

Grandmothers' breastfeeding stories to mothers: a knowledge translation gift

Breastfeeding is an ideal way to feed babies that promotes and protects health throughout life. In the Northwest Territories, Canada, in follow-up to a study from one region of the territory, we conducted a territory-wide study to learn about breastfeeding and at the same time look at breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. We were particularly interested in knowledge translation that included and preserved Indigenous traditional knowledge in our remote communities. The study design comprised of three data collection methods including retrospective chart audits, sharing circles, and individual interviews with mothers. The grandmothers participated in sharing circles capturing the experiences of past feeding practices and traditional mothering knowledge. Sharing circle methodology is aligned with the ways of life of Indigenous northern peoples, a form of sharing and talking in respect and appreciation of each other and in a spirit of preserving and safeguarding their words for future generations. This brief focuses on grandmothers' stories that were identified as: feeding practices, being resourceful, surviving hardship, rekindling the past and sharing wisdom.

Grandmothers talked about their desire to breastfeed all of their babies exclusively. There were barriers to this goal such as sore breasts or poor latch, consequently leading to some mothers resorting to artificial feeding or ending breastfeeding early, but they described being resourceful. Innate and practical mothering practices facilitated their resourcefulness in caring for their babies with what the land provided. They described using rabbit brains, fish broth and caribou and moose broth, if they could not breastfeed their infants. In some instances, another mother will nurse other babies if the mother is not available. It was also common to use local moss as a diaper for the baby.

Surviving hardship at their childrearing time in northern Canada was a part of bush life. The challenges of harsh temperatures of the Arctic, associated with hunting and trapping in the bush and coupled with breastfeeding babies, shape their will for survivorship and resourcefulness. When it became hard to breastfeed in the cold, mothers fed babies with broth or rice milk. The fourth theme is rekindling the past for their communities. This is maintaining their roles as knowledge keepers, cultivating relationship to the land, and preserving the tradition of breastfeeding as a part of life's practices. The concept of land and people as fluid, learning life's lessons from and with the land, and nourishing children with breastmilk are all cultural practices fostering health and wellbeing. Lastly, the fifth theme identified from the sharing circles is sharing wisdom. Through storytelling, grandmothers imparted gems of knowledge and teaching about various subjects such as benefits of breastfeeding, care of the baby, watchfulness, importance of fathers to participate in parenting, shared responsibility for the new baby, support of friends and other women, and pregnancy care.

It is evident that community grandmothers wish to share a precious gift to mothers that may impact

the lives of individuals, families, and communities. The engagement of elders and grandmothers in preserving the mothering practices and histories of breastfeeding may play a critical role in improving the breastfeeding practices and health outcomes of mothers and babies in the Northwest Territories, Canada.

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Publications

[Creating exclusive breastfeeding knowledge translation tools with First Nations mothers in Northwest Territories, Canada.](#)

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[Learning from mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers about breastfeeding in the Northwest Territories](#)

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