A GUIDE TO THE INNU CARE APPROACH

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In this Guide, the word "children" is often used in a broad sense to include both children and youth of all ages.

Introduction

The Innu Healing Strategy (2014) clearly outlines the need for healing in Innu communities, and also what is needed to achieve it. The impacts of separation and displacement from traditional lands, life and culture, as well as decades of negligence from the Canadian government, have led to severe challenges for the Innu to surmount. Today, far too many Innu families are struggling, and suffering. It is also clear that the effective ways to face and overcome these challenges come from the strength and resilience of Innu culture and relationships.

Even when assuming the best of intentions, the interventions of non-Innu governments in Innu communities have suffered from a lack of expertise in Innu culture. The true experts in Innu culture, *Innu-aitun*, are the Innu. Innu children, families and communities have an enormous wealth of knowledge and skills that must be valued and engaged with in order to rebuild the circles of support that keep all Innu healthy and strong.

The life of a community is its children. Children have the capacity to bring out the best in all people, with their laughter, their curiosity, and unconditional love. Providing love and support to all children is the basis for a healthy future, anywhere in the world.

However, families and communities that have been impacted by trauma face greater challenges in providing the necessary support for growing children. In that context, bringing the best of our qualities together is even more important. For Innu, this includes our respect for one another, our capacity to work together in the best interests of our children, our ability to trust and depend on one another, our love and value for family, and our timeless relationship to Nutshimit, the source of all our health and wellbeing.

The elements of Innu life that come together around our children in order to safeguard them and support them are like the poles of a *tshuap* (home on the land). Each one can only do so much on its own. But working together, in ways we have understood for millennia, we can provide the kind of environment that nourishes and sustains resilience in our children, families, and communities for generations to come.

Parents, Extended Family, Community, Innu Services, Culture & Language, and Elders are like *tshuap* poles building this caring environment around our children, standing on Nutshimit and woven together by the Innu Healing Values. In this supportive environment, our children are encouraged to grow strong in all aspects of life. This is the Innu Care Approach.

Innu and non-Innu alike who work together for the wellbeing of our Innu children need to be guided by a vision of health and wellness that moves beyond reacting to crisis and maintaining the status quo. We need to be inspired by the creativity and resilience of our children and bring about the changes we wish to see in our communities. This approach must inform our practice so that instead of tearing families apart, our interventions help to recognize and build upon the many strengths present in our communities, and bring support networks together so that our families and the children within them will thrive.

That is the purpose of this *Guide*. Based on Innu Healing Values and consistent with the *Innu Healing Strategy*, it sets out an Innu approach to helping Innu children and their families: **the Innu Care Approach**. The Innu Care Approach is introduced here to provide guidance to Innu services, including our new Innu child welfare prevention services. We also hope that non-Innu services serving our communities will take guidance from this wisdom.

The Innu Care Approach explained in this document is not really new. It has been practiced by Innu for generations through *Innu-aitun* in daily life. And it still practiced in healthy Innu families today. Many Innu service providers already use it in their work.

The development of this *Guide* came from drawing upon this expertise within our communities. Jack Penashue, an Innu social worker, developed the core image and concepts of the Innu Care Approach based on his deep knowledge of Innu traditions as applied today. Using that base, the Innu Round Table Secretariat collaborated with others to help expand on these ideas and write them down. In 2015, 55 people, including Innu staff, Innu community members, Innu leadership, and Provincial child protection staff, participated in interviews, focus groups and surveys led by the Child Welfare League of Canada. In 2016, we integrated that information into the main ideas of the Innu Care Approach. In 2017, social work student Nico Contreras worked with staff and community members in both Innu communities to put together this document.

Over time, we know the Innu Care Approach will continue to grow. More tools, images and guides may be developed as Innu programs and services grow, to help use the approach in particular contexts. This *Guide* sets out the practice framework of the Innu Care Approach; it provides an initial resource and essential foundation on its main concepts.

With healthy, strong supports around them, we know our children can grow up healthy and strong too.

