

CARING FOR OUR OWN CHILDREN

Voices of our Communities



LAICHWILTACH FAMILY LIFE SOCIETY

To Laichwiltach Family Life Society

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



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PART 1: SASAMANS SOCIETY



Sasamans Society Overview

Sasamans Society is charting new waters in providing 12 First Nations and 3 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 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.

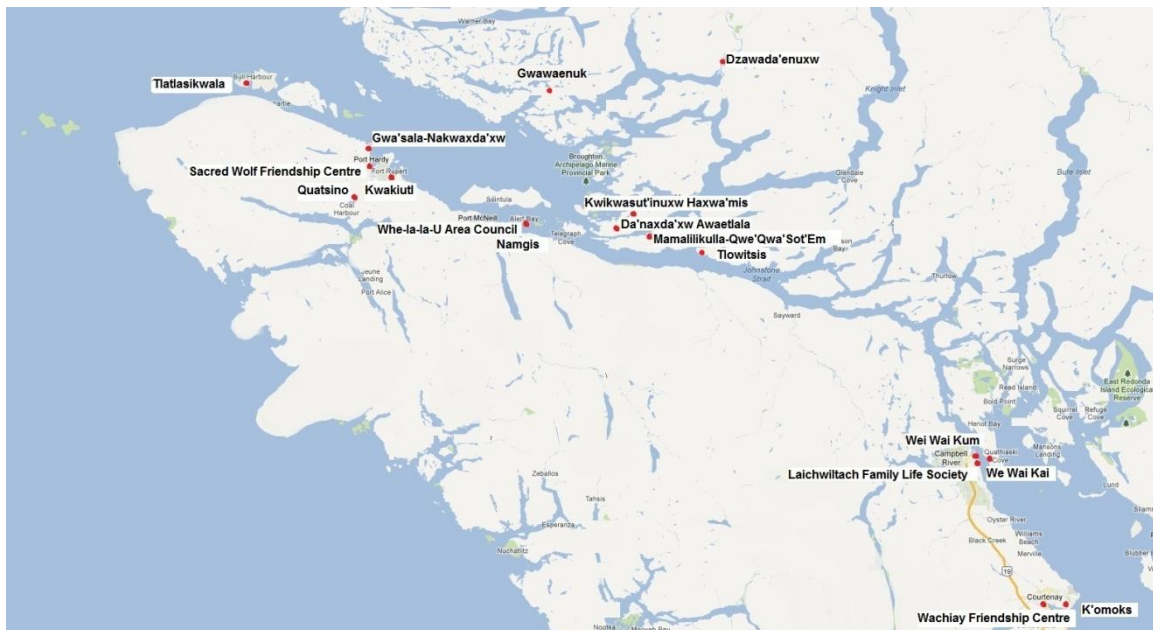


Member Nations

- Kwakiutl Band
- Da'naxda'xw Awaetlala First Nation
- Dzawada'enuxw First Nation
- Kwikwasut'inuxw/Haxwa'mis Tribe
- Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw First Nation
- 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
- Wachiy Friendship Centre



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.

At that time, Vancouver Island Aboriginal Transition Team (VIATT) was established as an interim Aboriginal planning authority for communities on and surrounding Vancouver Island. However, given the region's cultural diversity and geographical challenges, when the VIATT process ended in 2008, it was determined that smaller regions would be more manageable. Consequently, the North Island Wellness Society (NIWS) was established as one of five Vancouver Island regional authorities. We recognize both MCFD and VIATT for their successful work during the regionalization process.

Formed in 2009, 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.

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:

- Appreciate and nurture the strengths and capacities of our people.
- Communicate and engage, openly and on an ongoing basis.
- Honour our traditions, customs, and beliefs.
- Involve the voices of our children and the wisdom of our Elders.
- Commit to learning from one another.
- Dedicate 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: VOICES OF OUR COMMUNITIES

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



The Process and The Reports

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 clients of Laichwiltach Family Life Society in Campbell River.

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
- Keeping children out of care
- Other

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,

¹ Dzawada'enuxw First Nation, Quatsino First Nation, We Wai Kai First Nation, and Wachaiy 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).

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 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.

In the following section of the report, we present our conversations with clients of Laichwiltach Family Life Society.

PART 3: LAICHWILTACH FAMILY LIFE SOCIETY



Community Summary

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society is a multi-service organization in Campbell River that serves Aboriginal people throughout the region. The Society works in caring, collaborative, culturally based ways to create a safe environment and circles of care, healing, and wellness for First Nation and Métis families. The Society provides direct service to over 1,000 people a year, not including those who take part in family dinners and celebrations like Aboriginal Day.

In our community engagement process with the community, the Sasamans team met with a good representative sample of people from Laichwiltach:

- 18 youth were reached through a focus group and one individual interview; in addition, 12 youth filled out a survey and participated in a dialogue in conjunction with an evaluation of the Laichwiltach youth program conducted in March 2011, and those findings have informed this report
- 16 parents were reached through a focus group and interviews; 14 parents completed a survey
- 14 Elders participated in an interview and/or focus group; 9 Elders completed a survey

The survey results indicate that all of the youth value learning about their culture. Most (9) feel they have opportunities to do activities and that they are learning from the community's Elders. Eight of the youth participate in cultural activities, and half say they are learning their Native language "often" or "always." These results indicate a strong desire on the part of the youth to learn and participate in cultural activities. Eleven of the youth feel safe in the community; however, 4 reported that they only feel safe some of the time. Seven say that drugs and alcohol affect their lives at least sometimes; 5 say they always or often worry about life; 6 say they rarely or only sometimes feel successful; and 11 agree that the issue of children in foster care is a concern for their community. These results are troubling.

Fourteen parents were surveyed; all but one would like to learn more about their culture and 12 would like more opportunities to either learn or use their Native language. Most of the parents (8) feel there is inadequate support for youth in the community, and 10 say there are not enough activities for youth.

Nine Elder surveys were completed, which is close to the number of seniors who attend the Elders' group at Laichwiltach. Five of the Elders were 65 years or older. For a few of the questions, the responses do not clearly point toward any particular trend. After reviewing the data, we found that the older the Elder, the more likely they were to know a lot about their culture. Those under 65 were less certain. This fact underscores the urgency of having the older Elders share their cultural knowledge in the very near future. The older Elders are more willing to spend time with youth; perhaps they feel they have more cultural knowledge to share. Most of the Elders feel they have adequate support and safe housing, which speaks to the success of Elders' programming within the community. However, most of the Elders (8) say they worry about life at least sometimes, and 4 say they always worry about it. More than half (5) say that drugs and alcohol have an impact on their life at least some of the time.

Sasamans was encouraged by the community's active participation in the information-gathering process and appreciated the open and heartfelt responses to our questions. The complete survey results are included in the appendices.

Key Findings

1. Drug and alcohol abuse has been identified by the community members as being very high and impacts some families children going into care.
2. Racism, isolation, and intergenerational trauma are recognized as underlying causes of stress and of drug and alcohol abuse in the community.
3. People at Laichwiltach Family Life Society show a great interest in learning about Native language and culture.
4. The parents and staff identified outreach advocacy for parents with children in care and youth in care as an urgent need.

Service Gaps

1. Additional parenting programs that focus on education for parents with children in care
2. Programs for 7-12 and 19 -24 (aged out youth)
3. More youth addictions and mental health counseling (wait list)
4. More cultural programming for all age groups
5. Advocacy for parents, grandparents and youth in care

Community Profile

Laichwiltach's Vision: *To empower and promote healing in our communities from a First Nations perspective for all people of Native ancestry in Unity.*

Located in the heart of Campbell River on Vancouver Island, the Laichwiltach Family Life Society is a multi-service organization that services Aboriginal people throughout the region. The Society has worked in a caring, collaborative, culturally based way to create a safe environment and circles of care, healing, and wellness for First Nations and Métis families over the last 20 years.

