

VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

*“The last pieces of the puzzle -
joining the past to the present.” – Elder Quote*



SASAMANS SOCIETY

To Our Elders

Gi'lakas'la for allowing us to speak with you and to learn from your wisdom.



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PART 1: SASAMANS SOCIETY



OUR VISION

Strengthening “Our Children” and families, in a community-driven and culturally appropriate manner.

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: THE VOICES OF OUR ELDER



Elders' Gathering

On March 21 and 22, 2012, Sasamans Society invited Elders aged 65 and over to attend a gathering at the Quinsam Center in Campbell River. Thirty-seven Elders generously shared their knowledge and wisdom about how parents, families, and communities can care for children in a traditional, community-driven way. At the gathering, Elders were asked to speak on four main themes:

- Traditional family law
- Traditional parenting
- The needs of children and families in government care
- How to prevent children from going into government care

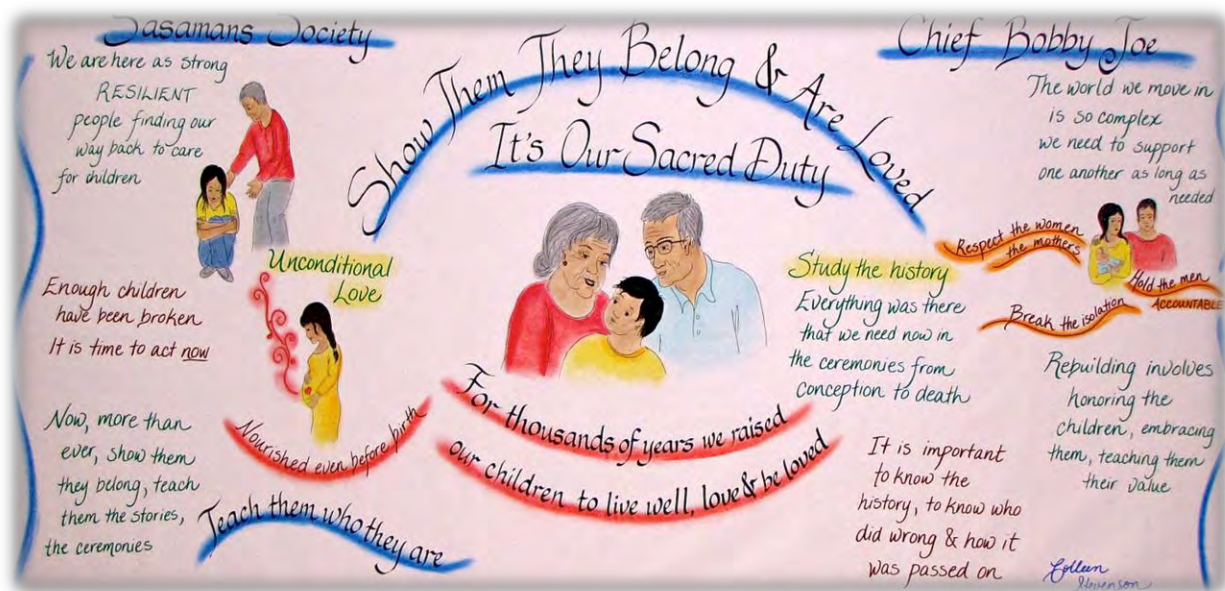


Elders sat at tables in groups of four to five to engage in rich discussions around these themes. A member of the Sasamans Society team sat at each table and took notes from these important conversations. This report is based on these notes. Out of respect for the wisdom shared by the Elders at this gathering, this report attempts to use the words and language captured in the notes as much as possible.

This report also contains pictures taken at the gathering, as well as images created by Colleen Stevenson through what is called graphic recording. While Elders spoke in groups, Colleen simultaneously drew images based on what was being discussed.

This report includes a summary of the keynote addresses made at the gathering, an account of what the Elders shared in regards to the main themes listed above, and an overview of next steps articulated by the Elders.





Summary of Keynote Addresses

Several people were invited to deliver keynote addresses at the gathering. This section outlines the main messages shared by each speaker.

Chief Robert Joseph (Bobby Joe)

Chief Bobby Joe, hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation, asserted that it is a sacred duty and a blessing to work with and for our children. He pointed out that for thousands and thousands of years, Aboriginal peoples created ways to care for children. Everyone in the family, community, and nation was involved in raising a child. He spoke about the many words and names in First Nations languages used to validate and honour children. Children were considered sacred gifts, and people spoke to babies in the womb so that even before they were born, they knew they were important. The traditional way made sure that children understood they were the center of the universe and they felt loved and cared for.

Chief Joe also spoke about the pain caused by the residential schooling system, including the loss of traditional ways of caring for children. He described how this has led to present-day challenges like addictions, violence, hopelessness, and the apprehension of children by the government. He stated that too many children are broken, and asked, "How can we allow that?" He insisted that even though the ways of the *mamaŋa* (white man) are here to stay, the practice of the endless acknowledgment of children can be renewed. Chief Bobby Joe asserted that young women need to be honoured and respected, young men need to take responsibility for their children, and people need to hold one another accountable for our children's care. He said that this means walking in the best of both worlds – bringing back some of the old teachings as well as developing new ways to support healthy children and families. Chief Joe acknowledged everyone at

the gathering as strong and resilient people who are finding their way back to caring for our children.

Edith Wilcox

Edith Wilcox shared her experiences of raising her grandchild. She said she thought she was alone in this before meeting the Elders at the gathering, many of whom are “going through the same thing” as her. Edith emphasized how important it is for Aboriginal children to know who they are and to be raised by their own people. She explained how the residential schools almost caused the loss of all traditions, but said that she still remembers many of them. For example, she described how hanging a cedar branch over the door keeps negative things out. She spoke about how it is important to take footwear off in the house so that you don’t spread your negative things in others’ homes and they don’t spread theirs in yours. She also remembers that if someone knocked on your door, you let them in and put a plate on the table for them.

Edith spoke about how she had adopted her granddaughter after raising her own children. She mentioned that the values she instilled in her children, like always helping out in the home, are now being shared with her granddaughter.

One of the things Edith stressed is the importance of welcoming people back to the community after they have been away. She described how sometimes people who do not grow up on reserve are treated as outcasts, but said that even adults who return should be welcomed home. Edith shared how going to meetings and gatherings and really listening can offer rich learning.

Felicia Greekas

Felicia Greekas generously shared her powerful personal story. She described how, as a child, she was left to be the adult. “I didn’t know I was a child,” she said. She explained that she was not sure who she was or where she belonged. She was lost, confused, and hurt. Then an aunt became involved and brought her and her brother back to her family and culture. Felicia described how being reconnected with her culture was life changing. “We can learn and feel connected to who we are,” she asserted.

Felicia emphasized that creating connections with children can have lifelong impacts. She stated that changes can be made to stop the cycle of children going into care, and that part of this is remembering the teachings and listening to the Elders. Felicia described the loving home that she has created for her daughter. “MCFD won’t have a part in our lives,” she affirmed.

Key Messages

The Elders' gathering was an opportunity to access Elders' plentiful knowledge and wisdom in order to work towards creating healthy children, families, and communities. After discussing and reflecting on the important contributions made by Elders at the gathering, Sasamans Society has identified the following key messages:

Traditional Family Laws

- Children are sacred gifts and are made to feel precious from birth.
- The values of respect, equality, humility, and hospitality inform the many ways in which traditional family law is embodied and practiced.
- One of the most important things in life is to know who you are and where you come from.

Traditional Parenting

- Parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and community members serve as important role models for children and teach them the ways of life through leading by example.
- Language, culture, and traditions must be passed down to parents today. Elders know that parents and children need and want this knowledge to be shared with them.
- As links between the past and the present, Elders recognize that they have a vital role to play in keeping language, culture, and traditions alive, and they are eager to share their knowledge.

The Needs of Children and Family in Government Care

- More resources and oversights need to be devoted to keeping Aboriginal children in government care safe.
- More Aboriginal social workers and foster families are needed.
- Families need to be able to stay in contact with their children and relatives in foster care, and children need to be welcomed home with the traditions of their community.

How to Prevent Children From Going into Government Care

- Policies and procedures need to be changed so that grandparents and other relatives are more readily sought out and recognized as caregivers for children at risk of being taken into government care.
- Communities need to support families to become strong and healthy.
- Cultural identity and education are crucial to keeping Aboriginal children out of care.



Traditional Family Laws

Many Elders expressed a strong desire to bring back the traditional ways. 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. Everyday practices like trading, sharing wealth, and raising children embodied these laws. One Elder emphasized that the intention and meaning behind traditional laws were more important than the word. Another person added to this, explaining that these laws weren't written, but were moral and spiritual. Many important concepts and teachings were explained in the Elders' rich conversations about traditional family laws.

Respect

The importance of respect came up often throughout the gathering. Many people shared stories of how their parents, granny, or auntie had taught them to respect everyone from a very young age. One person stated that respect is the most important thing to teach. Someone else noted that respect starts at home, and along this line, another Elder remembered hearing from his father, "Respect your children."

Elders also spoke about the notion of equality and that everyone was understood to be on the same level. One Elder reflected that there was no discrimination. Someone else contributed that everyone was together as one in the *gigukwdzi* (Big House). Several Elders expressed worry over the discrimination and racism that they see today, and suggested developing an education program to prevent racism.

Children were taught to respect the land and all things. One Elder recalled how, as a child, her aunt taught her to respect the flour used to make bread, because flour gives us food. In the old times, you were always told that you were connected to people, places, and things, shared another Elder.

Humility

Several Elders discussed humility as being extremely important. One person remembered their father always saying, “Live a humble life” and “Never push people aside.” Another participant shared that her grandmother would say, “A sign of greatness is humility.”

Hospitality

A number of people described the importance of hospitality and spoke of how people would visit one another just so that they could be together. One person remembers people always being welcome in each other’s homes, and somebody else recalled that nobody could enter a home without being offered food to eat. People would get together and tell stories and jokes, said another, and this is how they learned who they were related to. Elders emphasized that it was, and is, very important to know where you and your families come from.

Children

Many Elders recalled the many ways that children were honoured as sacred gifts. Reverence and love for children was built into Native languages. Children were tenderly called ‘k’wala’yu,’ which means ‘our reason for living’ or ‘precious one.’ One participant explained that as soon as children were born, they were given names that let them know how precious they were.

It was important for grandparents to greet children at birth with, “How lucky you are to be here,” explained one Elder. Teenagers were given names that reflected their futures and what they were going to do. Several Elders described how people were fed positive messages throughout their lifetime so that they could become role models and mentors to the younger ones. One man spoke about how looking to his dad as his role model taught him about who he would grow up to be in his life. His father taught him the ways of potlatches, the songs of the Big House, how he was going to speak and stand, and what he needed to say.



One participant shared the teaching of the cast iron pan. An old one had taught her that the handle of the pan was key because it held the pan together. The handle represented the children and the pan represented the parents, so it was the children who held everything together.

One Elder emphasized that a happy child equals a happy environment. Another person emphasized that an important part of being happy is living free of fear. This participant stated that they had had no fear as a child because there was no fear in the household. Someone else remarked, “We never got hit,” and she believes that this has made her a better grandmother. Another Elder commented that in the old way, things were seen to be “going right” when children were happy.

Family

One Elder clearly stated that, “Family is the most important thing.” Many Elders echoed this idea, and described how family members took children in when parents could not care for them. Another participant elaborated on this point and explained that the passing of a parent led to family discussions about where the child would go. Numerous people shared personal stories of being raised by grandparents, aunties, great-aunts, and older siblings. One person shared the story of his grandmother, who took in an infant whose parents had drowned and breastfed it as her own without question. While adoptions were common, many people emphasized that children were always reminded of where they came from.

