

# Native and Mainstream Parenting A Comparative Study

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It has long been known that Native parenting practices are different than those of mainstream parents. A review of the literature on parenting practices shows that substantial differences existed particularly in looking at Native parenting practices before contact (van de Sande, 1995). Traditional Native parents taught by example and use teasing and ignoring to discipline children as opposed to hitting or scolding (Trigger, 1985). Traditional European parents viewed children as the property of the father and the sole responsibility of the parents (Martens, 1988) while Native parents believed that children were gifts from the Creator (The Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 1986). Raising children was a community responsibility as opposed to the individual families responsibility (The Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 1986).

It has also been recognized that, since contact, First Nations communities have been greatly influenced by mainstream culture and values including the way children should be raised. Trigger, (1985) found that Jesuit missionaries encouraged Huron parents to use corporal punishment on their children. A classic study on acculturation involving 150 "Chippewa" families spanning 33 years and three generations, (Inez Hilger, 1939) demonstrated that the third and youngest generation of Chippewa families retained very little of their language and culture.

Finally, it has been recognized that Canadian government's policy of assimilation has had a devastating effect on Native communities (Shkilynyk, 1985). Until the 1960's, the policy of assimilation was carried out by church operated residential schools (Dunning, 1959). From the 1960's until the middle of the 1980's, thousands of Native children were placed in non-native foster or adoptive homes while provincial and federal authorities argued over funding responsibilities related to Native children who required care under provincial child welfare laws (Johnston, 1983). Although more recent policies attempt preventative strategies within Native communities, the effect of removing Native children from their homes continues to have an impact. Many communities argue that the current deplorable social and economic conditions are directly attributable to social policy makers, social workers and other agents of the government (Mawhiney, 2001).

Even, with the influence of mainstream culture, are there still differences in the way Native parents raise their children? What has been the impact of the assimilation policies on Native parenting? Research

conducted by the principal author on the evaluation of Native parenting programs for *Anishnabe* (Ojibway) people, suggests that, in spite of generations of influence by western mainstream culture, there continue to be significant and measurable differences in views about raising children. The research also suggests that assimilation policies continue to show their effects and that here are areas where native parents need support.

This article will deal with three questions: 1) are there significant differences between Native and non-Native parenting? 2) are there significant differences between Native and non-Native parenting? And finally 3) in what areas do Native parents need support? The article begins with a brief review of the literature on Native and mainstream parenting practices. Next, the methodology used to conduct the study will be described followed by the results and conclusion.

### **Literature Review:**

The literature review will cover what is known about Native parenting before contact with Europeans and the impact of European influence after contact. Although it must be acknowledged that each First Nation had their own traditions related to parenting, the values related to the role of children in many Native communities and their approaches to childcare may be common enough to establish some patterns. Since no written history exists of family life of the Anishnabe prior to contact, the only source of information is oral history as told in stories and legends preserved through time and passed along for generations Basil Johnston, (1976), an Anishnabe author, has recorded these stories and legends in written form in hope that the heritage of his people will be better understood.

Traditional Anishnabe stories describe the stages of life of young people. The first important event in a person's life is the naming ceremony. The name is normally given by an Elder at the request of the parents. The boys receive names related to climatic conditions or from the anticipated character of the boy, while the girls receive names derived from plants, or varying weather conditions, or the uses of water. During the next two or three years the young child spends most of the time in a *Ti Ki Na Gen*, the Anishnabe word for cradle (Johnston, 1976).

As soon as the child is old enough, their education begins. Skills of living are taught by example. Native history and culture are taught through stories. At about age seven, the education of boys and girls begins to differ. The boys begin to follow the men of the village and are trained to hunt and fish. A great event in the life of a boy is when he had made his first kill of an animal or bird. This is normally followed by a celebration to recognize the boy as provider of food. The girls follow their mothers and

learn to cook, make clothes, and care for young children. When not otherwise occupied, young girls watch other women make baskets or prepare hides. For a girl, the attainment of womanhood, at the time menstruation, was considered her greatest gift. A special lodge was built for her and from four to eight days she would live in this lodge by herself and keep vigil. She would abstain from food and take only water (Johnston, 1976).

Because of the precarious nature of their subsistence, knowledge of the natural environment was essential. The belief was that the world was made up of spirits or "Manitou's" with Kitchi Manitou being the Great Spirit. Spiritual education was seen as the foundation of a successful life and fasting and dreams were important aspects of this education. Further events were predicted through dreams. While the Europeans viewed these ceremonies as pagan nonsense, their psychosomatic effect on the believer was substantial (Schmalz, 1991).

After contact, Christian doctrine greatly influenced Native people. Bruce Trigger who is an authority on the early contact between Europeans and Natives found that the Jesuit missionaries encouraged corporal punishment of Huron children by their parents to help them become "good Christians" (Trigger, 185, p.267). Trigger points out that up to that point in time corporal punishment was considered inhuman and disgusting by Native people.

Some of the earliest writings about the Anishnabe people that make reference to parenting practices date back to the mid-1800' George Copway, (1972) or Ka-Ge-Ga-Gah-Bowh, an Anishnabe chief who become a Wesleyan minister, describes the traditional history of the Anishnabe in a book first published in 1850. He complains about the discipline practices used in non-people schools and suggested that "This whipping to learn is brutish and degrading – I might add, savage (Copway, 1972, p.28)."

Soon after, Johann Kohl (1985), a German historian describes life among the Lake Superior Anishnabes in a book first published in 1860, and reprinted in 1985. He writes, "Many Indians bring up their children as strictly as the Presbyterian families (Kohl, 1985,p.276).". There is no mention of the use of corporal punishment but he states that these children are well disciplined. While he doesn't define what he means by well-disciplined, as a European, it can be assumed that he means the children are well disciplined in the sense that they obey their parents wishes and follow their guidance.

This description is in sharp contrast to the work by Rev. Peter Jones (1970) a missionary who is Native. First appearing in 1861, his book provides a history of Anishnabe people and their conversion to Christianity. He describes parenting practices in the following manner:

In family government, I regret to say, my countrymen are very deficient; no discipline is enforced upon their children, consequently they grow up without restraint, and become self-willed and disobedient to their parents and guardians. They (the parents) scarcely ever inflict any punishment upon them beyond angry looks, and a little angry talk. (Jones, 1970, p.67)

Much later, in 1929, Frances Densmore published a book entitled Chippewa Customs. Chippewa is the English variation of the word Ojibway. Regarding the "governance of children", Densmore states that Anishnabe parents used gentleness and tact and that fear used was a form of control but "not to the extent which injured the child (Densmore, 1929, p.58)." He also mentions that one or more grandparents were usually found in each household. Grandmothers helped the mother bring up the girls and grandfathers would help to bring up the boys.

An extensive study was conducted by Inez Hilger (1939) on one hundred and fifty Chippewa families in Minnesota. The study, which was part of her doctoral work, describes in some detail the effects of white cultural influence. She divides her sample into three generations with each generation covering thirty-three years. The oldest was born between 1839 and 1872, the second born between 1871 and 1905, and the last born since 1905. The first generation spoke only "Chippewa" and practised the Mi-de-win religion. "They unhesitatingly say that modern education has been no substitute for traditional, parental practice (Hilger, 1939, p.77)." She also describes the involvement of grandparents:

"At times grandparents live in the homes where grandchildren live. Other older people, following their traditions, adopt, not legally but in the "Chippewa way" one or two of their grandchildren. Grandchildren so adopted live their lives entirely under the influence of grandparents. (Hilger, 1939, p.78)"

The second generation included in the sample showed a wide range of acculturation to European culture. The largest group were Catholic, Episcopal, or Methodist but they still lived in common-law marriages. They spoke both English and Chippewa. They still gathered wild rice but became dependent on cold packed meat and vegetables.

The last and youngest generation showed the greatest degree of acculturation. They all spoke English and only a few spoke Chippewa although many understood it. Only a few spoke Chippewa although many understood it. Only a few practiced the Mi-de-win religion. Hilger

concludes by underscoring how much change had taken place in three generations. Only vestiges of the traditional culture were evident in the third generation (Hilger, 1939).

The Anishnabe of southern Ontario were encouraged by the government to give up their traditional economy based on hunting and trapping and turn to agriculture. Far more land was needed to support a band through hunting and trapping than through farming. This was not the case for the Anishnabe living on the north shore of Georgian Bay. Since the poor climatic and soil conditions precluded farming, traditional pursuits of fishing, hunting and trapping were practised long after southern Anishnabe had become farmers (Schmalz, 1991). Based on a description by Flannery (1940), the Anishnabe from the North Shore of Lake Huron still lived a traditional lifestyle in the 1930's. They would disperse each winter to survive by hunting, fishing, and trapping. Traditional ceremonies such as the naming and fasting ceremonies were still practised and so was a reliance on dreams for guidance.