The Society got its start in 1991 when four First Nations women in the Campbell River area broke the silence that had long surrounded domestic violence. Audrey Wilson of We Wai Kai First Nation, Pauline Janyst of Da'naxda'xw First Nation, Barb Mitchell of K'omoks First Nation, and Lorna Quatell of Wei Wai Kum First Nation wanted to provide a safe place where urban and on-reserve women with young children who were experiencing domestic violence could get help and support.

Today Laichwiltach provides direct service to over 1,000 people a year, not including those who take part in family dinners and celebrations like Aboriginal Day. It employs 35 full-time and part-time staff, many of whom are Aboriginal. Its programs and services cover the entire life cycle and include baby groups, parent-tot, preschool, parenting programs, youth outreach and support, counselling and addiction recovery, employment skills training, an Elders activity group, research projects, referrals, supervised visitation, and community-wide events.

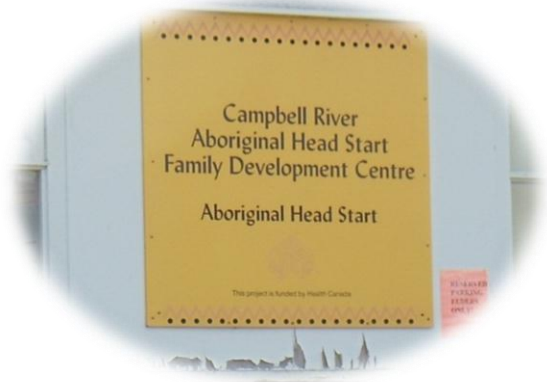


PROGRAM AND SERVICES

All of Laichwiltach's programs are grounded in First Nation concepts of wellness, which center children in circles of care that extend to include all family members.

Core program areas include the following:

- Early childhood programs (0-5 yrs)
- Programs for speech and language
- Youth employment skills training (18-30 yrs)
- Elder activities
- Individual and family counseling
- Referrals
- Community-wide events



Child and family programs



LFLS provides a full range of family programming, including parenting programs and a family support program for parents with children in care. The Aboriginal Families Planning Circle helps families plan to keep children out of care or to get them back. An early childhood development program serves expectant mothers and their children. A community kitchen/fitness program teaches parents to cook and to shop on a limited income. Aboriginal Head Start and Little Fry programs prepare children for kindergarten. Recently, daycare was added for working parents. Aboriginal Supported Child Development is designed to meet the needs of children with special needs, and the Aboriginal Infant Development Program supports children within the context of the family, community, and culture as an early intervention.

Youth programs

Youth programs include outreach to youth at risk, youth counselling, sexual abuse counselling, and the Blade Runner program. After school programs and activities are scheduled on a daily basis.



Adult programs

Programs for adults include support groups, a residential school healing program, family therapy, sexual abuse counselling, addictions counselling, and anger management.

Elders program

The Elders program Rekindling the Spirit of Our Elders is open to status, non-status, and Métis people; members are from various BC First Nation communities. The program's purpose is to reduce feelings of isolation. The Elders accomplish this through fundraising activities, teaching skills to youth (e.g., how to make bannock during Aboriginal Day celebrations in local schools), and attending local and regional cultural events. The Elders attend monthly luncheons at various locations on Vancouver Island in addition to attending the annual BC Elders Gathering.



For further information on Laichwiltach Family Life Society, please visit the website at www.lfls.ca

MCFD SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY

Ministry funding for at-risk youth outreach pilot project, a critically important service, was cut this year.

The Ministry currently supports:

- First Nations Family Support/Child & Youth Counseling
- Aboriginal Family Group Conferencing
- Aboriginal Supportive Child Development
- Urban Aboriginal ECD program
- Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP) – 0-3 & 0-6 risk of developmental delays
- Speech Language Pathology program

Community Engagement Process

WHAT STEPS WERE TAKEN?

In March 2011, Sasamans Society signed a memorandum of understanding with Laichwiltach Family Life Society. The LFLS Executive Director held a luncheon in May 2011 to introduce the role of Sasamans Society to Laichwiltach's frontline workers.

When plans for community involvement were delayed due to MCFD funding changes, Laichwiltach was one of several communities that were put on hold until the next fiscal year. However, after Sasamans' quarterly budget review in the fall, funds were reallocated so that LFLS could be included in this year's community engagement process.

Information gathering with the Elders, parents, and youth began in the fall of 2011. Sasamans Society hosted a luncheon to meet with frontline workers who could assist the Sasamans team (which included four facilitators) to connect with participants in the Laichwiltach programs. Then, 7 Elders and 14 parents attended separate information luncheons where they were invited to sign up for interviews and to take part in surveys.

The Laichwiltach youth workers organized a pizza night in November to review, with youth and the Sasamans team, the findings from the Youth at Risk Program evaluation completed in March 2011 by Little Drum Consulting.² The youth did a placemat exercise to generate ideas about what they want in life. In brief, they want to go places, to learn, and to succeed in life.

Digital recordings of the interviews and discussion groups were transcribed in December 2011. In February 2012, the Sasamans team met and began the process of reading the transcripts to identify key themes and write the first draft of this report.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

Youth

Thirteen youth aged 13–18 attended the pizza night, and 12 completed surveys. Four youth signed up for interviews and 6 indicated their interest in a group discussion session; however, only one youth interview was completed and only 4 youth attended the discussion group.

Parents

Nine parents, ranging in age from 23 to 43, were interviewed and 7 participated in a group discussion.

Elders

Two interviewers had individual conversations with 5 Elders, all female, in the age range of 55 to 77 years. An Elders' discussion group also took place, with 9 female Elders in attendance. Unfortunately, we were not able to obtain a male Elder's perspective.



² Some of the findings of this evaluation are included in Part 3 of this report.

Community Conversations

In this section we summarize our conversations with clients of Laichwiltach Family Life Society. We have organized the conversations under the following headings: *Challenges Faced By Community Members, Community Wisdom Regarding Wellness, Laichwiltach's Role in Addressing Community Needs, and Service Gaps.*

To maintain the integrity of the wisdom shared, direct quotes are used as much as possible. In a few cases, quotes have been slightly changed to make them more readable or to avoid identifying any individual.

CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Laichwiltach Family Life Society is a multi-service organization serving a community that faces many complex challenges. Some of the challenges mentioned in the conversations are more common among the youth, parents, or Elders. Others – like discrimination – are experienced by many people in the community regardless of their age and circumstances.

Discrimination

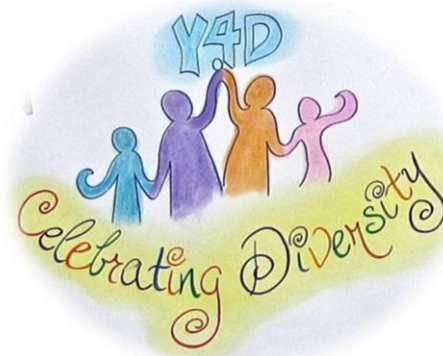
Laichwiltach clients talked about their experiences with many different forms of prejudice, including discrimination based on gender, religion, and appearance. Most of the conversations about discrimination, though, were about racism.

"Society still looks at us with their own colours in their eyes. They don't see us as real, kind-hearted, smart Aboriginal women." (an Elder)

"[For the] older crew, like maybe a little older than me, people getting beat up.... For kids, it's the teasing and taunting." (a parent)

"It was heartbreaking 'cause there's not really much I could do, it seemed like..... Where it was happening they weren't really actively doing anything about it, either." (a parent)

"Being in Vancouver, we weren't ... around culture as much. My kids went through a lot of racism there.... And it was really hard on them." (an Elder)



Racism acts as a barrier to education, housing, employment, health care, and well-being, as the following quotes testify:

"It's pretty hard because, like, I wanted this one place to rent there, and he wouldn't rent to me because I was on my own and had three kids. That was kinda discriminatory, I thought." (a parent)

"I was so far into depression ... that I started focusing on all the negative things in life.... From that I was going from counsellor to counsellor to counsellor because ... the first few counsellors weren't good ones. They didn't keep the information to themselves.... They started, you know, the stereotyping and the racism ... put me back even further." (a parent)

"School is still hard because there is so much racism and some people are bullies, but at least I have this [LFLS youth program] to come to." (a youth)

"It's not just the First Nations kids. We have a huge mix of black children in ... there ... Vietnamese, Korean, they're all getting it equally." (an Elder)

An Elder thinks the community's biggest problem is *"the racialness in school. And trying to help our youth deal with it the best way that we can show them."*

Another Elder talked about students who use *"racial slurs"* and who use *"the words for gay people incorrectly ... inappropriately."* The Elder feels that the school district does not show enough cultural sensitivity, and that one school in particular is *"really intolerant of our ways, intolerant of our sense of humour.... Intolerant of how we communicate, intolerant of our culture."*

A parent discussed how hard it is for kids to learn when they are faced with racist bullying and other stressors at school:

"Stress is really hard with education. You don't retain ... it if you're not feeling your best.... If you're stressed, you're just like ... in one ear and out the other."

An Elder who witnessed racism at the local hospital said:

"I do not ever wanna be at the mercy of this place or ... any doctor or nurse ... because of the attitude. They're extremely racist there."

Racism causes frustration, shame, and isolation, as the following comment from an Elder attests:

"Well I've seen it myself in my family. 'Cause we were ashamed. My father said 'Stay away from the Indians. They're no good, and they're bad.' And my mother grew up in the convent, and that's what she was told: 'Stay away from the Indians, and marry the white man because the Indians are lazy and drunks.' And that was so sad for me to hear my mother say that."

The Elder talked about the shame of not fitting in:

"I always walked with my head down, and kind of embarrassed. And didn't fit in. 'Cause when I did go to the reserve in the summertime, I didn't fit in. The kids would make fun of me: 'You don't live here.' ... And then the white people would say, 'You know, you're not a white person, you're an Indian. Did your mother carry you on her back?' And that kind of making fun of you. So I didn't really feel like I fit in [in either world]."



Being subjected to racism often results in shame that may lead a person to reject their First Nations culture. In the words of one parent,

"I didn't wanna be First Nations. I didn't wanna practice my culture because I would get picked on for it."

Another parent was aware of people who are ashamed of being Native. When asked why this might be the case, the response was:

"Racism ... all of what's being said about First Nations people. Like First Nations people should be paying taxes. First Nations should be.... It's just a lot of them, I've noticed, growing up are ashamed and ... like you shouldn't be. You should be proud and just hold your head up high."

One individual observed that when a person continually feels discriminated against, they may lose their determination and say, *“Why bother [when] they keep getting no’s?”*

The Residential School Legacy

The trauma caused by enforced residential schooling was mentioned by several Laichwiltach clients, who can see the impact this system has had on their families, their parents, and the First Nations community as a whole.

An Elder said she had experienced bullying at residential school from both students and teachers.

“Oh boy, I had boxing gloves on me for the five years I was there. Because I got sick and tired of our Native children being called lazy, stink, dumb, stupid, you’ll never amount to nothing, you know, good for nothing, and all this.”

Many of the parents who were interviewed grew up with parents who were residential school survivors and were addicted to alcohol and/or drugs. As one parent explained,

“Alcohol helps to numb the pain.”

An Elder noted an intergenerational impact of residential schools when she observed that many young parents do not know how to be parents.

“There’s so many that are ... young moms ... with ... residential parents. And so those parents have a hard time as well ... and there should be ... training.”

Some Laichwiltach clients who thankfully were spared the experience of residential schooling talked about the trauma of being in foster care. An Elder linked foster care in non-First Nation homes with loss of identity and cultural shame, and a parent who had been in foster care with white families recalled

“[not having an identity other than] apple Indian ... ’cause I don’t know my culture ... white on the inside and red on the outside.”

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

The Little Drum evaluation of Laichwiltach’s youth program noted that drugs and alcohol are “very easy for our youth to get ... and they see it everywhere so it is part of what they are used to.” This finding was echoed in our conversations with Laichwiltach clients. More than one person identified drugs and alcohol as the community’s biggest problem:

A parent talked about the difficulties her family and children have gone through because of her addictions:

“Alcohol abuse ... and drug abuse.... My kids, they’ve gone through a lot because of the choices I’ve made.”

Drugs and alcohol are seen as a particular problem for the youth, as discussed in more detail in the section on challenges faced by youth.

Depression and Suicide

Many of the conversations with Elders, parents, and youth touched on the issue of suicide in their community:

“We have so many that have committed suicide. And I wish there was more that we could do to reach out to them.... I’ve had family that have committed suicide and it’s really the wonder why, and what they were going through.” (an Elder)

"I was depressed and sad and contemplating suicide, through like addiction and alcoholism and being a parent on my own." (a parent)

"There's a lot of people thinking suicide now." (a youth)

Challenges Faced By Elders

The Elders were not specifically asked about the challenges they face. However, many of them talked about discrimination and racism; some talked about the impact of residential school; others described their life-long struggle to learn to love themselves and overcome feelings of shame and low self-worth. Some of these comments are included above because these challenges are experienced by many in the community, regardless of their age. Others can be found in the section on community wisdom.

Challenges Faced By Parents

The parents we talked to identified many challenges they face, including isolation and other challenges of being a single parent; the pressures of work and schooling; having insufficient time and money; and experiencing stress from multiple sources.

Parenting Alone

An Elder was asked about parents in the community, and she identified a significant issue quite succinctly:

"It's not parents, it's parent."

In her observations of the community, there are

"more single mothers and grandmothers [who are] taking care of their grandchildren."

The Elder understands what these women are going through *"because I was single mother – a single parent, whatever you call it. And it's tough, it is tough."*

Several of the parents echoed the Elder's statement that parenting alone is tough:

"I just find it hard sometimes being a single parent."

"I was depressed and sad and contemplating suicide, through like addiction and alcoholism and being a parent on my own, too.... Sometimes you're stuck at home and you've got a sick kid and you just kinda feel isolated, right? ... sad ... lonely."

"It seems so different now.... I remember my mom raising us young kids, she had aunties and uncles around. And I am pretty sure they would want to help me, it's just that, you know, we all live out in different ... areas now that it is not possible.... Help is not there anymore."

Studying and Working To Get Ahead

Many parents are struggling to achieve their career goals. One parent has completed the resident care certificate program and dreams of becoming a nurse. Another wants to finish school and then open an automotive mechanic shop. Both of these parents need help with childcare and the costs of education:

"I am gonna have to wait until [the baby] goes to kindergarten ... full time so that way ... I don't have to rely on babysitters.... Being on Assistance, you don't get that much money to be able to ... find a babysitter."