Many of the Elders at the gathering reflected on the central roles that grandparents played as teachers in their lives. Elders recalled how their own grandparents had taught them the language and had taken them out into the woods and shown them how to survive. One participant shared how her grandmother had had very high ideals and would not speak English. She understood the spirit world, and she served as an important role model to this Elder. One person mentioned that there was no such thing as an Elder going to an old folks’ home – they lived with their families.



Several Elders remembered that men were considered the head of the household. One person contributed that men were seen as providers and protectors, and were given more status. Another Elder stated that the Big House was male dominated, and remembers that women were not allowed to speak.

One Elder emphasized that it was very important to obey the wishes of your parents. Someone else contributed that people were expected to represent themselves properly. If not, it reflected badly on their parents. This was echoed by another person’s assertion that one’s name is the most important thing in First Nations cultures.

Families were very close, mentioned many Elders. Family gatherings and dinners were extremely important, as they presented important opportunities to talk and connect. One Elder shared that family members got together every day. Another Elder described what Christmas used to be like. There was hardly any drinking. Everyone came in from trapping in the woods, and dressed up in colourful regalia and shared stories. This Elder remembered that the local priest spoke the language.

Marriage

The traditional laws, ceremonies, and customs related to marriage and divorce were also discussed at the gathering. Several Elders mentioned that it was common for marriages to be arranged, and that this was done in order to pass stories and dances to other communities. One participant explained that relatives studied young people to see who they would make a good match for. Another participant remembered 12- and 13-year-olds getting married in this way. Someone else contributed that, until the early 1900s, it was common for marriages to be arranged between Aboriginal women and white men.

Elders contributed a lot of knowledge about the customs surrounding traditional marriages. For example, men had to ask the woman’s father for his daughter’s hand. Once it was arranged, the husband’s father would go to the wife-to-be’s family to begin the process of accepting the standing, songs, dances, and names that represented the

dowry. One Elder recounted how he had had to follow his wife from house to house and eat whatever was given to him. Someone else remembered that, before marriage, Elders surrounded the man. Once married, women moved to their husband's territory with their dances and songs.

One of the participants remembered the way that her father, who was from a different community than her mother, shared his own culture with the children while nurturing his wife's as well. If a marriage did not work out; couples could get divorced through a ceremony in the Big House to make things right.

Responsibility to Family and Community

Responsibility came up often in conversations. Many Elders remembered being responsible for themselves and/or their siblings when they were very young. One person looked after and cooked for their siblings at the age of three. Another Elder explained that children needed to learn to look after each other early in life because parents would often be out fishing.

A good number of participants reflected that children learned responsibility through chores. Elders recalled being taught as children how to cut fish, cook, sew, bake bread, chop wood, pick berries, can fish, get seafood, and clean the house. Several people mentioned that it was only time for play when all the work was done. One person described how children's chores rotated weekly in her house so that each child learned how to do everything.

The community came together to get important work done. One Elder remembers going from one home to another for the seasonal gathering of seaweed, herring, and oolichans. Another Elder explained that when people's chores were done, they helped their neighbours. While older people went out to harvest and prepare food, one participant recalled being responsible for watching the children in the community. Several people mentioned that everyone looked out for and cared for each other's children.

Children were also taken visiting and to meetings. One Elder recalled children being told at meetings to keep their mouths shut, listen, and learn. Elders at the gathering also shared stories about how they themselves have become teachers to children who are open to the traditional ways.



Ceremonies

One Elder emphasized that everything important in the life cycle centered on the Big House. For example, there were ceremonies held to name children at nine months old, ceremonies for hair cutting, coming of age, marriage, and death.

Several women recalled that ceremonies and potlatches were held to celebrate their rite of passage into womanhood. One Elder described having just started school with white people and being embarrassed by her parents' wish to celebrate her first period in a traditional way. Another participant recounted how her father brought her to a group of

women who explained to her who she was and how to look after her body.

One participant explained that in Kingcome, when a girl got her first period, she slept on goatskin for sixteen days and stayed in the home for twenty. Men would leave the house for four days while the girl was cared for by women who fed her four times a day. She would step through a wreath of cedar to ensure that she would have a long life, and she would put her hands in bowls of money. On the sixteenth day, her friends would visit her in another room of the house.

Some of the customs surrounding death were also discussed. When someone died, their body was brought into the house. Someone stayed with them at all times until they were buried. One Elder told the story of how six killer whales would come every year to talk to where the community's deceased were buried. "They are the keepers of our ancestors," this person reflected.



Traditional Parenting

Elders at the gathering generously shared their rich knowledge about traditional parenting. One of the Elders summarized the traditional ways her mother instilled in her. She explained that children learned to listen from the time they were born because people were always talking to them. This learning followed them through their lives. She was taught that positive, gentle talk was important, and that one should not yell or belittle children when they made mistakes. For example, it was important never to tell children that they were bad or stupid because they would grow up to be what you taught them to be.

Many people spoke about how talking to babies, both in the womb and after birth, was very important. One Elder stated that, “You were told every day who you were.” Several Elders expressed that it is important to speak with children openly and honestly. Participants emphasized the importance of remaining mindful of how children are affected by the care they receive.

Role Models

The strongest theme that emerged in discussions about traditional parenting was the idea that family and community members served as role models for young children and taught them by example. One of the participants commented that the entire community used to be involved in raising a child, but this doesn’t seem to be the case nowadays.

Participants shared personal stories about how their mother, father, aunty, or grandparent made them into the person they are today. One person stated that traditional parenting was taught through passing down important skills, including parenting skills. Children were instructed to treat their dolls like real babies, and in this way they learned about

parenting. Elders also spoke about being taught to cook, clean, use tools like axes and guns, and catch, clean, and smoke fish.

Ways of life were imparted by showing. Children would learn to do chores, and many other things, by watching parents, grandparents, siblings, and older people in the community. One Elder recalls that his grandfather never explained anything to him outright because he knew that his grandson was watching him closely. Discipline was also administered in particular ways. One person shared that children were lectured and disciplined in private, not in public.

