



Monique Mandamin and
one-year-old Shontae.



When a baby cries, you pick her up



by DAFNA IZENBERG
photography by THOMAS FRICKE

It's a simple idea, but life — and parenting — is anything but simple in a First Nations community wounded by a painful past. A new program is helping parents heal those hurts and build stronger bonds with their babies

A little girl is wandering through the hallways of the health centre on Shoal Lake 39, a First Nations reserve in northwestern Ontario. She is about three years old. Her nose is runny, her eyes are damp, and the muscles in her face seem to be on their mark for a big, heartbreaking sob. But she doesn't cry. She follows her grandmother in and out of an office, then another woman behind the reception desk. She is not in their way, but neither does she solicit their sympathy. They continue about their business, seldom looking at, speaking to or touching her.

Watching her, I think of something I've heard several times since arriving at Shoal Lake: When a baby cries, you pick her up. It's an idea that is slowly gaining ground on the reserve, and it goes against one that seems to have a strong hold here — the old belief that tending to a crying baby will spoil her. The new thinking — that a crying baby needs attention — is partly coming out of a program called Supporting Security, a parenting group that works at strengthening the bonds, or



Louise Mandamin is grandmother to 15 kids, including 2½-year-old Shamira.

“security,” between parents and infants. It was introduced in Shoal Lake a year ago and is now in its second 12-week cycle. I am here at the health centre on this muggy May morning to observe a session of the group.

This little girl I’m watching is not a baby, but I keep hoping someone will pick her up. Finally, she approaches a woman who is sitting on the floor — her aunt, who is here for the group — and settles into her lap. I feel better and, finally, it seems, the little girl does too.

Five pairs of moms and babies arrive. Patric Lehnhoff, a community nurse and a trained Supporting Security facilitator, gets things going. He asks the women about their take-home assignments: They were supposed to observe the different ways babies express themselves. At first, no one speaks up, but eventually someone says her daughter didn’t seem to want a bottle last night.

“How could you tell?” asks Patric.

The baby pushed the bottle away, says the mom, and she squished her face. But she was happy when she was given solid food.

“How did you know?” Patric asks.

The baby kicked her feet, the mom says, and she made cooing sounds. She ate the food.

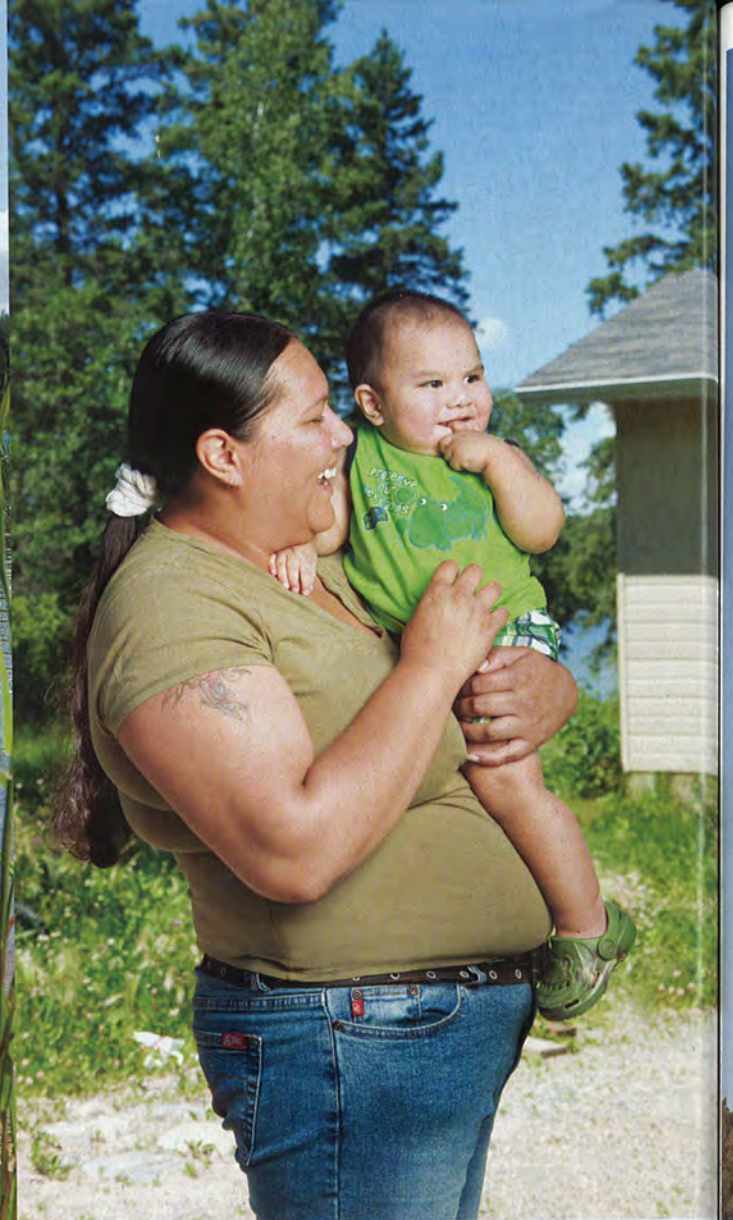
It all strikes me as utterly obvious and I think: Do the moms really not know this stuff?

