




# STORIES AND TEACHINGS ABOUT PREGNANCY



“My hope and vision for Aboriginal midwifery would be that all Aboriginal women have access to an Aboriginal midwife.”<sup>1</sup>

*Claire Dion Fletcher,  
Lenape Potawatomi  
Registered Midwife*



# The midwives at the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives want every Aboriginal person to receive reproductive health care that improves all areas of health.

The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives gather and share Indigenous teachings and cultural knowledges related to pregnancy, birth, infant, and reproductive care for our children, the communities we serve, and for the future.

“We feel it is essential to honour and respect ourselves in order to care for that first environment. Together, we cultivate the next generation/s of healthy and self-loving people.”<sup>2</sup> – NACM

This booklet contains stories, teachings, and information related to prenatal care and education.

“Storytelling is a way to empower and put tools of empowerment in the hands of Communities.”<sup>3</sup>  
– Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence


## Looking for an Aboriginal midwife in your community?

### Contact NACM for information:

nacm@aboriginalmidwives.ca or 1-514-807-3668, ext. 220  
aboriginalmidwives.ca

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# WATER

We begin with words from Katsi Cook, who is a Traditional Mohawk Midwife from Akwesasne. She is a women's health advocate, an environmental activist, and her life's work is well respected across the world. Katsi was instrumental in the formation of the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives. Her teachings of water are foundational to Aboriginal midwifery.

**“In the Mohawk language, one word for midwife is *iewirokwas*. This word describes that ‘she’s pulling the baby out of the Earth,’ out of the water, or a dark wet place. It is full of ecological context. We know from our traditional teachings that the waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are the same water. The follicular fluid which bathes the ripening ovum on the ovary; the dew of the morning grass; the waters of the streams and rivers and the currents of the oceans – all these waters respond to the pull of our Grandmother Moon. She calls them to rise and fall in her rhythm. Mother’s milk forms from the bloodstream of the woman. The waters of our bloodstream and the waters of the earth are all the same water.”<sup>4</sup> – Katsi Cook, Mohawk Midwife**



## Water

Water is important to many Aboriginal peoples across North America as it is interwoven with women, pregnancy, babies, rivers, lakes, and rain, to name a few. Water is precious and without it, life is not possible. In fact, water is healing as it is medicine.

**“The notion of ‘carrying water’ has come to be fundamental in my understanding of the issue of birth place. The health of the water, both in the body and on the land/territory, is fundamental in the movement to revitalise and restore some kind of healing in Indigenous communities.”<sup>5</sup>**  
– Rachel Olson

Spirit of Birth, a film by  
Rebeka Tabobondung:  
**[www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=5vABSuTTrbg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vABSuTTrbg)**

# THE POWER OF PREGNANCY

“A pregnant woman was not only ‘treated special,’ she was also honoured as a conduit between spirit life and life on earth.”<sup>6</sup> – *Kim Anderson*

“Pregnancy is a time when spiritual and intellectual teachings are more needed and present to help the mother adapt to her new life and to take on the mothering role as a learner and future teacher. This learning cycle will happen with every pregnancy a woman has during her lifetime.”<sup>6</sup>

The family and community play an important role in supporting and protecting a pregnancy. This includes bringing positive energies and thoughts.

“A pregnant woman was a very medicinal woman because she was carrying a new life inside her.”<sup>7</sup> – *Marie Anderson*

“If there was a difficult decision coming on the reserve they’d approach this young pregnant woman and they’d ask her for advice...they’d offer her tobacco.”<sup>7</sup> – *Marie Anderson*

“Pregnancy itself is a ceremony.”<sup>8</sup> – *Patrisia Gonzales*

“Being pregnant and growing a child inside of my womb definitely felt like a ceremony every single day. Your entire body is like the sweat lodge for the baby. The baby is kept there, warm, moist, safe, protected in the darkness and with a lot of love. I constantly made a lot of effort to sing to the baby all the time, to sing the songs I would remember, Nahua songs, prayer songs, some songs that I would make up just for the baby. The entire pregnancy was a ceremony, being in a ceremonial place, mentally and physically.”<sup>8</sup> – *Contreras*



# HOW TO FIND AN ELDER

When seeking an Elder, it is good to talk to others about their experiences. Trusted Elders are generally well known within strong community circles.