Children were expected to know how to do things. “There was no room to say, ‘I don’t know how to do that.’ Only lazy people talked like that,” said one Elder. Another participant remembered everyone going fishing with just a branch, a safety pin and a string. Just as children watched adults, adults observed children. One person explained that children’s various skills were recognized, and that children were groomed according to their strengths.

Grandparents and Elders

Many people spoke about the important role that grandparents played in their lives. Grandparents did a lot of the parenting while parents fished, cooked, and cleaned. Many of the Elders spoke about being raised by their grandparents. Memories shared about grandparents included being taught the language, learning to sing, making button blankets, berry picking, packing water from the river, making oolichan grease, and baking bread. Someone remembered that the old ones made it really fun to work. They played fiddles, told stories, sang songs, and made getting together feel “like a holiday.” One person remembered old people coming from all over to drum, and playing bone games and guessing games with old songs.

Quite a few people described how Elders passed down vital parenting knowledge to mothers. One person remembered how Elders taught expectant mothers how to eat during pregnancy and met with them after they had become parents to share important advice.

People agreed that what children learn from grandparents and Elders remains with them through their lifetime. One person credits his grandfather for teaching him how to be a man, how to treat women, and how to be part of a family. Another Elder shared that she learned calmness and the importance of balance in her life from her grandmother.



Children learned their language and traditional ways by spending as much time as possible with Elders. One person shared that Elders would tell children stories about the river and the animals. Another participant emphasized that all of these stories had a moral lesson. A few people talked about teachings around anger: the importance of never going to bed angry, never leaving the house angry, and never bringing negativity home through the door.

Elders also shared about their experiences as grandparents. One Elder remarked that you can't retire from being a grandparent – it is a responsibility, not a job.

Food

Food was central to the old ways. Many Elders spoke of the ways that food tied into their culture and brought families and communities together. One Elder stated that sharing food was a way of communicating. People were offered food when they visited one another, and families and communities came together to harvest and prepare food.

Food was also medicinal. One person explained how people intentionally built their immune systems with proper food. Elders described being taught which foods were safe to eat and living off of diets dictated by the seasons. Some food, like 'tli'na,' (oolichan oil) was also used for ceremonial purposes.



Traditions and Customs

Throughout conversations about traditional parenting, numerous customs were explained. One person said that some of the old people could detect the direction of the baby before birth, and they were able to turn the baby around for delivery. Elders and midwives even knew how to care for premature babies.



Another participant remembered how babies were brought down to the river and bathed so that they could get some of the water in their mouth. It was believed that they would never get sick that way. Another participant's grandmother had placed cedar branches on her mother's tummy to ensure that the baby she was carrying wouldn't be a crier. Someone else shared that the

midwife who delivered her buried her umbilical cord in the blackberry bushes, and this is why she is great at picking berries today. To protect children from evil spirits after dark, adults rubbed charcoal down the middle of their noses, one person recalled. Finally, several people brought up that children were not taken to funerals before the age of about 12.

Rules

Elders also reflected that there were more rules in their time. Many people at the gathering talked about how, as children, they were expected to be home before dark. One person described the rules in her home as "be nice" and "speak the language to Mom."

The old ones were very strict, and one person recalled that when the Elders got counting from one to three, kids got moving! This same Elder commented that counting to three doesn't seem to work with kids nowadays. A few people also spoke about how several people had been banished from the reserve, in some instances for using alcohol and drugs when their community was dry.

Some of the rules Elders recalled from their time as children were based on traditional teachings. One Elder remembered being taught by her mother never to gossip about others. Another participant remembered being taught to be respectful and to always help others. Someone else spoke about rules that applied to parents. This Elder said that people were told never to smoke or drink during pregnancy, never to spank their children, and never to leave children with a babysitter.

Children Today

Elders shared some of their views on children nowadays. Several people suggested that children be encouraged to speak and share so that they can express themselves without being hurt.

A few people also mentioned that children today are allowed to run free, and that disrespect has become an issue. Many Elders suggested that teaching the traditional ways to today's kids is a good idea.

The Impact of Residential Schools

As Chief Bobby Joe stated at the opening of the gathering, traditional ways sustained Aboriginal people for thousands and thousands of years. Enforced residential schooling created a devastating rupture with traditional family law and parenting. Elders at the gathering described some of the intergenerational effects of residential schooling: some people stopped knowing how to care for their children, corporal punishment became the new way, and many were disconnected from their language and culture.

Numerous Elders described their experience in residential school as horrific and devastating. Kids would be gone and no one would know where they had been taken. One person recalled that children at school would be lined up 10 to 15 at a time to get the strap. In this person's case, school was safer than home, as home had become affected by the legacy of residential school.

Many people reflected on how residential school impacted them personally as children and in their role as caregivers. One person asserted that residential schools are the reason behind much of today's trouble. Another Elder expressed envy of those who did not have to go to residential school because they have their culture today.

Enforced residential schooling also decimated First Nations languages. Several Elders spoke about how residential schooling had caused their native language to get 'stuck' in their throats. One person said, "The language was knocked right out of me. I know the words but can't say a sentence." Other people shared similar experiences of understanding, but not being able to get the words out. One man shared that his inability to speak his language is the result of trauma suffered in residential school. He was told that counselling might help "unstuck" the words.

Healing

Elders told powerful stories of strength and healing. Several people saw the healing process as the starting place for changing what needs to be changed. Some Elders shared that talking about their experiences has made them stronger. One Elder in particular stated that it takes a lot of courage to talk about what happened, but it needs to be done for the sake of the family. “If I don’t teach my grandkids, I won’t stop the cycle,” echoed another Elder. Several people spoke about how they have found their way back to culture and the traditional ways.

One person made the important comment that there are not enough occasions to “release,” and that more of these would be helpful. Someone else asserted that she wanted the government to understand the extent of what was done.



