FINDINGS REPORT ON

SAPUJJIJUIT

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

FINDINGS REPORT FROM SAPUJJIJUIT CONSULTATIONS

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

February 2022

For Tungasuvvingat Inuit

Written by: Okpik Consulting Inc.

Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI) has long advocated for Inuit children, youth and families involved in child welfare agencies in Ontario to remain within their communities. In 2020, the Province of Ontario acknowledged that there is an over-representation of Indigenous children and youth involved in child welfare agencies across the province and announced a redesign of the child welfare system. This includes re-aligning in distinctive-based approaches for Indigenous communities, particularly community-based prevention, early intervention and family-based options. Through this, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) designated TI to be its Inuit representative for Inuit children and families in Ontario who are in contact with Children's Aid Societies (CAS) to support the access of Inuit-specific services and to advocate for Inuit families in maintaining connections and strengthening community well-being. The Sappujjijuit Project is currently underway to identify gaps, barriers and aspirations of the Inuit community to create an Inuit Foster Care Program. This report provides insight into the experiences of Inuit community members and examines how a Sapujjijuit Program may improve the experiences of Inuit children and families involved in child welfare agencies.

This report was prepared for the Sapujjijuit Project by Tungasuvvingat Inuit in partnership with Inuuqatigiit Centre for Inuit Children, Youth and Families. We gratefully acknowledge and thank those who participated in this phase of the Project and for sharing their experiences, views and perspectives.

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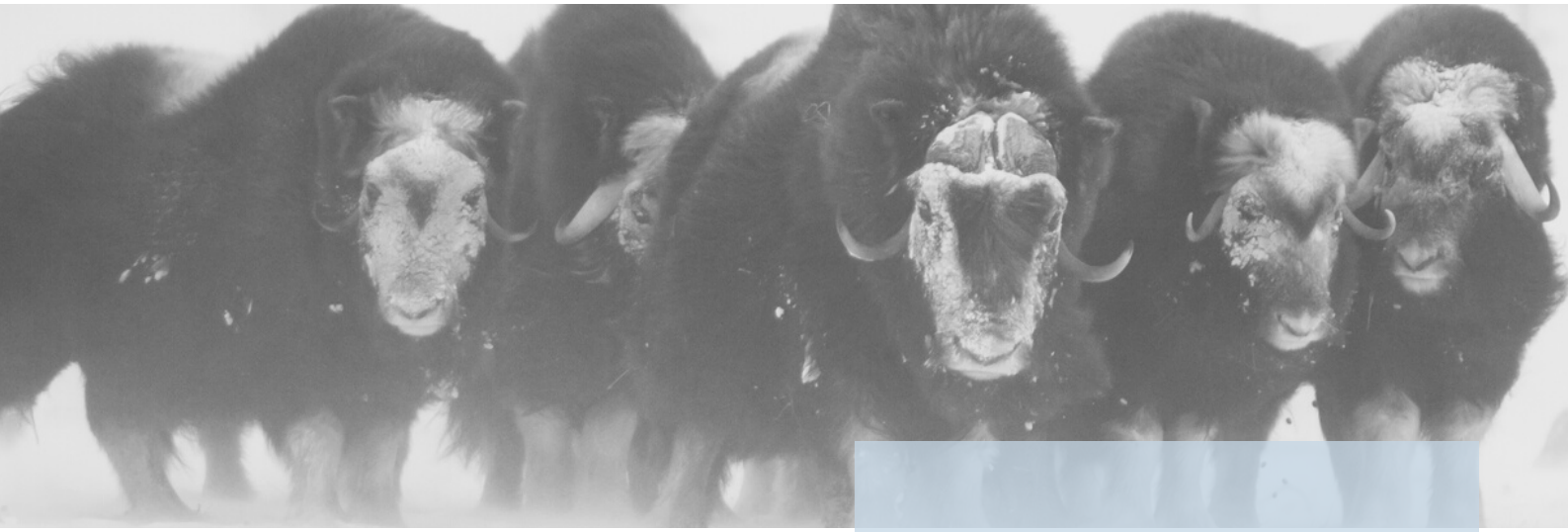
SAPUJJIJUIT CONSULTATIONS



Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI) in collaboration with Inuuqatigiit Centre for Inuit Children, Youth and Families began preliminary consultations with the Inuit community in Ontario by creating a Steering Committee in 2021. The Steering Committee is made up of 23 members with various backgrounds, including Inuit community members and Children's Aid Society representatives. The purpose of the Steering Committee is to ensure that proper representation of lived experiences and Ministry policies and knowledge are accounted for in the development of an Inuit Foster Care Program known as the Sapujjijuit Program. The Sappujjijuit Program will provide Inuit-specific training to families across the province in order to build and strengthen Inuit foster homes and to keep Inuit children, youth and families connected to culture, traditions, language and community.

