Inuit Children with Special Needs: Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators
“We do have children with special needs and we do not have the services for them. They are discriminated against — we do not give them the proper services that they should have.” – Nunavut Elder
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Acronyms and Terminology

**AHS**: Aboriginal Head Start is an early childhood development (ECD) program funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (for Inuit communities). It supports early intervention strategies to address the learning and developmental needs of young children living in First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities.

**Administrator**: Childcare centre director, manager or operator

**Childcare Centre**: Daycares and Aboriginal Head Start Programs typically responsible for children aged 0-5 years old.

**Early Childhood Educator**: A teacher and caregiver who works with children in a childcare centre.

**ECD**: Early Childhood Development

**ECE**: Early Childhood Education

**ECE (Early Childhood Education) Level 1**: Usually a one year certificate in early childhood development from a recognized post secondary institution. (1 year)

**ECE (Early Childhood Education) Level 2**: A two year diploma in early childhood development from a recognized post secondary institution or a one year program taken upon completion of the ECE Level 1. (2 years)

**FASD**: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

**IECDWG**: Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group. Made up of representatives from the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut (Qikiqtaaluk, Kivalliq, Kitikmeot), Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. It was created in 2001 to provide a forum for Inuit to discuss Inuit early childhood development resources, priorities, policies, issues and concerns. ITK is the secretariat for this working group.

**ITK**: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is a national Aboriginal organization responsible for promoting Inuit interests and challenges on a wide variety of environmental, social, cultural, and political issues.

**Inuit Language**: Term used to describe all dialects of the Language spoken among Inuit, including Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, Inuvaluktun and Inuttutit.

**Inuit Nunangat**: Term used to describe the collective Inuit homeland in Canada encompassing the land, water and ice of the four Inuit land claim regions (Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut).

**Special Needs**: “Children who require additional public or private resources beyond those normally required to support healthy development. This definition includes children who require additional resources because of exceptional gifts and talents, physical, sensory, cognitive and learning challenges, mental health issues as well as problems due to social, cultural, linguistic or family factors.”

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1. Introduction

In 2004, ITK and the Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group (IECDWG) developed an Inuit Early Childhood Development Strategy (IECDS). The IECDS focuses on the development, health and safety of Inuit children across Inuit Nunangat.

One of the primary goals of the IECDS is “to ensure that resources and infrastructure are readily available so that Inuit children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential.” However, there is little research which outlines the gaps and challenges that Inuit children with special needs, their families and caregivers experience.

In a 2005 Inuit Early Learning and Childcare Discussion Paper, ITK noted the following gaps and areas of need: training required for early childhood educators and centre staff to support children with special needs; human resources to support children that require extra attention; lack of diagnosis; a general lack of awareness of special needs among children; and more support for children with FASD.

In response to the need for further research, ITK, in partnership with the IECDWG, whose membership includes the six Inuit Regional Childcare Coordinators and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, developed an Inuit-specific special needs project in 2007 to assess the current situation.

This report presents the results of questionnaires completed in 2008 at childcare centres by administrators and educators in Inuit communities. It also offers an initial understanding of special needs and the challenges that exist within Inuit Nunangat. Finally, it provides Inuit-specific recommendations from administrators and early childhood educators who work daily to enhance the lives of Inuit children.

Figure 1: This map depicts the four Inuit Regions of Canada: The Inuvialuit Settlement Region in the Northwest Territories, the territory of Nunavut, Nunavik in northern Quebec, and Nunatsiavut in northern Labrador. The dots represent the 53 communities. Source: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

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2. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed by the IECDWG and distributed by e-mail and fax to childcare centres throughout Inuit Nunangat. The questionnaire consisted of both qualitative and quantitative questions and was available in English and Inuktitut. Information regarding the project was provided to respondents prior to completing the questionnaire. Respondents also signed and returned a consent form. The consent forms indicated that communities would not be identified in any materials resulting from the project as its small sample size could potentially disclose identity.

