



Working with Elders



**These guidelines are for anyone,
Indigenous or non-Indigenous, who requires the
assistance of Elders for a project or event.**

The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) supports community-based work in language, arts and cultural heritage across British Columbia. Much of this work depends on the involvement of our Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Here, we offer suggestions that can help to create a smooth and rewarding experience both for our Elders and for the communities they support.

These guidelines are for anyone who requires the assistance of Elders for a project or event, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. If you feel you are experienced with working with Elders, you may wish to review this document for suggestions which are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic.



When working with Elders, consider:

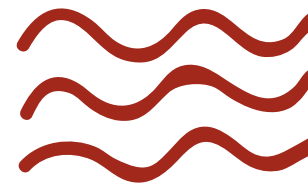
Exposure to illness. Do not work with Elders when you are sick with a cold or the flu. If you work with Elders regularly, we strongly recommend getting a flu vaccination.

Mobility issues. Where is the work taking place? Are there a lot of stairs? Are you going out on the land in an area with uneven or hilly ground? Be aware of any mobility issues that an Elder may have and plan accordingly. If you are out on the land, ensure that you have a chair or stool for an Elder to comfortably rest in.

Length of work. Elders may need to rest more frequently than younger people, although some young people can't keep up to Elders! Ensure that you check in with Elders to see when they need to rest or stop.

Refreshments. Provide meals, snacks and water as appropriate, especially when out on the land. At events, it may be customary for Elders to be served their meal. Ask if they would like assistance, particularly if there is a buffet.

Other medical needs, health issues or disabilities. Be aware of Elders' health issues. This may include allergies, dietary needs (e.g., for diabetes), required medication, required accommodation for sight or hearing impairment or any other health concerns. Be considerate and make accommodations as necessary.



Take some time to plan ahead before approaching an Elder.

Like all people, Elders have different skills, interests and life experiences. Try to ensure that your project and the Elder are a good fit for each other. We recommend that you talk with staff at the band office or band health department who will be familiar with community members. This is especially important if you are not a member of the community or if you have been away from your community for a while.

Don't assume that all Elders can speak their language. Due to the effects of colonization, many Elders cannot speak their language or they may not feel comfortable speaking their language but they have other cultural knowledge to contribute. In addition, there are people who don't consider themselves "Elders" but might consider themselves "Knowledge Keepers" and have important experience to share.



Consider the Task

Be sensitive to the requirements of your task.

Really give some thought to the nature of the task you are requesting and think about the impact on the Elder. For example, inviting Elders into a school setting to share their knowledge can be wonderful for children and Elders alike. However, asking Elders to work full-time with rambunctious young kids may be too much. Avoid asking Elders to do things which may be too strenuous.

Clear Communication

When you invite an Elder to participate in a project, be very clear about what you want to achieve so the Elder can identify how they can contribute. Then you can discuss details about the Elder's role with the work.

How will you ask them? If possible, make your request in person rather than sending an email. During the pandemic, make a phone call. You may have to call the person more than once and the Elder may want a family member or support person to be part of the conversation.

What is the task? Be as specific as possible and be clear about what the obligation entails. This includes any honoraria or expectation, such as drumming or ceremonies. Be clear about how and when the honorarium and travel will be paid.

Does the Elder have transportation or gas money to get to the required location? It can be helpful to ask someone to drive the Elder to and from the event.

Elders are among the busiest people in communities. It is helpful to call and remind them of the project or event before it happens.

When will you need the Elder to be present?

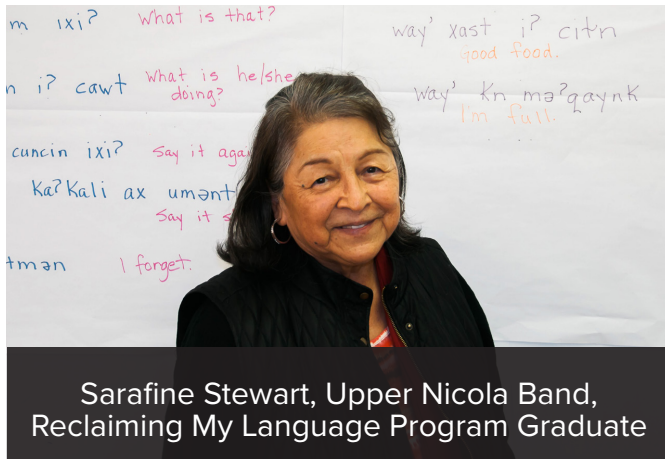
How long will the project last – will this be short term or long term? If your project takes place on multiple days or is long term, set a regular schedule and invite the Elder to participate on a consistent schedule – the same time of day and same days of the week. Avoid using a flexible schedule that will result in the Elder participating at different times and days each session.

Be flexible. If it turns out an Elder is unable to participate for some reason, have a Plan B.

Educational Settings. Elders are often asked to work with young people in educational settings. Sometimes there is a mismatch between traditional and western expectations of child management practices that can cause conflict. If Elders are asked to share their knowledge with children, that is their role. Educators should prepare children for an Elder's visit and take on the responsibility for managing children's behaviour themselves.



