

A Guide to Fostering Innu Culture for Innu Children



Prepared by Prevention Services Staff of the Innu Round Table Secretariat

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Introduction

This guide has been developed by Innu health staff in the Prevention Services office of the Innu Round Table Secretariat. We have prepared this specifically for non-Innu foster parents who have been given the responsibility of caring for Innu children who are in the legal care and or custody of the Newfoundland Labrador Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development (CSSD). We consider this to be a first draft of the guide, because we believe that as we meet with foster parents throughout the province who are caring for Innu children away from home, that we will learn important messages that we will try to incorporate into the next version.



The Innu vision for the future is that when an Innu child needs out of home care that we will have the necessary resources and supports in our communities so that our children will not need to be placed away from our culture and communities. However, until such time as that vision comes to be, we appreciate the importance of your role in providing a safe and caring environment for our children.

We have put together this short guide in the hope that it will help to increase your knowledge of Innu culture and history and your understanding that an important part of your role as a foster parent for Innu children is to help them develop and maintain their Innu identity and connections to family and community. This is likely the most challenging aspect of being a foster parent to Innu children. We have put together the following information to try and help you with this critical part of your work.

The idea for this guide has been borrowed and adapted from the resource booklet *Foster Their Culture, Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-Of-Home Care*¹. The Torres Strait Islanders developed their booklet to help non-Indigenous foster parents care for Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children placed in foster care. We acknowledge the rich history and culture of the Torres Strait Islander People and want to thank them for their commitment to all the children and their foster parents.

Innu culture is not a perk to an Innu child

Innu Culture

The following is a way to define culture:

Culture is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings that is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Before we are born, our culture is already being determined. Our culture determines who we are, how we think, what we believe, how we communicate, and what we value.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child ² states

“ you have the right to practice your own culture, language and religion- or any you choose. Minority and Indigenous groups need special protection of this right.”

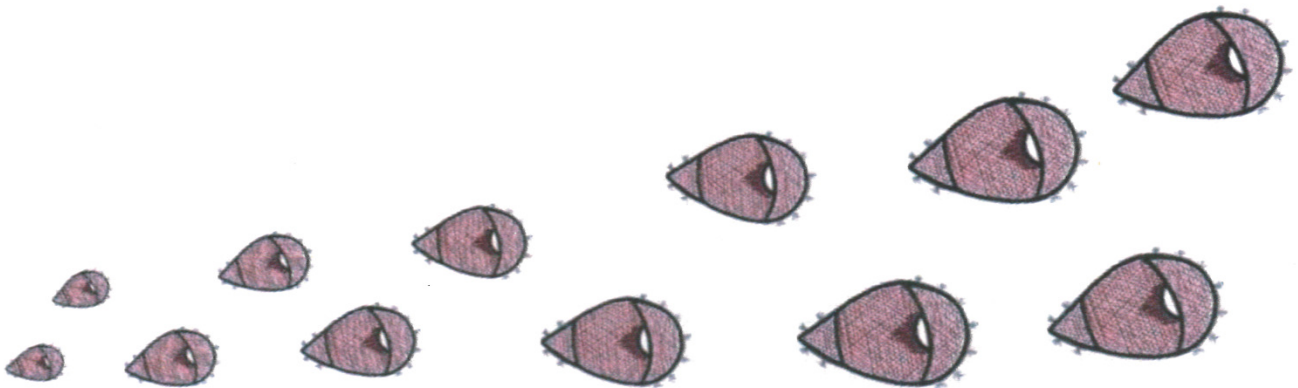
Children have many other rights. All these rights are connected to each other and equally important but there are reasons why Indigenous groups, including Innu children and families, need special protection of this right. The reasons for this are found in the history of our culture.

What is Innu culture?

Innu culture is the sum total of the ways of living built up by this specific group of human beings over thousands of years of nomadic life on the land we call Nitassinan, and that is transmitted from one generation to another. Innu ways of living include hunting and gathering knowledge and skills, a shared language, Innu aimun, and our dreams and spiritual beliefs, which are the foundation of our culture.