Overview:

- Five community consultations (ages 30 +)
- Inuit Youth (16-29)
- Inuit Community Members

Due to the ongoing novel-corona virus pandemic, community consultations were conducted virtually to gain insight, knowledge and experiences of Inuit youth and families in the child welfare system. The sessions were supported by an Inuk counsellor and an Inuktut interpreter.
The consultations focused on identifying key themes and recommendations to best support Inuit families involved in Children's Aid Societies.

INUIT YOUTH CONSULTATIONS

The Sapujjijuit Steering Committee recognizes the importance of learning from Inuit youth who have been involved in CAS. Consultations with Inuit youth will help to inform gaps and barriers in the current foster care system and help to identify best practices to meet the needs of Inuit children and youth in care and for future Inuit foster families.

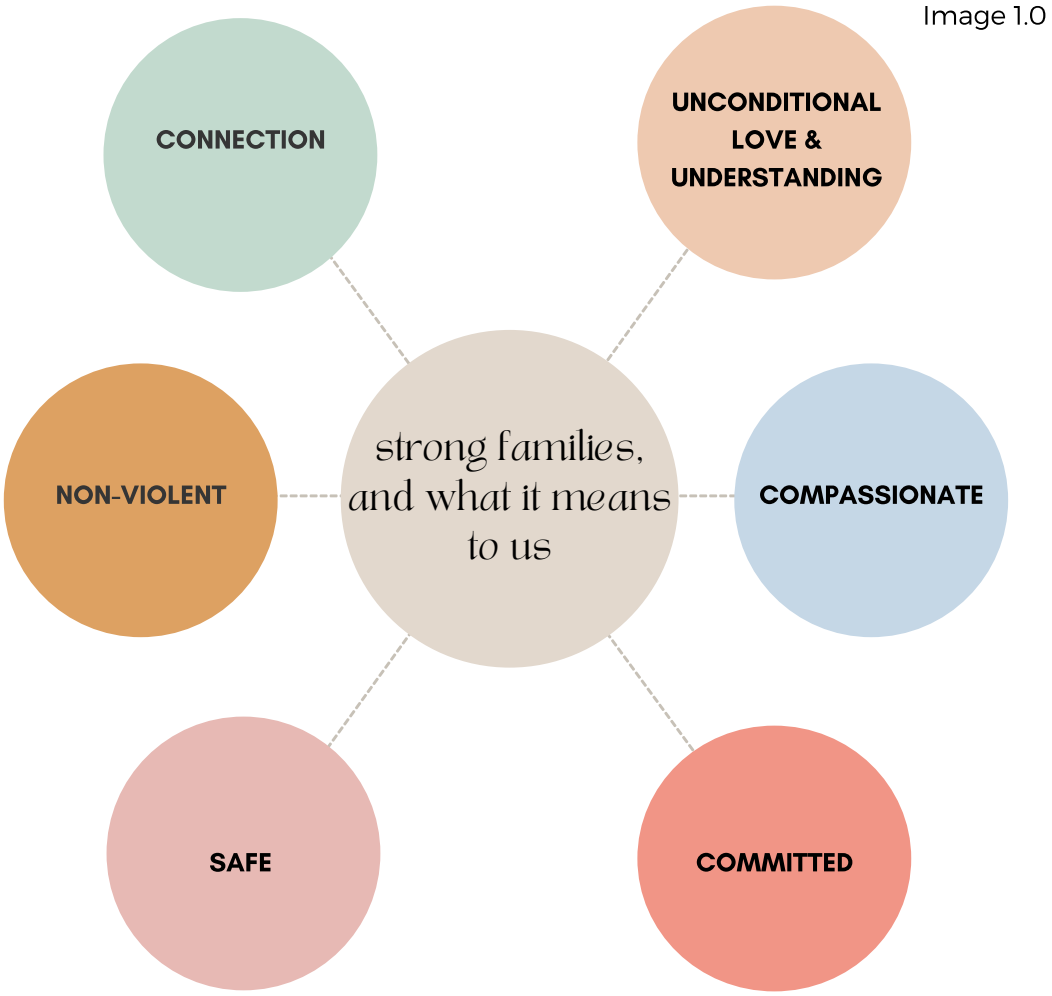
The consultations showed that many gaps and barriers exists in the child welfare system and access to culturally relevant and safe programs and services lacked on many fronts including experienced case workers within the Inuit community, system navigation and connection to culture, traditions, language and community. An overwhelming number of Inuit youth expressed loss of identity and language which has resulted in barriers to connection with their family and community.

