



FIRST NATIONS OF QUEBEC  
AND LABRADOR HEALTH  
AND SOCIAL SERVICES  
COMMISSION

PERINATALITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD  
AMONG FIRST NATIONS

*The culture*  
A GIFT FOR  
FUTURE GENERATIONS



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### **NOTE TO THE READER**

The vision and examples presented here can in no way substitute for the wishes, culture and vision of the children's parents, communities and nations.

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## *Preamble*

This document is intended for members of First Nations as well as for the various interveners and professionals working with First Nations communities or anyone who is interested in the issue of perinatality among Quebec First Nations.

The framework is intended as a tool to preserve, transmit and reinforce traditional ways of doing things related to pregnancy and infancy. From pregnancy to the first years of a child's life in the family, this document hopes to perpetuate the different teachings and ceremonies surrounding perinatality among First Nations, using a holistic approach, in order to keep the circle alive.

We are aware that the definition of perinatality is unique to each person, and in no case would we want to define rigidly, in a single way, what perinatality should be for First Nations. We are aware of the different national, community, family and individual realities that exist. **The vision and examples presented here can in no way substitute for the wishes, culture and vision of the children's parents, communities and nations.**

By sharing some of the practices that are held in one community and some practices that are preserved in another, by lifting the veil on teachings that are still present in one family or another and in listening to the elders, we can reappropriate and transmit our cultures and our vision of the world.

We must recognize that the culture is still, and always, present in our communities.



For a healthy community, it's important to know where you come from in order to prepare for where you're going...

### **First Nations in Quebec, still present: the importance of language and culture is demonstrated.**

Aboriginal people cover the entire territory of Quebec. They are made up of ten First Nations in 40 communities and the Inuit Nation, divided into fourteen villages. In Quebec, according to the 2015 Indian Register of Indigenous Services Canada, there were 7,109 First Nations children from 0 to 6 years of age.

- Children 0 to 5 years of age make up 8.6% of the First Nations population.
- The average age of mothers when they have their first child is 22.
- Nearly half of all mothers breastfeed their babies.
- About six in ten parents speak a First Nations language as their mother tongue.
- About half of all children 0 to 5 years of age mostly speak a First Nations language in their daily lives.
- Nine out of ten parents think it is important for their children to practice the traditions.
- About 75% of children participate in traditional activities at least every month.

According to data from the 2014 First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey, in Quebec:

- Among little ones under 5 years of age, almost one in two children use the language of the community daily. The language most often spoken in childcare is a First Nations language (42%), followed by French (31%) and English (27%).
- The practice of cultural activities with children is a fundamental element for the transmission of culture to subsequent generations. Slightly more than 40% of children participate in cultural activities at least once a month, compared to less than one-fourth of children who never participate.



Source: First Nations Little Ones Shown With Big Numbers. FNQLHSSC, 2016.

## *The place of children among First Nations*

Children have always occupied an important place among First Nations.

### **They are the heart of the community.**

Children, seen as a gift, are placed in the center, in the heart of the circle, with their parents, family and community surrounding them. Their sense of family will grow through their discoveries and learnings.

The study of linguistics also teaches us a great deal about the place of children among First Nations. In fact, the words that define children in Aboriginal languages are good illustrations that enable us to better capture the value given to children. Take, for example, Atikamekw. In this language, the word for child is “awacic,” which means “little being of light.” This word gives us access to a holistic image and vision of the child; we immediately understand the importance of the child for this nation: hope, the future, love, happiness.



**“We would be nothing without children; we don’t want the things that happened to us to happen to them. History and colonialism have taken many of our cultures and languages. The whole family structure has collapsed. We now have the opportunity to rediscover them. The children are the future, and we cannot preserve our cultures and languages without the children.” Debbie Delisle, former Executive Director, Step-By-Step Child and Family Center, Mohawk from Kahnawake**

Even the functioning of a community is greatly influenced by the children who make it up. Indeed, even today, decisions, whether political or family, will often be made in consideration of the children and the generations to come. Take, for example, the principle of making decisions for the next seven generations of First Nations people. This illustrates the fact that we must think of the little ones as those who will come after us, when the community makes a decision.