Innu culture is not fixed in one period of time. It changes over time, as do all cultures. At one time, Innu walked and canoed huge distances but today we regularly use more modern forms of transportation, such as skidoos or trucks.

We are an Indigenous culture, meaning our ancestors were the first human beings to occupy the land we call Nitassinan. As an Indigenous culture, there is a very significant point in the timeline of our history. That point is the period of time that is marked by contact between Innu and Western Europeans, dividing our history into two very distinct and different periods of time, pre-contact and post contact.



Pre-contact and post contact

Innu life on the land, Nitassinan, is documented as going back thousands of years. Our culture was evolving over the generations. It was strong and intact. We had distinct ways of living that were perfectly adapted to suit the vast topography and weather across the seasons. Our dreams and the spiritual powers of our shamans were the basis for our spiritual beliefs. The caribou and all it offered was central to our ways of life. Our language reflected the richness of the land and all the knowledge that was being shared across generations. We had strong social systems that enabled us to rear up our children into competent adults, that enabled us to deal with risks and disharmony. The wellbeing of the collective was the focus because only working together were our ancestors able to survive and pass on the culture to the younger generation.



Our culture began to change as contact with non-Innu became more frequent. Non-Innu said we needed to change. The early Priests, the "black robes" said our shamans and our belief in the animal masters were evil and that we needed to become Christians. They also believed we needed to be settled in one place because they wanted to teach our children their ways and they couldn't do this effectively when we lived a nomadic way, following the caribou into the interior and travelling out to the ocean in the summers.

This process that began with contact and continued on into the present is called colonization. Colonization has brought about dramatic and unintended impacts to the strength and transmission of our culture to the next generation.

As experienced by Innu, colonization is a process whereby non-Innu governments and religious authorities systematically try to replace Innu ways of living with non-Innu ways. The basis for colonization was the belief that Innu culture and ways were inferior to Western European ways. The residential schools system across Canada was built on this same belief.

We know now that cultures can be very different, even Indigenous cultures can be quite different from one another. However, cultures cannot be compared as being superior or inferior to one another. Tremendous harm to individuals, families and entire groups has come about as a result of one culture claiming superiority over another.

Collective and intergenerational trauma

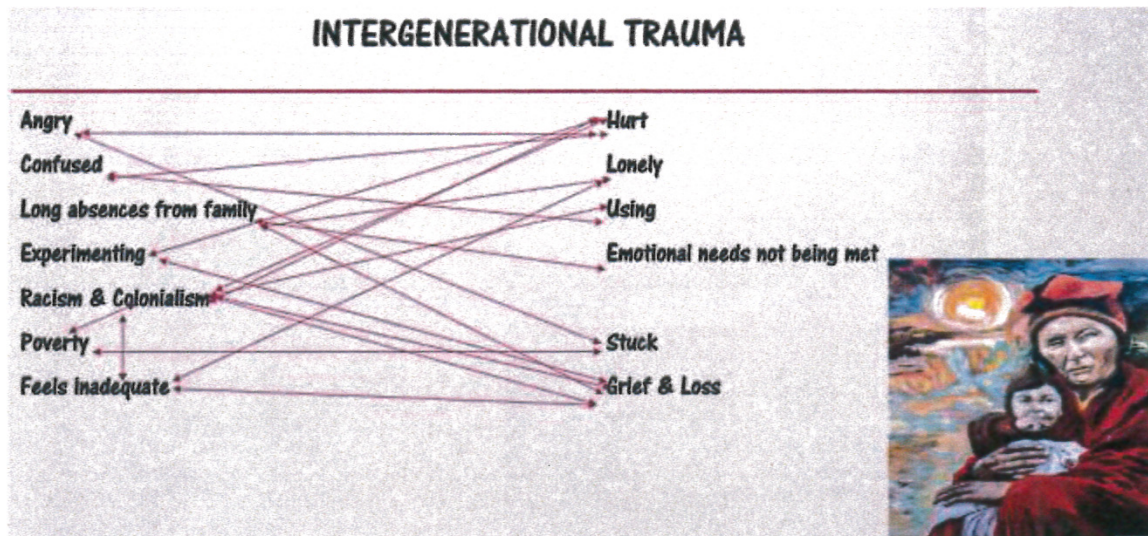
As a result of the process of colonization, Innu have experienced trauma, not only as individuals but as a whole group or collective.

