

Putting Children First

By Beverley O'Neil

The early years are reported to be the most influential of a child's development years. Putting these children first was the objective of the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society and the First Nations Employment Society at the first *Aboriginal Leadership Forum On Early Childhood Development* held in Vancouver on March 10 and 11.

Studies reveal that giving children the best start possible benefits all. Helping our children carve a path of their own helps them to be self-sufficient with strong self-esteem meaning that our communities too will be stronger and self-sufficient. BC Aboriginal Childcare Society Executive Director Karen Isaac reports that, "Research shows that services such as childcare lead to higher rates of high school graduation, increased employment, less dependence on welfare, and even lower crime rates. In fact, for every dollar spent on high-risk children, Canada saves seven on health and social services costs over the life of an adult." For First Nations negotiating self-governance agreements, putting children first today could result in tremendous savings in social assistance payments in the long-term... a cost that we (First Nations) can expect will one day be the responsibility of our own self-governing nations.

Presenters federal HRDC Minister Jane Stewart, BC Ministry of Children and Family Development Minister Gordon Hogg and Ministry of State for Children Minister Linda Reid along with the First Nations Summit Task Group Member Chief Ed John agreed that leaders have to take greater responsibility for early childhood development remarking that "Early childhood development is about giving children the resources, skills and knowledge they need to enable them to create a brighter future for themselves and generations to follow." Forum Chair Wendy John added, "Clearly, investing in young children and their families is an investment in the future for all Canadians."

More than 200 Aboriginal people working in the field of early childhood development, child and family services, and education for Bands, Tribal Councils, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies for on and off-reserve Aboriginal children provided comments that are being incorporated into the BC Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Strategy. Only a handful of BC Aboriginal Chiefs attended.