

## Chapter 5

### Keepers of the Circle Learning Centre:

#### Kirkland Lake and Temiskaming Shores, Ontario

by Ronda Guenette, Lisa Sloan, Fiona Traynor, and Arlene Haché

*Land, known as mother earth, is not a metaphor...earth is a being, a source of life that gives birth to all living creatures and sustains the life of her children...land is a place of birth, growth and development, and death. Land and formal education share important characteristics. Both provide a focus for livelihood and survival, sustain life, validate the individual and assure the future.*<sup>25</sup>

(Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Place*)

This report provides an overview of intervention methods used by Keepers of the Circle, an Indigenous Hub situated in the District of Temiskaming in Northern Ontario. Keepers of the Circle operates two centres, one at each end of the District: one in Kirkland Lake and one in Temiskaming Shores. Each offers early learning and family support programming and childcare. Both use similar Indigenous cultural and land-based interventions with children aged 0–12 years, although for this project access to the on-the-land component was restricted to children aged 4 years and older. Beginning in fall 2019, children aged 2 ½ and older will be involved in on-the-land programming. Keepers of the Circle is a critical resource for Indigenous families living in an urban setting, especially for those living away from their communities. It is also important for non-Indigenous families who choose to access childcare services at Keepers of the Circle, in part because of our program approach and in part because of our policy around inclusiveness that endeavours to “leave no one behind.” Both sites have environments that are welcoming and where Indigeneity is visible. These are smudge-friendly spaces and the smudge table is open to everyone at any time. The sound of the drum is in harmony with Grandmother Marilyn’s voice as she sings with the children in the classrooms. Nookomis<sup>26</sup> Roberta shares the Ojibwe language with the children and their families in the outdoor learning space.

Although the two Keepers of the Circle Centres are located at separate sites, they operate under the umbrella of the Temiskaming Native Women’s Support Group and are part of a larger collective that serves as an Indigenous Hub. Keepers of the Circle is guided by a council of Wisdom Keepers, with members from each First Nation in the territory, and the Temiskaming Métis Community Council. The Wisdom Keepers led the development of an Indigenous-specific plan for the delivery of early learning, family support and childcare services in the District of Temiskaming. Their visionary perspective, outlined in “The Journey Together: The District of Temiskaming Indigenous Community Hubs”<sup>27</sup> report in 2017 revealed that Indigenous languages, local Indigenous Traditional

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<sup>25</sup> Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> “Nookomis” is an Ojibwe word that means “grandmother.” We use both words here because that is how the people have asked others to address them.

<sup>27</sup> “The Journey Together: The District of Temiskaming Indigenous Community Hubs,” 2017.

Knowledge and cultural practices, an outdoor learning environment, and involving everyone from the community in creating a learning environment are all essential to the healthy development and inclusion of all children. “The Elders” Council stresses the importance of engaging local Elders and cultural teachers in service delivery because they alone understand the history, customs and tribal relationships in the territory.”<sup>28</sup> Following the Journey Together report, Keepers of the Circle has worked diligently to implement the findings by transforming our spaces and programming models to include on-the-land learning options so that Indigenous peoples, including children, could feel a greater sense of belonging.

This environmental and programming shift within the organization informed decisions and newly implemented practices in early learning, family support and childcare programming. The IECSS project presented us with an opportunity to evaluate the impact of those changes in relation to identifying and addressing one or more major barriers children with disabilities face in accessing our services; we selected on-the-land programming and its effect on behaviours that are perceived to be negative or problematic as the most pressing. As frontline and highly experienced child educators, staff know these perceived behaviours are the primary reason Indigenous children are being excluded from childcare settings. The comprehensive and child-led interventions contained in this report are important additions to the focus of this research project. These responsive interventions included changes to the physical spaces within the centres and, most importantly, a fully instituted On-the-Land Learning Program that began in May 2019.

### **Problem Identification and Strategy Description**

On May 18, 2019, Keepers of the Circle hosted an agency-wide consultation led by Wisdom Keepers, on the inclusion of children with disabilities in Kirkland Lake. This meeting was a response to the experiential knowledge that Indigenous children, whether they are diagnosed with a disability or not, are often excluded from school and other learning settings. This meeting brought together Wisdom Keepers, management, early-childhood educators (ECEs), parents, and grandparents to discuss this issue, and to look for solutions that could be incorporated into the operations of the early-learning, family support and childcare programming.

