

Moments of Warmth and Care in Indigenous Girls' Relationships: A Lens for Viewing Existing Relational Strengths

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Abstract

Research has established that it takes only one positive adult to change the course of a child's life (Rutter, 1989). In the present study, we focused on aspects of relationships in the lives of 16 Indigenous girls that created feelings of warmth, love, and care. The purpose of our study was to listen to the girls' voices to understand their memories of caring moments, what mattered to them, and how they had been cared for in significant life relationships. Eight girls from surrounding communities had been referred for services at Dilico Anishinabek Family Care, an Indigenous child and family mental health care centre; the other eight were from surrounding communities but had not been referred for services. An inductive thematic analysis of conversation transcripts revealed five themes in the girls' experiences of love, warmth, and care: 1) Honouring Development; 2) Humour, Generosity and Playfulness; 3) Intimacy and Closeness; 4) Inspiring and Confirming Identity and Worth; and 5) Safety and Trust. To promote the wellbeing of Indigenous girls, it is important to support the loving relationships that already exist in their lives. Providing resources to caring adults could foster more quality time and moments of warmth, thereby supporting girls' wellbeing. Implications for intervention include culturally informed strategies that nurture a felt sense of familiarity with loving and caring relationship experiences and approaches that empower girls to recognize their worthiness of receiving love and care.

Indigenization Statement and Offering Our Thanks

Our research was guided by processes that align with key values of Indigenous community-partnered health research (Harfield et al., 2020). We describe these processes transparently

below. More importantly, we express our immense gratitude to those who made this research possible and guided the project in a good way.

The present study was part of a larger research project called Empowering Adolescent Girls: First Nations Girls Telling Their Stories (or *Empowering Girls*; Madsen et al., 2007), which was initiated by Dilico Anishinabek Family Care (Dilico). Dilico is a multiservice organization guided by Anishinabek¹ worldviews and governed by representatives of each community with which it partners to deliver family welfare and health services (Dilico, 2017; Dion, 2013).

Empowering Girls was conducted within Dilico's community territories. We offer our gratitude to Dilico's board of directors at the time of the project and to the 14 communities they represented, which provided band approval: Animiigoo Zaagi'igan Anishinaabek, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek, Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek, Fort William, Ginoogaming, Kiashke Zaaging Anishinaabek, Long Lake #58, Michipicoten, Pays Plat, Pic Mobert, Red Rock, Whitesand, and the Thunder Bay District off-reserve population.

Dilico staff and community members prompted this collaborative project by expressing the need to understand and address a perceived rise in aggressive behaviours among Indigenous girls in their communities (Dion, 2013). A core mandate of *Empowering Girls* was to inform existing prevention and intervention programs for girls at Dilico and beyond (Dion, 2013).

We offer our sincere gratitude to the girls who shared their experiences with us. Their voices contributed to an impactful understanding of their lived experiences (Dion, 2013). Themes from the girls' stories were shared with the research leadership and advisory teams, who generally responded positively (e.g., "keep going" and "you've got it right"; Dion, 2013, p. 25).

The research was led by a Women's Research Advisory Committee (WRAC), comprising Elders, Dilico staff, and three women researchers (authors Pepler, Madsen, and Dion). The intersecting interests of Dilico staff and the researchers created an opportunity to learn about specific, actionable findings that could inform services and deepen understanding of how aggression may have been adaptive for the girls, given their lived experiences. The researchers recognized that the community-based staff were best suited to lead the conversations² with the girls because of their understanding of the girls' lived experiences and strengths (Dion, 2013).

We offer our gratitude to the Indigenous Elders and Dilico staff for their leadership and wisdom: Agnes Hardy, Dolores Morrisseau, Karen Marano, Alice Sabourin-Nowegejick, Karen Lesage-McCardy, Angela Carter, Judy Cameron, Joanne Taylor, Rose Pittis, Betty Perrault, Brenda Savignac, Frankie Misne, Jenn Moore, Kim Ducharme, Debbie Sault, and Destany Johns.

We would especially like to honour the exceptional legacy of Debbie, who was a strong, proud Ojibwe and Irish member of the Red Rock Indian Band and a Dilico staff member. Debbie was

¹ While primarily Anishinabek, Dilico's service users represent other Indigenous identities (e.g., Métis). We use the term "Indigenous" to reflect this diversity.

² We have chosen to replace the word 'interview' with 'conversation', and the word 'interviewer' with 'conversation partner' according to the recommendations of Kovach (2010) for conducting research with Indigenous peoples.

truly extraordinary, completely dedicated, and went above and beyond in serving her community throughout her career.

WRAC members and Dilico staff collaboratively established the conversation questions and other research and safety protocols, which aligned with an Indigenous research paradigm (Dion, 2013). A team of women community-based staff received training and ongoing support to collect and manage *Empowering Girls* data through their affiliation with Dilico. They conducted and transcribed the conversations while implementing the protocols established by the WRAC (Dion, 2013). WRAC members were confident that these women knew their communities' cultural protocols and were competent in creating safety and connection during the conversations.

