

**ABORIGINAL GIRLS GROUPS
IN
SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 73 (KAMLOOPS/THOMPSON)**

The information in this website link is made up of excerpts from the manual entitled “Groups for Aboriginal Girls and Young Women in Schools and Community” - a partnership project involving School District No. 73, the First Nations Education Council, the Kamloops Aboriginal Friendship Society, and Thompson Rivers University with funding support from the Canadian Women’s Foundation.

The information includes:

- An overview of the Girls Group Model
- Key Components of successful Aboriginal Girls Groups
- Guidelines for setting up Aboriginal Girls Groups in Schools
- Key Lesson Strategies
- Session Outlines for Girls Groups
- Samples of group sessions and sample handouts
- Selected quotes from girls who have participated in Girls Groups

For more information regarding Aboriginal Girls Groups in School District No. 73 schools, please contact Cheryl Sebastian, the District Principal of Aboriginal Education at 250-374-0679. email csebastian@sd73.bc.ca

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Groups for Aboriginal Girls and Young Women in
Schools and Community



A Partnership Project

Kamloops Aboriginal Friendship Society, School District No. 73,
First Nations Education Council, Thompson Rivers University
Kamloops, British Columbia

Funding support through the Canadian Women's Foundation



The Model – A Brief Overview

Who: The program serves Aboriginal and First Nations girls ages 8 - 18 who are living in urban or rural communities in the Interior of BC.

What: The curriculum is a school based or community based, train the trainer model.

Central to the group is shared decision-making and involving girls in the planning of each group. Each group begins with a meeting with girls in the school or community where the group will take place. Girls will take ownership of the group through a process whereby their voice and ideas are central in developing the name of the group, preferred day of the week; topics of importance and key issues.

Objectives:

- To provide a culturally-safe place for young Aboriginal girls to explore adolescent female issues and to promote a positive and healthy gender and cultural identity
- To help the girls resist societal stereotypes and develop healthy definitions of themselves as Aboriginal/First Nations girls
- To increase protective factors for Aboriginal girls within the context of relationships (peers, family, culture, school and community) and teaching cultural practices
- To provide participants with increased coping skills and leadership skills regarding the issues they face as Aboriginal girls and a shift from unhealthy coping to healthy coping mechanisms (decreasing risk factors).
- To take into account the developmental needs of Aboriginal girls at the critical stage for gender identity formation and healthy cultural identity (protective factors).

How: This is not a “how to” manual. Instead it is the sharing of a model that we developed together with the community. ***A community-development approach is required in each community to allow for Elders and development of curriculum consistent with the local Aboriginal community and First Nations territory.***

The girls group model was built by listening to the community and working towards what they want. The community wants us to use a traditional family approach. This means we want to continue to weave into our program as many Elders, aunties, families and university women as we can so that we can connect girls to as many different ages and stages of womanhood as we can. In addition the essential elements of the groups include Aboriginal worldview through the medicine wheel and seven sacred teachings; a focus on strengths and healthy resistance; trauma-informed and cultural safety that recognize the diversity within and between Aboriginal girls and their identities. The groups take into account the development needs of Aboriginal girls at a critical stage in their gender identity formation and cultural identity. The Aboriginal girls groups build relationships between girls and adult females including female Elders, in order to nurture and reinforce femaleness as a positive identity with inherent strengths to support healthy self-expression. It will also provide decision-making models and life skills to aid in transition to womanhood and through invited Aboriginal female role models provide leadership capacity.

The group is co-facilitated by Aboriginal women, utilizing facilitators with various levels of professional training.

Key Components

These are some of the key components of a successful Aboriginal girls group.

- Girls, older girl role models, aunts, adult supporters and Elders through Grandmother's council and community relationships
- Funding (food, art supplies, honoraria, travel activity expenses)
- Space (classroom or community room)
- Facilitated by First Nations Counsellors, First Nations Education Workers, community professionals together with volunteers, practicum students from education or social work and human service programs from local university
- Circles and other cultural practices and protocols from community
- Activity resources that provide healthy expression
- Community awareness and networking
- Collaborative process: share decision making and planning via the medicine wheel
- Evaluation*

**The Kamloops B.C. Girls' Groups have participated in an evaluation through the Canadian Women's Foundation. Year 2 results can be found in Appendix A.*

Girls Group participating in community Santa Claus parade

Girls Groups: Setting up for Success in Schools

Five Critical Stakeholders

When planning the implementation of Girls' Groups in elementary and/or secondary schools support is needed from five critical groups. These groups include community, administration, staff (teachers and support staff), parents, and students. In the following outline the process we used to implement the groups and the structure of the groups is detailed. In this outline the methods we used to garner the necessary support from the different critical groups is described.

