


Families On the Land
4 week Program Evaluation
Native Child & Family Services of Toronto



Quality Assurance and Decolonization Outcome Measurement Team

Aug 1, 2020



This report is dedicated to all the families who graciously offered their time and experiences to help us understand the OTL program.

This report is also dedicated to all the hard working “on the landers” who staffed this initiative during heat, rain, parking battles and lawn mower attacks: Michelle Meawasige, Shannon Wooller, Charlene Claudio, Astrud Hagong, Cecily Jacko, Matthew Fogel, Victoria Town, Clare Elie, Reta Hamlin, Jessica Wilson, Khamini Sharma, Kiello Osmond, Anna McLeod, Faron Johnston, Rebecca Laforme, Joni Shawana, Vanessa Ruso, Maria Falcon Obregon, Valerie Kerr, Nahanni Araujo

Chi Miigwetch!

Abstract

It is difficult to overstate the importance of getting families outside and on the land during a time of crisis. The results of this 4-week evaluation echo what is known intuitively and intergenerationally by Indigenous communities in Canada (both rural and urban) which is being on land is healing in ways that go far beyond “recreation”. Changing indoor play group programming into a family-centred, trauma-informed, land-based experience fundamentally transforms its core purpose into that of a culturally safe healing encounter. It is the primary conclusion of this report that as many of NCFST’s programs as possible be safely relocated directly onto the land to ensure transformative healing opportunities for participants. It is further concluded that land ownership is considered critical for NCFST to continue and extend these land based encounters within the urban environment.

Introduction

In March, 2020, as a response to the high fatality rate¹ of COVID-19 the Ontario government ordered closed all public schools and shared public spaces (including parks, pools, recreation centres, trails and beaches) in the city of Toronto. As a further safety measure the Province also implemented social distancing measures restricting in-person contact with friends and between extended family members. These measures, although normal during a pandemic, create considerable social/emotional stressors for families and while children are among the least impacted by the symptoms of COVID-19 they are significantly impacted by the *indirect effects* of the pandemic specifically an absence of gross motor exercise opportunities (i.e. outdoor play), limits on access to group activities and social opportunities². The *On the Land* initiative, envisioned by NCFST’s executive team, was developed to address these impacts by delivering multi-faceted family programming directly to individual families in outdoor spaces within the city of Toronto. The OTL initiative received special permission from the City of Toronto to operate within 3 city parks in Toronto for 4 weeks during June and July 2020.

The purpose of the On the Land Survey was to assess the impact of the programming for the families during a four-week period in three broad areas: its impact on children’s stress levels, family connectedness and physical activity. This summary presents an overview of the survey findings and considerations. Overall, the pilot survey findings are promising. Notably, over 92% of caregivers indicated that they found having their children on the land very or extremely helpful.

This research report is the result of a collaboration between NCFST Holistic & Early Childhood teams, NCFST QAD Department and the University of Toronto Factor Inwentash School of Social Work. The data presented here is co-owned with the 29 Indigenous families that participated in the OTL initiative.

Consultation

On August 25, 2020, this report was presented via the online meeting platform, Zoom, to all data collectors, supervisors and the Director of Holistic Services and QAD for feed back and sign off. This writer provided my contact information and a 48-hour time period for any edits or corrections for the

¹ Buheji, M., Hassani, A., Ebrahim, A., da Costa Cunha., Jahrami, H, Baloshi, M & S Hubail (2020) Children and Coping During COVID-19: A scoping review of bio-psycho-social factors, *International Journal of Applied Psychology*, 10(1), 8-15

² Chanchlani, N., Buchanan, F., & P. Gill. 2020. Addressing the indirect effects of COVID-19 on the health of children and young people. *CAMJ* 2020. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.201008; early-released June 25, 2020

report to be brought to my attention. This writer received feedback about some missing staff names however no other feedback was received during the time period. The feedback during the presentation was positive and accepting of the information contained in this report.

Background

Indigenous healing practices are underpinned by the principles of restoration (removal of illness) and transformation (the journey to wellness).³ For Indigenous communities, these practices require a contextual (land-based) interchange that reflects and strengthens identity, the physical body and a sense of self. Land-based healing activities have been central to Indigenous communities since time immemorial however colonization (specifically, disruptive and involuntary community relocation, land paternalism, industrial pollution and climate change) have compromised opportunities for communities to restore and transform.⁴ The On the Land initiative was developed to restore the social, emotional and physical imbalances brought on by the abrupt end to land access experienced by Indigenous families due to the COVID global pandemic. Families in relationship with the land were no longer able to connect and were cut off from familiar healing practices due to park closures and recreation restrictions and in some cases visiting restrictions in their home communities. Parents with children at home and out of work suddenly had to find new ways to cope with the rapid changes effecting their family. The OTL initiative aimed to restore, in small part, family's relationships to the land through facilitated and culturally appropriate outdoor programming for children and support for parents by way of caregiving respite. It was hypothesized that the program would deliver: 1) improved children's mental health; 2) increased family wellness; and 3) increased levels of physical activity for participants.