Bringing the Old Ways Back

In addition to the rupture caused by residential schooling, Elders cited other obstacles to parenting traditionally. One Elder commented that the notion of the nuclear family isolates people as it makes everybody think “that we don’t have to look after one another.” Another participant reflected that modern society makes it hard to continue to teach traditional ways. Several Elders contemplated the detrimental impacts of modern technology on connectedness. However, Elders also commented that they observed many parents and young ones going back to language and culture. One person said, “People want to get involved more – they just don’t know how these days.”

Participants offered creative suggestions on how to preserve and pass down cultural traditions. Storytelling, for example, was discussed as central to learning about culture. Someone suggested that Sasamans Society could compile stories to give to parents to share with their children. Someone else had the idea that Elders should be videotaped telling stories, which could then be shared with the community. One Elder suggested that families create books to remember family ties. Another Elder shared that having family gatherings has given them the courage to express what they wanted to learn about the culture.

Language was referenced as key to passing down cultural traditions. Several Elders spoke of the urgency of speaking Kwak’wala with grandchildren, as communities are running short of fluent speakers. One Elder cited the importance of having language classes for children in school.

Some Elders highlighted that they do not like the “go with the flow” approach to teaching language and culture. One person claimed that the old ones would turn in their graves if they saw how potlatches were done today. Several Elders insisted on the importance of teaching the language properly. One person told a story about a teacher they had encountered who was making up words in her language class with children.

Elders recognize the vital role they play in connecting children and families to their culture. One participant declared that Elders need to be bold because they are the last pieces of the puzzle joining the past to the present.





What Do Our Children and Families in Care Need?

Above all else, Elders communicated that their children in government care need to be safe. Many of the powerful stories shared throughout the two-day gathering strongly illustrate a past and current *absence of safety* for Aboriginal children in government care. One Elder said it clearly: “Too much damage is done to our children.” This person emphasized that being in care for one hour, one day, or one month affects a child. Speaking of the trauma caused to so many Aboriginal children in foster care, one Elder pointed out that the child welfare system is doing the same thing as residential schools.

Many Elders spoke about horrible and degrading abuse in foster homes. People shared stories of children being sexually abused, children whose faces had been rubbed in urine, children being forced to eat vomit, live in basements, and sleep in cubbyholes. One Elder recounted knowing of a child who had been taken away from its mother only to die in care. The mother still does not know what happened.

To say that Elders expressed a lack of trust in the current child welfare system would be an understatement. As survivors of this system, and as loving parents and grandparents, Elders shared their views on the many things needed by children in care and their families to ensure children’s safety and provide actual care. The following section attempts to summarize the Elders’ wisdom and knowledge around this question.

Our Children in Care Need to be Safe

Elders had many suggestions for ensuring the safety of Aboriginal children in government care. First, many Elders emphatically stated that foster parents need to be thoroughly evaluated before receiving a child to make sure that their home is safe. It was also suggested that foster parents get extensive cross-cultural training before taking children in. One Elder cited the importance of ensuring not just a safe home, but a stable one. Children may be coming from disruptive situations and they need stability – a place where they are loved instead of yelled at.

Elders also stated that foster homes need to be checked regularly to make sure that children are being properly cared for. Participants believe that these check-ins should be regular, ongoing, and conducted by an experienced professional. One Elder suggested that Sasamans Society could be involved in managing foster parents who have taken in First Nations children. The urgency of this need was highlighted by one Elder who pointed out that what goes on outside the front door may not be what happens behind closed doors.

Our Children and Families Need More Resources and Support



A variety of potential supports and resources for children in care and their families were brought up throughout the gathering. Elders suggested more support for families who have had their children taken into care, such as parenting courses. They noted a difference in resources between families living on and off reserve, and claimed that all families need more resources to be able offer their children a quality standard of living.

Foster parents also need more support, said one Elder. This participant stated that children in foster care sometimes act out, and the whole family, including foster siblings, needs to have some way to prepare for the presence of other children in the home.

Several people commented that there are not enough supports in place to help families navigate the system. One Elder shared the story of a young girl who had a baby with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). This young girl did not understand that the paperwork the Ministry had her sign gave them permission to adopt her baby out. Several Elders suggested liaisons and advocates for parents at risk of losing their children.

A need was also expressed for a program for 18-year-olds who have “aged out of care.” One Elder summarized what typically happens as, “They show them the door, and then nothing.” This Elder argued that more resources need to go towards supporting these youth.

Our Children and Families Need More Aboriginal Social Workers and Foster Parents

One Elder clearly stated that the Ministry and white foster families do not understand the needs of Aboriginal communities. Another Elder asserted that Aboriginal children are treated differently because of the colour of their skin. Many comments called for more Aboriginal social workers and foster families. Several Elders relayed personal experiences of children running away from white foster homes. One participant insisted, “We need to have a home for our children at home.” This point is discussed in more detail in the section below on prevention.

We Need to be Able to Stay in Contact With Our Children in Care

Stories were told about adults returning to First Nations communities from as far away as England to try and find out where they had come from. Elders stressed again and again how important it is for their children to know where they come from. One Elder emphasized that links with culture and language must be maintained, as they are essential for young Aboriginal children to feel proud. Another Elder suggested that the Ministry should provide documentation to every child when they come of age telling them who they are. This person asked, “Don’t they see what this does to a person who does not know who they are?”

One of the strongest messages delivered by Elders at the gathering concerned the need for children in care to have contact with their families and communities. This message relates directly to the significance of knowing where you come from. Many Elders expressed frustration about how difficult it is for them to keep in touch with their grandchildren in foster care. One Elder shared that he has five grandchildren in care who he has not



been able to see in over a year. Despite repeated requests, the Ministry will not tell him where they are or provide any information about their well-being. Elders resoundingly stated that family members, including grandparents, should have visitation rights with their relatives in care. One Elder asked, exasperated, “Why is it so hard for this to happen?” Another Elder explained that when a child goes into the foster system, foster parents are instructed to keep in touch with families, but rarely do. Elders suggested that the whole family could become involved in maintaining contact with kids in foster care through Facebook, e-mail, and letter writing.