You can also connect with people at Native Friendship Centres, Aboriginal health and cultural centers, and community centers. Sometimes local colleges or universities also offer Elder appointments.

Be mindful of cultural and personal safety with all care providers including Elders. You could take a close friend or family member with you. This can help you understand and remember the teachings as well. A responsible Elder will be supportive of your choices.



Within Aboriginal teachings across North America, all children are important.

“Each child was considered a gift to be respected and cherished. Elders related that the birth of a child was a joyous event, regardless of the social situation of his or her birth.”<sup>9</sup>

“In the Anishinabek worldview, the states surrounding women and pregnancy are considered to be highly sacred and spiritual. Our traditional knowledge demonstrates to us the importance of paying close attention to our spiritual experiences. This is especially true during pregnancy, because these experiences have the capacity to hold vital teachings, which can affect us, our unborn children, and the community on individual, medicinal, political, and spiritual levels.”<sup>7</sup> – *Rebeka Tabobondung*

“Our belief is that before conception, that child’s spirit sits with the Creator and it’s given instructions on what its life is going to be like when it comes here. And it’s told what it will do in its life here on earth and what its name is going to be.”<sup>7</sup> – *Faith Pegahmagabow, Aboriginal Midwife, Oneida and Lena Lenape*

# BREASTFEEDING

Today, there is a lot to think about during pregnancy and breastfeeding is one of them.

**“Breast milk is a gift and a medicine a mother gives her child.”<sup>9</sup>**

Sometimes, people worry there won't be enough breastmilk for their baby. Lena Wolkie, an Elder from Sachs Harbour offers this advice:

**“New mothers need to suckle their babies right after birth to help them get their milk flowing well.”<sup>10</sup>**

There was a time when all babies were breastfed. If there wasn't enough breastmilk, another person fed the baby, such as a close relative or someone else in the community who had breastmilk.



Establishing breastfeeding early on helps ensure there is enough breastmilk. Early skin-to-skin contact with the baby greatly helps breastmilk production. When you breastfeed your baby a lot, it tells your body to make more breastmilk in the coming days.

There are many people and organizations who can help with breastfeeding. Talk to your midwife or contact La Leche League for support: [www.LLLC.ca](http://www.LLLC.ca) or 1-800-665-4324.



# CONNECTING *and* RE-CONNECTING

There are teachings and stories in all Aboriginal communities about the importance of families, communities, and acceptance. These teachings include two-spirit, gender fluid, LGBTQ+, Queer, and transgender peoples. It is widely believed that a child will reveal who they are to the parents. The parents do not need to impose a specific identity onto their child.

We are all learning more about Aboriginal communities before contact with European settlers. NACM honours all Aboriginal peoples in our families and communities through our first core value, which is healing:

*Aboriginal midwives enhance the capacity of a community to heal from historical and ongoing traumas, addictions, and violences. Aboriginal midwives draw from a rich tradition of language, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural practice as they work with women to restore health to Aboriginal families and communities.*

**“ONCE WE BRING BACK TWO-SPIRITED TEACHINGS THEN HEALING WILL COME BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN AND BETWEEN GAY, STRAIGHT, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDERED... I DON’T THINK THE IMBALANCE THAT COMES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN WILL NOT DISAPPEAR UNTIL THE HOMOPHOBIA GOES AWAY. IT DOESN’T BELONG HERE. THE HOMOPHOBIA DOES NOT BELONG HERE, IT CAME WITH COLONIALISM.”<sup>11</sup> – SWAMPY CREE MOM DOE O’BRIEN-TEENG**



# PARTNER INVOLVEMENT

Teachings tell us that partners are vital to the wellbeing of the pregnancy as well as to the baby. Partners were encouraged to be very gentle and kind to the pregnant person and to also help after the baby was born. These teachings were shared during the pregnancy, not just after the baby was born.<sup>6</sup>