With reference to parenting practices, the author tells of the belief held by the Spanish River Anishnabe that animals approach young infants and make love to them. The animal, which makes love to a child, will take the child away if the mother is abusive or neglectful. With respect to discipline of young children, Flannery states that threats about bears, big birds, or spirits are enough to frighten the child into proper behaviour.

The next study by Dunning was published in 1959. Dunning states that with increased contact and compulsory residential schooling for Native people, the 1950's were a period of rapid change. Traditional ways of life largely disappeared and western mainstream parenting practices replaced traditional ones.

Based on oral history from older Native people living in communities near Sudbury, most Native children in the 40's, 50's and 60's from the area went to residential schools run by both Catholic and Protestant churches. Attendance was compulsory. In addition to regular school subjects, children were taught that they should abandon their language and spiritual beliefs, and adopt Christian values. Discipline was harsh by today's standards and there was much abuse both physical and sexual. After years in residential school, children returning to their communities found the adjustment back to traditional Native ways very difficult. Most experienced problems with alcohol, often abusing and neglecting their own children.

In 1985, a book by Anastasia Shkilnyk greatly influenced the attitude of the Canadian public towards Native people and the impact of government intervention. Shkilnyk wrote a damning account of the destruction of an Anishnabe community caused by a forced move of the Grassy Narrows community and the resulting shift from dependence on fishing, hunting, and trapping to welfare. The following quote, while

Nishnaabe Kinoomaadwin Naadmaadwin

somewhat long, will help the reader to understand the situation from the perspective of the people of Grassy Narrows:

I was born on the trapline, and I grew up in the bush. Trapping was our culture. Trapping kept the family together because everyone had something to do; the man has to lay the traps and check them, the women skinned the animals, cooked, and looked after the kids. The grandparents helped with the kids; they taught them manners, how to behave, and told them stories about our people. The kids, if they were old enough, had work to do. They had to set snares for rabbits and chop wood.

Now, on the new reserve, we can't trap as a family any more. The woman has to stay home 'cause the kids are in school on the reserve. The man has to go out on the trapline by himself. But he gets lonely there and doesn't like to do all the work by himself. So he comes back to the reserve and tries to find a job or he goes on welfare. At least in the days of residential school, we could still trap as family, but no more. You can see that only a few people are trapping nowadays.

What happens now is that men, if they have a job, go to work in the morning, and the women are left in the house alone. They don't share in the work any more. They buy cans at the store and have nothing to do in the daytime. The kids also don't do chores anymore. The old people don't teach the kids how to behave. In my generation, marriages are breaking up, and kids are sniffing gas while parents are drinking. This is happening because people don't work together any more. Trapping was not just an occupation for the man. It was a way of life for the whole family. With the school on the reserve, we just can't live the way we used to. If you divide the family in work, you tear it apart in other ways as well. (Grassy Narrows resident quoted in Shkilnyk, 1985, p.83)

In the last decade, as a result of several studies criticizing the situation with respect to Native child welfare, (Hepworth, 1980; Johnston, 1983), social work practice in Native child welfare has changed dramatically. With the recently evolved appreciation of the importance of respecting the child's cultural heritage, the practice of removing Native children from their communities has been reduced. However, even though Native, more children are now able remain in their communities, the

problems of family violence, of child abuse and neglect in Native communities, still exists. The difference is that now Native people are developing their own programs to deal with these problems (van de Sande, Naidoo, & Gloade, 1989). As part of the process of developing culturally relevant programs, research on the current state of Native parenting would be very useful.

### **Methodology:**

To measure differences between Native and mainstream parenting attitudes and practices, the principal author developed a 55 item questionnaire based on a parenting program called *Cherish the Children* (Minnesota Indian Women's Resources Centre, 1988). Using the program's lesson plans as a guide, the principal author developed the questions from the individual objectives of Cherish the Children. Following is a list the items grouped by subscales:

#### **Family Life Skills**

- ❖ How often does your child visit his/her grandparents?
- ❖ How often does your child play with his/her cousins?
- ❖ How often does your child help a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or elder in any way?
- ❖ Do you accept advice from your older relatives on how to raise your child?
- ❖ How often do you and your child do things together, such as cooking, or crafts?
- ❖ Does your child avoid spending time with uncles or aunts?
- ❖ Does your child ignore advice from their community elders?
- ❖ Is your partner involved in doing things with the family?