Numerous Elders emphasized that measures should be taken to allow children in care to participate in potlatches, coming of age ceremonies, and birthday and Christmas celebrations. One Elder suggested that Elders from the community could go to foster homes to celebrate important rites of passage with children. Several Elders insisted that foster parents should be educated on the culture and be connected to the village that the child is from.

One Elder at the gathering shared how he and his wife, as foster parents, make efforts to include the family members of their foster children in the activities they do. Social workers also need to make more efforts to understand the culture, said one participant, and should be invited to circles with the whole family so that decisions about the child can be made together.

Our Children Need to Be Welcomed Home

Children who come back from foster care are filled with fear, said one Elder. Another participant shared the powerful story of a young man at a ceremony at the First Nations House of Healing for people who had been in foster care. One of the Elders at the ceremony hugged the young man, and he began to cry because he felt like he was home. He asked the Elder, “Where were you for all my life?” The Elder that shared this story emphasized that children who have been in care must be welcomed back home with their community’s traditions. “We need to give welcome home ceremonies to these children.” Another Elder echoed this, saying that the community needs to come together to love these children when they return.

What Can We Do To Prevent Children From Going Into Care?

Referring to the number of children in foster care, one Elder noted, “It’s worse than it’s ever been.” During the many conversations that took place over the course of the gathering, Elders discussed what could be done to prevent children from going into government care. The following paragraphs attempt to summarize the strength and wisdom shared by Elders about how to keep families and communities together. But first, some of the challenges the Elders touched upon are outlined.

Challenges

Elders discussed several challenges preventing communities from taking control of their children’s well-being. First was the issue of funding equity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster parents. Several Elders expressed concern about the disparity between what mamala (white) families receive to care for children and what First Nations families are allotted. One person stated that the Ministry seems to set people up for failure.

Another challenge discussed at length was the lack of support and resources for children with FASD in some communities. A few people described how they had to visit or move to Vancouver to access resources and support for children or grandchildren with FASD. Elders also expressed concern that schools don’t properly understand FASD, and that children with FASD are still placed in small rooms like outcasts rather than in the school system.

Elders spoke about the challenges presented by drugs and alcohol, with one person suggesting that they be banned from communities. One of the Elders reflected that when reserves were “dry land,” things used to be peaceful. Another person observed that it was when the liquor stores arrived that kids in their community started drinking. Someone else suggested that there be more roadblocks on reserve to deter drinking and driving.

Contact Families Before Children Are Taken Away

Many Elders expressed extreme frustration that children are still placed in government care when they have family members who want to look after them. Numerous people shared personal stories of children being apprehended in the middle of the night, or in movie theatres, without the Ministry first contacting the family. Elders stated emphatically that the Ministry should have to contact all family members before a child is placed into government care. As one person highlighted, once a child is apprehended they seem to disappear into the system for at least three to six months before they get to see or be with family.

One Elder suggested that a family meeting should be called before a child is taken into



care. This meeting could be just for family or could include the Ministry. This participant acknowledged that social workers' workload might make this difficult. Another Elder proposed that the Ministry should work with someone in the community to enable better communication. Someone from

Kingcome Inlet explained that their community does not let the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) in unless they have spoken with the parents, children, and Elders first. For the past three years, MCFD has had to notify the community of all complaints registered against families. Someone made the point that it is important to consult with the community about the child, not least of all to make sure that it is appropriate to place that child with other children. One Elder suggested that every band member write a letter so that the same policy can apply to every band.

Elders discussed ways in which the Ministry could be more accountable and objective in their work with Aboriginal children and families. One Elder stated that child welfare people should be brought to the Big House to learn about culture. Several people said that good social workers are those who sit down with families in need to help them resolve problems before involving the Ministry.

“It Shouldn’t Be a Fight to Get Our Children Back”

Elders expressed pain and confusion about the many injustices they have to face in their efforts to care for their family members. One Elder shared that when she adopted her grandchild, the Ministry asked her how many times a week she had sex. Another person shared that they were sent to the police station for a criminal record check when trying to adopt their niece, and by the time they got back to the Ministry, it was too late. One Elder stated, “They are taking our souls by making us fight.” “It is important to stand up for what you believe in when dealing with MCFD,” said one Elder, “and refuse to let them tell you that you’re too old to care for your loved ones.” One of the unexpected outcomes of this gathering was that it provided a safe venue for Elders to relate to one another’s experiences.

One Elder shared that even with complete community support, including letters from the Chief and council and band employees, it still took three years to get their granddaughter back. Another Elder described being given the runaround when she tries to figure out

where her grandchildren are. Someone else described a situation where the mother abides by every condition the Ministry stipulates, yet her child has still not been returned to her.

Even when grandparents do get custody of their grandchildren, it is not guaranteed to be permanent. One Elder explained that the Ministry administers two-year contracts, which leads to a lack of security for families. Furthermore, this Elder went on to emphasize the importance of developing a language and process that allows families with mixed histories (e.g., 20 years of sobriety after an addiction) to take children in. One Elder noted that it would be ideal to take care of children and families without the Ministry stepping in.

Support Strong Families

Elders spoke about how communities could come together and support families to be healthy and strong. Elders described strong families as encouraging, supportive, and loving (with lots of hugs). One Elder emphasized that parents should support the spirit in every child. Several people believe that parents need to stand by their children through their lifetimes. It was suggested that parents and families can show children they are supported by doing concrete things like staying to watch their sports games instead of dropping the children off. One Elder declared, “It is simple – show love, love, love!”



Elders also cited the importance of family members staying close to one another. One person described that this can be done just by sitting down at the end of the day and asking children how their day was.