They do, Patric tells me later. But talking about squishy faces and cooing sounds brings home the fact that babies have their own thoughts and feelings. It helps the mothers see that crying from a hungry baby means more than hunger. It means something like: “Something is wrong. This is scary. I need you. Are you there?”

This is a way of thinking about babies that seems to have been compromised in places like Shoal Lake, where, for



Renée Letander and almost-two-year-old Laiton.



Kelly Blackhorse and one-year-old Troy.

several generations, parent-child relationships were laid to waste by the Indian residential school system. Beginning in the late 1800s, as part of its “assimilation” policy, the Canadian government mandated the forced removal of aboriginal children from their families. As young as six or seven, children were taken to church- and state-run boarding schools, where their heads were shorn, where they were prohibited from speaking their native languages, and where many — if not most — were abused, emotionally, physically and sexually. This continued through the 1970s; the last school closed in 1996.

We know something about the aftermath for the schools’ survivors: the addictions, the depression, the violence, the poverty. And yet, there is reason for hope in First Nations communities; there are a lot of babies. In 2005, the aboriginal birth rate was 1½ times Canada’s overall rate; in Shoal Lake, 10 were born in the past year. The question is: Can

a program like Supporting Security help to make these babies’ lives — and their futures — better? Can it strengthen the bonds in their families enough to weaken the despair in their communities?

Louise Mandamin certainly hopes so. During the group session, Louise sits quietly outside the circle, following closely in the program manual. She is the Healthy Baby, Healthy Children coordinator for Shoal Lake 39 and has been trained to lead Supporting Security groups. She is also, at the age of 50, grandmother to 15 of the roughly 200 children who live on the two Shoal Lake reserves (known as 39 and 40), among them Shamira, the teetery toddler I was watching before the group started.

Louise grew up in this community, as did her husband and their five adult sons, all of whom still live here. She had what might be described as a 360-degree experience of the



Diana Keewatin and one-year-old Isaiah.

residential schools — as the child of a survivor, as a survivor herself and as a mother who had no real parenting role models. She spent three years at Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, Ont., about 60 kilometres from Shoal Lake, from ages six to eight. She had her mouth washed out with soap (if a child in her group swore), was lined up for a “licking” (if a child in her group tried to run away) and had her head banged against other kids’ (when she didn’t want to eat her dinner).

Louise’s voice is flat as she speaks of those days, but the weight of her memories is evident when she describes watching her younger sister — only five when first sent to “CJ” — cling to the car door upon arrival at the school, not wanting to get out.

Back at home, Louise’s parents would disappear on drinking binges for days at a time. Louise started drinking and sniffing solvent when she was 10. She was pregnant and then married at 17, and gave birth five times over the next seven years. She and her husband, Roderick, were both drinking heavily then, and Roderick was frequently in jail.

By the time she had her fifth baby, Louise was done in. She gave the child to her sister for six months, then to a sister-in-law for another six. But that year, 1984, turned out to be a good one. That was when most of Louise’s family converted to Apostolic Christianity. It was also when Louise and her husband stopped drinking.

