

# The birth of a language speaker

In the first part of our Discovery Language series, one Kanyen'kehá:ka family shares what it takes to raise a language speaker

BY **SHELBY LISK**



**IN THE HECTIC** moments following labour, everything is hushed in the delivery room as Evin Kring begins speaking in Kanyen'kéha (the Mohawk language): “ó:nen ki:ken seksá:’ ahsatahónhsatat ne wahi tóhkara nikawén:nake,” instructing his newborn son, Elwin, only minutes into his life, to listen to the welcoming words in their language.

“The entire room went still and quiet. I just remember holding Elwin on my chest and Evin was saying the words,

and just how emotional it was,” says Kring’s partner, Jessica Parks. “That we were able to take that time to welcome him Earthside within our culture and our language was something really important to us.”

Kring and Parks are among a number of Kanyen'kehá:ka families continuing the tradition of speaking the first words to their baby in their ancestral language. “The welcoming baby speech is so important because you are welcoming

that spirit to the Earth,” says Parks. “Letting them know that we want you here, that this is your family — this is who’s going to love you and take care of you.”

Onkwehón:we (Original People’s) birth teachings are tied to an understanding that babies are spiritual beings who have chosen their parents and families. There is great responsibility to care for these spirits and tether them here as they transition into the physical, earthly realm. As well as the welcoming



speech, Kring and Parks followed their traditional knowledge by having their cousin make their son a leather bracelet, which is tied on the baby's wrist to ground him to the Earth. They also worked with Onkwehón:we midwives from their community to ensure they could bring Parks' placenta home to bury it nearby, to forever connect Elwin to his community.

The welcoming words prepare the baby for their experiences here on the Earth, this place the Creator has prepared for them. They outline their connection to their family, especially to their mother, their grandmother and their clan. They also set out lifelong responsibilities as humans, including the Onkwehón:we original instructions to care for everything that has been set down on the Earth.

The couple received a copy of the speech by the late Elder Jake Thomas and, although they are not fluent speakers, did their best to pass on those words to their newborn son. Kring says he is familiar with the sounds of the language from learning a little bit as a child. "My intentions were to really have the words come out of me as best as I could."

Parks and Kring are from Kenhté:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory) and took Kanyen'kéha classes in school. They've both continued their language learning journey as adults by taking night classes and part-time programs. "It was

emotional for me to say [the welcoming words], because both my parents are Mohawk, but they never knew about that," says Kring. "It was nice to give our son the best possible start in this world to embrace his culture."

The welcoming baby speech isn't just a beautiful ancient tradition; it is an act of revitalization. Kanyen'kéha is an endangered language. According to 2018 research by Kanyen'kehá:ka

## THE WELCOMING WORDS PREPARE THE BABY FOR THEIR EXPERIENCES HERE ON THE EARTH

professor Jeremy Green, there were just 932 native speakers of Kanyen'kéha in the world, consisting primarily of 14 family lines, and the majority of fluent speakers were over 65 years old. Based on community research, there are fewer than 10 advanced-level-proficiency second language speakers in Kenhté:ke.

Many First Nations believe language learning begins in the womb, and scientific study is now confirming this knowledge that has been passed down in Indigenous communities for generations.

THIS and PREVIOUS PAGE, left to right: Jessica Parks, baby Elwin and Evin Kring. The leather bracelet grounds Elwin to the Earth.

"When I was pregnant, the language was something he heard a lot in the womb, when I was in classes, or when I was doing my homework and practising," says Parks. "I also sang to him a lot while I was pregnant, and I sing the same song to him now every night when he's going to sleep."

Babies not only prefer their mother's voice, from hearing it in utero, but research also indicates they learn to identify intonation, stress, rhythm and volume, allowing them to more easily acquire language later in life. At birth, infants are already able to discriminate their native language from other sounds.

The couple are still speaking the language with Elwin, now a toddler, including singing and reading to him in Kanyen'kéha. "We hope that gives him an interest and a foundation that neither of us had," says Parks. "Being a role model with our culture and language is important so that he has a strong sense of who he is and his identity, and his roles and responsibilities as a man. And it's been important for us to have that right from pregnancy." ☺



Discovery Language is supported by the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages.