

We Were Children



ONE NFB
FNO | EDUCATION 

Welcome & Introduction

Contextualizing the Film

Opening Activity: *Framing the Inward Journey*

Old Man Stone Teaching

The Gift of Water Teaching

Break

Screening & Viewing Activity: *Bursts of Thoughts, Reactions and Feelings*

The Gift of Silence

Break

Checking-in Activity

Footprint Activity: *Heroes Who Walk Amongst Us*

Closing Sharing Circle: *Looking Back Upon the Day – Sharing Our Insights*





Session Goals

The activities in this workshop are designed to create a reflective learning space. The main goals of the activities are to:

- create understanding of our shared Canadian history;
- respectfully engage in dialogue about the experiences of Survivors;
- create an inquiry-based learning environment;
- discuss resilience development;
- recognize and understand contemporary manifestations of the legacy of the Indian Residential School System; and
- collectively consider and discuss our role in reconciliation.

On March 31, 1998, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) was created. It was given 10 years to disburse this \$350-million fund beginning March 31, 1999, and ending March 31, 2009. Since June 1999, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has been providing funding support to community-based initiatives that address the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System. In 2007, the AHF received \$125M from the federal government, extending the life of the Foundation to 2012.



In 2000, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation established the Legacy of Hope Foundation – a national charity whose mandate is to educate and raise awareness about residential schools and to continue to support the ongoing healing of Survivors.



The Residential School System and Why It Matters

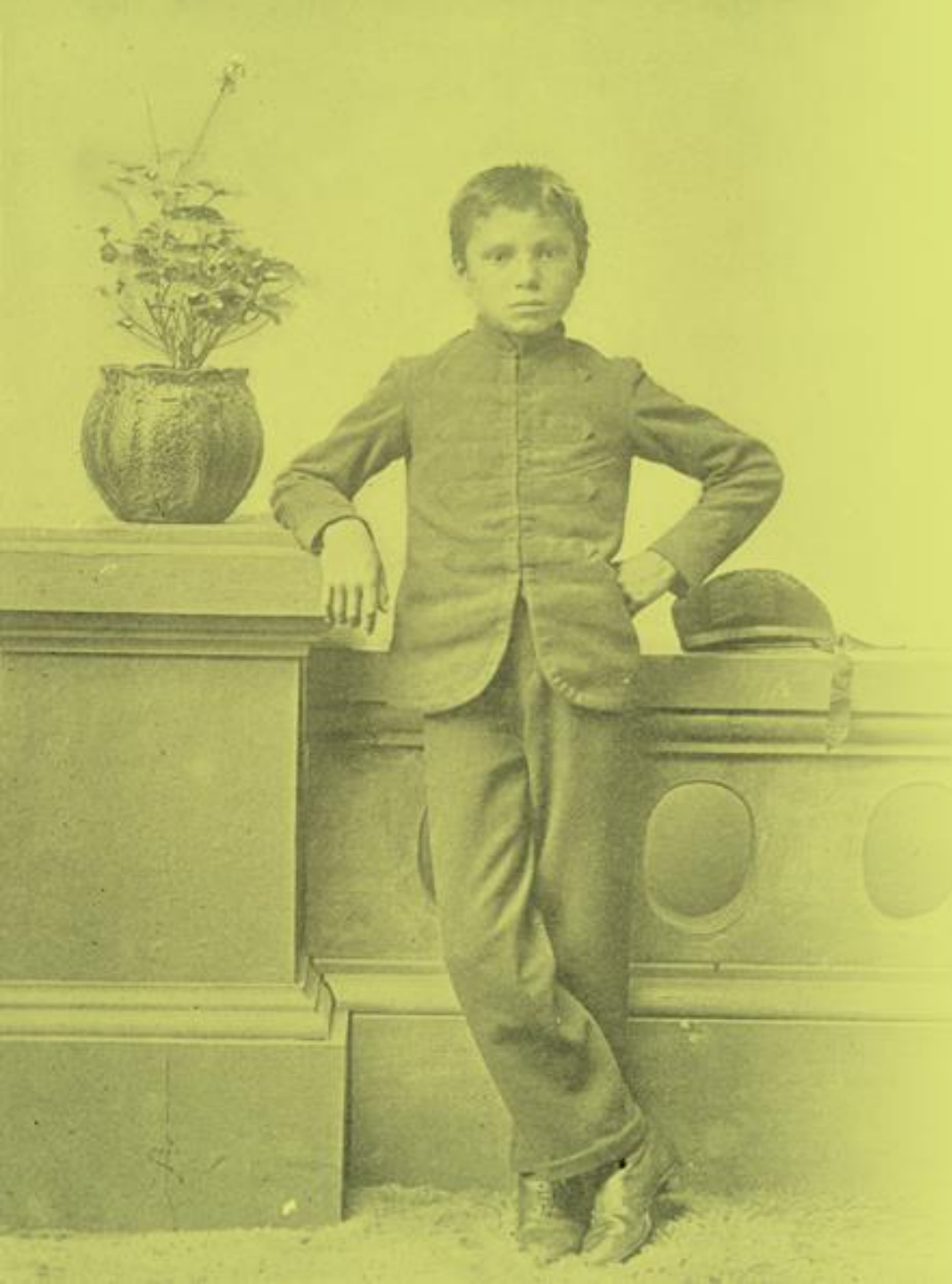
From the early 1830s to 1996, thousands of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children, some as young as four years old, were forced to attend residential schools.