Measured Constructs:

1. Children's Mental Health

Ideal developmental for children requires participation in relationships with trusted adults other than their parents.⁵ For Indigenous children the so called "extended" family is often as important as the "immediate" family: cousins feel like siblings, Aunties feel like parents and the list goes on. The consequences of social distancing protocols and the limits on "family" visiting for Indigenous children are not yet fully understood by academic literature⁶ or the communities at large. Some preliminary global research conducted in 2020 in Shaanxi Province in China suggests children and adolescents may exhibit increased clinginess, distractibility and irritability as a result of the pandemic conditions. Research closer to home⁷ emphasises that children in isolation are at risk of depression, sadness and loneliness - risks exacerbated for communities impacted with conditions of poverty. Parents coping with increased anxiety in their children coupled with their own fears and isolation puts pressure on their

³ James B. Waldram (2013) Transformative and Restorative Processes: Revisiting the Question of Efficacy of Indigenous Healing, *Medical Anthropology*, 32:3, 191-207, DOI: [10.1080/01459740.2012.714822](https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2012.714822)

⁴ Radu, I., House, L. & Pashagumskum, E. (2014) Land, Life and Knowledge in Chisasibi: Intergenerational Healing in the Bush. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3:3, 86-105.

⁵ Buheji et al. 2020

⁶ Kelsey M. Graber, Elizabeth M. Byrne, Emily J. Goodacre, Natalie Kirby, Krishna Kulkarni, Christine O'Farrelly, and Paul G. Ramchandani Faculty of Education, PEDAL Research Centre, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

⁷ Schwartz, C., Yung, D., Barican, J., Gray-Grant, D. & Waddell, C. (2020) Supporting Children by Supporting Practitioners and Families During COVID-19 and Beyond. Vancouver, BC: Children's Health Policy Centre, Simon Fraser University, 2020.

normal coping habits, exacerbates existing relationship tensions and creates risk for healthy family life. In creating the OTL initiative NCFST anticipated that providing children opportunities to connect outdoors with a children's facilitator would assist them to utilize skills otherwise unused at home and to reinvigorate their 'social selves'. Further, it was anticipated that this opportunity would create levity in mood and relieve the anxiety brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Family Wellbeing

The risks to family connectedness due to pandemic conditions have been well documented. Families in isolation and outside their regular social routines are at an increased risk of interpersonal violence, dysregulation and substance use⁸. Researchers predict that the stress of simultaneously working and managing children who are no longer in school (and who may be expressing their loneliness behaviourally) will put parents at risk of implementing an increasingly impatient and frustrated caregiving style as well as subjecting their children to borderline neglectful conditions due to the need to focus on work. The above described conditions provide an context that can easily lead to relationship issues within families and a decline in family closeness.⁹

3. Physical Activity

Research demonstrates that for many children time at home with family (such as school breaks and weekends) presents less opportunities for physically activity as compared to school days¹⁰. Pandemic related isolation increases children's exposure to screens and decreases physical activity and is very likely to impact the availability of physical activities for children. Considering the additional restrictions associated with COVID-19 opportunities to engage in physical activity is ever more crucial.

Program

The On the Land program consisted of one hour of programming per week delivered by an early childhood navigator (sometimes 2 navigators) directly to a family group no larger than four within a designated outdoor space. Programming aimed to engage children at their developmental stage engaged children physically and cognitively for an hour minimum and would allow for the parent to be involved or sit on the sidelines as an observer. Programming would be catered to the individual family and was informed by the choices and ability levels of each family individually.

Methods

The pilot spanned a four-week duration, beginning June 15, 2020 and ending on July 17, 2020. The Qualtrics survey link was distributed to each hub location liaison. After each visit on the land, the caregiver was asked to complete a web-based survey either in-person or on the phone with worker. The survey took approximately five minutes to complete. There were four different time points that were examined.

Caregivers were asked questions that focused on rating several key dimensions, which included their perspectives of: (1) their children's feelings; (2) their relationship with their children; (3) the helpfulness

⁸ Humphreys KL, Myint MT, Zeanah CH. Increased risk for family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Pediatrics*. 2020; doi: 10.1542/peds.2020-0982

⁹ Humphreys et al. 2020

¹⁰ Buheji et al. 2020

of having their child on the land; (4) the physical activity provided by the program, and; (5) overall physical activity of the caregiver with the children (see Appendix A)

Overview of the Findings

Demographics

There were approximately 29 families with 56 children that participated in the pilot program.

