

Promising Practices



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Innovative practices & initiatives from around Ontario

Aboriginal Child and Youth Mental Health Counseling: Wholistic Child and Youth

“We don’t know what we don’t know. And that is OK,” says Ela Smith, about working with children, youth, and their families at Wholistic Child and Youth. “It is also OK for us to find out what we don’t know. That is where we begin the journey.”

Located within White Owl Native Ancestry Association, Wholistic Child and Youth is a program that offers culturally appropriate mental health and addictions services. Ela, who self-identifies as an Anishnabe woman of Ojibwe heritage, is one of the Aboriginal Child and Youth Mental Health Counselors serving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities within the area of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin. Wholistic Child and Youth was established through Open Minds, Healthy Minds, Ontario’s Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.

Ela and her colleague, Mairi Anderson, have provided individual, couple, and family wholistic counseling for children and youth experiencing personal difficulties since the program was introduced in January 2013. So far they have doubled the number of clients expected, effectively meeting a need in the community. Providing



Ela Smith, Aboriginal Child and Youth Mental Health Counselor

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culturally appropriate counseling, group therapy and/or crisis intervention encompasses a range of traditional teachings, ceremonies, and services that are as diverse as the communities they serve.

“Aboriginal culture is not one culture, it is many cultures,” says Ela. “It is fluid, and is influenced by geography, ancestry, identity, intergenerational and current lived experience. Finding out how a person identifies and respecting the traditions they embrace is important. Assumptions are not helpful. For example, a person living in an urban centre may embrace traditional culture and practices, while a person living on a reserve may not.”

Aboriginal social work begins with an acknowledgement of the interrelated and intergenerational impacts of Canadian policies on Aboriginal peoples. It also acknowledges the effects of colonization. Mindful of the impacts of the past, the Wholistic Child and Youth counselors focus on improving outcomes for youth in their care. The aim is to have a positive impact on the generations to come.

The circle and the medicine wheel, both representing symbols and cycles in the natural world, play an important role in many First Nation’s teachings. The medicine wheel recognizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, emotions, and spirit. A person is well when there is balance in all four dimensions. This wholistic approach provides a framework for how Wholistic Children and Youth counselors work with families. Recognizing

relationship and connectedness often leads to work with siblings and parents. Because fixing one piece of the whole is not going to create meaningful change, counseling can mean treating a whole family.

An extended family in Aboriginal culture includes Mother Earth. As a result, Aboriginal social work respects ‘the land you are on’. Respecting the land includes acknowledging the influence of geography on cultural traditions. Understanding those differences and how they influence approaches to practice across the vast region of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin is an important aspect of a counselor’s work.

“Trauma-informed wholistic social work is how I would describe our services,” says Ela. “It is important that we build relationships of trust. As counselors we do that by being present, authentic, and patient. It is a good way to interact with people generally.” Ela often demonstrates trust by singing traditional songs with her drum in her counseling sessions. Trusting someone enough to sing in front of them makes an impression.

When a client comes to work with Ela she describes the work a little differently. She likens the journey they are about to embark on to a voyage in a canoe with a single paddle. The canoe represents the client’s journey and the paddle represents the work to be done. “I am here for you,” she tells them, “but you must take the paddle.”

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Wholistic Child and Youth recognizes that many social workers in the community may want to increase their competencies and comfort working with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth and families. It offers agencies in the area of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin case conferencing to ensure cultural best practices are being met, and helps to bridge gaps within services.

For more information on Wholistic Child and Youth, please contact Ela Smith at ela.j.smith@gmail.com

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