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Tips for Parents/Caregivers to Support Young Indigenous Children's Talking, Listening, and Learning

Here are some tips to develop language through relationships and daily activities. These tips value Indigenous ways and traditions.

Listen

- ▶ Show your child how carefully you listen to them and to other people around you. Tell your child about what you are hearing.
- ▶ Encourage your child to listen carefully.
- ▶ Tell stories. Ask your child about what they heard. As language development increases, ask them to retell the stories.

Notice

- ▶ Your child is naturally curious and will enjoy watching, listening, and exploring things.
- ▶ Take notice of what your child is interested in or likes by watching them while they play or take part in family and community activities. It makes your child feel noticed and respected.
- ▶ Be sensitive to your child as this lets them know that you understand what they need and want.
- ▶ Watch your child's sounds, gestures and actions closely. Follow their lead to find out what they need or want. Say their request out loud to help them learn the words.

EXAMPLE:

- When your child pulls you to the cupboard, points and says "oop", open the cupboard, bring out the can or package of soup and say, "Soup. You want soup."

▶ *Your child is a gift.*

Children are gifts from the Creator. The family's role is to treasure and care for them. The child has chosen their parents. Children honor the family with their unconditional love. Each child is unique—there is beauty in individual differences. A child's special gifts unfold over their life journey.

▶ *Play.*

Play is a child's natural response to their surroundings. Childhood is a time to enjoy playing and social time. This time develops the child's skills including listening, watching, and speaking.

▶ *Becoming social.*

Social development involves learning about the world and others—respect for self and others; sharing with others, playing fair, playing with kindness and consideration, taking turns, practicing independence, working on listening skills; and having a positive attitude.



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- ▶ When your child uses short phrases, say their request out loud to them adding in a few more words.

EXAMPLES:

- When your child says “Want soup”, add one or two words: “You want chicken noodle soup.”
- When your child uses sentences, respond by taking a talking turn by making a comment or asking them a question. If your child says “I’m hungry. I want soup” ask, “What kind of soup do you want? Chicken noodle soup or tomato soup?”

Respond

- ▶ Being responsive to your child’s needs means listening to what your child wants, and responding in ways that are relevant and respectful. It does not mean always giving your child what they want.

EXAMPLE:

- If your child asks for soup and you were not planning to serve soup, you could respond: “I know you want soup, but we don’t have that. How about applesauce and crackers? Offering something that is available will help your child feel heard and respected in a way that leads to respect for you as the parent.

Play together

- ▶ Playing together promotes your child’s language and conversational skills.
- ▶ A gentle, quiet voice lets your child know that they are loved and responded to with kindness.
- ▶ Copy your child’s sounds, gestures and actions and say what they are doing out loud.

EXAMPLE:

- You can make a sound that goes with an action such as “Oh, oh!” when a tower of blocks gets knocked down. You can use a word to name an item or person or tell what is happening by using an action word like “fall”, “more”, “in”.

- ▶ Share in what your child is doing by taking a turn and using a single word to go with your action. If your child responds and shows interest, wait for them to do something and then take another turn by copying their action and saying a single word. Your child will follow along in a back and forth interaction with actions, sounds and words.

EXAMPLE:

- Your child points at a ball. You push the ball and it rolls along the floor and you say “roll!” Your child then moves toward the rolling ball and picks it up and then bounces it to the ground. You catch the ball and say “catch!”

- ▶ When your child uses short sentences to talk about what is happening, you can do what your child is doing and say a bit longer sentence that goes with the action.

EXAMPLES:

- *If your child puts an animal in a toy truck and says “Go ride”, you can add another animal and say, “The deer goes for a ride too!” When your child uses sentences, you can add interest and fun by doing what the child is doing and add pretend play talk.*
- *If your child is loading and unloading a toy truck, you could make a toy construction worker say, “Ok. Back up over here”, or “I want to get in too.”*

- ▶ It is good for your child to learn to spend some time safely playing alone and some time safely playing with others.
- ▶ Turn-taking in play helps your child learn to play with others and enjoy being with others. Your child may not always want to take turns. But when they are agreeable, sharing in their play shows them you are interested in them and shows them ways to respond.
- ▶ It will help your child to hear you say, “My turn” and “Your turn” now and then, so that they understand how play and toys are shared. Doing so will help your child develop listening skills and how to have conversations with other people. They will grow to understand what is meant when they hear people say: “Share.”, “Take turns.”

Technology time

- ▶ Your child will learn the most from interacting—with you, with friends, with things, and with nature.
- ▶ Watching TV and videos alone can encourage your child to be passive and dependent on being entertained rather than developing their skills and range of experiences, including their language skills.
- ▶ Watching TV and using the computer or other devices such as iPads and iPhones can provide a young child with learning opportunities, especially when this time is actively guided and shared with an adult.
- ▶ Talk with your child about what they are seeing and hearing in the media. You can help the child to understand new things, places, and people that are shown in a video or TV program.
- ▶ Use media to encourage their interests, for example, in music, art, ballet or stories.
- ▶ These screen based activities are not recommended for children under 2 years of age. After that, continue to limit the time your child spends in front of a screen.

