How would you feel, if this happened in your kid’s class? Last fall, a grade 6 social studies class outside of Edmonton was learning about residential schools. A student put up her hand and said, “I don’t have anything against Indigenous people, but my grandma told me we had to put the Indians in residential schools because they were killing each other and we had to civilize them.” Her words hung in the air for a moment. And then her teacher responded, “Well, I don’t have anything against your grandma, but people who are your grandma’s age and your parents’ age and even my age didn’t have the opportunity to learn the truth. So, we have a responsibility, because we’re learning the truth now.”

For generations, the full history of Canada’s residential schools, which existed for more than a century and housed 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit kids with the flat-out mission of assimilation into white society, was suppressed and ignored. If you’re non-Indigenous, you may have had some hazy idea of “Indian schools,” but the kind of nightmareish abuse, bullying, deprivation and death that went on? It was rarely acknowledged and never discussed. I can remember first hearing about the schools only about 10 years ago in one of those free-ranging discussions that go on at my bookstore meetings, and thinking, “I have a history degree…how is it even possible I’ve never heard of residential schools?”

Today, however, Canadians—kids, adults, every body—have that opportunity to learn that really difficult truth. And we have a responsibility to acknowledge the truth and fight untruths, just like that teacher told her class. Two years ago, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) issued 94 calls to action to address the legacy of residential schools and move toward reconciliation. I still can’t quite figure out what reconciliation could or should look like in everyday life, it’s one of those slippery words that can mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. Maybe, then, we should pay attention to the truth part first. As Pamala Agawa, a curriculum coordinator for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education (FNMI) at York Region District School Board in Ontario, told me, we need to figure out the truth for ourselves. “What biases do we carry; what learning do we need to do to better understand the true history of the country?”

Chances are, your own kids are learning about residential schools in class this year. In the TRC’s calls to action, points 62 and 63 specifically call on schools to deliver age-appropriate curriculum about residential schools, as well as Indigenous culture and treaty education, to students in kindergarten to grade 12. It’s not a quick and easy item on a to-do list. How do we talk about Canada’s cultural genocide with our kids? How do we tell them about what our country did to families? One of the families involved in the TRC’s hearings for the Shingwauk Residential School, described as the “most extensive and predominant” on the West coast, was single out? Will they be anxious they’ll be taken away? The truth that hurt the most is the truth that’s part of being a decent human being.

Talking honestly about hard things in a way kids can understand helps open a door to the empathy and understanding that can mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. Maybe, then, we should pay attention to the truth part first. As Pamala Agawa, a curriculum coordinator for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education (FNMI) at York Region District School Board in Ontario, told me, we need to figure out the truth for ourselves. “What biases do we carry; what learning do we need to do to better understand the true history of the country?”

For some Indigenous parents, there may be added stress of having kids learn about the horrors of residential schools. Chances are, your own kids are learning about residential schools in class this year. In the TRC’s calls to action, points 62 and 63 specifically call on schools to deliver age-appropriate curriculum about residential schools, as well as Indigenous culture and treaty education, to students in kindergarten to grade 12. It’s not a quick and easy item on a to-do list. How do we talk about Canada’s cultural genocide with our kids? How do we tell them about what our country did to families? One of the families involved in the TRC’s hearings for the Shingwauk Residential School, described as the “most extensive and predominant” on the West coast, was single out? Will they be anxious they’ll be taken away? The truth that hurt the most is the truth that’s part of being a decent human being.

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Some Indigenous parents, there may be added worry about classroom lessons. Will their child feel singled out? Will they be anxious they’ll be taken away, too? For others, the lessons are welcome. Julie Mallin of Port Dover, Ont., who is Anishinaabe and the daughter of a residential school survivor, says she didn’t have any concerns. “I absolutely think it’s important for kids to learn in school. It’s been a hidden part of our history,” she says. “For this to be taught is just another layer of becoming more emotionally aware and learning how to deal with their feelings.” While Mallin’s mom rarely talked about her experiences when Mallin was a kid, she didn’t want it to be a taboo subject with her own kids.
Kids—about the gifts she’s received from her child—her “Kulu,” an Inuktitut term, is steeped in the bond of blood between child and parent. It is the definition of IKP. It’s essential, then, for parents to begin teaching the dynamic between child and parent is one of equality, understanding and truth. It is the innate knowledge that she has the power to be herself—100 percent unapologetically Indigenous. It was essential, then, that we returned to the parenting principles of our ancestors and consciously integrate Indigenous kinship practices (IKP) into her childhood.

In essence, IKP requires that the dynamic between child and parent is one of equality, understanding and truth. Kinship, by definition, is steeped in the bond of blood connections, returning to a deeply nurturing love of family and community. As a mother, consistently maintaining an open listening environment for our daughter has been key, so that she doesn’t grow up thinking she has to hide her emotions just to please others or to get what she wants. Instead of a reward and punishment system, IKP supports our kids so that they learn to take responsibility for their own behaviours. Kids are encouraged to express all emotions, freely and openly. As a baby, when River-Jaxsen would cry, my partner would lovingly cradle her in his arms and tell her, “Cry as long as you need to. Let it all out. We’ll hold you in our arms and make it okay.”

