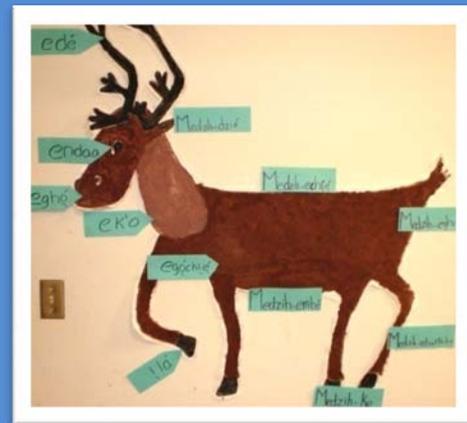
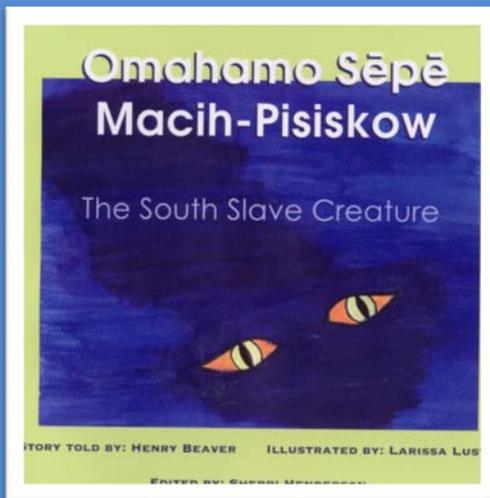
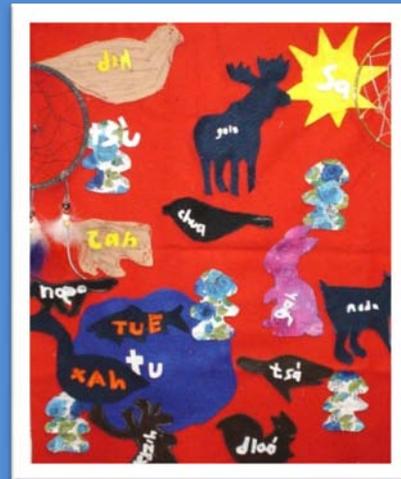


Celebrate

Aboriginal Languages Month



March 2009



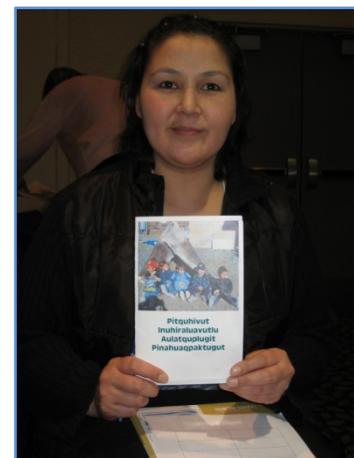
NWT Literacy Council

Introduction

The NWT is rich in Aboriginal cultures and languages. Language and culture are strongly linked. However, Aboriginal language loss is increasing at a rapid rate. The NWT has eleven official languages—nine of these are Aboriginal: Gwich'in, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, Inuinnaqtun, North Slavey, South Slavey, Tłı̨chǫ, Chipewyan and Cree. The health of these languages varies greatly, but unfortunately most are declining.

We hope that this resource helps you:

- Understand why it is important to encourage the use of Aboriginal language in your community, home and literacy programs.
- Understand some of the issues around maintaining and revitalizing an Aboriginal language.
- Understand how young children learn language.
- Integrate culture and language into your community programs.
- Promote Aboriginal language and culture in your community.
- Get ideas for Aboriginal Languages Month.



My Dene Language - A Lost Heritage?

I stole something very important from my son – his Chipewyan language. I didn't intentionally do this to deprive him. I could come up with all kinds of excuses of why I didn't teach him to speak Chipewyan, but after all is said and done the fact remains that by not teaching him, I deprived him of the opportunity to learn some valuable lessons and history from his grandparents.

