

Caring For Our Own Children

Voices of Our Communities



Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations

To the People of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations

Gi'lakas'la for allowing us to visit your community and speak with your youth, adults, and Elders. This document attempts to reflect your community's wisdom.



Table of Contents

Part 1: Sasamans Society	7
Our History	10
Society overview	10
Our Mission	11
Our Values	11
Part 2: Community Profile & Process	13
Community Profile	15
Community Process	17
Services funded or provided by MCFD	18
Service Gaps	18
Key Findings	19
Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Child & Family Services Response	19
Part 3: Voices of the Community	24
Community Engagement Process and This Report	26
Conversations with the community members	27
Life Back Then	29
The Impact of Residential Schools	29
The Impact of the Relocation	30
Perspectives on Community	31
Traditional Family Laws	32
Traditional Parenting	33
Traditional Foods	36
Traditional Values	37
Role Models	39
Culture	40
Challenges	42
Drug and Alcohol Issues	42
Housing and Roads	43
Community Frustrations with the Ministry of Children and Family Development	43
Community Wish List	44
Expanded Services and Programs	44
More Community Activities	46
<i>More Cultural Programming</i>	48
<i>Keeping Children Out of Government Care</i>	49
Parents and Families Need More Support	49
<i>Advocacy</i>	50
Family Healing	50
Support for Children and Families in Care	51
Part 4: Closing Remarks	54
Appendices	58
Youth survey	60
Parent survey	61
Elder survey	62

PART 1: SASAMANS SOCIETY

Our children and our families are the cornerstone of our Nations' futures.



Sasamans Society Overview

Sasamans Society is charting new waters in providing twelve First Nations and three urban Aboriginal organizations on North Vancouver Island and the BC coast with the support they need to develop their respective cultural and traditional approaches with the goal of keeping children out of government care. Sasamans is committed to honouring a community-driven process to assist communities in creating their vision of a child and family wellness plan.

Sasamans Society's vision is to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner. In the Kwak'waka'wala language, Sasamans means *our children*; the society's name reflects our intention to honour and listen to our children's voices and the voices of the communities we serve.



Member Nations

- Kwakiutl Band
- Da'naxda'xw Awaetlala First Nation
- Dzawada'enuxw First Nation
- Kwikwasut'inuxw/Haxwa'mis Tribe
- Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw First Nations
- Quatsino First Nation
- We Wai Kai First Nation
- Wei Wai Kum First Nation
- K'omoks Band

- Tlatlasikwala First Nation
- Mamalilikulla-Qwe'Qwa'Sot'Em Band
- Whe-la-la-U Area Council

Urban Aboriginal Organizations

- Laichwiltach Family Life Society
- Sacred Wolf Friendship Centre
- Wachiay Friendship Centre
- Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry



Our History

In 2002, representatives from Aboriginal communities across British Columbia united to demand that control of the well-being of our children and families be returned to us. In response, the province pledged to create and eventually transfer responsibility for Aboriginal children to Aboriginal planning authorities.

Formed in 2009, North Island Wellness Society (NIWS) focused on furthering community engagement to directly influence and engage in policy setting, governance, and management authority over services that currently remain within MCFD. NIWS experienced growth in membership, support, and direction. In June 2010, society management changed along with a strategic plan that moved the organization to a new name, Sasamans (“our children”) Society, and a more developed identity and direction. Sasamans Society is governed by a board of directors appointed by member Nations and participating urban Aboriginal organizations.

With the development of Sasamans Society, we seek to move beyond the limitations imposed on our communities through the current MCFD system. Ours is a process of developing and implementing, within the context of our culture, our traditional laws and way of life. This effort is set within the context of moving progressively forward from the long history of government authority and control over the care and support of our children. The work of changing from a government-designed system to a system grounded in the cultural and traditional laws of our Nations will take time, effort, commitment, and a positive working relationship with MCFD.

Society overview

Sasamans Society's vision is to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner. In the Kwak'waka language, Sasamans means "our children"; the society's name reflects our intention to listen, acknowledge and honour the voices of the communities that we serve. Sasamans is supported and guided by the Board of Directors (BOD), comprised of 16 community representatives from our partnering communities and organizations.

Sasamans was funded through Ministry of Child & Family Development under the Indigenous Approach to co-develop creative traditional service delivery models that meets the needs of our communities.

The work undertaken by Sasamans is designed to identify the gaps in service and complement the Aboriginal Urban agencies and/or First Nations Bands.

We measure our accomplishments by the success we achieve in balancing our limited resources with the needs of the communities we serve. We do this by identifying high priority COMMON needs across our various communities.

Our Mission

In pursuit of our vision to strengthen our children and families in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner, the Sasamans Society will respectfully:

- **A**ppreciate and nurture the strengths and capacities of our people.
- **C**ommunicate and engage, openly and on an ongoing basis.
- **H**onour our traditions, customs, and beliefs.
- **I**nvolve the voices of our children and the wisdom of our Elders.
- **L**earn from one another.
- **D**edicate ourselves to achieving our short- and long-term goals.

Our Values

We strive to openly demonstrate Trust, Honesty, Respect, Integrity, Values, and Empathy in achieving our goals.

We believe in practicing compassion, transparency, honesty, and accountability.

We will respect and practice equality for all.

We believe that we are all one and we strive to be inclusive at all levels as we walk and talk with honour.

We embrace and nurture the strengths and abilities of our people.



PART 2: COMMUNITY PROFILE & PROCESS



Community Profile



Located on the Tsulquate River adjacent to Port Hardy, BC, the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations were originally two separate Nations that the federal government amalgamated in the 1960s. Gwa'sala homelands encompass Smith Inlet and 'Nakwaxda'xw homelands including Seymour Inlet, the Deserters Group islands, and Blunden Harbour.

The community of Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw is committed to supporting one another in all areas of community and social development. This commitment is supported by the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School, whose vision statement states "together in all we do."



The Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community has a total of 899 registered band members, with 536 members living on reserve and 363 living off reserve (that is, about 60% on reserve). The table below shows the 2006 Canada census statistics on the age breakdown of the on-reserve population:

Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw First Nations			
Ages	Total	Ages	Total
0-6	177	19-54	432
7-11	89	55-64	43
12-18	135	65+	23



The Health and Family Services building is a community centre that houses many of the community's programs and services. Programs offered there benefit children and families of the community in all areas of health and development.

The Child & Family Services department provides Family Support, Addictions & Mental Health services. The band has a Child Welfare Protocol agreement with MCFD and this department is responsible for attending child welfare investigations, assisting parents in accessing support services, case planning, and liaison with MCFD at all levels.



Maternal Health provides educational support for parents and families of children ages 0–6 years and assists families with accessing medical appointments, educational services,

and nutritional services. It also raises awareness on breastfeeding, birth control, and topics related to pregnancy and birth.

The Post-Natal Program has two main services that support new parents and families in the community. The Cultural Play Group was created to introduce culture to children at a young age. The Post-Natal Sewing Group allows new parents to come together to share and to create items for their new babies.

To directly address the issue of diabetes in the community, a Diabetes Prevention Program was developed to raise awareness and provide supportive education. Twice a week there are fitness classes offered to Elders with diabetes, classes for people at risk for diabetes, and a healthy meals and cooking program that teaches people living with diabetes about healthy cooking and living on a limited budget.



The Healthy Children Program provides services to children in the community in all areas of health, including teeth varnishing, doctor appointment scheduling, dental information, immunizations, and pediatrician visits. Quarterly the program hosts a Healthy Kids Fair for 3- to 5-year-olds. Further services at the centre are provided by a NNADAP worker, a mental health worker, family support worker, two early childhood education program workers, and nurses.



The Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Band Office is another centre of activity in the Tsulquate reserve. The following departments operate out of the Band Office: Economic Development, Education, Housing, Finance, Natural Resource Management, Communications, Social Development, the Treaty library, and the Treaty office. The Band Manager, working out of the Band Office, liaises between elected Chief and Council and the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw staff to meet the needs of community members.

The band entered into a settlement agreement with the Government of Canada in 2008. A Trust Committee was created of community members and two non-community members. Their role is to review proposals and distribute the funds as needed. They have recently funded programs for culture, youth and sports recreation and Elders support. Their long-term vision is to begin working towards economic development and creating jobs for the community members.

For more information about the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations, please visit their website: www.gwanak.info

Community Process

In September 2010, the Executive Director of the Sasamans Society, in accordance with First Nations protocol and tradition, asked the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations Chief and Council for permission to work with the community. A combined follow-up meeting was held in January 2011 with Chief Paddy Walkus, Ernie Henderson, Janet Hanuse, Leslie Taylor (Band Manager) and Sasamans Chair Richard Dawson to provide an update. Following this, in February 2011, Sasamans Society signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations.

