

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE



Deadly Dads Support Society: understanding the development and impact of a culturally centred, group-led support strategy for nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) fathers and men

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ABSTRACT

Through a long-standing community–university partnership, we developed a culturally centred, group-led support strategy for nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) fathers and men to enhance their well-being. A community-based participatory research approach was adapted to honour nêhiyaw ways of knowing. Group-led and developed support activities for fathers and men took place from August 2021 to January 2023, with data gathered from Wisdom Circles, meeting minutes, reflexive journals, photos, implementation notes, and community reports. Data analysis was narrative, relational, and non-linear. Knowledge sharing efforts aimed to: 1) explore lessons from co-developing support activities; 2) understand the significance of gathering in safe and healthy ways; and 3) examine the impacts of support on members. The group's development was rooted in mutual generosity and overcoming institutional inequities to offer meaningful supports. This resulted in healthy ways of gathering and supporting one another through relational connections; learning from and identifying with one another; and breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma through cultural connections, sharing, and expressions of love. Experiential and pressure-free activities contributed to a sense of belonging, positivity, and collective ownership, and supported participants through life difficulties. The success and sustainability of the group relied on transcending Western academic approaches to embrace community ways of knowing and relationality.

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Introduction

There is substantial support for interdisciplinary research approaches to include and examine paternal lifestyles and influences on offspring health [1–3]. For instance, research has shown that the health fathers-to-be and capacity to support their partners during pregnancy has vast positive impacts on not only the health of their partner and on pregnancy outcomes but can have lasting effects on the long-term health trajectory of offspring [4]. Further, there is growing literature on the intergenerational transmission of fathering practices, recognising the devastating impacts of colonialism on identity and culture, and acknowledging the importance of hearing directly from Indigenous fathers in community programs [5,6]. Research efforts are

beginning to amplify the voices of Indigenous fathers, identify culture-based program strategies that support men throughout fatherhood, use participatory methodologies, and build research capacities within Indigenous communities [5–9]. Our research is consistent with findings from this emerging academic literature [1].

Positive impacts from connecting to culture for Indigenous people and men include connection to kinship, a sense of identity, sobriety, increased self-esteem, space to be vulnerable, self-confidence, and improved conflict resolution [7,9–16]. Some studies have highlighted strategies that could be applied to programming, such as intergenerational mentoring, peer support networks, and the integration of cultural

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material into existing health services [7,12–16]. To date, however, few studies centre community ways of being and knowing to imagine research possibilities to improve well-being that are rooted in community and cultural resurgence, beyond the colonial institutions of health and research that are rooted in deficit.

This study arose from over a decade of collaboration within the Wâhkôhtowin¹ Research Group (WRG) [10,18–21]. The group invites individuals to imagine, negotiate, transform, and create a flexible, respectful, and relational working and intellectual environment, through which this research was made possible. The partnership was motivated by a desire, shared by community members, to come together through research to support healthy family systems and the well-being of future generations through connection to culture, language, and identity, among nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) communities traditionally known as Maskwacîs, Alberta, Canada. Maskwacîs is a rural community located in Treaty 6 Territory that continues to maintain its close community identity through connecting to its rich nêhiyaw culture and preserving connection to the land and its long and proud history. The first and official language of Maskwacîs is Nehiyawewin (Cree), and the community is a global hub for nêhiyaw culture. There are four individual Nations that make up the community, each with their own unique yet overlapping and interrelated history, traditional beliefs, and ways of knowing.

Through years of community engagement and discussion we have learned from Elders and a wide variety of community members that in order support pregnant women, mothers, and families, male partners need to be meaningfully included, understood, and given a voice that is finally heard. In addition, the underpinning of our research group that permeates all our intentions, actions, and relationships is the nêhiyaw concept of wâhkôhtowin and the understanding that we are all related and interconnected to all things, including people, animals, land, and ancestors [10]. From this perspective, by supporting men and fathers we believe our work will have positive ripple effects within the community and beyond.

Previously, through formative qualitative research, the WRG examined how compassionate and involved young fathers in Maskwacîs supported their partners (and in some instances their coparents) and “what it took” for them to do so [10]. We learned that fathers in the community can sometimes feel left out and unsupported (such as within Western healthcare spaces), and

it was only possible for them to be there for their partners and overcome challenges rooted in damaging intergenerational colonial impacts by having their own strong support systems. These systems were grounded in family, connection to culture, and a stable upbringing characterised by positive male role models and intact nêhiyaw kinships [10]. Building from these findings, the purpose of this study was to better understand the development and implementation of culturally centred, group-led support systems with and for nêhiyaw nâpêwak (Plains Cree men) and the impacts of these supports on their overall well-being. Specifically, our aims were threefold: 1) to explore what was learned from co-developing support activities for fathers and men; 2) understand the context and the importance of gathering in safe and healthy ways; and 3) examine the impacts of support on group members.