Known as the Indian Residential School System, this was an attempt to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the dominant culture. These children suffered abuses of the mind, body, emotions, and spirit that have had a deep and lasting impact on the Survivors, their families, and their communities.

The Indian Residential School System in Canada: A Backgrounder

For over 300 years, European settlers and Indigenous Peoples regarded one another as distinct nations. In war, colonialists and First Nations formed alliances, and in trade each enjoyed the economic benefits of co-operation. By the mid-19th century, however, European hunger for land had increased dramatically, and the economic base of the colonies shifted from fur to agriculture. Alliances of the early colonial era gave way to direct competition for land and resources. Settlers and the government began to view Indigenous Peoples as a “problem.”





In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, summed up the government's position when he said, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. [...] Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department."

In 1844, the Bagot Commission produced one of the earliest official documents to recommend education as a means of assimilating the Indigenous population.

The commission proposed implementing a system of farm-based boarding schools situated far from parental influence, the separation of children from their parents being touted as the best means by which to sustain their civilizing effects.

- Gradual Civilization Act (1857)
- An Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians (1869),
- The Nicholas Flood Davin Report of 1879, which noted that “the industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of ‘aggressive civilization’.”





A product of the times, this report by Davin disclosed the assumptions of his era – that “Indian culture” was a contradiction in terms, Indians were uncivilized, and the aim of education must be to destroy the Indian in the child. In 1879, he returned from his tour of the United States’ Industrial Boarding Schools with a recommendation to Canada’s Minister of the Interior, John A. Macdonald, that a system of industrial boarding schools be implemented in Canada.



Although policies to manage "Indian Affairs" were being devised in Ottawa as the numbered treaties were signed across the prairies in the 1870s, it was not until 1924 that Inuit were affected by the Indian Act, and not until the mid-1950s that residential schools began to operate in the North.

For Inuit, the Indian Residential School System was but one facet of a massive and rapid sweep of cultural change that included: the introduction of Christianity; forced relocation and settlement; the slaughter of hundreds of sled dogs eliminating the only means of travel for many Inuit; the spread of tuberculosis and small-pox and the corresponding mandatory southward medical transport; the introduction of RCMP throughout the Arctic, and other disruptions to the centuries-old Inuit way of life.





Prior to the 1800s, few opportunities for formal European-based education were available to Métis children. Treaty provisions for education did not include these children, who were considered half-breeds and not Indians.

It wasn't until the Northwest Half-breed Claims Royal Commission of 1885 that the federal government addressed the issue of Métis education. The Catholic Church, already a strong presence in Métis society, began instructing Métis children in the Red River area of Manitoba in the 1800s. Despite these efforts, many Métis parents struggled to find schools that would accept their children and would often have to pay tuition for their education.

Attendance at Indian Residential School, where the use of Indigenous languages was prohibited, resulted in the erosion of an integral part of Métis culture. Indian Residential Schools profoundly affected Métis communities, a fact often overlooked in the telling of the history of residential schools in Canada.



The intent of the Indian Residential School System was to educate, assimilate, and integrate Indigenous Peoples into European-Canadian society. Effectively, it was a system designed to kill the Indian in the child.

The earliest was the Mohawk Indian Residential School, opened in 1831 in Brantford, Ontario. The schools existed in almost all provinces and territories.

At the System's peak in the early 1930s, 80 residential schools operated across Canada with an enrolment of over 17,000 students.



The Indian Residential School System, as defined by the federal government, is limited to 132 schools that operated across Canada between 1831 and 1996. This disputed definition does not represent Survivors who attended provincially-administered schools, as well as hostels and day schools.

