Sharing the Message of Truth and Reconciliation
A Guide for Parents, Kids, and Educators
Introduction

Reconciliation and the lasting impacts of residential schools have sparked conversations between parents and children, educators and students, around Indigenous issues, histories, and perspectives in homes and classrooms across Canada. This guide provides background information, two articles, and sample notes to help parents and educators have conversations with children about the need for reconciliation.

In response to the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s report in 2015, Scholastic Canada partnered with Indigenous educators including 10 key advisors to create Take Action for Reconciliation for grades 3–8.

“Truth Before Reconciliation” The importance of understanding the true history of Canada regarding Indigenous Peoples must occur before reconciliation. Each Canadian needs to know that the impacts of government policy, including residential schools, were designed to be hurtful to Indigenous Peoples.

—Brad Baker, educator from the Squamish Nation
Learning About Reconciliation and Residential Schools

Many of us are just coming to know the history of treaties and residential schools in Canada because of the way the education system functioned for so long. As such, it is important to come to terms with the fact that learning will take time, and there may be some bumps along the way. This is okay. It is important to act, learn, reflect, and make things better as you come to know better. As writer Thomas King stated, “Don’t say you would have lived your differently had you heard this story. You’ve heard it now.” The same applies here. Reconciliation is about action, and there is a moral imperative to teaching this content in a good way. There are many excellent resources, and many more are being developed on a regular basis. If there is something you don’t know, don’t be afraid to learn about it and find out!

Terminology

First Nations, Inuit, or Métis peoples are often assumed to be culturally homogeneous. This could not be further from the truth. One of the challenges is the terminology used to describe Indigenous Peoples. For example, one of the historical terms used is Indian. This term is outdated and often felt to be offensive. In the 1970s, the term Indian was replaced with First Nations, and it is meant to honour the nationhood that the government sought to erase through the treaty-making process and residential schools. The term Indian, however, still has legal relevance because of the Indian Act. The Indian Act impacts many aspects of people’s lives, but one of the biggest ways is through Indian Status. Indian Status is legal recognition of an individual’s First Nations ancestry and all associated rights, including any treaty rights and the rights to live on a First Nations reserve, apply for funding for post-secondary education, and limited health benefits provided through NIHB (non-insured health benefits). There is a growing movement to change the Indian Act so that it is less restrictive and oppressive.

The word Aboriginal is also considered to be offensive to some people, but it is accepted by many. It is an umbrella term that can refer to First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. It is not a term that captures distinctions, which is one of the reasons some like it. The term First Nations, as well, functions in the same way. It implies many nations, but unless one seeks out more knowledge, the distinction is not clear. There are over 800 distinct nations across Canada that could fall under the category of First Nations. While many are important to act, learn, reflect, and make things better as you come to know better. As writer Thomas King stated, “Don’t say you would have lived your differently had you heard this story. You’ve heard it now.” The same applies here. Reconciliation is about action, and there is a moral imperative to teaching this content in a good way. There are many excellent resources, and many more are being developed on a regular basis. If there is something you don’t know, don’t be afraid to learn about it and find out!

• Connect with your school board’s Indigenous education liaison or department.
• Build relationships with local communities. Expect it to take time to build trust and for the relationships to grow.
• Prioritize the voices of Indigenous Peoples and listen.
• Centre Indigenous content, knowledge, ways of knowing and being in your practice (Traditional Knowledge, books, film, music, philosophy, art).
• Follow traditional protocols in your local area (e.g., gifting, blankets, and tobacco), and don’t be afraid to ask if you are unsure of the protocols.
• Work with Elders and Knowledge Keepers trusted in your local communities. Often Indigenous education departments and local agencies that serve Indigenous groups are great resources for advice.
• Reciprocate—Value the time and knowledge of any guests in your learning space, or community members you work with. Think about how you can reciprocate the relationship. Remember that a gift or an honorarium is also given.
• Go beyond arts, crafts, and displays of music and dance. Talk about the issues, even the most difficult ones, and make sure to include Indigenous voices, values, stories, and perspectives.
These sample articles and lessons may help teachers, parents, and children start their journey of learning about Canada’s history with Indigenous Peoples and take their first steps towards reconciliation.

