



Empowering Indigenous Communities Through Life Skills:

Case Study

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EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES THROUGH LIFE SKILLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study serves as a valuable resource for our clients, highlighting our deep understanding and appreciation of the challenges faced by Indigenous communities. It offers meaningful insights into the proactive measures we have implemented to address these challenges effectively.

At the heart of our mission is a steadfast commitment to equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive. By empowering individuals to achieve success and foster a life of wellness and balance, we contribute to strengthening the resilience and vitality of Indigenous communities.

“I WOULD STRONGLY RECOMMEND REACH TORONTO FOR YOUR PROGRAMMING NEEDS AS IT WOULD BE A GREAT BENEFIT TO YOUR COMMUNITY AT ALL LEVELS AND AGES”
LISA GEROUX, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SHAWANAGA FIRST NATION HEALING CENTER

WHO WE ARE

For over 12 years, Reach Toronto has been committed to delivering personalized life skills programs that empower diverse groups, families, and individuals. Through our Life Skills Centre and remote initiatives, we strive to foster personal growth and strengthen the foundations of resilient, thriving communities.

Our programs are thoughtfully designed to be flexible, ensuring they meet the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of the communities we serve. In particular, our Four Pillars Life Skills Program is tailored to address the specific challenges and aspirations of Indigenous communities. Additionally, we work closely with each community to adapt and customize our programs to align with their distinct learning needs and life circumstances. Our clients include esteemed organizations such as the Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, and various First Nation communities, alongside countless individuals and families who benefit from our expertise and dedication.



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THE PEOPLE BEHIND REACH TORONTO

At Reach Toronto, our leadership and training are guided by Mary Salerno and Bo Forbes, both of whom have extensive expertise in Psychology and Behavioral Science. Supported by our dedicated and knowledgeable staff, we bring a wealth of experience to every initiative we undertake. Our direct work within First Nation communities has offered invaluable firsthand insights into their unique needs and challenges, shaping our understanding and approach. Our methodology is experiential, inclusive, and deeply rooted in everyday life. By embracing these principles, we have successfully developed innovative programs that inspire meaningful and lasting positive change in the lives of those we serve.

"I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO START. BO AND MARY PROVIDE AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE TO ALL PARTICIPANTS. THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS AT WORKING WITH ALL AGES IS FANTASTIC. ALL PARTICIPANTS HAVE ENJOYED THEMSELVES IMMENSELY IN THE PROGRAM THAT THEY OFFER. I AM SO GLAD TO HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH THEM."

SUSAN WHEATLEY
CHILD & FAMILY COORDINATOR
SHAWANAGA FIRST NATION HEALING CENTRE

CHALLENGES

Food: Indigenous communities face unique and multifaceted challenges that significantly impact their well-being. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure are increasingly prevalent. Among children and youth, alarming rates of obesity and food-related illnesses are observed. Several factors contribute to these issues, including the remoteness of communities, elevated food costs, limited access to fresh and nutritious foods, inadequate nutritional education, and financial constraints.

Financial Literacy: Indigenous communities continue to feel the effects of systemic inequities that persist today. Many of these communities lack sufficient access to financial institutions. The transition to electronic banking has introduced further challenges, including limited digital access, technology literacy barriers, increase in fraudulent activity, and cultural differences. Equally important is the influx of funds to Indigenous families and the lack of financial literacy needed to manage and invest these resources effectively. These obstacles can make budgeting and money management more difficult.



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CHALLENGES

Entrepreneurship: The growth of Indigenous businesses is essential for the economic empowerment of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. By fostering entrepreneurship, these businesses create jobs, generate income, and drive economic activity within their communities. They also serve as a powerful means of cultural expression, incorporating traditional knowledge, art, and practices into their products and services. However, numerous challenges hinder this progress. Many Indigenous entrepreneurs face limited access to capital and funding opportunities, as well as a shortage of financial institutions in their regions. Additionally, gaps in business skills and knowledge—such as navigating legal requirements, marketing, financial management, sales, and human resources—can make it difficult to transform ideas into successful enterprises. Addressing these barriers is crucial to unlocking the full potential of Indigenous businesses and supporting sustainable development in their communities.

Living Independently: Indigenous youths striving to move out of their parents' homes often face a unique set of challenges rooted in historical, social, and economic factors. A significant barrier is the limited financial literacy needed to budget effectively and manage living expenses. High costs of rent, utilities, and groceries add further strain, making independent living difficult to navigate.

For those pursuing education, juggling the demands of work and study can be overwhelming. Living away from home may also lead to feelings of isolation, as they miss the sense of belonging provided by community events, gatherings, and ceremonies. This underscores the importance of finding alternative sources of emotional support to maintain mental well-being.

Moreover, many young people may lack essential life skills such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, scheduling, and prioritization, having relied on their parents for these tasks. These skills are critical for fostering independence and ensuring both physical and mental health in their transition to self-sufficiency.



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SOLUTIONS

Our programs play a crucial role in educating children and families on health, nutrition, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial empowerment. With a strong focus on addressing the persistent challenges faced by Indigenous communities, these initiatives aim to create meaningful and lasting impact.

The Four Pillars Program was specifically developed to respond to these challenges, offering a holistic, hands-on approach that fosters practical learning and personal growth. By integrating real-world applications with culturally relevant strategies, our programs empower participants to build stronger, more resilient communities.

