



STORIES AND TEACHINGS ABOUT INFANT CARE

“As Indigenous people, the babies are everything to us. It’s our hope for the future.”¹

*Laurie Jacobs,
Aboriginal Midwife*



The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives wants every Aboriginal person to receive reproductive health care services that improve all areas of health for our people.

“How do I define Aboriginal Midwifery? I don’t think you can define it. I think that when an Aboriginal person is a midwife, then she will define her practice the way she needs to and the way her community needs to. I think that if Aboriginal midwifery is anything it is community midwifery. It is community based and it is defined by that community.”² – *Carol Couchie, Nishnaabekwe, Midwife, Nipissing First Nation*

This booklet shares teachings and stories related to infant care.

“Storytelling is a way to empower and put tools of empowerment in the hands of Communities.”³
– *The Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence*

Looking for an Aboriginal midwife in your community?

Contact NACM for information:

nacm@aboriginalmidwives.ca or 1-514-807-3668, ext. 220
aboriginalmidwives.ca

Warm thanks to: Karen Lawford (researcher-writer); Kerry Bebee, Melissa Brown, Lisa Bishop, Cherylee Bourgeois, Evelyn George (advisory committee); Melanie Laquerre (designer).

This publication was made possible through a partnership with  Save the Children

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN

We are at a turning point in history. All across Turtle Island, there is renewed attention of the importance of children and how Aboriginal midwifery can actively contribute to the health and wellbeing of all community members.



The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives recognizes the vital importance and role of children as community members. Children are more than our future; they are key to the continuity of our knowledges, teachings, and peoples.

“A newborn is very powerful, the greatest of all teachers. They can sense things that are not the norm, and let you know. And they continue to teach us as they grow. For example, they will crawl, stand, fall down and get up again. You don’t just get up once and walk forever, you will fall, and you will have to get up again and again.”⁴ – Elder Mary Lee

CONNECTING *and* RE-CONNECTING

There are teachings and stories in all Aboriginal communities about the importance of families, communities, and acceptance. These teachings include Two-Spirit, gender fluid, LGBTQ+, Queer, and transgender peoples.

“The term Two-Spirit refers to another gender role believed to be common among most, if not all, first peoples of Turtle Island (North America), one that had a proper and accepted place within indigenous societies. This acceptance was rooted in the spiritual teachings that say all life is sacred and that the Creator must have a reason for making someone different. This gender role was not based in sexual activities or practices, but rather the sacredness that comes from being different. This definition is not meant to replace cultural and traditional teachings, which speak to this role. It is intended to find common ground and to help educate in a contemporary context.”⁵
– *Native Youth Sexual Health Network*

We are all learning more about Aboriginal ways of being before contact with European settlers. NACM honours all Aboriginal peoples in our families and communities through our first core value, which is healing.

WELCOMING CEREMONIES *and* FEASTS

Many communities have ceremonies and feasts to welcome a baby into the community.



The Tsay Keh Dene Nation, for example, has blessing ceremonies for a new baby:

“Elders welcome and introduce the babies to community and a feast follows the event. This is [a] way not only to recognize and welcome new life but also to bring traditions back with singing, drumming and Elder involvement by speaking on traditional beliefs and parenting styles.”⁶

– Tsay Keh Dene Nation Teaching

Naming ceremonies are also a part of introducing a baby into a community.

“Naming fostered a connection between Elders and infants; those who were closest to the doorways of the spirit world in terms of coming into this world and preparing to leave it.”⁷ – Kim Anderson

To find an Elder, talk to others about their experiences. Trusted Elders are generally well known within community circles. Be aware of your own cultural and personal safety with all care providers, including Elders. A responsible Elder will be supportive of your choices.

BREASTFEEDING

Breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed your baby.