## THE MYTH OF THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

In America, many First Nations share a myth of the creation of the world with many points in common. In Quebec, the Mohawks and Wendat share a common story about a pregnant woman who falls from the sky, although there are several variants. Here is one of the Wendat versions:

A long time ago, the Hurons-Wendat lived on the other side of the sky, on the clouds. One day, a young pregnant woman, named Aataensic, was looking for roots at the foot of a large tree to heal her sick husband. Unfortunately, because of over-digging, the tree fell, dragging the young woman into the hole.

Two large wild geese saw her falling to the ocean below. They rushed to poor Aataensic, and carrying her on their backs, saved her from drowning.

Not knowing what to do with the young woman, the geese turned to Great Turtle, who was swimming in the ocean. Recognized for her wisdom, Great Turtle convened a meeting of all marine animals to find a solution. Suddenly, she had an idea: “I saw Aataensic falling. Before, there was a tree. If any of you could dive into the ocean to bring back some of the earth from around the roots of the tree, I could spread it on my back and Aataensic could live on it.”

Among the best swimmers, Otter, Muskrat and Beaver tried, but none succeeded. It was then that Grandmother Toad volunteered. All the animals laughed, for Grandmother Toad was already old. She nevertheless dove into the ocean. When everyone thought she’d disappeared forever, Grandmother Toad sprang up again, spitting some earth from her mouth onto Great Turtle’s shell, and then fell asleep forever, too tired.

The earth was spread over Great Turtle’s shell, which soon became a large island. The young woman settled there and gave birth to her child. Since that time, whenever the Earth trembles, it is said to be Great Turtle, stretching.

This myth, in its symbolism and in its image, carries several elements to better understand the vision of the world, here of creation, for many First Nations. The Haudenosaunee say that if we look carefully at the image of a tree with its roots, we can make a rather direct link with a fallopian tube. The woman is expelled from the sky through the roots of the tree, a little like an egg. Thus, according to this image, each individual is, in a way, the story of creation that is constantly being repeated.

**“You know, before the non-Aboriginals arrived, every person had an animal name: mokw, loon, masko, bear, mos, moose, mikeciw, fox. Every family had a name. The name was the family’s clan. Why were there these clans? It was to avoid the problem of consanguinity, so that there, a fox couldn’t marry another fox because foxes are from the same family. He or she could get married to a wolf or a bear.” Paul-Yves Weizineau, elder from Opitciwan**





## *Pregnancy*

**Pregnancy is an important stage in a woman's life, and there are many teachings about it. We invite you to talk to elders or guardians of the teachings in your community so that they can tell you about the teachings, ceremonies, and traditions that are part of your community's history.**

“A pregnant woman has the honor of carrying life, she is lucky to have a connection between life on Earth and the spiritual world, so it is important to treat her well.” Kim Anderson

Traditionally, for all First Nations in Quebec, women have a special place, at the center of family and community life. Although there are many differences between nations, especially among those whose lifestyles differ in various ways, the fact remains that the central position of women is widespread.

This centrality, combined with the gift of life that women possess, confer on them great importance and special treatment. Since creation was also central among First Nations, women were seen in the same way as the Earth, which also brings forth life. We only have to think about the expression “Mother Earth.”

As a result, pregnancy and childbirth were cherished moments for the woman and the community as a whole. That is why the whole family and the community mobilized to make pregnancy and birth pleasant moments.

In the traditional culture, in the territory, men wanted to be providers, hunters, bringers of food for their families and communities. Women took care of the children, provided care for those who needed it, made objects and clothes, and took care of the fields when the way of life demanded as in Iroquoian culture. However, during a pregnancy, all the friends and relations tried to ensure that the environment (physical, social, spiritual and psychological) was as safe and positive for the mother as possible.