A Path to Healing

“Reconciliation.” It’s a big word, but what does it mean? It is when people work to repair a relationship. It is an ongoing process. In this case, it is repairing the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and other Canadians. It has been unequal for a long, long time.

In 2008, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a formal apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools on behalf of the Canadian government. That same year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was set up. Their job was to go across the country to interview people who had attended residential school to get their stories and statements. This was stressful for many students because they didn’t want to remember those hard times, but it was also healing for some Survivors.

The TRC completed its report in 2015. It came up with 94 Calls to Action—ways that Canadians can move forward. There is a lot of healing and work still to be done, but the TRC report is a good start for finding a way to honour the past, while looking towards a bright future for all Canadians.

People have lots of ideas from learning to caring to acting.

“It took 125 years to create the problem—seven generations—so it may take generations to fix.”
—Senator Murray Sinclair, former Chair of the TRC

“Reconciliation means… you have to recognize and listen to the survivors of events and hear their stories. You need to spread awareness and make sure that everyone knows about it. Then you need to fix the problem and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”
—11-year-old Zachary Mullin, 2014

“We know we made mistakes in the past, but now it is time to right our wrongs. Time to learn from them and teach the next generation this important history. No matter our race or background, we stand together, all of us as one, and we are united as a country because we are all different, but we are all Canadian.”
—Novah Murray, Grade 6, Charlottetown, PEI

“We all go to school and we each have the power to decide how we will use our learning for good. As a young person, your voice is powerful. How will you use your voice to make your community more fair and respectful?”
—Charlene Bearhead, Pathways to Education Canada Indigenous Education Advisory Circle Member

How do you reconcile with your friends and family when you break a promise?

“Expect folks to understand that reconciliation is a two-way street. And that we can’t get to reconciliation until we have the truth part.”
—Rebecca Benson, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust

“Reconciliation is a two-way street. And that we can’t get to reconciliation until we have the truth part.”
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Excerpt from Community Ties Student Book

Download Sample
Historically, Canada’s oppression of Indigenous Peoples led to the loss of their traditional territories, ways of life, and languages, the banning of cultural practices, and the Residential School System. We learn on page 34 that reconciliation means repairing a relationship. What do you think repairing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involves? Discuss your ideas as a class. In your discussion, consider the idea that reconciliation is an ongoing process.

Write a letter to your local government to ask if they are working towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. How is the government working towards reconciliation? Write why you think it is important for the government to achieve reconciliation. Share your letter with your school to show that you want changes.

Social Studies — Historically, Canada’s oppression of Indigenous Peoples led to the loss of their traditional territories, ways of life, and languages, the banning of cultural practices, and the Residential School System. We learn on page 34 that reconciliation means repairing a relationship. What do you think repairing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involves? Discuss your ideas as a class. In your discussion, consider the idea that reconciliation is an ongoing process.

Global Citizenship — Write a letter to your local government to ask if they are working towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. How is the government working towards reconciliation? Write why you think it is important for the government to achieve reconciliation. Share your letter with your school to show that you want changes.
Far From Home

by Lisa Charleyboy

Not many kids can imagine living apart from their parents for a month, let alone an entire school year. Well, that’s exactly what happened to more than 150,000 Indigenous kids who had to go to residential schools far from their homes.

Across the country, children aged 4 to 16 were taken from their families by the Canadian government. They were forced to attend residential schools for the whole school year, and sometimes even longer.

In school, children had to cut their hair, wear a uniform, and be called by an English name, or worse yet, just a number. They also had to follow very strict rules, or they could be punished harshly. Many Indigenous children spoke their own languages at home, but they were forbidden to do so at school.

The Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, was the first recognized residential school. Founded in 1828 as the Mechanics’ Institute, it became a full residential school for boys and girls in 1834.

The first residential schools were run by churches. Many students had to take part in church activities that were strange to them. Later, the schools were turned into boarding schools under the Canadian government’s control. More than 130 schools operated across Canada between 1831 and 1996.

Boys lined up in rows at the Brandon Indian Residential School in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1960.

When children were taken from their homes, it had a huge impact on communities. Parents and grandparents were sad and lonely without any children around, and the whole circle of life was broken.