One parent who is trying to finish high school sometimes wonders whether it's worth it; she expressed concerns that she won't be able to get ahead even if she completes her schooling:

"I am just trying to finish school and ... it's like, I'd be more or less working to pay off the babysitter."

Worrying About the Children

For many parents, worrying about the challenges their children face is a significant cause of stress. For one parent, bullying at school

"was the hardest thing to face ... for my child to be ... a loner at school ... she'd come home crying ... hard to deal with ... try and comfort her ... kind of a helpless feeling."

Another parent talked about the peer pressure children and youth are faced with:

"It's not right in a lot of ways because ... friends are supposed to be there to understand, friends are supposed to be friends ... and not pressure ... peer pressure."

Others worry about detrimental adult role models. For example, a parent who has a brother who continues to choose unhealthy behaviours worries that her children will emulate him as they grow up, just as he followed older family members who chose unhealthy behaviour:

"You gotta smarten up, you've got nieces and nephews who are gonna look up to you and all they see is you in jail, so they're gonna think that's cool and think it's okay.... All his uncles were in jail when he was growing up, so there was like no positive role models."

Having Children Apprehended

Having one's children apprehended is a tangible threat for many First Nation parents. A parent described the trauma of having her children apprehended:

"And Ministry saying I wasn't going to be able to get them back. And then to have them five years later tell me that they were wrongfully taken."

Many parents lose hope when their children go into care. Some of the parents shared how challenging it is for children to come back into the parents' lives once they've been in care. For example, foster parents tend to have more resources available to them, and the children have difficulty with the transition back to their parents because they are coming from a middle-class home back into poverty.

One parent, when asked about her goals and dreams, poignantly answered:

"To just have my kids come home.... I'm just waiting. We're so excited that they get to come home in like a couple weeks.... And stay involved and be a good parent."

Challenges Faced By Youth

Barriers to Education

In addition to discrimination creating a barrier to education and racist bullying causing harm to children and youth in school, an Elder believes there is a lack of professional support for students in the public school system. For example, one school where a third of the population is Aboriginal has only one First Nations Education Assistant. The Elder noted that Aboriginal students are put together with students who have developmental needs, creating an unmanageable number of students in a classroom and leading to *"a huge population of our First Nations kids that are falling through the cracks."*

The Elder's concern is corroborated by the youth survey results, which show that only 3 of 12 youth surveyed strongly agree that they are getting enough support to succeed at school.

Stress

First Nations youth are coping with many stressors that affect their health, including racism, bullying, violence, drugs and alcohol, and isolation. Some of these comments from youth touch on the difficult issues they are facing or see around them:

"Drinking, drugs, hurting themselves, hurting other people."

"Attempting to commit suicide."

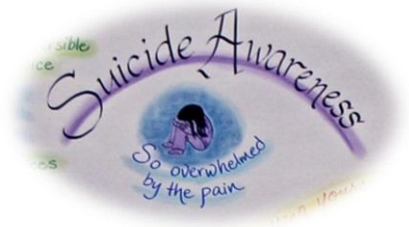
"There's a lot of drugs being used... and a lot of new drugs being used."

"A lot of people, I hear, are cutting themselves."

"I drank last night to get my problems dealt with."

"I just don't like the people drinking ... because that's the reason most of this drama starts, is from the drinking and that ... the drugs, the peer pressure."

"When I keep myself busy, I don't like to get in trouble. But like, when I'm around the wrong people, I end up getting in trouble.... That's how I almost got put in jail last weekend."



An Elder discussed the impact that stresses like these have on youth:

"It gets to them, and it aches even though they don't show it, and you can tell in their voices when something's wrong. And ... just looking at them, you can tell, or at least I can anyways, tell that there's something bothering them. 'How do you know, Gran?' And I said, 'I know.'"

Another Elder noted the impact stress has on mental and physical health:

"I think mind and body are absolutely connected."

Isolation

One Elder thought that the biggest stress for youth is isolation:

"Number one is no one in the home, in a lot of places, or even with teachers, wherever they go they feel they are not being heard.... All it takes is one, to listen to you, and believe you. Trust you."



A parent observed:

"Being able to reach out for help may be one of the biggest barriers youth face today in their lives."

An Elder figured that living away from home to further one's education leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation for youth:

"That stress turns into 'where do I belong? where do I go?' and I see that with both ... male and female becoming sexually active way too early.... Because they're going to the first person that is going to take them and love them and care for them and comfort them unconditionally. And unfortunately it's usually another teenager."

In addition to the loneliness of being away from home and family for school, an Elder suspects that another source of stress is the sense of obligation youth may feel toward their host family, who receive funding for their room and board.

"It becomes a huge stress ... on these young kids from ... middle school right through to high school age that are placed here, within other family member's homes, and then ... their family members are dependent on that income."

A parent noted that computer games isolate the youth and keep them from wanting to learn about their First Nation culture:

"Games ... Nintendo ... Wii Station ... that's what my son does, too ... sits in his room all day playing his games."

Another parent feels there are not enough programs or activities for pre-teens. There are programs for younger children, and youth who are in their teens, but,

"as soon as they were 11 years old there's no programs ... absolutely none.... Now we have to wait again till the summer time.... It's costly for me ... because I have to put them in sports all the time ... and we're on low income."

Low Self-Esteem

A parent raised concerns about youth having low self-esteem, noting that some youth may be

"thinking that they're worthless ... discouraging themselves, thinking they're not good enough or they aren't beautiful or good looking and they have low self-esteem issues ... weight issues."

Another parent mentioned the importance of *"promoting ... self-esteem when they're a certain age"* and talked about how some youth mistakenly think they can build self-esteem *"by doing something stupid."*

At least one parent linked self-esteem with learning one's culture, saying that when you have self-esteem you will not be ashamed of who you are:

"Most people's unhappiness stems from not loving themselves.... Self-esteem comes from loving yourself."

Drugs and Alcohol

According to the survey results, a majority (58%) of the youth feel that drugs and alcohol are affecting their lives at least sometimes. And, when parents were asked "What do you see youth doing to hurt or damage themselves?" the response was "drinking" and "doing drugs ... and they start so young."

An Elder discussed the problem of youth drug use:

"They're just hiding out behind it ... not willing to face the real world, or coping skills again with the real world, or troubles at home ... or just trying to fit in with other teenagers too. So ... yeah, I think that's the worst one, it's the drugs. It just kills them."

Youth partying is seen as a serious risk; parents and Elders talked about youth being vulnerable to dangerous things that can happen when partying gets out of control:

"Rape is number one ... violence ... get beat up ... while they're out of it and they won't remember."

"Having unwanted sex ... causing pregnancy ... kids having kids ... can die from overdoses ... alcohol poisoning."

"Overdosing, dying ... just falling down, throwing up, choking in your vomit and dying that way."

"A lot of our ... youth that are girls end up getting pregnant this way.... They have too much to drink and they pass out and somebody takes advantage of them while they are passed out... It's an easy way for a girl to get pregnant ... and it is the same with guys, too.... I mean, it's not just the girls who get raped."

"I think that's how the girls get raped. 'Cause I've heard about it. And then that only encourages the shame and the hiding out, and ... just going backwards instead of forward for the young people."

A parent noted:

"There's a lot more different drugs now, and they're also cut with different ... things ... some of them are just ... dangerous."

A parent commented that the presence of older people at parties sends the wrong message to youth, while others observed:

"Kids, teenagers do as they see. So when they see parents who they could be looking up to doing bad things, they'll do bad things."

"If a child grows up ... in an alcoholic home ... and they're not like getting ... or showing love the way that they're supposed ... because their parents are focused on more drinking or doing drugs, then they're gonna be the ones that are suffering.... They're not shown love, they're not shown anything, you know, they're not treated the way that they're supposed to be."