In the early stages of Sasamans Society's work, community-based collaborators (CBCs) were hired in each community. In Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw, a CBC was hired in November 2010. Sandrina de Finney (PhD) provided training for the CBCs, a community profile was created, and an information session was held with frontline workers in May 2011. Youth pizza nights were hosted along with other summer activities to recruit participants for interviews and/or focus groups.

However, in June 2011, plans for community involvement were delayed when MCFD changes required Sasamans to complete a review of the community engagement process and modify the work plan and budget. Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw was one of several communities that were put on hold until the following fiscal year. In April 2012, when the new fiscal year was launched, another visit was made to the Chief and Council to provide an update regarding the work plan for the year. A meeting was then scheduled with the Director of the Child and Family Services department, who then scheduled an information session with his frontline staff.

After the budget and work plan had been modified due to MCFD changes, a team approach was implemented to replace the CBCs in each community. A team of facilitators was created and they completed a two-day training session in mid-August 2011 to develop facilitation skills for individual and group discussions. A Follow-up refresher training was coordinated for May 2012 as three new members had been added to the team. These additional team members included two community liaison workers/facilitators, one for the north and one for the south, and a youth facilitator. Sasamans Society posted these job opportunities with the colleges and universities on the island so that we could recruit First Nations students and enhance their community work experience. The community liaison worker/facilitator's role was to organize information sessions in collaboration with frontline workers in each community/agency by tagging onto existing activities and introducing the Sasamans team. The team would spend a week in the community getting to know the people prior to conducting interviews and/or focus groups. It was important to have a key person from the north and south to be part of this team. Once the refresher training was completed, the community engagement process began. In Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw, the conversations and focus groups got off the ground between May and July 2012.

Digital recordings of the interviews and discussion groups were transcribed in July and August, and the first draft of the report was completed in October. Once this draft was complete, the Sasamans team read and provided feedback to the writer and the report was edited accordingly. After this process, the draft report goes to the community frontline team for their input and comments on next steps. Presentations on the final product to leadership, Elders, parents, and youth can be done by the Sasamans team if requested by the community.

Services funded or provided by MCFD

Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Child & Family Services

- 1.5 family support workers
- 1 case manager
- 1 Child/youth & family wellness outreach worker, which is not exclusive to their band but serves the whole of Port Hardy

Sacred Wolf Friendship Centre

- 1 Roots worker

MCFD

- 9 social workers (2 teams – 1 for tribands, 1 for rest of north island)
- 5 member Child & Youth Mental Health team (1 community position from North Island Crisis & Counselling Centre, 2 are Aboriginal positions)

Service Gaps

The findings of our community engagement process with the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations (see below) identified the following service gaps:

- 1) Community-run services offered on reserve, such as:
 - A receiving home
 - A drug and alcohol treatment program
 - 24-hour mental health support.
- 2) FAS education program in the schools.
- 3) For the whole community:
 - More cultural activities
 - Opportunities to connect with Elders
 - Additional space for the community to come together
 - A young parent play group
 - Youth AA
 - More organized sports and easier use of spaces for sports
 - Support groups
 - Parenting workshops

- Increased in-school support
 - Activities geared specifically towards children aged 12 and under
 - Additional support for Elders.
- 4) More resources devoted to keeping children out of care and supporting children and families in care, including:
- More support for parents, families, and children
 - Advocacy
 - More resources for healing from drugs and alcohol
 - Increased opportunities for parent education
 - Keeping children connected to culture and facilitating more contact between children in care and their families.

Key Findings

- 1) There is a deep desire for community connectedness, and members of the community would like to see more gathering spaces, activities, and programs that bring people together.
- 2) Elders, youth, and parents want to see a receiving home reopened in the community.
- 3) Community members value traditional laws, traditional foods, cultural values, language, and the stories that connect them to their history. They would like to see more language and cultural programs offered on the reserve.
- 4) Gatherings, activities, and sports are seen as strong alternatives to the use of drugs and alcohol. Parents, youth, and Elders would like consistent access to a range of activities that promote wellness.
- 5) Parents working to keep their children out of government care, and fighting to get their children back, cannot do it alone; they need more support, including advocacy.
- 6) Children in government care need to remain connected to their families, culture, and community.
- 7) The knowledge and wisdom of Elders are seen as key to all program areas. Community members would like Elders to be involved in programs concerning youth, parents, keeping children out of government care, and providing support to children and families in government care.

Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Child & Family Services Response

The Child & Family Services department is primarily responsible for liaison with the Ministry for Children & Family Development (MCFD) and providing support services to community members who are involved with MCFD or at risk of being involved with MCFD. While Sasamans worked on this community research our department was also undergoing many changes as part of our Strategic Plan to better address child welfare

issues and support community healing. We worked with Sasamans to ensure that we were working together and welcomed the opportunity to take information gathered from these sessions to influence our services.

The Child & Family Services department provides Family support, Addictions and Mental Health services. The Band has a Child Welfare Protocol with MCFD and this department is responsible for attending child welfare investigations, assisting parents in accessing support services, case planning, and liaison with MCFD at all levels.

We have seen many of the same issues that community members have identified and our plans and this research have led us to try and develop solutions to many of the issues that are outlined as Service Gaps.

1) Community-run services:

- Receiving Home - We are attempting to find funds to develop a program similar to the Receiving Home that used to be in the community. More importantly we have developed a joint management meeting with the local MCFD team and their managers from down island to reduce the number of children in care and reduce the number of children that are taken into care in the first place. This has been working well and we have jointly planned for the return of over 15 children with support plans for their families. We have revised our child welfare protocol. MCFD has agreed to a variety of changes in local practice to support parents to make plans to keep their children safe so that they don't need to go into care - this also requires community members to provide supports to each other (for example, taking children when parents are unable to care for them).
- Drug & Alcohol Treatment program - We have been working with a group of community members to develop a Community Addictions Plan to deal with drug and alcohol issues. This plan is based on information from the October 3rd community meeting. We are re-prioritizing worker time and other resources to make this happen and seeking new funds and resources for things we don't have the funds for. We have just been approved for funding to hire a Community Addictions Action Coordinator. We have linked this work to the Mt. Waddington Addictions Recovery Plan to make sure we are working together with off-reserve services to better meet community members needs. In addition, we are working with a new community group in Port Hardy that is trying to develop a treatment program aimed at people who have MCFD in their lives. The 'Namgis treatment centre has asked for us to assist them as they adapt their programs to meet the needs of families with MCFD involvement as well.
- We have a Mental Health Outreach worker (Cathy Swain) who is responsible for coordinating responses to suicide concerns. All of our staff have been trained in responding to suicides and are available to respond if Cathy is away or dealing

with a situation already. We are working with the Port Hardy Hospital, RCMP and Mental Health/Addictions in town to make sure that they respect our risk assessments and to do joint case planning. This reduces the chances of people falling through the cracks. We do not have enough staff or funding to provide services 24 hours a day, but we do recognize that help is needed at any hour - so we have been working to ensure that people can still access help at any time. We have negotiated a protocol with the North Island Crisis Line to have them take emergency calls and provide support to people who are in crisis. If someone needs follow up support, they will ask if the person would like follow up and take their name and we will be notified the next work day so that our staff can respond. If a person needs an immediate response (i.e. they are planning to kill themselves) the Crisis Line will notify RCMP or ambulance and will notify us the next day so we can do follow up. These plans use partnerships and existing resources more effectively to ensure people can get support when they need it, reduce the number of people completing suicides, and increase the number of people getting help.

2) FASD Education program in the schools:

- We have an interest in increasing knowledge about the impacts of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and how to prevent it as well. We will be looking at how to use existing resources to meet this need.

3) For the Whole Community:

- I am happy to say that we have secured funding for VIHA to hire a Community Addictions Action Coordinator for 2013/14, as part of the Community Addictions Plan. This worker will be primarily responsible for three main areas:
- Helping community members organize evening & weekend activities for all ages of community members as alternatives to drinking or using drugs (e.g. Games nights, dry dances, family fun events, Halloween party, etc.),
- Organizing monthly Drug & Alcohol awareness events (e.g. Roadblocks, workshops, marches, FASD education, etc.)
- Coordinating the development of a program to have Elders visit and support people who are attempting to quit drinking or using drugs.

In addition, the Trust fund is hiring a Youth Sport & Recreation Worker to provide athletic and recreational opportunities for youth; and has a Cultural committee aimed at supporting the increase of cultural activities within the community.

In partnership with the Elder's Coordinator, our Mental Health worker and Home Care Nursing team have begun an Elder's day program that runs every Monday.