Inuit youth have a strong sense of empowerment to pursue academic and professional goals when they feel supported and guided. In their experiences with CAS, Inuit youth felt they've had to address issues and navigational systems on their own and have felt strongly that CAS workers have not taken their cultural concerns seriously and shared there is an opportunity for improving relationships by providing safe and inclusive spaces for Inuit youth to decide what it is they aspire to do and aspire to be. They shared during the consultations that safe spaces and safe homes are often overlooked in policies and procedures and being with fellow Inuit provides the foundation needed to be understood, heard and supported in culturally safe ways. They expressed being placed in Inuit foster homes children and youth will have access to language, culture, and traditions. In addition, youth expressed that these placements will provide a safety net where awareness of intergenerational trauma and experiences are wholly understood and supported. Inuit youth also shared that this builds their identity, sense of community and sense of belonging allowing growth and well-being of individuals all while minimizing trauma. Though it was recognized that intergenerational trauma may pose risks to child, youth or families, there is a shared and communal healing journey.
By allowing Inuit youth to continue to live in non-Inuit foster homes, there is fear for ongoing loss of identity, culture, language, traditions and community.

"The colour of our skin does not mean you get to choose who we are" – Inuk youth, 2022

Family's and communities play a pivotal role in the emotional and psychological development of children. We know that children respond differently to different situations based on their environment and the nature-nurture factors. Often times, children and youth will associate terms differently from one to another based on many environmental factors, especially those who have experienced or are experiencing foster placements. Within Inuit culture, it is traditional knowledge and experience to care for and support community, regardless of blood relation and that community encompasses the whole of the individual. Thus, varying ideas about what family is and what family means. During the Sapujjijuit consultations with Inuit youth, participants were quick to write what strong families mean to them. One participant expressed that strong families isn't about perfection and being better, but working out challenges together and healing together through understanding, compassion and connection. Image 1.0 shares descriptions of what strong families mean to Inuit youth:

Image 1.0



Below are sticky notes that were drawn directly from the youth consultations about the strengths they feel the Inuit family and community has that helps them to grow:

Open communication

traditional knowledge transfer

Love

Acceptance

Connections

Open-mindedness; sharing feelings

We talk it out

they never give up on you

Supportive for positive coping mechanisms

We don't compare traumas

Youth participants shared their personal experiences in the child welfare system during the consultations - most indicating their experiences were negative, particularly CAS workers lacking educational awareness about Inuit traditions, culture, language and customary practices. One participant shared they had a positive experience in group home settings and stated it helped for this individual during that time - living communally with other youth with similar backgrounds and not feeling alienated from the rest of the world like their experience in a foster home. Another participant indicated they built a strong and trusting relationship with a group home worker who ended up adopting, however, they were challenged with systemic policy issues and criticism from CAS during the process which posed unnecessary conflicts for the child, the adoptee and CAS.

During the consultations, group homes were far more supported by the youth than standard foster homes. Many expressed frustration over the system where they felt they were less then. When the question was posed to them about how CAS could help youth grow and succeed, they shared the following in image 1.1:

The image describes how to best support Inuit youth involved in Children's Aid Societies. Youth expressed that harm reduction and prevention and early intervention services can help keep families together, they've also highlighted a number of times the need for cultural sensitivity training for CAS. Youth also shared that financial support is almost non-existent to the youth themselves and never benefitted from the financial support CAS offers foster families, including the lack of support in transitioning between placements, where suitcases are never provided, leaving youth feeling helpless and a sense of homelessness as they pack their belongings in bags.