Community

Engage the stakeholders: As a community, Kamloops citizens had spent many hours discussing the problems facing our under-supported youth. We formed broad based committees that engaged community and worked together to develop programs that met the needs of our Aboriginal youth. These steps were crucial to the success of our program. Strong partnerships were formed between staff from the School of Social Work, Thompson Rivers University, the Kamloops Aboriginal Friendship Society, the First Nations Education Council and the School District. These consultations and discussions culminated, as described in the article written by student Charlotte Overvold, in a powerful workshop where chiefs, elders, youth, parents, teachers, professionals, etc. identified issues and then talked about solutions. It was agreed that some of our youth were not being taught and supported by elders as they would have been in more traditional times. It was agreed that the elder's role was important in passing on knowledge and customs to the youth. It was also thought important that youth be supported in a manner that honoured their cultural background.

The School District

Consultation with district staff: To promote the benefits of our program we were fortunate to have champions in the school Board Office (Principal of Aboriginal Education) and the First Nations Education Council (administrator), the organization representing the seven local bands. As part of the project team, these champions were able to bring information to district executive directors, administrators and front line staff, both teachers and First Nations Education Workers. Also at the district level we had a champion in the Stay in School Coordinator. This person was able to promote the program to school coordinators, teachers, counselors and district support staff. Project team members gave presentations to School Board members, district administrators, district coordinators and school staffs. After this the groups were established in the schools through a process that varied according to the needs of the particular school.

How are the groups structured?

- a. The groups are held **during school time**. In high school, the girls sign into their class, get homework and then come to group. Rationales for offering the group during the school day include showing the participants that their cultural heritage and emotional well being matters to the school and that the school is prepared to support them missing class to attend this group. Using school time for group is also key in targeting the at risk girls we want to reach. These girls are often more attached to their peer group than to school so that asking them to attend group during their breaks is not as successful. These girls feel that taking them from their peers during breaks seems more of a punishment than a benefit.

- b. The groups require a **room** that can allow for **private discussions**, is **comfortable** and can support craft activities and eating of snacks. It is a bonus when group art work can be left on the walls.
- c. The groups run **once a week (same space, day and time)** and range from **45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes**, depending on the age of students and school variables.
- d. Teachers are assured that they can have students **stay in their class if an important assignment is due**. It is important that teachers agree to support the girl being in the group generally and help her catch up on what she may have missed, etc.
- e. Students are given an **appointment slip** to be signed by their teacher at the start of the day. Then at the appointed time they approach their teacher, get their slip signed, and come to group. Teachers may write instructions of homework assignments on the slip and facilitators check the slips when the girls arrive.
- f. In high schools the timetable generally rotates so that girls do not miss the same class every week.

Setting up the group in a school

To set up a girls group in a school we follow the steps below:

1. Communication with the administration

If administration is supportive and interested in a group they complete an application form and submit it to the Girls Group Project Committee. This form outlines the requirements for reporting for our Canadian Women's Foundation project and as well indicates that the First Nations Education Worker of the school will be supporting the group. After receiving the application form a meeting is held with the administrator and First Nations Education Worker. They are given a copy of our manual and copies of the project research results, completed by the Canadian Women's Foundation. We may discuss and introduce facilitators at this point as well as outline the necessary structural components to create a successful group.