An Elder agreed from experience that youth are influenced by adults who drink, smoke, and do drugs in front of them:

"Seeing their parents drinking, it's a big impact. It was a big impact on me."

Another Elder observed that:

"When [the youth] party, they think it's lots of fun. And they talk about it, but they don't realize the hurts that come out of it. And they say, 'Oh, I just won't do it again.' And then they go out and just do the same thing over again, and I'm just scared. Something always ends up bad happening. And I wish I could just make them go away. Make the drugs and alcohol go away."

An Elder noted that peer pressure and the need to belong are powerful influences that lead to drug and alcohol use by the youth:

"Because again, that seems to be the norm out there.... In order to fit in to maybe a group, you have to be using when your with them.... A lot of the kids that are really getting sucked into drugs, really getting sucked into the alcohol are the kids that are not joining with any of those [youth programs]."

Several parents and Elders said they believe that involving youth in activities will help to make them more resistant to drugs and alcohol, and this youth's comment backs that up:

"When I keep myself busy, I don't like to get in trouble. But like, when I'm around the wrong people, I end up getting in trouble."

COMMUNITY WISDOM REGARDING WELLNESS

Strengthening Cultural Identity and Pride

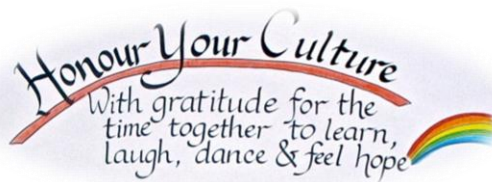
Because Laichwiltach serves people from many different First Nation cultures, and in an urban setting, many of its clients have experienced a disconnect from their culture and community. We mentioned in the section on challenges that some of the Elders we talked to described a life-long struggle to overcome feelings of shame and low self-worth caused by racism, residential schooling, and other devastating effects of colonization. An important factor in reclaiming their identity and their well-being has been reconnecting with First Nation culture – even if it is not their own culture.

One Elder said she has taken many courses,

"and ever since then I've been doing as much as I can learning about Natives, and their customs, and their culture, art, and I've become a basket weaver.... I'm doing Salish hats, and baskets, and bracelets, and earrings, and everything. So yeah, I'm really pleased."

This Elder said she had found a sense of belonging through her art, and several others mentioned the sense of belonging that cultural activities provide for them and others:

"I hear from all ages – even the younger ones how good it felt in that ... Big House. How good they felt spiritually, that they were so lifted and they forgot about everything that was happening outside that door."



Because many of the Elders were disconnected from their culture in their youth, they feel they have much to learn:

"I don't understand everything. I'm 58 and I still don't know everything. [Laughter] But I'm still trying to learn. I ask questions ... like some of the dances.... And that's things that the kids need to know – what goes on in the Big House and how to respect it."

Several Laichwiltach clients talked about the importance of learning their Native language – or even of learning another Native language that was not their own.

"Language is one of the most important things." (an Elder)

"I get offended.... When my kids had to learn French in school as a language and they kept saying 'English language is the first language, and French is the second language' and I'm going, 'Well, where does the Native language come in here?'... I would really like to learn. And I don't care if it's my ... language or another language." (an Elder)



Every parent we talked to expressed that they would love to learn more about their culture and language:

"I would love to learn how to dance again ... the language, too. It's really hard but I would love to know how."

One parent described how her grandmother had taught them cultural knowledge, and said she plans to use the same method to teach the children in her family:

"She would like literally sit us down and make us watch potlatch videos.... She would like, 'Watch that lady ... watch her dance and that's how you're supposed to dance ... watch the hand movements and listen to the words.'... That is how she taught us."

Another parent explained why culture is so important for the youth to learn:

"Culture and traditions is a core of who they are ... it's their whole ... it's like mind, body, and spirit.... And if they don't know anything about it, then they're losing part of themselves."

The Elders are very supportive of youth who would like more cultural programs:

"I think it's great that they do want to learn their culture ... 'cause I think that ... for a while it was really lost."

"I hope that they get more and I'm glad ... they're wanting it."

An Elder believes that cultural programs will provide youth with *"respect and honour ... self-well-being ... [and] something to be proud of."* To help youth make healthier choices, the Elder suggested having a weekly cultural program that includes all youth from the various bands in the local area:

"We need something that everybody can be involved in. And I think we need a culture night here once a week."

An Elder described the positive change in behaviour they had witnessed when youth are active participants in community events:

"You will see a child or a young person with their hands to their side or in their pockets or ... in a respectful posture.... They're not all flopping all over on the

benches in the Big House.... Because they're in their community, they're aware of the expectations. They're also aware that if ... a faux pas happens, it's on the whole family; it's not just on them."

Learning from the Elders

The information we gathered through the conversations and surveys revealed that the older the Elder, the more likely they were to know a lot about their culture. This fact underscores the urgency of having the older Elders share their cultural knowledge in the very near future. In the words of one parent,

"They have a lot of wisdom.... There are not many left."

Other parents and some of the youth also talked about how they value learning from the Elders:

"I have learned from our Elders ... how to be caring and loving."
(a parent)

"We do things like have the Elders come, we do cedar making, drumming, we learned how to play lahal... all of these aren't done at other groups and it is a big part of who we are and how important it is for us to know who we are and be able to share that with our younger brothers and sisters and cousins."
(a youth)

"It's a blessing ... to hang out ... hear their stories." (a parent)

"... to hear the language ... even though I don't know what they're talking about.... It doesn't matter what language.... I could just sit there for hours listening to them talk." (a parent)



A parent would like to learn to make *"button blankets, cedar and stuff ... so that I can ... be able to pass it on to my kids."*

Another parent likes how the Elders are *"willing to teach ... what they been passed on to them."* She shared a story of being at a fundraiser at LFLS and talking to an Elder about cedar weaving. Every year, Laichwiltach Family Life Society offers a class in cedar weaving. A master cedar weaver scouts the area, gets permits to culturally modify trees, and then takes a group out to the specified location to gather the cedar. This activity and the weaving are a highlight for many of the Elders, parents, children, and youth of LFLS. This parent already knew a little, but wanted to learn more. The Elder she was talking to, without hesitation, said, *"Would you like to learn? Well, you get your cedar and you just come on by and I'll teach you."*

The Elders value all the cultural activities they do with younger members of the community, including storytelling, speaking the language, singing, sharing arts and crafts, making Aboriginal food and participating in community events. They have noticed the youths' respectful behaviour at gatherings and they appreciate the work parents do to teach the youth proper protocol.

Coping With Stress

Laichwiltach clients shared their wisdom on a number of different ways they cope with the many stresses in their lives, including exercise and other leisure activities, engaging in cultural activities, connecting with others, expressing one's feelings in a journal or to others, and taking action.

A youth who belongs to the youth group remarked:

"I had a lot of stress and by coming to this group I got rid of it. Now I don't only come to group when I have stress. I come when I don't have it too because it helps me not to have it."

A parent talked at length about the importance of finding ways to release stress:

"Either like a pen and paper ... praying to your ... spirit guide ... pick up a phone.... I know that you get really sick if you keep your sadness in ... if you don't cry, if you don't get mad. And you know, it's okay to get mad, it's what you do with it.... If you don't get it out, it's gonna make you sick ... I found out the hard way."

This parent sees success when people are able to look at their stresses and do something about them:

"If I'm stressed and I don't like a situation or whatever, it ... motivates me to get myself ... outta here ... and I think that's where success happens ... you know, you're tired of being stressed and you're just like, 'C'mon let's get outta here.'"



Support for Youth

The youth who attend Laichwiltach's youth program have a growing understanding of what it takes to have a successful life. According to the program evaluation conducted by Little Drum Consulting in March 2011, the youth are learning that success involves:

- a healthy lifestyle: avoiding drugs and being physically active
- being connected to Native culture
- a strong connection to family
- being emotionally strong
- finishing school and getting a postsecondary education
- having trusted people who can help when things get tough

In the words of some of the youth, success means:

"That I finish something!"

"Achieving your life-long goals and dreams."

One youth noted the importance of having supportive people in one's life:

"The people in my life can help by telling me that I can do it, rather (than) telling me that I can't do it."

Parents also recognize how important it is for them to support the youth. This parent, for example, thinks the youth need constant encouragement and direction:

"Keep encouraging them.... They hurt so much that they push other people away.... It's like they clam up, they box up and they might not realize that they're doing [that].... They go into protection mode ... they turn to the alcohol and the drugs and cigarette smoking and all the negative things.... Just ... be there ... help them and direct them."

In terms of youth using drugs and alcohol, a parent suggested ensuring that the youth “understand what can happen to them.” Another parent talked about wanting to give youth a workshop on how precious life is:

“You know how they have suicide workshops and suicide awareness workshops, but not that.... But like, how precious life is.... When you go into a suicide workshop, I feel like that’s promoting the actual suicide.... Tell them life is precious.”

One parent linked self-esteem and culture, noting that children and youth need to be taught to be proud of their culture. Another noted:

“Most people’s unhappiness stems from not loving themselves.... Self-esteem comes from loving yourself.”

The Elders are also concerned about the many barriers to health and well-being that the youth of the community face, including loneliness and isolation, particularly when living away from home to further their education; partying with drugs and alcohol; low self-esteem; depression; suicidal feelings. The Elders would like to see more services to help youth cope with these challenges. In addition, they drew from their own extensive experiences to offer their support and guidance.

One Elder suggested that the whole community work together to support the youth, but added that, in order to do so, the community itself needs to be healthy.

“We need to work with our Elders, we need to work with the parents and the adults because it’s up to those three categories to be able to help the younger generation. So if the three that I’ve mentioned aren’t working on themselves, how are you going to work with the teenagers ... or the younger children? So a lot of changes need to be made.”

Encouraging the youth to be more involved in cultural activities was a frequent recommendation. An Elder suggested:

“First, having a meeting with them, talking with them, seeing what they want. Maybe having a potluck dinner and getting them to know everybody first. And, you know, just slowly bring them in and see what they want.”

An Elder who was particularly concerned about suicide among the youth said:

“I think they need a place to go where they can express themselves.... If they were taught the coping skills then they could express themselves or go to counselling, or go to someone where it’s confidential. I think confidentiality is the most important thing for a teenager. You just don’t want other people to know ‘cause that’s where the shame comes from.”

Another Elder wanted to let youth know “that there’s a lot of love out there, and if they need somebody to talk to, we’re all here.”

Support for Family Wellness

The Elders emphasized the importance of the family unit, both for giving one another love and support and for transmitting cultural teachings and practices to youth.

An Elder talked about “being there for each other.... When there’s a crisis or anything we pull together.” This familial support extended to the whole community; an Elder remembered that

"whenever my brothers went out hunting or fishing, they didn't just do it for our immediate family ... they did it for the whole reserve."

A youth described his vision of a healthy family:

"They like to have fun, they're loving. They always – at the table, they always talk."

One parent, responding to another who was expressing frustration that her kids spend too much time playing video and computer games, suggested instituting a family night. In a separate conversation a parent suggested

"more family outings, I guess, you know, like we go ... we go out swimming. The kids like to go rock climbing, bowling, ice skating, they love being out."

One parent talked about how it used to be growing up in her family:

"My dad always made sure we had a game night ... you know, once a week, as well as a movie night ... just to spend ... family, like no friends ... nobody, just us.... Family values ... put your family first ...spend time with your family ... whether you want to or not."

An Elder talked about spending time with their grandchildren:

"I listen to them. Like if they want to ... play a game of some kind, then I'll participate in that and then I just listen to them 'cause they have a different point of view of how to do things. And I go, 'Oh, I never thought of that. Oh, interesting. Yeah, okay, let's try that!'"



There was recognition that supporting children and youth means supporting the health and well-being of the whole family. One person observed that *"broken parents can't raise healthy children."*

The Elders identified a need for programs to strengthen parenting skills for those needing additional support.

"It starts with the parents.... I think coping skills are needed in families. They don't teach that in school."

"The thing that really upsets me today is watching, when you go downtown you see all these little girls with babies.... And my concern is ... I don't think that there's a place for them to go if they need assistance ... or just a kind of a drop-in center, where they can maybe ... talk to somebody about their needs.... They're so young and do they have the necessary knowledge ... to be rearing these precious babies?"

An Elder believes that parenting skills need to be taught

"right from the beginning ... 'cause there's so many that are ... young moms ... with ... residential parents. And so those parents have a hard time as well ... and there should be ... training."

Teaching coping skills to parents will help create *"more clear communication"* and will, in turn, help teach youth *"how to express their feelings."*

A mother talked about needing to break the cycle of addiction within the family unit:

"You grow up with an alcoholic family and then you ... you're in that cycle mode, and then you inherit that and you don't want your kids to see that.... So you break the cycle ... and give them something else to look at instead."

Because addictions not only affect the addict but the family as a whole, a parent suggested family treatment centres.

"I think, you know, when they sent the ... Ministry of Family and Children sends the parents to treatment ... to get alcohol and drug treatment, that they should send them all to like family ... places ... where they promote love and respect and ... you know, just ... not taken into care ... but the whole family goes for help."

Activities

Most of the Elders are physically active. They walk, garden, and do yoga, among other things, and they would like to encourage the youth to participate in physical activities like hockey, lacrosse, volleyball, hiking, canoeing, and snowshoeing.

One Elder suggested having more multicultural events in the community:

"Culture nights where we do dancing and stuff, where the kids learn dancing. Like Clayoquot, ours ... and the Métis. Everybody has different ... and it would be nice to get everybody together to learn."

To encourage families to attend community events, an Elder suggested

"letting them know that it would benefit them and maybe if they go, they might ... feel ... inspired, and maybe go to another event. If they go to one event and they like it they might just want to keep on getting involved."

Some parents expressed the opinion that activities for families are less available today than they were when the parents were young. One parent said:

"We use to do Friday fun night ... that turned into ... Friday Family Night.... We'd do like cooking and everything. And I'd go with them, bowling and all that ... with the youth group.... Now that I like haven't lived on the reserve I don't do anything ... other than with just my kids."

One parent would like to play Lahal with the youth and spark their interest in *"the culture ... teach them songs and stuff ... dance."* Other parents talked about wanting to involve their family's children and youth in sports like soccer, basketball, ice skating and swimming. One parent mentioned after-school activities like *"arts and crafts, karaoke, family bingo, painting, go to the beach during summer to collect things and make something."*

Parents understand that activities keep children and youth busy, and benefit the youth in many ways:

"They would normally use alcohol or drugs, but I think if they had more activities that they probably would use those instead."

"It would benefit the youth a lot because it keeps them healthy, keeps them active and, I don't know how to put that ... with your mind. Like it keeps ...them focused."

"[Youth need] more stuff that's, you know, available to them, like sports or music ... something that interests them. You know, just something other than them falling back and just using drugs and alcohol."

Elders agreed that activities are important for the youth:

"It puts them in a different setting where they're not drinking, you know, hootin' it all up, being macho and showing off kind of a thing. Where you're in sports and other activities I think you learn different skills about cooperation ... communication ... lots of different skills when you're doing activities together and not partying."

"If there was more activities for [youth], they wouldn't be steered the wrong way."

Keeping Children out of Care

A focus group of seven parents (6 females and 1 male) talked about "how to keep our kids out of care." The question sparked many ideas and thoughts. Parents discussed strategies like implementing more activities to bring parents and children together for quality time in a safe environment, such as the gymnasium.

One parent touched on the importance of outreach to parents to let them know about all of the resources and agencies available to provide them with support, information, health education, parenting skills, and so on:

"Let them know there's different kind of support groups out there. If I knew I could have all this different support ... it may have been able to like, not be how it is right now ... when my kids went to go stay with my sister ... and being able to talk with other moms about it and having like little information topics every week. I am learning how to deal with those kinds of behaviours, instead of like whereas before it was just like 'Oh, I'll get a babysitter and just go drink my problems away.'"

One parent suggested helping parents realize

"how precious their children are and ... to learn to put their children and their children's needs first ... as opposed to putting their wants and needs.... And going out and doing things too, like with other ... people ... even people you don't even know. You know, just go out and associate and, you know, be around them so that you can expose your child to those things as well ... get them ... involved with everything that goes on in our communities."

A parent observed:

"It takes a community to raise a child.... Everybody help out. You know ... that's what worked back then ... in the day, and if we could bring that back, that'd be so awesome."



The conversations evolved into parents talking about how difficult it is for the parents and the children when the children are taken into care; it affects the family system as a whole. The children can get bounced around between foster parents with no continuity. The parents agreed unanimously that there needs to be more qualified Aboriginal foster homes.

The parents discussed some strategies to prevent children from going into care. One suggestion was support groups so that parents who had been through the ordeal of having their children removed could share what it was like for them, their ups and downs, the “hoops” they had to jump through before their children were returned, and advice on how to prevent children from going into care.

Other suggestions were to help couples by providing parenting classes and a person to work directly with the parents on parenting before and after the baby is born.

During the Little Drum evaluation of the youth program, youth were asked what is needed to keep kids out of care. Their responses were straightforward:

“Drinking ... that’s what affects kids the most. Pretty much the choices you make around kids.”

“They (parents) not drink at all. They (children in foster care) could have just been with the mom right now.”

“We want our parents to care enough to not drink.”

The critical issue of children in care was also discussed in conversations with Elders. An Elder expressed concerns that the current child welfare system allows children and youth to continue to be with parents who are unable to properly care for them and that those children and youth should be placed in foster care to protect them from neglectful situations:

“I think the social system is just wrecked. They want to keep children who ... shouldn’t be with those parents. They just shouldn’t be there. I don’t care if they are the natural parent, they should not be with that parent.... So I think the system ... in the first place they’re ... overworked. They just can’t keep up with the children and then the children get lost in the system.”

If children must be removed from their home to keep them safe, the Elders would prefer that they stay with extended family so that they remain connected to their community and do not lose their cultural identity. However, an Elder suggested that more screening should be used for potential foster care homes:

“One of the most important things I feel is that when a child is gonna go into a home, regardless of whether it’s gonna be First Nations, non-First Nations ... that home has to be screened before the child goes into that home. Because you know, from ...the past, there’s been children that have been put in Native homes that have been abused ... physically, emotionally.”

Above all, the Elders would like to see parents receive more support in the form of counselling so that the children and youth are not taken into care.

“Parents need to be helped. We need to have people in there that have done that themselves, where they have changed things. Where they – the whole family – get together ... and talk, communicate with each other.... But I believe 100% the only way things are going to change is we have to start with the Elders as adults, and then we’ll be able to help our children.”

The Elder described a holistic strategy for strengthening families:

"I always tell people you've got three major groups you've gotta hit.. And you've gotta hit them all at the same time, and you've gotta hit them equally. And it's a whole lot of funding. And that's ... the young, the teens, and the Elders. You've gotta hit all three of them at once because ... you can't just keep taking our kids into care – any children into care – without fixing what's at ... you know, within their ... their grandparents and their parents and their aunts and uncles.... Because once they go back [to their families], they're thrown right back into that and ... it doesn't matter, First Nations or non ... wonderful foster home they've been in, it's all gonna crumble. It's all gonna disappear again anyway."

An Elder suggested a crisis line that parents could call when they need help:

"And if they have a problem, they can come and talk to somebody right away and maybe we can get hands on things right away [and help] them to learn that if they are having trouble in themselves, to talk to somebody, if we can have that open all the time. Like even on the weekends. I know that's a hard, hard thing to do, but that's usually when things happen [is] on the weekend."

In the words of an Elder, keeping children out of care requires:

"a lot of teachings ... to help the family. If we can find out before things go wrong ... to let the families know that we're here."

LAICHWILTACH'S KEY ROLE IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY NEEDS

A recent program evaluation (Ball & Wilson, 2012) describes Laichwiltach Family Life Society as a "hook, hub, and lifeline" whose holistic family development model has made it "a highly respected partner in the region's mix of community service agencies." The report states that Laichwiltach's

"effectiveness in outreach and service to First Nations and Métis families has enabled it to grow, earned it credibility with funders, community leaders, and families, and fostered its vision 'to empower and promote healing in our communities from a First Nations perspective for all people of Native ancestry in unity.'"

The clients of Laichwiltach appreciate the range and helpfulness of the programs. Specific programs that were mentioned were the baby groups, Elders' program, after-school programs, and cultural Thursdays.

Youth, parents, and Elders described the warm welcome they receive and the sense of belonging they feel:

"People were coming there because of their problems ... they were really made to feel at ease." (an Elder)

"I feel like we belong here." (a parent)

"[I] feel safe." (a youth)

"It's like family." (a youth)

"Makes you feel like you're part of something, like someone cares.... And you know someone who's all there for you... And like you're not alone." (a youth)



Many Laichwiltach clients have been using the services for many years:

"I've been coming here for about five years ... they ... help me a lot ... referred me for counselling, helped me get into ... the [First Nations House of Healing] Lodge." (a parent)

Programs for Elders

An Elder talked about what it means to her to have opportunities to learn more about First Nation cultural teachings and to feel a sense of pride and belonging as a Native woman. She explained that when she was young, she used to walk with her head down, out of shame, but she once met Chief Dan George, who said, "Hold your head up high."

"I saw him once and he said, 'I know who you are. You're a relative.' And he said, 'You walk with your head down. Don't do that. Walk with your head up and be proud that you're an Indian.'"

Since then, the Elder has increased her knowledge of cultural teachings and participated more in cultural activities.

Another Elder said:

"I really appreciate all the things that go on. You know when I joined ... and I seen all the courses and things, I'm really pleased that there's places to go now."

Programs for Parents

Some parents who attended Laichwiltach programs when they were young now have children enrolled in the Little Fry and Head Start programs. One parent said about the parenting programs:

"I like interacting with other parents, getting new ideas...and for my kids to interact with other children."

Another parent noted that the programs are well attended:

"The parenting groups are great—too big at times."

Programs for Youth

The youth program plays a vital role in supporting the youth to lead healthy, happy lives. An evaluation that was conducted by Little Drum Consulting in March 2011 found that "a sense of belonging and 'family' is an important strength of the Laichwiltach Youth Program as it lessens young people's vulnerability from the intergenerational impact of the residential school system and/or from living in foster care" (p. 10).

