

Natural Helpers for the Children Learning Circle

Pilot Report (March 2023)





Introduction

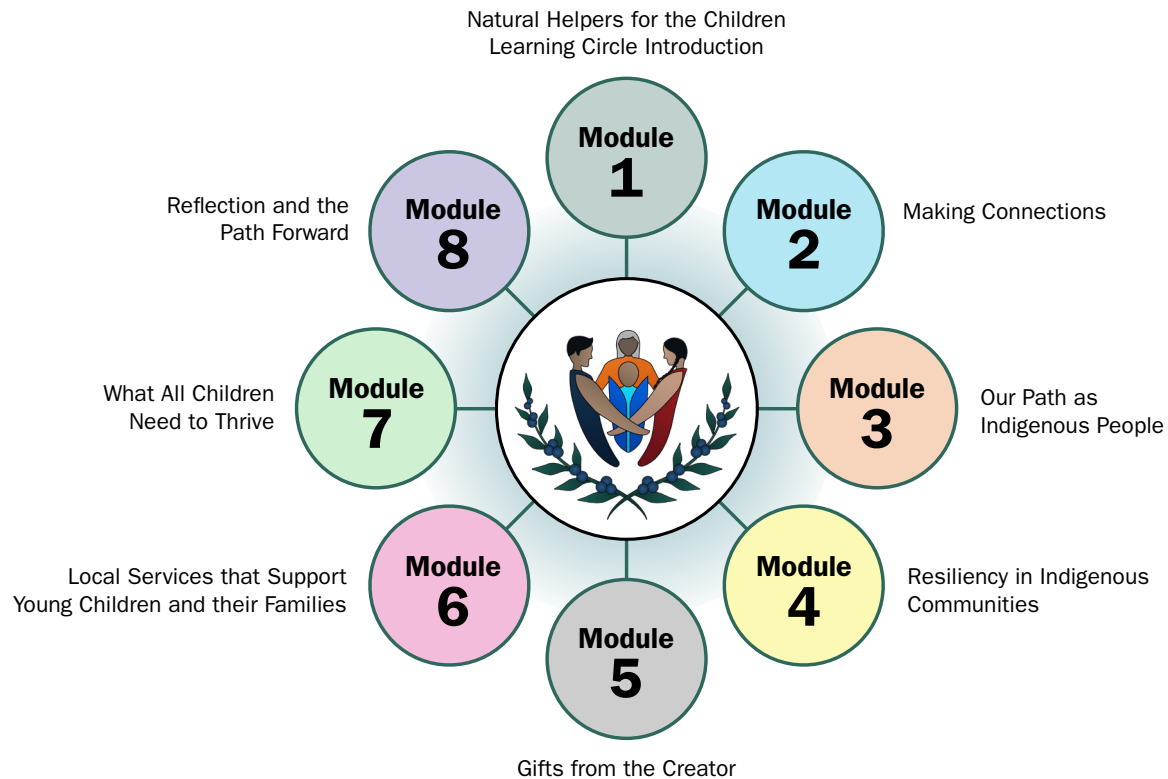
The Natural Helpers for the Children – Learning Circle (Natural Helpers or NH) is an innovative program created and developed through a partnership between Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP), and the Child and Youth Milopemahtesewin Services (CYMS) in Moosonee and Moose Factory, ON. In this project, Indigenous community leaders worked with non-Indigenous infant and early mental health (IEMH) experts, in the development of a unique community-based approach to better support infants, young children and their families.

Goal

The goal of the Natural Helpers project is to build community capacity in supporting prenatal, infant and early mental health. We aim to achieve this through a series of facilitated conversations with engaged community members who share a common interest in better supporting local families with young children. Through increased awareness, knowledge, and understanding, we will highlight the critical importance of relationships in the first five years of a child's life. The initiative acknowledges that the community as a whole plays an important role in supporting infants, young children and their families, and that every individual has something valuable to contribute to their community and future generations. Natural Helpers supports increased community capacity and draws attention to the existing capacity within Indigenous communities. The project builds upon the strengths within communities, recognizing how the traditional culture and ways of being and knowing are essential to the health and wellbeing of young children and their families.