Elders shared a lot of wisdom about the many ways community members could support children and families. One Elder declared, “We need to come together as a community to come up with solutions on where children can go instead of the foster parents. We all have the power to do this.” Several people emphasized that grandparents, Elders, and other community members need to step in and help families before their children are apprehended. One participant proposed get-togethers to discuss how to support families. Another Elder put forward that getting rid of drugs and alcohol would make communities much safer. Elders agreed that it was important to build hope in parents, kids, and families, to not give up, and to help.

People offered suggestions about the types of programs that support and assist families. Elders mentioned the need for families and communities to design programs like mentoring, buddy systems, teen/Elder groups and baby/parent groups. One Elder highlighted the need for communities to offer families respite care. Others suggested the creation of community-based group homes as an alternative to sending children to foster homes.

Elders also noted the importance of drug and alcohol counsellors, family support workers, and youth workers. One person shared that having an anonymous counsellor encourages people to access services. This person also noted that some people do not go to programs because staff are not First Nations or do not have knowledge of First Nations people. The importance of having a place where parents can talk to someone and get

support was highlighted by many Elders. One participant suggested home visits as a way of doing more effective outreach with families, because people talk more honestly in their home.

Several people at the gathering spoke about the role of band leaders and tribal councils in prevention. Several Elders stated that tribal governments need to make strong declarations on the issue of children being taken into care, and follow this up with a commitment to prevent community from being broken apart in this way.

Focus on Culture



As noted throughout the report, Elders discussed how important it is for people to know who they are related to and where they come from. People conveyed how crucial it is to have culture in one's life. One person emphasized that the Big House offers many important teachings. Several people recounted their positive experiences with taking their grandchildren camping to experience the old ways. And many Elders emphasized the central role that language plays in passing down culture.

Many interesting suggestions were made about the kinds of activities that would connect children and families to culture. Elders mentioned gathering traditional foods with children and families; holding cultural workshops; teaching songs, language, dances, games, and traditional cooking; and creating a series of story books to build children's self-esteem. Elders expressed a strong desire to see cultural programming expand into schools. Another Elder suggested holding more feasts to bring people together, and someone else added that cell phones should be turned off during dinner. Many Elders spoke of their willingness to be teachers and of their grandchildren's desire to learn and connect with the language and culture.

Focus on Education

Elders spoke at length about the role of education in preventing children from going into care. Several Elders highlighted the importance of teaching young people and parents life skills. One person listed the necessary skills as including problem solving and communication, baking and cooking, cleanliness, and cutting fish. Another Elder suggested that all teenagers learn about prenatal care. One person touched on the need to get away from the stigma surrounding teen pregnancy issue.

Before children are taken away from parents, they should be offered parenting skills. One Elder remarked that sometimes parents don't realize when they're doing their child wrong. Several people proposed teaching everyone to be parents by introducing parenting skills to young children, like it was done in the old way.

Feedback from Participants under Age 65

Eight people under the age of 65 attended the gathering. They sat together and shared feedback in regards to two of the meeting's four main themes: the needs of children and families in care, and how to prevent children from going into government care. The paragraphs below attempt to summarize their important insights.

What Do Our Families and Children in Care Need?

Participants in this group reiterated what some of what the Elders had discussed, particularly the need for children to know where they come from and the importance of staying connected with where you come from while in foster care. One person suggested that MCFD provide family background information to children.

The topic of parent/foster parent relationships came up in this group. One person shared that they had observed that some parents become angry with foster parents when their kids are taken into care. Another participant noted that, ideally, the relationship between parents and foster parents is healthy, so that both groups of parents model how to get along to children.

Participants in this age group stressed the importance of non-Aboriginal foster parents learning about Aboriginal teachings. Several people proposed having a gathering or circle where Elders could teach non-Aboriginal people about culture. Someone also highlighted that, while in foster care, Aboriginal children should be able to attend Aboriginal preschool programs when available. However, one participant raised the issue that there may be some children who don't want to identify with the culture. Someone else noted that some kids are not connected due to drugs, alcohol, or early pregnancy.

What Would You Like to See in Place to Prevent Children from Going into Care?

The conversation on how to prevent children from going into care focused heavily on working with young girls to educate them. Suggestions in regards to education ranged from teaching young girls about their cycle, to encouraging them to wait until they are older to have children. Several people suggested holding circles to talk about the responsibility of parenting with young girls and boys. One participant proposed that Elders be brought into schools to talk to children and youth.

Although some people resist parenting courses, one person noted that workshops that teach parenting skills would be useful. Another participant suggested that mothers, fathers, and family Elders who are willing to participate hold circles to discuss how parents can take responsibility and get their children back. This person noted that it is important not to dictate to parents what to do in these situations.

Conclusion

Elders expressed a lot of hope about the future of their families and communities. Several people shared that the Elders gathering had inspired them to get more involved with their grandchildren. One Elder declared that she must “get busy and do my job.” Other people emphasized that knowing your grandchildren keeps you healthy, with another person stating, “What we give to them is what we give back.”

These Elders believe that their people can flourish. One person said that this requires everyone bringing as many resources to the table as they can. As someone else firmly stated, Elders must keep teaching and nurturing their grandchildren. This is something to feel good about.



Life Back Then

Elders shared many incredible stories about what life used to be like for their families and communities. It was a time when people spent much of their time outdoors, and survival was a way a life. One person remembers that people were never home – they were always out working or gathering traditional foods. Someone remembered that everyone stayed up until the last person went to bed, and all would rise at the same time. No one was bashful, and kids used to run around with no clothes on. “It was just the way it was with us,” said an Elder.

Many people described the many ways in which day-to-day living depended on what could be found around them. One Elder recalled her mother telling her that in her time, people used moss for diapers. Other people described spider webs or dried-out button mushrooms being placed on babies’ belly buttons. People wouldn’t wash their hair every day because they didn’t want to remove the natural oils. They used mink oil in their hair, and if someone got lice, they treated it the traditional way with coal oil. One of the Elders explained that she was taught to pick medicine for midwives. And one of the women described how she was instructed to burn her pads, fingernails, and hair in a fire because of witchcraft.

