

## Article

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# Family, community, and Aboriginal language among young First Nations children living off reserve in Canada

by Evelyne Bougie

## Introduction

Aboriginal languages are central to many First Nations people's identity.<sup>1</sup> The 2006 Census recorded more than 60 different Aboriginal languages spoken by First Nations people in Canada, grouped into distinct language families (Algonquian, Athapascan, Siouan, Salish, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Iroquoian, Haida, Kutenai and Tlingit). Some Algonquian languages, such as Cree and Ojibway, are considered to have better long-term viability than other languages spoken by First Nations people because of their relatively larger base of speakers. However, even these more viable languages have experienced a decline in their use as the primary home language over the past two decades.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the passing down of Aboriginal languages across the generations was disrupted by residential schools in Canada, where the use of Aboriginal languages was prohibited. The Royal Commission also noted that the revitalization of Aboriginal languages in Canada is a key component for building both healthy individuals and healthy communities.<sup>3</sup>

Given the state of Canada's Aboriginal languages, information about Aboriginal language knowledge and the factors that are associated with language development and retention among today's First Nations children is relevant and important for those working to preserve, revitalize and promote Aboriginal languages.

It has been stated that for many First Nations children, the 'ideal' conditions for acquiring an Aboriginal language—such as both parents having an Aboriginal mother tongue and residing in a First Nations community—are not always possible.<sup>4</sup> In this context, an exploration of the characteristics associated with Aboriginal language knowledge among young First Nations children residing off reserve is important. This article uses data from the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey to investigate the extent to which the home, the family, and the community can contribute to Aboriginal language knowledge among young off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5 years in Canada (for more information on data and concepts see "What you should know about this study").

This article will explore two research questions: 1) To what extent do the families and communities of young off-reserve First Nations children provide opportunities to hear, learn and use Aboriginal languages? 2) Which family and community characteristics are associated with Aboriginal language<sup>5</sup> knowledge among off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5 years?

## One in five off-reserve First Nations children were able to understand an Aboriginal language

According to the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey, 1 in 5 (20%) off-reserve First Nations children<sup>6</sup> were able to understand an Aboriginal language (regardless of whether these were learned as mother tongues or as second languages). Cree and Ojibway were the languages understood by the largest number of off-reserve First Nations children.

Data also show that the vast majority (98%) of off-reserve First Nations children who understood an Aboriginal language could also understand a non-Aboriginal language (i.e., English and/or French). This indicates that most of these children

## What you should know about this study

This article is based on data from the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS). The ACS was developed by Statistics Canada and Aboriginal advisors from across the country and was conducted jointly with Human Resources and Social Development Canada. The ACS provides an extensive set of data about Aboriginal (Métis, Inuit and off-reserve First Nations) children under 6 years of age across Canada. Indian settlements and reserves in the ten provinces were excluded from the target population for the survey. All First Nations children living in the Yukon and Northwest Territories were included.

The ACS was conducted between October 2006 and March 2007. In the ACS, the child's parent or guardian responded to the survey. For the majority of First Nations children (89%), this person was the birth mother or father. Parents or guardians of approximately 10,500 Aboriginal children under 6 years of age, including more than 5,100 First Nations children living off reserve, provided information through a combination of personal and telephone interviews. The overall response rate for the survey was 81.1%. For more detailed information on the Aboriginal Children's Survey, please consult the Aboriginal Children's Survey 2006 Concepts and Methods Guide (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-634).

In this article, ACS data include children whose parents identified them as North American Indian in response to the question: "Is (child) an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit?" Data include children who were identified as North American Indian only and those identified as North American Indian in combination with another Aboriginal group (either Métis or Inuit). There are some instances where 2006 Census data are used. In this article, census data include children who were identified as North American Indian as a single response (i.e., not in combination with Métis or Inuit identity). In the 2006 Census and the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey, children were identified as "North American Indian," however, the term "First Nations children" is used throughout this article.