The father's support during pregnancy is important. It is often through traditional culture that he is able to bond with the unborn child, by singing traditional songs and playing drums or shakers for the unborn baby. Other future fathers, skilled with their hands, make utilitarian objects from their living environment. This is the case especially among the Atikamekw, where the future father still often makes the baby carrier (**Tikinakan**) which will be used to carry the child in the first months after birth. Among the Mohawks and the Wendat, the future father prepares the **shaker or certain essential elements** for the baby's arrival.





However, during pregnancy, the expectant mother will not rely solely on the support of her partner. The entire immediate and extended family will also support her and make sure she is well, especially if the woman is giving birth for the first time. After all, we often hear that a pregnancy surrounded by positive energy will bring forth a baby that is good-natured and calm.

Elders remind us that the baby is influenced from the moment it comes into existence, through what the mother sees, hears and says. It is said that the mother and the baby are together as one during the pregnancy. For this reason, it is important to keep the future mother happy.

For example, we compliment her, help her, listen to her and keep her happy in the same way that we protect her by avoiding unpleasant surprises or stressful events.

**“My niece was pregnant when her friend passed away. She was strongly urged not to attend the funeral so as not to be so exposed to feelings of sadness and anger, and to protect the baby from all the negative emotions. She didn’t go. In some societies, that may have been misinterpreted.” Debbie Delisle, former Executive Director, Step-By-Step Child and Family Center, Mohawk from Kahnawake**



Also, it is customary to speak to the mother and the baby in the mother tongue as soon as the baby shows its presence in the mother’s womb. Many First Nations also believe that language learning begins not at birth, but in the womb. We approach the mother and baby with kindness and delicacy. We sing traditional lullabies in the First Nations language when possible, accompanied by a shaker. We play the water drum, the **tewegan (drum)** gently near the mother’s tummy. Once born, to calm the baby, we continue singing the same lullabies and playing the drum, which is reminiscent of the sound of the mother’s heart when the baby was still inside her.

Among the teachings and traditions, it is necessary to name all that touches on the traditional plants. For example, some women recommend teas or herbs for the woman to drink at different stages of the pregnancy.

While some women supplement their diet with folic acid, iron or other vitamins, if necessary, others turn to more traditional medicine, based on herbs that they prepare in the form of teas or herbal teas during pregnancy or to facilitate childbirth. Among the Innu, for example, herbal teas are made from slippery elm bark to help deliver the baby. Among the Wendat, dandelion root tea is prepared to counteract nausea. Every future mother makes these choices supported by her knowledge, whether more traditional or more contemporary.





First Nations enjoy a multitude of stories and legends, ceremonies and traditions. The oral tradition is indeed still very present. As part of a pregnancy and a birth, many stories, from superstitions to stories drawn from life experience, will be told to the future mother.



## LEGEND TSHIKAPESH

Tshikapesh is a well-known character among the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, adults as well as children. He is a legendary hero who lives through a whole series of adventures. We see him evolve in all kinds of situations.

He is a strange being with powers, including the ability to change his size at will. Indeed, in the stories, Tshikapesh grows quickly, by leaps. He is a baby, then a youth, a man and an adult.

### His family situation

Tshikapesh is an orphan. His father and mother were killed before he was born, when he was still in his mother's womb. He has only one elder sister who watches over him. She intervenes constantly with him to inform him of dangers or to forbid him from doing things in order to save his life, which is constantly threatened.

Despite his sister's prohibitions, Tshikapesh cannot help but ignore her advice. So, he often finds himself in embarrassing or dangerous situations, and she must come to his rescue.

Each time, Tshikapesh promises he won't do it again, but he can't help it, he always does.

Credit: First Nations Education Council, 2007. Our legends to read and tell, Volume III.