2. Promoting the program with school staff

Ideally, facilitators or other district staff will attend a **school staff meeting** to inform teachers as to the purpose of the group and to answer any questions or address any concerns they may have. Generally teacher concerns are around students missing their class. Once teachers are assured that they can have the student stay for particularly important classes they are usually relieved, particularly when they have had the **purpose and format of the groups** explained to them. It is important for teachers to learn that the group's main purpose is to help at risk girls become connected to adults in meaningful, caring relationships. We have been using the results of the CWF evaluation research with outcomes that show girls with improving self esteem, body image, communication, relationship skills, ability to make friends, positive choices around drugs and alcohol, etc. to sell our program to staff as well as to parents. By making improvements in the previous areas it is hoped that girls's school attendance and academic effort will be improved. Facilitators are encouraged to talk to teachers of the girls to ensure that **if problems arise they can be quickly resolved**.

3. Fit the model to the needs of the school and skill level of available facilitator(s)

The groups are facilitated by **Aboriginal professional women** as much as possible. Although groups with two facilitators may have one facilitator who is non-Aboriginal, the other facilitator must be Aboriginal.

The level of need of the girls combined with the availability of skilled facilitators are the main factors we use to determine which of the group models, either **educational/relational** or **process**, will be implemented. In the final analysis, the mode implemented depends on the skills and attributes of the women who will be facilitators of the group. In our district the First Nations Family Counsellors (all with either Bachelor and or Master degrees in Social Work, etc.) are our primary facilitators. Careful allocation of resources allows us to use process groups in schools with the most need (generally two facilitators, optimally both with advanced training) and educational/relationship groups in others (run by school based First Nations Education Workers).

5. Parents as partners

Once a school has decided to offer a group and the core team has recommended participants it is time to **inform the parents**. As parents learn about the program (i.e. **who, what, when, where and why**) their responses are generally positive. Sending home an **information letter** and asking that a **permission slip be signed** before their daughter is able to participate in group are essential steps. Parent meetings, where parents learn more about the group and get to meet the facilitators, are important. Alternately a personal phone call from the First Nations Education Worker is advised. The more personal the approach used to inform parents about the program, the better. Also, **parents are often an important resource** in the groups. Moms, grandmothers or aunts may join discussions about traditions, help with crafts or participate in honour teas.

6. Engaging the girls

Telling the girls about group is a very important step. Most importantly they must know it is **their choice** whether or not they join. The group is not a punishment for bad behaviour—it is a chance for them to meet with other Aboriginal girls and a caring facilitator to discuss issues that matter to them. Each school will handle this step in the way that works best for their staff. Generally the girl will be told about the group by a School Counselor, the First Nations Family Counselor or a First Nations Education Worker. In a meeting the girl will learn about the program and be invited to an **initial group meeting**. As the groups are **designed by the girls** and follow the topics the girls want to cover, selling them has not been a problem to date. Our groups have been running for a few years and now we find when school starts each fall, returning girls ask if they can attend and sell the group to others. While girls are encouraged to come to group regularly there is no penalty if they do not attend. **Each and every time they come they are welcomed.**

Information and sample forms for setting up Girls' Groups in schools can be found in Appendix B.

Key Lesson Strategies

A. Medicine wheel

- i. Mental - Identity, goal setting expressing all of who they are as Aboriginal girls
- ii. Spiritual - Circle check-ins, talking circle, Elders
- iii. Emotional - Art, writing, dance, music that allows expression of feelings and emotions
- iv. Physical - Encourage physical movement through activities such as self defence, yoga, basketball, dance

B. Talking Circles

C. Writing

D. Artistic Expression

E. Role Modelling

F. Speakers

G. Field trips – nature, outdoor

H. Other key tools: brainstorming, questioning

I. Review Vocabulary that may be unfamiliar, particularly for younger students

Session Outlines for Girls Groups

Please consider the following session outlines as guides for your group. Remember, that building the group, together with the girls, and with guidance from your Elders, is essential. These lesson plans move from the centre of the circle, and relationship with themselves, through to relationships with others, family, peers, community and culture. Additionally, with all of these sessions it is important to follow the pace and comfort level of the group. Sessions can be continued or stopped at any time that is appropriate to just “go with the flow” of the girls’ discussions as relevant to giving voice to their current experience. For additional ideas for group activities, see the list of other group manuals that are listed in the Appendix C.

Building Circles of Relationships

The sessions are organized within an Aboriginal understanding of relationships, and circles of connections. They build on the teachings of Elders and the work of some Aboriginal scholars.

