

The Bringing Hearts and Minds Together research project was a collaborative effort between Bow Valley College and Kainai Board of Education. The project co-created lifelong learning materials for caregivers of Indigenous children. To do so, this initiative brought together early childhood educators, Kainai Nation Elders, early childhood development subject matter experts, Indigenous researchers, and school administrators for a series of Sharing Circles. These Sharing Circles fostered cooperative learning, mutual respect, openness, self-direction, and critical reflection for two-way learning and community-led goals. This culminated in the creation of a video tool supporting healthy brain development using Kainai community knowledge.

During the Sharing Circles, research team members presented information from The Brain Story, which is an education tool developed by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative that explores the latest research in brain development and child social-emotional well-being. The Sharing Circle format then allowed for the translation of that knowledge into culturally appropriate understandings, as put forth by the Kainai team members. The Circles included time for learning about and discussing community context, personal histories, individual experiences, and Blackfoot culture and protocol. Participants in the Sharing Circles also dissected the information contained in the western knowledge-based brain science course.

The outcome of the Sharing Circles indicated that the Brain Story course, although articulated in a western academic manner, supported traditional Blackfoot cultural practices for helping children develop in a healthy way. However, due to the legacy of colonization and the Indian Residential School System, consistent community practice of these traditional cultural ways of being, knowing, and doing has been lost. The project output video and the development of a series of posters with culturally appropriate messages, language, and images articulates the principles of the Brain Story in culturally congruent Blackfoot ways to support social-emotional well-being in Kainai children.