**“I remember when I came to Kanehsatake to live with my husband, about seven months pregnant with my first child. On the road between Wendake and Kanehsatake, we passed a container truck, and a tire blew out right next to my window. The noise was intense and I jumped in my seat. I immediately had the reflex to protect my baby by holding my belly with my hands. I calmed myself, understanding what had caused the noise. When I arrived in Kanehsatake, I told my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law and both told me not to put my hands on my belly if something frightened me again, because the baby would have birthmarks where I put my hands. The baby was born without any birthmark... I know that a similar belief exists among the Atikamekw, where it is forbidden to scare the future mother, even a startle.” Isabelle Picard, Huron-Wendat**

## LEGEND

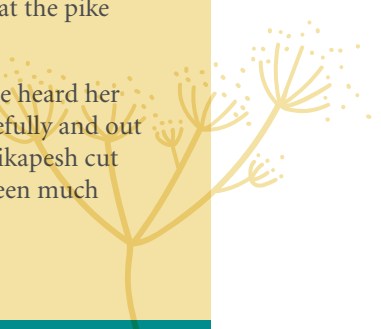
### TSHIKAPESH AND THE FISH

A long time ago there lived a man named Tshikapesh. Now Tshikapesh liked nothing better than to swim in the lakes and rivers, and he did just that all the time. However, in those days the pike was evil and Tshikapesh's big sister knew it, so she often prevented her brother from swimming. One day though, he went swimming despite her warnings and ended up getting swallowed by the enormous pike.

When he was inside the pike's belly, Tshikapesh remembered that his sister had set some fish hooks with bait. So he said to the pike "You should be looking for something to eat." The pike replied that he wasn't hungry – he had just eaten very well indeed. Tshikapesh tried again and said, "It doesn't matter if you're not hungry, go look for something to eat." But the pike did nothing except swim toward the shore of the lake. All this time, the sister of Tshikapesh was wondering where he had gone.

She was pretty sure Tshikapesh had been swallowed up by the pike and was dead. She was very sad. Tshikapesh, who was still in the belly of the pike, kept saying, "Go, look for something to eat." The pike kept replying that he wasn't hungry. Finally though, the pike started getting hungry and he saw some food, but what he saw was the bait that Tshikapesh's sister had set on a fishhook. The pike ended up getting caught by the fishhook. The sister of Tshikapesh saw from the shore that the pike had been caught, so she pulled on the fishing line.

As soon as she had landed the fish, she cut its stomach open with her knife. Suddenly, she heard her brother cry out, "Don't cut too deep or you'll cut me too!" Astonished, she cut more carefully and out came Tshikapesh. To make sure the pike would never cause harm again, the sister of Tshikapesh cut the fish up into many little pieces and she threw them back into the lake. The pike has been much smaller ever since.





Among the Mohawks, they also say that if you talk to babies in Mohawk while breastfeeding, they will understand everything that is said to them; it's a good time to teach them things, tell them how much you love them, talk to them about life.

Among the Atikamekw, it is said that the baby will hear what the tree used to make his or her baby carrier has heard, the elements of the forest and that the baby will feel calmed when in its carrier:

**“The tree had been used to make the tikinakan, the baby carrier, and I heard my grandfather and my grandmother say that, when the child is tied in his tikinakan, she hears the tree that was used which heard the wind, the rain, the animals and the birds. She hears all this. So when she’s in her tikinakan, she sleeps soundly because she too hears what the tree has heard.” Jeanette Laloche, elder from Wemotaci**

**TAKE A MOMENT TO MEET WITH YOUR COMMUNITY’S ELDERS AND GUARDIANS OF KNOWLEDGE SO THEY CAN TELL YOU THE STORIES, LEGENDS AND BELIEFS OF YOUR COMMUNITY.**




## CHILDBIRTH

“Canada’s oldest midwifery traditions stem from Aboriginal peoples. Midwives have been part of virtually every Aboriginal community.” (Shroff, 1997)

In the past, life was lived in the territory in a more traditional way. Childbirth took place with the help of midwives. These women had the role of supporting, caring for and guiding pregnant women before, during and after the birth of the baby, in addition to attending to the delivery. This role was often passed down from mother to daughter. Midwives helped women carrying life at all stages of their pregnancy, and even beyond. The Cree term for midwife means “the one who delivers life into the world.”