Methods

Research partnership

Our partnership between Maskwacîs community members and academic researchers from the University of Alberta, and the eventual WRG, began in 2013 with community engagement and a community desire to collaborate. Early engagement, before the word “research” was discussed, lasted approximately one and a half years. This was a time of meeting and developing relationships, getting to know one another, and forging trust. Community engagement efforts have continued throughout the entire time of our research partnership, to continuously be connected to and guided by community, to nurture, strengthen and expand relationships, and to remain transparent with the community. This is achieved in a wide variety of ways including informal get togethers, hosting community events, supporting local community activities, being active on community newsletters and social media, and so on.

This study was rooted in ceremony, which permeated all aspects of our research. Ceremony specifically grounded our team in the spirit, intent, and commitment of trusting relationships and working towards the benefit of the community. Coming together in ceremony was not a “check box” or means to an end for our research, but an open door to trusting deeply one another. It is where our heart-to-heart relationships thrived as we meet in a more earnest way, developing

¹Wâhkôhtowin is a nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) concept that “encompasses the act of being related, a worldview that everything is related, and a set of laws or obligations around how to conduct good relationships”[17].

spiritual interconnections that naturally encourage mutual respect and vulnerability, goodwill and kindness, humility and a responsibility to one another. “Ceremonial-based thinking” ensued where our research embraced the mindset where all things are possible.

The specific ceremonial interactions were led by *mosôms* (grandfathers) connected to our research and followed *nêhiyaw* ways of knowing appropriate for the community and territory. The details remain private for our group.

Through relationship development, *mosôms* and *kokôms* (grandmothers), along with community members in Maskwacîs, sought to leverage research to influence health care systems, programming, and policy to benefit future generations. The research team was guided by *wâhkôhtowin* and, therefore, trusting relationships were foundational to community-led and strengths-based strategies. We seek a depth of relationship that is akin to family and in several instances our families have adopted one another. Our relationships continue outside of formal research activities and beyond the life cycle of our research partnership, where we are personally and emotionally invested in each other’s lives. The partnership was directed by community members, ensuring community control over the research process and data ownership. Central to this approach was recognition that community members are best suited to understand and realise their own context, and possess knowledge that is needed for research to ultimately benefit their community [22]. The WRG emphasised a strengths-based approach, centring community resilience, opportunity, hope, and capacity, while rejecting deficit-based narratives and the pathologization of Indigenous people [23,24].

The specific research team for this study was comprised of a non-Indigenous master’s student, men and fathers from the community/community researchers, a community *mosôm*, and longtime non-Indigenous academic research partners. Our positionality reflects our commitment to working together in a good way and the principles described above.

RAPF is a second-generation immigrant of mixed Filipino-European ancestry. He grew up on Treaty 7 Territory and did his master’s degree at the University of Alberta with guidance from *mosôms* and *kokôms* in Maskwacîs. From this experience, he learned the importance of knowing your history and finding your roots. In *mosôm* Rick Lightning’s words, “don’t become what your ancestors were running from”. Currently, he lives on Treaty 6 Territory, works as a plumber, and organises in the Filipino community for the rights of migrants

forced abroad, and for the rights of people to stay in their homelands.

PL Sr’s Cree name is *Wapî-maskwa* (White Bear). He comes from the Buffalo Child family (Albert Lightning) and the Bear Hills people of Maskwacîs. His wife, Inez Lightning (Yellow Bird Woman), is *Anishinaabe*. He has 10 children, 37 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. He is *Nêhiyaw* (Cree) and lives his life accordingly. He is a third-generation residential school survivor.

PL Jr’s Cree name is *Pisimawasis* (Sunchild), from Maskwacîs, Treaty 6 Territory. He is of Cree and *Anishinaabe* descent, with traditional knowledge and upbringing in the *Nehiyaw* (Cree) way of life. He aims to raise his family in the same way he was taught. He is currently the Deadly Dads’ Support Society coordinator and a Community Researcher with the WRG.

GB’s ceremony name is *Osâwastatim* (Yellow Horse), he is a *Nêhiyaw nâpew* (Plains Cree man), a deadly dad to five children, a member of *Nipisihkopahk* (Samson Cree Nation), and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Alberta. He is also the Academic Lead for Indigenous Child Health at the Women and Children’s Health Research Institute. He is dedicated to raising his children in *Nêhiyawatsiwin* (Plains Cree life) and as a proud First Nations scholar his research weaves *Nêhiyaw* knowledge systems and Western frameworks to create inclusive, decolonised approaches to healthcare for children and youth.