4) More resources devoted to keeping children out of care and supporting children and families in care:

- Our funding is inadequate for the need of the community, so we have refocused our efforts to improve our own services so that we are as efficient as possible in

- prioritizing our work, and we are seeking new resources/funds to meet some of these needs - which is why this partnership with Sasamans is so important to us.
- We have developed a new culturally based model for supporting families in their healing. All our systems are now based on it.
 - We have renegotiated our Child Welfare Protocol with MCFD.
 - We have a joint management meeting with MCFD to review and revise case practice issues, improve relations between our office and MCFD and encourage collaborative work. To date this has resulted in improved plans and arrangements for over 15 children to return to family/community have been made. We are all eager to continue this work.
 - We are developing closer connections with the ROOTS program out of Sacred Wolf Friendship Centre who are responsible for developing cultural plans and supporting reconnection to culture and community for children in care.
 - We are working with Sasamans to develop an Aboriginal Child & Family Counselor position to support families to reduce the risks that bring children into care, or to help them returned sooner if they are already in care. We are hopeful that this position will allow children and families to address the trauma's they have experienced that result in children's health or safety being put at risk - and to do this in a culturally safe manner. This position will not just serve our community, but help aboriginal children and families in the Port Hardy area.

We look forward to working with Sasamans to address these important needs, and thank the community for their important input!

PART 3: VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY



Community Engagement Process and This Report

This report is one in a series that presents key findings from information gathered through a community engagement process with the First Nations and Aboriginal organizations served by Sasamans Society. This particular report presents findings from information gathered from members of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations.

The purpose of these reports is to provide each community and/or agency with information that reflects the views expressed by community members through individual conversations, group discussions, and surveys. These reports will inform community committees as they engage in a dialogue with Sasamans Society to identify and design services to support family wellness and keep children out of government care.

The first focus of our community engagement process was to gather information from the youth. The following topics were developed from data collected from youth at the "Painting Our Way" and "Maya'xala" youth gatherings in March 2011: *Community, Culture, Family, Challenges, Strengths, Activities, and Keeping Children out of Care.*

These themes are providing the foundation for community engagement sessions with children, youth, parents, and Elders. First, the Sasamans team developed guiding questions about these topics to pose in individual conversations and group discussions. Next we developed work plans to guide the collection of information from our 15 member communities (12 First Nations and 3 urban Aboriginal organizations).

In July 2011, due to internal changes in the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), the work of Sasamans Society was suspended until a new work plan and budget could be developed. This resulted in a reduction in the number of communities taking part in the process,¹ a downsizing of Society staff and contractors, and a change to our community engagement process. Where initially one person was hired for each community as a community-based collaborator (CBC), the new budget and work plan necessitated a shift to a team approach with one team member (facilitator) focusing on one of three groups (children and youth, parents, and Elders) in all of the selected communities.

Beginning in August 2011, Sasamans staff and the facilitators (hereafter called the Sasamans team) participated in a three-part training which included community outreach and recruitment, ethical guidelines and procedures, culturally grounded facilitation and data collection methods, individual and group interviewing techniques, field and observation notes, and analysis and evaluation of findings.

After the training, the Sasamans team visited the six communities to build relationships and invite community members to participate in providing information. In some situations, community frontline workers were engaged to coordinate events designed to

¹ Dzawada'enuxw First Nation, Quatsino First Nation, We Wai Kai First Nation, and Wachiay Friendship Centre were selected for completion during the 2011–2012 fiscal year. Funds were sufficient to gather information from two additional communities (Whe-la-la-U Area Council and Laichwiltach Family Life Society).

connect the team with the community so that the team could provide information on the process and arrange meetings with potential participants.

One of the lessons we learned early on was about the use of language. When we began our search for participants, our flyers and presentations often used the terms individual interviews and focus groups. We received feedback that some community members felt intimidated by these terms or were tired of being analyzed by researchers, with the result that some people would not participate in providing information. This feedback allowed us to change our language to use less formal words such as chat, discussions, or conversations. We also decided to offer an anonymous survey as another option for individuals to participate in providing information.

With the participants' permission, the individual and group conversations were recorded and later transcribed. All participants received gifts of appreciation from Sasamans Society. The Sasamans team carefully read the transcripts looking for trends and important information regarding the communities' views on the topics identified above.

In the next stages of the process, Sasamans will present the key findings to each of the participating communities at a community event, and community committees will be formed consisting of four to eight volunteer members representing youth, adults, parents, Elders, frontline workers, council members, and Chiefs. The community committees will assess the draft reports and work with the Sasamans team to identify their specific community needs. Ultimately, this work will result in community-owned child and family wellness plans aimed at supporting the development of healthy families and keeping children out of government care.

Conversations with the community members

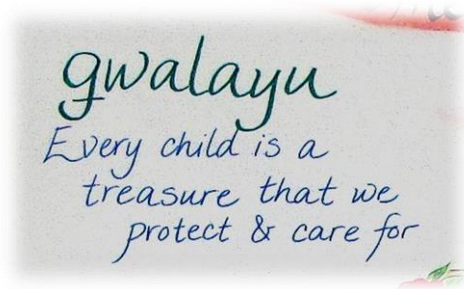
As part of the community engagement process, the Sasamans team met with a number of community members, including:

- 16 youth ranging in age from 14 to 19
- 16 parents ranging in age from 22 to 53
- 17 Elders ranging in age from 55 to 84

In addition to these conversations, 19 youth, 13 parents, and 5 Elders filled out surveys. The complete survey results are included in the appendices.

The Sasamans team appreciates the community's active participation in this process and the open and heartfelt responses offered by participants. Conversations with Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw community members brought forward incredibly rich suggestions about how to better support youth, parents, and Elders. What is clear in these conversations is that the community knows what needs to happen in order to keep children out of government care.

Many people believe that keeping children in the community requires a range of integrated services and activities, designed holistically, for the benefit of everyone. During the dynamic individual and group conversations held with members of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations, participants shared their knowledge of cultural teachings and traditional knowledge, the impacts of forced residential schooling and relocation, current challenges faced by community members, as well as suggestions for how to build strong families and communities in order to keep children out of government care.

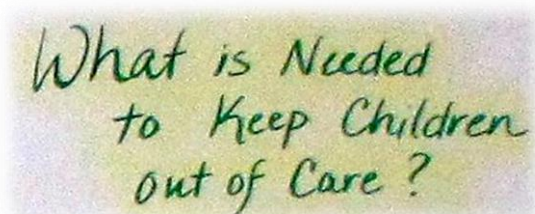


To maintain the integrity of the wisdom shared by community members, all of the information presented in this section is drawn from the words of participants. The conversations have been summarized. Direct quotes are also used, and in some instances, quotes have been slightly changed to make them more readable or to avoid identifying individual participants.

This section also draws from the wisdom shared by Elders at a gathering organized by Sasamans Society on March 21 and 22, 2012. At this gathering, Elders generously shared their knowledge and wisdom about how parents, families, and communities can care for children in a traditional, community-driven way. This important knowledge will be referenced in this report where it connects to some of the key messages expressed by Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community members.

The conversations are organized into the following sections: *Life Back Then; Perspectives on Community; Challenges; Community Wish List; Keeping Our Children Out of Government Care; and Support for Children and Families in Care*. It is important to emphasize that, for the most part, people expressed that all of the elements of their community are connected, and solutions need to be connected as well.

The first three sections present information that was shared about the community as a whole. First, "Life Back Then" will help the reader to understand the history of the community. Then, we summarize community members' perspectives on living in the community and highlight people's knowledge about traditional laws, traditional parenting, traditional foods, traditional values, and the importance of role models and culture.



Life Back Then

When reflecting on the past, several community members mentioned two significant events that they had experienced: residential school and relocation. Youth, parents, and Elders described the impacts that these two events have had on people and community, and spoke about the importance of healing.

The Impact of Residential Schools

At the Elders gathering held in March 2012, the traditional ways were discussed as having sustained Aboriginal people for thousands and thousands of years before residential schooling created a devastating rupture with traditional family laws and parenting.

Several people in the community explained that they had not known a lot about residential schooling, and the rupture described above, until recently. They talked about how learning about what their parents or grandparents had lived through in residential school has been important for them. An Elder explained:

I didn't actually have a role model to follow. ... because my parents were in residential school, I don't think they really knew how to be parents. My dad never ever talked to me. You know there's no communication. ... So communication is a really big factor. ... if people aren't communicating with one another then we just sit there in our own little worlds, lost and lonely. (Elder participant)

A parent described how learning about her mother's experience of residential school has meant that she and her mother are “*seeking healing and not carrying all that heavy stuff anymore.*”

Another parent reflected on the legacy of residential schools and the current use of drugs and alcohol in the community:

Because you take a look at our Elders ... they weren't drug users, they weren't alcohol users. ... And it hurts to see that our people have gone down that road. ... You know and I feel like “what happened”? Where did – where did it all go wrong? ... And I finally realized where it kicked in. The reason why we became alcohol and drug users is because when our parents got taken and put into residential school and after all the abuse that they went through and losing friends [and] what not, brothers and sisters, once they got old enough and they went out and experienced life, they got introduced to drugs and alcohol to at least numb the pain that they went through. And then it got passed on continuously until now. I think that's where it went all wrong. Because of the residential schools. (parent participant)

A young person in the community pointed out that residential schooling has had “*a huge impact on our language and culture and it would be nice to see all of us pull together and heal together.*” Several youth spoke about the importance of healing, but they had different suggestions about how this could take shape. While several youth stated that

they wanted to “learn more about it,” other youth thought that workshops on residential schools would be “hard” or “sad.” One youth shared the belief that individual healing is the first step: “We have to like heal, but it has to start one on one in the community.”