**Algonquin: Nidabijewinikwe  
Mohawk: Watasnienens, she helps  
Atikamekw: Otapinawso iskwew, the one who takes the newborn child  
Innu: Ka Inniukaushet ou Ka inniukat auassa (the one who gave birth to the children)**

In a holistic approach that linked the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects, the practice of traditional birthing in the territory (and all prenatal and postnatal care) combined teachings on medicinal plants, the vision of the world, Aboriginal philosophy, bonding with the child as well as spiritual teachings and more anatomical teachings. Delivery most often took place in the camp, a tent sometimes set up a little bit in the rear for



this purpose. Among the Innu and Atikamekw, some elders remember that the children in the camp were told to check around in the dry wood or under the old stumps to see if they might see the baby. That's how, at one time, they explained the baby's arrival.

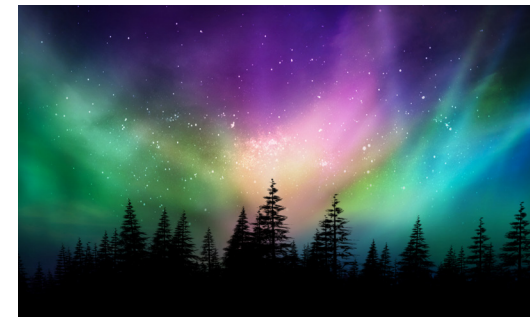
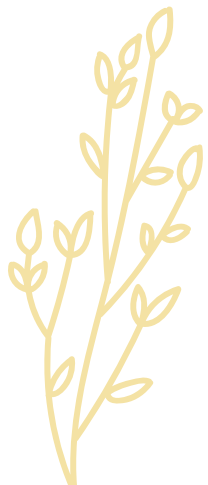
**“There was my father, the midwife, my mother and I. Then, my mother gave birth and the kokom (grandmother) said, “Stay outside, then when you see your little brother or little sister run, go catch him! Go catch her!” I waited outside, the wind was blowing, there was a snowstorm. Suddenly my father came and said, “Jeannette, what are you doing here?” I replied, “Don’t bother me, I have to catch my little brother or sister.” My father laughed and went back inside the house. Not long after, I heard a baby crying, and then, I was there, in the doorway, ready to catch it. It was in conditions like this that our elders, our mothers, our grandmothers gave birth.” Jeanette Laloche, elder from Wemotaci**

Plants were used to manage and facilitate delivery. Among the Innu, for example, marsh moss was used to mop up blood and fluids during delivery. After delivery, the woman was given spruce gum tea to stimulate blood circulation. Poultices were also made with this same gum and placed on the belly of the new mother to help heal her insides.

**“My mother had always explained to me that the delivery of a child is a happy event. The woman, the midwife, got dressed up in her Sunday best, a beautiful dress. And the birthing tent was spotless. New fir trees, everything was just right, it seemed to me, for the delivery. There were two women, two, three women, plus the lady who was going to give birth.” Madeleine Ashini, elder from Matimekush-Lac-John**

Even if, today, childbirth usually takes place in a more contemporary setting in hospitals, many rituals and ceremonial practices surrounding the arrival of a child are still alive. Once more, don't hesitate to meet with the elders so that they can tell you about YOUR rituals and ceremonies.

During labor, it isn't unusual to see not only the spouse of the mother-to-be in the birthing room, but also her mother, mother-in-law, sister, grandmother and aunts constantly coming and going. Since all of these people had an important role to play throughout the pregnancy of the expectant mother, in support or otherwise, it is not surprising that they all come to the birthing room during labor. It is the woman's choice to restrict access to the birthing room as she wishes, unless a difficult medical situation emerges and the situation requires it.



During childbirth, a custom common to many nations is to welcome the baby as serenely as possible. Many elders we have met stressed the importance of speaking in the mother tongue during labor and when the baby arrives.

Then, as soon as the child is born, it is immediately wrapped in a blanket with very precise gestures to avoid the shock of the outside world, as if it were still in the mother's womb.

**“When my mother-in-law arrived in the birthing room, she started to talk to my boy in Kanien’kéha (Mohawk), tenderly. My spouse similarly spoke to him, although I had rarely heard him speak this language. From then on, she spoke to him in Kanien’kéha. I didn’t understand anything she was saying to him, but, in some sense it seemed completely normal. When he was ready to open his eyes, he looked at her in such a way, as if he understood her.” Isabelle Picard, Huron-Wendat**

Some nations, communities and families hold a welcoming or interpretive ceremony as soon as the baby is born. During this ceremony, held only in the Aboriginal language, an elder will gather all those present at the birth to welcome the baby and give him or her a special name. This name will often correspond to something, an event or a particularity that happened around the birth of the baby. They present the baby to the Creator and to the welcoming Earth. For others, the ceremony will be held a little later.

The placenta, called the baby's pillow in some Innu families, is the subject of a ceremony of the same name in many Aboriginal nations. The burial of the placenta, usually performed at the foot of a tree, to the sound of a drum and songs proper to this ceremony, expresses through a ritual the return of the newborn's protective envelope to its roots, to Mother Earth.

**“The way we do it, it's you who is going to dig a hole in the earth.” The grandmother puts in some fir, the young mother separates the placenta from the plastic, she wraps it in a red cloth, then she puts it in, with the fir branches, then it's the father who puts the earth back in. It's like a return to Mother Earth. “Is it deep enough?” I said: “No.” I had him digging and digging. At one point, he says, “I'm in pain, my back hurts, my arms hurt.” “It's just a small sample of the pain your wife had to deal with to bring your baby into the world.” He laughed and said, “OK, OK.” As he had attended the delivery, he said, “It's like I've only reached 2 cm, huh?” He had made the connection. After, we had tea. We always have tea after practicing this ceremony.” Martha Coocoo, elder from Wemotaci**







The entire ceremony related to the burial of the placenta has become possible once again over recent years. During the period between the end of traditional birthing and the beginning of the 2010s, it was almost impossible to be given the placenta after a birth since it was considered biomedical waste. However, steps taken by the Mohawks of Kanehsatake at Hôpital de Saint-Eustache, parallel to other steps taken in higher places, have led to changes in the law so that it now permits hospitals to give the placenta to parents who ask for it. Many families had kept the ceremony alive, but if they did not have the placenta, they held a similar ceremony using the umbilical cord.

## *The first days*

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### **BREASTFEEDING**

In a belief shared by many First Nations, if we speak to the baby in the Aboriginal language during breastfeeding, he or she will understand everything.

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### **BACK IN THE HOME**

A fairly widespread belief among Quebec First Nations is that we can communicate with children in their sleep. Some people consider this the perfect opportunity to teach, transmit and give love to the baby:

**“But, he’s sleeping! That’s the best time to send a message to your baby. Because I’m going to talk to your child’s spirit and not to his or her conscious mind. The conscious mind is traveling, but not the spirit. It is important to let future mothers and fathers know, to tell them to talk to their child while she’s sleeping, because it is the child’s spirit that is receptive. The conscious mind isn’t there anymore. That’s what’s important.” Paul-Yves Weizineau, elder from Opitciwan**



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## CEREMONIES

### THE DANCE OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE

Back when humans could still talk with the animals, a young boy set out to hunt for small game. He saw a squirrel and followed it to a cliff. The squirrel jumped onto a tree top just below the cliff. He looked down and saw two boys. They were his age, but were much smaller than he was. The little boys were also trying to catch the squirrel, but their arrows were so small that they hardly flew halfway up the tree.

The boy decided to help them and he shot an arrow at the squirrel, which fell beside the two little boys. They went up to it and saw the huge arrow that had pierced the animal. They looked up and saw the face of the boy looking down. They asked him to help them remove the arrow, which was much too heavy for them. The boy went down the cliff and gave them the squirrel, even though he was the one who had killed it. He helped them carry the squirrel to their home, and in this way they arrived at the place where the two little boys lived.

Inside the little boys' home were their parents. They called themselves the "Djonh-geh-onh" (the Little People) of the Hunters' tribe. Their duty was to chase away the evil spirits that lived under the earth. This was the first time the little people had met a human being, so they decided to celebrate with a ceremony they called the Dark Dance, which was danced at night. They told the little boy to watch everything carefully. Then, the woman, who was in charge of the ceremony, made a great feast and called the rest of her people by the sound of a drum.