We would like to recognize Debbie, Angela Carter, Amanda Shebobman, Bonnie Lynn Vermette, and Carmela Magbonica for the sensitivity and safety they created during their conversations, and for their management of the data. We are grateful to Destany, who tirelessly supported the project through recruitment, screening, and transcription. Without Debbie and Destany, *Empowering Girls* would not have been possible.

The WRAC and Dilico staff collaboratively established the *Empowering Girls* Data Ownership Agreement, informed by the literature, community discussions, Dilico, SickKids Hospital, Sheridan College's research ethics board (REB), and funders. The data agreement stipulated the following: partnership and shared learning; mobilization of the girls' contributions to benefit them and their communities; Band representatives' approval of protocols and data agreements; Dilico's storage, ownership, and control of the de-identified data; signed agreements with researchers regarding data use and publication; expansion of Dilico programming; and knowledge mobilization.

The current study was initiated by WRAC members Pepler and Madsen, who shared transcripts from *Empowering Girls*, some of which had not yet been analyzed. Our study aligns with *Empowering Girls* directives to honour the girls' stories by mobilizing the knowledge they shared through clinical, community, and academic channels and by informing programming for Indigenous girls at Dilico and beyond. This study focused on aspects of the girls' relationships that honoured their strengths and promoted healthy development. We aimed to de-center trauma narratives and center the girls' voices. The secondary analysis was conducted by Major and Pepler, with a third Indigenous coder for consensus. The results were presented by Major and Pepler and discussed with Dilico staff to further inform services. Collaborative review by all authors enables us to continue to mobilize the findings and honour the girls' voices.

We offer our gratitude to Taylore Dupuis Shalovsky, an Anishinaabe woman from Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nation, who contributed to group consensus coding. We offer our gratitude to the Dilico staff members for their time spent attending and participating in the discussion of the results from the current study.

Every effort has been made to include the original research leaders as authors of this paper, and to credit Indigenous staff and researchers for their contributions to *Empowering Girls*. Susan Dion is an Indigenous scholar who co-led the study with Dilico as a WRAC member, alongside authors Pepler and Madsen, who were directly involved in the project as researchers. Melissa

Major is a clinical developmental psychology graduate student who is exploring her family's oral histories of European and Indigenous ancestry (see the Locating Ourselves section).

We, the authors, lived on and conducted the current research on the traditional territories covered by Treaties 13, 14 and 22 with the Mississaugas of the Credit, as well as the Anishnabeg, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, Attawandaron, and Wendat Peoples. We offer our gratitude to those who have taken good care of her (the Land), such that we may have a relationship with her today. This immense gift moves our hearts to care for the next Seven Generations in kind and to commit to honouring the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant as you have. We invite readers to nurture their relationship with the Land alongside us, as this relationship is not solely the responsibility of Indigenous Peoples but is shared by anyone who traverses time on this land.

Introduction

It is love itself that brings us all together. This human family we are part of, this singular voice that is the accumulation of all voices raised together in praise of all Creation; this one heartbeat, this one drum, this one immaculate love that put us here together so that we could learn its primary teaching – that love is the energy of Creation, that it takes love to create love.

—Richard Wagamese (2016, p.46), *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*

In the current study, we listened to the voices of Indigenous girls who participated in the *Empowering Girls* conversations (Madsen et al., 2007) to gain an understanding of the importance of warmth in relationships for girls' development. The girls' voices described living in two worlds: the Western world and the cultural traditions of their communities. Therefore, we explored the nature of these moments of warmth through a bicultural lens. First, we drew from Wesner and colleagues' (2025) Early Relational Wellbeing model of Indigenous childrearing, which posit that a person's wellbeing originates in early life experiences of interconnected, cultural relationality. Second, we drew from Lieberman and colleagues' (2005) work, in which they posit that memories of parental warmth scaffold future relational success for women whose family lives were strained. Through listening to the girls' descriptions of loving moments they experienced with others, we developed a lens for intervention considerations that reinforce the strengths that already exist in their lives.

Locating Ourselves

Melissa Major is a clinician-researcher who aims to provide accessible, effective, culturally attuned services that draw upon healthy relationships to address impacts of violence. Major is also a violence survivor who grew up in rural Québec and is connected to maternal oral histories that have preserved an understanding of the nature of her Euro-Canadian, Métis and Abenakis ancestry, which she finds meaning and continues to learn more about. Her goal is to support the self-determination of community journeys to wellness.

Debra Pepler is a mother, grandmother, and Professor of psychology. Her teaching and research have focused on child and youth development in family and peer relationships. Her European ancestors came as settlers to Canada over a century ago. She has been on a learning journey to understand the strengths and challenges of Indigenous children and youth in the context of families and communities.

Kirsten Madsen has a PhD in Developmental Psychology and is a second-generation European-Canadian Settler. She was honoured to work and learn with the girls, the women, the staff from Dilico and the communities they serve, as well as her fellow researchers on such a relevant project.

