



First Nations Languages and Health

What is the connection between language and health?

Language has a vital role in the mental, physical and emotional health of First Nations communities in B.C. Language connects us to our culture, history, spirituality and land, which are the foundations of personal and community wellness.

One study found that language plays a key role in lower youth suicide rates (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Another study found a connection between language maintenance and lower rates of diabetes in some First Nations communities (Grier et. al, 2014). A third study pointed to the profound role of language in resiliency (Christian et. al, 2015). *Resilience* is the ability to remain strong in the face of overwhelming challenges. Connections to tradition, language and culture can build resilience and support healing from a history of cultural and linguistic repression and loss.

Aside from direct impacts on health, language also supports increased academic success. For example, a study on a Mi'kmaq language program showed that students in the immersion program had greater

academic success than students in an English program (Tompkins & Orr, 2011). Studies on the Nawahi Immersion School in Hawaii have shown that the school has averaged a 100% high school graduation rate and an 80% college attendance rate since its first senior class graduated in 1999 (Wilson & Kamana, 2006; Wilson, 2012). These findings are significant because academic success helps people get better jobs and more economic benefits. Increased income in turn contributes to better health.

Why is the connection important?

Not only do our languages tie us to our history, spirituality, culture and the land, they also are a source of knowledge about our health and well-being. The forced loss of First Nations languages caused the loss of traditional knowledge that had kept communities well for centuries (Baldwin, Whalen & Moss, 2016). Language is a critical part of the

"Throughout the world, Indigenous languages are being lost, and with them, an essential part of Indigenous identity. Language revitalisation can be seen, therefore, as a health promotion strategy."

- King, Smith & Gracey (2009)

cultural values and beliefs that are essential to the emotional well-being and mental health of a community. King, Smith & Gracey (2009) highlight the important link between language revitalization and Indigenous health and well-being, especially because language is strongly connected to spirituality, which plays an essential role in Indigenous people's health.



Preparing salmon, Photo by Candice Simon

What can I do?

Promote traditional land use and lifestyles in the community

Language supports traditional land use and lifestyles. Our ancestors knew how to live healthy lives on this land, and much of their knowledge is embedded in our languages. By learning our languages and being on the land, we can reconnect to our traditional healthy lifestyles.

Develop community language programs for all ages

Language programs ideally should start at a young age. Young children learn new languages faster and easier than adults. Early learning sets children on a path of strong cultural connection. But although early learning is ideal, it is important that

everyone in the community have opportunities to learn the language.

Language programs are a way of bringing the community together, to improve the unity and health of the community. There are many “silent speakers” of First Nations languages, people who can understand the language but don’t speak it due to trauma from residential school or other reasons. Special programs can be developed to support silent speakers to begin speaking the language again.

Support First Nations identity in the community through language and culture

Our languages teach us who we are and how to live well in this world.

Language and culture provide healing and build strong identities as First Nations people.

Community-based programs that provide cultural opportunities and pass on language and traditional knowledge will help build positive identities and resilience for community members of all ages.



Aboriginal Arts Development Awards recipient Tara Willard, photo by Candice Simon

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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