"trauma is when we have encountered an out of control, frightening experience that has disconnected us from all sense of resourcefulness, safety, coping or love." ³

Not all Innu have experienced trauma to the same degree or from the exact same experiences. Everyone has their own story and everyone has been impacted.

Consider the trauma experienced by grandparents in the 60's when the villages were becoming year round settlements. Their value as elders, their knowledge of the land and travel routes, their belief in the power of Innu spiritual ways, the necessity that they pass on all these teachings to the next generation, all this was being attacked.

The next generation, who were the first generation of Innu to grow up in the village year round, started going to school daily at the priest's house. The boys were expected to be in church as altar boys. The elders were being displaced, parents were being displaced by the priest and by the teaching of non-Innu ways of living. Given this loss of value, of self-worth, it is not surprising that alcohol abuse became widespread. It is also not hard to understand how this trauma was passed down and became intergenerational.

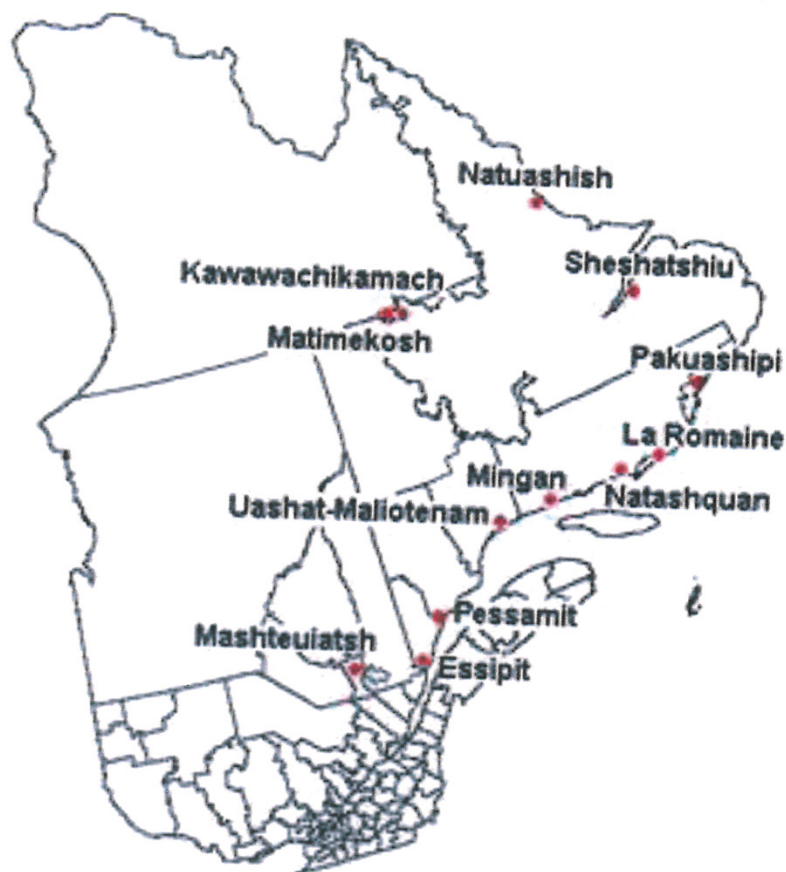


What is important to know is that Innu understand that trauma doesn't have to be an end to the story. We know we must try and address trauma and work hard to ensure that Innu children do not carry the trauma of their parents or grandparents' generations through their lifetimes. Because trauma is marked by a loss of control, trauma work, treatment and helping "must start with creating an atmosphere of safety through predictable respectful relationships. For an individual to heal, they must feel safe and in control. Choice, empowerment and the ability to express how they feel and be heard are essential to recovery." Dr. Bruce Perry (2006)⁴