They began the ceremony with an opening speech. Then they drank some blackberry juice and smoked the sacred tobacco. The little boys' father played the drum and everyone began to sing. This went on all night. The boy stayed for many days, and each night they performed the same ceremony. Finally, one day, the boy left, but first he promised he would do the Dark Dance three days after he got home, and he kept his promise. The boy also taught his own people everything he had learned about the little people and their ceremonies, which are still being performed to this day.

Many ceremonies, rituals and rites of passage are still taking place in First Nations communities and families. True elements of political, cultural and identity affirmation, these ceremonies are a reappropriation of their own traditional culture.

Early childhood is a unique moment in which to inculcate sociocultural values and develop a strong sense of belonging and identity in children. Ceremonies are one of the ways to do this. A number of ceremonies are held during this period. It is important to remember that some families will systematically participate while others will participate in certain ceremonies and others, not at all.

It's up to each family to choose. Today, it is not uncommon to see adaptations of certain ceremonies.

Some families turn to more conventional ceremonies, such as the baptism of their child in the religion of their choice; others hold a welcoming ceremony a bit like an official presentation. During this moment of celebration, family and friends are invited to come and meet the baby at a given moment. This gathering can be simple or more elaborate; more spiritual or traditional or less so, according to the wishes of the baby's parents.

Among the Atikamekw, there is a special ceremony for welcoming new babies. Today, many young families celebrate the birth of their child with a newborn ceremony or *Cawerimawasowin*, which marks the arrival of a new baby in the family. More than just a ceremony marking the birth of the child and its recognition in the family circle, this ceremony highlights the place, strength and responsibility of women as mothers. In other communities, this ceremony, an occasion for rejoicing and feasting, will be held once a year for all the babies born that year. On this occasion, they make an offering of tobacco and thank the Creator for the gift of the child. It is also an opportunity to choose the elders who will "follow the child" throughout his or her life, transmitting the teachings in a timely manner.


Also, many Aboriginal nations in Quebec practice a special ritual in connection with the umbilical cord. When it has fallen off, it is sewn into a piece of cloth that is then placed near the child. There are several variants to this ritual. Sometimes the umbilical cord is buried during a special ceremony, symbolizing a return to the Earth, a presentation of the child to Mother Earth, which is reminiscent of the placenta ceremony. Other times, the child will keep it.

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## CEREMONIES AROUND THE AGE OF ONE

The first steps ceremony, or *Orowitahawsowin*, performed in the Atikamekw Nation among others, is an important rite of passage for children, their parents and family, as well as their community. It is indeed symbolic, a vision of the world and a philosophy about the roles that are demonstrated in the ceremony. During this ceremony, each person present will commit to being an example for the child. Before this ceremony, which takes place around the age of one or when the child is old enough to walk, the child will not be allowed to take his or her first steps outside the family home. Taking place early in the morning, near a large east-facing tent, the child is dressed in the traditional way. The site of the ceremony, which will be held





exclusively in Atikamekw, is decorated. Boys are given an ax and a toy rifle and girls, an ax and a toy basket. The child, accompanied by his or her godfather and godmother, walks on a path littered with fir branches, symbolizing the obstacles of life. The child falls, gets up again, is encouraged by cries and laughter. The child gets to the end of the path, and is invited to pretend to cut wood, go hunting or to carry and stack the logs, according to his or her inclinations. Then, back to the tent to the applause of the participants.

This ceremony conveys many values: respect, courage, mutual aid, strength and community spirit. It affirms the masculine and feminine roles, among others. It presents to the children their circle of relatives, their clan in a way, the people who will accompany them all their life and who will participate in their spiritual, emotional, physical or intellectual development.

Among the Cree, a similar ceremony takes place when children are old enough to walk: the take-off ceremony. This ceremony welcomes children into Cree society. The conduct of the ceremony is very similar to the first steps ceremony. In particular, it emphasizes the value of each person in Cree society.

