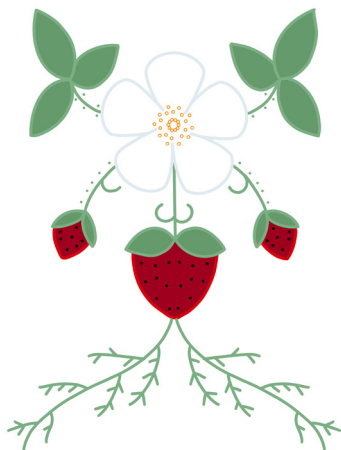




Program Profile: Early Years at Tungasuvvingat Inuit

By Wendy Rahman

This article, Early Years at Tungasuvvingat Inuit, marks the first in a series of program profiles developed by members of the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation. Committee members collaborated to create guiding questions and to identify Indigenous early learning and child care

programs whose work should be highlighted. In future issues of eceLINK, readers will be introduced to a range of programs across the province, including Métis, urban First Nation programs, and rural First Nation programs.

How are Indigenous history, culture, and ways of knowing meaningfully integrated into program design, curriculum, and daily practices?

At Tungasuvvingat Inuit, our Early Years work is rooted in community, relationships, culture, and care. Through Illipalialisaaqtilugu EarlyON Child and Family Centre and our connected family support programs, we create spaces where Inuit children, parents, caregivers, and families can come together, feel welcomed, and see themselves reflected.



Tungasuvvingat Inuit

Our work is guided by Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and Inunnguiniq, which shape how we understand children, families, relationships, learning, and community responsibility. Inunnguiniq reminds us that raising children is a collective

responsibility and that children learn through observation, connection, storytelling, language, play, and everyday experiences.

In practice, this means culture is not treated as a separately. It is woven into the environment, relationships, food, materials, conversations, and the way families are welcomed. Through cultural teachings, storytelling, sewing, food preparation, songs, Inuktitut exposure, community gatherings, and family engagement, children and families are supported in ways that feel meaningful, natural, and grounded in everyday life.

What specific Indigenous-focused elements distinguish these programs and raise awareness of the First Peoples of this land?

What makes our programming distinct is that it is designed for Inuit families living in an urban context. Many Inuit families in Ottawa are living far from their home

communities, extended family networks, language, land, and familiar systems of support. Early Years programming becomes one way to help rebuild those connections.

Our programs include EarlyON, CAPC, CPNP, prenatal and postnatal supports, parent-child programming, cultural activities, family engagement, and community-based early learning opportunities. Across these programs, we create space for Inuit identity, cultural teachings, Inuktitut exposure, traditional skills, food, storytelling, and relationships with Inuit staff, Elders, cultural knowledge holders, and community members.



These pieces help raise awareness by showing that Inuit families, histories, cultures, and ways of knowing are distinct and living. They also create spaces where Inuit children and families do not have to explain who they are. They can simply belong.

Our pedagogical approach is supported by Inunnguiniq, Inuit childrearing practices, and provincial early learning frameworks, including How Does Learning Happen? We are intentional about ensuring these frameworks are understood through Inuit values and community priorities.

We see children as capable, curious, competent, and full of potential. We also understand that children develop within families, cultures, histories, and communities. For us, early learning is not separate from identity, language, wellness, relationships, or belonging.

What we are most proud of is the way our programs continue to grow from the needs, strengths, and voices of our community. Early Years work is never just about one program. It is about the whole family. It is about creating spaces where children are supported in their development, while parents and caregivers are also supported in their own journeys.

A strong example of this approach is our Pregnancy Circle, which was adapted through collaboration with Ottawa Public Health and our CAPC/CPNP programming. The Pregnancy Circle brings together prenatal education, cultural connection, food security, peer support, and relationship-building. It reflects our belief that early childhood begins before birth, and that supporting pregnant individuals, parents, and caregivers is part of supporting infant and child well-being.

In what ways are Indigenous languages incorporated into programming to support cultural continuity and identity?

Language is deeply connected to identity, culture, memory, and belonging. In our Early Years programs, we create opportunities for Inuktitut exposure through songs, greetings, stories, teachings, cultural activities, and everyday interactions.

Even small moments of language exposure in the early years can support pride, recognition, and connection for children and families. These moments help children hear and experience Inuit language as part of who they are and as part of the community around them.

For families living in an urban setting, opportunities to hear and connect with Inuktitut can be especially meaningful. It supports cultural continuity and helps create an environment where Inuit identity is visible, valued, and celebrated.

How do the programs support educator development, advocacy, and retention through continuous professional learning grounded in Indigenous perspectives?

Supporting educators is an important part of this work. Early Years staff need opportunities for continuous professional learning that strengthens their understanding



of trauma-informed practice, infant and early mental health, cultural safety, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Inunnguiniq, and community-based approaches.

This work requires educators to hold space for many realities at once. Families may be experiencing joy, growth, isolation, grief, poverty, housing concerns, food insecurity, or difficulty accessing mainstream systems. Educators need to feel supported, valued, and connected to the purpose of the work so they can continue supporting children and families in meaningful ways.

There are real challenges in the Early Years sector, including burnout, wages, recruitment, retention, and the emotional labour of community-based work. Supporting staff through reflective practice, cultural grounding, professional learning, and stronger sector investment is essential to sustaining this work.

What systemic strategies, community partnerships, and local collaborations are in place to ensure long-term sustainability, quality, and distinction-based excellence within these programs?

Our Early Years programs sit within TI's broader role as an Inuit social service agency, which means families are not supported in isolation. Families may first connect with us through a playgroup, prenatal program, food support, or family activity, but through those relationships we can also help connect them to broader supports within the organization.

This may include referrals or connections to food security programming, housing support, employment services, family wellness, cultural programming, and other community-based services. Because TI offers multiple services under one organization, we are able to respond to families in a more holistic and relational way, without asking them to start over or retell their story in disconnected systems.

This reflects how we understand early childhood and family well-being. Children do not grow and develop separately from the realities of their families. When caregivers are supported with food, housing, employment, wellness, culture, and community connection, children are also supported. Our Early Years programs are part of a broader circle of care at TI, where departments work together to support Inuit families in ways that are practical, culturally grounded, and responsive to community needs.

For Indigenous Early Years programs, sustainability requires more than short-term funding or project-based solutions. It requires long-term investment in Indigenous-

led programming, culturally grounded spaces, professional learning, and community partnerships. It also requires recognition that Indigenous communities are not all the same. Distinction-based approaches matter. Inuit families need Inuit-specific programs, led by Inuit organizations, and grounded in Inuit knowledge and community priorities.

Looking ahead, our hope is that early childhood education continues to move toward models that are more relational, culturally grounded, and responsive to the realities families are living. In our community, the ultimate Early Years program would be an Inuit-led, wraparound model that brings together early learning, licensed childcare, infant and early mental health, perinatal support, cultural programming, food security, land-based learning, family wellness, housing support, employment support, and caregiver support.

At the heart of our work is love for community. It is the belief that children deserve spaces where they are celebrated, families deserve supports that honour their realities, and culture belongs in the everyday moments of early childhood. Our programs are still growing, and we are always learning, but the vision remains clear: to build Early Years spaces that are rooted in Inuit ways of knowing, responsive to community, and grounded in care.