### **Issues**

Findings from this consultation highlighted the disconnected nature of services that are available for children experiencing learning disabilities and/or behavioural issues.

Participants noted these additional issues:

- There is no single plan for children
- Plans are cookie-cutter and are not shared with the ECEs
- There is over-reliance on professionals
- Parents who are just learning about a diagnosis and young parents looking for a cure rely on professionals to tell them what to do
- Poverty and low income contribute to misdiagnosis

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<sup>28</sup> “The Journey Together,” 2017.

- There is a lack of resources/transportation to get children to therapy
- Parents always sense that they are being judged in public or are asked to leave public spaces
- Parents sometimes feel alone and confused
- Parents who need respite care are required to enter into an agreement with CAS
- Intervention plans often focus on making children comply with what is accepted as “normal” behaviour within society
- The system creates children who are isolated
- Children with disabilities are not often seen “out and about”
- Society thinks that a child should be perfect
- Children on the Autism Spectrum are powerful and attuned and should be recognized as very smart.

### **Solutions**

- Community-based supports are needed
- Children should have access to on-the-land programming
- Provide regular access to outdoor spaces
- What you really need is parenting skills
- Unconditional love
- Need to accommodate children
- More funds to finance equipment to support children with disabilities
- Care providers need to build a relationship and trust with the parents, not be judgmental
- Value differences—let them be
- Everyone has a place and we have to support them in finding it
- Stay away from labels
- Provide respite programming
- One-on-one support and special-needs teachers
- Have safe spaces in public places for children and fidget boxes
- Have somebody on-site and on staff to accommodate children with special needs rather than outsourcing to professionals who are seldom available.

This consultation added guidance for the interventions already used in the early learning, family support and childcare programming.

Importantly, Keepers of the Circle is grounded in a model of inclusion, cultural safety and Indigenous traditions. Its Mission Statement reflects these tenets:

...We support public education and advocacy, the revitalization of our languages for culture, the elimination of all forms of oppression and genocide, the attainment of self-sufficiency and the protection of Mother Earth for future generations...

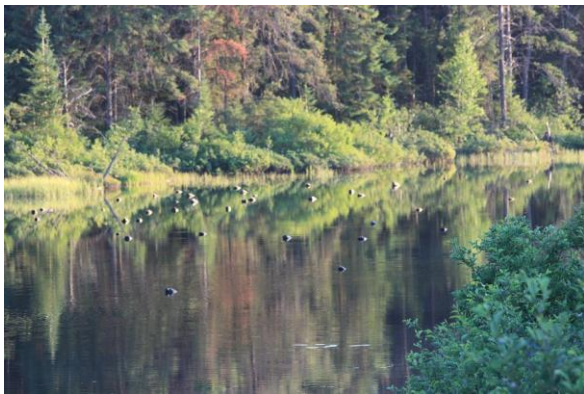
The Inclusion of people with disabilities is informed by Indigenous perspectives on the term “disability.” Some Indigenous communities consider people with disabilities as having special gifts or powers which enable them to communicate with the spiritual

world.<sup>29</sup> That positioning places high value on the inclusion of and respect for people with disabilities. While many Indigenous communities embrace the definition described by the social model of disability, there is an overriding belief in collective responsibility for the wellbeing of the whole. By including the community collective within our understanding of disability, we conclude that inclusion and honouring are the foci for action. These actions are premised on, as will be shown here, the importance of cultural, emotional, mental, social and spiritual wellness for children.

### **Implementation Process: Temiskaming Shores**

#### **Intervention: On-the-Land Learning Program**

On-the land learning has been a main focus of programming in 2018–2019. This nature-based learning environment is natural to Indigenous people. It is a holistic approach to learning, one involving all five senses while in the presence of Mother Earth. Keepers of



The Circle Centres are continually working to create such an environment for the children to explore, learn and grow in. Starting in 2018, the coordinator of the early learning and childcare programs visited different forest schools with the Quality Assurance Advisor from the District of Temiskaming Social Services Administration Board. The knowledge they gained was shared with the childcare supervisors at each site and the staff. This

knowledge was instrumental in creating a plan to institute our own land-based learning program.

Starting in May 2018 and continuing until the end of October, the children (ages 4 to 12) explored the community of Temiskaming Shores until they found an area they wanted to investigate more closely. Small groups of children visited their space several times a week. The children began to build their own community, developing a sense of ownership of and pride in their space. The curiosity that was sparked on the land was brought back to the indoor classroom. When learning occurs in a natural way it allows for the flow of continual scaffolding knowledge in such a way that the children are not even aware they are being taught. When children feel trusted, capable, and competent they expand their learning scope.

With the change of season came changes in the program schedule. In the fall, Hopi Martin from the Martin Clan generously shared his experience in learning about his Indigenous roots later in life. Having grown up in the Western world with linear concepts, he had wonderful input on how we, as non-Indigenous staff, can change our way of thinking to that of a circular, holistic way. He honoured the staff with the gift of sharing the knowledge his Auntie gave him about his Anishinabek traditions and teachings.

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<sup>29</sup> Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Toronto: A. Knopf, 1998), 423.

The playground became the learning environment. The children enjoyed building forts and shelters, and were introduced to different shelters for winter weather. The children's time outdoors was then increased, allowing for longer periods of uninterrupted play. In May of 2019, it was decided that the location for the On-the-Land Learning in Temiskaming Shores would be a site close to the location of the Indigenous Health Team, Mino M'shki-ki. As it is necessary to involve all community members in the On-the-Land Learning, it was thought to be an ideal spot. Wisdom Keepers Liliane Ethier and her husband George, as well as Grandmother Marilyn, are members of the health team and they participated in the On-the Land Learning programming. A second location on Dorothy Lake, a beautiful spot with a variety of rural terrain and access to water, is also used for On-the-Land Learning.

Children attend the On-the-Land Learning program a minimum of three days a week. While on the land they are free to explore and learn at their own levels. Culture is embedded in the program through the use of language, customs, and teachings. Upon arriving on the land, the children offer tobacco to Mother Earth, say their morning prayer and smudge, bringing positive thoughts and energy to their space and spirits. The families' response to the program has been very positive. Two children who were not attending childcare this summer because the families felt it no longer met their needs returned after hearing about their younger sibling's experiences with the On-the-Land program.

**Outcomes.** While on the land, there is a strong sense of belonging and engagement with the children. The children's well-being grew stronger and they gained a better understanding of their abilities and existing knowledge. A strong sense of autonomy, self-confidence and pride was being sparked within the children's spirits. As the medicine wheel teaches, it is important to engage in all aspects of ourselves—the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual. The On-the-Land Learning Program supports this holistic model of learning.

### **Intervention: Bringing the Outdoors Indoors**

Staff made the decision to rearrange the rooms in the Kirkland Lake centres to see if the behaviours of children attending programs would change. Aspects of this change included replacing the overhead fluorescent lighting with lamps that provided more natural and softer lighting. Rooms were decluttered and rearranged to have an "open concept" flow. Brightly coloured furniture was replaced by pieces with natural tones. Prior to this change some children refused to co-operate and follow routine schedules. One child would start to run around the room, throw toys, spit on the tables and hit his friends. As the educators worked with this child, the other children would get worked up and follow his lead by running away from the educators. Childcare staff observed that

transition times were difficult and some children used biting and hitting as their way to deal with issues or frustrations instead of using their words.

**Outcomes.** Staff observed that children were calmer and more engaged in activities in the new environment. There is less running around and fewer acting-out behaviours. While some children are still busy, the group as a whole is not following or participating in the disruptive behaviour. (Previously, it was observed that when one child was showing undesirable behaviours many others would often follow that child's lead, and the room would become chaotic.)

### **Intervention: Drumming**

Staff included drumming every morning at the centre and the On-the-Land program co-ordinator led this practice. If Grandmother Marilyn was at the centre, she led the drumming. The children took the lead on the timeline of the drumming activity. Staff observed that if the children were very involved, they participated in drumming for an hour to an hour and a half. Drumming was also done in the halls as the children moved to other classrooms. The co-ordinator visited each room, singing songs in the Indigenous language.

The coordinator also did a morning smudge around 9:30 a.m. and the children were invited to join in. Smudge was also brought to different rooms at the beginning of the day.



**Outcomes.** It is noticeable that when the children hear the drum, they are drawn towards it. Any conflict or undesired

behaviour stops and the drumming becomes the children's focus. The children show respect for the drum and wait patiently for their turn to play it.