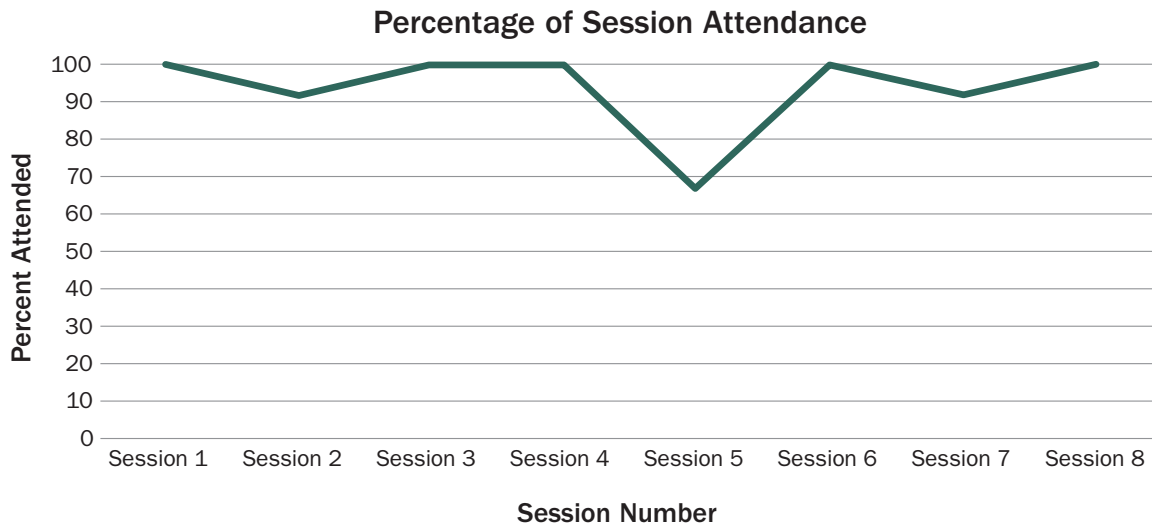
Description

This 8-part learning circle was designed with a broad audience in mind to include parents, caregivers, extended family, professionals, students, and any other interested community members. The modules were co-delivered by Indigenous community leaders and non-Indigenous IEMH experts, and are titled as follows:



Pilot

Natural Helpers piloted in the fall of 2022 in Moose Factory and Moosonee, ON. While 16 participants were registered in advance of the project start date, 14 initiated the training, and 2 dropped out after week two. The remaining 12 participants stayed for the duration of the training and their attendance rates are shown in the graph below (session 5 was a bad-weather day). Upon registering for the pilot program, participants were asked a few demographic questions. Three of the registrants lived in Moosonee, and 13 – in Moose Factory. We learned that while 4 participants had little or no experience with children, 60 per cent of participants had interacted with young children for over 5 years. Additionally, almost 70 per cent of participants had a college diploma or a higher degree.



Participants took part in their own unique learning journey as they viewed videos and other resources related to infant and early mental health. They then engaged in weekly discussion sessions facilitated by content experts, community members and an Elder. Participants had the opportunity to watch, listen, learn, share, and reflect throughout the duration of the program.

Evaluation

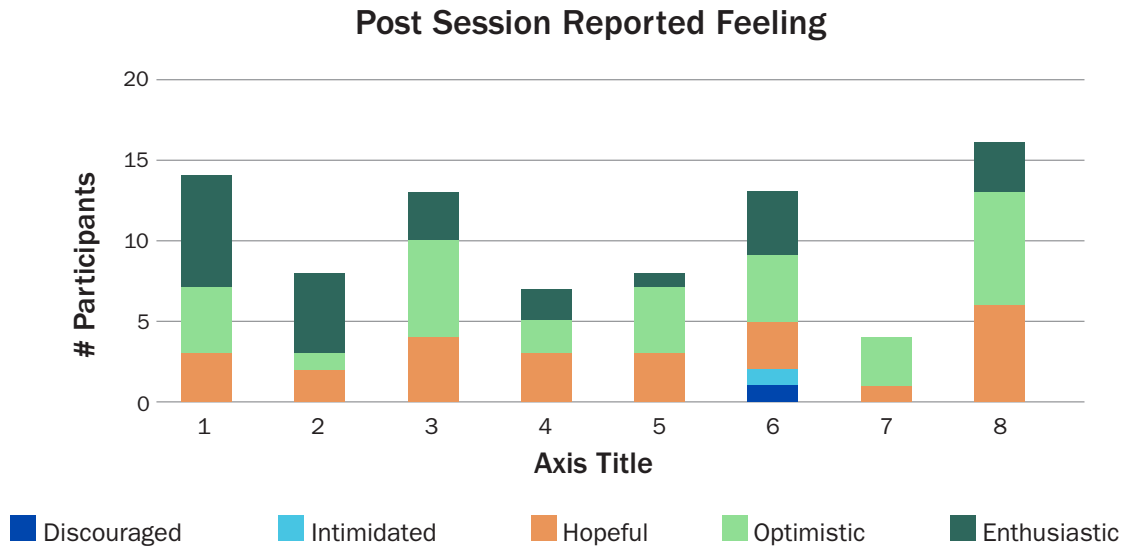
A pre and post evaluation of the project was conducted, and extensive anecdotal responses were collected from participants after each of the 8 sessions. It is interesting to note that the scores prior to the learning circles were, for the most part, already quite high, suggesting that the knowledge of participants may have been underestimated by the training planners. While 6 of the 13 participants who completed both pre and post questionnaires increased their overall scores, there were no significant differences between the pre and post scores overall.

