

## Article

# Selected findings of the Aboriginal Children's Survey 2006: Family and Community



November 26, 2008

# Selected findings of the Aboriginal Children's Survey 2006: Family and Community

by Vivian O'Donnell

This article has been adapted from Aboriginal Children's Survey 2006: Family, Community and Child Care (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-634-X). It is available free online at: [www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-634-x&lang=eng](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-634-x&lang=eng).

*"Children hold a special place in Aboriginal cultures. According to tradition, they are gifts from the spirit world .... They carry within them the gifts that manifest themselves as they become teachers, mothers, hunters, councilors, artisans and visionaries. They renew the strength of the family, clan and village and make the elders young again with their joyful presence."* (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996)

The Aboriginal population is growing at a rate that outpaces that of the rest of the Canadian population. Aboriginal children account for a growing proportion of all children in Canada, particularly in some western provinces and in the Territories. According to the 2006 Census, there were approximately 7,000 Inuit, 35,000 Métis and 47,000 off-reserve First Nations children under the age of 6 across Canada.<sup>1</sup>

This brief analysis is designed to offer a starting point to understanding the circumstances under which Aboriginal children are living and growing.

## First Nations children living off reserve

### Family

In 2006, the Census enumerated about 47,000 First Nations children under the age of 6 years living off reserve in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The majority (78%) of these

children lived in urban areas, with 46% in census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and 32% in smaller urban centres.<sup>3</sup> The remaining 22% were living in rural areas. About two-thirds (67%) of First Nations children living off reserve were Registered or Treaty Indians. (See "What you should know about this study" for a discussion of Registered Indian status.)

While large families are becoming less common in Canada, this is not the case for some First Nations families living off reserve. About 17% of young First Nations children were living in families with four or more children, compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal children. Among off-reserve First Nations children, those with registered Indian status were almost twice as likely to live in big families (20%), compared to those without registered status (12%).

According to the 2006 Census, 52% of off-reserve First Nations children were living with two parents, 41% in

lone parent households, about 8% in multiple-generation households (children, parents and grandparents) and 2% were living with their grandparents only (without parents present).

The parent or guardian responded to the Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS). For the majority of First Nations children (89%), this person was the birth mother or father. The remaining 11% included grandparents (4%), foster parents (3%), and adoptive parents (2%).

According to the 2006 ACS, parents/guardians of 90% of First Nations children reported that many people were involved in raising the child. Mothers were most commonly involved (93% of children) followed by fathers (72%) and grandparents (44%). More than one-quarter (28%) of First Nations children had relatives (such as siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles) who were playing a part in raising them (Table 1).

## The Aboriginal Children's Survey

The Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS) provides an extensive set of data about Aboriginal (Métis, Inuit, and off-reserve First Nations) children under 6 years of age in urban, rural, and northern locations across Canada. The survey was developed by Statistics Canada and Aboriginal advisors from across the country and was conducted jointly with Human Resources and Social Development Canada between October 2006 and March 2007.

The ACS was designed to provide a picture of the early development of Aboriginal children and the social and living conditions in which they are learning and growing.

The focus of this analytical article is First Nations children living off reserve, Métis children, and Inuit children. It is based on information provided by parents or guardians of about 10,500 Aboriginal children under 6 years of age.

The ACS is a post-censal survey, that is, the sample was selected from children living in private households whose response on their 2006 Census questionnaire indicated that they: (1) had Aboriginal ancestors and/or; (2) identified as North American Indian and/or Métis and/or Inuit and/or; (3) had treaty or registered Indian status and/or; (4) had Band membership.

The Aboriginal identity definition is used in this report. For the ACS, children were identified by parents/guardians as North American Indian and/or Métis and/or Inuit. The term "First Nations children" is used throughout this report to refer to those children living off reserve who were identified as North American Indian.

It was possible to report both single and multiple responses to the Aboriginal identity question on the ACS (approximately 3% of children in the Aboriginal identity population of the ACS were identified with more than one group). In this article, data represent a combination of both the single and multiple Aboriginal identity populations. As an example, the Métis data tables include those who were

identified as Métis only and those identified as Métis in combination with another Aboriginal group (for example, Métis and North American Indian).

Where Census data is used in this article, the single response Aboriginal identity population is used. Less than 1% of Aboriginal children under the age of 6 were identified as belonging to more than one Aboriginal group on the 2006 Census.

More detailed information about the survey is available in the *ACS Concepts and Methods Guide* (catalogue no. 89-634-X 2008006).

## Registered Indian status

Not every individual who identifies as a First Nations person is a treaty or registered Indian. According to the 2006 Census, 67% of children under the age of 6 years old living off reserve who were identified as First Nations children were also treaty or registered Indians (31,425 children). The remaining 33% were not treaty or registered Indians (15,680).

Registered Indians or "status Indians" are people who are entitled to have their names included on the Indian Register, an official list maintained by the federal government. Certain criteria determine who can be registered as a status Indian. Only registered Indians are recognized as Indians under the *Indian Act*, which defines an Indian as 'a person who, pursuant to this Act, is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian.'

Status Indians are entitled to certain rights and benefits under the law. Generally speaking, treaty Indians are persons who are registered under the *Indian Act* and can prove descent from a band that signed a treaty. Differences in findings for these two groups are included throughout this article.

For more information, including the inheritance rules regarding the passing of registered Indian status from parents to children, see the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website at: [http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/pub/wf/index\\_E.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/pub/wf/index_E.html)

When the 2006 ACS asked how often the child and different people in their lives "talk or play together, focusing attention on each other for five minutes or more," it was reported that children were most likely to receive focused attention at least

once a day from their mothers (93%), followed by siblings (69%), fathers (64%) and grandparents (27%). Most also received focused attention from their extended family at least once a week: 67% from grandparents, 55% from aunts and uncles, and 45% from cousins.

## Daily life and community

The ACS asked parents/guardians to rate their feelings regarding five aspects of their home and daily life. The vast majority reported being "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their social support network, main job or

**Table 1 Persons involved in raising off-reserve First Nations children under age 6, 2006**

	First Nations children living off reserve		
	Total	With registered Indian status †	Without registered Indian status
	<b>percentage</b>		
Mother	93	93	94
Father	72	68	78*
Grandparents	44	45	43
Other relatives (aunt, uncle, cousin, sibling)	28	31	24*
Other <sup>1</sup>	17	16	18

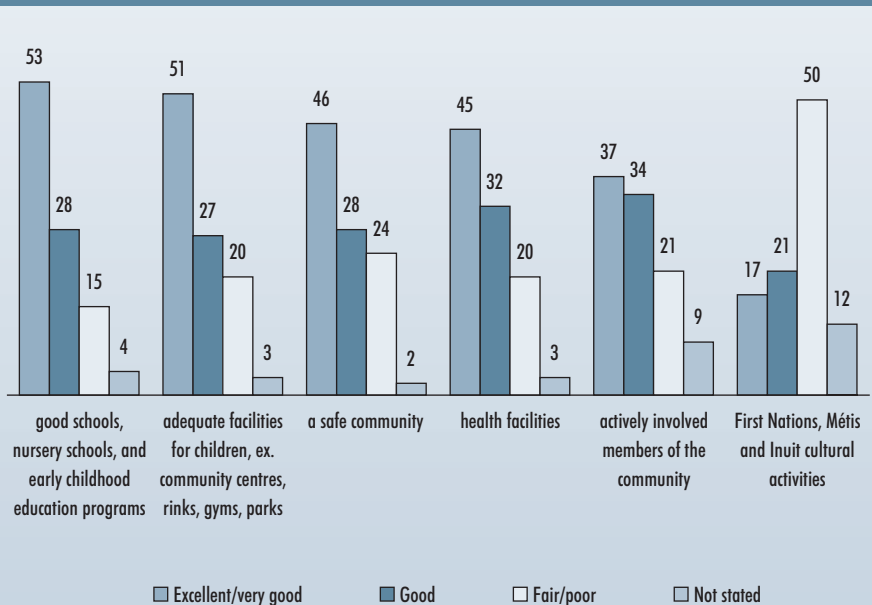
† Reference group.