### Statistical analysis and model building

Correlates of Aboriginal language knowledge were examined using logistic regression analysis. The final full model included a number of covariates categorized under sociodemographic,

home/parent, extended family, child care, and community factors. The initial sample consisted of 3,640 off-reserve First Nations children between the ages of 2 and 5. The analysis included 2,780 children (76% of the initial sample) with no missing values for any of the covariates included in the model.

Covariates were retained for inclusion in the preliminary full model if they were found to be related to Aboriginal language knowledge at  $p < 0.25$  in preliminary single variable models. The full model was simplified by deleting the covariates that did not contribute to Aboriginal language knowledge at  $p < 0.05$  when all the covariates were included. Some covariates that did not significantly contribute were nonetheless kept because they provided a needed adjustment of the effect of the covariates that remained in the model, or because of their theoretical importance.<sup>1</sup> The covariates that were initially considered but later deleted from the model because their presence or absence did not change the results from the final full model were the following: child's sex and age; parent's sex; parental residential school attendance; parental employment status; and parental Aboriginal identity.

This article's statistical analysis measures the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language (as reported by the parent or guardian), isolating the impact of one characteristic of interest at a time. The odds ratios were estimated through a weighted regression that used ACS survey weights, with variance estimation done through survey bootstrapping.

It is important to understand that the direction of the relationship between children's ability to understand an Aboriginal language and the factors under investigation is difficult to determine. As such, results from this study are best interpreted as highlighting correlations between variables. It should also be emphasized that this study investigated children's ability to understand an Aboriginal language as perceived and reported by their parent or guardian. More objective measures of language abilities are not available in the ACS.

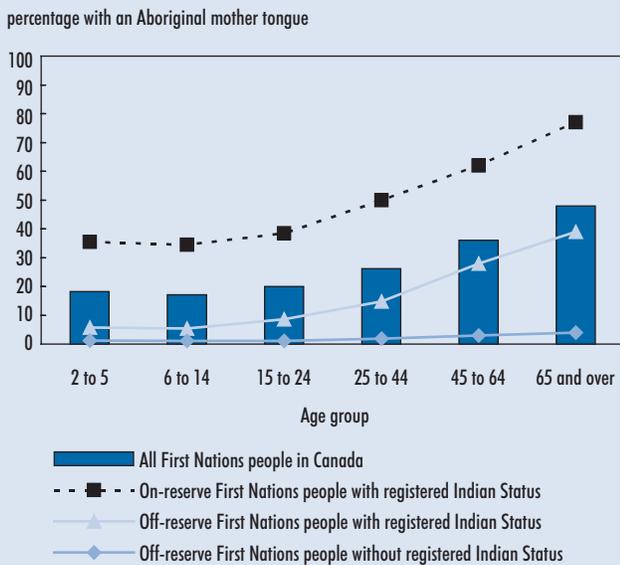
1. Hosmer, David W. and Stanley Lemeshow. 2000. *Applied Logistic Regression*. 2nd edition. Toronto. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. p. 92-104.

## Aboriginal languages in Canada: Snapshots from the census

First Nations children make up a growing proportion of all children in Canada, particularly in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. In 2006, the census enumerated about 57,110 First Nations children aged 2 to 5 across Canada, 82% of whom were Registered or Treaty Indians.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2006 Census, 18% of First Nations children across Canada had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (or first language learned), down from 21% in 1996. Older generations of First Nations people are generally more likely than younger generations to have an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (Chart 1). Notably in 2006,

**Chart 1 Older generations of First Nations people were generally more likely than younger generations to have an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue in 2006**



Note: The "on-reserve" population includes First Nations people living on reserve in the ten provinces. The "off-reserve" population includes First Nations people living off reserve in the ten provinces and all First Nations people living in the territories.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006.

48% of First Nations people aged 65 and over and 36% of those aged 45 to 64 had an Aboriginal mother tongue. An exception to this trend can be observed for off-reserve First Nations people without registered Indian status, for whom the proportions reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue are relatively small across all age groups.

The decreasing share of First Nations children reported to have an Aboriginal mother tongue from 1996 to 2006, coupled with the higher proportions reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue among older generations of First Nations people, indicate some erosion in the intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal languages in Canada.

Data from the 2006 Census also show that having an Aboriginal mother tongue is more common among the Registered Indian population living on reserve (Chart 1). For instance, 36% of First Nations children who were Registered Indians and who were living on-reserve at the time of the 2006 Census had an Aboriginal language as their first language.<sup>2</sup> Off-reserve, these figures were lower at 6% for First Nations children who were Registered Indians and 1% for those who did not have registered Indian status.

1. 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. For more information, see the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website at: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/tln-eng.asp>
2. There were 22 incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and settlements in the 2006 Census. Data are not available for incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and settlements and these areas are not included in the tabulations.

appear to be learning an Aboriginal language alongside English or French, and that some may be learning their Aboriginal language as a second language.<sup>7</sup> This observation appears to be supported by the fact that English or French was the primary language spoken at home for the majority (90%) of off-reserve First Nations children. About 10% of children were spoken to primarily in an Aboriginal language at home: 8% in combination with English or French, and 1% exclusively in an Aboriginal language.

It has been suggested that the intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal languages may be difficult when the language is not used at home.<sup>8</sup> The home, however, is not the only setting where children can be exposed to languages. Research suggests that different social environments can provide supports for language acquisition.<sup>9</sup> Parents, the family, and the community have all been shown to play an important role in the transmission of Aboriginal languages to children.<sup>10</sup> Child care facilities and schools, as well as other settings with caregiver-child interactions, also provide communicative opportunities that can influence language acquisition.<sup>11</sup>

There is evidence that the preschool years are a time when

language skills are emerging.<sup>12</sup> The 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey provides information on young children's exposure to Aboriginal languages in many different contexts, as well as information on the involvement of parents, extended family members, and other child care providers in children's lives. Taken together, these data offer a more complete picture of the extent to which the families and communities of off-reserve First Nations children can provide opportunities to hear, learn, and use Aboriginal languages.

### To what extent do the families and communities of off-reserve First Nations children provide opportunities to hear, learn and use Aboriginal languages?

The home environment naturally impacts the transmission of an Aboriginal language from parent to child.<sup>13</sup> According to the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey, 17% of young off-reserve First Nations children had (at least) one parent with an Aboriginal mother tongue (Table 1). Moreover, 1 in 5 (20%) children were exposed to an Aboriginal language on a daily basis at home, and almost one-third (31%) had parents who helped them understand First Nations culture and history. As for parental attitudes

toward Aboriginal languages, the majority (68%) of young off-reserve First Nations children had parents who believed it was "very important" or "somewhat important" for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language.

Contact with Aboriginal languages can also be made through interactions with extended family (see "Aboriginal languages in Canada: Snapshots from the census"). For example, in 2006, 44% of young off-reserve First Nations children had grandparents and 28% had other relatives who were involved in raising them. A sizeable proportion of children also spent time "talking or playing together" on a daily basis with their grandparents (27%) or aunts and uncles (17%). In addition, one-quarter (25%) of children had grandparents, and one-tenth (10%) had an aunt or uncle, who helped them understand First Nations culture and history.

Off-reserve First Nations children can also be exposed to Aboriginal languages in the context of child care. About 8% of off-reserve First Nations children had a teacher or child care provider who helped them understand First Nations culture and history. About 8% were in child care arrangements<sup>14</sup> where Aboriginal languages were used.