Susan D. Dion is a Lenape-Potawatomi scholar with mixed Irish and Québécois ancestry who has worked in education for over 30 years. As Associate Vice-President Indigenous Initiatives and Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University, her research focuses on Lenape Language, History and Culture, Indigenizing, Decolonizing and Realizing Indigenous Education, Urban Indigenous Education, and Indigenous Student Wellbeing. Dion is widely consulted by diverse community groups, workplaces, and

institutions on developing methods for building more equitable, respectful relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people.

Our Choice to Focus on Strengths

The authors of this work carry an understanding of the depth and pernicious nature of colonial harms and their intergenerational sequelae, due to decades-long firsthand research and clinical experience with the cascades of harm Indigenous peoples in Canada have suffered and the pathways they are walking towards wellness (e.g., Cardinal & Pepler, 2021).

Therefore, we know that colonial discourses can objectify Indigenous girls by framing their strengths as part of a trauma narrative. In conducting this study from a strengths-based approach, we did not see a need to focus on the girls' traumas to celebrate their strengths and successes. Instead, we aimed to affirm that trauma survivorship is not the only explanation of a person's strengths.

Indigenous Views on the Importance of Relationships in Families and Communities

Indigenous children's health is connected to the health of their caregivers and communities (Greenwood et al., 2018). Canada's institutions and systems fail to uphold the rights of Indigenous girls. Thus, adverse girlhood experiences occur disproportionately (e.g., sexual, spiritual, and cultural violence; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG], 2019). Indigenous families and communities have resisted with deep strength and commitment to relationships (Chansonneuve, 2007).

Indigenous worldviews place children at the heart of the community, as articulated by Elaine Alec of Penticton: "Our children are at the *center* of our people – they are our value that ties our people together and *centers* our nations. Without our children we have no purpose" (Eni,

2009, p. 11). Children are viewed as future adults who are their own persons (Neckoway et al., 2007) and adults have the responsibility to partner with children and nurture their development so that they thrive, grow into their identity, and live a good life (Neckoway et al., 2007; Tagalik, 2009). Indigenous worldviews conceptualize health as a collective relational process; thus, relationships are viewed as a primary determinant of Indigenous wellbeing (Cardinal & Pepler, 2021).

Wesner and colleagues (2025) conducted a review of Indigenous scholarship on relational development, resulting in a concentric model of Early Relational Wellbeing. Beginning at the center and moving outward, experiences of (a) Early Relational Wellbeing originate in caregiving interactions that are opportunities to raise healthy children by enacting (b) Ceremony, Culture, and Spirituality. These (c) Relational Practices locate children within an interconnected network of (d) Familial, Intergenerational, Community, and Environmental relationships. Experiences of relatedness remain consistent (e) Across the Lifespan throughout different stages of development (i.e., Prenatal to Elderhood), weaving together a person's sense of identity and belonging. Relational wellbeing throughout the lifespan is indicated by 19 key (f) Values (e.g., Balance, Interdependence, Independence, Identity, Socialization). For example, 'Socialization' relates to conceptualizing caregiver roles beyond immediate biological parents.

Developmental-Relational Theory in Western Psychology

In the current study, we focused on Indigenous adolescent girls' healthy development through relationships. The critical developmental tasks during adolescence include establishing an identity, preparing for adult roles, and forming a cohesive worldview (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990).

The cascading harms of colonization (Cardinal & Pepler, 2021) included attempts to erase cultural and social models that were traditionally created to nurture Indigenous girls' gifts (Green, 2009; Tagalik, 2009). From birth, children's healthy development depends on secure attachment and consistent patterns of nurturance with primary caregivers (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Carlson & Sroufe, 1995). When children feel accepted, safe, and loved by caregivers, they develop internal working models of relationships that enable them to create and sustain healthy and securely attached relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Lieberman et al., 2005). These experiences lay the foundation for the transition to being available and non-restrictive when caring for others and having reciprocally rewarding intimate relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Lieberman et al., 2005). Earned secure attachment is still available to those whose childhood relationships were strained through the development of healthy ways to adapt and a focus on experiences of warmth and care (Lieberman et al., 2005; Roisman et al., 2002).

Adolescent identity is co-created (Erikson & Erikson, 1998; McLeod, 2008) through reflecting on how one is treated, how one treats others, and whom one emulates (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Lopez & Gormley, 2002; Sroufe, 1990). Our study adopted a strengths-based perspective (Harfield et al., 2020) on caring relationships that supported Indigenous girls' development.

Study Goals and Objectives

Our study draws on Wesner and colleagues' (2025) model of Early Relational Wellbeing showing that relationships and culture underpin wellness across development, and Lieberman and colleagues' (2005) work showing that memories of caregiver warmth and love can transmit safety and self-esteem, which support relational capacities. Our central question was: 'What

aspects of girls' relationships with the people in their lives bring feelings of warmth, love, and care?' We conducted a thematic analysis by identifying moments of nurturance linked to girls' positive development to propose a lens for intervention considerations that reinforce relational strengths in the girls' lives.