\* Statistically significant difference from reference group at  $p < 0.05$ .

1. Includes child care provider/teacher, other relatives not already specified and non-relatives.

Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

**Chart 1 Percentage of off-reserve First Nations children whose parents/guardians rated their feelings about quality of life in their community**



Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

was over twice as high for those living in low-income families than for those not in low-income families (22% versus 9%).

About half of off-reserve First Nations children lived in a community rated by their parent/guardians as "excellent" or "very good" in terms of schools, nursery schools and early childhood education programs (53%), adequate facilities for children (51%), as a safe community (46%) and a place with health facilities (45%) (Chart 1).

Many young First Nations children living off reserve are growing up in communities where Aboriginal people represent a small minority among a diversity of cultures. In many of these communities, it is likely more difficult to maintain ties to traditional Aboriginal cultures than in communities where Aboriginal people represent the majority of the population. In 2006, 17% of young First Nations children were living in a community rated as "excellent" or "very good" in terms of being a place with First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultural activities.

Almost half (46%) of young First Nations children living off-reserve had participated in or attended traditional First Nations, Métis, or Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings or ceremonies. Just as many (45%) had taken part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping. About 30% had also participated in traditional seasonal activities such as gathering goose eggs or wild plants, for example berries, sweet grass, roots or wild rice. Children in rural areas were more likely to have taken part in these traditional and cultural activities than children living in urban areas (Table 2).

In 2006, 45% of off-reserve First Nations children had someone who helped them to understand First Nations history and culture. This figure was higher for children with registered Indian status (54%) than for those without status (32%). Of those who had someone involved in helping them understand their history

activity, and the way they spend their free time. They were least satisfied with their finances and housing.

Nearly half (49%) of off-reserve First Nations children under age 6 were in low-income families, compared with 18% of non-Aboriginal children.

Of these low-income First Nations children, 38% had parents/guardians who were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their finances. The proportion was 19% for those who were not in low-income families. Similarly, dissatisfaction with housing

**Table 2 Participation of off-reserve First Nations children under age 6 in selected traditional activities, 2006**

Type of traditional activities	First Nations children living off reserve who...		
	Total	Urban †	Rural
		percentage	
Participated in or attended traditional First Nations, Métis or Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings or ceremonies	46	46	47
Took part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping	45	41	58*
Participated in seasonal activities, such as gathering goose eggs or wild plants (for example, berries, sweet grass roots or wild rice)	30	26	40*

† Reference group.  
 \* Statistically significant difference from reference group at  $p < 0.05$ .  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

A larger proportion of Métis children in rural areas (39%) were living in families with three or more children, compared to Métis children in urban areas (30%).

According to the 2006 Census, 67% of Métis children were living with two parents, 30% were in lone parent households, 7% were in multiple-generation households (children, parents and grandparents) and 1% were living with their grandparents only. Living in lone parent households was more common among children in urban (33%) than rural communities (22%).

In the 2006 ACS, the parents/guardians of most Métis children (91%) reported that many people were involved in raising the child. Mothers were most often involved (94%) followed by fathers (78%) and grandparents (41%). About one-fifth (21%) of Métis children had relatives (such as siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles) who were playing a part in raising them (Table 3).

When asked how often the child and different people in their lives "talk or play together, focusing attention on each other for five minutes or more," parents/guardians reported that Métis children were most likely to receive focused attention at least once a day from their mothers (94%), followed by fathers (71%), siblings (70%) and grandparents (24%). At least once a week, 69% of Métis children received focused attention from grandparents, 51% from aunts and uncles and 40% from cousins.