The community where children live is another context that can

**Table 1 Characteristics of off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5, Canada, 2006**

	percentage		percentage
<b>Sociodemographic characteristics</b>		<b>Parent's level of education</b>	
<b>Child's registered Indian status</b>		Less than high school	31
Without	42	High school	25
With	58	Some postsecondary	11
<b>Child's living arrangements</b>		Completed postsecondary	33
Two parents	58	<b>Average household income in dollars</b>	
One parent	39	Lowest quintile	13,600
Other (living with relatives or with non-relatives only)	3	Second quintile	25,600
<b>Parent's age (in years)</b>		Third quintile	40,000
45 and over	7	Fourth quintile	59,900
35 to 44	27	Highest quintile	109,400
25 to 34	50		
24 and under	16		

**Table 1 Characteristics of off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5, Canada, 2006 (continued)**

	percentage		percentage
<b>Household size</b>		<b>Focused attention ("talking or playing together") from grandparents</b>	
Two persons	8	Less than daily <sup>3</sup>	73
Three persons	21	Daily <sup>2</sup>	27
Four persons	32	<b>Focused attention ("talking or playing together") from uncles or aunts</b>	
Five persons	20	Less than daily <sup>3</sup>	83
Six persons	10	Daily <sup>2</sup>	17
Seven persons or more	9	<b>Child care</b>	
<b>Region</b>		<b>Child care arrangements</b>	
Atlantic	5	Attends child care where Aboriginal languages are used	8
Quebec	6	Attends child care where Aboriginal languages are not used	42
Ontario	26	Does not attend any regular child care	50
Manitoba	14	<b>Teacher/child care provider helps child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>	
Saskatchewan	12	No	92
Alberta	16	Yes	8
British Columbia	17	<b>Community</b>	
Territories	4	<b>Community as a ... place with First Nations cultural activities</b>	
<b>Home and family characteristics</b>		Fair / Poor	57
<b>Parent's mother tongue</b>		Good / Very good / Excellent	43
Non-Aboriginal	83	<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages at the home of others</b>	
Aboriginal	17	Less than daily <sup>1</sup>	91
<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages at home</b>		Daily <sup>2</sup>	9
Less than daily <sup>1</sup>	80	<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages in the community</b>	
Daily <sup>2</sup>	20	Less than daily <sup>1</sup>	92
<b>Parents help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>		Daily <sup>2</sup>	8
No	69	<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages through media</b>	
Yes	31	Less than daily <sup>1</sup>	95
<b>Importance of speaking and understanding an Aboriginal language</b>		Daily <sup>2</sup>	5
Not very important / Not at all important	32	<b>Participation in traditional activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings and ceremonies</b>	
Somewhat important / Very important	68	Less than monthly <sup>4</sup>	79
<b>Grandparents involved in raising the child</b>		At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	21
No	56	<b>Participation in hunting, fishing, trapping, camping activities</b>	
Yes	44	Less than monthly <sup>4</sup>	88
<b>Other relatives involved in raising the child</b>		At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	12
No	72	<b>Participation in seasonal activities such as berry picking or gathering wild plants</b>	
Yes	28	Less than monthly <sup>4</sup>	91
<b>Grandparents help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>		At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	9
No	75		
Yes	25		
<b>Uncles or aunts help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>			
No	90		
Yes	10		

1. Includes responses of more than once a week, once a week, at least once a month, at least once a year, less than once a year and never.

2. Includes responses of more than once a day and once a day.

3. Includes responses of more than once a week, once a week, less than once a week, and never.

4. Includes responses of at least once a year, less than once a year and never.

5. Includes responses of more than once a day, once a day, more than once a week, once a week and at least once a month.

Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2006.

contribute to the passing down of Aboriginal languages to children. According to the Aboriginal Children's Survey, 9% of young off-reserve First Nations children had daily exposure to Aboriginal languages at the home of others ("others" could include family members not living in the child's household, neighbours, family friends, etc.). Moreover, 8% of children had daily exposure to Aboriginal languages in their community, and 5% through media (such as TV, DVDs, radio or books). About 43% of off-reserve First Nations children had parents who rated their community as an "excellent," a "very good," or a "good" place for First Nations cultural activities.