Our Method

In the current study, we conducted a thematic analysis of conversation transcripts from *Empowering Girls*, some of which had not yet been analyzed. We built on the initial project's aim to understand aggression from a strengths-based perspective by contributing a focus on relationships. In the current study, the authors Major, Pepler, and Madsen met to discuss the objective of exploring relational strengths in the girls' stories. With an established data agreement, Madsen shared transcripts from *Empowering Girls* with Major and Pepler, who conducted a Semantic Inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This secondary analysis was granted ethics approval from the York University Human Research Ethics Board, certificate number STU 2021-001. Findings from the girls' stories were presented at Dilico and continue to be mobilized.

Who are the Girls in Our Subset of Empowering Girls Transcripts?

We received *Empowering Girls* transcripts from conversations with 26 Indigenous girls (ages 12 to 18). We analyzed the conversations of eight girls who had been referred for support at Dilico. An additional 18 girls had been invited through community liaisons within Dilico's catchment area (Dilico, 2017). We randomly selected eight of these girls' conversations to analyze for the present study ($n = 16$). Guardian consent (when required) as well as consent or assent from each girl were obtained.

Empowering Girls Conversation Protocols

Empowering Girls conversation questions and safety protocols were developed in collaboration with WRAC, Dilico staff, and researchers.

Empowering Girls Conversation Questions

The questions were created to understand the risk and protective factors relating to the girls' witnessing, experiencing and/or participating in aggression without pathologizing or retraumatizing them in the process. The 56 questions were semi-structured, comprising four main domains (Self, School, People in Your Life, and Home). The 'Self' domain included 19 questions, such as, "What are three words you would use to describe yourself?" The 'School' domain, which focused on learning in general, included eight questions, such as, "Tell me about the person you learn the most from." The "People in Your Life" domain included 14 questions, such as, "When you are in trouble, whom do you ask for help?" Finally, the "Home" domain included 11 questions, such as, "If you could change one thing about where you live, what would it be?". Four general questions were also asked (e.g., "Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?").

Empowering Girls Safety Protocols

An Indigenized, feminist perspective (Madsen et al., 2007) guided the formulation of step-by-step protocols for responding to girls' disclosures or distress while honouring their power, safety, and autonomy (i.e., abuse disclosure, crisis response; Madsen et al., 2007). As part of these protocols, conversation partners conducted a mental health screener with a guardian and checked in with the girls about their wellbeing during the conversation process. Conversation

partners responded with appropriate supports in the event that the girls and/or their guardians indicated a concern, followed by an offer to refer for additional support.

Our Qualitative Analyses

We conducted a Semantic Inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a process which includes description, summary, interpretation, and connections to previous literature. See Table 1 for Phases of Our Qualitative Decision-Making Process. The focus of this approach was on allowing the girls' voices to determine the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1

Phases of Our Qualitative Decision-Making Process

Braun and Clarke's Phases of Analysis (2006)	Our Process	Our Steps
Description Organizing data to reveal patterns in semantic content.	Established a coding framework through iterations of coding and group discussion.	1. Determined initial coding approach based on research question: "Identify moments of warmth in the girls' relationships". 2. Defined what constituted a unit of meaning: Individual moments in time described by the girls when someone acted in a caring way towards them. 3. Tested and refined codes through iterations and documented discrepancies in interpretation and changes to the coding framework. A. Codes were abstract as opposed to present or absent (Cascio et al., 2019; Richards & Hemphill, 2018). 4. Finalized inclusion criteria for text to code: A. Direct statements made by the girls (e.g., "My mom hugged me.") B. The girls' direct agreement with questions (e.g., "Yes") paired with the corresponding question (e.g., "Did your mom hug you?"). 5. Agreed on a theory that grounded coding: A. Semantic method: attribute codes based on the semantic content of the girls' statements (i.e., their explicit words). 6. Solidified coding framework: Each moment was to be coded twice.

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- A. One code that captured her words, near verbatim, about the caring act (e.g., hug from mom; See Figure 2).
 - B. One code to name who that person is to her (e.g., mother; See Figure 1).

Summary	Implemented the coding framework to arrive at consensus and saturation.	7. Major, Pepler, and Dupuis Shalovsky familiarized themselves with the coding framework and met to compare perspectives on codes. 8. Consensus was established once the group applied the coding framework with consistent agreement on data moving forward (Cascio et al., 2019), via: A. Initial agreement on how a moment of warmth was identified in a section of text and coded. B. Discussing discrepancies on codes to reach consensus (Cascio et al., 2019). 9. Transcripts were coded until saturation: when codes began to repeat without new themes arising.
Interpretation	Built consensus regarding patterns in themes and subthemes.	10. Discussed clusters of similar codes that coalesced into a subtheme 11. Worked to define what each subtheme meant 12. Discussed and organized the subthemes into larger themes 13. Agreed on how to define each theme in detail 14. Resolved discrepancies and established consensus regarding internal consistency by agreeing on whether: A. Codes <i>within</i> subthemes were conceptually <i>similar</i> to the overall theme, and B. Codes <i>were distinct</i> from <i>other</i> subthemes within the theme; and C. There was dialogue about the analytic process and fidelity to the research question and girls' words. 15. Agreed on a theory that grounded interpretation: Constructionist method, considering sociocultural and structural conditions underlying the girls' stories.

