How Our Children Learn:
What We Heard through Engagement on Métis Early Learning and Child Care
Early childhood development for Métis early learners is one of the most critical stages in building a connection to oneself, one’s ancestors, culture, community and the land. Indeed, the end goal of quality Métis-specific early learning and child care is to provide culturally relevant support to Métis early learners on their journey into successful, culturally connected Métis adulthoods.

Métis women have traditionally been and continue to be the heart of the Métis Nation Motherland. As caregivers, teachers, mothers, kookums and aunties, Métis women have always been deeply involved in their children’s early learning and child care, working hard to ensure that their young ones begin life grounded in love and close to kinship ties.

For a long time across the Métis Nation Motherland, Métis families were forced to teach their children to hide their Métis identity in hopes of ensuring their children would never experience anti-Indigenous racism. This was known as the “Hidden Generation” which resulted in the “Lost Generation,” who were often completely unaware of their Métis identity and ancestry. Thus, it is important now more than ever before to instill Métis pride in our early learners from a young age.
Métis-Specific Activities for Early Learners

**Land-based Learning**

Access to land-based opportunities and teachings from an early age are incredibly important for early learners, both Métis and non-Métis alike. For Métis early learners, opportunities to reconnect with the land can heal and repair the disrupted relationship many Métis families have experienced due to historic land dispossession and colonization. For non-Métis early learners, the chance to learn about the land one is on, as well as its history, from a Métis perspective is essential as we navigate reconciliation collectively.

“Land-based learning can be going for a walk. I can walk with my children, and we name plants. We see Saskatoon berries, and my children can identify them. Educators can go for a walk with children and identify plants. Identify the ones not to eat. Explain the different uses of a dandelion.”

Other examples of Métis on-the-land learning for early learners include visiting trappers’ tents and lodges, developing foraging skills and identifying plants and traditional medicine as well as their uses.

“I did my last placement in a forest school. Everything, including cooking, was done on the land. We involved the children in everything. When we made tea, we picked the cedar and talked about brown and green cedar. We taught that when you do the first run, you give the water back to the tree the bark came from.”

**Métis Baby Carrying**

For centuries and to this very day, Métis women have raised their children using traditional parenting practices that not only connect them more deeply with their child but with their culture as well. Moss bags, for example, allow mother and baby to be close; they also soothe colic, stimulate speech development and facilitate deeper sleep. Cradleboards, though similar in appearance, are multi-purpose, functioning as a baby carrier, crib, highchair and playpen while also keeping the infant safe and warm.

Often crafted out of leather, deer hide, velvet and beadwork, moss bags keep infants warmly wrapped. Cradleboards, or *tikinagans* in Cree, are made from wood and have a halo hoop on top in order to further support the baby’s head during infancy. Both moss bags and cradleboards are often passed from generation to generation and are integral to traditional Métis early child care.

Working to ensure that early learning spaces accessed by Métis families have these tools is crucial and can be supported through Métis-developed and Métis-led workshops on how to create moss bags and cradleboards.
Métis-Specific Early Learning Materials and Activities

Métis early learners learn best about their culture and teachings by doing. Hands-on activities, such as using natural materials like blueberries, dirt and grass as dye, painting paddles, participating in drum circles, jigging, tufting, basket making, finger weaving, bannock baking and making cedar tea, all allow early learners to learn about traditional Métis ways of life.

Storytelling has been central to the Métis Nation Motherland for centuries. It comes as no surprise then that Métis-specific books for early learners are crucial in strengthening Métis early learners’ language development as well as their Métis identity. Books written by Métis authors or books featuring Métis language and content, i.e. learning Michif words or learning about the sash, its history and colours, are incredibly valuable to Métis early learners. For example, the Métis Nation of Alberta’s (MNA) partnership with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library is a great example of beginning work to share more Métis-specific resources for early learners up to the age of 12.

Food is also deeply tied to various parts of Métis culture and traditions and so too must be built into early learning spaces for Métis children. This could look like providing meals to Métis early learners, hosting family night events with food and refreshments available, and/or sending food packages home to ensure they are getting fed and are able to learn comfortably.

Métis Elders and Early Learners

The transmission of Métis knowledge, traditions, teachings begins when Métis Elders are able to connect with Métis early learners. Just like many Métis households are multi-generational, so too are the roles involved with child care and early learning in Métis families. Kookums and aunties often assist in the child-rearing process, whether that means sharing traditional teachings, raising early learners around their cousins or cooking meals for the whole family.

“Our community hosts a cultural camp every year to connect Elders with youth. Young people became friends with Elders and learned how to hunt, fish, and make canoes.”
When Elders have space and capacity to connect with early learners, they pass on important protocol, like how to introduce one's self and territory, who one's parents are, how to take care of the land and how to give thanks when laying down tobacco. Because colonization worked hard to disconnect Métis women from their culture and history, many teachings have been lost over the years. As a result, Métis women are working even harder to protect and share the teachings that remain.

The future of the Métis Nation rests with its early learners. Thus, in addition to creating and strengthening Métis early learning spaces, we must also adapt our world to accommodate early learners into all spaces, such as at high-level meetings, policy engagements, working groups, etc.

“We need to allow early learners to attend and run around the room. They will be the ones carrying on the work after us; they need to be in the room.”

This not only reduces barriers for Métis women with early learners who are otherwise unable to participate in these spaces, but it also exposes Métis early learners, the future of the Métis Nation, to examples of Métis leadership.

**2SLGBTQQIA+ Children, Parents, Caregivers and Families**

From the moment a child is born, they enter into a world of gender roles and expectations and for many Métis 2SLGBTQQIA+ folks, they are and have been aware of their Two Spiritedness from a very young age. For many children in early learning spaces whose identities dwell across the rainbow, this is incredibly challenging, as they are forced to fit into the gender binary.

Métis 2SLGBTQQIA+ persons have reported being told from a young age by early learning staff and peers to be “more ladylike” or to play with dolls instead of cars. For the families of Métis 2SLGBTQQIA+ persons, assumption of gender roles are also challenging as they strive to create safer spaces for their rainbow children. One participant noted that dresses are more practical for early learners who are potty-training; however, upon doing this, she has faced criticism from others because her son was “dressing like a girl.”
For these reasons, it is especially necessary that early learning spaces have opportunities to connect Métis Two Spirit Elders with the families of rainbow children, as well as with all Métis early learners. These connections not only help strengthen the bonds between the generations, but also ensure the safe transmission of Two Spirit-specific teachings and traditions as well as build pride within rainbow children and understanding among their family, peers and community.

“[The only way I am seen is if I announce who I am and I make my own space.]”

LFMO also heard that work to ensure Two Spirit inclusion in early learning spaces must be Two-Spirit-led, and to do so, early learning spaces need increased supports for their 2SLGBTQQIA+ early learning staff, staff children and families.

For Métis Two Spirit parents, there is also the fear and anxiety associated with picking up and dropping off their early learners due to heteronormative assumptions made by service providers and other families. For example, if one mother drops off her child in the morning, and the second mother comes to pick up the child, they often face discrimination, such as being asked uncomfortable questions or having to face judgemental stares.

“I do not want any child to feel that they do not belong, and go through what my son did—people would say, “Here comes your dad,” and he would have to straighten them out when he was three; He would say, “I do not have a daddy. I have two mommies.”

Métis Two Spirit pride can be strengthened within the halls of early learning spaces through a diversity in representation within resources, such as books that feature Two Spirit parents. Books with Métis-specific and 2SLGBTQQIA+ inclusive language and images, such as Two Spirit families or Two Spirit Métis sashes, would help early learners frame their identity and the world around them.
Gaps and Barriers Across the Métis Nation

Intergenerational trauma stemming from colonization has resulted in devastating cultural loss and disconnection across the Métis Nation Motherland. Restoring these ties early in life is essential so Métis early learners do not seek to fill this loss with negative experiences later on.

Lack of Distinctions-based Supports

There is a great dearth in distinctions-based supports available to Métis families’, which not only stifles the potential of Métis early learners but does little to address the lack of understanding among mainstream service providers about what the Métis Nation is.

While it is incredibly important to ensure distinctions-based supports for Métis early learners, it is also important to ensure these supports are built into and are available in mainstream service providers.

Accessibility

Access to early learning service providers, whether mainstream or Métis-specific, remains an ongoing issue for many Métis families. For those living in remote communities especially, where it is harder to find culturally relevant programs and services, many are forced to shift online to access these supports. For families in more urban settings, access to on-the-land opportunities becomes incredibly challenging.

Families are also putting their names on waitlists as soon as they become pregnant in the desperate hope that they will have a spot when their parental leave is over.

Affordability

For Métis families of early learners who actually are able to access either mainstream or Métis-specific early learning spaces, the issue of affordability comes into the fore.

Across the Métis Nation Motherland, child care costs are rising. Though more provinces are signing onto the federal government’s $10-a-day early learning and child care, for many Métis families, the programs that are eligible are few and far between as well as complicated to access. As a result, many Métis families continue to pay astronomical costs for daycare and early learning services or are forced to settle for unlicensed providers.

Professional Development and Training

Low wages and salaries for early learning professionals and service providers remain rampant across the Métis Nation Motherland; this in turn impacts the quality of care that Métis early learners receive. When staff are underpaid, there are troubles not only with staff burnout but also in staff retention. A revolving door of early childhood educators provides little consistency for Métis early learners.

“We are losing many knowledgeable people. We must value them more and pay them more.”
There are also major gaps in training for educators and curriculums for early learners, leaving many staff to have to fill these gaps themselves as an individual, which is a form of tokenism. For many Métis service providers, this is often an unpaid service they provide on a volunteer basis.

“I am taking an Indigenous-focussed Early Childhood Educator (ECE) program and bringing Métis content in. Everyone says this is not my job, but if I do not do it, this content will continue to be missed across all Indigenous studies programs.”

There is a great need to ensure more training opportunities and mechanisms for early childhood educators beyond one-day workshops. This could include mentorship opportunities between Métis women looking to become early childhood educators, or between mainstream service providers and Métis-specific service providers as part of an ongoing dialogue. This could also include kits for educators, such as the participant kits that were disseminated at a Métis Nation of Ontario IELCC Conference to both Métis and non-Métis educators to help bridge gaps and share information and wise practices.

Ultimately, Métis-specific ELCC Educator training is required to ensure the needs of Métis early learners are completely met.

**Conclusion**

Métis-specific early learning and child care starts with halls, walls and resources. When there is space for Métis early learners as well as culturally specific tools, Métis children are better positioned to reach their full potential.

Métis women are not only the voices of our ancestors; we are also the advocates for our children. We will continue to ensure thriving, colourful and culturally specific Métis spaces for our early learners.
Recommendations

LFMO recommends that the Government of Canada:

1. Improve access to land-based learning programming and services, particularly for those in urban settings;

2. Improve access to distinctions-based programming and services, particularly for those in rural and remote regions;

3. Improve supports for the development and dissemination of Métis-specific tools and resources for early learners;

4. Strengthen connections and increase opportunities between Métis Elders and early learners and

5. Increase education and awareness supports for 2SLGBTQQIA+ early learners, families and caregivers.