Childcare administrators and early childhood educators were asked to fill out and return the questionnaire based on their experience working in childcare centres. Responses were collected throughout 2008. A total of 50 respondents (administrators and educators) completed the questionnaire, representing 18 of 63 childcare facilities in Inuit Nunangat.

A breakdown by Inuit region of the completed questionnaires is provided in Table 1. Due to the limited time span, the number of questionnaires returned was fewer than the total number of childcare centres in each region.

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed in 2008 and 2010. The purpose of the secondary analysis (2010) was to gather more conclusive recommendations for the purpose of developing this report. Rather than a collection of baseline evidence, the results of the analysis represent an initial perspective from a small sample.

Table 1: Completed Questionnaires by Inuit region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Childcare Facilities</th>
<th>Total Childcare Facilities in each Region (Daycares and Aboriginal Head Start programs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inuvialuit</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitikmeot</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kivalliq</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qikiqtaaluk</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunavik</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunatsiavut</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Findings

During the secondary analysis, the results of the questionnaires were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Following a review of all responses, common and/or similar answers were categorized by theme. The themes were determined by consensus and were cross-verified by two independent analysts.

The majority of responses were categorized under three themes: training, screening and assessment tools, and resources and materials. This section is structured according to these themes and includes observations of the current situation of special needs in Inuit childcare centres. Recommendations related to these themes are also provided.

3.1 Theme One: Training

Respondents were asked a number of questions related to training. The results of five of these questions are summarized below.

Focus of Special Needs Training

From a list of training types, respondents selected “Identification of Special Needs” as the most critical training requirement. More than half of the respondents also listed the following types of training as important:

- Working with Parents
- Strategies for Inclusion
- Providing Appropriate Curriculum
- Using Screening and Assessment Tools

Best Training Experiences

“The best training I had was learning how to handle the children with special needs.”

Twenty-three respondents answered the question, What was the best training experience you have had? Respondents identified types of special needs specific training, including: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and autism workshops, speech and language development, and training in screening and assessment tools. Other responses included CPR certification, national workshops, and early childhood development training.

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What Made the Training Good
Respondents were asked to explain why the training they received was so effective. A majority of respondents noted that the level of success depended upon the training delivery model. General comments regarding successful training included: practicality, hands-on teaching methods, sharing of personal experiences, and one-on-one training.

Many respondents also identified training outcomes as key to evaluating success. These respondents identified that they were able to take what they had learned and apply it in their childcare centres.

Training Challenges
“We have never had any special needs training in the eight and a half years that I have been here. We have just dealt with the children as they come along.”

Challenges regarding training emerged frequently throughout the analysis. Both administrators and educators spoke of a lack of training opportunities in their community and region, little or no special needs training, and a scarcity of good training experiences.

General Recommendations for Training
When asked to identify aspects of a supportive and useful training experience, respondents provided a variety of answers. More than half of the respondents said there was a need to have more local training and more trained educators. Further, they said, special needs training and special needs educators need to be available in centres on a regular basis.

The quality of the instructor and format of the training experience were also described as important, as were use of the Inuit language, better and more resources, and a consistent teamwork environment.

3.2 Theme Two: Screening and Assessment Tools

Use of Screening and Assessment Tools
There are several screening and assessment tools used in Canada to assess children’s development and whether they may have a special need. Thirty-nine or 78% of respondents said that their childcare centre used one of the following tools: Nipissing, Ages and Stages, Brigance or Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale. Of those, 77% indicated they used the Ages and Stages Tool. A brief description of these tools is provided in Table 2.

Conducting the Screening and Assessment
When asked who conducts the screening and assessment in their childcare centre, approximately 50% of respondents said that it is carried out by an educator. Some 25% of the assessments were said to be conducted by an administrator. One respondent said a specialist6 conducted the assessment, whereas an overwhelming majority of respondents (36) indicated that specialists were not involved.

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6 A specialist is generally referred to as a professional who is qualified to assess and support children with special needs (i.e. Pediatrician, Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, etc.).
Table 2: Description of Screening and Assessment Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Nipissing District Developmental Program (NDDP)</strong></td>
<td>An Ontario-based program that examines 13 key developmental stages and explores a child’s skills in the following areas: vision, hearing, speech, language, communication, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social/emotional and self-help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)</strong></td>
<td>An American tool for screening children aged one to 5½ for developmental and social-emotional delays in the early years of life. ASQ looks at strengths and trouble spots, educates parents about developmental milestones, and incorporates parents’ knowledge about their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development</strong></td>
<td>An individually administered test that evaluates the development of children up to age 7. It is often used to identify children with developmental delays, aid in designing individualized educational programs for them, and monitor progress over a period of time. The test evaluates the following skills, in the order in which they are developed: preambulatory, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, pre-speech, speech and language, general knowledge, readiness, basic reading, manuscript writing, and basic math skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS-R)</strong></td>
<td>Designed to assess group programs for preschool and kindergarten-aged children, from 2 through 5 years of age. This scale is designed to assess process quality in an early childhood or school-age care group. Process quality consists of the various interactions that go on in a classroom between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, among the children themselves, and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in the environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 BNET. Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_q2602/is_0001/ai_2602000108/
General Recommendations on Appropriate Screening and Assessment Tools

“Ask the Elders what they used to do with people with special needs, then apply [those answers].”

More than two-thirds of respondents provided a recommendation regarding the development of screening and assessment tools more appropriate for Inuit. The range of recommendations was broad but several themes emerged, including the need for Inuit-specific tools and culturally relevant materials. For example, one respondent stated that assessment materials should be available in the Inuit language and should include Arctic landscapes and animals, traditional images and geographic references that Inuit children can relate to.

“We need Inuktitut screening tools. For instance, we don’t see snakes, use tractors, or alphabets. We use Inuktitut syllabics.”

Other recommendations regarding appropriate and relevant screening and assessment tools for Inuit children included:

- More training on Inuit-specific screening and assessment tools
- Tools need to be available and accessible in order to be effective
- Tools should be in an easy-to-use format and include pictures
- A teamwork approach should be used when conducting screening and following up with the family

3.3 Theme Three: Resources and Materials

Understanding the Needs of Children

When asked, What information do educators require to better understand the needs of children in their care?, more than half of the respondents said that knowing the child’s history and background was the most critical factor in understanding that child’s needs.

“Work with the parents and understand the child with the help of the parents.”

Other factors included, having an awareness of early childhood developmental stages and different special needs.

Available Resources for Educators

Only 6 educators (or 17% of respondents) said that they had readily available resources to meet the needs of the children in their care. Sixteen educators said that they received information from others, including: nurses, occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, physiotherapists, doctors, community health representatives and Elders.
General Recommendations for Resources and Materials
Recommendations to better equip educators to understand the needs of children in their care included:

- Greater use of the Inuit language
- More training for educators
- More teamwork and cross disciplinary approaches among staff within centres as well as across centres

3.4 Suggestions from Respondents

“[We need] Inuktitut educational material, as well as more specialists that are willing to work with daycare centres to diagnose children with special needs. There are so many undiagnosed children who are not getting what they need for a good start to their lives.”

Numerous suggestions regarding the overall care of Inuit children in Inuit Nunangat were provided. Some 86% of respondents commented on the importance of providing a supportive, inclusive, and consistent environment for all Inuit children.

Fifty per cent of respondents expressed a need for additional training and more trained educators. These respondents also identified a need for special needs training and support for special needs educators.

Nearly a third of respondents identified the need for improved support networks (with parents and with the community), including increased communication between educators, parents and the child.