Connections to Previous Literature	Reflected on themes and subthemes.	16. Discussed how the themes and subthemes: A. Related to Indigenous developmental-relational literature. B. Offered a new lens for understanding the importance of relationships in Indigenous girls' wellbeing C. Informed Dilico's service delivery and beyond.
Making sense of patterns based on previous work.		

A total of 324 moments of warmth, love, and care were identified in the 16 transcripts.

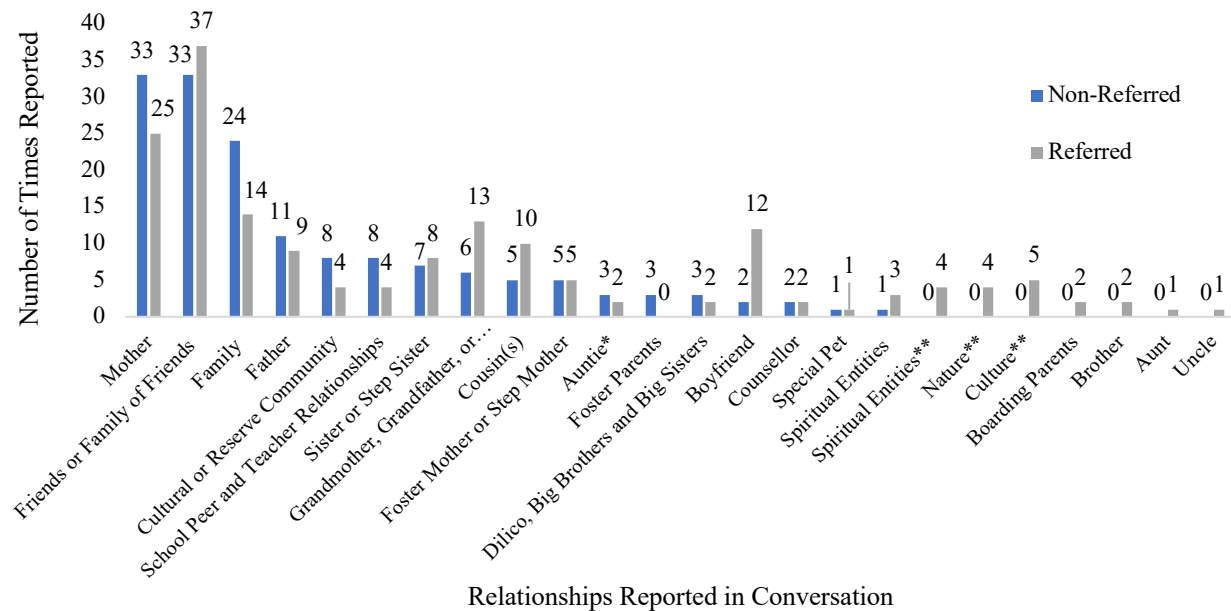
Individual units of meaning or subthemes (e.g., 'someone to turn to') were grouped together to comprise clusters of meaning or themes (e.g., Safety and Trust). Through our inductive approach, a lens containing five themes and 29 subthemes through which to view relationship strengths were constructed by the researchers and girls' voices.

Results

Our main goal in the current study was to listen to the girls' voices to learn about memories of love, warmth, and care in their relationships to understand how to reinforce the relational strengths that already exist in their lives. Figure 1 depicts the relationships within which these moments occurred.

Figure 1

Relationships in Moments of Warmth



Note. Number of times a given relationship is reported with a moment of care.

*Auntie is a caring female figure who is not necessarily the sister of one's mother.

**Spiritual Entities, Nature and Culture are significant to Indigenous relationality (Cardinal & Pepler, 2021).

The girls' voices have shaped a five-theme lens for understanding their loving moments.

These themes are: Honouring Development; Humour, Generosity and Playfulness; Intimacy and Closeness; Inspiring and Confirming Identity and Worth; and Safety and Trust (See Figure 2 for a visualization).

Figure 2

Moments of Warmth, Love and Care



Note. Number of codes attributed to a given subtheme or code.

Honouring Development

In the first theme, the girls' stories described moments when they were *Honoured in their Development*. We defined this theme as moments when a caregiver, role model, or peer remained realistic, nonjudgmental, and supportive in their expectations of her development, met her where she was at, or encouraged her growth. This theme comprised seven subthemes. *Shared Parenting* is explored below as an illustrative example; definitions and excerpts for the remaining six

subthemes are presented in Figure 3.1. For example, in the subtheme *Shared Parenting* (i.e., receiving care from several different figures within the community), one of the girls shared:

I'll walk to my auntie's, I'll talk to her and say what is going on, and she talks to me about it—or at my grandma's house— she'll be like “well you have to do your homework to get through school so you may as well do it now and get it over and done with.” [...] They encourage me to do things. My mom does too, but they are a little bit more encouraging.

