

How the Healing of the Seven Generations Came to Be

While working in a First Peoples employment agency almost two decades ago, our Executive Director, Donna Dubie, realized that she would have difficulty placing clients in many of the positions because of their overwhelming and unresolved traumas. There were no services at the time to address the complex needs left by the legacy of the residential school system, and the community was suffering greatly. She went back to school for social work, and began envisioning specialized healing supports that would be needed to help overcome the past. In 2001, Donna applied for and was awarded a grant that saw her vision come to fruition with the opening of the Healing of the Seven Generations centre, which was incorporated as a nonprofit in 2004 (Ontario Corporation #1599390). The centre started small, and has been gradually growing to try and meet the needs of those in our community. See our [community calendar](#) or [programs](#) for more information on what's currently available.

“Traditionally, no decision was made until it was understood how it would affect the next *seven generations*.” This philosophy inspired the name of the organization, and we hope that the work we do, can help repair the lasting intergenerational effects of the residential school system and help the next seven generations onto a healing path.

Residential Schools and their Impact on First Peoples

In 1876, the government of Canada enhanced its genocidal campaign against First Peoples, creating a devastating legacy that continues to this day^[1]. Lawmakers, politicians, religious institutions, the media, and the general population labelled First Peoples as “savages”, backwards relics of the past that desperately needed to “modernize” or become more “civilized”. The eradication of First Peoples’ traditional cultural practices and languages through forced assimilation was seen as the only way to “save” these souls and make First Peoples productive members of the new industrial economy. The government believed that children would be the easiest to mold, and that the best way to mold them would be to separate them from their parents and place them into boarding schools away from their parents where they could be better prepared for the Canadian cultural reality. The results were not as hoped. Instead of integrating and assimilating, First Peoples became the most at-risk and most poorly integrated ethnic group in the country, with limited economic and societal opportunities still felt more than a century after their opening. Instead of integrating into the Canadian system, a great distrust for the government and its services grew as the oppression continued, marring the interrelations of the communities for generations.

The schools were legislated as mandatory for First Peoples between the ages of 7 and 16 years of age^[2]. As a result, some 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were forcibly removed from their parent’s homes and had their entire lives disrupted. The students often lived in substandard, unsanitary conditions and were severely neglected; some eating only grey, bug-filled “mush” for every meal^[3]. Students were

often physically, mentally, sexually, and/or culturally/spiritually abused and faced violent reprimand for speaking their mother tongues or practicing cultural traditions. **In fact, students in residential schools had a greater chance of dying than soldiers fighting during World War II**[\[4\]](#); and one in five students reported being molested or sexually assaulted while attending [\[5\]](#). Students learned to feel shame in themselves, their families, and their cultures. Their sense of self-worth and belonging in their communities was completely disrupted. They often left the schools with no where to really go, facing difficulty obtaining employment because of their ethnicity and the stereotypes that came with it, and struggling to find places to live because of discrimination. Some entered the school with no concept of money and no real understanding of individualistic societies, but now found money and competition necessary for their survival. Some no longer fully belonged in their old communities or homes; or felt as if they no longer fit in anywhere. The attachments they had to their earlier life had eroded after years away, and some even felt resentment to their parents for not protecting them. Others could no longer even remember their own languages, or were too terrified to speak them, and found themselves unable to even communicate fully with their own families. They hadn't gone through the traditional ceremonies that recognize their belonging and place in their community, and as a result, communities sometimes shunned them. Some students now looked down their noses at their old communities, after learning to hate their cultures and ways, seeing it now as "savagery". It left many students in a desperate state, with no sense of belonging, no community or support, little employment opportunity, no where to live, and an entirely damaged psyche, facing severe trauma from the abuses all on their own. Many turned to drugs and alcohol or lives of crime to simply survive. Missing a positive parenting model for the crucial stages in their lives, many struggled severely when they had their own children, as they had no frame of reference of how to discipline without abuse or care without neglect.

Scientific, Academic, Linguistic, and Cultural Losses

The schools continued for more than a century until the mid-nineteen-nineties, resulting in long-standing cultural devastation and oppression for First Peoples across the country. More than 80,000 residential school survivors still live in Canada today. This horrible legacy resulted in the extinction of hundreds of different languages and dialects and their corresponding cultural practices and knowledge, with only three languages thought to survive past this generation[\[6\]](#). Only around 15% of First Peoples are fluent in their mother tongues[\[7\]](#) and educational language programs in the province are scarce. This has been a devastating blow to humanity's body of knowledge that is only beginning to be fully realised. Language is the root of First Peoples' cultures, and much of our knowledge is contained within our stories and traditions that rely on the languages for continuity. For years, First Peoples' knowledge was dismissed as useless, a relic of the past with no relevance to the future. Researchers in many areas are now looking to the long-standing teachings, stories, and cultural traditions of First Peoples to fill in the gaps in their knowledge [\[8\]](#). Medicine wheels have been reborn as meditative and therapeutic practices [\[9\]](#), and have helped to advance more holistic medical practices through the focus on life balance instead of the relief of specific

symptomology. Ancient sites and ships labelled as “lost” are “found” thanks to the stories saved and passed on by First Peoples communities[10]. The antiseptic and antibacterial properties of smudgings [11] and the effectiveness of our traditional healing medicines and methods are being revisited by the scientific community and have inspired countless medical advances [12]. Our dispute resolution and justice methods are being hailed by legal and conflict experts as incredibly effective, and successful in lowering recidivism rates [13]. Our environmental stewardship and knowledge of land and sacred Earth balance are being explored to help reduce environmental catastrophes and slow climate change [14].

Despite significant effort to eradicate our populations and our cultures, we have persevered. First Peoples are strong, capable, and an asset to this country, the body of human knowledge, and the preservation of our global environment. Our cultural knowledge and memory is valuable but faces real extinction if an effort is not made to preserve it and pass it on to the next generations.

Lasting Intergenerational Effects

The rippling effects of the residential school system have left First Peoples as the most “at-risk” ethnic population in the country, with the highest incidences of unemployment [15], poverty [16], incarceration[17], being victims of murder/assault/or other violence [18], early mortality [19], infant mortality [20], and suicide [21], among many others. The National Health Indicator Profile released by Statistics Canada for 2011-2014 [22] found that First Peoples have higher incidences of arthritis, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, mood disorders, other chronic conditions, pain that interferes with daily activities, and respiratory problems than non-First Peoples. They are more likely to be overweight or obese, to binge drink, to smoke or be exposed to second-hand smoke; and are less likely to have a regular medical doctor, be satisfied with their lives, or to eat fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis. These statistics outpace every other ethnic group, by significant percentages in many cases. These are all indicators of severe crises that can not be easily rectified and will require a comprehensive and holistic approach over a sustained period to make real and lasting change.

Researchers have evidence that massive generational trauma, such as the genocidal policies enacted against the First Peoples of Canada, can potentially be passed down epigenetically for over a dozen generations, literally altering the genetic instructions of a family’s DNA for centuries [23]. Studies done on the descendants of Holocaust survivors, for example, show that they frequently have lower levels of the hormone cortisol, which helps your body bounce back after trauma, even through three and four generations. There have been limited studies on the medical and genetic effects of the residential school system on First Peoples, but a recent article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal suggests that chronic hunger and malnutrition, which was central to the experiences of residential school survivors, is a contributing factor to First Peoples having a higher risk for obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic

conditions [\[24\]](#). The authors reference studies that followed famines in China, Russia, and the Netherlands that show chronic hunger and malnutrition led to hormone changes, greater insulin sensitivity, lower insulin levels, chronic diseases, fertility issues (stillbirths), and made individuals more prone to develop Type 2 diabetes, with effects lasting several generations. The residential school legacy then, is not only lasting emotionally, it is physically and potentially even genetically affecting First Peoples' communities, likely for generations to come.

Continued Oppression

Sadly, many policies continue to devastate First Peoples in our country, specifically those in the child welfare and justice systems. The legacy of removing children from their homes, for instance, continues to this day. The *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* from 2013 found that First Peoples children in the Province of Ontario are 130 per cent more likely to be investigated as victims of child abuse or neglect than Caucasian children, 15 per cent more likely to have maltreatment confirmed, and 168 per cent more likely than Caucasians to be taken from their homes and placed into protective care [\[25\]](#). This is significantly greater than every other ethnic group in the country. In fact, nearly half of the children in protective care in this country are of First Peoples' heritage, despite representing only around 4-10% of the overall population [\[26\]](#). These numbers reveal the desperate need for more adequate social supports as a preventive measure. Removing children, after the fact, only continues this desperate cycle, creating more adults with low self-esteem and self-confidence, attachment issues, lack of culture, and traumatic long-lasting psychological effects.

First Peoples continue to face oppression in Canada on many fronts, significantly impacting their quality of life and their families' sense of belonging and well-being. The Ontario Human Rights Commission [\[27\]](#) found in 2017 that First Peoples face significant discrimination in policing and justice practices, and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal [\[28\]](#) ruled that the Government of Canada (including Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada) racially discriminates against First Peoples children. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner has spoken out about the inequitable and inadequate responses of the Government of Canada to the plight of First Peoples [\[29\]](#). First Peoples are 2.1 times more likely to be unemployed, have a median income that is only 60% of the national average, are 10 times more likely to be incarcerated, 6.1 times more likely to be killed in a homicide, 2.3 times more likely to die in infancy, 2.7 times more likely to drop out of school, and live significantly shorter lives than non-First Peoples [\[30\]](#).

What Can Be Done?

We cannot change the past, but we can change our future. The Healing of the Seven Generations hopes to help reconnect individuals affected by the residential school legacy to their stolen cultures, languages, and traditions. We want to give them a safe

space to learn traditional stories, songs, crafts, teachings, and have a community of support that they can turn to when they need it. We want to help them access the supports and healing tools they need to not only survive, but to thrive. Our community is strong, resilient, resourceful, and intelligent and we want to see those skills reach their full potential.

If you are suffering from the inter-generational effects of the residential school system, please check out our [Programs](#) section or come in to 300 Frederick St and talk to one of our staff about how we can assist you.

Resources:

Read more...

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[2] From 1884 to 1908, compulsory attendance was legislated for children between 7 and 16 years of age (TRCC 2015). This changed in 1908 to children between 6 and 15 years of age. Compulsory attendance officially ended in 1948, though coercive government policies ensured continued attendance until the schools' closure.

[3] The Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, the school many of our community members or their families attended, was nicknamed the "Mush Hole" by students because of the low-quality, mushy oatmeal served for every meal. Evidence elicited through community sharing circles, interviews, and TRCC documentation.

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