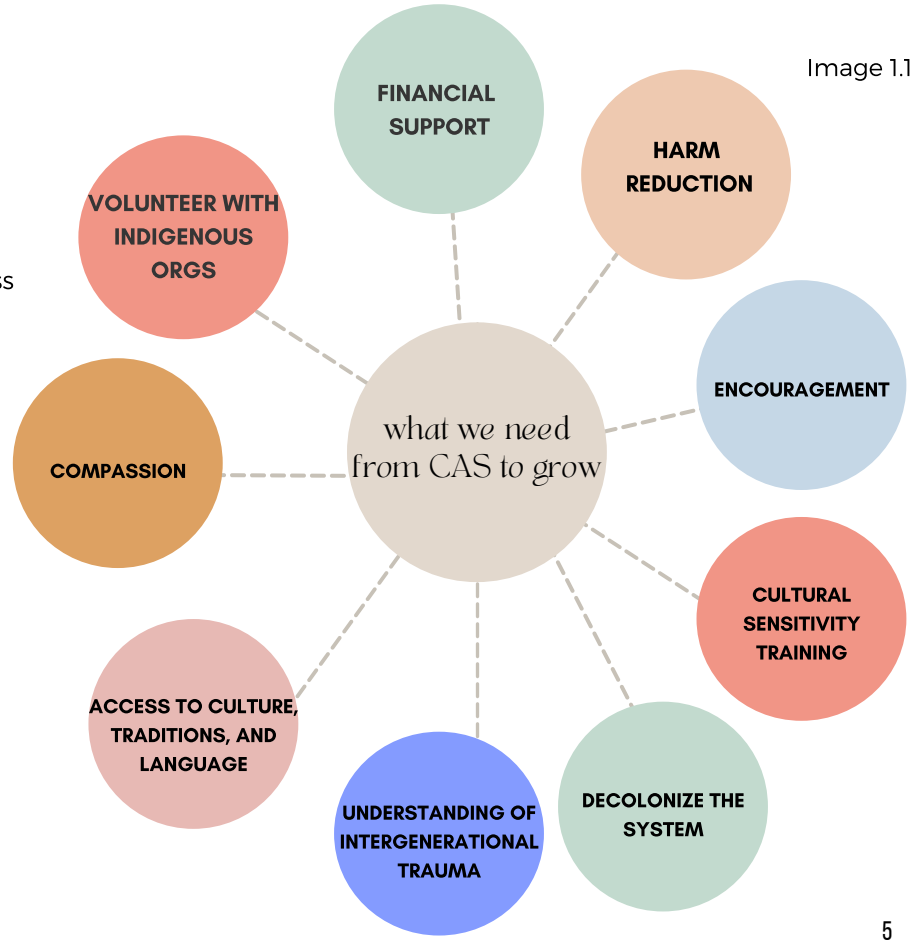


Image 1.1

Although it is ideal for Inuit youth to remain with their families, they recognized that it may not always be possible. Youth were very quick to share their ideal foster family citing they wished that they had access to Inuktut (Inuit language that encompasses all dialects) and country food more regularly. The following image shows what an ideal foster family looks like based on the consultations.

Image 1.2 shows that cultural and linguistic connection is important to their sense of belonging. Ideally, Inuit children and youth are placed in Inuit homes, who have access to language and cultural identity - this leaves youth feeling safe, connected, heard, and understood.