The Mushuau Innu and Sheshatshiu Innu

At the time of contact, non-Innu gave us names to try and distinguish us from other First Peoples they were encountering. We have been called the Montagnais and the Naskapi. We used group names to describe ourselves and distinguish our most common connections to place and others. Mushuaunut or people of the barrens, is the name we use to describe those who summered most frequently at the more northerly point of old Davis Inlet and then Davis Inlet. Today Mushuaunut applies to the Innu who moved from Davis Inlet to the village created at Natuashish. Sheshatshiunut also has geographical meaning, describing those Innu who regularly spent summers on the coast near Shatshit or Grand Lake, the 40 mile long lake just in from the ocean inlet.

In our language the word Innu means human being. We recognize many other Innu who are extended family and kin that live on reserves within Quebec.



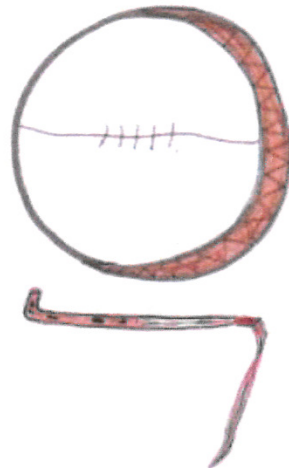
Even the Cree of James Bay are our close relatives. We call them Uapimekstuinut or Great Whale River people. In their language, which is like our language, Illu is the word they use to describe themselves, meaning human beings. We are really the same People, but over the generations boundaries have been drawn by non-Innu that have separated us. We know our shared history goes back long before borders were drawn on maps and territories were claimed by non-Innu.

Today our combined population at Sheshatshit and Natuashish is approximately 2800. Half this total population are children 19 years of age and younger. The reserves at Sheshatshit and Natuashish are very recent creations, almost the youngest reserves in the country, even though the Indian Act dates from 1876.

In the mid 1970s we began formally to organize ourselves to better protect our rights, lands and way of life in light of resource developments and other outside forces affecting Nitassinan. Our leaders were the first generation of Innu who were learning to speak English as they were the first generation of Innu ever to be formally schooled. We formed the Innu Nation in 1990 and this organization continues to function as the overarching government for Innu as a whole, focused on issues of self-governance and Innu rights. The two First Nations governments at Sheshatshit and Natuashish are responsible for community issues, such as housing and social services.

Innu values and beliefs

All cultures and societies have particular values and beliefs, which give meaning to our sense of identity, both as belonging to the larger group and of our own self. Innu values and beliefs are based on our understanding that the spiritual world and the natural world, which includes the land, water, animals, birds, fish and humans, are all interconnected. Through our dreams we made regular connections to all beings. Our beliefs guided our day to day behavior. Elders taught the younger generation that it was disrespectful to the caribou for example to leave the meat to rot or discard the hide, and to show this disrespect could bring about harm as the animal masters would be displeased.



Our values and beliefs also reflect the individual's relationship to community, to the larger group of which they are a member. The well-being of the community is paramount. In the *Innu Healing Strategy* of 2014 ⁵, we identified Innu healing values, and then in the *Innu Care Approach* of 2017 ⁶, we added some brief commentary. These values are as follows:

Respect

Innu value each other and all our surroundings and treat everything with respect as we recognize that we need each other, the land and the animals to survive.

Anyone working to support Innu communities must be willing to understand and respect each other as individuals, as well as our culture, traditions and the land we live on. Innu will be the leaders of our own healing, and our needs and concerns must be heard and addressed every step of the way.

Trust and Honesty

Trust has always been a key value for the Innu as our very survival as a People, has always been dependent upon our need to rely upon one another and trust that we would fulfill our role and make decisions that are best for the collective. For trust to exist, honesty must also exist.

We need to be able to rely on each other for healing to reach entire communities. Commitments made to Innu communities, especially to children, must be honored. When our thoughts, words and actions are in harmony, our relationships can be strong and resilient.

Cooperation

Innu work with each other to support the advancement of the People.