The Innu Care Approach – Built on Innu Healing Values

The Innu Healing Values are described in *The Innu Healing Strategy (2014).*

They are essential to the practice of supporting Innu children, youth and families.

The Innu Healing Values inform the Innu Care Approach in order to ensure that work with Innu communities will consistently follow best practices from our culture.

Below are the Innu Healing Values, along with some brief commentary on their use in the Innu Care Approach:

Respect

Innu value each other and all our surroundings and treat everything with respect as we recognize that we need each other, the land, and the animals to survive.

Anyone working to support Innu communities must be willing understand and respect each other as individuals, as well as our culture, traditions, and the land we live on. Innu will be the leaders of our own healing, and our needs and concerns must be heard and addressed every step of the way.

Trust & Honesty

Trust has always been a key value for the Innu as our very survival as a People, has always been dependent upon our need to rely upon one another and trust that we would all fulfill our role and make decisions that are best for the collective. For trust to exist, honesty must also exist.

We need to be able to rely on each other for healing to reach entire communities. Commitments made to Innu communities, especially to children, must be honoured. When our thoughts, words and actions are in harmony, our relationships can be strong and resilient.

Cooperation

Innu work with each other to support the advancement of the People.

There are many inside and outside of our communities who have the strength to bring healing to Innu children and families. We need to work together, to communicate freely and integrate our approaches so that we can be an interwoven network of support.

Family

Togetherness and connection to family is important to Innu.

Innu families have provided the support necessary to continue our way of life for millennia. The family is sacred, and all efforts to help bring families closer together must be made in order to keep our communities strong. Every member of the family brings their own gifts to the table, and in this way we embrace the many kinds of diversity present in our communities.

Nature

Nature has been integral to the existence of the Innu as it has provided for both our physical and spiritual needs since our creation, and will do so into the future.

Nutshimit is the foundation of Innu life, and the life of all beings. Our relationship to the land must be safeguarded, as well as the health of the land itself. Our children need to have access to the land, as well as to the knowledge of our elders, so that we always remember who we are through our connection to nature.

The Innu Care Approach – Supports Surrounding a Child

The Innu Care Approach starts with our knowledge that the wellbeing of Innu children depends on the wellbeing of the supports around them:

- Parents
- Extended Family
- Community
- Innu Services
- Culture & Language
- Elders