The sessions are organized in the following categories:

- A. Relationship to Self and Culture
- B. Relationship to Others
- C. Looking Forward

The sessions have been developed around the following relationships:

Relationship to self

These activities increase positive identity as Aboriginal girls and facilitate healthy coping, dealing with trauma and triggers through healthy self-expression.

Relationship to peers

These activities build sisterhood and healthy communication and develop skills such as conflict resolution. For older girls healthy dating relationships are discussed.

Relationship to family

These activities support healthy connections understanding past history impact on current family functioning, and building on traditional Aboriginal concepts of family that included extended family.

Relationship to school

Activities here support girls in their educational and career goals, through goal setting, study skills and introduction to role models.

Relationship to Community

The groups provide and build on connections to community agencies and role models.

Relationship to culture and spirituality

Relationships with Elders and other traditional teachers are central to the group.

Sample Sessions
and
Handouts

for

Aboriginal Girls Groups

Session 1: Getting to Know Each Other

Purpose: To introduce the program and to provide activities that facilitate the girls' learning about each other, and sharing about themselves in a fun and active way.

Age: All girls

Time: 30 – 60 minutes

Materials:

- Handout: "Let Me Introduce Myself"
- Handout: "Autograph Party"
- Handout: "Ten Things I love About Me"
- Handout: "Personal Assessment"
- Small prizes

Procedure:

1. Facilitators Introduce Themselves and the Program: (name, length of time of association with agency/working in the field, experience with groups, etc.). Talk about why the facilitator is interested in doing this work.
2. Explain about the circle, and protocols and safety within the circle. Provide the girls with a talking rock or stick that will be used in the group. Explain that we don't cross talk, but go around the circle, listening to each other. If someone doesn't feel like sharing, they can say this and it will be respected. Point out that this is important, that girls are sharing and are being respected, even if it's to say they do not want to share today.
3. Have the girls move around the room and get to know one another using the sheet "Autograph Party" .. Prize for the one completed first.
4. Debrief the activity and what girls have learned about someone in the group.
5. Have the girls complete the form "Introducing Myself".
6. In circle have them share 3 things from their list. During an open ended discussion, ask "Why are you here? What do you expect from this experience? What do you want to gain from this experience? What was difficult about coming here today?"

Debrief: Were participants able to fill in all the lines? What parts were you able to complete not complete? Did you feel uncomfortable asking questions? What did participants learn about themselves? Did they make any interesting discoveries about group members?

Traditional Teachings: Every Nation has slightly different teachings about where the person leading the circle will sit and other protocols. Please ask a local Elder for more information if you are unfamiliar with local traditions.

Resources: Any icebreaker books and warm up activities can be adapted.

Session 3: Creating Safety in the Circle

Purpose: To make the group as welcoming and non-threatening as possible. Together with the girls, develop a list of safety rules and guidelines for the group.

Age: All girls

Time: 1 hour

Materials:

- Large paper
- Magazines
- Paints
- Felt Pens
- Scissors
- Glitter
- Glue

Procedure:

1. Check In: Sharing rock or talking stick is passed around the circle. Each girl briefly shares 1 thing that makes them feel safe, and anything else including current feelings or experiences, or how their day or week has been.
2. Introduce and welcome any new group members.
3. Develop Group Rules: Discuss each girl's needs in order to feel as safe and as comfortable as is possible in this group experience.
4. Brainstorm guidelines for group rules. Have the girls create a visual representation of the rules – collage a poster, or paint/draw a poster together that can be displayed in the classroom.
5. Symbol of Safety: Introduce this concept and ask participants to begin to think about a personally significant symbol, place or thing that represents safety or the absence of danger, fear and anxiety.
6. Tools to Practice: Think of something that signifies safety and/or comfort for you. It may be helpful to think of a pleasant memory, experience or perhaps you have a pet or a favourite place or activity that gives you comfort and safety.
7. Identify a symbol or souvenir of safety and draw it.
8. Check out: End the session with grounding exercise - allowing each participant to draw their own meaning or relevant interpretations for themselves. Each girl is offered the opportunity to comment on her experience of the session or make any comment needed to finish the discussion for them.

Traditional Teachings: Consider a traditional teaching for this activity.

Session 4: Seven Sacred Teachings and Creating Safety in the Circle

Purpose: To identify the Seven Sacred Teachings and how they relate to creating a safe and welcoming group environment.