Sure they could talk to him about simple everyday things in their limited English, but they could not share with him the stories of his ancestors and the life they lived because he wouldn't understand it. He is missing out on learning more about himself and his people because he cannot effectively communicate with the source of this information.

I can tell him the stories in English but sometimes the richness of the history is best related in the language. Telling him about "Dene Medicine" is not the same as telling him about *ʔekáʔé* – one explains a practice, the other defines a people's way of life. I've taken this concept away from my son by not teaching him his language.

I wish that someone had told me when my son was born to make sure I taught him his language. By not doing so, I have taken away an important part of his culture. It makes me very sad when I think about what I didn't do.

As parents, we should make every effort to teach our children their language.¹

By Sabet Biscaye

¹ From *Languages of the Land*, NWT Literacy Council, 1999

Why encourage the use of the Aboriginal language?

Language is connected to culture and one's roots and identity. Elders tell us that it is important to speak your Aboriginal language because "languages are tied to knowing who you are in the core of your soul." (First Nations Congress 1991)



Culture and language are important parts of who we are. Culture shapes the way we look at the world. Language represents culture, and shows which cultural group we belong to. We use language to pass on our culture from one generation to the next. Through language, we learn about the culture and traditions of our ancestors; and we learn our stories.

If language is so connected to one's identity then promoting Aboriginal language in your community can be seen as promoting self-esteem, healthy lifestyles and family and cultural values. Learning an Aboriginal language from an early age whether in the home, in school or ideally in both helps children emotionally and socially. It also helps them do well in school.

For a language to survive, it needs to pass from generation to generation. Ideally, this happens in the home and the community, where family members learn the language from birth and use it as part of their everyday lives. However, everyone in the community can be involved in culture and language activities. You don't have to be fluent in the language yourself. You can invite elders and other people who know the traditions and culture and who are fluent in the language to help with some of the activities. ²

(photo from Ulukhaktok, courtesy of Jeri Miltenberger, Fort Smith)

² **Handbook for Aboriginal Language Program Planning in British Columbia**, First Nations Education Steering Committee, Vancouver by Marianne B. Ignace Phd Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, Simon Fraser University.

How do children learn language?

For many years, Aboriginal parents and educators were told that education in an Aboriginal language, whether through immersion or bilingual education, would be harmful to the children's education. Basically, they were told that if they taught their children their Aboriginal language at home it would 'hold them back' in school. The result of this was that Aboriginal parents were told to teach their children English at home so they could get their children off to a good start in school.

As linguists and specialists in education now know, the opposite is actually true. Learning an Aboriginal language from an early age in the home, daycare, pre-school or community enhances the social, emotional and intellectual development as well as the academic achievement of children. It turns out that learning to speak and understand, as well as read and write, in an Aboriginal language provides many benefits. ³

"I speak Cree to my toddler at home and my husband speaks English to her. She can now say words in both languages. She is so excited to speak in both languages."

Here are some ways children learn a language:

- **They need to hear both languages.** If they are learning more than one language it is important that they hear and speak both languages. One parent can speak one language and the other parent can speak the other with the child.



³ **Handbook for Aboriginal Language Program Planning in British Columbia**, First Nations Education Steering Committee, Vancouver by Marianne B. Ignace Phd Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, Simon Fraser University.

- **They copy what they hear and see.** Talk to them about everything you are doing. Help them learn the words and phrases they need to express themselves.
- **They learn by playing.** They use dolls and other toys to “talk” to each other. This helps children play and learn at the same time.
- **They often have a “silent period”.** This means they are getting ready to speak the language as soon as they feel comfortable.
- **They sometimes make mistakes.** This is a natural part of language development. Sometimes they can’t make a certain sound or say a word properly because their mouths, tongues, throats and lungs are still developing. Don’t focus on correcting their errors all the time.
- **They like to repeat things.** They often want to read or hear the same story over and over again. They like it when they can tell the story themselves. They have great memories.
- **They love singing.** Singing uses a different part of the brain than speaking, so children often learn the words to songs faster than the words we use for everyday speech.
- **They sometimes mix up the languages.** Don’t worry. It won’t take long for them to sort them out and put the pieces together. It just takes time, and a lot of listening and practice.⁴



No language is too hard for a child to learn. Children can easily learn more than one language or dialect at a time. A child can master up to 90% of a language in the first four years! Children have the capacity to learn several different languages at one time when they are young.