**Daily life and community**

Parents/guardians were asked to rate their feelings regarding five aspects of their home and daily life — housing conditions, support network, main job or activity, free time, and finances. Most Métis children (93%) had parents/guardians who reported relatively high levels of satisfaction with the informal social supports available from family, friends and others. They most often gave the lowest ratings of satisfaction to "finances."

**Table 3 Persons involved in raising Métis children under age 6, 2006**

Relationship to the child	Métis children
	percentage
Mother	94
Father	78
Grandparents	41
Other relatives (aunt, uncle, cousin, sibling)	21
Other <sup>1</sup>	17

1. Includes child care provider/teacher, other relatives not already specified and non-relatives.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

or culture, 60% were being taught by their parents, 50% by grandparents, and 20% by aunts and uncles. About 14% of First Nations children living off reserve who had someone to help them understand their culture were also learning from their teachers or child care providers.

**Métis children**

**Family**

In 2006, the Census enumerated about 35,000 Métis children under the age of 6 in Canada. The majority (89%) of young Métis children were in the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan

and British Columbia. A relatively large proportion of Métis children were growing up in rural areas, with 27% of young Métis children living in rural areas compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children. Another 41% of Métis children were living in census metropolitan areas and the remaining 32% in smaller urban centres.

About one-third (32%) of young Métis children were living in families with three or more children, compared to 25% of non-Aboriginal children. (When considering families with four or more children, the percentages are more similar, at 11% for young Métis and 8% for non-Aboriginal children.)

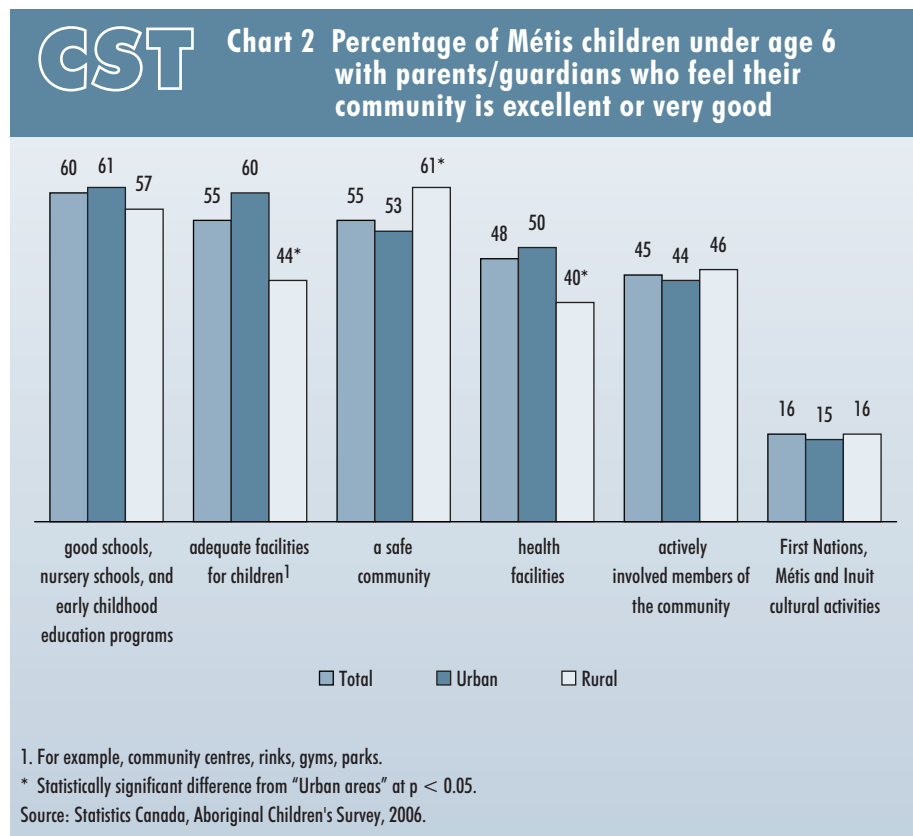
Almost one-third (31%) of Métis children under age 6 were living in low-income families, compared with 18% of non-Aboriginal children. The percentage of Métis children in low-income families was higher in urban than rural areas, at 36% compared to 20%.