“THE BRAID THEORY CONSISTS OF LOOKING AT THE MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT: ONE STRAND REPRESENTS THE MIND, ANOTHER THE BODY, AND THIRDLY THE SPIRIT. WHEN WE BRAID OUR HAIR, IT IS SAID THAT WE ARE FEELING PROUD AND WORTHY, WHEN WE DO NOT, IT IS SAID WE WALK WITH HUMBLENESS.”<sup>12</sup> – LUCY BARNEY, LILLOOET NATION

# References and Resources

<sup>1</sup>National Aboriginal Council of Midwives (n.d.). Claire Dion Fletcher. Hope Vision Rewards.mps. Available at <http://aboriginalmidwives.ca/resources>

<sup>2</sup>National Aboriginal Council of Midwives (2014, February 14) Retrieved from <http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/feb102014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (2004). Community based research and Aboriginal women's health and healing (Project 136). Author:Winnipeg, MB. Available at <http://www.pwhce.ca/pdf/CommBasedSaskatoon.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Cook, K. (2003, December 23). Cook:Women are the first environment. Indian Country. <http://gopal.aulacourses.com/wp-content/uploads/11/2016/04/Cook-Women-are-the-First-Environment.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Olson, R. (2013). Relocating childbirth:The politics of birth place and Aboriginal midwifery in Manitoba, Canada (unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Sussex, Brighton, U.K.

<sup>6</sup>Anderson, K. (2011). Life stages and native women: Memory, teachings, and story medicine. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.

<sup>7</sup>Tabobondung, R. (2012). Wasauksing women sharing knowledge. In Tensions, 6, pp. 1-23. Available from <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue6/articles/pdfs/rebekatabobondungarticle.pdf>

<sup>8</sup>Gonzales, P. (2012). Red medicine:Traditional indigenous rites of birthing and healing. University of Arizona Press.

<sup>9</sup>Dodgson, J., & Struthers, R. (2003). Traditional breastfeeding practices of the Ojibwe of northern Minnesota. Health Care for Women International, 24(1), 49-61.

<sup>10</sup>Pauktuutit (n.d.). Born on the land with helping hands:The Inuit women's guide to a healthy pregnancy. Available at [http://pauktuutit.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/11/assets/29-Born-on-the-Land-with-Helping-Hands\\_English.pdf](http://pauktuutit.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/11/assets/29-Born-on-the-Land-with-Helping-Hands_English.pdf)

<sup>11</sup>Best Start (2012). Supporting the journey: From preconception to parenting for First Nations families in Ontario. Health Nexus:Toronto, ON. Available at [http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep\\_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf](http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep_health/pdf/SupportingtheSacredJourney.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>BC Reproductive Mental Health Program (2011). Celebrating the circle of life: Coming back to balance and harmony. Author:Vancouver, BC. Available at <http://www.perinatalervicesbc.ca/Documents/Resources/Aboriginal/CircleOfLife/CircleOfLife.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>National Aboriginal Council of Midwives (n.d.). Aboriginal midwives. Available at <http://www.isuma.tv/en/national-aboriginal-council-of-midwives/aboriginal-midwives>

# Core Values of Aboriginal Midwifery

HEALING  
RESPECT  
AUTONOMY  
COMPASSION  
BONDING  
BREASTFEEDING  
CULTURAL SAFETY  
CLINICAL EXCELLENCE  
EDUCATION  
RESPONSIBILITY

“We need to have a post-colonial vision of what our families could be.”<sup>13</sup>

*Carol Couchie,  
Nishnaabekwe, Midwife,  
Nipissing First Nation*



The National Aboriginal Council of Midwives exists to promote excellence in reproductive health care for Inuit, First Nations, and Métis women. We advocate for the restoration of midwifery education, the provision of midwifery services, and choice of birthplace for all Aboriginal communities, consistent with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

**Our Vision: Aboriginal midwives working in every Aboriginal community.**



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