

Youth Mental Health in Ulukhaktok: A Community-Driven Approach

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Background

In recent years, Integrated Youth Services (IYS) have emerged as a pan-Canadian movement to improve youth mental health by providing accessible, coordinated care. However, conventional services often fail to meet the needs of Indigenous youth due to top-down approaches and colonial legacies. ACCESS Open Minds/ Esprits Ouverts (AOM) is a pan-Canadian network working to transform youth mental health services in 16 sites, including six Indigenous communities (four First Nations and two Inuit). Each site, including Ulukhaktok, Inuvialuit Settlement Region, (NWT), adapts AOM's five core principles to create community-led, culturally grounded services rooted in local worldviews.

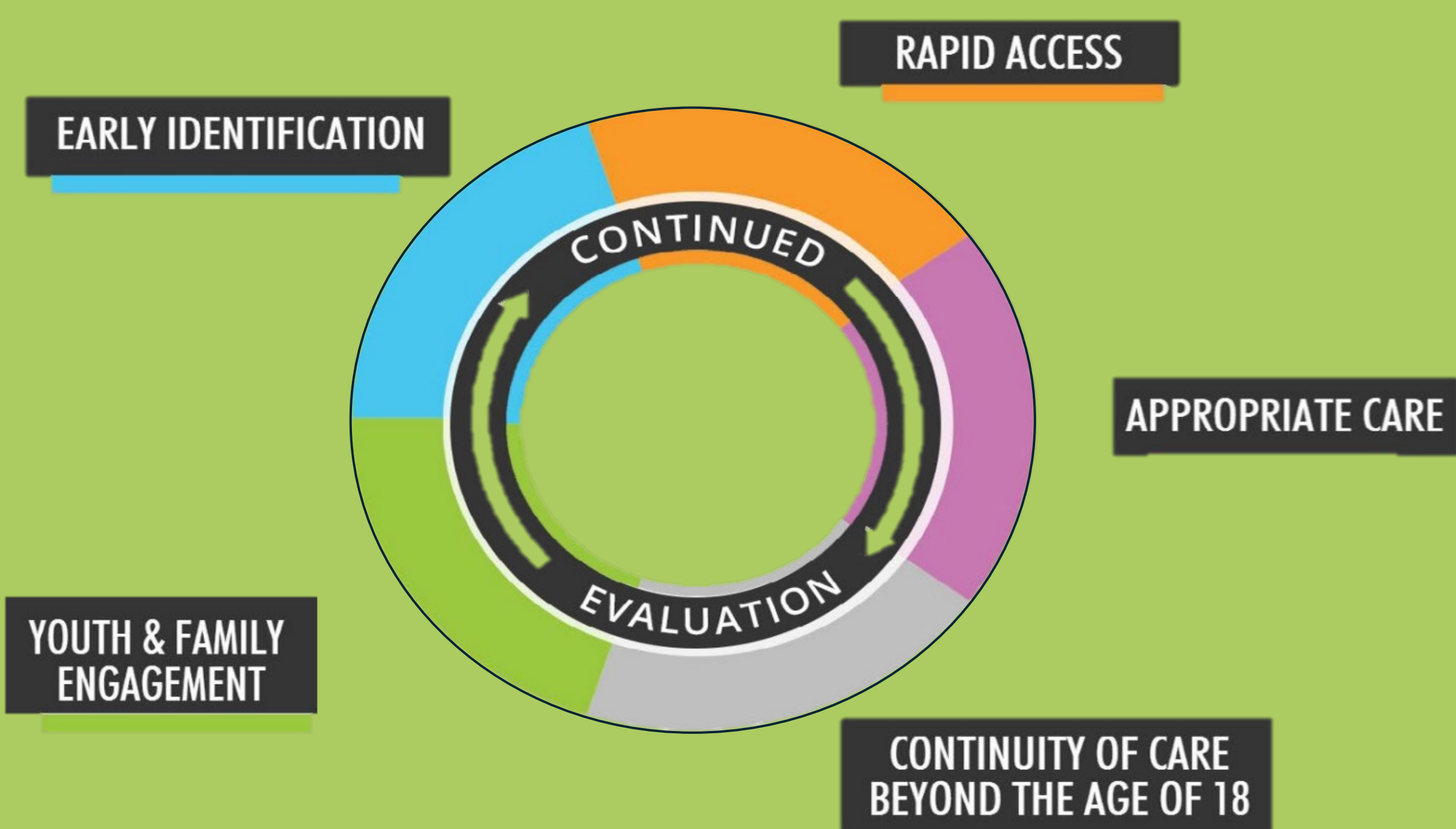


Figure 1. ACCESS Open Minds' five core principles.

Research Objective

To synthesize current knowledge on wise practices for developing, implementing, and evaluating Indigenous youth mental health services in Canada.

Research Questions

- 1.What wise principles, practices, and policies support Indigenous youth mental wellness?
- 2.How are these principles enacted in specific communities like Ulukhaktok?

Methods

Design: Narrative case study approach
Framework: Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
Focus sites: Eskasoni, Purvirnituk, Elsipogtog, Ulukhaktok, Sturgeon Lake, Mistissini

Data sources

- AOM annual and community reports
- Peer-reviewed articles
- News coverage
- Community reflections
- Photos and storytelling

Analysis

- Descriptive narrative synthesis
- Thematic coding of documents using inductive approach
- Exploration of common principles and culturally rooted strategies

Key Features in Ulukhaktok

Community Context & Needs: In 2016, youth made up 25% of the NWT population. Many faced challenges with substance and alcohol use, stigma toward counselling, and limited connections. Most health providers were non-Indigenous and only visited briefly, making follow-up difficult.

Community Partnerships: In collaboration with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, the community led its own mapping process—identifying local needs to shape programs and ensure initiatives reflect community priorities.

Natural Helpers: Local helpers were hired and trained as ACCESS Youth Workers and Liaison Workers, using cultural and community knowledge to build trust, raise awareness, and guide youth through key transitions—including post-treatment support.

Cultural Revitalization: Workers integrated Inuvialuit values and promoted cultural identity as part of healing.

Holistic Wellness: Services emphasized body, mind, spirit, and community connection, aligned with the Inuit Mental Wellness Framework.

Trust-Based Access: Youth Workers acted as bridges between youth and formal care, reducing stigma and improving follow-through.



Community members from Ulukhaktok (ACCESS Open Minds, n.d., Learnings from the ACCESS Open Minds project in Ulukhaktok)