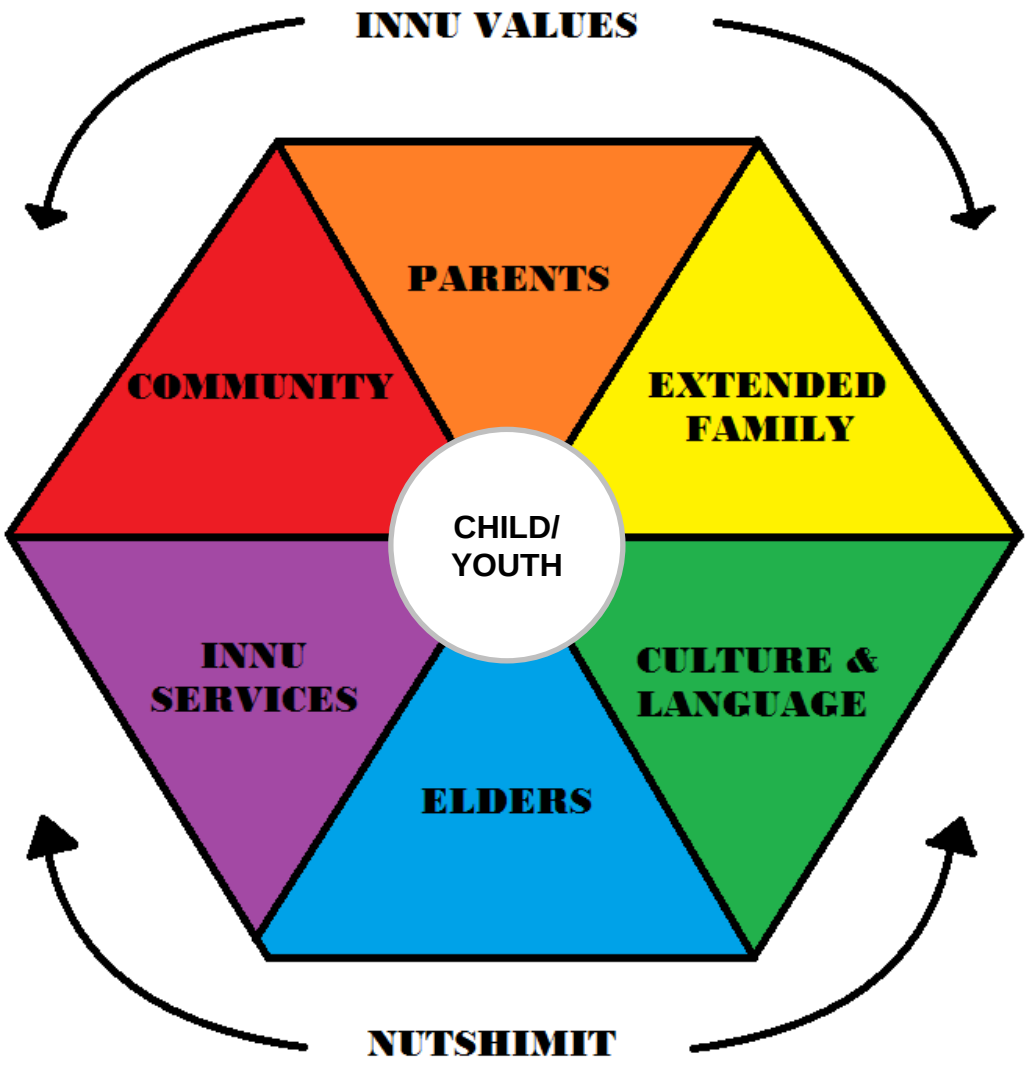
These supports are like *tshuap* poles that support a caring environment around our children. They stand strongly on the ground of Nutshimit which is inseparable from Innu culture. The Innu Healing Values wrap around this support structure, protecting the Innu way of life.

Two Kinds of *Tshuap*

Over time, Innu people have used different kinds of *tshuap* (home/tent/dwelling) when living on the land. In older times, a tipi was often used. Later, the more modern canvas style began to be used; it has now been in common use among Innu for many years. In this Guide, images of both types of *tshuap* are used to discuss the concepts of the Innu Care Approach.

There are different ways to visualize the Innu Care Approach. The image on the previous page shows a whole picture in a natural context, using the older, tipi-style *tshuap*.

The image below is like a diagram of the Innu Care Approach; picture it as a tipi *tshuap* as seen from above. This format can be helpful for developing evaluation and planning tools that can be worked through and filled in with notes and other content when staff are working with children, youth, and families, or when leaders and staff are designing or improving services.



The poster on the next two pages can help people learn about the Innu Care Approach with both visual images and written summaries.

After the poster, the following pages provide some additional explanation about the meaning of each of these supports surrounding the child.

ELDERS: Knowledge Keepers

What role do elders play in the life of the child, family and community? In what ways can relationships to elders be engaged, and the connection to culture and Nutshimit be strengthened through their knowledge?

CULTURE & LANGUAGE: Foundations of Wellbeing

How can Innu culture be preserved while adapting to rapidly shifting circumstances? How can the available tools be harnessed to offer youth new ways of engaging with their linguistic and cultural heritage? How can the relationship to Nutshimit, the foundation of Innu cultural identity, be strengthened and reaffirmed with each generation?

INNU SERVICES: Integrating Care

What Innu-led services are in place to support the child and family? How can they access and engage with services? What services need to be formed to address gaps in support? How do these supports communicate with one another?

PARENTS: Primary Caregivers

What kind of support is most needed in order to help strengthen that parent-child bond? What supports exist within the community or need to exist so that parents can thrive?

EXTENDED FAMILY: Circle of Support

What can be learned from the extended family to best support the child? What are the strategies already in place from the extended family, and how can they be strengthened?