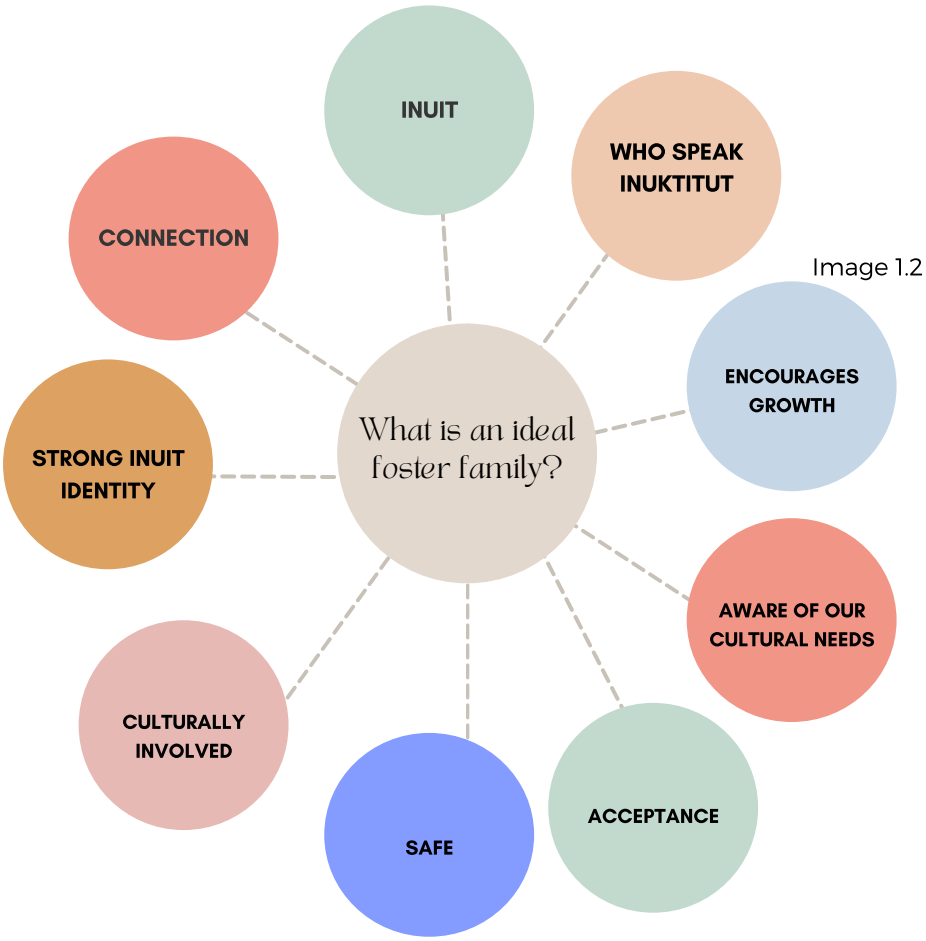


Image 1.2

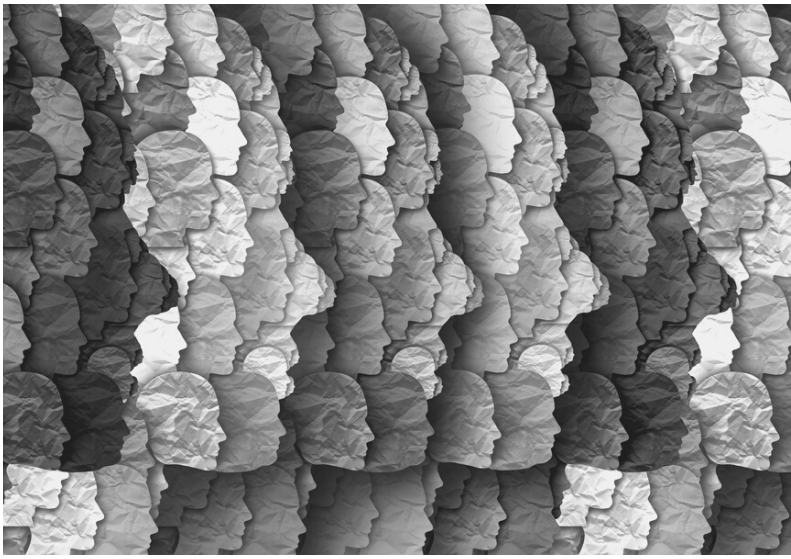
VALUES

The Sapujjijuit Steering Committee recommended the need to understand and gain insight into the values of Inuit community members to create safe and inclusive spaces. Understanding this knowledge will ensure that the Sapujjijuit Program is guided in what those values are, what they stand for, and what should be the guiding principles.