Without any children around, some people lost the ability to parent. They had no model of what family life looked like before residential schools. Some of the children who were taken away to school never learned how to show love to their own children—never hugging them or kissing them good night.

Culture is another thing that was taken away by residential schools. Children didn’t learn about their culture, and many didn’t have any opportunities to learn even after they grew up. There are generations of Indigenous people who have lost their culture because of this. Thankfully, many people are working hard to regain this knowledge.

Girls in sewing class at the Fort Resolution Indian Residential School in the Northwest Territories.

This scene is from We Were Children, a 2012 film by Tim Wolochatiuk. The film recounts the story of Lyna Hart and Glen Anaquod, who were both taken from their homes at a very young age and sent to residential school.

Loss of Language and Culture

Many Indigenous languages are disappearing because kids were forbidden to speak their language at residential school. Being forced to speak English or French for most of the year meant that many simply forgot how to speak the language of their ancestors. And when they became adults, they couldn’t teach their children how to speak the language either. As Elders and Knowledge Keepers get older, there are fewer chances to regain these language skills. Young people learning their language become even more important because of this.
Although residential schools seem as though they happened long ago, the last one only closed down in 1996. What happened in these schools is still affecting people’s lives today.

Jacob Pratt’s Story

Jacob Pratt is from both the Dakota and Saulteaux Nations. He went to the Gordon Indian Residential School as a day school student from grades 3 to 7. The school was on the George Gordon First Nations in Saskatchewan.

“I had no other options for school than to go to this residential school on my reserve. The school was run very military-like. For instance, when we had to eat, we would run as fast as we could to the lunch area and we would have to line up facing the wall. We weren’t allowed to talk, move, or do anything. And if you did, you’d have to go to the back of the line, and you didn’t want to do that because there’s only so much good food, and then you’d have to eat the food that was leftover—if there was any food by the time you got your turn.”

The conditions at the school Jacob went to were not as harsh as the conditions that some students of residential schools faced. Many students consider themselves “Survivors,” because the treatment they faced at school was so difficult.

“I don’t consider myself a Survivor. I consider myself a former residential school student, but not a Survivor,” Jacob says.

At only 33 years old, Jacob is one of the youngest former residential school attendees in Canada.

For most of my life, my mother was a stranger to me.

When I was a wee Deechild, she showed little physical affection, was quick to anger, and suffered from depression. She also struggled with alcohol and a difficult marriage.

She showed her love in other ways; she kept the house clean, kept us clean, sheltered and fed us. Every day, my mother brushed and braided my hair while she hummed and sent me off to school with soup and sandwiches.

I know she cared, but I never understood her. To me, she was a mystery and it wasn’t until I was in high school that I learned her dark secret. It took another 20 years before she shared her story with me.

My mother, Edna Ferguson, is a residential school Survivor. Born in 1945 in South Indian Lake, Manitoba, she was raised in the North—on the land with her parents and two older sisters.

But that would all be taken away from her. After her dad died on the trapline and her mom died after getting sick with tuberculosis, she was sent away. She arrived at her first school when she was just five years old.

“You didn’t go to school to learn. All you learned was to be mean. I didn’t learn nothing. I didn’t know how to read, and when I talked Cree they grabbed your hair and bang bang on the floor. I was too young to fight for myself.”

She went to three residential schools between the ages of 5 and 14. After returning to South Indian Lake, she tried to put the past behind her.

What do you learn from your family that you can’t learn from other people? How would residential schools affect that learning?
Summary: This selection explains how residential schools impacted First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in the past, and continues to impact Indigenous families across Canada today.

Reading Level:

Vocabulary: residential schools, Canadian government, forced, uniform, strict, culture, Survivor, Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Health — What is required for a child to be healthy? Based on what you have learned about residential schools, do you think that residential schools allowed Indigenous children to be healthy? Provide specific examples for why or why not to explain your thinking.

Social Studies — What role do families have in a community? Revisit the quote on page 2 by Elder Vital Daniels, when thinking about your answer: “Family is what keeps us happy! Being together, helping one another out is what family is all about.” What are the different parts that can make up a family? How do the various parts of a family work to transmit culture? How did residential schools disrupt Indigenous families? What impact do you think this had on Indigenous communities?