Here we see multiple caring women in her network *Sharing Parenting* roles by showing concern for her growth and remaining a predictable, safe space for her to seek support and guidance while encouraging her to progress.

Figure 3.1

Subthemes

Name of Subtheme	Definition	Excerpts from Conversations*
Advice and Storytelling		
Learning from others who shared lived experiences or told stories that guided them.		“My friend [...] she tells me things about reality.”
Talking it Out		
Processing thoughts and feelings aloud with a trusted listener who acted as a sounding board.		“I'll get up and I'll leave and go hang out with some friends. [...] Talking about things makes me feel better, cause if you don't talk, you're going to hold that grudge inside [...]”
Being Seen or Understood		
Feeling noticed, included, or supported in their identity and needs.		“[When I am sad] I like talk to [Granny], she listens to me. She won't have to say anything, she'll just say a couple of things, and it will be ok.”
Honouring Vulnerability		
Questions, vulnerable moments, or mistakes being met with patience and viewed as opportunities to learn.		“[Mom will] explain it to me, and then she'll tell me that she loves me and ‘I make mistakes too, [...] that's okay, we all make mistakes, we're human.’”
Relationships as Respite		
Relationships that comforted or helped resolve emotional instability in other high-conflict relationships.		“I went to live with my sister for [around] a year and then I went to my auntie's house, and I moved to my uncle's house, I stayed at my Granny's for a while. [...] I was having a hard

	time getting along with my mom and her boyfriend, and I just wanted to get away from that.”
Modelling Reconciliation or Repair	
Modelling how to find peace in severed relationships or repair a valued connection after conflict.	“[...] my mom and dad split for awhile [...] [finally] he came to where we were living, to visit [...] and that was the best thing that happened to me [...] then [my parents] got married.”

Note. Conversations were coded wholistically; excerpts only represent part of the conversation.

Humour, Generosity, and Playfulness

In the second theme, the girls’ stories described moments of *Humour, Generosity, and Playfulness*. We defined this theme as a sense of delight and enjoyment arising when others do not take themselves too seriously and as the use of humour to transform neutral or negative situations into positive experiences. This theme comprised four subthemes. *Sharing Joy and Delight* is explored below as an illustrative example; definitions and excerpts for the remaining three subthemes are presented in Figure 3.2. For example, in the subtheme *Sharing Joy and Delight* (i.e., excitement to celebrate good news or share in life’s simple joys with others), one of the girls shared: “When my mom and my grandma would dress me up with dresses and [do a ponytail hairdo] [...] My grandma used to call them waterfalls, cause it’s like a dolphin, how they have those little spouts.” She *Shared Joy and Delight* in a tactile, loving interaction with her mother and grandmother who dressed her up using a fun hairdo.

Figure 3.2

Subthemes

Humour or Playfulness	
Sharing in moments of fun, silliness, and excitement; placing value in approaching life circumstances with humour.	“We [friends and family] just like to have fun together, hang out, and make each other laugh [...] [Cousin 1] makes me smile from talking [with them] [...] [Cousin 2] can be dumb sometimes [...] but you always get a kick out of it. Its just fun being around him.”

Special Gift	
Receiving special gifts, typically in the form of a trip, meal, object, activity, or event.	“[Grandma] used to always mostly take care of us [siblings]. She would always come and take us out to McDonald’s or go to Pow Wows.”
Feeling Happy	
Lighthearted positivity and contentment in the presence of their loved ones.	“Just being with my granny [at her house], she is the sweetest person in the world, when I am with her, I am happy.”

Intimacy and Closeness

In the third theme, the girls’ stories described moments of *Intimacy and Closeness*. We defined this third theme as warmth and proximity in the girls’ relationships, creating a sense of togetherness that comes from nearness, be it comfort from a caring parent or the delight of holding hands in a romantic relationship. This theme comprised six subthemes. *Warmth and Intimacy* is explored below as an illustrative example; definitions and excerpts for the remaining five subthemes are presented in Figure 3.3. For example, in the subtheme *Warmth and Intimacy* (i.e., experiences of intimate connection, warmth, or comforting touch – either platonic or romantic), one of the girls shared: “[...] he hugged me [...] [then we] came back downstairs, laid on my bed, and cuddled [...] that was the best thing that ever happened to me.” She felt *Warmth and Intimacy* in reciprocal physical affection from a boy she was interested in romantically.

Figure 3.3

Subthemes

Quality Time	
Feeling connected and close with someone due to the time they spent together.	“[Q: I love it when I...] Am with my mom [...] We’ll hang out and watch movies once in a while. We’ll go for a car ride and get coffee [...] We’ll go shopping or to the movies.”
Authenticity and Closeness	
Deeply understanding the personality and character of a	“We’re really close. She is like my number one person [...] [My mom is] I don’t know, my best friend, I guess.”

close, kindred person in their lives.	
Place-Based Connection	
A personal connection to land, home, spaces that held memories, or places of cultural significance.	“What I like the best is that I have my family here [on the reserve]. I have my sisters, my uncle, I’ve got everybody here. It’s quiet, it’s peaceful, it’s beside the lake, and there are good people around here.”
Gathering and Togetherness	
Feeling surrounded by a warm, supportive network of caring people.	“Friends, music just togetherness, having fun, being hyper and laughing and having my space but not too much.”
Romance and Companionship	
The excitement of new friendships or romantic commitments with a love interest.	“[...] he [love interest] was like the nicest guy I ever met, and he just asked me out and I said ‘yeah’, and we would hang out and stuff, and it was really fun [...]”