In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, the bureaucrat in charge of Canada's Indian Policy, revised the Indian Act to make attendance at residential school mandatory for all Indigenous children up to age 15.



Very gradually, the System was discarded in favour of a policy of integration. Indigenous students began to attend mainstream schools in the 1940s.

Indian Affairs and Northern Development assumed full management of the Residential School System on April 1, 1969.

Throughout the 1970s, at the request of the National Indian Brotherhood, the federal government undertook a process that saw the eventual transfer of education management to Indigenous Peoples.

In 1971, Blue Quills residential school became the first residential school managed by Indigenous Peoples. The last federally-administered Indian Residential School closed in 1996.





Attendance at Indian Residential Schools was mandatory for Indigenous children across Canada. Many children were taken from their homes, often forcibly removed, and separated from their families by long distances.

Others who attended residential schools near their communities were often prohibited from seeing their families outside of occasional permitted visits.

Broad occurrences of disease, hunger, and overcrowding were noted by government officials as early as 1897.

Though some students have spoken of the positive experiences of Indian Residential Schools and of receiving an adequate education, the quality of education was low in comparison to non-Indigenous schools.

As late as 1950, according to an Indian Affairs study, over 40% of the teaching staff had no professional training. This is not to say that past experiences were all negative, or that the staff were all bad. Such is not the case.



First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were often separated from their parents for long periods of time and this prevented them from discovering and learning valuable parenting skills.

The removal of children from their homes also prevented the transmission of language and culture, resulting in many Indigenous Peoples who do not speak their traditional language and/or who are not familiar with their culture.





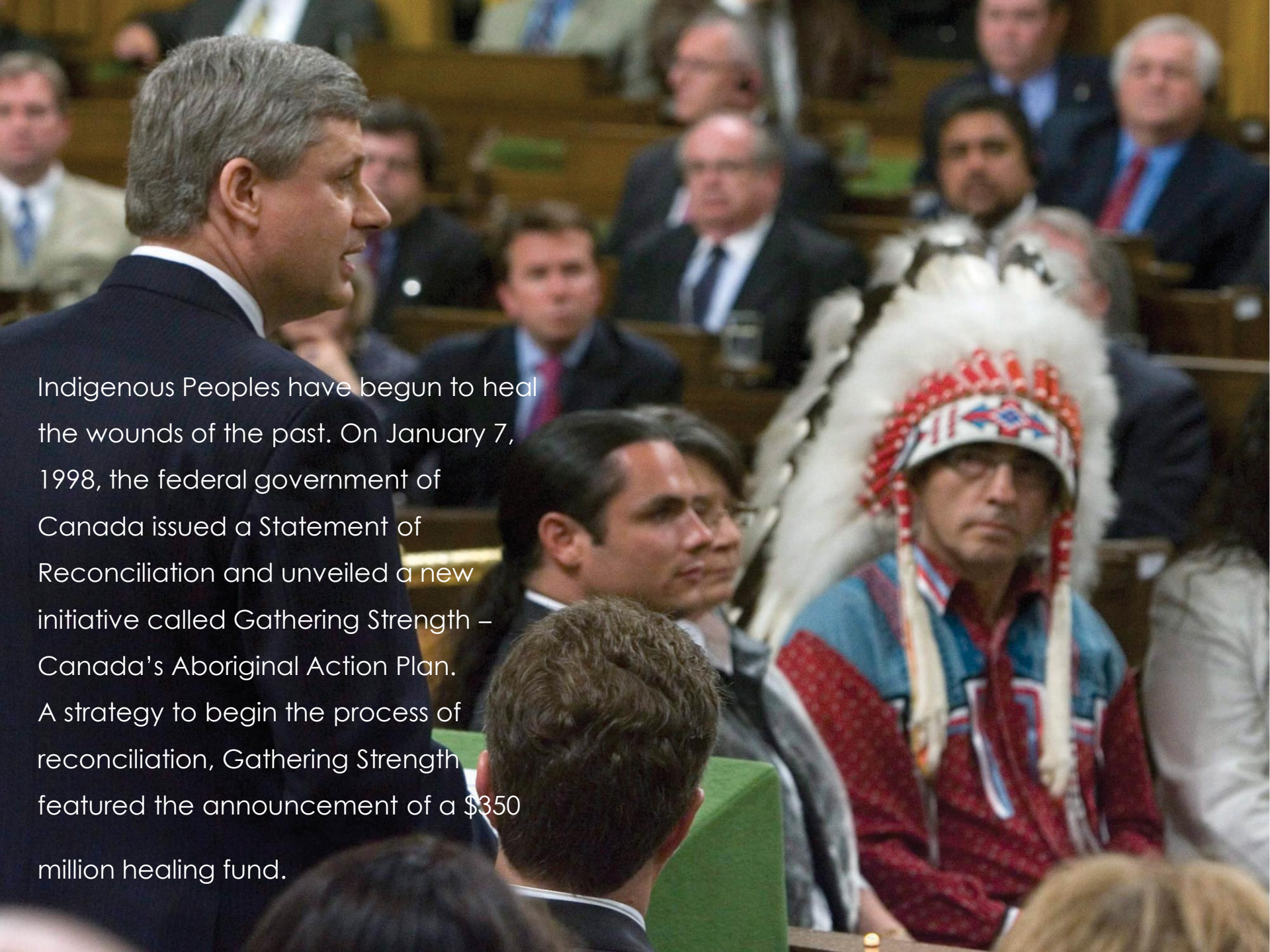
The system of forced assimilation has had consequences that continue to affect Indigenous Peoples today. The need for healing does not stop with the school Survivors: intergenerational effects of trauma are real and pervasive and must also be addressed.