#### **Communication Skills**

- ❖ How often do you tell your child that you love him or her?
- ❖ How often do you praise your child for doing a good job?
- ❖ How often do you yell at your child?
- ❖ How often do you encourage your child to talk about his/her ideas?
- ❖ How often do you sing to, or with your child?
- ❖ How often do you tell stories to your child?
- ❖ How often do you play and joke with your child?
- ❖ How often does your partner play and joke with your child?
- ❖ How often are you impatient with your child?
- ❖ How often is your partner impatient with your child?
- ❖ How often do you blame your child for things that you know is not his/her fault?

- ❖ How often do you spend time reading, drawing, or colouring with your child?
- ❖ Do you have your child follow a basic morning routine?
- ❖ How often do you hug your child?
- ❖ Do you kiss your child?
- ❖ Does your partner show his affection to your child?
- ❖ Do you encourage your child to pursue his/her ideas?
- ❖ Does your partner encourage your child to pursue his/her ideas?
- ❖ Do you interrupt your child when he/she is talking?
- ❖ Do you criticize your child's idea?
- ❖ Does your partner criticize your child's ideas?
- ❖ Do you share your values and beliefs with your children?

#### Child Development Issues

- ❖ How often do you find yourself thinking that your child is not developing as quickly as other children?
- ❖ How often do you tell your child that he/she is clumsy?
- ❖ Do you find that unless you stand over your child they will fail at whatever they are working on?
- ❖ Do you overreact when your child is not doing something you think he/she ought to be doing? (Ex. toilet training)
- ❖ Do you worry about your child developing too slowly?
- ❖ Are you concerned about your child's sleeping habits?

#### Nutrition, Health and Safety Issues

- ❖ How often do you encourage your child to eat a well balanced diet?
- ❖ How often do you let your child eat too much sugar, starch, or fat?
- ❖ How often does your child drink too many soft drinks?
- ❖ Do you prefer preparing meals alone without having your child around to bother you?
- ❖ Do you keep your child's medical records up to date?
- ❖ Do you give your child special attention when he/she is sick?
- ❖ Does your partner give your child special attention when he/she is sick?
- ❖ Do you insist that your child wear a seatbelt in the car?
- ❖ For how long did your breastfeed your babies?



### Teaching and Learning skills

- ❖ How often does your child do jobs around the house to help you?
- ❖ How often do you ignore incidents when your child does not finish a job?
- ❖ Do you involve your child in working with you?
- ❖ Does your child prefer watching T.V. to working with you?
- ❖ Do you and your child go on nature outings together?
- ❖ Do you find that you are too busy to do activities with your child?
- ❖ Do you ever make the kind of toys for your children that your parents made for you?
- ❖ Does your partner ever make the kind of toys for your child that his/her parents made for him/her?
- ❖ Do you play the kind of games with your children that your parents played with you?
- ❖ Do you prefer doing the chores yourself rather than asking your child to do them?

The principal author used a seven-point scale for each item ranging from 1 for Never to 7 for always. The number 8 was provided for not applicable.

### Reliability and Validity:

The reliability of the questionnaire was established using the Cronbach's Alpha test of internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951) and a score of 89 was obtained on the overall questionnaire. Because of the difficulties in contacting participants, it was decided not to conduct a test-retest.

Face validity was established by asking several "experts" in Anishnabe parenting to review the questionnaire. These people included Anishnabe academics and social workers working directly with the population of interest. These experts provided constructive feedback which was used in finalizing the questionnaire. Since no comparable instrument to measure parenting practices in Native communities exists, it was not possible to conduct a test of criterion validity.

### Sampling Procedures:

The population being considered in this study is the Anishnabe population of the seven first Nation communities that make up the North Shore Tribal Council. This population lives in a semi-rural setting having access to most modern conveniences, i.e. modern homes, with electricity, indoors plumbing, television, modern schools, stores, and medical facilities. None of the communities is more than 90 minutes away from a large urban centre, either Sudbury or Sault Ste. Marie. The population excludes Native

families living off the reserve in urban settings, or families living in remote wilderness settings where the only contact with the outside world is radio and bush plane.

The sample for the study included one hundred and two (N=102) parents from these communities. While every effort was made to use random sampling, such as randomly selecting 15 parents per community, some participants were selected because of convenience. For instance, the principal author would arrive a few minutes before the start of a program involving large groups of parents and ask these parents to participate in the study.

In order to identify differences in parenting styles between Native and non-Native populations, a purposive sample of non-Native parents (N=60) was selected from the same geographic area. Ten from Sudbury, ten from Sault Ste. Marie, and forty from Blind River, were given the questionnaire to fill out. Most parents in the non-Native sample were contacted through the local public schools.