Age: All girls

Time: 1 hour

Materials:

- “Seven Sacred Teachings” hand out
- David Bouchard’s book, “Seven Sacred Teachings”

Procedure:

1. Introduce each of the teachings and brainstorm each of the elements (adaptation – see elementary section)
2. Group discussion: How do these teachings relate to our group rules? What elements of the Seven Sacred Teachings would you want to include in our group rules now that we have learned about these traditional guidelines?
3. Debriefing: how do we know if these are being used? How will we know that we are following these teachings? How will it work?

Traditional Teachings: The Seven Sacred Teachings have many names, but are one of the aspects of First Nations culture that is universal throughout the nations. To live by the Seven Teachings is to walk the Red Road. It is not the easy road sometimes, but it is the right road.

Adaptation for Younger Girls:

Read booklet with students and let them colour the pictures. Discuss teachings:

- Who do we love?
- What does respect mean?
- Who do we respect?
- What is a good way of showing respect to Elders?
- When did you do the right thing, even though you were scared?
- Why do you think Bigfoot represents Honesty?
- What are some gifts you have?

Session 25: Relationship with Learning and School

Purpose: To examine more closely how participants respond to experiences of learning, and to explore their relationships to school and promote positive learning.

Age: All ages

Time: 45 min – 1 hour

Materials:

- Art materials

Procedure:

1. As a large group brainstorm the ways in which we learn (prompt for all the senses.) Ask for examples of learning that have been positive and learning that has been challenging.
2. Have girls draw a picture of themselves when they are engaged in learning, ask them to put everything in the picture that supports their learning.
3. Have girls draw a second picture that shows them when they are not engaged in learning.
4. In journals answer: What is your behaviour when engaged in learning? Not engaged? What strategies do you use to disengage/disconnect?
5. Large group sharing circle of how we learn and challenges to learning.
6. Discuss strategies to address the challenges (i.e. when bored, when triggered, when feeling unsafe.) What can we do to remain connected to learning when we are having a hard time?

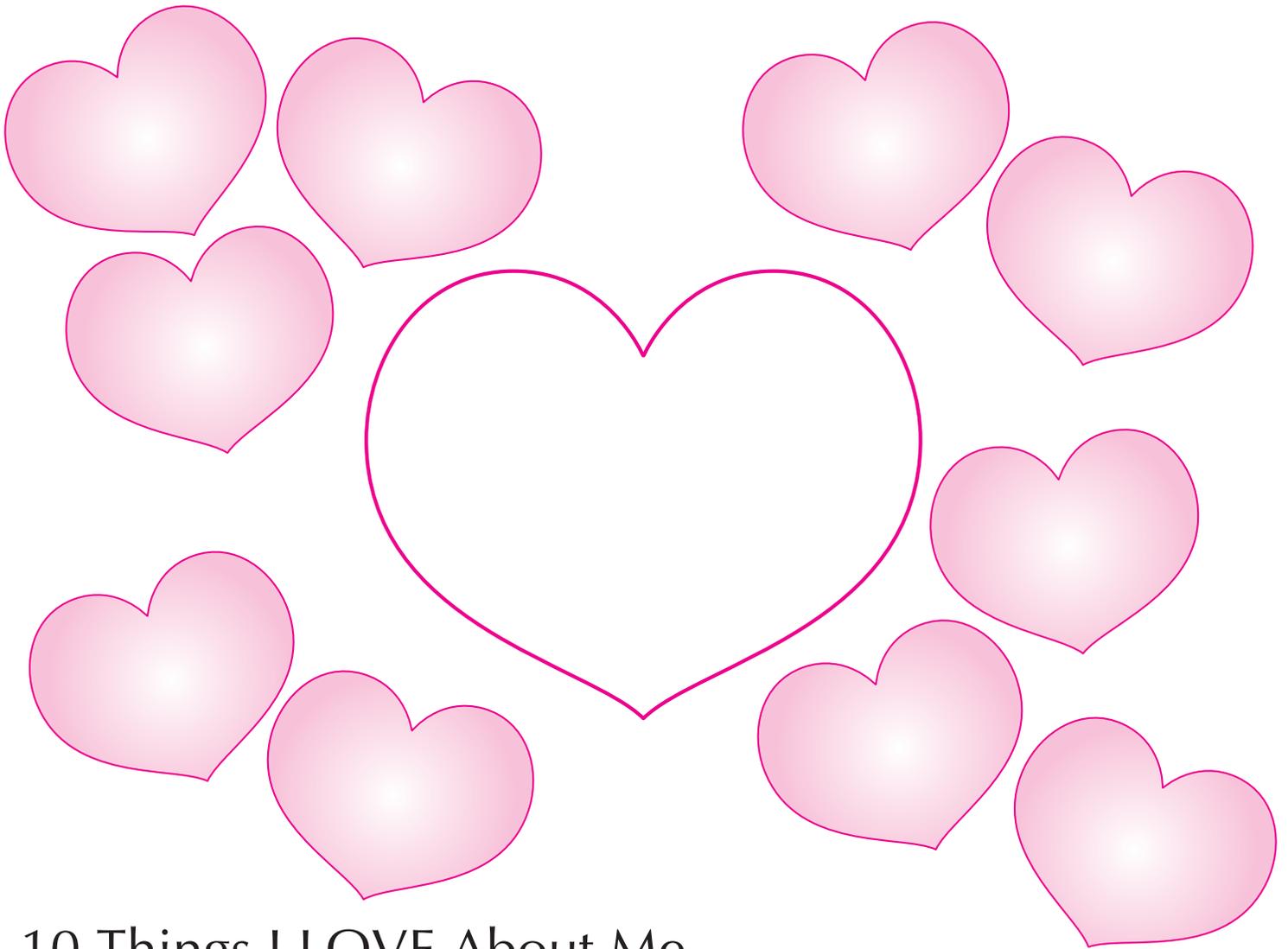
Traditional Teachings: Have an Elder share about ways of learning, and how girls and boys were taught in community.

