



## Stronger Together: Helping each other to strengthen and sustain Indigenous youth identity and cultural knowledge

Indigenous Youth Cultural Identity and Wellbeing in Toronto  
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### Background

Numerous scholars and researchers have identified that cultural identity, awareness and development are crucial components in the wellbeing and developmental process for Indigenous youth, yet little is known or understood about these processes (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Berry, 1999; Richardson, 2006). Furthermore, there is yet to be a conclusive assessment of Indigenous identity formulation and an understanding of what it means to be an Indigenous from the perspective of the youth themselves in terms of cultural and educational encounters (Maina, 1997; Mihesuah, 1998; Sinclair, 2007; Young et al, 2007). Thus, the research questions adapted for the Toronto Stronger Together project was “*How do Aboriginal youth in Toronto understand and relate to their cultural identity? What community services and supports in Toronto do Aboriginal youth require for mental health promotion around cultural identity and wellbeing?*”

### Methodology

Focus Group: A focus group was conducted comprising 11 participants, all of whom self-identified as Indigenous young adults and were asked the following questions:

- (1) We are interested in learning about cultural identity for Aboriginal youth. How does your Aboriginal cultural identity affect how you see yourself?
- (2) What people or situations have had an influence on who you are today?
- (3) What challenges and barriers have you experienced due to your Aboriginal cultural identity?
- (4) What community services would support your cultural identity and overall wellbeing?

Individual Interviews: Interviews were conducted with 4 self-identified Indigenous youth allowing them to share their experiences regarding their identity development as an Indigenous youth and various factors that had an influence on this process. The youth interviewed were asked:

- (1) We are interested in learning about cultural identity for Aboriginal youth. How does your Aboriginal cultural identity affect how you see yourself?
- (2) What people or situations have had an influence on who you are today?
- (3) What challenges and barriers have you experienced due to your Aboriginal cultural identity?
- (4) What community services would support your cultural identity and overall wellbeing?

### Results

Identity as product of mainstream influences: Some participants expressed that Aboriginal youth had internalized negative stereotypes of Native people (e.g., Aboriginal youth are less valued than non-Aboriginals, they are products of violence and substance abuse, undervalued Indigenous culture, view themselves as lazy, etc.) because this is how they are portrayed in the media and in mainstream society. However, other participants shared how they were resisting these negative stereotypes and reconnecting to their Indigenous culture. Those participants who were connected to the Native community and their Indigenous culture indicated that Traditional Healers, Elders, and their families were key to building those cultural foundations.

Identity and Indigenous culture: The majority of participants spoke of the importance of Aboriginal youth having access to Indigenous knowledge and education to foster a positive identity. However, youth with negative association to Indigenous culture or who have “dismissed” their culture may not have access to or be interested in participating in traditional culture or teachings. Some participants noted that mainstream education is not sensitive to Indigenous ways of knowing and that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum would help Aboriginal youth foster a sense of belonging, combat racism, show history from an Aboriginal perspective so the youth can understand the history of the land and people, and foster a positive sense of ability to make changes.

Community: Participants described the importance of having been involved in traditional ceremonies as a key to forming a positive cultural identity. Several participants noted that youth who are active in their communities take pride in being an Aboriginal youth, and that it creates opportunities for the youth as well as provides them with a sense of belonging. Other participants suggested accessibility to Elders and teachers is one way that access to Native culture could be improved.



**Education:** In terms of how cultural identity impacts overall wellbeing, several participants noted that it gives youth direction and purpose, as well as increases the likelihood of positive futures (e.g., education, employment, or having a voice in Aboriginal affairs). Other participants felt that, while a positive cultural identity is a tool to aid youth in dealing with “today’s demanding world,” until the resentments of colonization are addressed, a gap will continue to persist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In short, participants felt that until youth heal from the impacts of colonization, they will continue to be disempowered despite having a positive cultural identity.

**Early Influences:** Not surprisingly, another theme raised related to the early childhood influence of family, community and authority figures (both positive and negative) on each participant's resulting level of connection to culture and their identity. This is similar to the experience for all individuals, whether Aboriginal or not.

### Conclusion

Racism and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people continue to be a major issue for Aboriginal youth, as they are ostracized and isolated from mainstream society. The influence of family, community, and knowing the history and background of one’s ancestors, especially at a young age creates pride and strengthens Indigenous identity for youth. Connection to culture through ceremony, language, peers and involvement with other community members strengthens identity as an Aboriginal youth. These experiences from Aboriginal young people can be used to provide a better understanding of identity development and to promote cultural healing for Aboriginal youth.

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