

# Through the Eyes of Children: First Nations Children's Perceptions of Health

Results from research at the 'Bimaadiziwin Learning Experience'



A community-based research project created by  
The Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC)

In partnership with

The University of Western Ontario



## What was this research study about?

The purpose of this community-based research study was to gather information about First Nations children's perceptions of health. The objectives of this study were: 1) to understand how First Nations children think about their health, with an emphasis on the activities they connect to health; and 2) to understand how these children connect their health with their culture. The information gathered within this study will be used by the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre to develop more effective health programs for First Nations children in the local community.

## When and where did this study take place?



The Garden Learning Centre

The study took place within the Bimaadiziwin Learning Experience (BLE), a week-long culture camp in August 2013. The BLE occurred largely within the Garden Learning Centre at SOAHAC's Chippewa site (image above).

## Who was involved?

- 20 children
- Aged 10-12 years
- Place of residence: Oneida Nation of the Thames, Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, Walpole Island First Nation, city of London

## What were the research activities?

### Painting

The painting activity prompted children to be creative in thinking about health. The painting occurred on the first day of the BLE. Children were provided with paints, paintbrushes, and a blank canvas, and were asked to paint a picture in response to the question: "What does being healthy look like to you?"

### Sharing circles

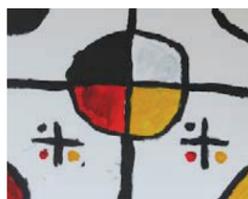
The sharing circles provided a safe environment for children to talk about health. Each sharing circle included 4 or 5 children, and was guided by a camp counselor. The children were asked to share their paintings, and to answer questions about health (E.g., "What does the word healthy mean to you?", "As a First Nations person, what does it mean to be healthy?"). The sharing circles were audio recorded, with permission from the parents and children.

## What were the results?

Overall, the children had a lot to say about health. Their paintings and discussions emphasized food and physical activity; healthy foods were portrayed in 12 of the paintings, while symbols of physical activity (e.g., a lacrosse stick, a walking trail) were portrayed in five. In addition to foods and exercise, the children's discussions centered around four main themes:

**The importance of relationships.** Relationships emerged as an important component of health. Healthy activities, such as dancing or playing lacrosse, were described as occurring with family members and friends. Parents were described as role models and important sources of health information. Grandparents were described as important sources of cultural knowledge, who taught the kids how to hunt, fish, dance, and speak their language.

**Being in nature.** The children associated being outside with being in nature.



They enjoyed being outside, and recommended that future programs involve more outdoor activities. Being in nature will help children to develop their cultural identity, another important component of health.



**Learning through doing.** While certain activities within the BLE involved sitting and listening, the children showed a preference for hands-on activities. When discussing activities that are connected to health and/or culture, learning through doing was evident as well.

**Living between two worlds.** The children's ideas about health were influenced by both Western and First Nations ways of knowing. While some children incorporated cultural symbols into their paintings (e.g., the wampum belt, the medicine wheel), and enjoyed discussing cultural activities, they often struggled to connect these to health. Children emphasized physical aspects of health, which is common in Western society, while rarely exploring the mental, emotional, or spiritual aspects, as depicted in the First Nations medicine wheel.

## What are the implications of this study?

1. Programs should promote the importance of relationships by involving family members, such as parents and grandparents, in the design and delivery
2. Programs should foster children's interest in nature by providing outdoor activities
3. Programs should emphasize hands-on learning
4. Programs should bring together Western and First Nation ways of knowing

Thank you – Miigwetch -  
Nia:Wen



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- Researchers at UWO
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## Where can I learn more?

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