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RROWING TOGETHER

NEWS & RESOURCES FOR THE BC FIRST NATIONS HEAD START ON-RESERVE PROGRAM



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(LEFT) VANESSA CARDINAL AND SON PHOENIX; (RIGHT) KIA7A CELESTINE SEARS WITH GRANDMA PUPPET.

Grandmas, Babies & Immersion

IN THE COZY ATMOSPHERE OF THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ROOM at the Splat-sin Child Care Center, eight Kia7as (grandmothers) come together several times a week to share language and love with Splat-sin babies and toddlers.

This new “Baby Immersion” pilot program grew out of a once-a-week hour-long language program for babies that

Splat-sin had already tried. With ageing Elders and an ever-decreasing window of opportunity for the language to be passed from Elders to the next generation, Splat-sin staff have been actively researching and exploring different language learning methods for a number of years to ensure that their language is not lost.

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(RIGHT) CEASAR RIVERA, KIA7A VIOLET MAXIME, AND KIA7A MARIE THOMAS

Cultural and Language Program Coordinator Rosalind Williams says that ever since the beginning, much of Splatsin's program development has been done with an eye toward immersion one day. "From everything we've learned, 'immersion' is the key to language retention. Immersion is language in a 'free flowing' state and as close to how language is authentically transmitted from one generation to the next as we can hope to get. The next best thing would be to move in with a fluent speaker for five years and stop speaking English for the duration."

When they first started out, Splatsin made every Monday a language and cultural day to emphasize the importance of language and culture. They held fast to making sure that no other activities interfered with Monday language days. Now they have three dedicated language days per week and are working on the fourth.

SPLATSIN KIA7AS (GRANDMOTHERS) COME TOGETHER AT THE CENTRE THREE TIMES A WEEK to develop curriculum and to document and teach the language. There are programs for infants, toddlers, 3 – 5-year olds and for some younger women who are being mentored to become language teachers. With the pilot Baby Immersion program, one of the three days was devoted wholly to immersion activities with babies.

The immersion environment is different than a standard ECE setting. Instead of play centers, there is comfortable furniture for Kia7as to sit on and there are displays of current themes being worked on, Support materials for language activities are brought into the room as each new activity takes place, and are removed when the activity is completed.

When the Baby Immersion first got

started, staff accompanied the babies to the Kia7as Language and Cultural room. When the children needed something, the children naturally tended to turn first to staff, and an opportunity for them to interact in the language with the grandmothers was being lost. The grandmothers also felt that with staff present, it might be seen as interference on their part if they responded to a child. So staff and grandmothers decided to experiment with having fewer licensed staff present, so the Kia7as could interact directly with the children when they needed something. It worked! Children who were previously apprehensive or shy with the grandmothers quickly became comfortable with the Kia7as. They figured out that Kia7as had a good stash of yummy, healthy snacks, and they knew the cupboard where the goodies are kept. They knew that by taking a Kia7a by the hand and pointing to the cupboard, a treat was sure to follow!



During Baby Immersion time, Kia7as, through doll play, expose the children to a rich array of language that would be used in real life situations. There are Kia7a (grandmother) and Selá7a

(grandpa) dolls and their dog, "Buster." Buster has his own dog dishes for water and "dog food." For example, Kia7as might use the language the way one might use it playing with a dog, teaching the children that it is dangerous to go near a dog when he is eating. Other doll figures include "Joe," a hunter, boys and girls, a baby doll that crawls, and numerous stuffed animals, birds and fish.

Physical games, numbers, singing and drumming, and changing babies follow doll play time. For example, a hat collection is used to learn numbers, stacking the hats on a child's or Kia7a's head to see how many can be stacked before they all fall over! The words for passing the hat (or other item)

LENA BELL



Kia7as. He insists on picking up the dog and carrying him over and placing him by her feet every time we bring the dog into play!”

THERE ARE DEFINITELY CHALLENGES. “It is hard for some of the Elders to hear and participate at all times because of hearing problems. Sometimes the Kia7as are not feeling well and need to rest rather than participate. It is hard having an empty spot to

deal with when one of the Kia7as passes on... the children, staff and fellow Kia7as all feel the void. We have a pact that when the time comes for one of us to pass on, those remaining will have a cry, have a lunch in honor, and carry on with our language work; this has been our greatest challenge.”

