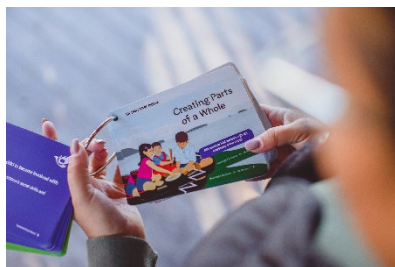




Supporting Mi'kmaw Families with Msit Mijua'ji'jk: A Cultural Approach to Early Childhood Development

By: Alexa Sylliboy and Coral Paul

Raising young children can be challenging for many caregivers, whether they are parents, grandparents, extended family members, foster parents, or kinship caregivers. From sleepless nights to feelings of isolation, caring for a young child can be both rewarding and overwhelming. For Mi'kmaw families, the need for culturally relevant support during these early years is crucial to help ensure children grow up comfortable and confident in their identity.



Msit Mijua'ji'jk Toolkit Cards

Recognizing these challenges, Tajikeimik, with guidance from The Martin Family Initiative (MFI), developed the Msit Mijua'ji'jk program. Designed to support families during the most critical stages of a child's development through age 0 to 4 years, the program provides caregivers with the tools and resources to be their child's first and best teacher.

A key component of the program is the Community Home Visitor initiative. This component connects families with trained home visitors who offer personalized, culturally specific support. While MFI provided the curriculum templates for training, the program was adapted with input from Mi'kmaw communities to reflect their traditions. Elders and Knowledge Keepers shared ancestral childcare practices, ensuring that the program is deeply rooted in Mi'kmaw culture and values.

Home Visitor, Kalo Johnson explains, "We support families through an Indigenous lens, allowing participants to feel accepted and connected to their [Mi'kmaw] identity. It's rewarding to see the children develop, and even though Home Visitors can experience burnout, I feel renewed after each visit."

In addition to one-on-one support, Msit Mijua'ji'jk brings families together for group activities that foster connections among caregivers and children within the



At the Evaluation Event in Eskasoni (L to R): Jolena Christmas, Home Visitor; Lauren Lucas, MFI; Miya Kagan-Cassidy, MFI; Maryi Joe-Francis, Tajikeimik; Adrianna Bonnell, Tajikeimik; Katalin Johnson, Home Visitor

community. Jennie Peck shares, "It's really good for my mental health. It gives me time to socialize with other mothers and caregivers, and my child gets to meet other kids their age." The program also incorporates cultural learning, such as traditional crafts and language, which further strengthen ties to Mi'kmaw culture.

In the Fall of 2024, Evaluation Events were held in the five Msit Mijua'ji'jk sites: Eskasoni, Membertou, Potlotek, Paqtnkek, and at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Kjipuktuk (Halifax). These events, combined with typical group gatherings, brought MFI representatives and community members together to gather feedback from parents, guardians, and Home Visitors. The discussions focused on what participants liked about the program, areas for improvement, and ideas for the future. This feedback is helping to shape the program's evolution, ensuring it continues to meet the needs of Mi'kmaw families.



Participant at the Eskasoni Baby & Me Halloween Party

Kalo Nicholas reflected, "I didn't know there were so many families with babies the same age as mine in my community. This program has brought us together."

The Msit Mijua'ji'jk program is committed to listening to the community and providing families with support as they navigate the joys and challenges of early childhood. The program is currently offered in Membertou, Eskasoni, Potlotek, Paqtnkek, and at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. We are working to secure funding to offer the program in all Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia.

For more information, check out the Tajikeimik website at www.mhwns.ca/programs to learn more about Msit Mijua'ji'jk and how this innovative program is making a difference for Mi'kmaw families.

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