

[Sharing the experiences of Indigenous educators and communities during COVID -19

Elder Brenda Mason opens with her experiences and teachings in relation to living well during the pandemic.

Today, it is so different, especially during COVID 19, which makes it so difficult. However, we are resilient, creative and wise. Our Elders have provided guidance to live a good life as well as our parents that have returned “home.” Also, it is our turn us Adults to demonstrate being resilient, brave, strong and wise, showing our children to be as we. The old ones have survived so much, and we will too. We will show the children to live a good life even in this time of COVID 19.

COVID 19—let it be a teacher for us with our children; let us find a way to motivate us to be creative and play with our children and to find a way to inspire the parents as well. To be safe and stay healthy with each other is important, and to find ways to make it fun and play.

We are all navigating with a new way of knowing and doing; we recognize that this looks different for everyone, especially how we will learn to interact and engage with children and families now and in the days/ weeks/years ahead.

We are welcoming and highlighting two Ontario programs: Ska:na Family Learning Centre and The Mnidoo

Mnising Sharing and Learning Centre. Both programs have rich, innovative experiences to share embedded in cultural and Indigenous pedagogies.

Ontario Southwest Region:Ska:na Family Learning Centre

Ska:na Family Learning Centre (SFLC) is an urban Indigenous-led childcare and family support service operator in Ontario’s South West Region. A year ago, COVID 19 challenged our Early Childhood Educators with finding new and inventive ways to connect with children and families, pushing them out of their comfort zone into the virtual (online) world. At first, the ECEs were reluctant to offer online programming for fear of increasing young children’s use of the screen as a means of education. Yet, if they did not provide virtual programming, families and children would lose their connection to the SFLC’s Indigegogy* framework. Implementing virtual programming stretched the schooling team into becoming leaders in motivating and supporting families through the global pandemic. The team created online programming within a week to help families provide their children with Mother Earth teachings (land-based learning) from home. Indigegogy

schooling included activity kits, adult-caregiver online workshops, with ECE’s as the facilitator of virtual programming and the parent as the educator. An unforeseen positive result of COVID 19 restrictions is the enriched co-facilitating relationship born between the parent and ECE in educating young children. It has been an inspiration to see the growth of families, children and the ECEs in creating a new way of virtually educating young children. Moving forward, SFLC is planning to expand its Indigegogy frameworks online across Turtle Island (North America) with the hope of enriching children and families.

** Indigegogy is a term coined by Stan Wilson, a Cree Elder and Educator.*

Indigegogy uses Indigenous knowledge, literature and scholarship and is centred on land-based education. Indigegogy engages Indigenous methodology such as circle work and lifts up traditional teachings, ceremonies and practices. Indigegogy is a decolonizing practice that builds on the resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning.

Submitted by: Faith Hale, RECE Ska:na Family Learning Centre Windsor, Ontario. Windsor, Ontario.

The Mnidoo Mnising Sharing and Learning Centre for All

The Mnidoo Mnising Sharing and Learning Centre for All provides virtual services, as well as outreach across the district/catchment area that would serve as the research and a training hub and cultural learning center for child care programs, family programs, early learning educators and families. The areas are Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board and the Manitoulin-Sudbury Network for Children and Families.



Land Based Art participants – Jill & Elise of Aundeck Omni Kaning

Art submission for weekly challenge

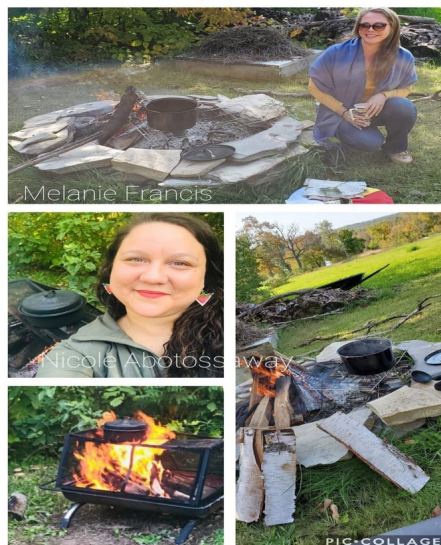
Last year, when the pandemic started, there were just two staff on our team, and we worked with about 16 centres, which has now increased to individuals and some elementary schools across the district. In preparation for March Break (2020), we decided to offer virtual sessions to try to connect with families over the break. So, two weeks before the shutdown, we were already getting that in motion. Little did we know we'd be still doing this a year later.

