

Meno Bimaadziwin: Healthy Bodies

Leisa Desmoulins (Lakehead University)

Abstract

Early Child Educators (ECE) offer informal education to families via workshops for parents and community members and programming for off-reserve Aboriginal children age 0-6 years. A recent study, *Meno Bimaadziwin: Healthy Bodies*, funded by Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and sponsored by Ka:nen, an organization supporting families, investigated healthy body weights for young Aboriginal children in the context of their families and communities. A Steering Committee guided the work. A literature review showed that the mainstream literature investigates children's healthy body weights through an obesity framework that focuses predominantly on changing children and parents' behaviours and findings of healthy eating and physical activity for obesity prevention and reduction. Limited Indigenous scholarship adds the concepts of embodiment and food security as important elements of healthy weights and as connected to individual and community wellbeing. The literature notes some connections between mental/emotional health and self-esteem as integral to healthy weights. This mixed methods study uses Indigenous research approaches to investigate how ECE workers can support Aboriginal children's healthy bodies. Methods included seven focus groups with 77 community member participants and a needs assessment survey with 25 ECE worker participants from three communities in northwestern Ontario. Focus group data illuminate three findings: children's healthy body weights research using a holistic approach with four dimensions—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—for meno bimaadziwin; qualitative indicators of wellbeing; and, the roles of families and caregivers for children's healthy bodies and communal wellbeing. Survey findings show that: EC educators perceive barriers to children's healthy bodies and families' sustainable wellbeing through constraints with: adequacy of sites and available resources to support children's holistic wellbeing; lack of site policies; comfort levels with mental/emotional health and self-esteem dimensions, which contrasts with their reliance on others and highly ranked training needs; and, parents' motivation and will to change. Conclusions follow.