About 36% of Métis children living in low-income families had parents/guardians who reported that they were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their finances. The proportion was 15% for those who were not in low-income families. Those living in low-income families were also three times as likely to be “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their housing situation, at 19% compared to 6%.

Research indicates that children’s well-being may be linked to neighbourhood “quality”.<sup>4</sup> The majority of Métis children lived in a community that their parents/guardians rated as “excellent” or “very good” in terms of good schools, nursery schools and early childhood education programs (60%), adequate facilities for children (55%) and being a safe community (55%). By comparison, 16% of young Métis children were living in a community rated as “excellent” or “very good” in terms of Aboriginal cultural activities (Chart 2).

In 2006, 28% of young Métis children under age 6 had participated in or attended traditional First Nations, Métis, or Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings or ceremonies. More than half (53%) had taken part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping. About 30% of Métis children had participated in traditional seasonal activities such as gathering goose eggs or wild plants, for example berries, sweet grass, roots or wild rice. Children living in rural areas were more likely to have taken part in these types of activities than children living in urban areas (Table 4).

In 2006, 31% of Métis children had someone who helped them to understand Aboriginal history and culture. Of these children, most



**GST Table 4 Participation of Métis children under age 6 in selected traditional activities, 2006**

Type of traditional activities	Métis children who have...		
	Total	Urban areas †	Rural areas
	percentage		
Participated in or attended traditional First Nations, Métis or Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings or ceremonies	28	27	30
Taken part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping	53	50	63*
Participated in seasonal activities, such as gathering goose eggs or wild plants (for example, berries, sweet grass roots or wild rice)	30	26	40*

† Reference group  
\* Statistically significant difference from reference group at p < 0.05.  
Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children’s Survey, 2006.

were being taught by close family members – their parents (56%) and grandparents (46%), as well as aunts and uncles (13%). About 14% were learning from their teachers or child care providers.

### Inuit children Family

In 2006, the Census enumerated about 7,000 Inuit children under the age of 6 years in Canada. The



majority (84%) lived in one of the four regions that comprise Inuit Nunaat, which means "Inuit homeland" in the Inuit language. The remaining 16% of children lived outside Inuit Nunaat, 13% in urban areas and 3% in rural areas.

The size of many Inuit families remains larger than other families across the country. For example, in 2006, 28% of young Inuit children were living in families with four or more children. The percentage was 31% in Inuit Nunaat, where the majority of Inuit children live. This is compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal children in the same age group across Canada.

In 2006, the majority of Inuit children (70%) were living with two parents, 28% with lone parents, 16% in multiple-generation households (children, parents and grandparents), and 1% with grandparents only.

The parent or guardian responded to the ACS. For the majority of Inuit children, this person was the birth mother or father (79%). Grandparents (4%) and adoptive parents (12%) made up the majority of the remaining parents or guardians. The proportion of adoptive mothers and fathers who responded to the ACS was significantly higher than that for the Métis and First Nations children living off reserve. Historically, adoption has been a common practice in Inuit society and continues to be widespread.

While members of the immediate family are primarily responsible for the upbringing of Inuit children, in many cases it is also a responsibility shared by many others in the community.<sup>5</sup>

In 2006, the parents/guardians of 91% of Inuit children reported that many people were involved in raising the child. Mothers were most commonly reported as being involved (92%) followed by fathers (77%). Grandparents (46%) and other relatives (47%) were also reported to be playing a part in raising the child (Table 5).

**GST Table 5 Persons involved in raising Inuit children under age 6, 2006**

Relationship to the child	Inuit children percentage
Mother	92
Father	77
Grandparents	46
Other relatives (aunt, uncle, cousin, sibling)	47
Other <sup>1</sup>	19

1. Includes child care provider/teacher, other relatives not already specified and non-relatives.  
Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

When asked how often the child and different people in their lives "talk or play together, focusing attention on each other for five minutes or more," it was reported that mothers were most likely to give focused attention to the child at least once a day (92%), followed by fathers (73%), siblings (73%) and grandparents (43%). At least once a week, 71% of Inuit children received attention from grandparents, 72% from aunts and uncles, and 69% from cousins.