⁴ Adapted from material prepared through the GNWT’s Early Childhood Development Framework for Action by Harnum and Associates

How can you promote language use in your community?

To make change in your community people must work together. At first it may be difficult to get everyone in your community to work towards keeping your language strong. You can start doing small things in the community to help build strong language skills.

You can:

- Have a meeting in your community to discuss the importance of revitalizing your language. Come up with a plan of action.
- Form a language and literacy committee that works to promote Aboriginal language in your community. You can plan special events, make presentations to the school, health centre and band office about the importance of Aboriginal language or work with literacy programs to include Aboriginal language activities in their program.
- Use promotional posters, signs and billboards. For example you could put up posters or signs around town saying, “Did you speak Slavey to your child today?”
- Encourage your band or council to put up signs in your language in your community. For example, Fort Resolution has all its street signs in Chipewyan.
- Organize bingo games in your language for prizes (cash or gifts). The Dettah Language Centre runs AEIO games in the Weledeh language for families. Elders, children, parents and youth participate in these fun nights. They have wonderful prizes that are donated by local businesses.



- Work with the community learning centre and try and organize language classes for community members. Some communities have brought people in for a week for intense language programs. These programs have been very popular.
- Organize immersion camps for weekends or work with the school to include cultural and language programs at the school. For example, Chief Jimmy Bruneau School in Bechokò (Rae-Edzo) has a trap line. Each Thursday, students go out to check the trap line and spend the night out on the land. They also have on-the-land caribou hunts each fall and month-long canoe trips in the summer for youth, parents, Elders and teachers. These are great examples of how you can incorporate language and cultural activities into a school.

Over time, community members will see the value of keeping their language strong. It may be difficult to mobilize younger members of the community who do not speak their language; they may not see a practical use for it. Many youth say they are embarrassed to use their Aboriginal language because they can't pronounce words properly or they are frustrated that they have not learned yet. Some older people may feel angry over their loss of language because of residential school.⁵

In order to mobilize community members, the revival and maintenance of the language must be tied to everyday life activities.

⁵ **Handbook for Aboriginal Language Program Planning in British Columbia**, First Nations Education Steering Committee, Vancouver by Marianne B. Ignace Phd Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, Simon Fraser University.

What are some ideas to celebrate Aboriginal Languages Month?

1. Have a language contest on the radio. For example Ulukhaktok used to have a language contest on the radio every Friday. They say 10 words in English and the first person to translate them into Inuinnaqtun wins a prize.
2. Ask Elders to tell stories on the radio for the month of March. Stories on the radio are a fun way to engage families in literacy. In one community they hand out the stories ahead of time so people can read along with the storyteller. They also have questions at the end of the story and the first person to call in with the correct answer wins a prize.
3. Organize a *Mystery Readers on the Radio*. Recruit volunteers to read on the radio. The first caller to identify the reader wins a prize.
4. Make up some literacy ads for your community. Have Elders, youth or parents read them out on the radio. Your ads can have different messages like:
 - Parents are their child's first and most important teacher. Read, sing and talk to your child everyday.
 - Speak your first language at home. Keep our language and culture strong.
5. Get together with community members and do a family tree for the different families in your community. It is a wonderful way to share language, culture and history with each other. Use your Aboriginal language to name the relationships of the different people. For example *nohkam* is Bush Cree for Grandmother.



6. Have an evening of storytelling with Elders. Stories are a wonderful way of teaching and learning Aboriginal languages. They help children with memory skills, oral communication, and imagination.
7. Think about all the values and laws that are part of your tradition. Ask Elders to tell you about the values of your culture. Write them down in your Aboriginal language and display them at the local store, school or band office.
8. Have a traditional crafts night. Ask Elders to come and teach a craft. Ask everyone who attends to only speak their Aboriginal language!
9. Put posters up around town with pictures of community members doing literacy activities or make pamphlets about the importance of using your Aboriginal language. You can include Elders telling stories, families reading together, people doing traditional skills like sewing. Put slogans on the posters/pamphlets that promote community, culture, language and literacy like:



- Literacy is a family affair.
- Literacy is more than reading and writing – share your culture and your language.
- Start Early – read, sing and talk to your baby in **Tłıchǫ** (you can use the language of your community).
- It's never too late to learn.
- Learn something new everyday.
- Share your stories – share your culture.
- Speak **Gwich'in** at home (substitute different languages).

Did you speak Slavey today?

10. Have a fun night of Aboriginal language bingo. You can create simple bingo games in your Aboriginal language. Use pictures of things that are unique to your culture and traditions. You can use clip art or draw pictures. You can also use pictures and words together. Write the words in your Aboriginal language. You can find a northern picture bingo on the NWT Literacy Council's website at http://www.nwt.literacy.ca/famlit_res.htm



11. Invite families to come and make homemade books. You can create your own Aboriginal language books that reflect your unique dialect in your community. Homemade books are easy to make and lots of fun.

This book was developed by the folks at the Goyatı́ kò Language Centre in Dettah. It is done in both English and Tłı́chò and each page is filled with different 'I love yous.' For example: I love my son, I love my husband, I love my grandpa. They printed these off for families in their community for Valentine's Day. The local pre-school also uses them in the program.

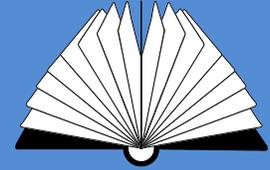


You can make this simple book in your own community with your own language. You can use the computer to dress it up a bit or you can cut out pictures from magazines.



NWT Literacy Council

NWT Literacy Council
Box 716
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2N6
(867) 873-9262 or 1-866-599-6758
nwtliteracy@nwtliteracy.ca
www.nwt.literacy.ca



NWT Literacy Council

For more information contact your language coordinator.

Chipewyan

Chipewyan Language Coordinator
Akaitho Territory Government
Fort Resolution, NT X0E 0M0
Phone: (867) 394-3313 Fax: (867) 394-3413
atgovt@ssimicro.com

Cree

Regional Cree Language Coordinator
Northwest Territory Métis Nation
206 McDougal Road
Box 720
Fort Smith, NT X0E 0P0
Phone: (867) 872-2770 Fax: (867) 872- 2772
Email: reception@nwtmn@northwestel.net

Tłı̨chǫ

Language, Culture and Community
Director
Tłı̨chǫ Government, Bag #5
Rae-Edzo, NT X0E 0Y0
Phone: (867) 392-3000 Fax: (867) 392-3001
Email: wmantla@Tlı̨cho.net

Gwich'in

Manager of Language Programs
Gwich'in Social & Cultural Institute
Box 54
Fort McPherson, NT X0E 0J0
Phone: (867) 952-2377 Fax: (867) 952-2433
Email: wgfirth@learnnet.nt.ca

North Slavey

Regional Program Manager
Sahtu Secretariat Inc.
Box 155
Deline, NT X0E 0G0
Phone: (867) 589-4719
Fax: (867) 589-4908
Email: Phoebe.Esau@gov.deline.ca

South Slavey

Language Specialist
Deh Cho First Nations
Box 89
Fort Simpson, NT X0E 0N0
Phone: (867) 695-2355
Fax: (876) 695-2038
Email: admin@dechofirstnation.com

Inuvialuit

Manager, Inuvialuit Cultural & Resource
Centre
Bag Service #21
Inuvik, NT 0T0
Phone: (867) 777-2595
Fax: (867) 678-2597
Email: cockney@irc.inuvialuit.com