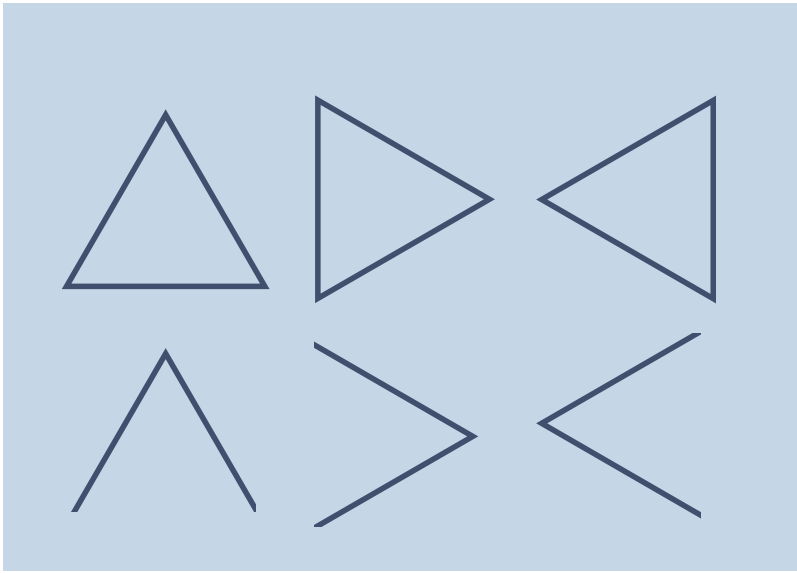
Throughout the entirety of the consultations, Inuit youth expressed the need to remain connected to culture, traditions and language. As this conversation arose, they shared the fear and worries of loosing their ties to who they are as Inuit during their time in the child welfare system and reconnecting can be just as painful. The Sapujjijuit Program should ensure that the values embed **open-mindedness**, **compassion**, **equity** that is centred around **ilaagit**, *family* with a focus on **awareness** and **education**.

CULTURAL SAFETY

Today we are seeing more and more organizations offering cultural safety training, but what does this actually mean? Cultural safety could be understood as a way of protecting ones culture by providing necessary awareness and education to those who may not be aware or it could be about delivering programs that protects and promotes cultural practices. Inuit youth shared the importance of recognizing ones cultural identity and having accessible cultural practices, such as access to resources, knowledge holders and programming. They also shared that cultural safety also comes in a form of non-Inuit who are open-minded to learning, who are non-judgemental and respects Inuit identity, culture, traditions and language.



Youth expressed the importance of ensuring that Inuit remain in homes where Inuktut is accessible, whether the foster families speak this at home or offering language classes. There was a strong desire to see Inuit children and youth placed in Inuit foster homes, however, if that is not possible that placements be made to homes where there is similar cultural backgrounds. Cultural safety is Inuit remaining in their communities.



INUIT COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

Similarly, the consultations conducted with the Inuit community across Ontario echoed the findings from the youth engagements. According to the participants, gaps and barriers exists well for families involved in child welfare agencies, including parents, guardians and family members caring for those involved in CAS.

Rather focusing on existential gaps, community members focused on bridging gaps to bring forward meaningful changes to how the system can operate to best meet the needs of the Inuit community in the province, such as a gap analysis of the current employment and self-employment rates of Inuit and establishing a framework that aims to improve transferable skillsets and access to equitable employment opportunities for both urban and rural areas. There was shared knowledge amongst participants that Ottawa has a large representation of Inuit and accessing Inuit-specific services and programs are easier than those living in rural communities. The framework would address the need for other service providers within the province to work closely with Inuit organizations to identify programs and services to meet the needs of community members. Along with closing employment gaps, community members expressed a strong desire to see improved collaboration between organizations and CAS.

This means further engagement with service providers across the province to educate and build awareness of the Inuit community, its services and programs that could be offered through third-party organizations in partnership with Inuit. The approach for community members centred around preventive measures to keep Inuit families together. Though at the time of this report, there was no information available on the labour force market amongst the Inuit community in Ontario to compare to Inuit Nunangat, participants shared their experiences working within the Inuit community in the province and expressed that the unemployment rates are much higher then non-Indigenous Canadians. Bridging employment gaps will ensure Inuit families remain together.

Along with preventive care, community members highlighted financial challenges of kinship care. Kinship care is customary to Inuit, however, with a changed economy, adequate financial support for families caring for Inuit children and youth will alleviate financial stress and in turn, keep Inuit families and communities together.