COMMUNITY: Resilient Relationships

What community members participate actively in the life of the child and family? What relationships help to strengthen child and family, and how can these relationships best be supported?

First *Tshuap* Pole: Parents

Parental involvement is of central importance to the development of happy and healthy children. This is the primary *tshuap* pole, the life-giving support of the child from even before their birth.

The role of parent though, can be flexible, understanding that all parents need some form of help in order to be as healthy and supportive as they can be. Sometimes a child's primary caregiver may be another closely-related, caring adult. As long as there is at least one attentive and loving adult actively present in a stable way in a child's life, this *tshuap* pole can stay strong, and the child will learn a number of important social and emotional skills from this person or people by example.

Work in Innu communities needs to understand the bonds of trust and support between adults in parental roles. Sometimes, children who may seem to be on their own could indeed be under the watchful eye of a supportive friend or family member.

Parenting can also look quite different in the community and in Nutshimit.

In the village settlement, children may spend more time alone or with peers (for example, in school) as is more conventional in non-Innu society, but the parent-child relationship remains crucial.

In Nutshimit, children have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of life in an extended family environment, learning through play and storytelling as well as through direct observation of the adults around them, including parents.

For today's Innu, becoming strong parents in both contexts is important. This integrated circle of care is fundamental to the well-being and growth of Innu children.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, we ask how to strengthen this primary source of support. What is most needed in order to help strengthen that parent-child bond? What do the parents have or need within the community so that they can thrive?

If a child's relationship with their parents has broken down, or risks damage when a child needs more help or must come into care, steps need to be taken immediately to rebuild that relationship and to support the parents' success for the long term.

Second *Tshuap* Pole: Extended Family

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, older siblings – these can often be caregivers invested in not only the well-being of children, but also as primary supporters of the child's parents. This is why the full extended family is the second pole: it not only helps the child, it helps keep the first support (parents) strong and stable as well.

Innu culture values the relationships of family across generations. The wisdom of children, parents, grandparents and others can come together to support one another in their growth.

Throughout history and to the present day, the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs of Innu children are met by a number of family members.

They witness the child's growth and development over time, provide love and care, and gain extremely valuable insight into the child's individual strengths, and their struggles as well.

Work with Innu children needs to recognize the importance of extended family connections, and draw upon their vast knowledge about each child.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, we ask: What can be learned from the extended family to best support the child? What are the strategies already in place from the extended family to support the child and the parents, and how can they be strengthened?

If parents need more support or can no longer provide primary care for their child, we turn to the child's extended family to provide more help. If a child must come into care, extended family should become the caregivers in most cases.

In other cases, if a child must go elsewhere, the child's connections with their extended family members need to be maintained with regular contact and involvement. If these connections are lost or damaged, they should be supported and re-established.

Third *Tshuap* Pole: Community

The Innu people have survived and thrived through countless generations, in part due to a resilient network of relationships that hold families together as communities. The old saying, “it takes a village to raise a child” is true the world over, and certainly is so for the Innu.

Innu life and culture relies on the knowledge and skills of many different community members working together, and this applies to child rearing as well. Community, in the Innu world, is not entirely separate from family, but rather, an extension of it. Relationships exist on a continuum. The bonds that hold these relationships together might be blood, marriage, or shared experience, but they are fundamental to the way of Innu life, and they help to hold families and children together as well.

Gatherings, large and small, are important times for child, family and community, as they help to commemorate those relationships that keep Innu culture and society vibrant and strong. The nomadic history of the Innu has shifted significantly in recent generations, which leaves many questions as to how communities can best live and work together under current circumstances, or how those circumstances must change in order to cultivate resilient communities.

Work with Innu communities must maintain an awareness of these cultural and historical transitions, and the importance of relationships far beyond the immediate family circle.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, we ask: What community members participate actively in the life of the child and family? What community relationships or dynamics help to strengthen this child and family, and how can they best be supported?

All Innu children have the right to remain integrated and participate within their community. Innu children should remain placed within their own community to the greatest extent possible, and service gaps should be addressed to allow for this.