In the early 1990s, beginning with Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Survivors came forward with disclosures about the physical and sexual abuse at residential schools.

Throughout the 1990s, these reports escalated and more Indigenous victims from one end of the country to the other courageously came forward with stories.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) confirmed a link between social crisis in Indigenous communities, residential schools, and the legacy of intergenerational trauma.



Indigenous Peoples have begun to heal the wounds of the past. On January 7, 1998, the federal government of Canada issued a Statement of Reconciliation and unveiled a new initiative called Gathering Strength – Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan. A strategy to begin the process of reconciliation, Gathering Strength featured the announcement of a \$350 million healing fund.

As young children, Lyna and Glen were taken from their homes and placed in church-run boarding schools. The trauma of this experience was made worse by years of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, the effects of which persist in their adult lives.

In this emotional film, the profound impact of the Canadian government's Indian Residential School System is conveyed unflinchingly through the eyes of two children who were forced to face hardships beyond their years. *We Were Children* gives voice to a national tragedy and demonstrates the incredible resilience of the human spirit.

Film producer Lisa Meeches interviewed over 700 Survivors and felt compelled to make this film to honour their truths.





Opening Activity: *Framing the Inward Journey*

We are about to hear about two Indian Residential School Survivor's life experiences and how they moved forward from that experience, including its lasting impacts and effects. This is our chance to reflect upon our own life experiences and to learn from each.

Life Experiences: What life challenges have you experienced or heard about?

Resilience: How was it overcome?

Effect: What were the lasting impacts?



What factors contributed to resilience?

Think about the caring and supportive relationships in your life.

Whom do you reach out to in your time of need?

Were the resources internal or external?

Who taught you how to deal with problems?

Who taught you how to overcome adversity?

How did you overcome the feeling of hopelessness?

Write these key words or ideas on sticky notes and post them on the wall in a resilience collage.

Old Man Stone

At the time of creation, it was Old Man Stone (Asinapewiwyin) who stepped forward to take on the role— as listener, and to hear the people.

“I sit all over the world, I hear their prayers and on behalf of the human people, I will take their prayers to Creator.”

– As expressed by Barry Ahenakew (Cree), Ahtahkakoop
Cree Nation

The Gift of Water

Water is used in all of the teaching. Water is sacred, water is cleansing, and water is the life blood of Mother Earth. Without water, there would be no life. Water binds our bodies together and in doing so, our mind and spirit. All life is bound by the sacred spirit of water. It is important when we do this work with our people, who have experienced this extreme pain, [that] we have water, as it is a sacred medicine.

- As expressed by Kathy Bird (Cree/Nakota), Peguis First Nation (Manitoba)

Screening & Viewing

Activity: *Bursts of Thoughts, Reactions and Feelings*

The subject matter of the film is difficult – personal testimonies are powerful. Emotions and memories might be triggered. This activity allows for the outward expression of pain or emotions.

The purpose of this activity is to encourage the viewer to capture any image or thought-provoking idea that they experience while watching the film.



The Gift of Silence

There will be a four-minute period of silence at the end of the film.

Within the cultural practice of the oral tradition, listening is an art, and Elders teach about the importance of silence, as explained in the following passage:

In traditional First Peoples cultures, silence has a particular value and purpose: to demonstrate respect, to train and discipline warriors and hunters, to strengthen the body and mind.