It also helps to bond with baby as well as providing immunity to some illnesses. Breastfeeding skin-to-skin helps regulate the baby's temperature, heart rate, and blood sugar. Skin-to-skin contact with the baby helps the baby grow.⁸

There are many benefits of breastfeeding⁹, like:

- Convenient
- Nutritious
- Portable
- Chronic disease prevention
- Reduced risk of SIDS
- Inexpensive
- Protection against breast and ovarian cancer

For more information and support, talk to your midwife or contact La Leche League: www.LLCC.ca or 1-800-665-4324

“Nengajgchigewin means gentle parenting, extended nursing, strong attachments, immediate response to a child’s need. This is based on the fundamental belief that ‘children will only ask for things as long as they need them.’”⁸ – Best Start Resource Centre



**PARENTS WHO
CHOOSE NOT TO
BREASTFEED ARE STILL
LOVING, NURTURING,
AND RESPONSIBLE.**

USING A MOSS BAG



Moss bags and cradleboards were regularly used by Aboriginal peoples.

Today, there is a growing interest in learning more about using moss bags.

“Babies were wrapped in a moss bag and securely bound to a thin cushioned board usually made of pine or cedar wood, and laced with thin straps of leather. Boards were smudged with prayers, songs and good thoughts for the baby. They were then either carried in parents’ arms, worn on mother’s back during travel, propped up on the ground like a baby chair or secured to a sled for longer journeys.”¹⁰

– *Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc.*

“The moss bag long ago was a place to keep baby warm. The moss was wrapped in there, and that’s the moss bag. And the moss was actually the diaper, which was reusable, medicinal. Babies never had diaper rashes, never suffered from any of those things. The original purpose was just for safety and comfort and it just helps them to grow strong, grow sturdy and at this point, the wrapping keeps her head mostly secure. Babies sleep longer, rest better.”¹¹

– *Roxanne Shuttleworth, Ebb and Flow First Nation*

Ask your midwife or a community member to show you how to use a moss bag. A Friendship Centre may also have information.

CRADLEBOARDS



Aboriginal peoples all over Turtle Island use cradleboards for their babies.

The baby is snugly wrapped into the moss bag, which is then laced to the cradleboard,

called tikinagan in Anishinaabemowin and tikinakan in Cree. While the styles and construction of the cradleboard differed among nations, it is used to keep baby safe and protected. The Blackfoot people even attached the cradleboard to the saddle when riding a horse.¹² Being inside a moss bag and cradleboard also provides teachings for the child.

“Children also learned patient observation and mindfulness while in the cradleboard, having only their senses to rely on for entertainment. They would sit in stillness, watching their mothers work, listening to the sounds of their environment or their mother’s lullabies, taking in the fragrances around them, and feeling the sun, wind, warmth, and coolness on their face. There was no other option than to be mindful.”¹³

– Sarah Sunshine Manning

HERE IS A VIDEO THAT SHOWS HOW TO USE A
CRADLEBOARD: TYING UP BABY IN NISH TIKINAGAN
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FugNA_LaK_E

PARTNER *and* FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Partner and family involvement with the care of your infant can be a healing experience for everyone involved.

Forming emotional connections helps build relationships and communities. Families can support you in raising your child, sharing the work, preparing food for you, telling stories about how they were raised, and giving you a rest!

Hearing the sounds of our languages, the songs and stories of our people, and the laughter of our families surrounds our children with the medicine of love. It is this way that the knowledges of our parents and grandparents get passed along to our children and their children.

“I have grandchildren now and I see how life goes on through your children and into your grandchildren and that continuity. So now when I see a baby, I see a future.”¹⁴ – Darlene Birch, Métis Midwife





BABY WEARING

Carrying your baby next to you builds a wonderful closeness between you and your baby.



It is also a great way to keep an eye on your baby while you are looking after other children, doing chores, or even going for a walk.

All members of your family can carry your baby in a sling or baby carrier. It also helps create memories of baby's warmth, soft skin, and drool for everyone. Do it now before baby is too big to carry!