Participation in traditional activities may provide unique opportunities for exposure to Aboriginal languages. About 21% of young off-reserve First Nations children participated in or attended traditional First Nations activities (such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings and ceremonies) at least once a month. In addition, about 12% of children took part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping, and 9% participated in seasonal activities (such as berry picking or gathering wild plants) at least once a month.

Taken together, these data suggest that there are some opportunities in the families and communities of young off-reserve First Nations children to potentially learn an Aboriginal language, either through different social networks or through different activities. The next section explores the association between these family and community characteristics and children's knowledge of an Aboriginal language.

### **Which family and community characteristics are associated with Aboriginal language knowledge?**

A logistic regression model was developed to explore the contribution of different individual, socio-economic and family and community characteristics of young off-reserve

First Nations children to their knowledge of an Aboriginal language. The analysis estimated the likelihood that a child with a given characteristic was able to understand an Aboriginal language, while isolating the effects of other characteristics. Results from this analysis should be interpreted as highlighting correlations between variables, not as causation (see "What you should know about this study" for more information about the logistic regression model).

Analysis of the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey revealed that there are a number of home, extended family, child care arrangement and community characteristics associated with the ability of young off-reserve First Nations children to understand an Aboriginal language (Table 2).

### **The language environment within the home plays an important role in the likelihood of understanding an Aboriginal language**

All of the characteristics related to the language environment within the home were found to be associated with children's knowledge of an Aboriginal language, once all other characteristics were taken into account. In particular, daily exposure to an Aboriginal language at home was strongly linked with Aboriginal language knowledge. The odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for young off-reserve First Nations children who were exposed to an Aboriginal language on a daily basis at home were 6.6 times the odds for children who were not.

Parental mother tongue was also associated with young children's Aboriginal language knowledge. The odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for off-reserve First Nations children whose parent had an Aboriginal mother tongue were about twice the odds for children whose parent had a non-Aboriginal language (e.g., English and/or French) as their mother tongue.

### **Parental beliefs and involvement matter**

Parental beliefs regarding the importance of Aboriginal languages also appear to be related to young children's knowledge of an Aboriginal language. Once all other characteristics were taken into account, the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for off-reserve First Nations children whose parent thought it "very" or "somewhat" important that their child speak and understand an Aboriginal language were about twice the odds for children whose parent thought it "not very" or "not at all" important.

Off-reserve First Nations children who had parents who helped them understand First Nations culture and history were also found to have higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language compared to children whose parents did not provide such help (Table 2).

### **Having extended family members who can speak an Aboriginal language and help children understand their culture is important**

The extended family can also play a role in the transmission of Aboriginal languages to children. Once all other characteristics were taken into account, off-reserve First Nations children who had an aunt or uncle who helped them understand First Nations culture and history had higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language compared to children who did not receive such help (Table 2).

In addition, First Nations children whose grandparents were involved in raising them were found to have higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children whose grandparents were not involved—presumably because grandparents are more likely to speak an Aboriginal language. Data from the 2006 Census show that Aboriginal language knowledge is more common among older generations of First Nations people.

**Table 2 Logistic regression model predicting the odds of being able to understand an Aboriginal language, off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5, Canada, 2006**