Elders tend to be in high demand. Beyond language, arts and cultural heritage projects, they are often asked to participate in council activities, funerals, other community events and non-Indigenous events outside the community. Be aware that you may not be the only one requesting their time and be considerate of the fact that they may have other obligations.



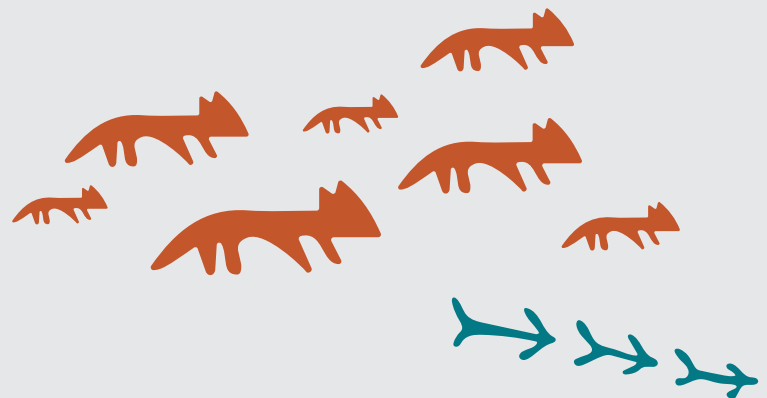
Sarafine Stewart, Upper Nicola Band, Reclaiming My Language Program Graduate

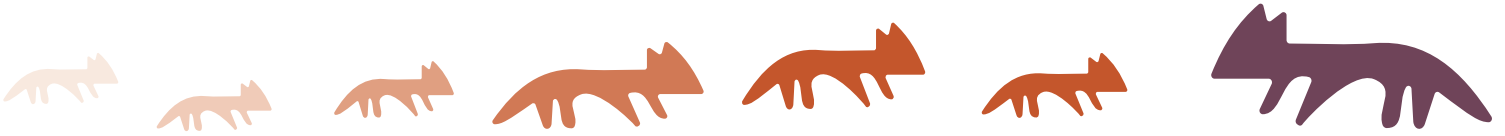
Elders will always seek to find a way to do what is being asked. So it is the responsibility of the people who are asking to ensure that Elders have the supports they need to do the task. Don't spring requests on Elders in front of others where they might find it difficult to turn you down. For example, not every Elder is comfortable saying a prayer in public, so if you plan to ask an Elder, ask them one-on-one well before the designated activity including opening, closing or mealtime prayers.

Monitor the situation. If the project or event seems to be causing stress, pause, re-assess the task, and when possible consider dividing the task among several Elders or breaking up the task into smaller, more manageable components. It can be helpful to have a contingency plan in place before the event starts so that there can be more than one Elder present in the case they are needed.

Due to the historical oppression of Indigenous people, Elders may be triggered by things that are unexpected and certain topics such as residential schools may be retraumatizing. Be upfront and clear about the topics that will be discussed in advance. If there are potentially difficult topics, the facilitator could note this at the beginning of the event. You could also ask the Elder for guidance ahead of time on how to approach sensitive topics to ensure a safe space will be created within your project or event.

Be prepared to respond if something comes up that triggers a negative response such as residential schools. Part of creating a safe space is meeting people where they are at. If you see the Elder or participants are having an adverse reaction, pause the conversation, tactfully acknowledge the challenge and change the structure of the conversation using a strength-based approach to move things along. It can be helpful to be aware of outside resources such as mental health counselling that can be suggested as supports. Depending on the event, it could be helpful to have a helper available for one-on-one support.





If you are meeting or interviewing an Elder, be aware that the location and questions may also be triggering. For example, some Indigenous communities have offices in residential schools and it can be triggering to meet at those sites. Alternatively, you can ask the Elder to suggest a location for the meeting.



We all want to avoid a situation where someone may take advantage of Elders. We know that no one would intend to do this but sometimes Elders can be left feeling that way if expectations are not clear. Think about the needs of the task from an Elders' perspective. Put yourself in their shoes and treat them how they would want to be treated.

Compensation

Be prepared to compensate for the work requested.

Provide adequate compensation for Elders' time – wages or an honorarium. If they don't want an honorarium, make a donation in their name.

Compensation by institutions or organizations often involves form-filling. Try to make the compensation process as uncomplicated as possible.

You may want to inquire what the traditional or community protocol is for compensation. For example, it may be appropriate to offer tobacco, sage or whatever is traditional in your culture, or to provide a small gift.

Openings or Welcomes for Events

Elders are commonly asked to provide a welcome or opening to events, many of which are external to the community.

- If you are unsure who to approach, check with the band office or friendship centre.
- Ensure the Elder has transportation to and from the event.
- Invite the Elder to stay for the event if they choose.
- Provide an honorarium. The current recommended amount for a welcome or opening to an event ranges from \$125 to \$200.
- It is nice to offer a small gift along with the honorarium.