"Community parenting is how we thrive as people"- Inuk Community Member, 2022

As highlighted, participants in the Sapujjijuit Consultations expressed a strong desire to focus on preventive measures, especially since there has been many conversations in the past about how the current child welfare system has failed Indigenous communities. Participants honed in on the substantive need of building and connecting resources to complement supportive services and programs through integration of policies, such as, service providers (CAS, employment offices, educational institutions, etc.) establishing a strategy to improve employment and educational opportunities for Inuit and working collaboratively with Inuit organizations to ensure intent and meaning are holistic in nature. It was also shared that more needs to be done for Inuit youth who are expecting or are new parents through young parent support programs that offers prenatal, community connection, skills building and parental skills training. By offering this type of program, Inuit will gain transferable skills to feel confident in navigating life. It's noted that training should not be limited to the Inuit community and more service providers must become culturally aware that Inuit are a distinctive group of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Inuit-specific training will provide the necessary foundation for service providers to improve their delivery and approaches when working with Inuit families. Participants highlighted the recent news of the creation of Inuvialuit Qitunrariit Inuuniarnikkun Maligasak, which is the Inuvialuit Family Way of Living Law. This law means that Inuvialuit youth will be supported to remain in their community regardless of where they live unless there are exceptional circumstances. The passing of this law inspired community members at this consultation to push for the same for Inuit living in Ontario, citing that many Inuit have been born and raised in the province and considers it home and should remain within their homes or the Inuit community. Image 1.3 captures what participants hope to see within the Sapujjijuit Program

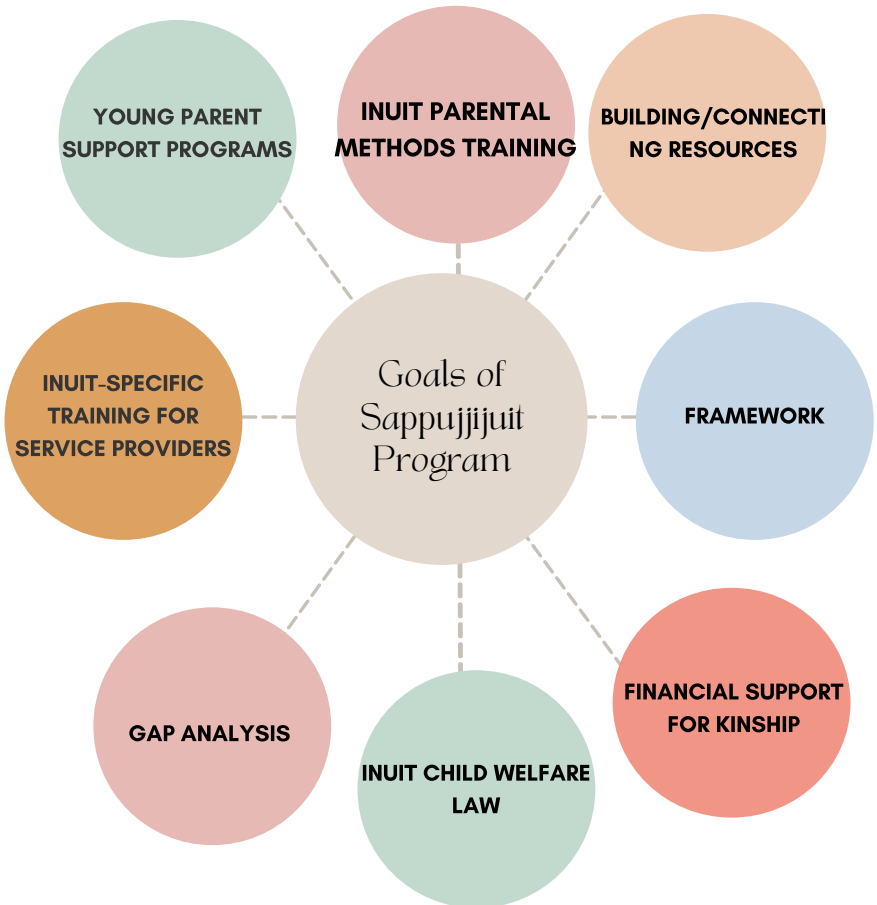


Image 1.3

GOALS

The following goals have been broken down to highlight areas of need based on the community consultations:

Building capacity	Policies	Resources
• Young Parent Support Programs • Guide to navigating city centres (financial knowledge and education) • Access to services/programs for rural southern Inuit • Promotion of workshops, such as balanced lifestyles (Inuit-lens) • Inuit parental methods training • Inuit parent mentorship and knowledge sharing • Employment and educational opportunities	• Increase in Inuit-specific training to service providers and CAS • Employment and education gap analysis • Partnerships between service providers and Inuit organizations • Inuit Child Welfare Law • Inuit rights recognized • Inuit driven and managed services • Inuit for Inuit (facilitating training sessions and providing services in Inuktut) • Inuit Child Welfare Framework	• 1-2 year financial commitment for services and facilities focused on prevention and increased cultural awareness for Inuit • Adequate financial support for children and youth in care • Adequate financial support for Kinship carers • More Inuit foster homes • Third party (such as TI) case management support

VALUES

Participants in the Sapujjijuit consultations expressed a strong need to embed Inuit traditional values into future programming. During the discussions, it was acknowledged that Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles are recognized by the Government of Nunavut, and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI), and that other regions and Inuit associations do not necessarily surround their work around these values.
However, participants urged that these principles are guiding values for the Sapujjijuit Program in an effort to revitalize Inuit way of navigating life. Participants were particularly keen to see **Pijitsirniq** (serving of family and community), **Piliriqatigiitsiarniq** (collaborative relationships/work for the common purpose), and general knowledge and sharing of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit.

Furthermore, the Sapujjijuit should ensure that it offers a space of healing for families through patience, respect, flexibility, honesty and open-communication.

IMPROVING EXPERIENCES IN FOSTER CARE

SAPUJJIJUIT CONSULTATIONS

It is well known that the child welfare system in Ontario has not been working to best meet the needs of First Nations, Metis and Inuit who are involved in CAS. The Province of Ontario released its intentions to re-scope how the child welfare system operates in 2020, which also included the delivery of services to and by First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities. This announcement was welcomed by Tungasuvvingat Inuit and its community members with the knowledge that consultations with those who have first hand experience in child welfare of youth and families will guide the work in the Sapujjijuit Program.

Inuit youth who have experienced being placed in foster care have expressed frustrations with the system and feel it has failed to maintain their connection to their family and community. Youth expressed deep understanding of trauma inflicted on their parents or grandparents and shared that necessary culturally-specific addictions and healing programs aren't readily available to support their families growth which resulted in being placed in either short-term or long-term care. They shared that separation from family are traumatic enough experiences, causing feelings of grief and sense of loss on top of an already decrease of involvement in cultural programs and services when they are placed in non-Inuit care. Youth indicated that more needs to be done by way of early intervention, such as offering addiction and healing programs for families. Early intervention will allow the opportunity for Inuit children and youth to remain in their homes and/or within their community.

Youth shared how being placed in non-Inuit foster homes has impacted their identity and connection to community creating unnecessary stress, anxiety and uncertainty of who they are, where they are from and where they see themselves.

Transitioning from foster home to foster home, or group home to group home with strangers also creates barriers to youth who would like to remain in the Inuit community. They shared that placements vary on an individual level, but most families they are placed with have little to no knowledge or experiences with Inuit culture, traditions, language and values, which may lead to misunderstanding and hurt for those who feel pressured or obligated to share about themselves and their cultural background. This also adds stress and anxiety to some who may have little to no knowledge if they have only ever been in non-Inuit foster homes and have been disconnected from the Inuit community since their apprehension.

"Find out why we run away..."
– Inuk youth, 2022

Followed by the need to remain in the Inuit community, youth expressed misinformation that is transmitted to them about their rights and processes as it relates to court hearings and overall judicial system. The current CAS procedures is that children and youth in care have separate case workers from their parents, which can create lack of accountability from case workers and varying opinions about how to best support the family and potentially leading to miscommunication. Youth recommended that there must be a system that involves a third party to keep track of files and records of the child(ren) and parent(s), and acts as the advocate and/or advisor. This third party would be an already established Inuit organization who have strong ties to the Inuit community and resources and must be an Inuk. Their role would ensure that all measures of prevention and early intervention are followed in order to keep the child(ren) and youth at home, and if not the least, within the Inuit community. Remaining connected to the community will ensure that children, youth and families have a sense of security, comfort and necessary supportive systems to feel heard, understood and cared for.

Ideally, a Sapujjijuit Program would foster Inuit values, culture and customs, keeping families and relatives connected and improving the overall well-being of our communities. Those that participated in the Sapujjijuit consultations also indicated along with providing the necessary training, it should become a program that oversees Inuit children and youth involved in CAS and becomes the third party that can best support Inuit families - including financially supporting those who are in kinship placements.