Let Me Introduce Myself...

1. The music that I like the best is:
2. The way that I dress could be described as:
3. I like to spend my free time:
4. My favorite food is:
5. The languages I speak are:
6. I am really good at:
7. My family is made up of:
8. The things I like about my culture/gender are:
9. The things I don't like about my culture/gender are?
10. I have lived in this community for:
11. I worry about:
12. Is there an adult in your life who you feel is your ally? I.e. supports you? If yes, how?
13. I feel most powerful when:
14. I feel safe to tell my secrets to _____ because:
15. A person I admire is _____ because:
16. When I see myself, I see.....
17. The thing I like the best about myself is:
18. The thing I most want to change about myself is:
19. The thing I want most for myself:
20. I dream that one day, I will:

10 Things I LOVE About Me...

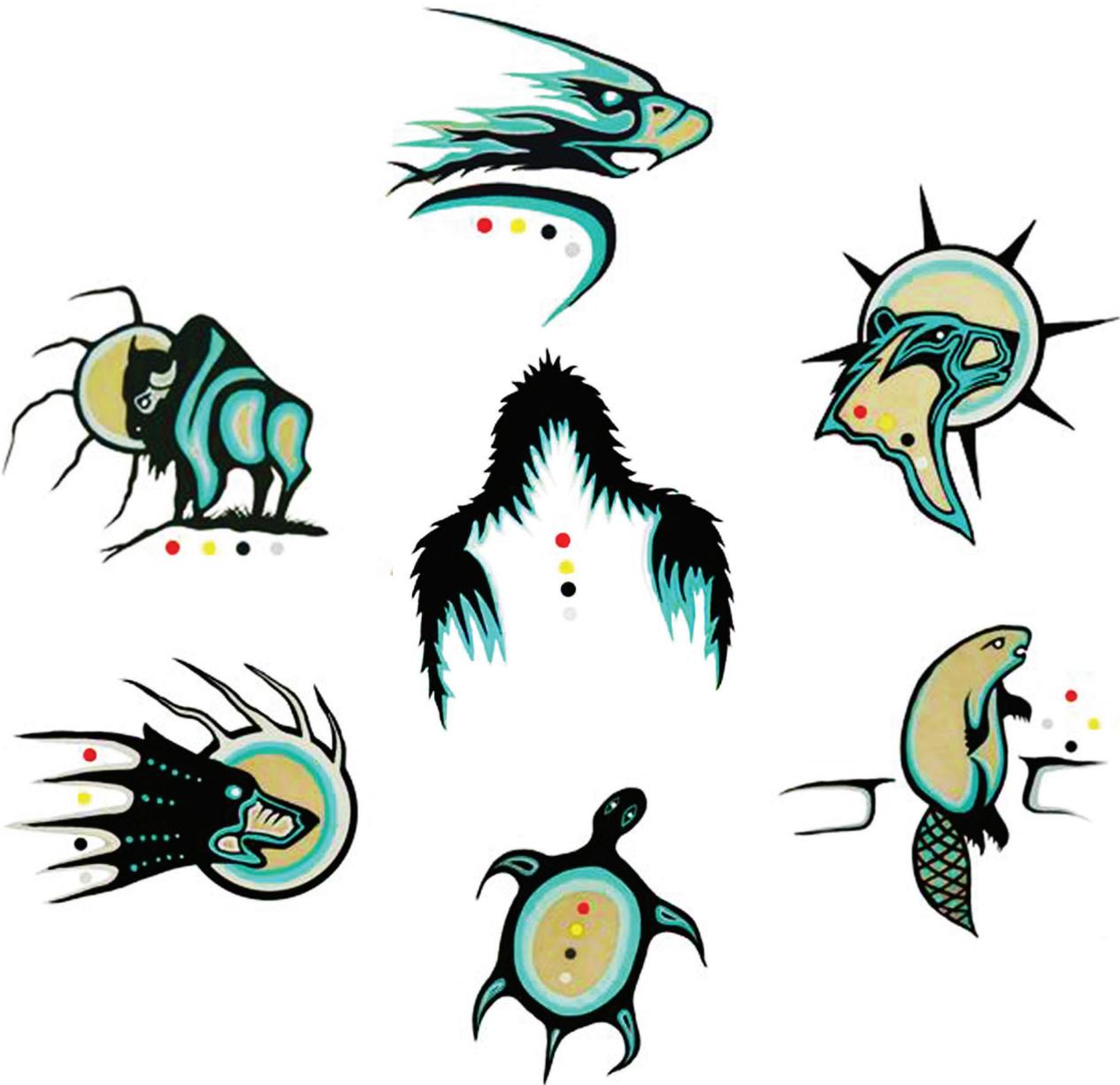
In the big heart, draw yourself. In each of the little hearts, draw or write about something you love about yourself.