Special Circumstances: The COVID-19 Pandemic



The health and safety of everyone involved in FPCC programs, and especially our Elders, is of the utmost importance to us. All FPCC projects must follow current physical distancing guidelines as recommended by the [BC Provincial Health Officer](#) and [WorkSafeBC](#).

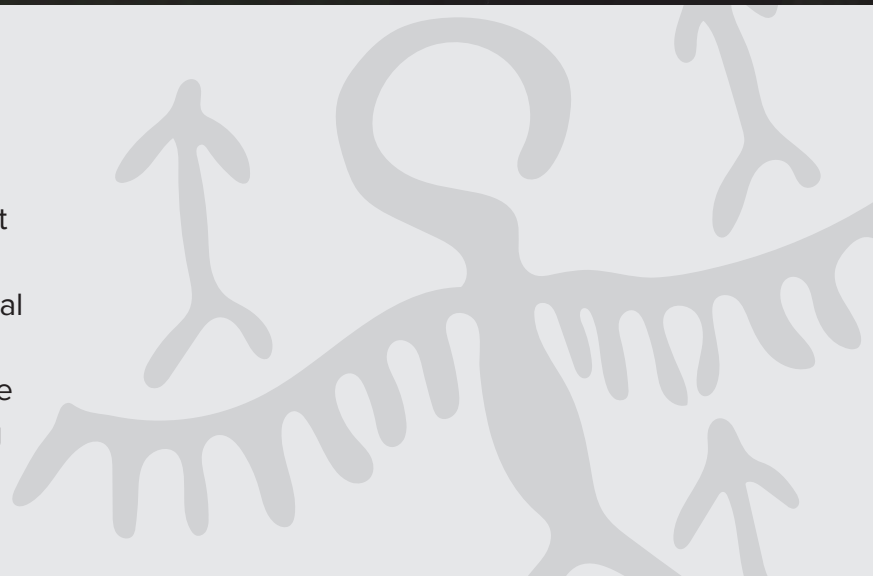
In addition, FPCC requires that people currently working on funded projects have no physical contact or in-person gatherings with Elders, people with underlying conditions, or pregnant people (unless you live in the same house).



Levi Martin and Tsimka Martin, Tla-oqui-aht First Nation, 2019 Mentor-Apprentice workshop.

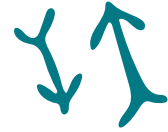
Health and Safety

Although health and safety *is* critically important during the pandemic, keeping Elders safe is an important consideration at all times. It is essential to work with Elders in a way that provides an opportunity for them to pass on their knowledge and to be respected and valued without putting their health at risk.





Safe ways to work with Elders during COVID-19



During this time of physical distancing, there are many ways we can still involve our Elders.

During the pandemic, Elders can still join gatherings, projects and events virtually. During your project planning include the cost or allocation of devices and internet access to support the Elder participation from the comfort and safety of their own home.

Consider adjusting your project plan to include an honorarium for a tech-savvy person who **shares the same household** with the Elder, so they can receive technical support if needed.

If Elders are new to using these types of virtual programs (Zoom, WebEx, etc.) or devices, share some good practices of meeting virtually, like finding a quiet area of the home, ensuring there is good lighting and a power source for their device. As part of the preparation, arrange for someone to work with the Elder to test and practice with the equipment and virtual program ahead of time.

Develop a protocol for handing out items to Elders. For example, only non-symptomatic people should be harvesting, distributing or dropping off items. Ensure that those who drop off items for Elders maintain clean hands and proper hygiene and that items are sanitized or isolated. Leave items at the door rather than going inside someone's house.

Be prepared for challenges. Providing written step-by-step instructions may help someone who has to navigate new technologies or platforms.

There are lots of recording projects that can be done with Elders during COVID-19. For example, have an Elder narrate while watching a separately recorded video of topical subjects such as a slow walk highlighting various plants, locations, objects, or other significant topics. Please see our website for more ideas:

<https://fpcc.ca/resource/virtual-at-home-language-revitalization-program-ideas/>



Jessica Creyke and Catherine Michell, Wet'suwet'en, 2019 Mentor-Apprentice workshop.

We are here to help!

If you are planning a project with FPCC and want FPCC assistance or advice, email the program contact listed on the website.

Other Resources

Here are some other resources to help facilitate your work with Elders.

Butt, M. (n.d.). 10 Tips for Working with Seniors | SFU OLC. Retrieved May 14, 2020 from <http://www.sfu.ca/olc/blog/co-op/10-tips-working-seniors>

Council on Aboriginal Initiatives. (2012). Elder Protocol and Guidelines. University of Alberta. <https://www.ualberta.ca/public-health/media-library/elder-protocol.pdf>

Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment. (2013). Elders in Schools Handbook. A Guide for District Education Authorities and Divisional Education Councils in the Northwest Territories. https://www.ntassembly.ca/sites/assembly/files/13-06-3td_84-174.pdf



Loretta Kristenson at the 2018 Elders Gathering

Elders are respected and valued members of our communities. They have a lot to contribute to community-based work in language, arts, heritage and culture. Keeping these tips in mind can help to make the experience positive for everyone!