True learning doesn’t just come from what we know in our mother tongues, and make sure she is deeply familiar with land-based practices. We nurture her relationship with the land every day, even if it is 21-2 degrees out. And at 20 months, she’s beginning to learn the sacredness in water, land, animals and plants. She is beginning to understand that with her as she grows. I’m hopeful that her connection to who she is and where she comes from will be natural and strong.

(Andrea Landry)

When We Were Alone by Adelle Robertson, Illustrated by Jason Frat, tells the TRC’s calls to action for educators to begin teaching About Residential Schools, present issues and future possibilities. It is an empowering story designed to support the collaborative action plan for elementary education. (Grades 3+7)

The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway by Edward Benton-Burke’s stories and teachings will appear in this book as an alternative to the sacred Midewiwin teachings, such as the importance of respecting for all living things and building a vibrant community.

My Conversations with Creators by Lee Maracle. "Young readers will learn about the legacy of residential schools, current issues and future possibilities, as well as the importance of respecting for all living things and building a vibrant community.”

Talking about resilience is really powerful—"We see a shift in the classrooms. It’s really the parents, and the teachers, and the students talking to each other," says Charlene Bearhead. "We see that in the light and in the stories. I was also deeply moved by the book." The book "Gladys Chapman, who fell ill with tuberculosis while at residential school and died in 1931 at the age of 12. Jani Mihche was born, my partner and I knew we wanted her to grow up with the innate knowledge that she has the power to be herself—100 percent unapologetically Indigenous. It was essential, then, that we returned to the parenting principles of our ancestors and consciously integrated Indigenous kinship practices (IKP) into her childhood.

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TEACHING THE TEACHERS

There’s no national standard for curriculum, and yet parents are among the most important in the calls to action that calls on parents, teachers and trustees to begin teaching Aboriginal education at the elementary level.

When Bearhead told me about that grade 6 student repeating her grandmother’s response, I finched, thinking my daughter could hear something that casually cruel in class—"When my baby doll was taken from me when I was 2 and a half," Bearhead says. Mi’kmaw community members were very moved by the book. "When we see that shift happen there, that’s when I believe we’ll be on the road to reconciliation as a country.”

"Helping Kids Get It

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(Andrea Landry)
I’ve been on the receiving end of some very questionable comments from children. One kid said, “Lol, my dad has a drinking problem.” When my grandfather was alive, I would say, “Lol, I’m so pale and don’t look like an Indian.” I’ve had someone laughing at me, patting my name on a mental image of a drunk Indian. It felt far away from me. And then on my wedding day, there was this mingling with guests when a woman came up to me and introduced herself. “I heard you’re a writer,” she said. “And you’re First Nations?” “Partly, yes,” I replied. She went on to tell a story about her daughter’s experience with First Nations people. Then she said this: “You know the whole residential school thing? Why can’t they just get over it?”

Many Canadians believe that what happened to Indigenous kids in residential schools so long ago it can’t possibly be affecting anyone now. Since we haven’t been taught that the schools even existed, it can seem very far removed from us. But the last school only closed in 1996, and this is only the second year that the new curriculum is being taught in public schools. The guest’s question left me speechless. I’ve come up with countless clever replies since then, but in that moment, I felt attacked.

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I’ve had the honour of travelling all over Canada, talking about the history of FNMI people and the residential school system, and I’ve witnessed the impact firsthand. Many kids share that their families don’t talk about their experiences. The shame of their abuse still haunts them.

On one school visit, there was a girl who waited until almost everyone had left the room before approaching. With tears in her eyes, she quietly told me she was constantly bullied by kids who called her names because she was First Nations. As a result, she was abandoning her culture—she’s learned to bead but stopped because other kids thought it was weird. She was afraid to speak up in class when the beads fell. I asked her: “Why would I be now? Why wouldn’t you be able to learn from my grandfather? If I had a connection to his home, would people be more accepting of me?”

I told her that, eventually, these stories must be told. We have a responsibility to share even the shameful parts of our history with our kids and tell them that the survivors of residential schools were kids just like them. We have a responsibility to share stories of kids who are going through trauma now. And we need to listen and learn from them. Things can change. I don’t know what happened to my family after my grandfather. They felt it myself. I grew up knowing nothing about my grandfather’s history or culture. I’ve had the honour of travelling all over Canada, talking about the history of FNMI people and the residential school system, and I’ve witnessed the impact firsthand. Many kids share that their families don’t talk about their experiences. The shame of their abuse still haunts them.