The Impact of the Relocation

In fall of 1964, the 'Nakwaxda'xw from Blunden Harbour and the Gwa'sala from Takush were amalgamated into one community and relocated to the Tsulquate reserve near Port Hardy. Memories of the days and months following the move were shared by Elders, and people of all ages described the impact that the relocation from the homelands has had on their lives and on the community as a whole. Elders remembered in great detail:

It was a big – really big change. And everything just seemed to fall apart, the way people were. ... I felt the darkness. I've always called this the darkness of how our people became when we first moved here. There was really nothing for us, you know. We didn't have the freedom to do what we used to do. We never – we could never go fishing. It was not our territory anymore. You could not go clam digging – it's not our place to go clam digging anymore. All these little things ... that came really wrecked our lives. And we started depending on liquor stores. (Elder participant)

When we came here, there was a lot of racism. Maybe perhaps feeling – I don't know what the feeling was. But with the alcohol and everything came the negative side of life. More and more people started drinking and there was a lot of frustration because when we first moved here there were only three homes ... I heard later that there were about 40 of us living in a four-bedroom home. ... So a lot of people lived on boats and sheds ... It was really horrible. ... and there was no one to help us cope – to help us understand why there was such a big difference in our lifestyle. And once we moved here, because more and more people were drinking ... there were less and less boats. Which was the main thing of our lifestyle, for work. (Elder participant)



Younger community members carry memories shared with them of the move and reflected on what they have learned from their Elders about the relocation in 1964.

You know, we come from two bands, the Gwa'sala and the 'Nakwaxda'xw, and they were relocated from their original lands and it's been a struggle for them, especially the ones that got transferred and you know the trauma [of] being taken away from their home ... we hear their stories every now and then, how much pain it brought to them and to remember getting relocated from the land they loved so much. (parent participant)

When we were living in our homelands they brought us here to say we would like it here. And then when we were here, they burned down our stuff in our homeland. ... and that was just too horrible. (youth participant)

Perspectives on Community

People shared their perspectives of what it is like to live in their community. Many community members expressed that they like where they live because of the closeness of people. As one youth stated, *“Everyone’s friendly.”* Another youth explained that the community is very close knit and described how you can’t go for a walk without bumping into someone you know. This young person thinks that this is *“really cool”* because *“if you’re having a bad day, you just need to go for a walk.”* A parent expressed that the community is a good place to raise a family.

One of the aspects of Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw that several people highlighted is that they feel as though they belong to a community that comes together to offer support when it is needed. As a youth put it, *“When one struggles, there’s a lot of people there to help. Like if there’s a family member that has passed, we all get together.”* This ability to pull together was also described by a parent, who said that people in the community put their differences aside when something happens. This parent explained, *“We can get together, pull together with all our differences aside and ... support the families.”* Another parent emphasized that, especially where children are concerned, people *“stand as one.”* This parent went on to explain that *“there’s a lot of caring people in our community ... when it comes to a child they’re willing to do what it takes to help out in any way they are willing to unite.”*



People also spoke about how much they appreciate Elders in their community. A young person expressed that one of the things that makes the community great is that there are Elders who can connect people to language and culture: *“We still have a lot of Elders that still speak our language and there are a lot that we can learn from them.”* One parent, echoing this feeling, stated that her favourite thing about Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw is *“the Elders and the friendship I have with them.”*

Despite many of the positive things participants shared about their community, several people believe that there is room to foster more togetherness. Some people shared that they would like it if the community came together more often outside of crises and sad occasions. A parent emphasized that more unity will ultimately benefit the children, saying, *“[I] think my community is an awesome community and I would like for my nieces and my nephews and my cousins and all the kids in the community to come together and just be happy.”*

Traditional Family Laws

At the Elders gathering held in the spring of 2012, Elders described how traditional laws were a way of life rather than an exact list of protocols. They explained that these laws were passed down from one generation to the next through teaching children by example. They emphasized that laws weren't written, but were moral and spiritual practices.



During conversations with community members, several Elders described ceremonies and feasts that form part of the traditional family laws of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw people. An Elder explained how the Big House was at the centre of living family laws:

The family laws was held at the Big House, and everything was ... held there for different celebration. ... celebration of new birth, celebration of Indian marriage. Celebration of how a child become a young lady. Celebration and there was also sad occasions ... they also held it there at the Big House. (Elder participant)

Community members remembered babies being welcomed and honoured through ceremonies. An Elder explained that every baby who was born was given an Indian name and a song, in the way that people were given gifts through the potlatch. First, a baby was given their name, then their songs, and then their dances. Another Elder remembered that when babies were nine months old, big parties were thrown for them. This Elder recalled, *"There was close to being a potlatch party for them."*

Different ages and events in people's lives were acknowledged through ceremony in the Big House. An Elder described the impact and purpose of her coming of age feast: *"It made me feel very proud that my family did that for me and had shown how they felt about me and teaching other people how to treat me as a person."*



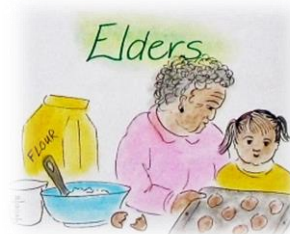
People also spoke about traditional family laws teaching them how to raise children, and the important role that Elders played in passing teachings on to younger generations. An Elder shared that traditional laws taught her about being a parent and grandparent, and described her learning process as a young parent:

I had Elders that I lived closely by, neighbour or relative, and uncles . They were my teachers. They were my guidance as a young parent. And I had friends that, in our generation, are elderly ladies. We just supported one another. We never had resources like today. ... If you plan to have children, they need to be guided, like the way it has been for me in the beginning. I had a mother and aunties and close friends that really helped me, taught me and just gave me that guidance and support. How to take care of my child, my children. And it's that love, care and discipline. And how do we ensure our children to keep their identity? Again it comes from your close relatives, your aunt and your grandmother. Teachings should come from the family. Just pass it on.... Now I'm teaching my

grandchildren. I know a little bit of my culture. I don't know too much. But it's my love and my life skill I'm passing on to my grandchildren. (Elder participant)

Numerous people spoke about the important role that Elders play in families and in the community. Several Elders described how, as grandparents, they are teachers. An Elder, talking about their relationship with their grandchildren, explained, *"As a grandparent, we always talk to them. We always pull them in and we explain things to them."* A parent spoke to the power of Elders as teachers and as links to the past:

Everyone should be welcome when it comes to the Elders because that's our key for our past. Because ...the future depends on us. ... Because when we become Elders, what are we going to do for the next generation? ... Elders are very powerful. ... there's no other way to look at our history. (parent participant)



At the Elders gathering, Elders talked about how "family is the most important thing." Traditionally, families were very close. First cousins were brothers and sisters, and this is still practiced today. An Elder in the community spoke about how his grandfather had been like a father to him, saying *"I always called him my dad."* Another Elder remembered the important teachings about family relationships they had received growing up:

I can tell you in my younger days, the only thing I heard from my mom and dad is the teaching that taught us who our relatives were and he'd point at somebody, "That's your uncle" and "that's your brother over there." He would teach us who our relatives were. (Elder participant)

Community members talked about the deep respect they have for Elders. An Elder recalled that looking after Elders in the community had been a priority when she was young. Every day, as a youngster, this Elder would *"have to go and help"* her grandfather.

Traditional Parenting

Elders at the gathering held in March 2012 explained that traditionally, parenting started before the baby was even born. Many Elders at this gathering described how *"parents would talk to the baby in the womb."* As an Elder emphasized, teaching children and talking to them as they grow is an important part of parenting. Another Elder reaffirmed this, saying, *"We all seemed to learn about how we raise our children and how we can help them. ... There's ways I feel can help them: talking to them and listening to them. If they want to learn something you can help them understand it."* We had many conversations with Elders in the community who shared rich stories and valuable teachings about what traditional parenting means to them.



