

# Developing a Culturally Appropriate Aboriginal Parenting Skills Assessment Tool

*Community-Based Research Case Example*

## WHO

**Researcher Team:** Charlotte Loppie and Kendra Gage

### **Community Partnerships:**

- Hulitan Family and Community Services Society
- Center for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement (Uvic)
- UVic Research Services- Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization
- Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Most importantly - members of the Aboriginal/Indigenous community

## WHY

### **Brief Project Description:**

In developing this project, Charlotte Loppie and Kendra Gage felt it was crucial to create an assessment tool that supported families to be assessed on their parenting capacity, in a way that fit with a value system in an Indigenous worldview. In British Columbia, assessment tools are completed clinically by Psychologists. These psychologists are expensive and complete their assessments within a period of five hours. These assessment tools determine whether or not a parent can have their children back or keep their children in their care. This is a large decision for a psychologist to make within a five-hour period of time. The research team didn't feel this assessment practice reflected the worldview of the community they served. The current assessment system functions around mainstream culture, which many families didn't share - therefore increasing their likelihood to fail. All Indigenous children have the right to grow up in healthy safe, and protective environments which reflect their worldviews and the family they come from.

## WHERE AND WHEN

**Location(s):** Victoria, BC

**Dates:** 2015-2018

## WHAT

The goals of the study were to develop and pilot test a culturally respectful parenting assessment tool for Indigenous people involved in the child welfare system in Victoria, BC. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Undertake an environmental scan of existing parenting assessment tools.
2. Document the paradigm (worldview) and concepts that inform indicators of parenting capacity currently utilized by Ministries of Children and Family Development (MCFD) across Canada.
3. Explore the worldview, values and principles relevant to the Indigenous peoples of Vancouver Island - to inform a locally relevant conceptual foundation for the new assessment tool.
4. Develop and pilot test a parenting capacity tool that meets MCFD standards and is culturally relevant and respectful of local Indigenous parents.
5. Share the process and findings of the pilot study with diverse stakeholders.
6. Contribute to wise practices for supporting Aboriginal families.

## HOW

### Research Values:

- Respect: self-care and respectful interactions
- Courage: setting healthy boundaries
- Love: demonstrating empathy and dealing with challenges
- Honesty: speaking and acting truthfully
- Wisdom: knowing developmental markers and basic needs of the child
- Humility: recognizing the gifts of the child
- Belonging: demonstrating attachment to the child, creating connections with others
- Honouring: creating a supportive and loving environment

### Research Design:

#### Study Participants:

- 4 Hulitan clients
- 3 Hulitan Family Development Workers
- 2 Hulitan senior managers
- 4 MCFD social workers
- 2 MCFD team leaders

**Data Collection:** Participants were asked to review the new assessment tool prior to data collection about their perspectives of the tool.

- Hulitan clients were asked to participate in an interview
- Focus group discussions held with Hulitan Family Development Workers (FDWs)
- Interviews held with Hulitan senior managers
- Focus Groups with MCFD social workers and team leaders
- One-on-one debriefing sessions between FDWs and senior managers
- Data gathering was undertaken by an Indigenous PhD candidate

**Ethical Considerations:**

Each participant was provided with a consent form, which detailed the study as well as their role, responsibilities and rights. The Research Assistant also went over this form carefully before asking participants to provide their consent. The following ethical considerations were given to participants who were Hulitan clients.

**Client participants were asked to:** participate in an interview with a Research Assistant or a Hulitan Family Development Worker (whichever they decided) to find out what they thought about the assessment tool. This interview took place at Hulitan in Victoria, it was audio-recorded and then a transcription was typed out to be used in the research.

**Inconvenience:** Participants were made aware that participation in this study might cause some inconvenience, as it took approximately 1 hour to conduct the interview.

**Risks:** The team did not expect the study to cause any harm to participants; however, they were made aware that, if they felt upset at any point, the team would provide support. Family Development Workers were available before, during and after each interview and Hulitan has three registered therapists on site, if participants wanted additional supports. All counselors at Hulitan abide by the Traditional Native Code of Ethics as well as the British Columbia Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics.

**Honorarium:** As a way to compensate participants for any inconvenience related to their participation, the team provided a cash honorarium of \$100 at the time of the interview. This is in keeping with Indigenous cultural norms of respecting and recognizing an individual's unique knowledge through the giving of gifts. An honorarium is a culturally accepted form of gifting in both urban and community contexts. The team did emphasize that this form of compensation must not make a person more likely to participate. It is unethical to provide too much compensation or incentives to research participants.

**Participants' Rights:** Participation in this research was completely voluntary. Hulitan clients had the right to not take part in this study and not taking part did not affect their ability to participate in any of the programs, services or events offered at Hulitan. They were also informed that, if any of the questions they were asked during the interview made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, they had the right to refuse to answer.

Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences or any explanation and they could keep the honorarium. If they did withdraw (none did), they could decide whether or not to have their data included in the study.

## **OUTCOMES**

### **Clients:**

- overwhelming preference for the new tool
- easier to understand, more positive, neatly laid out
- allows clients to be treated as a person
- strengths-based approach is empowering
- sets the stage for good relationships with workers
- more fully engages parents
- helps clients open-up in a more meaningful way
- enhances clients' self-esteem
- sets a positive tone for relationships and the journey
- helps clients to perceive the assessment more positively
- allows FDW workers to engage more deeply with clients

### **Family Development Workers:**

- wording represents a major improvement
- more respectful and inclusive of Indigenous worldviews
- value-focus will strengthen relationships
- will help build trust with clients
- challenge in learning how to use the tool properly
- might be difficult to change how some workers see clients, even using a culturally relevant tool.

### **Hulitan Senior Management:**

- provides space to honor Indigenous experiences
- language is accessible and people connect with the values

- collaborative approach to healing and family reunification
- language reflects holistic practice
- facilitates the education of Ministry workers
- use terms like humility, respect, love, and courage make it difficult to be deficit-focused
- represents a step toward balancing power within the Ministry
- confronts racist ideologies embedded in service delivery

#### **Ministry Workers:**

- facilitates better understanding between the Ministry and clients
- can promote trust and collaboration
- still able to measure indicators relevant to MCFD
- very evidence based and stable
- language is what people use daily, leaving clients less confused, thus fostering better relationships
- acknowledges the trauma Indigenous peoples have experienced and how it has impacted and continues to impact them

### **MORE INFORMATION**

**Webinar Recording:** <http://communityresearchcanada.ca/webinars/>

This research project took place between 2015 and 2018, in partnership with the Hulitan Family and Community Services Society of Victoria, BC (Hulitan). Hulitan is mandated to provide the Kwen'an'latel Intensive Parenting Program for Aboriginal parents/caregivers who have had their children taken into foster care by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). This program was designed specifically by the local Aboriginal community and is the first and only urban Aboriginal parenting program in the Greater Victoria area to be mandated by MCFD.

The culturally respectful draft assessment tool will be reviewed by two elders/knowledge keepers who have knowledge of local Aboriginal worldviews, values, and concepts. After appropriate revision based on elder and knowledge keeper feedback, we will attempt to establish content validity (i.e. determine if the measures (questions, observations) accurately assess parenting capacity) of the assessment tool through review and feedback by two independent C6 delegated social workers, who work in the area of child protection. A C6 social worker has the delegated authority of the BC Director of Child Welfare to approve the return of a child in foster care to the custody of their parents.