	Odds ratio		Odds ratio
<b>Sociodemographic characteristics</b>		<b>Other relatives involved in raising the child</b>	
<b>Child's registered Indian status</b>		No †	1.0
Without †	1.0	Yes	1.1
With	2.0*	<b>Grandparents help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>	
<b>Child's living arrangements</b>		No †	1.0
Two parents †	1.0	Yes	1.2
One parent	1.0	<b>Uncles or aunts help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>	
Other (living with relatives or with non relatives only)	0.9	No †	1.0
<b>Parent's age (in years)</b>		Yes	1.4*
45 and over †	1.0	<b>Focused attention ("talking or playing together") from grandparents</b>	
35 to 44	1.8	Less than daily <sup>3</sup> †	1.0
25 to 34	3.0*	Daily <sup>2</sup>	0.9
24 and under	4.8*	<b>Focused attention ("talking or playing together") from uncles or aunts</b>	
<b>Parent's level of education</b>		Less than daily <sup>3</sup> †	1.0
Less than high school	1.2	Daily <sup>2</sup>	0.9
High school †	1.0	<b>Child care</b>	
Some postsecondary	0.9	<b>Child care arrangements</b>	
Completed postsecondary	1.3	Attends child care where Aboriginal languages are used	3.7*
<b>Household income (quintiles)</b>		Attends child care where Aboriginal languages are not used †	1.0
<b>Household size (continuous)</b>		Does not attend any regular child care	1.5*
<b>Region</b>		<b>Teacher/child care provider helps child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>	
Atlantic	0.8	No †	1.0
Quebec	0.9	Yes	2.3*
Ontario	0.7	<b>Community</b>	
Manitoba	0.5*	<b>Community as a ... place with First Nations cultural activities</b>	
Saskatchewan	0.7	Fair / Poor †	1.0
Alberta	0.7	Good / Very good / Excellent	1.4*
British Columbia	0.5*	<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages at the home of others</b>	
Territories †	1.0	Less than daily <sup>1</sup> †	1.0
<b>Home and family characteristics</b>		Daily <sup>2</sup>	1.6*
<b>Parent's mother tongue</b>		<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages in the community</b>	
Non-Aboriginal †	1.0	Less than daily <sup>1</sup> †	1.0
Aboriginal	2.1*	Daily <sup>2</sup>	0.7
<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages at home</b>		<b>Exposure to Aboriginal languages through media</b>	
Less than daily <sup>1</sup> †	1.0	Less than daily <sup>1</sup> †	1.0
Daily <sup>2</sup>	6.6*	Daily <sup>2</sup>	0.8
<b>Parents help child to understand First Nations culture and history</b>		<b>Participation in traditional activities such as singing, drum dancing, fiddling, gatherings and ceremonies</b>	
No †	1.0	Less than monthly <sup>4</sup> †	1.0
Yes	1.8*	At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	1.2
<b>Importance of speaking and understanding an Aboriginal language</b>			
Not very important / Not at all important †	1.0		
Somewhat important / Very important	2.3*		
<b>Grandparents involved in raising the child</b>			
No †	1.0		
Yes	1.4*		

**Table 2 Logistic regression model predicting the odds of being able to understand an Aboriginal language, off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5, Canada, 2006 (continued)**

	Odds ratio		Odds ratio
<b>Participation in hunting, fishing, trapping, camping activities</b>		<b>Participation in seasonal activities such as berry picking or gathering wild plants</b>	
Less than monthly <sup>4</sup> †	1.0	Less than monthly <sup>4</sup> †	1.0
At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	1.4*	At least monthly <sup>5</sup>	0.9

† reference group

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

1. Includes responses of more than once a week, once a week, at least once a month, at least once a year, less than once a year and never.

2. Includes responses of more than once a day and once a day.

3. Includes responses of more than once a week, once a week, less than once a week and never.

4. Includes responses of at least once a year, less than once a year and never.

5. Includes responses of more than once a day, once a day, more than once a week, once a week and at least once a month.

Note: The analysis is based on 2,780 children with no missing values on any of the covariates included in the model. The model correctly classified 85% of cases in the sample.

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

### Child care arrangements where Aboriginal languages are used play a significant role

Teachers and child care providers can also contribute to the passing down of Aboriginal languages to children. Once all other characteristics were taken into account, the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for off-reserve First Nations children who were in child care arrangements where Aboriginal languages were used were 3.7 times the odds for children who were in child care arrangements but were not exposed to Aboriginal languages in this context. Children who were not in regular child care arrangements had higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children who were in child care arrangements but were not exposed to Aboriginal languages (Table 2).

Moreover, the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for off-reserve First Nations children who had a teacher or child care provider who helped them understand First Nations culture and history were about twice the odds for children who did not receive such help.

