

First Baby-Friendly Aboriginal Centre in Canada!

Ginette Bélanger and Louise Dumas, BFI lead-assessors

Last November, we had the privilege to assess the Kanesatake Health Center and to recommend its designation.

Kanesatake is the very first Aboriginal center to receive this recognition for the excellent work they are doing in their community going back to their traditional ways of caring for their children, starting with breastfeeding. Kanesatake is a small rural community of around 1500 Mohawk people who live in the south west of Montreal, in Quebec. Like many first nation communities in Canada, Kanesatake's history is linked to survival and resilience and it is considered as a vulnerable area at socioeconomic and health levels.

Their journey towards attaining this recognition took many years, not unlike most of the health facilities striving to become Baby-Friendly. However, the difference lies in the commitment of women from the community who decided to work at empowering other women to remember their ancient tradition of breastfeeding all their children. Important to know is that the Mohawk society is matrilineal and the children belong to their mother's clan. This is why it was so important for them to come back to this traditional cultural element to promote breastfeeding and to enlist the support of the whole community around breastfeeding. A creative peer counselor education program was implemented over the years so that women from the community could help other women in choosing and continuing breastfeeding their children.

The breastfeeding rates at Kanesatake health center give an idea of their success. In 1995, their initiation rate was around 32% with only 19% of mothers continuing to breastfeed at 6 months (Whelen Banks, 2003). After many years of ongoing efforts, in 2011, their initiation rate was 90%, persisting at 90% at six months (documentation review for the BFI assessment), which in itself is outstanding. What made a difference is that most of the women from the community were determined to convince the younger ones to give something better to their children and to nurture them differently. The word behind the breastfeeding promotion project has been that every woman has the ability to breastfeed if she is fully supported to do so. And to illustrate this, when you enter the community, you are welcome by a huge road panel explaining that this community welcomes breastfeeding as a natural way to care for children.

We believe that, for Aboriginal Canadian people, the journey to become Baby-Friendly has a healing potential for women, families, and the whole community while allowing the blending of traditional ways of knowing to the evidence-based interventions of the modern times. BFI is for every woman and her child, worldwide, and each community has to find out its own way to implement it within the respect of their own traditions and beliefs. This is exactly what the Kanesatake Health Center and the Kanesatake community have achieved.

As Louise wrote in *Karihwi :ios* (May-June 2013, p.4), « It was a pleasure and privilege to be part of this BFI assessment, so special and so new in our country and our province. The team at Kanehsatake Health Center is very open and interested into

moving forward the health status of the whole community, starting from mothers and newborns. It was a real learning occasion for me as a person and a wonderful challenge as an assessor. »

Kanesatake Health Center (2013). Baby-Friendly edition. *Karihwi :ios*, May-June

Whelen Banks, J. (2003). A Native community rekindles the tradition of breastfeeding. *AWHONN Lifelines*, 7(4), 341-347.

Website : www.kanesatakehealthcenter.ca



**All mothers
are welcome to
breastfeed in our
community.**

**Anytime,
and anywhere.**

Ka'nistéhsera akonòn:ta ne ne
sa'oié:ra aonhá'a ioiánere ne
eksá'a akotahkarihtáhtshera.

**Mother's milk is naturally the
best for the child's health.**

As part of our Baby Friendly Initiative,
the Kanesatake Health Center
promotes, protects, and supports
breastfeeding!

Kanehsata'kehrónon can count on our
commitment to:

- 1. Promote an atmosphere where breastfeeding is the norm
- 2. Implement the World Health Organization/ UNICEF's 10 Steps to Breastfeeding Success
- 3. Ensure quality maternal child health services and community support to all families regardless of feeding method
- 4. Not accept marketing of products that do not adhere to the international code from WHO and UNICEF.

You are invited to view the Breastfeeding Policy in English, Mohawk, and French at the Kanesatake Health Center and on our website:

www.kanesatakehealthcenter.ca