### **Intervention: One-on-One Care**

Staff observed that children who are provided individual care feel like they have some control over their situation. When children were overstimulated or showed an undesired behaviour, the supervisor would take the child from the environment, go outside or walk around with him or her in a quieter environment; the child was given the opportunity to express how he or she was feeling and staff would discuss with the child more appropriate options for next time. This was not used as a punishment or discipline, but as a method to help the child self-regulate and gain an understanding of their emotions.

**Outcomes.** Children appeared to be more in touch with their emotions and were able to name them. The children learned to stop and think before reacting. Over time there was no longer a need to leave the room—a simple conversation sufficed.



### **Intervention: Resource and Behaviour Consultants**

Typical practice is for the behaviour consultant to observe a child in the classroom and create a plan for the educators to follow specific to that one child. The educators were not necessarily present for the observation plan nor did they have any input into the plan. The supervisor requested that the behaviour consultant's observation/plan be shared, and that educators be more involved in planning. This intervention led to a more holistic approach to programming and was central to the physical changes to room settings (see above). This intervention has supported a better understanding of the child as the educators have a longer-term relationship with him or her than the behaviour consultants do.

**Outcomes.** Instead of creating a plan for one child in the hope that they change, a more global perspective on change was adopted. Refocusing how to institute change—away from an individual child, to the physical environment—has created a plan that meets the needs of many children, not just one. It has been very effective; including the educators in the plan promotes better support for the children. No one is the “expert” and this approach encourages team-based solutions.

### **Next Steps**

The On-the-Land learning coordinator, alongside the Wisdom Keepers, is working on creating a curriculum rich in Indigenous traditions, teachings and language that will be presented in a holistic way so the children can be themselves while learning who they are and where they come from. The curriculum will be based on the seasonal teachings and moon phases.

Children will be introduced to different tools to be used while on the land. Community feasts will be celebrated during seasonal solstices. Children will begin to cook over the open fire while on the land; the length of time on the land will increase so that eventually the children will enjoy their naptimes in the fresh air. In September 2019, the children in the toddler, preschool and Early Learning School Readiness programs will be attending On-the -Land programming.

### **Implementation Process: Kirkland Lake**

#### **Intervention: On-the-Land Learning Program**

Staff at the Kirkland Lake centre have taken the school-age children to Dorothy Lake for



about two hours a day three times per week. Some trips have been with a group of four children and other trips have been with the whole group (from ten to 17 children).

Nookomis Roberta has accompanied the group on some of the trips and shared an Indigenous perspective of the land. She guided everyone through opening circles, drumming and singing, giving thanks, harvesting medicines, and teaching about the nature all around us.

Once at Dorothy Lake, staff and children gathered and started with an opening circle allowing everyone to state their intention for the day. The children established their own boundaries and came up with some ground rules. Starting in a familiar place each time allowed the children to become comfortable in their surroundings and the space became their own.

After the opening circle, the children were encouraged to explore the space in their own way and at their own pace. They did this in a variety of ways: they built structures, took walks, played freeze tag, listened to the wind rustling through the trees, and even caught dragonflies. The educators followed the children's lead, supporting them as needed.

When it was time to wrap things up, the group gathered at the home base and they had a closing circle. Each child was encouraged to talk about something they were thankful for. The children named a few different things like the animals, the songs they sang, and the nice weather. An important observation is that one child commented on how everyone had a good time and "there was no fighting."

**Outcomes.** Staff observed a reduction in negative behaviours such as conflict, throwing toys, yelling, and so on. Also notable was the calmer/quieter room after lunch (when the younger children are napping). There appeared to be an increase in the children's confidence (such as taking on tasks they might not normally take on), and reflective thinking (commenting on how the day was going, observing that "everyone is happy and there is no fighting").

There is also a noticeable increase in co-operative and collaborative play (working together to build structures, carry large logs, and search for blueberry leaves). Children looked out for one another (reminding each other of the boundaries; using the group call, "Caa! Caa!" to call their friends back when they can't see them), and demonstrations of empathy (showing concern when someone was hurt).

Children also exhibited increased ownership and stewardship of the space by talking about how to ensure their structures are safe so they can play with them the next time they come, laying food waste by a tree with some tobacco for the creatures on the land, and helping teachers remove garbage from the area.