To help ensure and maintain an inclusive and consistent environment for all Inuit children, numerous respondents described a need for more culturally relevant, regionally specific and linguistically appropriate resources. Respondents also consistently articulated a need for regular access to specialists, including speech language pathologists. Other suggestions from respondents included:

- Better and more frequent diagnosis of special needs
- Specific rooms in childcare centres designated as special needs resource room
- More Inuit staff in centres
- Better facilities/more space
- Increased wages
- More Elder involvement

Finally, it was expressed by numerous respondents that there is not enough funding and that greater investment in Inuit childcare centres is required.
4. Limitations

A number of limitations became apparent during the development of this report, including: the duration of the data collection component of the project, the length of the questionnaire, and the confusion that resulted from some of the questions asked. Responses showed that some questions were redundant or that there was confusion regarding the question itself.

Another limitation was that the questionnaire did not ask why specific screening and assessment tools were used or whether they were culturally appropriate for Inuit. As a result, the IECDWG has expressed a need for further research in this area.

Despite these limitations, the outcomes of this report highlight key priorities and recommendations regarding the care of Inuit children with special needs. Childcare centre administrators and early childhood educators had an opportunity to speak about their experiences and identify research needs and gaps for further study.
5. Summary of Recommendations

“The way of life in the North is different than the South and it needs to be taken into consideration. Access to professionals is much easier in the South. Up here they need referrals and they take forever, no matter what it is for.”

This section highlights the results and recommendations presented throughout this report. In particular, it draws on the insightful recommendations provided by the respondents. In order to build on the programs and partnerships already in place, the following is recommended:

To better support Inuit children with special needs:

- Ongoing training for educators, administrators, parents and caregivers (at community and regional levels) that meets the needs of children.
- Training that is practical, hands-on, and includes personal experiences.
- Additional staff at childcare centres dedicated to working with children who require extra support.
- Increased investment and funding for childcare centre to support children with special needs and their families.
- Further training specific to screening and assessment for educators and administrators as they are ideally placed to do assessments.
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate Inuit-specific screening and assessment tools, and ongoing training in how to use these tools.
- Increased access to specialists and professional support such as speech language pathologists, occupational therapists and doctors.
- A greater support network and greater communication between parents/caregivers, educators and the community to ensure that children with special needs are achieving their full potential.

To better support childcare centres in Inuit communities:

- More training and ongoing professional development for administrators and educators.
- More Inuit staff hired at childcare centres in the full range of positions.
- More certified educators with ECE Level 1 and 2.
- Better infrastructure and more space for childcare centres.
- Increased wages for educators.
- Better and more up to date equipment and resources available in centres.

It is evident from these recommendations that training for staff of childcare centres is crucial — this message was consistently identified throughout the project. More investment and support for cultural relevant training is urgently needed.
Based on these recommendations, the IECDWG recognizes the need for a multidisciplinary approach when providing care to children with a special need. Further, the IECDWG recommends all stakeholders, including: early childhood educators, administrators, health and social services workers and/or health board staff, doctors, specialists, parents/caregivers, and child and youth family services sign a written agreement. This agreement would commit all parties to ensuring that each child is given the care and support he or she needs to achieve his or her full potential.

Partnerships with health and social services and/or the health board are essential in order to reach children who may not be placed in childcare centres.

The IECDWG also recommends that a comprehensive project be completed. This project should take into account current literature, regional and national data on diagnosis and treatment, and relevant policies regarding Inuit children with special needs.
6. Conclusions

There is limited research that summarizes the challenges Inuit families and early childhood educators experience when providing care to children with special needs. This project provides insight into the obstacles that early childhood educators face and provides recommendations they feel will help other educators, childcare centres and ultimately the lives of the Inuit children in their communities.

Culturally and linguistically appropriate screening and assessment tools for Inuit are desperately needed to effectively support Inuit children throughout Inuit Nunangat. Additional research is required to gain an accurate picture of the rates of diagnosis regionally and nationally. Further, more information regarding policy on special needs and the most effective ways of supporting Inuit children and their families is needed.

All parties must work harder and in collaboration to ensure that resources and infrastructures are readily available to ensure that “all Inuit children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential and to live happy, healthy and safely.”

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Works Cited


BNET. Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development. Retrieved November 2010, from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2602/is_0001/ai_2602000108/.