Social Studies — On page 30, we learn that the first residential schools were run by churches where Indigenous children had to take part in church activities that were strange to them. What is the purpose of spiritual practices? Who should teach spiritual practices to children? What impact do you think learning spiritual practices that were so different from their own spiritual practices had on Indigenous children?

Language — Revisit the quote on the Contents page by Freda Ahenakew: “Knowing your language gives you an inner strength and pride in your heritage.” What does this quote mean to you? Think about the importance of knowing your language in learning about your culture and heritage. What effect would being cut off from learning your language have on you? What has been the experience of Indigenous children? What are Indigenous Peoples doing today to revitalize their languages?

Connecting to the Final Project

Remember that an important part of reconciliation is learning about the history and culture of Indigenous Peoples. Think about the impact that residential schools had on Indigenous communities over more than 150 years, and the impact they continue to have today.

Further Inquiry

How are different communities working to heal from the legacy of residential schools? What actions could you take to participate in this healing process?
Discussion Prompts

Further Inquiry
The discovery of unmarked graves on the grounds of former residential schools over the summer in 2021 made the horror of residential schools real for many Canadians. It also confirmed what Survivors of residential schools told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. What else can we learn from the Survivors’ stories? What can we do to ensure that their stories are no longer ignored? For example, on Orange Shirt Day on September 30, wear an orange shirt to support Indigenous children and learn about residential schools, encourage others to take part in reconciliation, take a pledge of reconciliation yourself, learn about the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, or take action on any of the Calls to Action in the TRC.

Think About It!
What do you learn from your family that you can’t learn from other people? How would residential schools affect that learning?

Understanding the Page:
1. On page 32, former residential school student Jacob Pratt is quoted as saying, “We weren’t allowed to talk, move, or do anything. And if you did, you’d have to go to the back of the line, and you didn’t want to do that because there’s only so much good food, and then you’d have to eat the food that was leftover—if there was any food by the time you got your turn.” When you read this quote, how do you feel? Does Jacob’s school experience sound anything like yours? Explain your answer.
2. On page 33, Rosanna Deechild shares that when she was a child, her mother, Edna Ferguson, showed little physical affection. What ways did Rosanna’s mother show her love despite being unable to hug her children? What does Edna’s story tell you about the effects that residential schools continue to have on families today?
3. We learn on page 33 that in 2008 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began travelling across Canada collecting the stories of Survivors of residential schools. Why was it important for Survivors to tell their stories?
4. Why was it important for Edna Ferguson to hear the stories of other residential school Survivors?
5. Why is it important to learn about the experiences of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in residential schools? What can we learn from their experiences?

Social Studies — Often residential schools are talked about as if they existed in the deep past. However, based on Jacob Pratt’s story on page 32, we learn that he is only 33 years old and is a former residential school student. Do you find it surprising that these schools existed up until 1996? Explain why you are, or are not, surprised.

Social Studies — In Jacob Pratt’s short piece about his experience, he described what is called a “day school.” Rosanna Deechild on page 33 describes her mother’s experience in a residential school. Read both of these stories and describe what the difference is between a day school and a residential school. Why are both types of schools sometimes described as residential schools? What is the common message that people are trying to get across when they describe them as the same thing?

Links to Inquiry Question
Now that you have read many of the selections in this book, think about the inquiry question: “What makes communities strong?” Write down your opinions. Have your opinions changed? How have they changed? How have your opinions been challenged? Discuss the opinions and think about the question as a group.

Global Connections — Residential schools happened in places other than Canada, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Learn about how these schools worked in other countries by doing some research. Why do you think Indigenous people were treated in similar ways in countries around the world? What can we learn from these experiences?
Learn More

Truth and Reconciliation Commision of Canada (TRC) Commissioner Dr. Marie Wilson gives a backgrounder on the history of residential schools, their impact on Indigenous communities, and information about the TRC, and Survivors share their stories. Click to watch each video.

Please note: These external web links provide additional information that is consistent with the intended purpose of this discussion guide; however, the external links are subject to change and not maintained by Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Learn more about Take Action for Reconciliation:
www.scholastic.ca/education/take-action-for-reconciliation