Currently, on staff, we have 3, myself as the coordinator/facilitator, Nicole Abotossaway – Indigenous Early Years Team Liaison/Instructor & Corey MacDonald – Early Years Instructor.

We usually offer about 25 different workshops that we facilitate, and we

quickly transformed and adapted some of those into virtual training and PD sessions for educators. However, we realized we still needed more connection with families and parents and wanted to find more ways to connect with them. We have a few facilitators that we contract out who all have specific skills, traditional knowledge and skills to share.

A lot of our focus is about land-based learning, and that was something we wanted to explore and had to figure out how to do it so that people are outdoors and can connect virtually at the same time. So, we worked out a hybrid type of training/workshop where we do a little bit online but also encouraging families to get outside. We've done multiple weekly challenges, such as asking people to send us pictures of them doing outside activities. When we had workshops onsite, we would start with a circle and a fire, families would join in, and we would be out on the land.



Maamwi Aniiibiishaabo – Let's have tea

Virtual Tea workshop with MMSLCA Program coordinator – Melanie Francis & Team Liaison – Nicole Abotossaway

Monthly session – traditional teas & safe harvesting practices

We still wanted to keep that practice, so we also started, Maamwi Aniiibiishaabo - Tea With Me weekly workshop where staff members set up our cameras and were outside making a fire in our own yards. The families love to be able to see the fire and sit with us virtually and make tea. During the session, we talk about harvesting teas, traditional harvesting methods, traditional teas - and we have had guest speakers as well. As part of the program, we send out a mug with a specific tea recipe that the families wanted to discuss and its medicinal purposes. This started as a weekly event but has now gone monthly, and we don't always have a fire.

One of our other programs is a virtual monthly cooking session, Maamwi Wiisnidaa – Let's Eat Together. To help families participate, we send out kits of ingredients where we could deliver and gift cards to other areas that are a little further to participate. It is similar to a live cooking show - we cook and have all of the ingredients needed. We have done recipes such as corn soup and wild rice, and the families like that, we did the cooking over the fire, step by step. We have had many classrooms join us as well - sometimes we get two people, and sometimes we have had four classrooms join in, so it can be a challenge to connect with everybody that way. There were teachings involved in this, such as traditional knowledge on wild rice and where our food comes from.

We recently started language and literacy programming, Maamwi Giindaasda – Let's Read Together program, where we send a book to families who register. All of the books are by Indigenous authors, and we have a language instructor that we work with who translates a lot of the



Nature Play Kit

Baashkaakodin Giizis – Freezing Moon

AKI kit sent out to participants monthly to coincide with a virtual workshop. Themes vary monthly, all in relation to AKI – the earth. Created by Sarah Early – Instructor



Harvesting Sweetgrass – family group activity. Promoting on the land learning, safe harvesting practices



Journey Together Quilt – participants each made a square to contribute to MMSCLA Journey Together quilt.

Several communities across the district made their own community quilt to symbolize our Journey Together on reconciliation.

books. The instructor will do a live session as well, and participants vary from parents to elementary school classes.

We have also just started a monthly virtual singing and drumming group, Maamwi Nagamodaa – Let's sing together. The instructor teaches a song, its meaning, where it comes from, and its history. We encourage all families to join in with their shakers or drums. We have had people say they don't know if they can participate because they don't drum or sing, but we open it up for everybody to learn and know the meaning behind the songs.

Another offering is a biweekly virtual sharing circle. This is just an open discussion - both educators and parents join in, and we may have a guest speaker or a parent who wants to share their challenges or successes. These sessions have been eye-opening in understanding where each family is coming from and their challenges - and even for educators – how they are feeling right now and how they are looking for new ideas.

The other monthly session we have is focused on land-based learning with natural elements. Aki – Earth. Our instructor has this as her area of expertise – she does a lot of land-based teachings. We have people pre-register. Then we mail them kits - they have things like clay, acorns, little mini scavenger hunt ideas, and various items—just to give parents ideas of what they can do outside, including good ideas for more urban families.

We hope to add beading circles in the evenings next for parents and children who want to take up

beading. Also, our family wellness subscription boxes will be happening this spring.

Attendance can fluctuate, some of our sessions have about 50 + participants, and some with fewer participants, but we just try to keep things consistent while going with the flow and changing things up as needed.

Submitted by Melanie Francis, Indigenous Early Years Coordinator

Mnidoo Mnising Sharing & Learning Centre for All, Kenjgewin Teg. Manitoulin-Sudbury, Ontario.

We would like to conclude our piece with a short Q & A with two Indigenous educators living in remote fly-in communities.