An Elder explained, *“Traditional parenting is ... love, respect, [and] teach your children what you have been taught.”* Another Elder shared that children should be taught responsibility, values, and love for themselves and their family. The following is a story shared by an Elder about traditional parenting:

And because our parents used to teach us lots, me and my [siblings] had a lot of respect for our dad. Even when we became adults, he still taught us. I never knew my mom and dad spanking us, or scolding us, or getting mad at us. He just taught us in a nice way. ... And that’s kind of a lost art these days, is the parents teaching the children right from the beginning. (Elder participant)

Another Elder shared a similar memory about teachings that her parents had passed on to her: *“They taught me not to get angry with my children, to be patient with them, to be loving.”* This Elder emphasized that although she was disciplined, she was never hit.

Several Elders described that they had been taught to make children the priority, to *“look after them, care for them, and not leave them alone.”* One Elder recalled that she had lived this teaching: *“You have to make sure you feed your child first before yourself. Make sure you ... take care of the children’s needs before your own, and I lived that.”*



When Elders and parents in the community reflected on traditional parenting, they spoke a lot about two things: learning responsibility through chores and “rules.” One Elder remembered that children were not allowed to stay out late, talk to strangers or talk about problems. One of the “rules” Elders mentioned frequently was making sure children came home before dark. As an Elder recalled:

Traditional laws in my young childhood was to get home before dark. And if I wasn’t, I had an uncle or aunt come look for me and bring me home. (Elder participant)

According to one Elder, teachings around responsibility included washing the dishes after you cooked and keeping the house clean. This Elder had work to do as a child, like pack and boil water. Another Elder remembered having to cut wood with their grandfather and make the beds. Several Elders touched on the importance of duties and responsibilities when they were children:

Right from when I was small. I put ooligans on sticks, I don’t know how many, seems like hundreds of them. Probably wasn’t, but I was little. But I was helping my grandparents do things like that. Pick berries. (Elder participant)

*Keeping children at the centre
we cannot help but make good decisions*

Many Elders in the community spoke about the importance of providing love, support, and safety in the lives of children. Speaking as a grandmother, one Elder emphasized, *“Our grandchildren are so precious”* and explained, *“It is very important to have your child loved ... in your home, your family, your community. It’s so important. ... It’s our responsibility to protect and to care for our family, our children.”* An Elder recalled how being raised by her grandparents according to traditional laws had made her feel safe:

I was given to my grandparents at the age of only 3 weeks old. They raised me. ... they adopted us. Just handed us over then to grandparents, uncles, whoever could look after us. I was pretty secure in that home. Cause there was ... traditional laws. They made me feel safe. ...It’s something that I pass on to my children, for my grandchildren. ... The love that I had in the family was great. The safety. (Elder participant)



Several community members shared stories of living with members of their extended family. An Elder remembered that her parents had looked after kids in the community so that they did not go into government care.

At the Elders gathering held in March 2012, Elders described traditional parenting as having provided the sustenance of healthy families and communities for thousands of years. People in the community expressed a desire to return to traditional parenting practices. Elders are seen as the link to traditional parenting knowledge and practices:

As Elders, we’ve had Elders teach us how to take care, teach us how to do things for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren. We teach our own children in our own way.... I think with the traditional parenting, that’s a ... huge thing that we could get from our Elders that we have now. What they ... were taught, the stories that they have. (Elder participant)



Traditional Foods

Community members expressed that they miss getting together over a meal, or coffee and tea. As one Elder put it, socializing was *“how our people knew who was sick and who was hungry. 'Cause they always visited each other.”* Many people shared that traditional food connected people to culture and family and *“kept us healthy and strong.”* Community members emphasized that knowledge of traditional foods needs to be passed down, with one Elder communicating:

We have to live off of the land. ... it's something that needs to be taught to our kids. ... The old people in the old days never got sick because they lived off the land. (Elder participant)

Another Elder recalled that as a child, hardly any food was bought at the store. Elders shared detailed memories about traditional foods, and the important role that they played in their lives and in the life of the community:

And ... we did help our grandparents. We did help them clean a lot of our traditional food. We helped clean clams and washed it and cut it up for clam fritters for the whole family. And pack wood. We did all that together. (Elder participant)

The powerful ability of food to bring people together was highlighted by numerous community members. Whenever traditional food was mentioned, it was always spoken of as being something that people prepared and ate with others. Many people talked about how their families, including the young ones, still participate in the preparation of traditional foods today:

Our grandchildren come here when – we work on fish. ... And we have our families come in to help. Every one of them come help out and I tell them, “This is how we used to do it. ... 'cause our grandparents made sure we all worked together as a family.” ... That's what I try pass on to my kids. And we all work together like that. (Elder participant)

My mom taught me how to make bannock, and bread. ... my dad taught me how to gut the fish and fry them, BBQ them. Spent most of my life watching him gut the fish and cook them. (youth participant)



Elders emphasized how hard people in their communities had worked, and described a lifestyle that centered on working to provide enough to live on:

It's just really neat how they lived off their lands and that was their education and their home – homeland, you know, the life skill, the work, the strength they had in how they took care of us as children and they supplied all what we needed, like clothing, food, and a table, and shelter. It was all there. I lived in the homeland, in our reserve, and I watched how they fished. They were fishermen, my dad and my uncles, they fished and provided food for the winter. (Elder participant)

One parent illustrated the unity that was created by the traditional harvesting and preparation of food: *“Going out hunting and gathering food and coming back and just cooking it for the whole community. That's how it used to be in our homeland.”*

Traditional Values

Community members of all ages spoke about the importance of respect as something that was deeply valued in the past and continues to be valued today, and Elders shared the teachings about respect that they had learned as children. One Elder remembered, *“One of the things that our old people used to say [is] that you need to respect one another.”* Another Elder observes young people in the community today showing respect by doing chores and maintenance work for the Elders, like *“cuttin' and packing wood for them, getting water, house cleaned. And they'd come and paint our house. Or they'd ... cut the grass or little things like that.”*

Numerous people in the community also offered rich descriptions of teachings about forgiveness and kindness. In the words of one youth, *“One of the big things in my family is putting forgiveness first.”* According to an Elder:

My father used to always teach us not to hate. Not to be bitter. To be loving even to the people who looked down on us. I always teach my children that. No matter what they do to you say “hi, how are you?” when you walk by. Even if they call you down and be mean to you, just say “hi.” ... Taught us to be honest and kind and loving. Sometimes it was hard when I was a child, when I was mistreated at school. But, it kept coming to my mind just to be strong, loving and kind. That's what I always teach my children ... they've all grown now, and they're alright. (Elder participant)



Several people spoke proudly about the practice of kindness and care that their parents modelled for them. One Elder cited her mother as her role model and remembered how she taught her to be nice to everyone and treat all children as if they were your own because the little ones remember when they grow up. Reflecting on the importance of compassion and kindness, one Elder described how these values were modelled for him:

What I learned from them (Elders) is compassion, kindness ... I wish I could have ... the heart my mother had. She accepted kids that were – seemed to be wandering around, no food, no nothing to eat. ... she'd call them in and feed them and give them some extra clothing that we'd have for them.... Ya, so that's what I learned to be compassionate, to be kind to people and that's how I see them when they did it [as] an example [instead of] ... tell us. They did what they can for people. (Elder participant)

In addition to respect and kindness, our people have learned how to be strong. First Nations people have learned to be resilient because of the many forms of oppression forced on our people after European contact, like residential schooling. Several parents shared what they have been taught about strength:

Like when all hope feels lost, don't give up. That's not what we were taught. We were taught not to give up. Like look at – look at our parents. Our parents went to residential school. My parents did. But they never gave – my dad never gave up on his culture. ... I feel like there's going to be nothing left if we give up. (parent participant)

Life is going to give you obstacles and you're either going to choose to let it push you down, or you're going to get right back up. (parent participant)



Role Models

At the Elders gathering held in March 2012, one of the strongest messages Elders shared was the idea that family and community members serve as role models for children and youth, and teach them by example. One young person in the community believes in the power of role models to inspire change, and stated, *“Just takes that one simple, amazing person, to set an example and be a role model for the adults.”* A parent spoke about her desire to model strength for her children and grandchildren, particularly in the face of the Ministry:

I’ve learned how to pray and reach out to God for strength to help me with my pain. ... I want to show my grandchildren now that I can do it and I’m going to be here for them all the time and I’m – I’m a stronger person now ... “Hey, I’m not going to let the Ministry do this and do that to me anymore.” Because I know that I have power, and I know I have the strength now to go on and fight them.
(parent participant)

Elders in the community described the practice of looking to role models as youngsters. They learned by watching those around them perform tasks, or by jumping into something new:

My granny – I learned how to cook Indian food just watching her – what she did with them. ... this is what you learned from your Elders. And you pass it on to the younger generation. (Elder participant)

It’s just something that came natural to us. You know, we’d go out and collect seaweed. The old man would take us out on the boat, take us to where we get it and say “there you go.” You know. Give you a bucket. Same as digging clams or whatever. You’d just go and do it. There was no real teaching there. We just hit the beach and you’d start digging. (Elder participant)

Many people spoke about the invaluable knowledge that Elders possess about cultural values, traditional parenting, laws, and foods. More than one person described that spending time with Elders, and listening to them, supports a sense of identity and belonging. Elders acknowledged their role in the community, and highlighted the importance of guiding parents and children:

I’d like to see all the grandparents try to speak to our younger generations ... You know, they ... speak about what they went through and how their parents raised them. Like my mother-in-law, you know, her mother. ... every day she would talk to her daughters that were there. You know, and they’d speak to them. (Elder participant)

Elders, I think, really hunger to be able to share what they know. And so parents ... need to want to I guess sit and listen ... to the grandparents and learn and even just hear their life story. (Elder participant)

Culture

Culture is a way of life. Community members shared powerful stories about the positive influence that culture has on their lives. Culture was described as supporting people to be confident and more connected to their families. Many participants expressed the importance of the potlatch, which is only one part of our culture.