#### **Intervention: One-on-One Care**

When children were overwhelmed by or struggling with the classroom environment, a staff member took them out of the classroom to give them time to regain control of themselves. The supervisor's office, where there was a basket of fidget toys, a book, and some other items to take the children's mind off what was happening in the room, was used for this purpose.

Children were guided to focus on being calm and were provided with positive responses. This time was framed as an opportunity to take a break from the classroom, not as a punishment. If there had been behaviour that was unsafe (such as throwing objects or



hitting others), the staff person explored with the child the idea of them not feeling safe and the goal of ensuring their safety.

Sometimes the office was too confining a space or the things in the office were too distracting. When this became apparent, the staff member headed outside with the child, where the child had more space to work out the feelings in his or her body.

This was a child-led exercise. If children needed to run or jump, they were encouraged to do so. When one child chose to go outside and began jumping in a mud puddle, staff commented that he really liked the mud puddle, and he continued to jump and enjoy himself. He found several mud puddles and staff encouraged him to describe how they were different.

Following the child's lead also meant waiting for them to be ready to return to the classroom. Staff avoided bringing a child back indoors before they showed that they were calm, and they waited for the child to say that they would like to go back to the room. If they had not initiated going back to the room, staff asked if they were ready to go back. If they said they were not, staff spent more one-on-one time outside with the child.

Importantly, there was very little discussion about the behaviour in the classroom; staff wanted the focus to be on the child's positive attributes. Instead, the child led the discussion. If the child was angry or frustrated, staff helped them to explore those feelings by saying, for example, "When Sally took your toy, it made you feel angry. How does your body feel when you are angry?" This allowed the child to know that it was all right to feel the way they feel.

However, the child did need to stay safe. So, if the child did something that was unsafe, staff were firm and explained the consequences of their actions and stuck to those consequences. Consistency and reliability were important.

**Outcomes.** The children enjoyed having some positive one-on-one time and talked about the things they had done together with the staff. One child came to the school-age room with a staff member and watched her clean our toad tank. Later that day, he said, "Remember when we cleaned the toads?"

The children built positive relationships with the person who was working one-on-one with them. They responded in positive ways when that person entered the room. They were not afraid because they were not being punished.

Staff observed that the children learned to self-regulate. When they were given opportunities to remove themselves from negative situations and shown strategies/tools to mitigate their feelings, they began to make positive choices about how to deal with things that upset them. They asked for an object that made them feel calm or looked for an educator with whom they felt comfortable.

Because the staff focused on the positive interactions, the children were able to see good things about themselves. They felt proud because they helped clean up a mess, or happy because they got to jump in the puddle. When a staff member took two school-age girls outside to run off some energy, they began rolling some tires around to make an obstacle course. One of the girls was proud because she found a bigger tire and could roll it.

Staff see a sense of independence developing in the children as a result of the on-the-land programming. The girl who was proud of her big tire also practiced some independence. The other girl wanted to help her, but she said, “No, don’t help. I can do it!” Sometimes just being able to try something on their own made a big difference in their behaviour because it built their confidence in themselves. Instead of thinking about what they did wrong, they focused on what they were doing right.

### **Recommendations**

- Governments must invest in and support the development of Indigenous On-the-Land Learning Programs and Indigenous culture and language programs in Indigenous-led organizations.
- Governments must recognize that outdoor learning is the natural learning environment for Indigenous children. Indoor classroom learning that isolates Indigenous children from the community and the land is not the norm and, in fact, is detrimental to learning for Indigenous children.

“We need to teach on the land; maybe have a land base in the bush. Teach the children where we came from so that they don’t get lost in the system. We have our own classroom.”<sup>30</sup>

- Governments must support the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies when evaluating Indigenous programs.
- Governments must commit to invest in and support Indigenous-led On-the-Land programs, and not replace Indigenous knowledge with a colonial framework that is found in programs such as those using the Forest School method.
- Governments need to understand the size of the district and population that is spread over a wide area and provide resources to hire more behaviour facilitators. For example, there are only two behaviour facilitators for an area between the towns of Haileybury and Kirkland Lake (which are 90 kilometres away from each other). The facilitators service all childcare centres and home childcares in this large area. At the New Liskeard LC alone, as of August 2019, there are five children using the services of the behaviour facilitator. From June until the end of August there was only one behavior facilitator.