JL: *Tansi Kahkiyaw! Miyo-Omachiwine nitsikasyon, ekwa Neyaskweyahk ochi niya. I am married to Wapikwan neyiw iskwew and my children Okimaw-wâpi-Mistatim-napew ekwa Kisikwaykhan iskwes. I work for the University of Alberta as a strategic manager for the office of the vice provost of Indigenous programming and research.*

RCB is a white woman of mixed Western European descent, including Scottish, English and German. She was born and raised in the Great Lakes area of Canada and the USA and moved from there to Treaty 6 Territory. She has lived and worked on Treaty 6 land, in the area called *Asmiskwaciwasgahigan* in Cree (Edmonton in English), for close to 30 years.

RTO is a man of mixed European descent, including Danish, Scottish, German, Austrian and Ukrainian ancestries. His ceremonial name is *Wâpastim* (White Horse). Since birth, he has called Treaty 6 Territory home. His family has lived in this area for four generations and he continues to live here with his wife (who is of Cantonese Chinese descent) to raise his two children. He positions himself as an equitable partner who supports strengths-based, solution-oriented, and

community-driven approaches to research, building specifically on Indigenous ways of knowing.

Overarching approach

This research, as well as the work of the WRG, was inspired by community-based participatory research (CBPR) [22], which uses an experiential, participative-knowing epistemology, as a framework and a way to collaborate. However, this study does not fit neatly into the Western CBPR approach. A central premise of this research was understanding that intergenerational impacts on well-being – in relation to the support and involvement of fathers, men, and Elders—are already present in community and have long been passed down through *nêhiyaw* ways of knowing and being. This research embraced approaches that respect the cultures, languages, knowledges, values, and rights to self-determination among the people of Maskwacis. Our research specifically sought to embrace the epistemological gifts of *nêhiyaw* culture, guided by community members that are not appreciated through reading about the community but rather through experiencing the community.

Deadly Dads Support Society

Around 2015, *mosôms* and *kokôms*, and other WRG community members, noticed a particular lack of *mosôms* and men supporting their partners and participating in ceremony. *Mosôms* part of the WRG, with support from their families and sons, took the lead in a research project aimed at addressing a lack of supports for men. Specifically, they formed a Community Advisory Committee (CAC; comprised of *mosôms*, community member fathers, and academic partners) to focus on the role of fathers and men in supporting their partners during pregnancy, and beyond. Building from previous research on the needs of supportive fathers in Maskwacis [10], the CAC developed a community-derived strategy to support fathers and men. Early pilot implementation began in 2020 but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, a master's student (RAPF; first author) was connected to the WRG, joined the CAC, and began to work closely with community members who were putting in great effort to become strong and healthy fathers and men for their community and future generations. Over the next 2 years, these fathers and men met regularly to support one another. During this time, the group, with support

from the WRG, applied for and received non-profit status as the Deadly² Dads Support Society (DDSS).

Key project activities

Between summer 2021 and winter 2023, approximately 40 *mosôms*, fathers, and young men came together to share knowledge, support one another, connect to ceremony and community, build relationships, cultivate identity, and foster positive experiences. Group members varied in age from youth (16–25 years of age) to *mosôms* and older men and fathers in their 70s. Not all group members were fathers, and those that were varied in their stages of fatherhood with some with pregnant partners, newborns, young children, teenage children, and adult children. Table 1 outlines each of the formally organised activities of the DDSS, though there were many unplanned connections and events that took place. Attendance varied at each of the activities; *mosôms* advised that the impacts for an individual and the collective group could not be quantified through numbers. Notably, many of the fathers and men who participated in the activities were not necessarily involved with the research study.

Knowledge-sharing and understanding

Knowledge was shared in different ways throughout this project, though primarily through relationships and time spent together. Knowledge-sharing and understanding were concurrent, following a circular (non-linear) and iterative path. We leveraged our collaborative relationships within the group to select and mould evaluation strategies that aligned with group members' wishes. The research process evolved as the project progressed. In the community, storytelling and knowledge-sharing were already in use, and developed with each new activity, introduction, and shared experience. Ongoing feedback and input for future meetings and activities provided an effective "living" developmental evaluation. This living evaluation also led to participants' learning and knowledge-sharing between activities, events, and ceremonies, on key aspects of developing supports in real time. This approach helped ensure that the evaluation process remained engaged with the realities experienced by the group.

The primary sources of knowledge (data) were 2 Wisdom Circles with participants and the meeting minutes from 20 CAC meetings. Wisdom Circles provided a space for participants to gather, share their

²Deadly is a colloquial term used in Maskwacis to describe something good or awesome; something that members of the Deadly Dads Support Society aspire to be.

Table 1. Deadly Dads Support Society activities and events, 2021–2023.