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LIKE MANY parents, I want to guide my kids on a healthy path in life. These Anishinaabe principles have become the foundation of my daily parenting practices. I often share them as stories and songs with my kids, as traditional practitioner and knowledge keeper Banakonda Kennedy Kish Bell has passed them on to me. As expressed in oral translations such as The Mishomis Book by Ojibway educator Edward Benton-Banai, the Creator—our grandfather, who gave us our first mother, Mother Earth—saw that humans needed morals to help one another as well as treat all of our relations as equals, especially our animal cousins as we’re reliant on them for our survival. Animals remind us of our responsibilities as stewards of the environment and protectors of our first mother. While expressions vary from nation to nation, the wisdom of these philosophies has spread across Turtle Island (North America).

These lessons enrich our lives, offering positive, playful examples of how to survive—and thrive—in this world.

**THE SEVEN GRANDFATHER TEACHINGS**

1. **WISDOM** Nbwaakaawin: The Beaver To cultivate knowledge is to know wisdom, which helps us make decisions that honour our well-being. This is represented by the beaver, who patiently uses his impressive teeth and creative mind to build sustainable communities. Be humble in knowing where you excel and what your limits are, and collaborate with others who have experience different ways of knowing.

2. **LOVE** Zaawidizin: The Eagle Unconditional love cannot be given without loving oneself, much like the eagle who soars high and carries these teachings from the Creator to share with her young. Educate yourself before you speak, consult with your mentors and your communities and love yourself enough to overcome difficulties.

3. **RESPECT** Maaendoondimowin: The Buffalo As long as we have walked the Earth, so have the buffalo, who have sacrificed themselves to give us warmth, food and shelter. To have respect is to honour all of creation. Balance what you need with what you want and recognize how your own good may be at the expense of Mother Earth. Do what you can to make a difference and lead by example.

4. **BRAVERY** Aaakwebo’oewin: The Bear Awaken the warrior within by facing adversaries with integrity. We see these traits embodied in mother bears, who guard and protect their young with strength and a playful heart. Remember, you can’t take care of others without taking care for yourself first. Conquer fears so you can help those you love. Don’t forget the power of play and humour.

5. **HONESTY** Gwekwadziwin: The Raven Facing a situation with truth, kindness and compassion is to walk with integrity. The raven, who uses his own cleverness to prosper, is a potent symbol of the power of honesty. Remain true to yourself, love and respect your own natural form.

6. **HUMILITY** Bbadendiziwin: The Wolf To know yourself and your gifts in a humble way is to set a good example for others in life, much like wolves who are devoted to their family. Uphold the power of love. Look for it everywhere and nurture it just as you would your children. To accept that we all need love to survive is to truly humble.

7. **TRUTH** Debwewin: The Turtle To commit to these seven teachings and see them as fundamental values that complement each other is to know them within oneself, authentically. The turtle, who methodically walks the Earth as one of our eldest animals, reminds us of our teachings that proceed and survive all of time. Walk with these teachings, share these teachings from a true place of regard for their capacity to enrich our own lives and those who we encounter.

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**FINDING THE WORDS**

For a lot of Indigenous parents, the struggle to preserve language is harder than ever in a Paw Patrol world. Which isn’t a slight on everyone’s favourite dog squad, but an example of how English culture dominates. For Nancy Mike and Andrew Morrison—the husband-and-wife duo who are part of the five-member band The Jerry Cans—I would not be comfortable with it. It’s challenging and complicated, and there is a lot of pressure on us as parents to navigate things. Southern culture is just so strong—if you’re not actively fighting it, it will dominate.

What does being vigilant against English influence look like in day-to-day life?

**ANDREW:** We are raising our daughters bilingually, so it’s not like we hit the panic button every time they speak English, but it’s becoming more and more their language of choice as they meet other kids in daycare, and that’s tough. At home we speak as much Inuktitut as possible. I’m actually a little stricter. Nancy says we don’t want it to be something they resent. It’s like getting kids to eat vegetables—you’ll do better if they see you enjoying veggies than trying to force it.

**NANCY:** I have a very strict belief that I don’t say “don’t” in my language. So instead of saying “don’t speak English,” I will just repeat what they said in Inuktitut and then get them to repeat it. We don’t restrict what they see, we expose them to both, but we definitely work hard at providing balance in our home. It’s delicate getting harder the older they get. Our middle daughter currently loves Paw Patrol. I will sometimes give the characters Inuktitut names. We have Inuktitut books and native colouring books and we’ve found a couple of iPad apps that are in Inuktitut.

**ANDREW:** It can be hard to find books and entertainment. That’s one of the reasons that the band is coming out with a children’s album.

Do you worry about them rebelling against what you are teaching them?

**ANDREW:** Our strategy is to just plant as many seeds as we can, so that when the girls are teenagers, the more seeds they have in their soul, the more they’ll be able to access them.

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**SELENA MILLS**

**AURA LAST + CHIEF LADY BIRD**

**ILLUSTRATIONS:**