If a child must be placed outside their community, a significant effort must be taken to help the child remain connected with normal life in their community.

Fourth *Tshuap* Pole: Innu Services

Innu self-determination involves the capacity to identify and respond to the evolving challenges and needs of the community, families, and individuals. It must be remembered that the only experts on Innu life are the Innu themselves.

Those working within the community to deliver both formal and informal Innu-led programs in health and healing, education, justice, housing, employment, recreation, culture and more, are extremely valuable resources to the community. Innu services act as an extension of the collective commitment to ensure the well-being of all Innu.

In 2016, Innu first began receiving funding for prevention services to help avoid the need for child protection intervention and mitigate its impacts. The addition of prevention services is of vital importance to the well-being of the community as a whole. Over time, as it grows, this service can help to address family challenges before they escalate into crises, help de-escalate crises underway, and to develop the strength and resilience of children and families. Other Innu services in addition to "prevention" services are also essential to prevention. A full scope of services in all subject areas is needed to help Innu families heal and stay strong.

Working within the Innu Care Approach means respecting the knowledge, expertise, and relationships formed by many Innu service providers, and working collaboratively. Innu services continue to evolve. Our leadership and staff have shown a lasting, multigenerational commitment to providing services both designed for and guided by the Innu people.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, or planning services generally, we ask: What Innu services, formal or informal, may already be in place in support of this child and family, or Innu children and families generally? How can a child and family access and engage with services that they haven't yet? What services need to be formed to address gaps in support? And, how do these service providers communicate with one another to deliver integrated support to the entire community?

When a child and family needs help, Innu-directed prevention services and other Innu services must be available at all stages. Innu services can help support a family to maintain its integrity and minimize the need for intervention. If a child must come into care, the child, placement family, and family of origin should all receive services. If an appropriate family placement is not available, an Innu-run facility should be used. After time in care, Innu services should help with transitions and family reintegration.

Fifth *Tshuap* Pole: Culture and Language

Cultural self-knowledge is fundamental to health and well-being for Innu. Our unique relationship to Nutshimit and to each other must be safeguarded. Innu have been nomadic stewards of the land for countless generations, and the recent history of settled life has impacted the culture of the Innu in many ways.

Culture and language is what binds community together. It must inform the delivery of any services for the Innu people.

The language of Innu-aimun is an extension of Innu culture and worldview. For services and programs to meet the health and wellness needs of our community, they need to speak with us in our language, and promote our language as it enriches us and sustains the community's cultural heritage. Innu children have the right to learn Innu-aimun, and this knowledge helps them develop understanding and pride in who they are.

The presence of modern informational technology in almost all aspects of life has the capacity to erode Innu language and culture, or to support it, particularly for youth who have grown up accustomed to these new methods of communication. Work within Innu communities must include an awareness of the historical and present cultural context while working towards a future that brings together the best of many worlds.

Added to that, in a child welfare context, children who go into care run the risk of being placed outside Innu communities, where they are very vulnerable to loss of language and culture. This can create stress and long-term risks.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, we ask: How can Innu culture be preserved while adapting to rapidly shifting circumstances? How can new and existing tools be harnessed to offer young people ways of engaging with their linguistic and cultural heritage? How can the relationship to Nutshimit, the foundation of Innu cultural identity, be strengthened and reaffirmed with each generation?

Innu children and their families need to receive services from trained Innu speaking staff who speak their language and know their culture – in prevention services, in protection services, and in the care homes and support services that they may access. No matter where they live, Innu children have the right to learn and participate in their language and their culture. Access to Innu-aimun and to land-based time in Nutshimit must be ensured, and should be done in a way that is consistent with normal community practices and seasonal activities.

Sixth *Tshuap* Pole: Elders

"Elders tie everything together. It's important that they are seen as more than just a nuisance or a burden." Jack Penashue

The final *tshuap* pole is the Elders of the community, from which all the other poles gain strength and support. Innu Elders are keepers of a precious cultural connection to Nutshimit and to the spiritual practices of the Innu, embodying knowledge from a time before the incursion of euro-centric worldviews into Innu life. We are fortunate to have living knowledge-keepers who can offer a sense of perspective over time and an awareness of the path where the Innu come from and where we are headed.