Rosalind cares deeply about language revitalization and has been a catalyst for her community. She has tried a number of approaches. “‘Immersion’ is a new/old concept and we have to find our way through it all. Our task is to recreate an environment as close to the natural environment that language immersion occurred in, but to do this in a child care facility, and in a world that is sometimes quite different from the one our language resource people are most familiar with.... We hope to keep finding the resources to keep an immersion program going. There are very real expenses including transporting the Elders, feeding them and taking care of their needs. We had to try some things to find out that they didn’t work, and then we saw how to improve on them.”

She says they looked at various immersion models and that for their particular circumstances, what they are delivering is what works for them. She emphasizes that people have to do what works for them because everyone’s set-up and resources are different.

to the next person are incorporated in this play. During “diapering time,” the most agile Kia7as each take one baby to diaper and there is a group baby changing session. At nap time, staff come and take the babies to the nap room and the Kia7as have some quiet time during their lunch hour.

Whether the play between children and grandmothers is with dolls, dogs, birds, or other animals, all the characters come to life and talk to one another through the grandmothers. The games change and the physical activities change, but immersion in the language is constant. Says Rosalind, “The language is being deposited and banked for future spending by some soon-to-be very wealthy recipients!”

ONE THING THAT MAKES THE BABY IMMERSION SPECIAL FOR THE GRANDMOTHERS is that they find it easier to use the language with babies and very young children because the little ones do not speak much English yet, so they mimic and pronounce the Secwepemc words perfectly and naturally. “They don’t challenge you with the English name, like some of the preschool age group do!—“Him’s not a ‘sqaxa’, him’s a dog!”

“The children make the grandmothers laugh with their antics. One child insists the stuffed dog belongs to only one of the

Learning our language is not a quick drive-through. There is no such thing as ‘McLanguage’. Make a commitment to be in it for the long haul and to celebrate every inch of success along the way.

—Rosalind Williams





BACK, L TO R:
TERESA JENSEN, MARION LEE, JUALIANNA
ALEXANDER, MARIE THOMAS, ROSALIND WILLIAMS.

FRONT, L TO R:
LENA BELL, LENA PAUL, MARIE DAVID, LOUISE
WILLIAM, EMMELINE FELIX, CELESTINE SEARS,
VIOLET MAXIME.

“If programs are thinking about immersion, there are a few things we have learned. Have a dedicated space where you can grow your language and cultural program. Make language and cultural programs a priority, with lots of dedicated development time. Identify the fluent speakers in your community and identify the younger ones who are interested in learning and who know how to work with both Elders and with children (most of the leg work will fall to them).

Identify the space where you will grow your program and begin to create a comfortable environment for the Elders and children that is clutter-free, so the focus is on language activity. Identify some topics to talk about and create some props (dolls, puppets, stuffed animals, etc.) for those topics so the children can participate in the conversation. Identify some games to play in the language. Identify some menus to plan to feed everyone. Set up a flexible schedule. And be prepared to work hard and have some fun!”

ROSALIND ENCOURAGES PEOPLE TO LOOK WITHIN THEIR OWN ENVIRONMENT FOR RESOURCE MATERIALS.

“What are the stories that live in your area? We all have some. What new stories, based on today time, can be made up? What are some traditional plants and how are they used? What do people eat, what are the foods called, how are the foods prepared? Collect puppets, felt boards, stuffed animals, hats, shoes, rocks, things that make sounds.... Your curriculum can be as inexpensive or as expensive as you allow it to be. Be resourceful! Most childcare workers live by this mantra already!”

Rosalind Williams is the Language and Cultural Program Coordinator at the Splatsin Child Care Center (Enderby).

ACTIVITY

FOR OLDER BABIES, 9 - 12 MONTHS

What Do You Feel?

Put several objects with different textures in a large container. You might put in: scraps of satin, velvet, sandpaper, two-sided sticky tape, bubble wrap, a smooth pebble, a rough rock, and so on. Take one item out of the pot and let baby feel it with his fingers. Place it next to his cheek. Tell him how it feels. “This pebble feels smooth.” Give it to baby and invite him to put it back in the container. Repeat with other objects, naming them and then showing and telling baby how each one feels.

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