Elders also shared a lot about the traditional ways of harvesting, gathering, and preparing food. One person shared memories of using a cedar bough touch to sweeten smoked fish. You couldn’t do it for too long or else it would be ruined. Someone else remembered that people would eat the inside of bulrushes. Another Elder spoke about the use of fish boxes to preserve fish. The box had no bottom and was hung from the trees. The meat was hung from a hook on the inside, and air would come in from the bottom to create a seal around the flesh. The meat would last for months this way. Because there were no fridges, people used the ocean to keep things cold. One Elder explained how they used to make a makeshift fridge out of a wooden box and canvas, which was then placed into the ocean.

A lot of the Elders described the work required to get things done when they were young. There were no machines or appliances to make things easier, so everything had to be done by hand. Clothes were washed on a washboard in the river and dried by the fire or on a clothesline. One person said that their community had a well, but other people remembered bringing water from the river.

One of the Elders, who grew up in Alberta, recounted how she had to get to school by dog sled team during the cold winter months. Elders who grew up on the island remembered spending a lot of time on the ocean. One person recalled a trip to Turner Island with dad as a young child. Someone else shared that they used to launch their canoe off of the beach and wait for the seals. Another Elder told a story about the time he went out with his father to get herring eggs. There was a big storm, and they got bogged in. One of the Elders spoke about trips by boat to Bones Bay with mom and dad. They spent summers up there and told stories.

Other people had known of people who loved to swim. One of the Elders at the gathering knew a woman who used to swim from Campbell River to Cape Mudge. Another Elder told the story of a woman who would swim far out into the ocean once a year. The same

sea lion would follow her every time. Finally, at 82 years old, on her last swim, the sea lion didn't appear. The woman said she had outlived it.

The Elders also talked about ceremonies. One Elder recalled blankets being hung over the windows. Some people thought that the blankets were there because the family couldn't afford curtains. But the blankets were used to keep light out during ceremonies. There were also certain ceremonies that required privacy, and the blankets were useful for this.

Several people recalled travelling with their families to potlatches. One person described going to their first potlatch at 8 years old and being terrified of the masks. The family packed clam snacks and travelled by boat. When they got there, the entire village went down to meet them. The Elder's father had spent all year making bowls and spoons to give to everyone at the potlatch.

Next Steps

At the end of the gathering, Elders were asked to submit their suggestions for next steps. Elders wrote down their ideas on cue cards and submitted them anonymously. Approximately 24 people contributed, and their feedback is summarized below.

- Get more Aboriginal people hired in front-line positions to work in these types of programs and an Aboriginal person in place of the Ministry.
- An Aboriginal-sensitive intervention team should be on hand for support and help before MCFD or RCMP are notified. Start working towards the creation of intervention teams in every community.
- More funding, resources, and programs devoted to youth.
- Parenting workshops for young parents that teach making children uppermost in their lives through both contemporary and traditional approaches.
- Formalize the commitment of band council and traditional leadership to children and families through thought, word, deed, resources, and knowledge.
- Hold more meetings like this one, where children, teenagers, and young mothers and fathers attend so we can tell them that we care for our children.
- Hold more meetings for Elders to learn how to share knowledge. Also to share how this workshop helped.
- Rewrite part of the regulations regarding apprehension and offer options for parents and family members in the best interests of the child. Tradition and culture should be considered.
- Involve Elders in teaching people in the community, from childhood to adulthood. Elders can support parenting workshops and youth programming.
- Encourage and support community-based approaches.
- Encourage more family and community involvement in the fate/destiny of our children. Support increased involvement by holding more gatherings like family dinners and game nights.

- The Ministry needs to support this initiative and help it to be strong.
- The Ministry should go through Sasamans Society before taking a child from its family.
- Sustained support for Sasamans Society without politics.

APPENDICES

Registration Form



VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

Traditional Approaches to Parenting

"PLEASE NOTE VENUE CHANGE"

The Sasamans Society is hosting an Elders' Gathering at the Quinsam Centre from March 21 to March 22. Elders age 65 and over are invited to engage in meaningful dialogue on the following topics:

1. Traditional Family Laws
2. Traditional Parenting
3. What do our families and children in care need?
4. What would you like to see in place to prevent children from going into care?

Registration March 21st 8:30 – 9am. See attached agenda.

Space will be allotted for two Elders per band/organization. A waiting list will be compiled for extra Elders to attend if some organizations do not send two. Rooms to be booked at Coast Discovery Inn for those travelling from north March 20/21st, so please book early for space.

REGISTRATION:

Registration Deadline: March 12, 2012 - 4pm

Last Name:	First Name:
Band/Organization:	
Address:	
City/Town:	Postal Code:
Phone:	Fax:
Email:	
Dietary or allergy restrictions:	

For further information, please contact coordinator Rachel Wiley at rachel_wiley1@hotmail.com or 250-202-7720 or the Sasamans Society at 250-914-2212, toll

Please complete and submit to: The Sasamans Society, 680 Head Start Crescent, Campbell River, BC, V9W 5B1. Email: reception@sasamans.ca or fax 250-914-2215

Elders will receive an attractive Sasamans Society vest as a thank-you gift for participating in this important event.

Agenda



VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

Traditional Approaches to Parenting

Agenda for Elders Gathering March 21-22

Day 1 March 21

9:00 – 4:30

Prayer – Irene Wydenese

Welcome to Territory

Board Chair – Opening
Remarks

Keynote Speaker – Bobby Joe

Short Break

Dialogue – Traditional Family
Laws

Lunch Provided

Keynote Speaker – Edith
Wilcox

Dialogue – Traditional
Parenting

4:30 Entertainment

5:00 Dinner & Door Prizes

Day 2 March 22

9:00 – 12:00 noon

Prayer – Sophie Hansen

Keynote Speaker – Felicia
Greekas

Dialogue – What do our
families and children in care
need?

Snack Break

Dialogue – What would you like
to see in place to prevent
children from going into care?

Closing prayer and door prizes

Brown bag lunch provided

12:00 Travel home



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 & Family Development