It [dancing] just relaxes me. Just like anything... it's uplifting. You get onto the floor and you turn and you turn into the spirit world. And you're not even yourself when you're out there on the dance floor. You know there's different dances that are there that are really moving. There's some of them you know they take all your energy and they get rid of it ... And some of them bring good energy. ... after you leave [you're] ... a lot closer with family than you've ever been ...
(parent participant)



Another parent asserted that young people's involvement in culture "builds their confidence." Community members described the power of the potlatch to bring family together:

At our granny's potlatch, it felt really good 'cause ... when I got up and danced, my son – my oldest son came up. He was dancing beside me. And it was like, "Holy cow. I'm dancing with my son."
(parent participant)

Brought a lot of strength to our family 'cause we honoured our greatgrandmother. (parent participant)

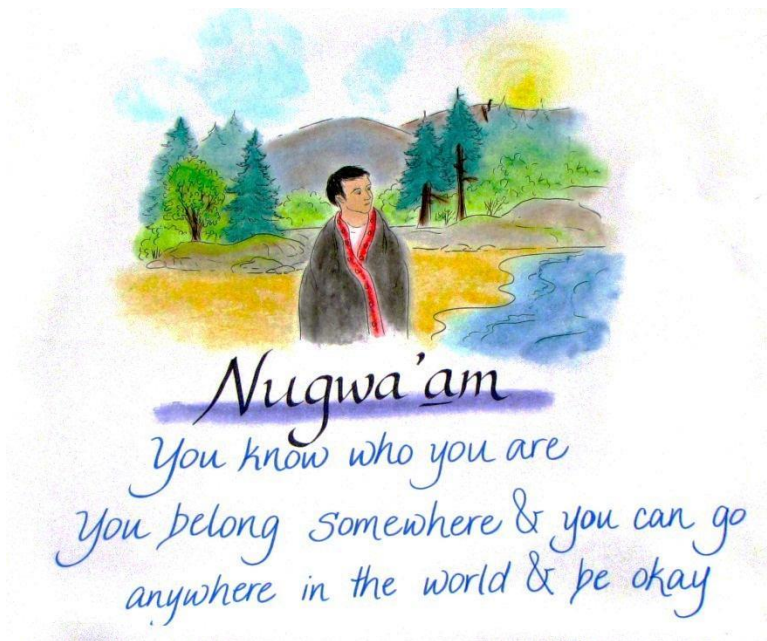
The Potlatch
· You honor your ancestors through the potlatch
· You are taught who you are, where you come from & where you belong

Many young people spoke about their efforts to learn the language and practice culture. Several youth shared that they are learning Kwa'kwa'la from their parents or grandparents, and acknowledged that it might be harder for those in the community whose families may not be as connected to language and culture to extend their learning beyond what is offered in the Band school. An Elder also raised this issue, saying:

If they have an Elder in their family they probably are [learning about culture]. And if they don't have an Elder in the family, they have to go and learn it somewhere else, like in schools. And they need to have that in the schools. (Elder participant)

If you know who you are and where you come from, you have a sense of belonging. Community members communicated that they would like more opportunities to learn about culture and language. One young person stated that being connected to culture means being connected to what it is to be Native:

I haven't had anything to do with our culture in years. And I feel really bad about that. I feel like I'm turning into a white person. ... You know, I'm very proud to be a Native person. (youth participant)



Challenges

Community members also discussed some of the challenges that they face or offered descriptions of challenges faced by the entire community. Throughout the conversations, three specific challenges were identified: drug and alcohol issues, housing and road issues, and dealing with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Drug and Alcohol Issues

Community members shared that drugs and alcohol are a destructive force in the community and expressed an overwhelming desire to see less drinking and drug use on reserve. Drugs and alcohol were described as acting to take things away from people. As one parent put it, *“It’s nothing but death and anger.”* People shared:

It just steals and robs. It breaks the family relationships. (Elder participant)

It’s taken friends. It’s taken family. But yet we’re still not afraid of it. (parent participant)

Some community members believe that drugs and alcohol are one of the primary reasons why children in the community are in government care. *“Especially the drugs,”* said one Elder, *“That’s what really took ... our younger kids.”* Youth in the community expressed a strong desire for change:

There’s one thing that really, really upsets me and that is the amount of drinking going on in the community. ... some of them [the kids] are in foster care because of the drinking. (youth participant)

I would like to see like the alcohol and the drugs leave. ‘Cause it takes a lot of the parents’ place that have kids and is part of the reason why they kids are in foster care. So I’d love to see that change. (youth participant)

Our Elders and parents also shared the wish to get our village cleaned up:

Another thing I really wish for is to get our village cleaned up. Like take the drugs out of there and ... booze and stuff. ‘Cause that’s why the kids are taken. ... And not only our village, but other villages. They have that problem too. (Elder participant)



When asked what could help to cut down on the amount of partying and drinking in the community, a group of youth suggested, *“Just a place for families to get together and do activities would be the first step.”* Community members shared powerful stories of healing from drugs and alcohol. Youth, Elders, and parents spoke about the many people who are *“trying really hard to quit drinking just to get their children back.”* An Elder

shared that he sees gatherings to celebrate people's healing more and more: *"Every week, there's a party somewhere."*

Housing and Roads

Participants shared that the lack of housing and mold issues have led their people to move away from the community into town. One parent talked about the health problems that resulted from mould in a relative's home:

One of the kids got really sick because of the mould and they thought they got rid of it just by cutting it out. But little did they know that it was behind the dry wall. ... And my [relative] she got it pretty bad, too. She woke up feeling like she couldn't breathe. She has a hard time walking around because of that mould that was collecting up in there. (parent participant)

Community members emphasized that healthy homes are particularly important for children:

Right now we've a housing situation where there's not enough housing and renovations [to] the home environment. And the homes should be a good home environment, healthy home, healthy environment for the children. (Elder participant)

Several youth highlighted that the roads in the community need to be repaired. One young person mentioned, *"We need better roads here. Everybody's like not even driving on the road half the time."*

Community Frustrations with the Ministry of Children and Family Development

People expressed frustration about the removal of children from the community by MCFD. Parents and Elders shared many stories about how the removal of their children 35 to 40 years ago is still being experienced by the community today.

In the words of one parent, *"They're kind of ripping families apart and they don't know what they're doing to us. It feels like we're at war."* Many people shared stories of children being separated from their family and community and sent to Sointula, Campbell River, or further. The impact of this is described by one parent, who stated:

A lot of kids they're all grown now and we don't even know where they are... today. A lot of my cousins are still out there, just all over and we can't even find them. (parent participant)

Throughout the community conversations, people spoke a lot about the importance of keeping children in care connected to their culture and community. A parent shared, *"Our kids need to know our families. They need to know our culture."* Although these connections are supposed to be prioritized for Aboriginal children in the child welfare

system, several people explained that it is not happening consistently. As one parent stated:

They aren't allowed to come to any of our cultural events sometimes – the ones that are in care. ... It's the choice of the foster parents. There are a few that let them come. But most of them won't let them come. (parent participant)

Community members described that parents can become disheartened when their children are removed and are gone for long periods of time:

The parents ... get discouraged because their kids are away from them longer. They're trying to make changes, but they say "No, wait a few more months. Do that all over again." ... it's hard for them to accept that they could be gone longer. (parent participant)



Community Wish List

Community members spoke about the programs, services, and activities that they believe will support strong families and communities. This section summarizes what participants shared about their desire for expanded services and programs, more community activities, increased cultural programming, and gathering places for the community to come together.

