with other Aboriginal children, they are developing a sense of community and closeness that closely reflects traditional Aboriginal family structures. The program aims to provide a schedule of weekly programming that includes the teachings of Elders as well as other Aboriginal community resources. Working in partnership with the Akwe:go program at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, the Aboriginal Children's Cultural Program has been able to grow, working to include other Aboriginal service providers in the Sudbury area. In addition to providing services to Aboriginal children in group settings, the Aboriginal Cultural Coordinator provides individual programming to those whose social skills may not allow them to function positively within a group setting. This sometimes includes connecting these children with a community Elder for additional guidance and support. In addition to providing services to Aboriginal children in care, the Aboriginal Cultural Coordinator is required to provide cultural training to foster parents, and childcare workers.

Cultural revitalization is recognized as a general healing strategy within the Aboriginal community. Our relationship with the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre has become stronger through the collaboration efforts of this program and the involvement of a strong community advisory committee. Committee members include our own First Nation Circle at the CAS, representatives from Cambrian Wabnode institute, the Social Planning Council, N'Swakamok Friendship Centre, Sagamok Language Initiative, Shkagmik Kwe Health Centre the Metis Nation, and support from the Laurentian University Native Human Services program. The committee and staff are promoting community (these are children of our urban Aboriginal community), networking and reinforcing traditional patterns of caring, sharing and cooperation. Frank Maidman (19) states, "Personal and collective identity are important parts of individual and community wellness. In theory,

an important part of recovering one's traditional culture is to establish clarity in the face of a culturally alien environment". We know through the 'Community That Cares' project research through the University of Ottawa, Dr. Robert Flynn, that child and youth risk issues and resilience are marked by supportive factors such as culture, self esteem, spirituality and self identity. The Aboriginal Children's Cultural program is an example where the community is beginning to undertake initiatives to guide urban Aboriginal youth through cultural and spiritual learning.

Activities, Elder Honorariums and nutritious snacks have been primarily supported through fundraising activities and donations from the Union of Ontario Indians, INCO and the Dream-catchers program. Over the past four summers an assistant coordinator position has been funded through various means; through N'Swakamok Nokiiwin Employment Services, ARCO, and HRDC. The Union of Ontario Indians represents 43 First Nations within the province. As previously mentioned, they have been generous and supportive of this initiative and commit to advocate and provide ongoing financial support for this program.

Future Direction

Aboriginal children in care need to be given the opportunity to learn about their culture and to practice it if we want to ensure that these children develop a positive self-esteem and awareness of who they are. The Children's Aid Society of the Districts of Sudbury & Manitoulin has committed to provide culturally appropriate and culturally competent and responsive services. The Society has recently made the Cultural Coordinator position a full time position for a period of one year. The future is our children.

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