



Healing Circles: Implementation & Evaluation of an Intervention for Indigenous Mothers & Children Affected by Intimate Partner Violence

In Canada, Indigenous women are four times more likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV) than non-Indigenous women. These inequities need to be understood within the context of Canadian colonization and the intergenerational effects of the traumas experienced by previous generations of families and communities. Women survivors of IPV are at elevated risk for a variety of physical and psychological problems which may also impact their parenting. Children exposed to IPV are 5 to 7 times more likely to experience a wide variety of emotional and behavioral problems in the short term and over their lifetime, compared to unexposed children. They are also at greater risk of continuing the cycle of violence later in adulthood than children who have not been exposed. Effective interventions are urgently needed; unfortunately, many existing programs are not designed to meet the needs of Indigenous mothers and their children. When used without the proper cultural contexts and adaptations, interventions can inadvertently exacerbate existing traumas.

Led by Drs. Caroline Piotrowski, Nicole Letourneau, and based on the groundbreaking work of Dr. Sandra Graham-Berman on her *Moms' Empowerment Program* and *Kids' Club*, the *Healing Circles* study aims to address these issues by combining the expertise of Indigenous knowledge keepers, community members and experienced researchers to combat the negative impacts of IPV on Indigenous children and families over time. Key community partners in this project are Discovery House in Calgary, led by Monique Auffrey and Harold Pliszka, and Wahbung Abinoonjiag in Winnipeg, led by Dana Riccio-Arabe and Tina Robinson.

To our knowledge, *Healing Circles* is the first evidence-based program of its kind in Canada. The original intervention was found to be effective in many international communities (e.g., Michigan, Texas, Australia, Alaska, Sweden). The *Healing Circles* adaptation embodies a "two-eyed way of seeing" approach that combines Indigenous and Western "ways of knowing" and bridges Western science and Indigenous.

The Moms' Empowerment Program and The Kids' Club program are ten-week trauma-informed evidence-based interventions delivered simultaneously but separately to mothers and their children. For *Healing Circles*, we intend to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the MEP and KC interventions. With funding from CIHR, this adaptation has begun. Due to COVID-19, pilot testing will begin in the Fall of 2020.

The goals of this study are:

- 1) to assess the suitability of the adapted content by listening to the mothers, children, and staff who participate;
- 2) to replicate positive changes in the mental health and well-being of mothers and their children; and
- 3) to assess what Indigenous mothers need in order to stay engaged in this kind of intervention.

Once we begin implementing the program, half of the families will be randomly selected to receive the intervention immediately upon recruitment, while the other half will receive it following a waiting period. Measurements will occur immediately before and after the intervention, as well as 6-8 months post-intervention.

It is expected that the health and wellbeing of Indigenous mothers and children who participate in this program will significantly improve, both immediately and over time. In addition to this, findings from this study are projected to provide counsellors and social workers with more effective tools specifically designed to help Indigenous families.