Jerephine Williams-Sakakeep from North Caribou Lake First Nation, Supervisor with the Early Childhood Development Building in her community.



Jerephine supporting a community garbage pick-up in North Caribou Lake First Nation. Jerephine is on the right and she is standing with her grandson Arius Benson.

Image source: Jerephine Williams-Sakakeep. May 2020.

Below are Jerephine's responses to the questions on February 4th, 2021.

Q: Is your child care centre open?

A: We are working but no day programs for toddlers and preschoolers; we will start doing programs when our band and pandemic team tells us to start programming. In September, we had started programs, but at the end of November, they had to stop due to the rise of COVID near our area.

Q: Is there any alternative programming being offered to children and families when your centre was closed?

A: We send homework packages home for the toddlers and preschoolers that are enrolled in our centre. And we have started a radio program to read children's books over the air and possibly sing. For families, we help with the distribution of foods and winter clothing if donations come in.

Q: What is the plan for returning to regular childcare hours, and who is providing you direction with operating?

A: As per our pandemic team and band, we will probably start doing programs after the Moderna vaccinations clinic is done in the middle of March. We have done community prayer walks to pray for the safety and wellness of everyone.

Q: Do you have a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) at your school/child care centre?

A: We were never given any PPE, so we just wear our masks and hand sanitizer, wash our hands as much as possible.

Q: What have been some of the biggest challenges for you as an educator during the pandemic?

A: Coming to work and making sure everyone is safe, and following new pandemic community protocols, which change from time to time, has been my biggest challenge.

A: We as community resources workers had to come together to work on different areas we were appointed to, so we childcare workers were making/sewing masks for workers, Elders, parents, teen and children and also we helped in the distribution of foods to all families the donations came from NAN, Newmont mine.

Amanda Wesley – Metatawabin, RECE from Fort Albany First Nation, Indigenous educator with the Aboriginal Head start Program. Still, since it has been closed because of COVID, she has accepted a new role as an education assistant at the Peetabeck Academy school.

Below are Amanda's responses to the questions on February 9th, 2021.

Q: Is your child care centre open?

A: Our local childcare has been shut down for a few months now, and the shortened days have put a strain on working parents. Our school Peetabeck Academy is currently closed and has been since the middle of December due to our reserve's positive case. We were supposed to open a couple of weeks ago, and staff that weren't quarantined were at work for a week but were required to lockdown again.



North Caribou Lake First Nation has held community prayer walks to pray for families and members dealing with COVID losses and fears.

Image source: Jerephine Williams-Sakakeep. June 2020.



Darlene Kanakakeesic, Community mental health worker and Rachel Beady, High school student, are sewing cloth masks for community members.

Image source: Jerephine Williams-Sakakeep. April 2020.



Amanda cleaning a fish at her family's camp Mathousini, Summer 2020.

The family camp has been in her family for many generations and is used all year around. It's a four-hour boat ride along the Albany river in the summer and a two-hour ski-do ride in the winter from Fort Albany, First Nation. Amanda is with her parents, grandparents and some extended family as they traveled together to camp.

Image source: Amanda Wesley – Metatawabin. July 2020.

Q: Is there any alternative programming being offered to children and families when your centre was closed?

A: Only homework packages have been handed out. Unfortunately, quite a few have not been handed back in.

A: Our classes have been split in half to follow social distancing. For example, class A would be on Mondays and Wednesdays, with no scheduled classes on Fridays, but teachers use it as prep days. Also, for class A they attend 'alternate' classes (such as cultural learning) on Tuesdays and Thursdays with other teachers. These days are shortened.

A: On the positive side, it's much easier to assist students that need extra help, but unfortunately, they are also missing out on a lot as their learning week is shortened.

Q: Do you have a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) at your school/child care centre?

A: Not at the moment, cloth masks have been given to each child and disposable masks at the school entrance and in each classroom as well as sanitizer stations.

Q: What have been some of the biggest challenges for you as an educator during the pandemic?

A: The most significant negative impact I've noticed is the homework packages not being returned. I don't think families fully understand that these are required for teachers to grade the students and see where they are.

Q & A Submitted by Lori Huston, RECE, Founder of Rising Indigenous Voices in Early Learning, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

As we continue in our own personal and professional lives and the stories of those close to us, we observe a wide array of innovations, adjusting and new ways of knowing and doing. We can look at this as a way to connect to our creative courage, to tell the truth, and think of our creativity as a companion to serve our communities.

Miigwech, Meegwetch, Thank you to our readers.