### The community also makes a difference

Social networks in the community appear to be linked with young children's Aboriginal language knowledge. Once all other characteristics were taken into account, off-reserve First Nations children who were exposed to an Aboriginal language on a daily basis at the homes of others had higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children who were not (Table 2).

In addition, off-reserve First Nations children whose parents felt that their community was a "good," a "very good," or an "excellent" place for First Nations cultural activities were also found to have higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children whose parents were less satisfied with the availability of cultural activities in their community (Table 2).

### Participation in traditional activities and knowledge of an Aboriginal language are related

Aboriginal language knowledge and participation in traditional activities were found to be related. Once all

other characteristics were taken into account, young off-reserve First Nations children who took part in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping at least monthly had higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children who participated in these activities less frequently (Table 2). Language and culture are tightly connected and it is difficult to identify the direction of the relationship between the two. Aboriginal language knowledge and participation in traditional activities could be associated because Aboriginal languages are more likely to be used in the context of traditional Aboriginal activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping or camping; alternatively, it could be that those who speak an Aboriginal language are more likely to frequently engage in these activities. Regardless of which comes first, these findings suggest that activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping or camping can provide unique occasions for young First Nations children to hear, learn, and use their ancestral language.

## Children with registered Indian status are more likely to know an Aboriginal language

Some sociodemographic characteristics were associated with Aboriginal language knowledge. Once all other characteristics were taken into account, the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for young off-reserve First Nations children with registered Indian status were twice the odds for children without registered Indian status.

Younger parents were also found to be more likely to report that their child was able to understand an Aboriginal language. Off-reserve First Nations children whose parent was aged 24 and under, or between 25 and 34, had higher odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children whose parent was relatively older (i.e., 45 and over) (Table 2). Further analysis would be required to better understand this relationship.

The following sociodemographic characteristics were included in the model but were not found to have a significant effect on children's language knowledge: family structure (that is living with one or two parents); parent's level of education; household income and household size. Region of residence was also included in the model: children living in Manitoba and in British Columbia had lower odds of understanding an Aboriginal language than children living in the territories.

### Summary

This article uses data from the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey to identify some of the characteristics in the lives of young off-reserve First Nations children aged 2 to 5 that are associated with their ability to understand an Aboriginal language. Better knowledge of these characteristics is important for the survival of these languages.

The Aboriginal Children's Survey data indicate that opportunities for Aboriginal language acquisition can take place in different social environments and through different

activities in the lives of today's young off-reserve First Nations children. The home, however, seems to play a particularly important role: daily exposure to Aboriginal languages at home was the strongest predictor of off-reserve First Nations children's ability to understand an Aboriginal language, holding all other characteristics constant. Being in child care arrangements where Aboriginal languages were used, having parents who believed in the importance of speaking and understanding an Aboriginal language, and having at least one parent with an Aboriginal mother tongue were also found to be strong predictors of Aboriginal language knowledge for young off-reserve First Nations children.

Given that not all off-reserve First Nations children have the opportunity to be exposed to Aboriginal languages at home, the finding that the extended family (i.e., grandparents, aunts or uncles) also plays a role in passing down Aboriginal languages to young children is important. Moreover, at the community level, social networks and child care providers appear to contribute to the transmission of Aboriginal languages to young off-reserve First Nations children, even after accounting for family and sociodemographic characteristics. Finally, residing in a community perceived by parents as a good place for First Nations cultural activities, and frequently participating in hunting, fishing, trapping or camping, were also associated with off-reserve First Nations children's ability to understand an Aboriginal language.

While this study investigated the unique contribution of different characteristics to language knowledge, it is important to note that language knowledge is influenced by children's experiences over many years—especially if children are learning a language as a second language. The Aboriginal Children's Survey, however, only captures these experiences as reported at a single

point in time. In addition, there is evidence that off-reserve First Nations children who are exposed to an Aboriginal language both at home and outside the home are much more likely to be able to understand an Aboriginal language than children who are exposed exclusively at home or exclusively outside the home.<sup>15</sup>

  
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