### Results:

To test the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in parenting styles between Native and Euro-Canadian parents, a t-test was carried comparing the sample of Native parents with the sample of non-Native parents on the scores of the questionnaire. The t-test revealed a significant difference between Native and non-Native parents, df-degreded Freedom ( $t=-2.90$ ,  $df=160$ ,  $p<.01$  level).

**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Native and non-Native Parents**

Variable	No. of cases	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Stand. Error
Group 1	102	263.1176	34.027	3.369
Group 2	60	278.9500	32.721	4.224
F value 2 – tail Prob., t value Deg. of Free. 2-tail Prob.				
1.08	0.753	-2.90	160	0.004

To further explore where the differences exist, it was decided to compare the two populations on the subscales of the Cherish the Children questionnaire. The table below provides the details of this comparison.

**Table 2**  
**Comparison of the Native and Non-Native Populations**  
**On the Subscales of the CTC Questionnaire**

Subscale	Group	N	Mean	t	Prob.
Family Skills	Native	102	40.42	2.13	0.036
	Non-Native	60	37.88		
Communication Skills	Native	102	114.26	-2.54	0.12
	Non-Native	60	120.30		
Child Develop. Issues	Native	102	30.15	-1.76	0.066
	Non-Native	60	32.27		
Nutrition, Health & Safety	Native	102	41.52	-4.84	0.000
	Non-Native	60	47.05		
Teaching & Learning	Native	102	36.76	-3.28	0.001
	Non-Native	60	41.45		

These results indicate that the Native population scored significantly higher on the Family Skills subscale but significantly lower on the Communication, Nutrition, Health and Safety, and Teaching and Learning subscales. On the Child Development subscale, at .066, the difference is marginally significant, with the non-Native parents again scoring higher.

### **Discussion:**

In looking at the differences in parenting between the Native and non-Native Parent, a t-test comparing these two groups on the scores of the questionnaire was carried out. The results presented in Table 1 above revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups on overall score. This seems to confirm what the literature and practitioners have been saying for years, that parenting practices are different in Native communities as compared to mainstream society. It also supports the need for culturally relevant programs.

The differences in parenting practices between the Native and non-Native differences become clearer if the subscales are considered. On the Family Skills subscale, which looks at degree of involvement of Elders and the extended family, we find that Native parents scored significantly higher than non-Native parents from the same geographic region. This suggests

that, in spite of years of assimilation, Native parents still have more contact with and seem to rely more on elders and the extended family. Furthermore, they believe that parenting is a community responsibility and that the entire extended family should be involved.

Other differences are also quite striking. On the Communication, Nutrition, Health and Safety, and Teaching and Learning subscales, non-Native parents scored significantly higher than Native parents and marginally higher on Child Development. This suggests that non-Native parents view themselves as using more of the behaviours identified by the instrument than Native parents. The issue of discipline is contained in the Communication subscale and on this subscale, non-Native parents score higher than Native parents. These results, seen in the light of the findings of the qualitative interviews that Native parents do use corporal punishment, seems to confirm that Native parents are not using traditional Native disciplining practices.

In trying to explain these differences, two different possibilities come to mind. First, it is possible that there are real differences in the behaviours between the two groups. What we may be seeing here is the impact of years of assimilation and the negative impact this has had on parenting practices in Native communities. If this is the case, these results provide workers from Native health and social services some areas where they should direct their attention.

Second, Native parents may be more critical of their own behaviour in those subscales where they scored lower. It must be remembered that the instrument measures the parent's perception of his or her own behaviour. In other words, Native parents may believe in a certain ideal standard and those they see themselves as performing somewhat below that standard.

These results are preliminary and further study is required to verify the initial findings of this research. Nevertheless, it shows that differences in parenting persist which confirms the need for culturally relevant programs for Native communities.

Over the last one hundred years, government assimilation policies have significantly influenced the historical relationship between Native children and their extended family members. The negative residual effects of these policies continue to influence Native families today. Despite attempts to acculturat Native family life to mainstream practices, the research undertaken by the principal author has identified that the parenting skills of families of the North Shore Tribal Council have not been totally acculturative. These results are preliminary and further research is required to verify the initial findings of this research. Nevertheless, as we attempt to learn from the errors of the past, it is imperative that culturally relevant social programs and services designed to assist Native families in order to

be of significant value to the community members to whom they are directed.

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