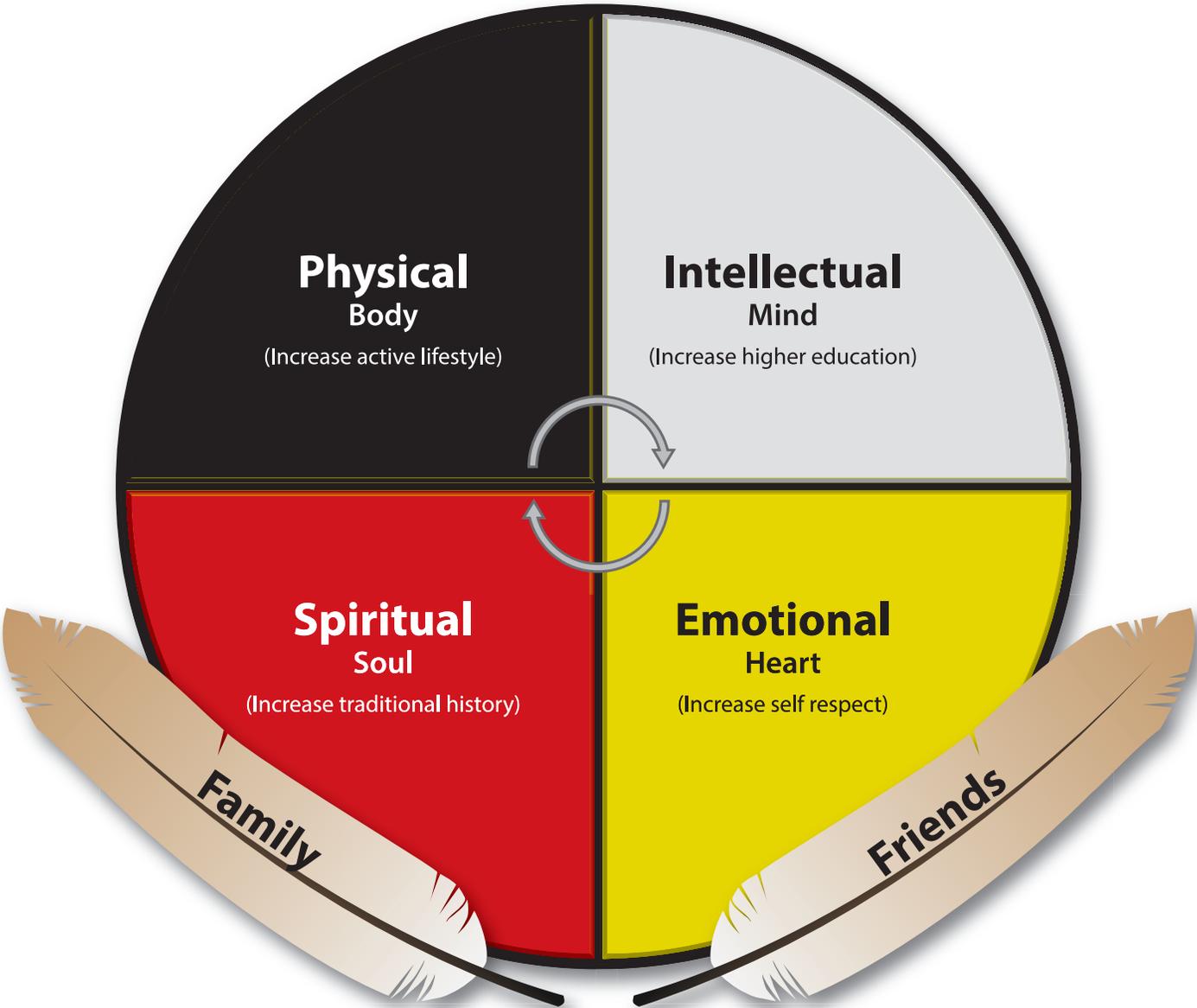
10 Things I LOVE About Me...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

SEVEN SACRED TEACHINGS



The Medicine Wheel



Quotes From Girls
Who Have Participated
in
Aboriginal Girls Groups
in
School District No. 73

Quotes From Girls

"I have higher self-esteem now and now I don't really care what people think of me and before I did."

"When I first did the program I was shy and kind of shy about my feelings and then in the middle I stopped being so shy and started talking about my feelings a bit and near the end I talk a lot about my feelings."

"I used to be so shy and now I'm quite confident in myself, like I can stand up and say if someone is saying one thing about somebody and I'm totally confident with disagreeing with them and standing up for what I want to say about it. I used to be really shy ... but ... they've really helped me just realize who I am..."

"Because now I feel more confident. Like whenever we have a test, I'm not nervous or scared because I know I'm going to get a good mark..."

"It gives me a positive look on things instead of focusing on the negative..."

"Sometimes I wouldn't want to go to school, but now I do because of them... I would ignore the people that would bother me... and they taught me all that stuff, so then I'll just walk past them and ignore [them] and walk away and don't even bother to look at them."

"I'm feeling better knowing that I have people to support me and help me with school work and knowing that I can go to them for help."

"We get to learn new things about our self and others. We know more of our culture when we leave. We feel safe in girls group... I have learned so many things in Girls Group."

"I've learned culture things like medicine wheel... Girls group made me learn about what was going on in life..."

"I learned how to make dream catchers and what they represent. Learning about the talking stick..."

"The group helped me to get to know people here. [My friend who came to group with me] ... are better friends [now]."

"I actually developed a better friendship with some of my friends in that group. I always have people to turn to now. It just makes me happier than I was before."

"I am in grade 8. I'm obviously the youngest grade in there so there's ... older girls in there, but I feel ... when we're in a group together I can talk to them if I need to. They're there ... I do feel like included and feel [a sense of] belonging."

"[I feel like] I belong more because I got to know people more and know that they really do care about me."



*Kamloops Aboriginal
Friendship Society*



School District No. 73



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