These results suggest that, if increased knowledge and improved attitudes are an objective of Natural Helpers, either:

- New methods to transfer knowledge may be needed (i.e., the required knowledge was not transferred to participants), or
- More adequate methods to assess knowledge should be considered (i.e., the pre/post knowledge test is not a good tool to assess the knowledge of this group of participants).
An argument in this direction is that the scores were often quite high *before* the circles had started, making it harder to detect an increase.

The project leaders and facilitators believe the latter to be true and that different evaluation measurements are needed. Interaction throughout all sessions, as well as participant feedback and testimonials, clearly identified increased knowledge and understanding as common themes throughout the sessions and, as such, new ways to capture this through evaluation are needed.

Although the results of the knowledge survey did not show significant change, participant satisfaction and feedback were very favourable for all sessions. At the end of each session, participants were asked how they were feeling. Specifically, they were requested to pick among 5 states – Discouraged/Intimidated/Hopeful/Optimistic/Enthusiastic. The results are presented below. While not all participants responded each time, it is notable that the dominant emotional states each time were Hopeful, Optimistic or Enthusiastic.



Furthermore, at the end of each session, participants were asked what struck them the most during the session and/or what was their ‘Aha!’ moment. Their answers were grouped by main themes and combined across the entire Learning Circle, to determine the predominant elements that participants reported. Themes that were mentioned more than once are gathered in the table below:

# mentions	Themes
8	Safe space, true sharing and listening
8	Resources to take home (especially the community supports list)
4	Knowledge
3	Beautiful environment
3	Benefits in their own lives / Therapeutic
2	Passion of presenters
2	What vision others have for the community
1	Proud of the people
1	Open to everyone
1	Paint kit to reflect creatively

Participants often related the topics of discussion to the experiences in their own families and therefore, many topics discussed resonated very deeply with them – the discussions seemed to help them make sense of their personal experiences. Moreover, participants expressed surprise at the strength of their community, the range of services available, and

the support and engagement from their leaders. They often did not realize the support available around them. The community members involved in planning and delivering the project also shared their observations, noting specifically the changes in some individual participants and their increased level of engagement in the community.

When asked, in an open-ended question, about anything else they'd like to share about the session they just attended, participants appeared extremely satisfied. What they felt particularly happy with can be grouped in the themes listed in the table below:

# mentions	Themes
13	Learning from and relating to people from various backgrounds
7	Learning resilience is important and it takes many forms
6	Impact of colonialism on families
6	Surprise/acknowledgement of community strengths
5	Services are unknown to parents
4	Resources for the NH project and involvement from leadership
4	Surprise about own knowledge level
3	Importance of supporting and educating young parents early
2	Importance of communication among families
2	Importance of culture and role of Knowledge Keepers
2	More supports needed; many people feel isolated

The majority of participants expressed the desire for the learning circle to continue and were very vocal in sharing what the program had meant to them personally, how much they had learned over the 8 weeks, and how they felt it had enriched their lives and the lives of the children and families they are connected to. Of the 67 comments left by participants, 54 were highly positive, with words such as “Love! Love! Love!”, “Truly amazing!”, “So proud of all of you!”, “Truly powerful!”, “Very beautiful!”, etc. Of the remaining 13 comments, only one could be interpreted as a complaint. The rest were the product of personal reflections, or suggestions of community initiatives to follow up on the program.



The program Elder and the community-based facilitator (both of whom helped develop the program from the very beginning) provided final feedback and reflections. They agreed that, on a scale of 1 to 5, they would assign Natural Helpers the highest rating when it comes to the success of the project and its value to the communities, given its unique nature and intentionality. A score of 4.5 was given with regards to the satisfaction level of the participants only because Moosonee participants did not get the same experience as they were not able to attend in person due to travel challenges across the water. The co-facilitators agreed that NH should continue in their community and that it would also be of benefit to other communities. They noted that the most powerful aspects had to do with (1) the opportunity to share in a safe space and learn from each other, and (2) the reported immediate and meaningful impact NH had on participants and their interactions with children.