Child and family visits occurred through three hub sites or locations – Malvern (36%), Mt Dennis (30%), and Galloway (34%).

Most children who attended the visits were younger in age. Over three-quarters of the children who attended the visits at various times were five years of age or younger.

Key Survey Dimensions

Caregiver Ratings of Children's Feelings

Using a five-point Likert-scale with ratings from never to always, caregivers were asked to rate their children's recent (last 7 days) feelings of being stressed, that their problems kept piling up, being overwhelmed, and unable to manage things.

Child Has Felt Stressed

At the initial visit, approximately 12% of children who participated were rated by their caregivers as being stressed often or always. In the latter, fourth time point, no children were rated as stressed either often or always.

Child Has Felt that Problems Keep Piling Up

At the initial visit, approximately one-quarter (26%) of caregivers said their children felt that their problems keep piling up either sometimes, often, or always; whereas, as at the fourth time point, a slightly smaller proportion (17%) of caregivers indicated that their children felt their problems kept piling up sometimes, often, or always.

Child Has Felt Overwhelmed

At the initial visit, approximately 37% of children who participated were rated by their caregivers as being stressed sometimes, often or always. At the fourth time point, 29% of children who participated were rated by their caregivers as stressed either sometimes, often or always.

Child Has Felt Unable to Manage Things

A similar distribution of responses at time 1 and time 2 were noted. More specifically at initial visit and latter visit, approximately 28% of children were rated by their parents as feeling unable to manage things sometimes, often, or always.

Caregiver Rating of Caregiver-Child Relationship

Relationship Distance/Closeness

Using a four-point Likert-scale with ratings from very distant to very warm and close, caregivers were asked to rate their relationship with their children (last 7 days). At the first time point, just under three-quarters of caregivers (74%) rated their relationship as very warm and close; whereas, at the latter time point, 93% of caregivers rated their relationship with their child as very warm and close.

Share or Talk About Things that Really Matter

Using a four-point Likert scale with ratings from not well to very well, caregivers were asked to rate how well they share or talk about things that really matter with their child. At the first time point, 56% of caregivers indicated that they share/talk about things that matter very well. At the latter time point, approximately 62% of caregivers said the same.

Helpfulness of Having Child on the Land

Caregivers were asked to rate how helpful having their child on the land was at each visit. The rating was comprised of a four-point Likert scale from not at all to extremely helpful. At each of the four time points, over 92% of caregivers indicated that they found having their children on the land very or extremely helpful.

Physical Activity Provided by the Program

Caregivers were asked to rate how much physical activity was provided by the program. The four possible responses included: less than 30 minutes, 30-60 minutes, 61-120 minutes, more than 2 hours. At the initial and latter time points, over 92% of families indicated that their child was provided with 30-60 minutes of physical activity.

Overall Physical Activity of the Caregiver with Children

Caregivers were asked to indicate the most amount of time in one day that they spent outdoors being physically active with their children in the past month. The four possible responses included: less than 30 minutes, 30-60 minutes, 61-120 minutes, more than 2 hours. At the initial time point, just under one-third of caregivers (29%) indicated that they spent more than 2 hours outdoors in the last month; whereas, at the last time point, over three-quarters of caregivers (79%) indicated that they spent more than 2 hours outdoor with their children.

Stories Are Findings (interview results)

Pilot participant parents (4) agreed to conversational-style, verbal surveys while their children were in program. Appendix A lists the questions the parents answered about their children's experiences in On the Land and assesses their affective changes as a result of participating. Program facilitators conducted the interviews with parents outside, just a few metres away from the child as they continued to participate with another program leader.

The stories that emerge from the interviews show the much-needed intervention that the On the Land Pilot provides. The interviews provide evidence of both parents and children experiencing improvements in mood and self-regulation, decreased sense of isolation and loneliness, and increased physical activity resulting in improved safety and connection to the land. The parent of one girl who is an only child responded that The On the Land program offered support in all three target support areas,

saying it was “extremely helpful; it helps mellow her out, when she comes home she’s fine and not upset because she can play outside and see people and interact.”

One parent shared that her 4 year-old boy is struggling with not having an outlet for his energy and strong emotions and said,

“Our normal “take a deep breath” is not working in these situations, and he just takes a deep breath and he goes, “it’s not working, mommy”. We’re still not getting what I want. Can I please go outside? We can’t. Nowhere to go. It’s hard” (Recording 17, no date).