Silence also offers opportunities for personal reflection.

Each person is singularly gifted, and as they are viewing the film, each will be inundated with emotions, responses and reactions to what they have just seen or heard.

There will be tears, and the silence allows those feelings to be honoured.

The Gift of Silence:

Value the space of silence as a productive place to educate and learn. Create moments of silence to reflect, consider and contemplate the issues at hand, with dignity and grace.

- as expressed by Barb Frazer, Cree

Beauval Indian Residential School Day Student

Gift of Silence

**Dene Chanie', a path to your past.
Finding the door to the universe, the freedom
of thought**

**giving you the ability to travel
to anywhere the Spirit desires.**

**The young Child
the gift of Love to us from the Creator,
is closest to all balance of the
Natural laws.**

**Through knowing this inner
strength of this balance,
Silence brings fourth freedom, peace,
and to take on the challenges
to be resilient and awaken the inner child
to live for Today and into the Future.**

Mahsi cho

- As expressed by Francois Paulette, (Dene Suline) Smith Landing (Northwest Territories)



We have just watched the film and the viewer has been taken into the inner world of two Indian Residential School Survivors. Their words are still with us, haunting images are etched into our beings. This activity takes into account that over 150,000 First Nation, Inuit, and Métis students attended the Indian Residential Schools.

This means we have Indian Residential School Survivors among us and most certainly, anyone who is of First Nations, Inuit, or Métis ancestry will know someone or perhaps have relatives who attended these institutions.

We may never know or be aware of how many Survivors we have passed on the street. How many heroes walk amongst us?



Footprint Activity: *Heroes Who Walk Amongst Us*

As we know, many Survivors overcame their experience of Indian Residential School and rebuilt resilience and their support systems. Many have been successful, although many are still struggling. What were the children's beliefs and views before they went to school?

This activity looks at internal struggles and the impacts Indian Residential Schools had on Survivors through their lifecycle and among generations.

We Were Children

HEROES WHO WALK AMONGST US

1

What were the children's beliefs and views before they went to school?

2

How did these beliefs change in residential school? What beliefs replaced them?

3

How did these changed beliefs affect them as adults?

4

How have their beliefs affected their children and subsequent generations?

Answer these questions based on what you learned from the film.

1. What were the children's beliefs and views before they went to school?

2. How did these beliefs change in residential school? What beliefs replaced them?

3. How did these changed beliefs affect them as adults?

4. How have their beliefs affected their children and subsequent generations?



Healing

Many Survivors are making positive changes and have turned to a combination of Western therapies and traditional practices to heal. Talking circles, sweats, storytelling, ceremonies, fasts, feasts, and vision quests reconnect Survivors to their cultures and to themselves. On-the-land activities such as trapping, hunting, fishing, and gathering medicinal plants and wild foods also renew the spirit. All of these practices assist in re-enforcing and celebrating Indigenous identities.

Healing is a long-term process that occurs in stages, starting with the individual Survivor and expanding to include the whole community. The intergenerational impacts of the Indian Residential School System – the legacy of poverty, ineffective parenting, abuse, grief, and health issues – can appear throughout the entire community, not just in the lives of the Survivors.



Education is an integral part of the healing and reconciliation process. We hope you share our belief that as people learn the historical context that forms the roots of the contemporary social issues faced by many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, they can foster an environment that allows reconciliation to take place.

Closing Sharing Circle: *Looking Back Upon the Day – Sharing Our Insights*

There is a teaching in the Nuxalk territory that the sun looks back upon its day. Even the sun reflects upon the work it has done during the day when it casts a red hue upon the land. Let us apply this teaching and reflect upon what we have just witnessed in the film *We Were Children*. How do we now see our world? How can we move forward?

Guidelines for participation:

- Listen with respect
- Each person gets a chance to talk
- One person speaks at a time
- Speak only for yourself
- It is okay to disagree but speak from the heart

There is a traditional teaching in the Nuxalk territory whereby the sun looks back upon its day and upon the work it has done by casting a red hue upon the land in the spirit of reflection, used with the permission of Melvina Mack:

Looking back upon the day

*The sun journeys across the sky,
it casts one final look back, upon its work.
They say even the sun reflects upon its day,
to see if it did everything it said
it was going to do.
When those red tones and hues appear,
it is time for introspection.*

-Malvina Mack Kwalhtna (matrilineal) Nusq'lst (patrilineal) Bella Coola, Nuxyalhtimut Nation



Thank You