The program evaluation showed that youth are eager to learn. At the pizza evening, they expressed an interest in life skills workshops and a desire to work with the Elders to learn their culture and history.

"I spend a lot of time with my grandma and she helps me a lot. And this group has taught me how to help her, too."

"The culture we do is a big difference, we do things like have the Elders come, we do cedar making, drumming, we learned how to play lahal.... All of these aren't done at other groups and it is a big part of who we are and how important it is for us to know who we are and be able to share that with our younger brothers and sisters and cousins."

One of the youth talked about attending the youth conference at Kingcome Inlet:

"I have learned a lot about my culture being part of this group. The trip to Kingcome was awesome and I learned so much that I had no idea about. I wish we could do more trips like that and that more of us could go so we could all learn."

One youth talked about how being part of the youth group has helped her develop better relationships with her family:

"I ... don't fight with my mom as much on days I come to group. I seem less angry when I go home from here. I think I would have had to move out of my house because my mom and I fought so much. Now we still fight, but not as bad. It is like some of the anger that was in me is gone. My family is proud of me."

The sense of belonging that parents and Elders expressed about the Laichwiltach programs was echoed by the youth.

"This group is teaching me how to be a part of a family and what that really means. It isn't always easy."

"Our youth group, we're like a family. Sometimes we don't get along, but we always work it out. We need to make sure we can keep having this chance for youth to come together, to build a family and to learn about what it feels like to belong, feel safe, and have people need you and depend on you."

"I can be myself here and feel, express my feelings openly."

"I am feeling proud of being First Nation. This is new for me and it is all because of coming to this group."

"I can now say out loud which Nation I am from and am proud to say it, not ashamed anymore."

"We all help each other so this group is a safe place to come. For some of us there aren't many safe places out there."

"Makes you feel like you're part of something, like someone cares.... And you know someone who's all there for you ... and like you're not alone."

"I have learned that a whole village can be a family. I am glad I'm part of this village."

SERVICE GAPS

Despite the vital and highly effective role that Laichwiltach Family Life Society is playing to address community needs, some service gaps were identified by the clients.

Additional Parenting Programs

A parent would like to see a program for blended families, *"with like step parents and step kids."* Others noted the need for more prenatal classes and counselling for young parents, and a drop-in center for young parents who need encouragement and support. A crisis line for parents was suggested, and, as noted above, a need was identified for a support group for parents of children in care and those whose children have been in care in the past.

More Programs for Youth

Many people identified a need for more youth programs, specifically for pre-teens and for older youth in the evenings and on weekends. The youth themselves, in the program evaluation, said they would like opportunities to travel to other communities and be with other youth; they would like to do charity work; they need practical skills like first aid and Food Safe, as well as career fairs and workshops; they would enjoy opportunities for hiking and overnight camping; and they would like to learn traditional skills like weaving and making button blankets, among many other things. As noted in the program evaluation, these activities align with known protective factors.

Youth Addictions

Laichwiltach has some funding for youth addictions and mental health but there is a huge waiting list to get service.

More Cultural Programming

Based on the conversations, there is a hunger in the community for more cultural programming. An overwhelming number of the people we talked to in the Laichwiltach community expressed a desire for more cultural programming, more opportunities to learn about their culture and language.

"The cultural workshops or when we do anything cultural is my favorite time here. I wish we did more of it." (a youth)

There seems to be an understanding of the link between culture and health. As one parent expressed about singing, dancing, and *"our old ways ... you know, maybe like we had that, there wouldn't be so much ... problems."*

"When I'm in the Big House I feel real good. Even though I don't understand everything." (an Elder)

An Elder shared a final thought on what's needed to have a healthy community made up of healthy individuals and families:

"I do believe the culture, being brought back, and we spend more time with each other, and being confident in yourself. Believing in yourself.... I tell a lot of them: Stand up straight, believe in yourself, walk 10 feet tall. Let nothing bother you but good."

PART 4: 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. This broader content must be considered in moving the discussion of keeping children out of government care beyond the individual child and parent and toward an inclusive, community 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.

The Ministry has publically 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 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 to keep our children out of government care: stronger families, stronger communities, and stronger support networks.



APPENDICES

Youth Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning my culture is important	9	3			
I am able to do lots of activities in my community	4	5	1		
I feel accepted by others.	3	6	1		1
I am learning from the Elders	5	4	2		
I get enough support in order to succeed at school	3	5	3		
I feel safe in the community	7	4			
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	8	3			

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

Survey Analysis

Because only one youth took part in an individual interview, the survey results represent important information gathered from this community. The 12 youth who completed the survey ranged in age from 13 to 18.

For all 12 of the youth, learning about their culture is important. Most (9) feel they have opportunities to do activities and are learning from the community's Elders. Eight of the youth participate in cultural activities, and half say they are learning their Native language "often" or "always." These results indicate a strong desire on the part of the youth to learn and participate in cultural activities.

On the other hand, 6 youth say they rarely or only sometimes participate in activities in their community. We relate this to the parent interviews where we found that many parents cannot afford to support their children's interests.

Only 3 of the youth strongly feel accepted by others, and only 3 strongly agree that they get enough support to succeed at school. The latter result may suggest inadequate support at school, or it may indicate a lack of educational support in the home for a variety of reasons.

Eleven of the youth feel safe in the community; however, 4 reported that they only feel safe some of the time. Seven say that drugs and alcohol affect their lives at least sometimes; 5 say they always or often worry about life; 6 say they rarely or only sometimes feel successful; and 11 agree that the issue of children in foster care is a concern for their community. These results are troubling.

Parent Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I would like to learn more about my culture	9	4			1
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	1	6	2	4	1
There are enough activities for youth in my community		1	3	8	2
Adequate support is available for youth	2	2	1	5	3
Adequate support is available for adults /parents	4	6	3	1	
Adequate support is available for elders	4		6	2	
I have adequate, safe housing	5	6	2	1	
I would like to spend time helping youth of my community	4	6	3		
I feel safe in the community	2	8	3	1	
I would like more opportunities to either learn or use my Native language	10	2	2		

Survey Analysis

Fourteen parents were surveyed; all but one would like to learn more about their culture, and 12 would like more opportunities to either learn or use their Native language. Most of the parents feel there is inadequate support for youth in the community (8) and that there are not enough activities for youth (10).

Elder Survey Summary

QUESTIONS	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I know a lot about my culture	2	4	2	1	1
There are enough cultural activities for families in my community	3	2	2	1	
There are enough activities for youth in my community	1	2	3	1	
I would like to spend time supporting the youth of my community	3	2	1	1	
Adequate support is available for adults/parents	3	2	3		
I have adequate, safe housing	4	3	1		
Adequate support is available for elders	3	3	2		
Children in foster care are a concern for your community	5	1	2		

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

Survey Analysis

Nine surveys were completed, which is close to the number of seniors who attend the Elders' group at Laichwiltach. Five of the Elders were 65 years or older. For a few of the questions, the responses do not clearly point toward any particular trend.

After reviewing the data, we found that the older the Elder the more likely they were to know a lot about their culture. Those under 65 were less certain. This fact underscores the urgency of having the older Elders share their cultural knowledge in the very near future. The older Elders are more willing to spend time with youth. Perhaps they feel they have more cultural knowledge to share.

Most of the Elders feel they have adequate support and safe housing, which speaks to the success of Elders' programming within the community. However, most of the Elders (8) say they worry about life at least sometimes, and 4 say they always worry about it. More than half (5) say that drugs and alcohol have an impact on their life at least some of the time.

References

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The community work was funded by Ministry of Children & Families