



Statement

National Indigenous Peoples Day: Three things to do

This National Indigenous Peoples Day, it is more important than ever that we use the occasion to take action towards reconciliation. This is not symbolic, nor is it simply an aspirational goal. As recent initiatives such as the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls have so clearly shown, it's time for every one of us to do something, because good intentions are not enough. Action, particularly on the part of non-Indigenous peoples, is an urgent imperative that will help us to collectively address the state of Indigenous child well-being in Canada. With that in mind, here are three things that I humbly offer that we can do to honour the day and, more importantly, the First Peoples of Canada and Turtle Island: learn, speak up and celebrate.

We can start with learning about colonization. There is an abundance of information available about the history and contemporary impact of colonization and trauma that is absolutely vital for each of us to understand. Taking responsibility for educating ourselves is an active step towards reconciliation that creates the conditions for lifelong learning to occur – and this is a lifelong project for all of us.

It is also vital to appreciate the diversity, strengths, wisdom and creativity of Indigenous peoples. We can learn from the stories and experiences of others and we can find wisdom when we open our hearts to the messages underlying their words. For non-Indigenous people, cultural learning demands a willingness to be humble and to unlearn some of the harmful and false ideas about Indigenous people that many of us have absorbed. When we open our hearts, suspend judgments and really listen, we have begun an important process. And I won't sugar-coat: the process can be uncomfortable or even painful at times. Nevertheless, we must persist.

A case in point comes from a member of our own Social Media Youth Team who, as a child, was sexually abused by a foster parent and was not believed by her social worker or police. SEMA'TSE Jordan – or the Kid Advocate as she is known through her broadcasts – started her podcast as a way to share her perspectives as an Indigenous youth from care, and to help ensure that other Indigenous kids in care wouldn't feel alone. In her most recent episode, SEMA'TSE Jordan described her experience of ongoing sexual abuse, of systemic failure and of her work to overcome its devastating impacts. Appallingly, she is not alone. This type of horrifying experience is not restricted to Indigenous children and youth, but, as many reports have shown – including the recent Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry and reports by my own Office – Indigenous young people are disproportionately affected by sexualized violence. The podcast episode is entitled

“Forgiveness” and can be found here: <https://rcybc.ca/kid-advocate>. It is an opportunity to learn.

Given that over 60 per cent of the children and youth in the B.C. care system are Indigenous, cultural learning is an important priority for me as Representative, and for all staff in my Office. We spend a lot of time consciously and intentionally learning and striving to make our organization more culturally aware and a culturally safer space. It is an ongoing project, and sometimes we make mistakes, but we support each other when we do and, most importantly, we keep going.

What else can we do? Speak up. National Indigenous Peoples Day is an opportunity to call on government to make the changes in Indigenous child welfare that are so urgently needed. We know that culture is a protective factor for children and youth. And we know that it is critical to keep children with their families. We’ve heard commitments from different levels of government to providing preventative services and to keeping families together, but we are still hearing far too often that services are not being provided until a family is in crisis, and families and cultural communities, ultimately, are being torn apart. This is the opposite of what should be happening. On National Indigenous Peoples Day, I call upon government to take action: to properly resource preventative services and ensure that they are actually provided to Indigenous families. Lip service is not enough. I invite you to join me in this call by speaking to your friends and family, by writing letters to government members, and by making your voice heard.

Is there anything else we can do? Definitely! Celebrate. National Indigenous Peoples Day is the perfect opportunity to celebrate First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, knowledge, ways of knowing the world, spirituality, teachings and resilience. Learn about the land you live on and seek to understand Indigenous relationships to the land, plants and animals. Look for events to attend. Try different foods. Look at different types of Indigenous arts and uncover their meanings and stories. Listen to Indigenous languages and see if you can learn a few words. Have fun and celebrate with gratitude and an open heart. Taking action is the essential step that will create positive change.

Happy National Indigenous Peoples Day!

Sincerely,



Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth