



Walking the Path Together

Walking the Path Together is a culturally based, innovative, five-year pilot project aimed at reducing the likelihood that Aboriginal children aged 6 to 11 will grow up to use or accept violence in their intimate relationships. It addresses chronic family violence, the foundation of intergenerational violence, and future offending behaviours. The project is being implemented in the Alberta communities of Wabasca, Morley, Hobbema, Fort Chipewyan, and Enilda.

Walking the Path Together is managed by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS), and is supported by Public Safety Canada through the National Crime Prevention Centre's Northern and Aboriginal Crime Prevention Fund. The project began in July 2009 and will be piloted and evaluated through to March 2014.

Objectives of the project include ensuring that the children who are participating:

- are not living with violence at home; and
- are not engaging in behaviour that would be deemed criminal if they were 12 years of age or older.

Program Participants

The primary participants are boys and girls who have witnessed family violence, experience the shelter system, and live on-reserve. These children live with at least one nurturing parent/guardian. Participation is voluntary. Secondary participants include siblings living with the primary participants, and other family members.

In addition to exposure to family violence, *Walking the Path Together* also addresses risk factors such as:

- attitudes that accept violence as normal, unavoidable or desirable;
- low attachment to school;

- parenting difficulties;
- drug use, gang involvement and self-harm;
- lack of role models for healthy relationships; and
- lack of or low connection to First Nation heritage.

Program Components

Wisdom from First Nation culture is incorporated into all facets of the project. Intervention activities include case management, individual counseling, talking circles, family counseling, discussions with Elders, and family group conferencing.

The program components are integrated into the ongoing activities at the shelters. The approach includes a careful and thorough assessment of the participants and tailoring services to address their circumstances. Where appropriate, children and families are connected with resources available through Child Welfare, Health or Income Support. Individual and family counseling, talking circles and family group conferencing are key activities, and Elder involvement is highlighted throughout. The project complements these services by coordinating three other types of activities for families:

- educational—tutoring, homework clubs and art;
- traditional and spiritual—round dances, praying, smudging, pipe ceremonies, and sweats; and
- recreational—picnics, swimming, camping, soccer and fishing.

These activities provide important opportunities for families to have positive experiences together and for staff to create and build opportunities for discussions and therapeutic work.



Staffing

In each of the shelters, one Eagle Feather Worker was hired to apply the F.E.A.T.H.E.R approach. Each Worker supports 10-15 children and their families over a two year period. The F.E.A.T.H.E.R. approach was developed as a foundation for the *Walking the Path Together* project:

- F** – Follow the family out of the shelter and into (and around) the community.
- E** – Earn trust and respect by demonstrating commitment.
- A** – Adapt to what a family wants and needs (today and as it changes).
- T** – Be **T**here when and where they need us, for as long as they need us.
- H** – Use a **H**olistic understanding of gifts and needs.
- E** – Empower adults to advocate for themselves.
- R** – Have **R**ealistic expectations of ourselves and the families we work with.

Partners

In addition to the partnership between the five on-reserve shelters and the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS), *Walking the Path Together* has partnered with the London, Ontario Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System (The London Centre), and Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell of John Hopkins University. The London Centre and Dr. Campbell provide expertise in risk assessment, appreciative inquiry and clinical work with children who have experienced family violence. A Project Guidance Circle involving the partners was established. It guides the implementation of the project and provides a forum for reflection and continual evolution.

Findings

Walking the Path Together is yielding promising results. It has involved 67 primary participants, as well as 104 adult caregivers and 129 siblings.

According to the impact evaluation being conducted with support from the Government of Alberta, 82 children from the primary and secondary participant groups have been prevented from entering government care, and exposure to violence has ended or been reduced for 50% of the primary participants. Twenty four of the caregivers have returned to school or become employed and 70% of the caregivers report being ready to take action, seek help and stay safe.

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) study, also supported by the Government of Alberta, shows an

overall social value, or financial saving, of \$5.42 for every dollar spent.¹

Several tools that may be useful for others have been created or adapted for the project. The "Protection, Options and Planning" or "POP TARTS" is used to guide conversations with women living, or returning to live, with someone violent. The "Danger Assessment Tool"² is used to determine the level of risk faced by women living with violence.

The extent of the intergenerational trauma experienced by the people in the communities, the depth and scope of economic needs and the low levels of access to systems have been greater than anticipated.

For the project staff, the distances required for travel in order to meet safety concerns in some homes have been challenging.

Barriers to participation in the project have been identified and include a general lack of trust, concerns about confidentiality, fear of losing children to child welfare or of potential impacts on social assistance benefits.

The staff of *Walking the Path Together* has learned that building trust with participants can take a year or more and is an essential element of success. The family activities and events provide important opportunities to accomplish this.

Some strategies that enhance family engagement are:

- Give presentations, workshops and promotional material in the home communities to raise awareness of the project and provide factual information;
- Include men and work with them to develop the plans for their children and partners;
- Create low stress opportunities for families to come together and experience the enjoyment of activities together;
- Begin work with whoever is most open, whether it be children or adults in a family, and slowly bring in the other family members as trust builds; and
- Help people meet their basic needs.

¹ Social Return on Investment (SROI) Case Study: Safe Communities Innovation Fund – Walking the Path Together, by the Alberta Safe Community and Strategic Policy Secretariat, co-funder of this program. For a copy or for more information, contact the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters at <https://www.acws.ca/contact-us>.

² For more information about the Danger Assessment, visit <http://www.dangerassessment.org/about.aspx>

Flexible work hours for staff, integration of the program activities with other shelter programs, coordination between First Nations and mainstream agencies, planning for continuity of service, and working with an umbrella network organization such as ACWS are all strategies that have helped with project implementation.

Police are important partners and need to be involved in the day to day activities of the project to help dispel fears of the RCMP and increase feelings of safety.

A computerized data collection system is an important element of the project. It ensures that the information needed to understand and adapt program activities is available and streamlines record keeping for staff.

Regular training and support for the Eagle Feather Workers helps to prevent burnout, and limiting the worker/client ratio to 1:10 helps to balance the intensity of the program with the resources available.

Summary

Walking the Path Together is addressing risk factors and building protective factors to help First Nations children and families move away from the dangers of violence and crime. The lessons learned from the project and the results for the individuals, families and communities involved will be valuable and useful for practitioners and policy makers who want to invest in programs.

Information about what has been learned so far from the *Walking the Path Together* Project is summarized in a document entitled “Walk Proud, Dance Proud: Footprints on a Healing Journey—A Draft Discussion Guide to *Walking the Path Together* to Reclaim the Teachings for our First Nations Children (2012)” and is available for use by any community in Canada. For a copy or for more information, contact the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters at <https://www.acws.ca/contact-us>.

Information on this project can be found on <https://www.acws.ca/walkingthepath> or by contacting the:

Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters

320 – 10310 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5J 2W4

Telephone: 780-456-7000

www.acws.ca

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page at: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>