“I AM WAY MORE CONFIDENT IN THE KITCHEN NOW. MY KNIFE SKILLS HAVE IMPROVED SO MUCH I’VE REDUCED MY PREP TIME IN HALF. I AM NOW BULK-COOKING AND FREEZING MEALS FOR MY FAMILY. I HAVE LEARNED SO MANY TIPS AND TRICKS TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE AND SAVE MONEY SHOPPING”.

ROB MELLICK - PARENT
MITAANJIGAMIING FIRST NATION

Food: Our programs are designed to equip participants with essential skills for shopping, cooking, and eating in ways that are both nutritious and economical. Recognizing the significantly higher food costs in Indigenous communities, we place a strong emphasis on smart shopping, effective budgeting, and minimizing food waste. Participants gain hands-on experience preparing healthy meals, with a special focus on diabetic-friendly options, supporting both physical and mental well-being through nutritional education.

To further enhance food security, we’ve included a food preservation component, teaching clients how to preserve, can, and freeze food. These skills help reduce costs and ensure easy access to homemade, nutritious meals, even during times of financial strain or when geographic distance poses a challenge. Our program is tailored to meet the needs of youth, adults, and elders, fostering practical skills and lasting benefits for all age groups.



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SOLUTIONS

Financial Literacy: Our programs empower youth and adults with essential financial skills, equipping them to make informed decisions and build financial confidence. We recognize the unique challenges faced by remote communities and focus on practical, real-world financial literacy that fosters independence and long-term stability.

To support this mission, we offer a comprehensive curriculum that includes savings strategies, budgeting techniques, investment fundamentals, and responsible credit management. Our approach prioritizes practical decision-making, demonstrating the real-world impact of financial choices rather than relying solely on mathematical theory.

We also acknowledge the vital link between financial literacy and mental well-being. By empowering individuals to manage their finances effectively, we help them to achieve personal prosperity and contribute to the overall well being.

Entrepreneurship: Participants engage in the creation of a “mock” business, incorporating their own concepts and ideas to build a comprehensive, real-world business model.

Through this immersive experience, clients gain in-depth knowledge of essential business components, including strategic planning, funding options, capital acquisition, grant opportunities, legal structures, marketing strategies, financial management, sales techniques, and human resources. A strong focus is placed on customer service, highlighting its critical role in building and sustaining successful enterprises.

Beyond individual success, our program underscores the broader impact of entrepreneurship. Participants learn how their efforts can drive community growth by creating jobs, fostering partnerships, and contributing to local economic resilience. By empowering individuals with the skills and confidence to develop thriving businesses, we aim to inspire lasting benefits for both entrepreneurs and the communities they serve.



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SOLUTIONS

Living Independently: Indigenous youth face challenges in financial literacy, housing, education, and emotional support when transitioning to independence. Providing budgeting workshops, financial aid resources, and education on banking can help manage expenses effectively. Affordable housing programs and shared living options can ease the financial strain, while guidance on cost-saving practices supports sustainable living.

Employment support, flexible learning options, and time management training assist in balancing work and education. Cultural connection programs, mentorship, and mental health resources help combat isolation and foster a sense of belonging. Independent living workshops teach essential skills like cooking, cleaning, and home maintenance, while health and wellness education promotes self-care.

By addressing these areas, Indigenous youth can confidently transition to independence while staying connected to their cultural roots and support networks.

WHO WE SERVE

Our programs offer comprehensive support tailored to various groups within First Nation communities, providing practical and essential skills that strengthen both individual well-being and family resilience. Here's a summary of our target group;

Youth (13+):

- Empowering young people with skills for independent living, urban transition, and entrepreneurship.
- Providing education on financial literacy, nutrition, and building healthy routines.

Elders:

- Supporting Elders with tools for managing finances and accessing resources to maintain their well-being.
- Encouraging intergenerational knowledge sharing to strengthen community ties.

“THEY HELP PARTICIPANTS UNDERSTAND THE FINANCIAL PART AND HOW TO MAKE GOOD NUTRITIONAL MEALS FOR ALL AGES. THEY BOTH HAVE A GREAT SENSE OF HUMOR AND FIT RIGHT IN WITH THE COMMUNITY”. CANDACE PAMAJIWON
PARENT SHAWANAGA FIRST NATION



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WHO WE SERVE

Families:

- Offering programs on budgeting, nutrition, and sustainable meal planning to support family well-being.
- Strengthening family units through education on financial management and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Single Parents:

- Equipping single parents with strategies for managing household expenses and creating a stable environment for their children.
- Providing resources on healthy living, financial literacy, and community support systems.

Aspiring Entrepreneurs (13+):

- Providing mentorship and resources to support the launch and growth of Indigenous-led businesses.
- Offering training in business planning, financial management, marketing, and navigating opportunities for funding.

Moms and Tots:

- Offering guidance on healthy meal planning, budgeting for young families, and early childhood development.
- Supporting moms with tools to balance parenting, self-care, and building a strong foundation for their children's future.

" IT HAS TRULY GIVEN A NEW EXPERIENCE TO EACH CHILD. IT HAS SHOWN HOW HELPING TO PREPARE A MEAL CAN ENRICH THE WAY THEY LOOK AT FOOD AND HELP RAISE HEALTHY EATING HABITS. WE HAVE LEARNED A LOT FROM THESE AMAZING PEOPLE AND ALWAYS LOOK FORWARD TO THEIR NEXT VISIT TO TEACH US MORE HEALTHY LIFE SKILLS TO HELP FEED OUR FAMILIES AND OUR COMMUNITY. "

WENDI-LEE STEVENS EARLY ON CENTRE
SHAWANAGA FIRST NATION HEALING CENTER