Nature time

- ▶ Spend time with your child in nature. Your child’s footsteps on Mother Earth speak a special language. So do nature’s sounds—the wind, rain, fire, water, birds, and animals in communication with each other.

EXAMPLES:

- *Tell stories about the animals, plants, rocks and trees.*
- *Name animals and talk about how they move and sound, what they eat, and where they live.*
- *Name trees, other plants, and their parts such as leaves, trunk, flower, berry, root and where they are found along the road, at the park, in the forest.*

- ▶ Tell stories that tell about your child's relationship to plants, animals, and the Earth, and how all things natural are interconnected.

EXAMPLES:

- *Remind your child that the tiny frogs sing in the evening to put your child to sleep. The birds perch in the tree outside of your child's window and sing to wake them up in the morning.*
- *Tiny ants and snakes are someone's child or parent and will surely be missed if we step on them, just the same as how we would feel if that happened in our family.*

- ▶ Go outside. Your child is naturally curious about things outside.
- ▶ Looking out of a window together, going for a walk, looking at books about nature and talking about what you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste will help your child understand new words such as the names of things and their different features.
- ▶ Your child will love to learn new words and concepts that go with things that can be explored. Understanding photos, pictures and printed words is harder, because these are representations of real objects.

Story-telling

- ▶ The Indigenous oral tradition of storytelling can help children listen, speak and develop their language. It also helps them understand how they belong to their family and community.
- ▶ Stories entertain, instruct, preserve history, traditions and beliefs and share cultural ideas about Indigenous world view and thinking.
- ▶ Your child could hear a story from you, a family member, community member or Elder.

EXAMPLES:

- *Tell your child their birth story and emphasize how happy you are to be their parent.*
- *Talk about their baby days and reflect with photos and keepsakes. Recount stories about their growth and achievements, for example, when they took their first steps, who was there, where it happened.*

- ▶ Tell stories about family members, pets, and places you have been.
- ▶ Share stories about your own childhood days and make connections that your child can understand.

EXAMPLE:

- *Let them know that you didn't like raisins and used to pick them out of the bannock/scone too.*

- ▶ Talk about where you have lived and where your child has lived and use photos to support the stories and visits with friends and relatives there.

EXAMPLE:

- *Encourage your child to re-tell what happened on a special event such as their birthday.*

- ▶ If you have a traditional name, explain how that came to you and what the name means. If you know the origin/meaning of your child's family name or traditional name, share the story with your child.

Family and community traditions

- ▶ Take part in family and community celebrations and gatherings so that your child can hear their Indigenous language, drumming and singing, and join in cultural activities such as making and sharing food, gifting something to another person to show respect/appreciation, pow wow dancing and making regalia.
- ▶ Your child has a natural affinity for the Indigenous language of your family. Your child can connect to the songs, chants, and stories of your family.
- ▶ The words of your family and community have a special rhythm and sound patterns that are linked back to the Indigenous language even if it is no longer spoken in your family.
- ▶ Your child can hear the wisdom of the Elders in the stories and respond in a deep way to the sounds and rhythms of traditional songs (the beat of the drum that echoes the heartbeat of Mother Earth) and the words, patterns and melodies (reflecting aspects of life and nature).
- ▶ Drumming, chanting, dancing/jigging and throat singing open your child to the pulse of the Earth and the Universe in a celebration of being alive in the moment.
- ▶ Your child's voice and breath unifies Nature and Spirit and brings out their true path forward in life.

Do household tasks together

- ▶ Doing everyday activities together can build communication skills.
- ▶ Activities that involve routines and planned sequences of actions are especially good for learning.
- ▶ Participating in household tasks can help your child feel important and become a good helper in the family.
- ▶ Start with easy tasks that promote language concepts and also encourage some independence.

EXAMPLES:

- *Ask your child to help you match socks. Hand your child one pair of socks at a time, and ask them to sort them for family members. This activity builds understanding and use of gender words that can be a challenge to learn. "These are daddy's socks. Put them in his pile." "These are Shelley's socks. Put them in her pile."*
- *Make a meal together as a special activity. Look at a written recipe. Ask your child to name and arrange ingredients and cooking tools. Ask your child to do some of the steps that engage them in fun actions like pouring, stirring, spreading, and sprinkling. Give your child directions to set up the table. This develops your child's listening and responding skills. Try challenging these skills. For example, if your child can follow two directions in a row try giving three or make up a direction that is new or just for fun.*

Do errands together

- ▶ Engage your child in everyday family activities and in different settings.
- ▶ This develops your child's behavior, communication, and social skills for different situations. It also helps your child to get used to transitions and not to fear new people and situations, such as grocery shopping, visiting in a friend's home, riding the bus, or borrowing a book from the library.

EXAMPLE:

- Ask your child to help make a grocery list and get items from shelves in the grocery store. This develops awareness of print and exposure to language that goes with shopping, including following directions ("Get the big yellow box, please.", "Bring one can of beans", "Put the bread on the counter", "Put the paper towel under the sink".)

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Reference

Ball, J. and Peltier, S. (2014). *Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities: Strategies for Early Language Facilitation and Support*. Prepared for the Public Health Agency of Canada.