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<sup>30</sup> “The Journey Together,” 45.

- Fund to hire more resource consultants. In the District of Temiskaming there is a long wait-list for the resource consultants who offer speech and language therapies. Staff at the Learning Centres (LCs) report that children in need of these services do not receive them until they are in the provincial school system.
- Provide behaviour and resource services to children who do not attend licensed childcare centres. When parents are unemployed (which is not uncommon in small towns throughout the district), and children do not attend childcare, the child's special needs might not be diagnosed and serviced.
- Provide more outreach services for families who do not regularly access the LCs. The local health unit has a Healthy Baby program and its goal is to stay in touch with new parents and children to offer support and address any concerns they may have. The health unit sends out screening resources but with no explanation of the purpose of the screening. Parents are left to figure things out on their own. This a gap in services for vulnerable families.
- Cut wait-lists and provide regular access to specialists such as pediatricians or psychiatrists, as these are clinicians who have the authority to make a diagnosis for a child, and a diagnosis is necessary in order to access services. The Temiskaming District does not have regular access to these specialists, who only travel to the area a few times a year. For example, if the parents do not have a referral from a doctor to test for a learning disability, the parents need to arrange for testing on their own and cover the cost. This is a barrier for families living in poverty.

*“Mental health is something I feel is neglected in childcare services. It seems that the focus is on the symptoms such as undesired behaviour or low testing scores in the schools. There is not enough focus on the actual issue. Children need to be taught coping skills. Many of the children in our care come from foster homes. They did not learn many skills necessary to be successful in social settings and when one is not socially accepted, they become labelled or ignored. I believe the true issue is being ignored. Disciplining a child for not understanding the way society expects him/her to behave does not help. The child only knows what he/she has been shown; it is up to us to teach them. The trauma that occurs when a child is taken from all they know and placed in an unfamiliar home with people they do not know can be devastating. It breaks my heart to see these little ones try to hold onto some control of their lives. All those emotions need to be dealt with, but not with high expectations or discipline but with understanding and patience. The one-on-one care from a social worker or child-and-youth worker is needed—*

*not a group setting but one-on-one, helping that child make some sense of what is happening. Allowing them to feel and act out in a safe way. Build their confidence and self-esteem so they can be successful. This would be my priority if money was no object. We focus too much on cognitive development and not on social and emotional. A child who believes in him/herself will take risks and be open to more opportunities, thus more successful.”*

Lisa Sloane, RECE, Site Supervisor  
Keepers of the Circle, New Liskeard

- Streamline service provision. If a child has a resource plan in place, then this plan should continue once they transition to the provincial school system. Currently, behaviour and resource services and plans that are in place for children enrolled in the childcare centre end once the child enters school. Once the child is in school, families must apply for specialized services and are often put on wait-lists—again. Unfortunately, many parents are not aware of this process and thus the child loses out on services and gets further behind.
- Embed comprehensive services for children and families in childcare centres. Staff support the concept that capacity within childcare centres should be developed so that specialized supports and services specific to individual children, families and communities can be provided as regular programming within centres. Currently, supports and services for children are outsourced to programs that have a wide-reaching territory of service. This means that these supports and services are only available to the children for one to two hours per week, when the resource/behaviour consultants have scheduled time with the child.
  - If every centre had its own supports and services program, they could ensure that each child could access the supports and services they need when they need them. The supports and services could be tailored to the children, families, and communities accessing the programs. The support staff would be able to get a truer picture of the needs of the educators, children, and families because they would see everyone daily.
  - Having a supports and services program in the centre would also allow much more preventative care to take place. Supports such as one-on-one care could be used not only when a child has become overwhelmed but just as a regular part of the day. The support staff could take time to work with any of the children individually and build a strong, supportive relationship with them.

*“If money was no object, I would create this sort of program in our centre. I would hire child advocates that would observe the children and the program; develop a*

*program plan and individualized child plans; support the educators to implement the plans; provide supports such as one-on-one care and activities targeted to support particular skills; advocate for additional services for children; coordinate services and meetings; provide resources to parents, educators and families; and facilitate the transition from childcare to school.”*

Ronda Guenette, RECE, Site Supervisor  
Keepers of the Circle, Kirkland Lake