

Stepping Stones



ELDER PROTOCOL

Planning your learning journey

What are Cultural Protocols for establishing and maintaining respectful relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors?



ELDER ELIZABETH MITCHELL AND ELDER DR. CHRISTINA FOX AT THE ATA
INDIGENOUS ADVISORY CIRCLE MEETING (2022).

FIRST STEPS



Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors are important members within First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. They fulfill critical roles of transferring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Knowledges, languages, stories and traditions from their ancestors to future generations, and are vital to continuation of Indigenous cultures and languages.

One-time events, visits or gatherings involving Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors are positive learning experiences, but in isolation, they rarely move beyond surface-level understanding and appreciation.

Ongoing collaboration cultivates mutual trust and opens meaningful dialogue that can inform educational practices, policies and perspectives. Establishing and maintaining respectful relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors are key to fostering understanding and affecting lasting positive change.



**Walking
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**EDUCATION FOR
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The Alberta Teachers' Association

WHO IS AN ELDER?

Elder is a general English term commonly used to refer to a First Nations, Métis or Inuit person of significance. However, the loose translation does not have the same meaning as terminology within First Nations, Métis and Inuit languages.

Each Indigenous language has descriptive words that signify the important roles and responsibilities carried by persons within Nations and communities. For example, in nêhiyawêwin (Cree) the term *kehtehaya* (keh-tey-ha-ya) is often used, and in some Métis communities, the phrase *Old Ones* may be used. Learning the appropriate word and its meaning in an Indigenous language within your area would be valuable and help develop a greater depth of understanding.

Broadly, *Elder* refers to the role a person is given within their community after a breadth of lived experience and attaining

deep knowledge of First Nations, Métis or Inuit histories, spiritualities, languages, cultural teachings, ceremonies or healing practices. Elders have worked and studied over a period of time with other Elders to earn the right to transfer this specialized knowledge (i.e., medicinal plants, smudging ceremonies, storytelling) and/or offer advice on personal and community issues.

Because the emphasis is on the responsibilities the person carries, gender and age are not factors, nor are they criteria in determining who is recognized as an Elder. Elders may be male or female. Some may be comparatively young in age but very well versed in ceremonial and cultural practices and have been given Elder responsibilities by their community.

Elders are highly revered and respected role models and mentors for all people. They embody First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and languages through their words, actions and being.



ELDER BILL SEWEPAGAHAM AT THE WALKING TOGETHER: EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION GATHERING (2019).

WHO IS A KNOWLEDGE KEEPER OR CULTURAL ADVISOR?

Knowledge Keepers or *Cultural Advisors* are persons recognized and identified by Elders, Nations and Indigenous communities as being knowledgeable about cultural practices or world views. Rather than being called Elders, they may be referred to as Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors. In some Nations and communities, the terms Knowledge Keeper and Knowledge Holders are used interchangeably.

The variations and meanings of terms used can vary from Nation to Nation, family to family, and even, person to person. It is important to learn and respect the terms and appropriate Cultural Protocols that are used within your local context.

WHAT IS CULTURAL PROTOCOL?

Cultural Protocol is another general English term that does not translate well from Indigenous languages; Protocol is much more than a transactional behavior done when seeking service from an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor.

Generally, Cultural Protocol refers to the ways of entering into and maintaining respectful relationships with all relatives, human and more-than-human. It is the manifestation of complex systems of ethics in striving to live a good life. Each community has its own distinct understandings and practices that reflect Cultural Protocol. As your relationship with Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors grows, learning the meaning, values and behaviors that reflect Cultural Protocols for their communities are important.

Taking time to visit with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors is foundational to creating a respectful and trusting relationship. As the relationship builds, inviting the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor to meet with staff, students and families might be intentional next steps.

Whether you are seeking to establish an ongoing relationship or seeking Indigenous Knowledges, appropriate Cultural Protocols should be followed and offered. Make sure to ask the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor about appropriate Cultural Protocols that are required for your specific request. Gifting is a respectful way to demonstrate reciprocity and respect for Indigenous Knowledges and personal time shared by the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor.

The inclusion of a significant traditional ceremony, such as a smudging ceremony or gifting an eagle feather or Métis sash, must be planned with an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor. This ensures Cultural Protocols are followed and cultural significance is shared.

NEXT STEPS

Fostering and developing relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors takes time and dedication. It requires learning and practicing appropriate Cultural Protocols as shared by First Nations, Métis and Inuit from within your local context.

Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors are to be cared for with great respect. They are held in the highest esteem in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities because they are teachers of Indigenous Knowledges. Developing and strengthening ongoing relationships with local Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors is a respectful way to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

Listening and learning from Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors provides valuable cultural experiences that cannot be achieved through other modes of learning. These experiences increase respect and awareness of Indigenous cultures, traditions, stories, ceremonies and histories that are deeply rooted within Indigenous Lands, Languages and Peoples.

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) *What opportunities are available within your school community to develop relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors?*

b) *What guidance and supports are available within your school community on Cultural Protocols including processes for preparing appropriate cultural offerings, gifting and honoraria?*

c) *How can your school community expand relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors from within your local context?*



Resources for Further Learning

- **Walking Together: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives in curriculum, Learn Alberta:**
<https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/>
- **Empowering the Spirit: Educational resource to support reconciliation**
<https://empoweringthespirit.ca/>
- **Rupertsland Institute: Métis Centre of Excellence**
<https://www.rupertsland.org/>
- **Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association**
<https://anfca.com/>



Walking Together

EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION



Stepping Stones is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association's Indigenous Education and Walking Together programs and supports for teachers. This resource series is intended to provide entry points in development and application of First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge.

The Alberta Teachers' Association is grateful for contributions from First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers, teachers, school leaders and community members in developing these resources.

For additional resources and information on Indigenous Education and Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.

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