The relationship of Innu Elders to Innu young people is of great value, especially for those youth that are struggling to understand themselves and their role in the community and the world at large. Work in Innu communities must consult and respect the advice of Elders, and strengthen the connections between Elders and youth, who will grow to be leaders in the community and someday Elders themselves.

Elders need the opportunity to share their knowledge and their stories, rather than being excluded from daily life as is the norm across much of North America. For Innu, Elders play a central role in the support and development of children into caring and self-aware Innu adults. Elders rely in turn upon parents, and other adults within their extended family and community to offer them care and support as well, and to value the gifts they have to offer their people.

Practice Points: When helping a child or youth, we ask: What role do Elders play in the life of the child, family and community? In what ways can relationships to Elders be engaged, and the connection to culture and Nutshimit be strengthened through the knowledge of Elders?

Contact with Elders is important for children in the context of their daily life. If a child and family needs extra help, or a child must come into care, the involvement of Elders should be integrated into plans, services, and alternate placements. If a child must be taken outside their community, additional effort is required to ensure the child and those around the child will still benefit from the wisdom, foundational knowledge and perspective of their Elders.

Re-building Circles of Support, Connected to the Land

These six *tshuap* poles surround the child with their supports. They stand firmly on the ground of Nutshimit, the source of Innu culture and spirituality, and connect together.

The image above shows a modern Innu canvas *tshuap*; the Innu Care Approach can be pictured that way too. If any of the poles is not strong, the structure of support around a child can become unstable. For an Innu child to succeed to their fullest, they need each of their support systems to be strong.

The central aspect that gives life, love and meaning to this structure is the life of the child in the center. Children bring light and hope into our lives. When a child is removed it causes darkness and despair. When that happens, the circle of support begins to disintegrate. And, children who return to the community after having been starved of their own connection to Innu life can struggle to reintegrate, especially if the circle of care has been weakened by trauma.

Re-building resilient circles of care is a multigenerational process. Innu are dedicated to doing so, recognizing the incredible strengths and gifts inherent in Innu people, life and culture. Innu and non-Innu alike, who work together to cultivate the health and wellness of Innu children, families and communities, also need to be supported and cared for, in order to be able to do this work over time.

The Innu way values the gifts of each individual as they are woven together, holding the *tshuap* strong through all seasons. Together, we can give all Innu children a chance to grow and thrive knowing they are loved and cared for by all around them.

Conclusion

The principles laid out in this document are not an instruction manual, nor a series of boxes to check off. They are also not linear, to be addressed one at a time, but circular, working together as a whole. As is the way of nature, the healing process is different for every individual, family and community, and takes place through cycles over time. Our focus may shift to one aspect of our healing at times, but we must be flexible, ready to adapt to changing circumstances and build networks of support rather than work in isolation.

The process of healing is one that will continue over generations. Much work has already been done, and much work yet needs doing. We are perfectly placed in time to learn the lessons of our ancestors and to enrich the lives of the generations to come. In order to grow and thrive, we need a strong belief in ourselves and our vision of healthy, strong Innu children, youth, adults and Elders connected by love for each other our culture and the land we live on.

Our love for our children has the capacity to bring us closer together, to respect our differences and to celebrate our common hopes and dreams. People around the world wish to live in peace, happiness and freedom. The Innu are no different in this regard. Innu and non-Innu alike can work together to ensure that Innu children grow strong and healthy, connected to their families, their communities, to their culture and to Nutshimit.

The Innu have a talent for storytelling. Our stories are woven through our lives, and shape the way we see the world. The Innu will continue to tell our stories in the future to come, in our own language, in our own way. We will continue to chart our own path across the land, the water, and through time. We will pass our stories on from generation to generation, create and learn many new ones along the way, from our elders and from our children, hand in hand.

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