Among the Wendat and Mohawks, there is a naming ceremony. This special ceremony will give the child a name in Wendat or Mohawk, as the case may be. This name will have a specific meaning for the child since it will reflect one of his or her characteristics or personality. Thus, it is important to observe children from birth and to encourage them later in the development of their personal abilities.

**“But, what we forget, too, one of the ceremonies that is very important, is the canoe ceremony. I remember when I had that ceremony. For little girls, it’s a baby carrier. Why a canoe? To learn to be a provider, while a baby carrier is to teach the girl the role of the woman. She plays the role of a woman, while the little boy, with the little canoe, pretends he’s the provider, a man. After that, there is also the snowshoe ceremony, which is important. Around the age of five, six or seven. After that, there is the bow ceremony, I remember that I had this ceremony with my grandfather. For a little girl, it’s the first meal she cooks for her family. I remember, for the canoe ceremony, I was taken into the woods. It was my job to choose a birch tree and my job to cut it down. Whatever sized boat I wanted! We were there all day. Just until when the man who had brought me there began to prepare the canoe. When he was done, we went to see my father and said, “Okay, we’re done, it’s time to invite the family.” He tied up the little canoe and said, “Now, go make a man of yourself. Everything you kill, put it there, in your canoe.” He brought some small things to put in the boat. After that, I remember, with my aspen branch, I was going to hunt! Then the tikinakan ceremony, that was with my father-in-law and my mother-in-law who had prepared the baby carrier. That’s where they said, “Now you’re going to pretend you’re the woman.” It’s the same for the snowshoe. What is also important is the teaching of the stars. Because snowshoes are prepared in the shape of a star; if you see it the way you should, you’ll see a lot of stars in it. Six-pointed stars.” Paul-Yves Wezineau, elder from Opitciwan**



Among Mohawks, there is also a very interesting ritual for women and future mothers. This ceremonial rite, called the moon basket, begins at puberty. The girl is given a basket made from ash, in which she will put objects that represent her and describe her personality. The basket will be kept and soon after the birth of her first child, while all the attention is turned towards the new baby and on herself as a new mother, with all that that implies in terms of tasks, responsibilities, education and all the rest, they give her back this basket. Through the rediscovery of the meaningful objects, the young mother will rediscover the whole person that she is. It is a way for mothers not to forget who they are as people and women in their own right.

## *Conclusion*

The topic of perinatal among First Nations is extremely rich and interesting. Although it is poorly documented in its entirety, by assembling and identifying the cultural elements (ceremonies, beliefs, philosophy, lifestyle, teachings, support, etc.), we manage to get a pretty good idea of it.

While there are some differences in socio-cultural practices among First Nations surrounding perinatal, there is a lot of common ground around this topic, including that children are in the center of the circle, surrounded by their family and community. The value of each child as a gift, as the future, as a hope for preserving and transmitting a culture in all that it expresses is recognized in the literature, in studies and in the interviews conducted.

Another point that is constantly raised is the desire to reinforce the traditional teachings surrounding perinatal among First Nations for parents, children, the family and the community. This reinforcement relies on community-based programs that take culture into account, regardless of the sector of activity. It also includes agreements with non-Aboriginal health and education services that take into account First Nations perinatal cultures.

Children with strong identities will know who they are. They will be better equipped for the life that awaits them. And this process starts well before birth.

**“Let’s ensure that First Nations children can flourish and take their place in a culture that is theirs.” Debbie Delisle, former Executive Director, Step-By-Step Child and Family Center, Mohawk from Kahnawake**



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*The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples defines the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples with respect to their culture, identity, language, employment, health and education. The Declaration stresses the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions. It also prohibits discrimination against Indigenous peoples and encourages their full participation in all decisions affecting them. It recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to live as distinct peoples and to pursue their own vision of their development (United Nations, 2008).*

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Take a moment to meet with the elders and guardians of knowledge in your community so they can tell you the stories, legends and teachings of your community in connection with:

Pregnancy

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Giving birth

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The first days

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The ceremonies

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Education

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Others

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