Expanded Services and Programs

I would like a receiving home, and I would like to see more people out there to go and talk to the Elders. I would like to learn our language. I'd like more to keep busy. I would like to see more parents succeed ... and just get the parent thing going, women's support groups. ... I really feel strongly that that would help our community a lot. (parent participant)

Community members made a number of suggestions about the type of services and programs that they feel the community as a whole would benefit from. They are:

- Receiving home
- Language
- Peer support groups
- Women's support groups
- Community clean-up
- A group home
- More Aboriginal foster homes

- Drug and alcohol treatment centre in the community
- Sexual abuse counselling
- Offering every member of the community assistance and support
- 24-hour mental health support
- A drop-in centre
- A support vehicle
- Respite

A parent expressed that more programs for youth would communicate to them their value in the community – make them feel more a part of the community, and said, “*I’d like to see more involvement with the youth.*” Youth expressed that they would benefit from more supports and resources, with one young person describing that what youth need is:

.... just someone they can go to. A place they can go to that will make them feel safe and supported. You know, they can either talk about what happened, or not. Cry when they need a shoulder. Arms for a hug. If they like music, they can go there to sing or write poetry or, you know, even take their frustrations out on a pool table. (youth participant)



One youth explained that it might be difficult for some young people to reach out for help. This prevents them from getting out there and finding out what supports are available. This young person believes that it is a question of confidence, and youth perhaps not feeling good enough to be out in the world: “*So maybe if we could start making our kids feel more like useful, like ... their life does have a use.*”

Youth described a range of services and programs that would support their peers who have become parents, like respite, daycare, and young parent groups. Elders spoke about the role that they see for themselves in supporting young parents:

The young parents ... it would be nice if we got together with the young ones for the Elders to talk to them. ... We used to have that before. Teachings. The Elders teach the young ones a lot of traditional things and that would be nice to have come back into our rez. (Elder participant)



Community members mentioned that Elders need more assistance maintaining their homes and getting around. Several people mentioned that it is very difficult for Elders who do not drive because walking through the community can be challenging due to the numerous hills and lack of sidewalks. Several people spoke about specific services that would benefit Elders. As one parent explained:

There should be more workers for the Elders, like if the Elders need groceries done, lawn mowing or woodcutting, or a housekeeper, or someone there. If they can't do what they have to or if they're struggling in a way, then there should be more workers like Elders workers that can be there to support them and to be there for them when they need somebody there. (parent participant)

One young person suggested a program that could get youth in the community to “go around and help Elders out in doing stuff for them” like house and garden work.

More Community Activities

In addition to expanded services and programs, the community expressed a strong desire for more community activities and events. One of the parents spoke about why organized community activities are important:

We want to be able to change what ... we've seen, what we've lived, into something better ... Because we do have future kids that want to be able to live a really good life that ... just don't want to see themselves lost in the system of the government due to alcohol and drugs and it's important to have numerous kinds of programs because you're in a small town like this, the only ... way people either come together is hockey, or partying, or some of them just go to their friends and game out or whatever ... It'd be nice to have ... something much bigger. Something more controlled. (parent participant)

The following is a summary of the many community activities that people suggested:

- Activity night once a week for families, kids, or young adults where they book the hall and play hockey or soccer
- More sports in general
- More game nights
- Family nights
- Family activities organized on the weekend
- Sports day (with Indian baseball)
- Monthly community clean-ups
- Community activities
- Community picnics a couple of times per summer
- Community river cleaning
- More time with Elders



Community members spoke about the many benefits of offering activities that give parents and children opportunities to spend time together. As one Elder put it, “We need to ... have some kind of community thing going on for our young ones – with their parents. Something for them all to do together.” The idea of having a family night came up often throughout our conversations with community members, with several people suggesting that such an event could take place once a week or every two weeks.

Community members also mentioned that they wish to see more space for recreational activities and a place to gather:

The ones that they’re using upstairs above the hall. It used to be like a rec room, there was like ping pong table, TV, pool table up there. If it was there you could go and hang out, I would love to see that come back. ... so we can get together, have family nights. ... I would love to just find an area where you can set that all up again ... where you can take an area, load it with different recreation stuff like ping pong table, pool table, even if it was used you get all that together and you know a place where you can have movie night and just relax for the weekend.
(parent participant)

The following is a list of community suggestions about facilities that would support community activities:

- Recreation centre
- Game room with a pool table
- A bigger hall for more sports
- Getting the field redone
- A rink for road hockey
- Art music facility
- A better playground
- A daycare



More Cultural Programming

A lot of our young parents ... never had that opportunity to teach their kids because they weren't taught. And we need to bring that back into the reserve. So, you know, we need to teach our young mothers stuff. Bring the cultural. There's a lot of values in our culture that our young people don't understand ... they need the tools to teach their kids. (Elder participant)

Another powerful message that emerged about community programs and activities concerns culture. Many community members expressed a strong desire to learn the language and engage in traditional cultural practices and activities, such as these:

- Big House
- Carving
- Weaving
- Making blankets
- Culture nights
- Singing
- Dancing
- More trips to the homeland
- Cedar bark picking
- Button blanket making
- Canoe journeys
- Harvest and preparation of traditional foods
- Cooking classes
- Hunting
- Bread and bannock making



Several people in the community described the importance of having a Big House. One parent explained that she would like to see potlatches and naming ceremonies go on in a Big House rather than in the hall. She also suggested, "We could also go there for culture night." Many of the youth agreed, with one young person stating, "It would be sweet if we had a Big House here." Another youth explained the difference that having a Big House in the community would make to ceremonies:

It would be more interesting to go to an actual Big House with like fire and everything. 'Cause that's the vision I have in my head when I think of a potlatch. But when you go to the hall, it's just crowded ... so it's not very comfortable in there. (youth participant)



Keeping Children Out of Government Care

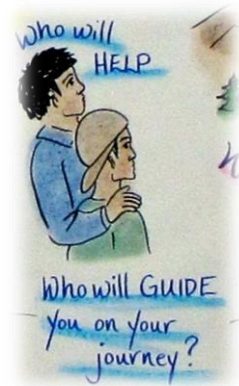
As one Elder in the community stated, “*children are our medicine.*” It was asserted that it is a sacred duty and a blessing to work with and for our children. It was pointed out that for thousands and thousands of years, Aboriginal peoples created ways to care for their children. Everyone in the family, community, and Nation was involved in raising a child.

Many people expressed frustration that children are being taken out of the community into government care. One parent articulated this frustration clearly: “*Like this has been going on for so long and it’s getting kind of tiring if you really think about it. Like our parents got taken. And now the third generation’s getting taken. ... It’s still happening.*” Community members articulated powerful suggestions on how to keep children out of government care based on their knowledge of what will work for their community.

Parents and Families Need More Support

At the gathering held in March 2012, Elders spoke about how communities can come together and support families to be healthy and strong. Elders at the gathering described strong families as encouraging, supportive, and loving (with lots of hugs). Similar messages were expressed by Gwa’sala-Nakwaxda’xw community members, who emphasized that people coming together to support parents and families – encouraging them, helping them, being there for them – supports families to be strong and keeps children out of government care:

As parents, we just need to feel that, you know, we can do it without thinking we’re alone. ... I guess that’s where ... the way I felt when my kids got taken and stuff. You know, we’re in this...we’re alone, this sucks, this shouldn’t happen and you know it’s just [a] horrible feeling. ... and we just need to hear a lot of encouragement these days, the community. Just knowing that we’re not getting looked down on for our ... our mistakes and our faults ... just showing that they are there, showing they care. Showing they’re willing to help in any way possible, like if we’re struggling, you know, with alcohol and just giving us a place, resources that we can access.
(parent participant)



As a community, we could ... prevent our kids from going into government [care] just by helping one another and being there and letting everyone know that you’re there to help them, if they need it. ... and it would be nice if they could have a community get together and say that ... “the Band is there to help.” (parent participant)

Advocacy

The need for more advocacy in the area of child welfare was expressed by numerous community members. People outlined various ways that advocacy could take shape in the community, including setting up a service that responds to MCFD involvement before the children are removed:

I'd like to see a family service ... especially when the Ministry [is going] to a house. That these people would get called to get there before they're taken and put into [a] white home. I'd like to see those workers go there and try and see what relatives can take them for the night or week or whatever. And give the parents a chance to sober up or get on their feet and take them back from their family. A lot of times, the kids just get taken out of the home and we don't know about it 'til the next day. (Elder participant)

Community members also emphasized that parents in the process of dealing with MCFD or who have children in government care need access to more advocacy support. Referring to a parent in the community, one Elder said:

Nobody's letting her know her rights. Nobody's talking with her and helping her with MCFD. So there does need to be more. We need more workers to be able to do that so that people don't fall through the cracks. (Elder participant)