Date	Event	Description/Purpose
2021		
July	Sweat Ceremony	To ground fathers, men, and project partners in the effort and intentions of the study; an opportunity for healing.
August	Warrior-Oskâpêwis Cultural Camp	An opportunity fathers and men to receive cultural showings, and connect with knowledge holders, mosôms, and other men in the community.
November	Hockey and Hamper Giveaway Event	To lift spirits and help men care for their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. A group of men and boys held a community floor hockey game with prize draws and food hampers.
2022		
January	New Years Sweat Ceremony	To pray for fathers and men in the community and invite them back into ceremony; an opportunity for healing.
March	Community Round Dance	Held in honor of Elders from Maskwacîs who helped develop this partnership, and other work, in collaboration with academic partners.
May	Sweat Ceremony	For fathers and sons, with a focus on fatherhood and traditional male roles around parenting; an opportunity for healing.
June	Wisdom Circle	To better understand the community context and share how fathers and men come together in healthy ways.
June; ongoing	Weekly or Monthly Activities	Activities and experiences that many DDSS members had never done or rarely got the chance to do, including bowling, golf, billiards, and paintball. These activities also acted as an opportunity to share updates and knowledge, relax, have fun, and support each other in ways that were not necessarily planned.
July	Horse Therapy	To provide an opportunity for healing and learning through interactions with horses and a wagon ride activity.
July	Family Camp	Fathers, men, and their families gathered in the Rocky Mountains over 4 days to create positive memories centered on parenting.
September	Firearm Safety Training	An opportunity for DDSS members to get their Possession and Acquisition Licence in support of their desire to learn how to hunt.
October	Tea Dance Ceremony	To introduce DDSS members to the Tea Dance, and other ceremony songs.
November	Wisdom Circle	An opportunity for fathers and men to acknowledge each other as knowledge sharers and to explore the impacts of the DDSS.
2023		
January	New Years Sweat Ceremony	In response to grief and loss in the community, members came together to pray for those who were struggling. Another opportunity for healing.

knowledge and experiences, and connect [25]. Both Wisdom Circles, as well as all CAC meeting minutes, were transcribed; other data were pulled from reflexive journals, photos, implementation notes, and community reports. The first Wisdom Circle, facilitated by GB, was held in June 2022 to better understand how nêhiyaw men come together in healthy ways and to provide a starting point for reflection on the impacts of support implementation. The second Wisdom Circle, facilitated by RAFP, was held in November 2022 to explore the impacts of the ongoing DDSS activities and supports on participants and the community.

Throughout this project, the lead author (RAPF) regularly visited the community – participating in ceremony, attending community events, volunteering, spending time with mosôms, contributing to other WRG projects, and getting to know the CAC members in a variety of unplanned ways. He kept a journal of his own reflections on the project that included personal lessons received while spending time in community and preparing for ceremony. During DDSS activities, descriptions and reflections of each event were recorded through photographs, in community documents, and in monthly reports shared with the group.

Given the relational basis of knowledge-sharing, identifying codes and categories for data analysis was important. The DDSS members strongly advocated for and developed an adapted narrative approach and relational model of analysis [26,27]. RAPF provided text summaries throughout the project, which became part of the analysis approach. Knowledge was organised to understand how members experienced the DDSS as the group evolved.

Rigor

Western concepts of rigour, including credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity [28,29] were re-envisioned and blended with Maskwacîs concepts of validity. We worked from a place of “relational accountability” [30], in which the validation of knowledge comes from all those who make an effort to connect and form relationships for the benefit of their community. From a nêhiyaw perspective, research is relationship and relationship is research. Thus, the validity of the knowledge generated in this research was founded upon the relationships and connections developed, and is inseparable to the people, their cultures, and its

ability to reciprocate their generosity and effort. Rigour in this study reflects those that have connected with the DDSS and does not reflect the perspectives of all men and fathers in the community.

We achieved credibility by creating spaces for vulnerability and trusting relationships in which participants could share their experiences openly and honestly. We engaged in ceremonies and prayers; tobacco was offered to participants before our Wisdom Circles and to *mosôms* for guidance throughout the project. These practices draw from inherited responsibilities that ensure that the knowledge shared is credible, authentic, and from a *nêhiyaw* lens. We also addressed authenticity in our approach of knowledge-sharing through Wisdom Circles, allowing people to speak for themselves, and recognising the gifts everyone brings to the table. Reflexivity, specifically with respect to individual assumptions, ways of knowing, “lenses”, biases, and personal learnings was a practice in criticality. Further, integrity was viewed as inherent to humility, understanding rights to knowledge, and being accountable to relationships. This was an ongoing process of learning how to remain accountable to these relationships in different spaces and recognising our responsibilities when representing them.

Ethics

We obtained ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Pro00092188), which adheres to the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2, Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada [31]. In addition, we codesigned a research agreement between Maskwacis Health Services, the University of Alberta, and *mosôms* and *kokôms*. This ensured that the project remained community-led; was equitable, strengths-based, and prioritised *nêhiyaw* approaches; was founded on trust and relationships; and emphasised community ownership of the research. The WRG also provided protocol and received verbal approval from key *mosôms* and *kokôms*, as well as community members who were specifically identified by the CAC for this project.

The CAC was involved and made decisions at all stages of the project. Members provided ethical counsel and ensured research moved forward in culturally and community appropriate ways. All participants who shared knowledge and information for this study provided written informed consent.

Lastly, as part of our relational accountability, there remains ongoing effort by our researchers to maintain accountability to all the relationships formed throughout this project.

Knowledge shared

The knowledge that was shared is outlined in 3 sections, in alignment with our aims. The first explores what was learned from codeveloping support activities for fathers and men. The second looks at context and the importance of gathering in safe and healthy ways. Finally, the third section examines the impacts of support on members.

Better understanding and time together

The proposed project (2019) originally had a structured design based on predominately Western academic approaches to research. The research changed, in part, due to restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, but primarily due to guidance shared by participants during the activities and time together. As such, the research approach evolved to intergenerational learning, which is a living process that prioritises in-person activities and relationships. Members shared that the group should continue “hanging out” and remain action-oriented. Subsequently, the importance of building connections so men could learn from each other, speak their language, and talk about kinship, became a larger focus. However, there remained misunderstandings and incongruencies between the agendas of members looking to support their community and the research team.

As a result of openness and guidance, the project focused more on relationships and the effort put in by everyone involved (including researchers) to support DDSS fathers, their families, and future generations. Further, the researcher/participant dynamic transformed as relationships developed. Researchers became participants and participants were researchers. Research was conducted by all those who were involved with the study. In contrast to the rigidity in other programs, DDSS activities became adaptable, consistent, reliable, and focused on belonging, connection to identity, and participation in ceremony.

Participants noted the importance of having consistent and reliable supports for fathers and men, even if attendance at events was low at times. We were informed that the process of bringing men together in the community to support one another would be slow and require long-term commitment, which led to the decision to hold regular, open, weekly meetings for the DDSS. Increased transparency and autonomy of the budget allowed for better understanding of what was possible for research and support activities.

A central philosophy was to welcome anyone interested in joining the DDSS. This tenet developed from discussions on research and the importance of encouraging participation among those who were apprehensive. We learned later that many group members had no problem being involved with the research once they understood the intentions and had established a relationship with the group. This was accompanied by a change in how research was viewed, with activities becoming more akin to sharing knowledge rather than data collection.

Despite the knowledge shared and adaptations made to this research project, there were still many aspects that remained unaddressed or needed attention. One gap included the need for American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, or workshops and education for the DDSS to learn ASL that would enhance access and connection to hearing-impaired fathers and families. Another area for improvement was around grant funding. The research cycle, including the application process for grant funding and how funds are held, accessed, and accounted for, requires further attention and transparency. Workshops to support funding applications were informally identified as useful and would require further action to explore the community's capacity and eligibility to hold research funding.

Deeper understandings and adaptations of this work were necessarily developed through our extensive time together. We relied on the generosity of everyone involved, both community members and outside researchers, to highlight, confront, further describe, and overcome institutional inequities to providing supports for fathers and men in a meaningful way. Although we were unable to address everything, engaging with this knowledge allows us to move forward in a better way. Furthermore, as our relationships grew, so did our adaptability in developing DDSS activities and supports.

Knowledge of context and gathering in healthy ways

Following a year of meetings and activities, getting to know each other, and evolving our processes, COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and we were able to come together for our first Wisdom Circle. DDSS members were invited to share their understandings of the community context, what brought them to the group, and what made them Deadly Dads, as well as to learn how nêhiyaw men can gather in healthy ways that promote well-being.

Stories revealed great vulnerability among those who shared them. The narratives addressed childhood trauma, difficulties with addiction, and the significant impact of fatherhood on life's trajectory, along with accompanying challenges. It was reaffirmed that although every father is on a unique journey, we can support one another in ways that, as one father put it, "are from your heart", and through relational connections. This understanding shaped the group-centred nature of DDSS operations.

Welcoming men in different stages in their lives, and seeing other fathers interact with their children, was important to DDSS supports as it helped plant seeds for future activities. Each story shared, whether in a Circle or informally during activities, created a sense of belonging and opportunities for learning. Relying on the knowledge, experiences, and spirit brought to the group by each person was viewed as a gift, which fostered a sense of belonging, facilitated intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and strengthened the inner spirit of fathers and men in their support for families and future generations.

Identifying as a "Deadly Dad", or wanting to be a "Deadly Dad", was shared among group members as a reason to gather and a source of motivation to join activities. This goal resonated with other discussions about being a group that people wanted to show up to. Other reasons to join spoke to the desire to be a better example for children and overcoming intergenerational trauma. One father explained, "What we are doing in this group is helping fathers break cycles. That's the responsibility all of us have to our children". Another father shared, "The hardest thing, man, is ending like that intergenerational trauma, and having it die with us in the grave and not letting it live on. It's like the toughest thing about our generation".

DDSS members viewed opportunities to learn about cultural roots as an important part of breaking intergenerational cycles, recognising that many men do not have such opportunities, especially during the major transition of becoming a father. Many members agreed that being part of this group could provide that opportunity and space for other men going through similar struggles. As one father shared,

That's the other thing, is going through these transitions through your life, and dealing with those things. Had there have been more supports [like] this kind of support we're offering, you know ... Those are the things that would be nice for fathers-to-be or fathers-that-are, a place to come to, right? So, coming into this program I was really into it. I'm still very involved. I still want to remain involved as well, and I want to continue the cultural aspect of everything ... Having that connection, keeping that connection ... It centers me again.

Despite the challenges, members described an abundance of hope that came from culture, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, language, and ceremony. Coming together through a support group helped nurture and foster this hope, which allowed fathers and men to make changes in their lives and positively impact their children and families. Including *mosôm*s in the group especially helped fathers and men to reflect on the long-term commitment of being a father, the transition to later becoming a *mosôm*, and were valuable role models and supports for younger men. As one *mosôm* explained,

One thing that's interesting when you become a dad, but then you also become a grandfather and then you have *ohpikihawanek* [grandchild you bring up] when you start bringing up your grandkids, you guys are all still young ... Like my *ohpikihawanek*, he's been with me since he was little ... He knows he's safe ... And so, our kids are a reflection of us. As young parents, you guys are all young. Your kids reflect you ... whatever you do they reflect. Good or bad.

Fathers and men also expressed love for their children. Getting together to talk about love opened up these experiences for others. Discussions revealed that having a space to talk about love for their children, and overcoming social stigmas of men expressing love, fostered space for displays of affection between DDSS members and their kids. One father explained,

I really truly just enjoy hanging out with my children. They're like my best friends. The things we talked about, you know, like you said, like learning how to say "I love you". [That's] something I've had to learn how to do because you kind of, you're scared, right? Because you're like, you know, am I gonna get judged, you know? The bros gonna say that I'm girly or whatever else? And now I've just learned like I don't care what other people think. I need to do what's best for me and my family. What's best for me and [my] family includes saying "I love you", and hugging, and showing affection.

Ultimately, knowledge of context and getting together in healthy ways included relational connections, learning from one another, identifying as a "Deadly Dad", breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma, and expressing love. Coming to these collective understandings as a group established a solid foundation for continuing the DDSS in ways that would positively impact members' well-being.

Understandings impacts

After 4 seasons of the DDSS getting together without COVID-19 restrictions, and with a better understanding

of our work, we gathered for a second Wisdom Circle in November 2022. This Wisdom Circle focused on capturing the spirit of the impacts of the DDSS supports and activities that members had felt, shared with the group, took home, and passed on to their families.

Knowledge-sharing was central to the DDSS and all gatherings. Fathers and men appreciated the experiential nature of the group – the opportunity to learn together and have new experiences. Encouraging intentionally spontaneous, light-hearted, fun, and flexible activities fostered an approachable and non-judgemental environment. Fathers and men were able to develop relationships, look for support from one another, and make group decisions together. They also shared knowledge, advice, stories, experiences, and memories. As one *mosôm* described,

We stay in the present tense, constantly. And that's what's important here ... If somebody's feeling this, doors open sharing, you know. It's not like we do circles every time we meet. We try to have fun and if someone needs to talk we're there. We share while we're playing. You know, like when we're bowling, somebody needed to talk to me. And that was cool ... It's that time out for dads. And that's the cool part about this group ... it just moves. We're not strict.

Consistency in holding regular meetings and allowing for flexible attendance where group members could join meetings when they can also helped them feel less pressured and created a more welcoming environment for ensuing opportunities for sharing and support. Our *mosôm* continued,

It's okay, there's no shaming. It's like, if you can make it great if you can, it's alright, we're here. We'll be here next Thursday, as long as the consistency that we have created is still there. We know it's Thursdays we know it's gonna be there. And then you know, whether you're having a tough day, we know Thursday's coming ... It's a dad's night, to be able to do something instead of sitting around a bar table, drinking beers and complaining about life we're sitting around here talkin' about positive things and promoting healthy living, healthy families, mental health all these things that are in there.

A sense of belonging and identity was fostered among those in the group, as relationships were built, understandings of mutual connections grew, and knowledge and experiences were shared. One *mosôm* explained that group members were "Finding ourselves as *nêhiyawak* [Plains Cree people]". Members reported positive impacts on their feelings of belonging and support, despite obstacles they were facing in their lives. Several fathers shared that being part of a peer group where they could relate, feel a sense of

belonging, and receive support was beneficial to their overall well-being:

Having the guys like sort of going through the same thing, we can all talk about it and be open [and] support each other. Because right now we're going through a difficult time in our community. Really tough. Sometimes it's really tough and I find myself crying every now and then. But when I do that, I just go and pray and try and meditate a bit helps.