One more baby and a few years later, Louise began working in Shoal Lake’s first daycare, and went on to study early childhood development. As she learned about children’s needs, it occurred to her that she had never really played or read with her own young boys. Wanting to make up for this, she would sit them down at home, pointing to letters she had put up on the wall. “I had trouble with one son,” she says. “He would always say ‘me’ when we were on the ‘u.’” Louise laughs at this now — it’s pretty cute. But she is also embarrassed, I think, to tell me what she did in response, which was to hit her son with a ruler.

Today, Louise devotes herself to making sure other moms know better. She keeps watch on the reserve’s young families, visiting them, bringing them together for lunch-and-learns

and reading circles, running workshops on child development. "I have found my job," she tells me.

I ask what she hopes Supporting Security might accomplish on Shoal Lake.

She says: "I'd like to see mothers pay more attention to their babies."

Jean Wittenberg would like that too. He created Supporting Security with a team of clinicians at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, where he is the head of infant psychiatry. The project was initially developed in Israel, where Wittenberg was doing some work with the government and Tel Aviv University. But he quickly saw how it might work here in Canada. He had long been looking for a way to work with First Nations communities ("We owe them," he tells me) and believed the group might hold appeal to them. For one thing, it is designed to be delivered by local community leaders, rather than outside experts. Plus, if the program succeeds, if babies do come out of it more securely attached to their parents, they could actually grow up to be happier, more productive adults. Which would mean a better future for everyone.

Katelyn Skead participated in the first cycle of Supporting Security on Shoal Lake (which was made possible when Save the Children Canada and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch joined forces with Jean Wittenberg and provided funding for the program). I meet her in 39's Prevention Office, a humble wooden structure and one of the first buildings you encounter on the reserve, following a 15-minute drive on a dirt road that is flanked by forest. Katelyn is Louise's niece, and has a similarly understated manner. She tells me that her father was sexually abused in residential school; as a parent, he was often drunk and had a bad temper. He was killed in a car accident about three years ago. Her mom has diabetes and is often in hospital for long periods. Katelyn has been stalked; she has a relative with whom she used to fist-fight.

Katelyn is 19, and has an 11-month-old daughter, Shia. She was initially reluctant to join the group. "I kind of thought I knew everything about having a baby," she says. "Sure enough, I learned some new things."

For example, Katelyn tells me, babies are not that different from each other. I ask what she means. "They feel the emotions of their parents and other people," she replies.

Katelyn has noticed that Shia is easily frustrated, and comments, "She probably got it from me." And when Katelyn used to fight with her boyfriend, Shia would campaign to distract her, trying to make her mom laugh.

Katelyn told the group about this. "They said, 'It's like she's the referee and that's not good for her,'" she recalls. "So we stopped arguing in front of her."

Other moms recount changes they've made since participating in Supporting Security. Renée Letander, a 33-year-

"It's hard for me to hug my children," Louise says. "I can say 'I love you,' but not hug them."

old mother of four, cuddles her snoozing toddler, Laiton, throughout our hour-long meeting. She says the group made her more conscious of her kids' need for comfort. For example, she used to give her kids a quick hug after they had a needle. Now, "I'll stay there and hug them and talk to them and even sing them a song, just to make them feel better."

Jean Wittenberg, who meets with participants before and after each group cycle (for research purposes), says they frequently tell him what a relief it is to learn that it's OK to pick up their babies when they cry. Across the board, he says, this is what they want to do. It's what everyone wants to do, he says — what we're wired to do.

So how did the opposite idea — that soothing a child will spoil her — become so entrenched? I never entirely figure this out, but find myself thinking about Shamira, the little girl from the health centre, and about the fallout from the residential schools. There is something about the physical gap between a crying baby and a soothing parent implicit in the "spoiling" philosophy that reminds me of the schools, makes me wonder about an unconscious fit with the emotional experience of survivors. If a child's distress triggers unbearable memories of their own. If old, unexpressed anger makes it hard to be physically close to children. If, by ripping children away from their families, the schools taught survivors that getting close to people is dangerous, likely to end in broken attachments.