There are many inside and outside of our communities who have the strength to bring healing to Innu children and families. We need to work together, to communicate freely and integrate our approaches so that we can be an interwoven network of support.

Family

Togetherness and connection to family is important to Innu.

Innu families have provided the support to continue our way of life for millennia. The family is sacred, and all efforts to help bring families closer together must be made in order to keep our communities strong. Every member of the family brings their own gifts to the table, and in this way we embrace the many kinds of diversity present in our communities.

Nature

Nature has been integral to the experience of Innu as it has provided for both our physical and spiritual needs since our creation, and will do so into the future.

Nutshimit is the foundation of Innu life, and the life of all beings. Our relationship to the land must be safeguarded, as well as the health of the land itself. Our children need to have access to the land, as well as to the knowledge of our elders, so that we always remember who we are through our connection to nature.



Innu family structures

Our values are reflected in the structure of our families. We have always lived and raised up our children in large extended family groups and this continues today. Certainly birth parents play an important role but Innu grandparents, older siblings, aunts and uncles and other kin may have equally important roles to that of a birth parent.

The purpose of Innu parenting and family is to nurture the meaningful connections for a child to know who they are in relation to others in the group, including their birth family, kin and others. It is also an important part of parenting to help children know who they are in relation to their environment and the living spirits of their ancestors and the land. These relationships help to define an Innu child's identity by connecting them to everything that is living.

Innu child rearing

Prior to settlement in villages in the 1960s, all the needs of an Innu child were met by Innu working together to raise the next generation of Innu into competent adults. This meant that there were clear roles and responsibilities understood and shared by members of the extended family group. Children too understood the relationships between themselves and the adults in their lives. These important connections were celebrated and shared over generations. Our language reflects these facts. The word *nika* means mother. *Tshekauinu* means "our mother" and is frequently used by grandchildren, including traditionally adopted children, to describe the actual relationship of a grandmother to a large group of grandchildren. She is mother.

Within extended family groups, children learned by the regular daily opportunities to observe and participate in every aspect of Innu life. Play and learning to be Innu were integrated. A toddler might sit at the foot of an older sister plucking a goose and then when a little bit older, be given the chance to pluck as much of the goose as their small fingers could manage. As an older girl, she might have sole responsibility for ensuring geese were plucked clean and singed.

Roles were also not specifically gender divided. Boys could learn how to sew skin clothing just as girls might set snares and hunt for partridge or cut wood for fire.

What do foster parents need to consider when caring for an Innu child?



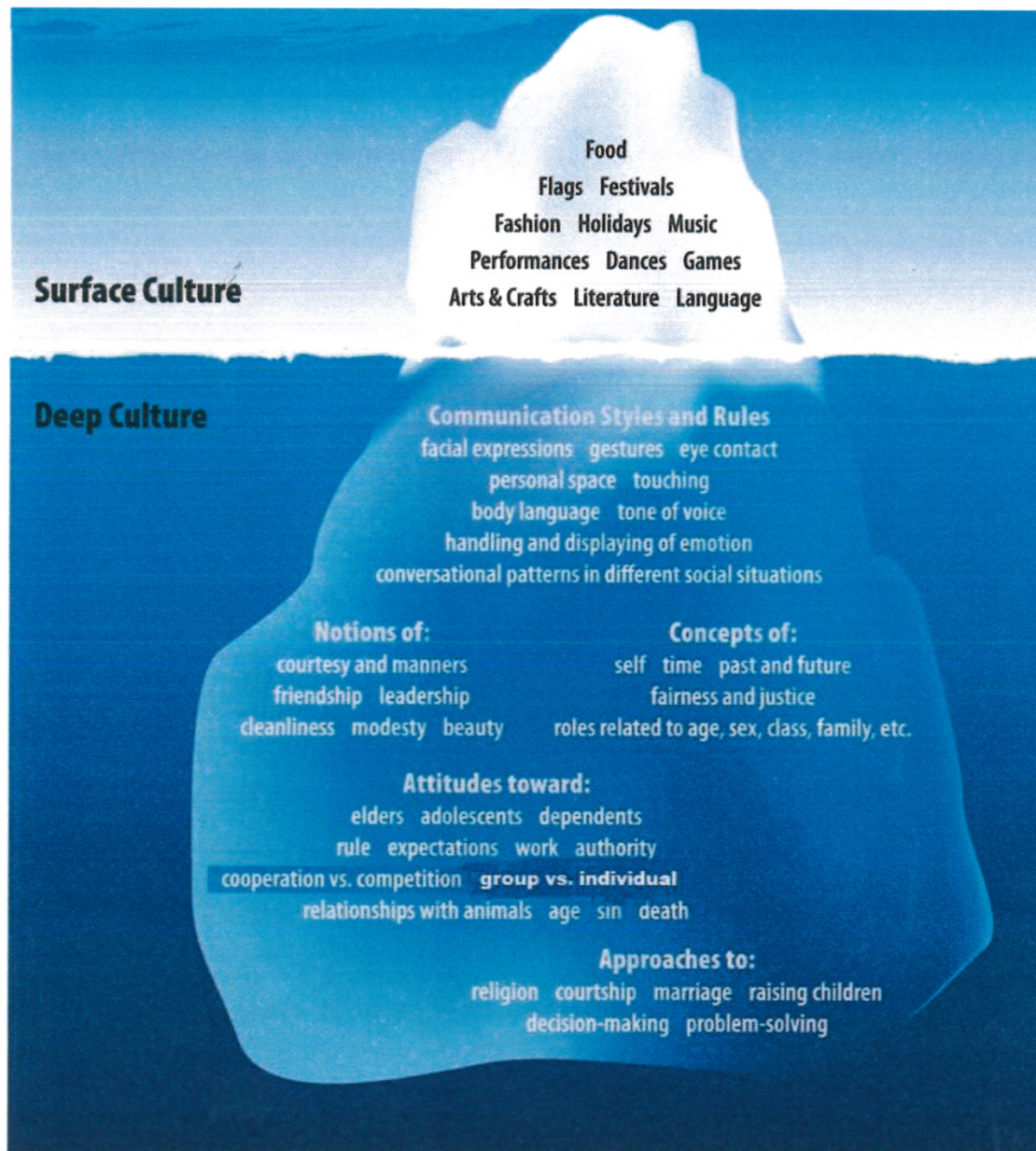
The most important thing to know about fostering an Innu child is that you need to promote the child's cultural identity. This is probably also the most difficult task for a non-Innu foster parent.

Any child you foster, regardless of their culture, may challenge your parenting skills. You are trying to help them adjust to a new place, new routines, visits with birth family and maybe help them to prepare for leaving care.

However, any child who has a different culture and background from you will need an approach to fostering which meets all of these needs as well as helping to meet their cultural needs.

Culture is critical to a child's development, identity and self-esteem, and in determining the overall well-being of the child. However, what makes up Innu culture may be very difficult to see and hold as a concrete thing, because so much about the importance of Innu culture isn't written down. Like Innu language, culture is passed from one generation to the next.

The Cultural Iceberg



As non-Innu foster parents, no one expects you to know all the questions and answers about Innu culture. However, it is quite possible for you to help promote an Innu child's cultural identity.

Culturally competent foster parenting

Culturally competent foster parenting is consistently and thoughtfully demonstrating a positive attitude toward Innu culture and Innu people. When you do this you are helping the child to develop positive attitudes about Innu culture and about their own identity as Innu.

We know that it is a sign of a child's overall well-being when they can speak about who they are in a positive way. We also know that depending on a child's experiences and development when they are first placed in foster care that they may be confused about their identity and struggle to feel good about themselves or others.

As foster parents, there are a number of things that you can do to help a child build a positive sense of identity and self-worth. You may be familiar with the poem "Children Learn What They Live"⁷. In a gentle way this poem helps to illustrate what we mean.

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.



You can't force an Innu child to acknowledge their culture, but, when you are able to provide positive messages about Innu culture and Innu people, the child is likely going to learn to be more accepting and appreciative of their own culture and heritage.

Building resilience

Depending on their age, Innu children know through the media and perhaps through various social encounters at school and other places, that Innu culture is not always held in high esteem by mainstream society. Children may be made fun of or bullied as a result of their cultural background. If children see that their culture may be viewed as "second class" they are likely to think this means they

are also second class and doubt their own self-worth. Since no child is able to control the attitudes and actions of others in larger social settings, they need your help.

We know that children who develop a strong sense of self-worth and see they are valued by others will become resilient as they grow older. You already understand the importance of giving children a positive view of themselves. This also extends to the child's culture, so that they can develop pride and see the value in their Innu culture. In this, your support to the child may make all the difference.



Promoting Innu Culture

You need information about Innu culture and history, Innu ways of living and being in the world in order to help foster the cultural identity of an Innu child. Depending on the child's development, they may be a source of information if they have positive stories and experiences to share about Innu culture. The child's family may also be a good source of information.

While it is very hard for Innu health staff to see Innu children placed away home, because these children are also family and kin to Innu health staff, they too are an important resource that you can draw on. At the end of this guide is a list of people and resources who are willing and able to help you with information and ideas about how you can promote culture.

The new Children, Youth and Families Act will also help when it becomes the law in June 2019 because for the first time, each child in care must have a cultural connection plan developed and presented to the court when they come into legal care. We are working with the Department to develop policies around this plan and anticipate that Innu health staff from each First Nation will work directly with CSSD to outline what ideas and elements should be part of each child's plan.

There are lots of practical ways you can promote Innu culture and one of the most significant may be your willingness to visit the child's community. This may happen as part of supporting the child's opportunity to visit their community. If the child has been in care since they were young and has no memories of their home community or extended family, helping them to visit Natuashish or Sheshatshit with you is a very concrete way to send the message to the child that their culture and community is important. No Innu child is responsible for being in care, placed away from home and you are in the best position to reinforce the message that they are Innu and have a right to experience their community, its culture and people.

Being aware of your own prejudices

Most of us don't see ourselves as having any prejudices until we actually have experiences of contact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes these experiences can result in us feeling

uncomfortable and drawing negative comparisons between our own culture and that of the other person, group or their culture.

Anyone doing work across cultures, across Innu and non-Innu culture, such as fostering Innu children, working for CSSD in the Innu communities or teaching in the Innu schools for example, should consider the following questions:

Do I respond differently to Innu people? If so how?

If I feel nervous when I am talking to an Innu person, do I know why I'm nervous?

Do I make assumptions about Innu culture and if so, what are those assumptions and why am I making those assumptions?

Did I make any assumptions about my Innu foster child and their family before I met them?

Because different cultures can be very different, have different ways of doing things and different values, it's not hard to make judgments about the "other culture". Often those judgments are negative. What is important is that we understand while all of us can make negative judgments about the other, we need to slow down and think about where those judgements come from and why we make those judgments. How you view Innu culture is bound to influence how you relate to your Innu foster child and their family, and the messages you promote to the child about Innu culture.

Our own self-awareness is so important and then, when we take opportunities to learn more about the other culture, the more likely we are to have an increased understanding of and greater appreciation for that culture.



Developing a positive relationship with the child's family

This applies to foster parents of all children who are in care living away from home. This may not come about easily in any foster situation and when the child is Innu, there is the added complexity of significant cultural differences.

It is not hard to understand that the child's parent or family may view you with anger or resentment. You are caring for their child and they are not. Whatever the parent has done or not done that has resulted in their child being in care, they still love their child. Also, many Innu children are fostered by Innu, sometimes adding to the frustration of the parent that their child isn't in an Innu home. Sometimes the child may also have anger and resentment at their parent or at you as a foster parent because you are not their parent.

Regardless of what brings out these feelings, an Innu child will do better in your care when you do not view their family or culture negatively, when you are able to show the child you are supportive of contact with their family.

Expect that CSSD staff should help you to try and build a positive relationship with family. Expect that CSSD staff may need to work with Innu staff in this regard because often the parent's relationship with CSSD may also be one of anger and resentment.

You should be aware that a child's parent may have experienced their own trauma as a child, may be experiencing intergenerational trauma given the Innu history of colonization, and that means the child needs you to take the lead in trying to build a positive relationship with their family. The following three steps are the key to this:

Always be respectful when speaking with the child's parent and family members or when speaking about them to other people.

Show the child's parent or family members that you want to learn more about Innu culture.

Advocate for opportunities so that the child in your home remains connected as much as possible to their family and home community.

Grief and loss

Grief and loss are human experiences. When dealing with their grief, Innu experience sadness, anger, confusion and similar emotions as any other race of people experiencing grief. The difference for Innu is that the loss leading to their grief lies not just in their human emotions, but in all that has been lost as a result of colonization, that collective loss of Innu culture.

When you have experienced the loss of ways of living, of your language, of children in some instances who were adopted away in what has been described as "scooping children" out of their culture and into another, the suffering is profound. These losses have accumulated and become detrimental to the overall social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being of Innu.

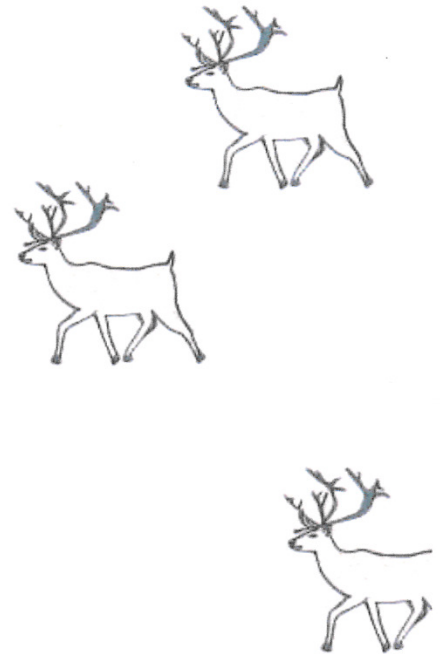
Older children who come into care may also have experienced their parent's grief and loss being passed on to them, something which the parent may not even realize they are doing. Just because they are young doesn't mean the children are not affected by loss and grief. Young children may show their grief in different ways such as

acting out feelings rather than talking

using age inappropriate behaviors such as thumb sucking

being angry, frustrated and restless

lacking energy and concentration in school



The historical losses which have led to Innu grief are not simply events in history which have little relevance today. Loss of language, loss of control over ways of living, loss of important roles in family and Innu society, all are losses that are still being felt. Mourning these losses is ongoing for many.

At the same time however, there are Innu women and men, mothers and fathers, grandparents and elders who are finding ways to rebuild, who are acknowledging the losses that have happened and trying to work to ensure that all is not lost. We are taking children into the country to have opportunities to experience life on the land. We are talking with one another about the importance of our dreams and the significance of our spiritual practices. We are working to help one another deal with the shame that comes from feeling you are not worthy enough, that leads to substance misuse and other kinds of violence. We know we come from a culture of strength and great resilience and we know the spirits of our ancestors are with us to comfort us and give us hope.

Conclusion

The most precious members of our culture are our children. All the generations of Innu who came before us entrusted us with passing Innu culture on to this next generation. Our hearts are heavy because we know in many respects we have not been able to live up to this trust. We also understand the processes beyond our control which have resulted in a breakdown of many of the strengths of Innu culture. This is the reason so many of our children are living away from their families in care.

We believe we have a duty to all our children to help them know they are valued members of our culture and communities. We need your help to ensure this message reaches our children who live away from us. We hope the information and ideas shared in this guide are a meaningful way to begin to work with you to ensure every Innu child, regardless of where they live, is able to grow up knowing they are Innu and belong to a remarkable, resilient culture, the Innu.

Tshinashkumitinan

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The Innu Round Table Secretariat www.irtsec.ca

Child Trauma Academy <http://childtrauma.org>

Nurturing Resilience <http://www.austinattach.com>

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