I only went to the camping trip but that was actually a really good time for me because, as you are all saying ... a lot of people are suffering from something that is, I guess holding them back ... or pretty well, just getting them in a dark place and it was really nice to go actually reflecting ... and I guess evaluate [the] way things are going. And pretty well, just know that I guess it's not the end of the world because I'm not the only one going through it, you know? Everybody else goes through it. Just having this group as well really helps to get those things out because I was able to relate to a lot of other people too at the camp there.

Another father described how the DDSS was a place to receive support, especially when carrying the weight of supporting other family members:

I've been trying to do what I do in the community and kind of help, you know, *oskâpêwis* [helpers]. And I'm finding lately that it's my support, I feel like the support, hey? For the people around me, and the people I help, and everything ... I'm the support, and I will sometimes think, well who supports me? I have my parents, but I limit those, hey? Like my mom, I try not to bother them ... And I maybe I let myself suffer more than I should ... And I think for me, I think that's what I'm most excited about is having these sharing circles where ... I'm not the one who's trying to run it ... I can come here and I could just be me, and I can share with you guys and we can you know, even keel ... like we're on the same level. You know we're equal and I think that that's something that I'm missing in my life.

Coming together through a variety of activities provided DDSS members with positive moments in their lives. These moments carried into other aspects of their lives and allowed fathers and men to find success in supporting themselves and their families. Connections and relationships formed within the group motivated and inspired members to improve their own well-being and remain strong supports for their families.

Humor was an important aspect while sharing knowledge; it lifted spirits and brought group members together. As one father shared, "I'm glad I found this group. It's good to relax with the boys, chat and joke around with each other, which should always be looked at with laughter".

Being group-led highlighted the many different gifts people brought to the group and a sense of equality among members. This fostered a sense of ownership, responsibility, and reciprocity towards supports and group effort. Understanding the effort others put into the group, including late *mosôms* who had passed on but had prayed for the group and the community, fostered a sense of commitment and hope among members for the continuation of supports and efforts like these. Treating everyone as equals also meant recognising everyone's diversity and understanding that strength comes from growing relationships and the group itself, not any specific program plans or leadership.

Importantly, connecting to culture, traditional knowledge, and ceremonies was central to the group and its impact on participants. These connections were embedded in all group aspects and activities and were crucial to helping members get through tough times. Moreover, members specifically sought out cultural teachings and ceremonial songs and protocols when they joined the group. These were learned and brought home to share with others and use in their own lives. One father noted,

I had been looking for this kind of a men's group to do culturally based stuff, learn more. I always need to be retaught, I'm very forgetful [laughter]. I always enjoyed our ceremonies and try my best to memorize the songs ... And with that I'm just looking forward to more events.

A *mosôm* described,

All of these things that we learn carry on, and you're going to need it in the future. Because that's what the prediction was, that it's gonna get hard for Indian people. And the only thing that will save us is our pipe, *ospwâkan*, our belief in the creator and our ceremonies will carry us through the hard times.

We concluded that being a part of the DDSS positively impacted members' well-being. Experiential and pressure-free opportunities to gather created a sense of belonging, identity, support, positivity, collective ownership, commitment, and hope. The cultural and ceremonial connections abated life's difficulties. After reflecting on what DDSS had achieved and the positive impacts it had on the lives of those involved, the group officially incorporated as a non-profit society to safeguard sustainability and hope for the future.

Discussion

Knowledge shared throughout the project revealed that this group-led initiative had many positive impacts for

group members, reflected in experiences of belonging; opportunities to connect, laugh, and express love; and intergenerational learning that occurred during impromptu activities. Discovering how each member was related to one another and connected to their culture was crucial. The group-led development of supports, centred in ceremony, generated hope among participants. The research story of DDSS suggests that research on supporting the well-being of future generations could benefit significantly from *nêhiyaw* theory and approaches, which could generate solutions that address the root causes of health inequities. Thus, our discussion section is organised around focusing on community ways of knowing and relationality, and community leadership, with our findings and those of others contextualised where appropriate.

Our research was reimagined to not solely rely on validation through a Western lens, but to encourage the conceptualisation of research based on community values [32]. Our research builds upon previous work that established our research partnership with Maskwacis.¹⁰ This partnership supported and allowed participants to create shared understandings on the development and impact of culturally centered, group-led supports, with and for *nêhiyaw* fathers and men. Central to the interpretation of our findings was a question posed by a *mosôm* in our DDSS group: Is our research making people more colonised, or is it helping people be who they are? To address this, the group worked to utilise *nêhiyaw* narratives in research and to find pragmatic approaches to both programming and research that worked for community members, supported community solutions and knowledge, and deviated from community-based to community-led research.