Family Healing

At the Elders gathering in March 2012, people described how the loss of traditional ways of caring for children has led to present-day challenges like addictions, violence, hopelessness, and the apprehension of our children by the government. At the gathering, Elders described the healing process as the starting place for changing what needs to be changed. Many community members indicated that drugs and alcohol are a big part of why children are taken into government care, and believe that family healing will support families to be strong:

I think intervention is very important for families because that's why kids get taken away (Elder participant)

Youth explained that recovery from alcohol and drugs takes time, and suggested that Elders have an important role to play in this gradual healing:

I believe that the Elders can help them. Can teach them the language, teach them how to dance. Fish, gut the fish, go digging for clams. Hunting, skinning, and cleaning the deers. There's just so much that can be done, but not in one day. ... hopefully, it'll keep their minds off the alcohol and the drugs, and focus [it] on their kids and how they can be teaching this to them. (youth participant)

An Elder in the community shared that he has given a lot of thought to working with parents who struggle with alcohol and drugs. Like the young person quoted above, he believes that teaching parents about culture will help them turn away from alcohol and drugs because it will “give something more meaningful for them to do”:

I had planned to do something ... with the parents that [are] involve[d] with alcohol and drugs. ... gather them maybe once a week or something. And get the Elders to talk to them and start teaching the right thing. ... If they got involved with cultural activities and teaching them how to make things, cut fish and all those other things that anybody could do, teach them how to do it. Get their mind off alcohol. ... And I always think that the Elders of the community and the adults as well should gather them in a place and start teaching them ... to teach them the right way to be a parent. (Elder participant)

Support for Children and Families in Care

Community members also shared important suggestions on how to better support children and families who are involved with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. When it comes to children in government care, participants expressed that consistent support is extremely important. Elders described the supportive role that they see themselves providing for children and families in care:

They should have parents to gather. Even the ones that don't have their children taken away. To get together and talk about things – what can help them – what they think can help them. I think that's the only way that we can get through this is help each other. And tell them of your experiences being a parent. And maybe they'll look at that and try and change. (Elder participant)



Organizing activities that connect parents with Elders was described as being beneficial for everyone. As one Elder suggested, bringing grandparents who might be “lonely” together in a room with parents who have kids in care to “hang out” would allow everyone to learn from one another. Parents could teach Elders how to use the Internet, and Elders could share stories about parenting.

For parents whose children are in care, and who return to the community after going through treatment, community members again emphasized that consistent support and follow-up are important. An Elder described the situation of someone she knows:

Every time she comes home she just starts drinking. 'Cause she's got no support. The support that would work for her is someone going to visit her and do things with her. (Elder participant)

Community members also suggested that parent support groups and parenting workshops would be good resources for parents with children in care. One parent described a

program called “Project Parent” that had been helpful for her: “ ... *that’s where I had to learn to get to know my kids all over again. To learn to communicate with them, to learn to talk to them. Because like I said, I was raised in a residential school. I didn’t have parents to talk to.*”

One Elder explained that in the past, children never left the community. In the old days, if a child’s parents died in an accident and they were orphaned, somebody in the community “*always managed to grab hold of those kids and look after them.*” Participants shared the clear message that when children are taken into care and removed from the community, it is extremely important that these children remain connected to their family and community. As one Elder stated, “*It’s really important that you teach them who their relatives are.*” A parent suggested that even activities like a family photo day with children in care would maintain important connections. In the words of one Elder:

The children need to be in our ... community. We need to be together always. Because when they’re out in somewhere else, they don’t know us anymore. (Elder participant)

*Only people
who love the child
should look after
the child. Otherwise
the child is confused*



PART 4: CLOSING REMARKS

Closing Remarks

It is clear from our conversations that many of the challenges our children and communities face are rooted in ongoing colonial impacts that have caused immeasurable harm to our people and disrupted our traditional way of life – a way of life that we view as key to rebuilding healthy families and communities. As the community conversations have illustrated, discussions about keeping children out of government care need to extend beyond consideration of individual children and parents towards an inclusive, holistic, community-based approach. As our Elders emphasize, our children can only be understood as part of a whole that includes their family, community, culture, and the natural environment.

Members of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations made it clear that keeping children out of government care means working with all parts of the whole, children, youth, parents, Elders, and creating more opportunities to come together. They described building strong families and communities in their own way, and articulated a vision for their community based on the knowledge and wisdom of their people. Community members recognize Elders as powerful links to traditional knowledge and ways that will heal and strengthen the community.

The Ministry has publicly stated that the child welfare system has failed to serve the best interests of Aboriginal children and families. In many ways the welfare system has also weakened the ability of our families and communities to care for our own children. Many positive changes have been made in recent years; still, our communities must take the lead in developing holistic systems of care for our own children and families. As a first step, child welfare policies and procedures need to be changed to recognize grandparents and other relatives as the preferred caregivers for children at risk of being taken into government care. Further, our community leaders need to have a voice in any revision or development of culturally relevant policies and procedures that impact our children and families.

The conversations that took place through our community engagement process have made it abundantly clear what our people need in order to keep our children out of government care: stronger families, stronger communities, and stronger support networks.



APPENDICES

Youth survey

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning my culture is important	18	1			
I am able to do lots of activities on my reserve	3	9	2	3	1
I feel accepted by others.	13	4	1	1	
I am learning from the Elders	8	8	1	2	
I get enough support in order to succeed at school	11	7		1	
I feel safe in the community	11	7	1		1
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	13	5	1		

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities.	1	7	8	1	1
I am learning my Native language.	3	4	7	2	2
I am learning about my culture	5	5	6	1	1
I participate in activities on my reserve	2	5	8	3	
I feel safe on my reserve	8	5	5		
I worry about life	9	4	2	1	3
I feel successful	9	8	1		
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life	1	1	1	1	14

Analysis

A total of 19 youth, nine males and ten females ranging in age from 11 to 19, completed the written survey. Most of the youth noted that they never use alcohol and drugs and feel successful in their lives. They also largely feel safe in the community and receive enough support to help them succeed in school. Many of the youth also noted that they feel safe on the reserve and participate in activities on in their community. However, while many also noted that they are learning about their culture and some are learning their language, the results also show that there could be more opportunities to participate in cultural activities in the community. All of the youth stated that learning about their culture is very important and many noted that they are learning about their culture from the Elders.

Parent survey

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning my culture is important	12		1		
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	2	5		4	2
There are enough activities for youth in my community	3	2	2	3	3
I would like to spend time supporting the youth of my community	11	1		1	
I feel accepted by others	6	4	1	2	
Adequate support is available for adults/parents	6	3	1	3	
I have adequate, safe housing	5	4		1	3
Adequate support is available for youth	3	3	2	2	2
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	13				

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities	3	4	2	2	2
I am learning my Native language	1	3	2	1	6
I participate in activities in my community	3	1	7	1	1
I spend time supporting the youth in my community	3	1	5	3	1
I feel safe in the community	5	1	5	1	1
I worry about life	8	3	1		
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life	5	5	2	1	

Analysis

Thirteen parents (nine females and four males), ranging in age from 20 to 54, completed the written survey. Although the parents provided a range of responses, several trends emerged. All of the participants feel that learning about their culture is important and some are able to currently participate in these activities; however, many feel that there are not enough opportunities for families to participate in cultural activities and events. Nearly all of the parents also noted that they would like to spend more time supporting the youth; children in care are reportedly a large concern for the community. Many of the parents also reported that they worry about life and are impacted by drugs and/or alcohol.

Elder survey

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I know a lot about my culture	1	3			
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	1	2		1	1
There are enough activities for youth in my community		3		1	1
I would like to spend time supporting the youth of my community	2	1			
Adequate support is available for adults/parents	1	2		1	
I have adequate, safe housing	1	1	1		
Adequate support is available for youth		3	1		
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	4				

QUESTIONS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I participate in cultural activities			2		2
I speak my Native language frequently			2	1	1
I participate in activities in my community		1	3		
I spend time supporting the youth of my community	1		2		2
I feel safe in the community	2	2	1		
I worry about life	1	3		1	
Drugs and alcohol are having an impact on my life		1	1		3

Analysis

A total of five Elders, two males and three females ranging in age from 57 to 67, completed the written survey. The Elders that they carry a great deal of cultural knowledge and would like to have more opportunities to spend time with the youth in their community. The Elders currently reported that they do not often participate in cultural activities or speak their language (with all of the responses ranging from 'sometimes' to 'never'). While most of the Elders feel quite safe in their community, many of them noted that they often worry about life. There were mixed responses around whether there are adequate supports and programs for parents, youth, and families. All of the Elders strongly agreed that children in foster care are a concern for the community.

This report was compiled in collaboration with Sasamans Society



SASAMANS SOCIETY

680 Head Start Crescent, Campbell River, BC V9H 1P9
Phone: 250.914.2212 Fax: 250.914.2215 www.sasamans.ca

The community work was funded by Ministry of Children & Families