Jean Wittenberg does not think trauma is the reason the "spoiling" idea is so pervasive in Shoal Lake. He notes that it's still pretty strong in mainstream culture too. But the schools *did* deprive children of their important attachment relationships, he says, and did nothing to fill that void. He explains that experiences like these, when unresolved, can leave people feeling extremely insecure. Preoccupied with fear, they may be unable to reassure or console others, including their own children.

Each mom I meet who took part in the group is the child of a survivor of the schools, and each wants to be a different kind of parent than her own, whether stricter, more sober or more loving. One said this about her parents' generation: "Because of the school, the way they were treated, I guess that messed with their minds enough to make them not really care about their kids."

The schools did not rob people of the ability to love their children. But there have been complications. For Louise Mandamin, affection has not been easy. "It's hard for me to hug my children," she says. "I can say 'I love you,' but not hug them."

I ask if this is painful.

"Not really," she says. "As long as I'm there for them. When they come and ask me for money or food, I help them out right away. In a way, that's how I give myself to them, in return for what is missing in our family life."

In 2000, Louise's 16-year-old son, Roger, drowned after falling through unsafe ice. "Our circle was broken," she says. She and Roderick decided to become foster parents, and eight years ago, they brought home a baby girl, who still lives with them. This has helped heal the rent left by Roger's death and has also been something of a fresh start for Louise as a parent.

She tells me how, as a newborn, the little girl whimpered whenever she was put to sleep in her crib, but settled as soon as Louise picked her up. "She knew!" says Louise.

"What did she know?" I ask.

"I need Mom and Dad close beside me," says Louise. "I need cuddles." She knew that love, that caring."

Louise wants her grandchildren to know too. She tells her sons and daughters-in-law to always pick up their babies

when they cry, and pushes them to read to their kids. Sometimes, she gives tougher advice. When one of her sons was running around and drinking heavily, she encouraged her daughter-in-law to take their young children and leave him, at least temporarily. Louise is not one to dwell on regrets. The priority is moving forward, and that means doing what she can to see that the young children of Shoal Lake are well cared for.

After she has cleaned up from the group session, Louise follows Shamira out of the health centre. Suddenly, the little girl is skipping. "She's so happy to be outside," Louise observes. I drive them both back to the Prevention Office. Shamira lights up when her grandma's computer starts to play "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," and soon she is giggling, playing peekaboo, rolling a ball around the office. It escapes outside, and she patters after it, stopping at the door in her bare feet. Louise comes to see where she is and calmly tells her to find her shoes. She joins Shamira outside, sitting on the porch to watch her play on the grass. In the gravel lot next to the office, two boys are skidding around on two-wheelers. They stop briefly to peer through the excited dust and wave to Louise. She calls back a friendly hello, as cheerful as I've seen her yet. She is happy, it seems to me, to be keeping an eye on all these kids. **TP**

Build bonds, save kids

Save the Children Canada is best known for its work in developing countries, but the international organization is also actively helping children here at home. Last year, Save the Children began sponsoring Supporting Security in six First Nations communities in the Kenora region of northwestern Ontario, and will expand this sponsorship to three more First Nations communities in the James Bay area. Supporting Security promotes healthy parent-infant attachment through a 12-week group that is facilitated by community leaders rather than outside experts. "Our mission is less about geography than it is about ensuring children grow up and thrive, and overcome poverty no matter where they live," explains Save the Children Canada's CEO, David Morley. "In Canada, First Nations communities need to repair and strengthen the parent-child bond that has been harmed by the ripple effects of residential schools. Children who are bonded to their parents grow up healthier and better prepared to learn and succeed."

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Save the Children provides funding for Dr. Wittenberg's Supporting Security program for new aboriginal parents because children start learning the minute they are born. This program teaches parents the skills to raise emotionally secure, psychologically and physically healthier kids.

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Save the Children has been working in Bolivia for over 25 years, reaching 712,417 people last year alone. We work with the government to help train community health workers on clean birthing practices, the importance of exclusive breastfeeding as well as other maternal and newborn health interventions.

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