Throughout its development and implementation, the DDSS adapted from its origins as a structured and predominately Western academic approach to invoking and highlighting *nêhiyaw* teachings in support of fathers and men. Our collective focus was not to connect the knowledge shared to Western concepts. Rather, the group shifted from common Western academic ways of thinking and doing to opening the doors for research to be leveraged by communities whose ways of knowing and being have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented in academic spaces [33]. Learnings from this study evince a need to recognise *nêhiyaw* approaches to health research across lifespans as being equally valid and legitimate as Western research methods. Our research shows that development of the DDSS was achieved only through humility, deep relational connections to one another, and acknowledging the gifts of everyone involved as

a means of overcoming institutional inequities and barriers – aligning with well-described approaches to community-led Indigenous research [34,35]. Collective experiences in community ultimately influenced terminology DDSS members used to express themselves. Members were empowered through organised action, as determined by community priorities and interests, alongside relationship-building and new understandings. Changing discourse is just one part in the process of overcoming institutional barriers to honour *nêhiyaw* knowledge.

Two narratives—one that conforms to and reproduces the structures of academia and one that draws from the power within community – overlap and are present in our partnership efforts. It was increasingly important to remain conscious of these different narratives throughout the project. As a result, our methodologies were able to adapt in counter-hegemonic ways and find solutions beyond those highlighted by Western institutions. Although these journeys of trust and learning are ongoing and require long-term commitment, because of the group-led DDSS research, we are now in a strong position to support bolder moves towards health sovereignty for the communities of Maskwacis. Together in partnership we grow our understanding that knowledge comes from the community and power from the culture. Action is necessary to promote *nêhiyaw* leadership and full community control over research projects. How we nurtured our relationships and established our partnership to address challenges and promote adaptability may be useful to other community–university partnerships (and our own as it moves forward), especially those focused on developing group-led supports for Indigenous men. By approaching research as a connection to knowledge through relationships, rather than to exclusively generate and analyse data, we contribute a perspective that recognises relationships and interactions as valuable methods [30].

Wisdom Circles were key to connecting to knowledge through relationships. They were considered valuable by *nêhiyaw* fathers and men for sharing knowledge, fostering belonging, and supporting well-being. The power of Circles in sharing knowledge and information, and in creating spaces for trust and openness, is well documented in the literature. “The healing method”, described by Lavallée [36], embraces each participant (including facilitators) as equals to allow information, spirituality, and emotionality to be shared. The yarning method used in Australia, involves story-sharing that fosters a connection to culture and Elders, and creates space to be vulnerable about personal issues, shared experiences, and family and community relationships [13]. There are also examples of Sharing

Circles being used for multiple purposes such as healing, connecting to community members, and knowledge-sharing; specifically with regards to Indigenous men [37].

The DDSS has demonstrated, in their own context, the significance of *nêhiyaw* leadership and community control in developing action-oriented research and, more importantly, in expanding imaginations of what research can achieve. Health research and services can better serve Indigenous communities by supporting existing community resources. Our work supports findings from British Columbia that showed parenting programs for Indigenous men should be led by Indigenous men; those that understand the context and conditions impacting their involvement in family life [5]. Similarly, when developing services by and for Indigenous men in Kettle & Stony Point First Nation (Ontario, Canada), knowledge-sharing between men with lived experiences, Elders, and role models was crucial [32]. In a study on the social determinants of health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, findings showed that men's groups can serve as a fundamental strategy for support, building confidence to flourish through activities in community life [14]. Our work supports this rationale and advocacy for men's groups and community-based knowledge-sharing. A recent scoping review showed that offering father-specific resources and support is key to engaging with fathers to support the whole family [38]. In addition, responding to local contextual factors when planning and implementing health promotion programs for adolescent boys and young men of colour is crucial [39]. The DDSS helped to create strong connections and explored healthy ways to gather, which are essential to learning, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and the well-being of fathers and men. DDSS group members reported that solutions to break cycles of intergenerational oppression exist in the community through cultural resurgence and the contextualisation of intergenerational knowledge as it is passed down. Similarly, in another study from British Columbia, many Indigenous fathers sought traditional practices as a means to prepare for fatherhood and escape the intergenerational cycle of trauma caused by the impacts of colonialism and assimilation practices [7].

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that a group-led support strategy for *nêhiyaw* fathers and men enhanced relational connections and created opportunities for sharing, cultural engagement, and the expression of love. These positively impacted the well-being of DDSS members

through a sense of belonging, positivity, collective ownership, and support. The success and sustainability of the group are predicated on transcending Western academic approaches and focusing more on community ways of knowing and relationality, and community leadership.

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Data availability statement

Respecting community ownership of the research and data, the data for this study will not be made publicly available.

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