Inspiring and Confirming Identity and Worth

In the fourth theme, the girls’ stories described moments of others *Inspiring and Confirming their Identity and Worth*. We defined this theme as important relationships in the girls’ lives providing reminders of who they are and what they deserved to experience from others. This theme comprised five subthemes. *Cultural Connection* is explored below as an illustrative example; definitions and excerpts for the remaining four subthemes are presented in Figure 3.4. For example, in the subtheme *Cultural Connection* (i.e., feelings of empowerment and healing through connection to spiritual and cultural traditions), one of the girls shared: “Going to sweat lodge [...] you see all of these spirits, and they go around the thing, and it’s pretty hot [...] [I felt] protected [...] she prayed, and things were just, better.” She experienced an encounter with spiritual entities during an event that *Connected her to her Culture* and left her feeling protected.

Figure 3.4

Subthemes

Self-Worth and Confidence	
Relationships that supported their self-esteem and affirmed their belief that they are worthy of good things.	“He [love interest] liked to phone me [...] and would tell me a lot of nice things. ‘You’re smart, you’re beautiful, and you have respect for yourself. You’re going to go places’.”
Feeling Loved and Wanted	
Feeling that someone wanted and cared about them, and that they mattered.	“My parents, giving me food and clothes, and loving me, and showing that they actually do want me.”
Kindness and Niceness	
Others treating them with kindness and behaving predictably and considerately towards them.	“My friends really don’t do mean things to me [...] I’ve never really been ditched before.”
Being Inspired	
Relationships in their lives modelling success, resilience, and grit.	“My dad ... He’s [had] hard times. ... [he] Tried to be good so no matter what was going on inside, he still finished school and got a good job and all that.”

Safety and Trust

In the fifth theme, the girls’ stories described moments of *Safety and Trust*. We defined this theme as mutual respect and consistency in relationships that provided experiences of emotional stability and predictability. These relationship experiences allowed them to feel calm and restored after spending time in their presence. This theme comprised seven subthemes. *Someone to Turn To* is explored below as an illustrative example; definitions and excerpts for the remaining six subthemes are presented in Figure 3.5. For example, in the subtheme *Someone to Turn To* (i.e., having people they trust to turn to in times of trouble or need), one of the girls shared: “I have a lot of trust in my family and my friend [name]. Her dad always helps me out. He’ll come and pick me up if something is wrong [...].” Trusted adults provided guidance and help when she needed *Someone to Turn To*, supporting her sense of safety and her ability to trust others.

Figure 3.5

Subthemes

Guiding and Protecting	
Others showing concern for their wellbeing and carefully looking out for their safety.	“[My family] Made sure that I wasn’t in trouble like some people that we know and stayed off the streets. Stuff like that.”
Provision and Support	
Receiving practical instrumental support.	“[My mom] put a roof over my head, stuff like that. She gave me things I needed, not just what I wanted.”
Dependable Presence	
Relationships that remained emotionally available and predictable, fostering stability.	“Because she [sister] has been with me my whole entire life since we have been living with my mom and she was always there for me.”
Home with Family	
Being home with family as a safe, positive, and warm place to be.	“[Q: Tell me about a place that you go that you consider special and why] My grandma’s house [...] because she just makes me feel better when I am with her. So, I could talk to her, or else I go to my auntie [name’s] house.”
Peacefulness and Tranquility	
Relationships that represented an absence of chaos and an ability to feel at ease.	“My reserve in the bush [...] It’s peaceful, and I like it. It makes me feel good.”
Innocence and Feeling Carefree	
Trusting caregivers to meet their needs, freeing them to enjoy childhood.	“[Q: The thing I remember best about being little?] Being happy. You don’t have to worry about anything [but] going to have fun at your friends’.”

Discussion

Our study and *Empowering Girls* (Madsen et al., 2007) provided an opportunity to listen to Indigenous girls’ voices to understand what matters to them, what they need, and how they have been nurtured. These findings support Wesner and colleagues’ (2025) review indicating that relationships in Indigenous children’s lives provide opportunities to enact culture and affirm identity throughout development. The girls’ stories also support Lieberman and colleagues’ (2005) observations that despite other life difficulties, drawing on memories of care can support relational development. The girls’ voices depicted experiences of living in two worlds, as they cherished memories like attending sweat lodges and going to the movies with friends. Therefore,

our discussion below is contextualized within Western developmental-relational research and conceptualizations of Indigenous relationality.