References and Resources

- ¹National Aboriginal Council of Midwives (n.d.). Aboriginal midwifery video. Available at <http://www.isuma.tv/en/national-aboriginal-council-of-midwives/aboriginal-midwifery-video>
- ²National Aboriginal Health Organization (2008). Celebrating birth – Aboriginal midwifery in Canada. Author: Ottawa, ON.
- ³The Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (2004). Community based research and Aboriginal women's health and healing [Project #136]. Author: Winnipeg, MB. Available at <http://www.pwhce.ca/pdf/CommBasedSaskatoon.pdf>
- ⁴Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc. (2015, Spring). Tikinagan - Moss bags. Author: Winnipeg, MB. Available at <http://mfnerc.org/newsletter/tikinagan-moss-bags/>
- ⁵Native Youth Sexual Health Network (n.d.). Two-Spirit & Indigenous LGBTQIA mentors, Elders, & grandparents support circle. Available at <http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/supportcircle.html>
- ⁶Tsay Keh Dene Nation (n.d.). Aboriginal infant development. Author: Prince George, BC. Available at <http://www.tsaykeh.com/aboriginal-infant-development>
- ⁷Anderson, K. (2011). Life stages and native women: Memory, teachings, and story medicine. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.
- ⁸Best Start Resource Centre (2013). Breastfeeding for the health and future of our nation: A guide for Aboriginal families and communities in Ontario. Author: Toronto, ON. Available at http://www.beststart.org/resources/breastfeeding/BFHFN_sept26.pdf
- ⁹Public Health Agency of Canada (2015). 10 great reasons to breastfeed your baby. Author: Ottawa, ON. Available at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-deal/stages-etapes/childhood-enfance_0-2/nutrition/reasons-raisons-eng.php
- ¹⁰Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc. (2015, Spring). Tikinagan - Moss bags. Author: Winnipeg, MB. Retrieved from <http://mfnerc.org/newsletter/tikinagan-moss-bags/>
- ¹¹CBC Radio: Unreserved (2016, May 31). Moss bag teachings with Roxanne. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/cbcunreserved/videos/1182246541799537/>
- ¹²St. Rosemary Educational Institute (2016). The Blackfoot Indians: History, culture, society. Available at <http://schoolworkhelper.net/the-blackfoot-indians-history-culture-society/>
- ¹³Manning, S. S. (2015, May 10). Baby baskets and cradleboards: Reclaiming the medicine of traditional mothering. Available at <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/05/10/baby-baskets-and-cradleboards-reclaiming-medicine-traditional-mothering-160314>
- ¹⁴National Aboriginal Council of Midwives. (n.d.). Aboriginal midwives. Available at <http://www.isuma.tv/en/national-aboriginal-council-of-midwives/aboriginal-midwives>
- ¹⁵First Nations Health Council (2002/2003). Healthy children, healthy families, healthy communities: The road to wellness. Author: West Vancouver, BC. Available at http://www.fnhc.ca/pdf/RHS_2002_2003_Regional_Report.pdf

Core Values of Aboriginal Midwifery

HEALING
RESPECT
AUTONOMY
COMPASSION
BONDING
BREASTFEEDING
CULTURAL SAFETY
CLINICAL EXCELLENCE
EDUCATION
RESPONSIBILITY

“The spirit is the whole base of our life....the culture has been in us for 1000s of years. It takes care of us. We are all medicine to one another.”¹⁵

*Elder Sarah Modeste,
Cowichan*



The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives exists to promote excellence in reproductive health care for Inuit, First Nations, and Métis women. We advocate for the restoration of midwifery education, the provision of midwifery services, and choice of birthplace for all Aboriginal communities, consistent with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Our Vision: Aboriginal midwives working in every Aboriginal community.



NACM
NATIONAL ABORIGINAL
COUNCIL OF MIDWIVES

514-807-3668, EXT. 220
NACM@ABORIGINALMIDWIVES.CA
ABORIGINALMIDWIVES.CA