This mom in Recording 17 had been at program with her 9-month old baby as well as her 4-year-old. She shared the stress that she experiences living in a “really hot and stuffy” apartment and that her two young children are “always fighting over who gets to go outside,” because she can only have one of them on the balcony at a time.

On the Land mitigates her stress levels through being outside, and “also not having to be the one they’re always crying for, for having someone to relieve me a little bit. It’s much needed. Much needed” (Recording 17).

Another parent shared that her daughter felt stressed and isolated before attending On the Land:

“We are dealing with the [death of] our dog and being alone. Being an only child without her friends she’s having a really hard time with it; I am guessing me and my partner aren’t too fun to play with (laughs).” (Recording 21, no date)

Not only have the children struggled with loneliness. The parents also navigate the loss of connection with community through the pandemic. The On the Land pilot offers this support and community. The mother of a 5 year-old girl shared,

“I was able to talk, I feel better because I was able to talk with N and V, about my past week. We were able to talk about health issues and stuff like that too, and honestly, when I got here, I was feeling jumbled and stressed from this past week, but I feel calm and relaxed now from being able to talk. I don’t have to watch her when she’s with you because I know she loves you and trusts you and I trust you as well. With certain other people, I be like, “what they doing?” I trust you guys” (Recording 16, July 2 Galloway).

Some families participated in interviews early in the program as well as later, and parents noticed a qualitative shift in their child’s mood and self-regulation between visits to the On the Land program. When asked about how often her child felt overwhelmed, one mother of a five-year-old girl shared,

“She’s had some meltdowns. Little things, like I said earlier, like I asked her to tidy her room, and it turned into 3 hours of a meltdown. Little things like that; it’s a whole bunch of things piling up.” (Recording 16, July 2).

When asked the same question at a subsequent session, this parent replied, “She didn’t have them [tantrums] as bad this week. Last week, she had them for hours at a time...This week has been better. If I say go to your room or give me a minute, she’s been better” (Recording 18, no date).

The mother of a 4 year old boy shared that her son was “so happy right now, so that’s just a total 360 from his normal days, so it’s less stress for me and what I need” (Recording 17).

The interview data also demonstrates that children are getting significantly more exercise and physical freedom in the On the Land pilot than with no programming through the pandemic.

That's what I love about this program; is the fact that he can just go. And I don't have to stress, like "don't touch that! No you can't do this!" I love that we're in a big open area, and we can social distance, and be away from everything, and at the same time, not have to be like, "mom! Mom!" I don't have to yell at him at everything, (inaudible)...stay close. (Recording 17)

All parent interviewees reported that their children are running around for the entirety of the two hour session. One mother of two reported that without the program, "We're lucky if we get 10 minutes outside" (Recording 17). Another parent concurred that her daughter gets "less than 30 minutes" of exercise without the program but with On the Land, this parent reported with delight, "Look at her! Over an hour, start to finish" (Recording 21).

Considerations

Small sample sizes precluded making individual comparisons across time (i.e. the creation of a visual four-week line graph for each variable). There were some differences across implementation sites with respect to assigning unique family identifiers. A mixed-methods approach, including the use of qualitative findings can assist in helping to understand what caregivers and children found most helpful about the pilot program.

Appendices:

Appendix A: On the Land – Survey Questions

1. Adult Parent Identifier (comment box) (each family is a Fruit, each parent has a number 1, 2,3)
2. Child Identifier (comment box) (family identifier with A for eldest child, B for middle child, C for youngest child)
3. What is your child's age (comment box)
4. In the past 7 days my child felt stressed: never (score 1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5)
5. In the past 7 days my child felt that his/her problems kept piling up: never (score 1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), Always (5)
6. In the past 7 days by child felt overwhelmed: Never (score 1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5)
7. IN the past 7 days my child felt unable to manage things: Never (score 1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5)
8. In the past 7 days my relationship with my child has been: very warm and close (score 4), somewhat warm and close (score 3), somewhat distant (score 2), very distant (score 1)
9. In the past 7 days please describe how well you and (child's name) share or talk about things that really matter: very well (score 4), somewhat well (3), not very well (2), not well at all (1)
10. How helpful was it to have your child on the land today? Not at all helpful (score 1), not so helpful (2), somewhat helpful (3), very helpful (4), extremely helpful (5)
11. If you stayed home today, how helpful was it be to have your child occupied outdoors with a facilitator? Not at all helpful (score 1), not so helpful (2), somewhat helpful (3), very helpful (4), extremely helpful (5)
12. what is the most amount of time you (the parent) have spent outdoors being physically active (including walking) in the past month __minutes
13. what is the most amount of time your child has spent outdoors being physically active (including walking) in the past month __minutes
14. This survey was completed a) by phone b) in person