The Potential of Relationships in the Girls' Lives

When children feel accepted, safe, and loved, they have opportunities to internalize cultural and relational experiences that enable them to seek and create securely attached relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Wesner et al., 2025). Memories of parental warmth scaffold future relational success for girls whose family life was strained (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Lieberman et al., 2005). The girls used language that suggested they had remembered the warmth and care they received because these experiences were special to them. These experiences of Early Relational Wellbeing (Wesner et al., 2025) shape general representations of caregivers' responsiveness and availability as well as perceptions of one's own identity within the community as one who is valued and cared for (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

Relationships Reinforce the Girls' Existing Strengths and Resilience

The girls spoke about many protective experiences such as developing a sense of right and wrong, their own worth, what they need and want, what they like, whom they should trust, when to set boundaries, their worth and purpose, the sacred, and cultural identity. The girls drew on caring moments to hold on to the good, even in the face of ambivalence, separation, and adversity. It seems that the girls expressed a will to thrive that was directly related to the warmth they had experienced in relationships. Indigenous ways of relating have nevertheless transcended cumulative attempts at systemic, generational, and cultural harms (Blackstock, 2007; Eni, 2009; Greenwood et al., 2018). This is consistent with Wesner and colleagues' (2025) findings that relationships which enact cultural values support young people's identity.

Study Strengths, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Our study adds to a growing body of research with Indigenous girls that is rooted in a relational, positive youth development model. We chose an inductive approach to our analysis to allow the girls' voices to shape the findings (Dion, 2013). Clinical services often reflect cultural, geographic/urban, and gender-biases (Dion, 2013). Our study offers transcultural insights from a relational-developmental perspective.

We recognize the limitations of our study based on the *Empowering Girls* conversations (Madsen et al., 2007) and analyses we chose to conduct. Relationships in small communities often present a challenge when ensuring confidentiality, so *Empowering Girls* researchers (Madsen et al., 2007) took extra steps to ensure confidentiality and avoid double roles (e.g., reassigning conversation partners to reduce the risk of overlaps in professional and community settings). The conversation partners provided safety and support for the girls to articulate their thoughts and feelings if they wished (e.g., providing terms to label emotions). Some girls exercised their right to withdraw from questions and asked to 'pass.' The girls may have been uncomfortable or unwilling to share aspects of their lives that recall traumatic memories. The coders in the current study did their best to hold the ambivalence of warmth and harm in the girls' close relationships and recognize that the recalled moments of warmth would never erase the harms done.

Finding Direction from the Girls' Voices

The relational lens that emerged from the girls' conversations guides responses for some youth who may have missed the warmth and love that is foundational to developing a safe and caring perspective of relationships (Pepler, 2012). Roisman and colleagues (2002) contend that

one can establish an earned-secure attachment style after relational harms by responding with relational work. For example, drawing from memories of warmth in positive early life relationships (Lieberman et al., 2005) can elicit a sense of safety and warmth paired with a desire to reproduce it with others.

The girls expressed a desire for a deeper connection to their culture and their loved ones, as well as an appreciation for peace, availability, and quality time. The girls enjoyed regular teenage activities like going to the mall, watching movies, dating, and staying active. They also expressed their joy in spending time with their mothers, aunties, and grandmothers, relationships that remain important during adolescence (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990). They appreciated learning Ojibwe, being taught by wise ones, and being given the autonomy to make their own mistakes. Despite the structural and systemic attempts of colonialism to disrupt their network of relationships, the girls drew from strengths in that same network to move past obstacles to their healthy development.

Intervention Suggestions

It is important to support the caring relationships that already exist in the lives of girls and dispel discourses of pathologization. Interventions should celebrate the girls' inherent strengths and draw from relational supports that are both developmentally relevant (e.g., fun, friends, dating) and culturally relevant (e.g., sweat lodge, traditional healers). Girls can also be supported by learning about healthy expectations for relationships and setting boundaries to protect themselves in relationships. In response to Dilico's concern for girls' aggression, supports might focus on learning from and honouring mistakes, as opposed to behavioural modification approaches. Indigenous girls may benefit from experiential or observational approaches as opposed to standard didactic ones. The girls valued relationships that celebrated their strengths

and held space for their difficulties while listening to them, an approach imperative for building a therapeutic alliance. The girls accessed multiple sources of support to meet different needs; involving multiple support persons in interventions may support different aspects of their lives. Finally, those working to support Indigenous girls must conceptualize girls' wellbeing as interconnected and share power with the girls.

Future Directions

Future inquiries might focus on learning from adult Indigenous women who are engaging with the relational work of healing attachment patterns and building healthy relationships. It would be valuable to describe traditional cultural approaches to creating a sense of familiarity and safety in healthy and caring relationship experiences.

Conclusion

Focusing on safe and caring relationships can support girls to develop the relational capacities that lead to wellness in adulthood. By listening to the girls' voices, we explored what mattered to them, how they had been nurtured, and what they had learned about their worthiness to receive love. The girls' voices suggest that they can re-experience the love they received during special caring moments in new relationships, as they identify and walk with those relations towards the life they want for themselves and their communities.

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