**Daily life and community**

On the ACS, parents/guardians were asked to rate their feelings regarding five aspects of their home and daily life. Of these five categories -- housing conditions, support network, main job or activity, free time, and finances -- parents/guardians of young Inuit children gave the lowest ratings of satisfaction to housing and finances. Levels of dissatisfaction with finances and housing were similar across the four regions of Inuit Nunaat.

Dissatisfaction with housing is likely a reflection of the relatively poor housing conditions of some Inuit. According to the 2006 Census, 29% of Inuit children under 6 years lived in homes in need of major repairs compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal children; 43% of Inuit children were also living in crowded dwellings, compared to 7% of non-Aboriginal children.

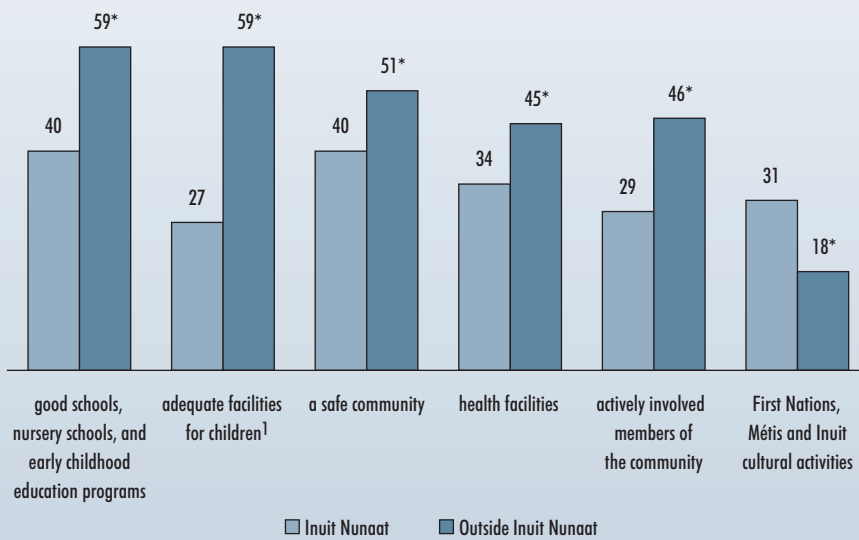
Parents/guardians of Inuit children were asked to rate their feelings about their community on the basis of six characteristics. Inuit children who lived in Inuit Nunaat had parents/guardians who were less likely to report that their community was "excellent" or "very good" in terms of five characteristics, compared to those living outside Inuit Nunaat. For example, while 27% of Inuit children within Inuit Nunaat had parents/guardians who rated their community as "excellent" or "very good" in terms of adequate facilities for children (such as community centres, rinks, gyms, and parks), 59% of those living outside Inuit Nunaat had parents/guardians who did so (Chart 3).

In 2006, about 63% of Inuit children under the age of 6 living in Inuit Nunaat had participated in or attended traditional Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, gatherings or ceremonies; and 58% had taken part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping. Children living in Inuit Nunaat were more likely to participate in these activities than those living outside Inuit Nunaat (Table 6).

In 2006, 60% of Inuit children living in Inuit Nunaat compared to 33% living outside Inuit Nunaat had participated in traditional seasonal activities such as gathering goose eggs or berries.

In all regions across Inuit Nunaat, about six in ten Inuit children had

**Chart 3 Percentage of Inuit children under age 6 with parents/guardians who report their community is “excellent” or “very good”**



1. For example, community centres, rinks, gyms, parks.  
 \* Statistically significant difference from Inuit Nunaat at p < 0.05.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

someone involved in helping them understand Inuit history and culture, most were being taught by their parents (76%) and grand-parents (60%).

**Summary**

Compared to non-Aboriginal children, young Aboriginal children were more likely to be growing up in large families. Many persons, including extended family and community members, were involved in raising young Aboriginal children. More than two-thirds of First Nations children living off reserve, of Métis and of Inuit children under 6 received focused attention from their grandparents at least once a week. Furthermore, between one-quarter and one-third received focused attention from Elders at least once a week.

In general, parents/guardians reported relatively high levels of satisfaction with their support networks from family, friends and others. The parents/guardians of at least 9 in 10 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children reported that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the social supports available from family, friends and others.

Many parents/guardians of Aboriginal children reported dissatisfaction with their finances. Parents/guardians of 29% of Inuit children and 28% of First Nations children living off reserve were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their finances. Among Métis children, the proportion was 21%.

Although parents/guardians of off-reserve First Nations and Métis children were generally satisfied with many aspects of their community as a place to raise children, they were less satisfied with access to activities and services that promote traditional and cultural values and customs. In 2006, parents/guardians of 17% of off-reserve First Nations children and 16% of Métis children rated their community as “excellent” or “very good” in terms of access to Aboriginal cultural activities.

**Table 6 Participation of Inuit children under age 6 in selected traditional activities, 2006**

Type of traditional activities	Inuit children who have...	
	Inuit Nunaat †	Outside Inuit Nunaat
	percentage	
Participated in or attended traditional First Nations, Métis or Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings or ceremonies	63	36*
Taken part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping	58	45*
Participated in seasonal activities, such as gathering goose eggs or wild plants (for example, berries, sweet grass roots or wild rice)	60	33*

† Reference group.  
 \* Statistically significant difference from reference group at p < 0.05.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006.

taken part in traditional activities such as singing, drum dancing or gatherings and hunting, fishing, trapping or camping. Participation in traditional seasonal activities like gathering eggs and berries was more common among Inuit children

in Nunatsiavut (74%) and Nunavik (66%) than in Nunavut (57%) and the Inuvialuit region (55%).

In 2006, about two-thirds of Inuit children had someone who helped them to understand their Inuit culture and history (65%). Of those who had



Inuit children appear to have more access to cultural activities than their First Nations and Métis counterparts. About one-third (31%) of those within Inuit Nunaat had parents/guardians who rated their community as “excellent” or “very good” as a place with cultural activities.

The Aboriginal Children’s Survey is a rich source of data with great potential for further research into these issues. For example, there are indicators of community and cultural strength and resilience that could be further explored. Further research using the ACS data could also help to build understanding of how culture is being transmitted inter-generationally to these young Aboriginal children, and how exposure to cultural and

traditional values and practices affect developmental and behavioural outcomes.



**Vivian O’Donnell** is an analyst with the Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada.

---

1. In total, the 2006 Census enumerated 131,000 Aboriginal children under the age of 6 – about 40,000 lived on reserve and 91,000 lived off reserve. (A reserve is land set apart and designated for the use and occupancy of an Indian group or band – as such, the terms “on-reserve” or “off-reserve” are generally not applicable to Métis or Inuit.) Census counts have been used to describe the number of Inuit, Métis and off-reserve First Nations children rather than the counts stemming from the Aboriginal Children’s Survey

(ACS) for consistency with previously released Census data. Please refer the ACS *Concepts and Methods Guide* for a detailed explanation of the relationship between the ACS and the Census (catalogue no. 89-634-X).

2. All First Nations children living in the territories were included.
3. Urban areas have a population of at least 1,000 and no fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre. They include both census metropolitan areas and urban non-CMAs.
4. Curtis, Lori J. et. al. (2004.) Child well-being and neighbourhood quality: evidence from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. *Social Science and Medicine*, 58:1917-1927.
5. Nunavut Arctic College. “Interviewing Inuit Elders: Childrearing Practices” <http://www.nac.nu.ca/OnlineBookSite/vol3/introduction.html>