Next Steps

The pilot for this project was well-received by those who participated and by the local community. There is unanimous interest in expanding Natural Helpers to other NAN communities. Moosonee and Moose Factory are also in the planning stages to look at how they can continue this project locally. Two of the participants involved in the pilot were included with the specific intent that they would become facilitators for future cohorts.

There has also been interest identified by other Indigenous communities in the province and in other parts of Canada to create a similar program for their communities.

Preliminary thoughts on scaling up:

- Identify other NAN communities for the project
- Build upon the pilot, involve more community members, ensure all interested community members have an opportunity to participate
- Explore various model options, and their costs
- Determine the elements of current content that can be used in other communities, and how to incorporate with new content
- Develop a Natural Helpers Toolkit/“Train-the-Trainer” guide

Considerations:

- Cost – What the cost is of replicating the pilot model in other communities
- Human resources – Train-the-Trainer vs. Pilot format
- Capacity – Which community-based program might be able to take on the project
- Technology – Virtual facilitation with hybrid model considerations
- Evaluation – Pre/post evaluation questions better suited to the nature of the project
- Other ideas – Use current resources to build an Indigenous Learning Series; National Film Board possibilities

Facilitators suggestions:

- Sustainability – more sessions and more community members involved
- Follow-up opportunities to keep the sharing going
- Other topics that participants were interested in learning more about:
 - Autism
 - Single-parent families and their challenges
 - Blended families and their challenges
 - First-time parents
 - Nursing moms
 - Respite for parents
 - Father involvement

Participants suggestions:

- A 'Part 2' /next step to this program
- Participants to do similar sessions with parents in the community
- Participants to volunteer with this program or others
- A program entirely about resilience
- NAN to be more present in the community and provide more information about the programs they offer
- List of community resources to be spread widely
- Cedar picking program for youth and families to learn how to pick and use as medicine

Reflections

NH participants were each given a water colour paint kit at the beginning of the training. The paint kits were sourced locally from an Indigenous company which makes their paints from the land. Each week following their session, participants were asked to take time to reflect on what they had learned and experienced from the session. They were encouraged to use the paint kits and provided with an instructional tutorial to assist. Those preferring to use a different means of reflection were welcome to do so. The reflection element of the pilot was a huge success as it provided a beautiful vehicle for participants to reflect and extend their learning.

The final session of the project was a sharing circle for members to discuss their creations and what being part of the Natural Helpers for the Children – Learning Circle had meant to them personally and as a community member. The following are excerpts from the final session where NH participants presented a summary of their reflections:

Love to Inspire

Northern Lights. After our first session. I just felt so inspired and totally excited for what we were going to be doing with the group! (Y'all did not disappoint!!)



Making Connections & Celebrate!

This was my attempt at trying to paint ancestors in a circle, with the northern lights in the background. It is meant to represent our ancestors praying for us and our future!



Return Your Roots

Our Path as Indigenous People. I just felt so connected to this picture. I had tried my best to freehand draw/copy my daughter's picture she had painted for Orange Shirt Day 1 or 2 years ago. I also tried to mimic the way she painted her picture when she was in kindergarten. I felt inspired by and chose this particular one because it was stuck in my head since I had watched the video and during our group that evening. I couldn't believe I had found it right on top of her kindergarten folder in the closet, it felt like it was "meant to be".





Deep set love and respect

Touchon and Brittany's module. I seriously love that quote from Touchon!! I think of it every single day. It is such a beautiful reminder to bring our children front and center, surrounded by so much love and RESPECT!

"This session reminded me that I have to work CONTINUOUSLY at being resilient. Yet sometimes I just want to curl up and forget everyone and everything around me. When I feel like this, I recognize that I need to put me first, but that's not always possible. In the meantime, I sometimes need to continue to act "as if" I'm superwoman, that means taking things one day at a time. And if one day at a time is too long, then I need to take it one hour at a time. Yeah, I know this. I just need reminders."



"It really, really helped me to remain calmer throughout the week when responding to a toddler having a gargantuan meltdown a few times! It just stuck with me that he needs a calmer mommy who doesn't react to his anger, rather one who validates his feelings and helps him to navigate through them."

