



Manitoba Advocate
for Children and Youth



2025

Overview

This guide is designed to help Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) staff prepare for, engage in, and follow up on consultations with Indigenous youth, families, communities, organizations, and Governing Bodies. While it is tailored to the needs, contexts, and priorities of Indigenous Peoples, many aspects remain relevant for all MACY consultations, including with domains. It is grounded in decolonial and anti-colonial principles drawn from Indigenous scholars such as Dr. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Dr. Kathleen Absolon, Dr. Shawn Wilson, Dr. Margaret Kovach, Dr. Michael Hart, and Dr. Gladys Rowe.

Their works emphasize approaches that centre Indigenous worldviews, honour relationships, and require deep personal reflection. Manitoba is home to diverse Indigenous Peoples – Anishinaabeg, Anisininewuk, Cree, Dakota, Dene, Nehethowuk, Métis, and Inuit – each with unique protocols and teachings. While each Peoples' traditions are distinct, they share core values of respect, relationality, and responsibility.

To embody the spirit and intent of consultation that is rooted in relationship, MACY staff must approach this work with intention, which can include preparing to engage with humility, patience, and a commitment to building genuine relationships. The following guide provides practical considerations and steps for engaging respectfully, aligning expectations, nurturing relationships, and carrying forward accountability.

By following this guide and embracing the spirit of storytelling, relationship-building, ceremony, time, and humility, MACY staff can foster engagements that are empowering and respectful for communities and transformative for our own practice. In doing so, we take meaningful steps toward reconciliation and justice for Indigenous children and youth in Manitoba.

Guiding Principles

RESPECT: Honouring each other's knowledge, time, and lived experiences.

RECIPROCITY: Ensuring that all partners benefit from the relationship in meaningful ways.

RESPONSIBILITY: Recognizing the shared commitment to community well-being and ethical engagement.

RELATIONALITY: Acknowledging that meaningful engagement is an ongoing and evolving process that is rooted in connection.

RELEVANCE: Ensuring that every part of the consultation process meaningfully contributes to the needs and priorities of the young people and communities that MACY serves.

REPRESENTATION: Ensuring that young people, their families, and their communities have opportunities to identify and share what is important and relevant to them for and throughout the consultation process.

TRANSPARENCY: Engaging in open, honest, and continuous communication.

ANTI-COLONIALISM: Actively resisting and rejecting colonial power, dominance, and ideology, and centring Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being at every opportunity.

CONSENT: Ensuring that all partners understand what it is they are sharing, what it will be used for, and in what spaces.

Preparing For Engagement: "The Work Before The Work"

Engagement with communities should begin long before the actual consultation meeting. Proper preparation is often called "the work before the work" (Ferland, Chen, & Villagrán Becerra, 2021) – a phase of learning, reflection, and relationship-building that lays a solid foundation for respectful dialogue.

Before reaching out to a community or organization, MACY staff should take the following steps:

1. Educate Yourself and Build Cultural Literacy

Invest time in learning about the specific community's history, culture, and context. This means understanding the Nation or community you will be engaging with. Each has its own language(s) and customs. Learn basic greetings or terms of respect in their language if you can, know the names of local leaders or Elders, and be aware of any recent community news or concerns. Also, review historical and contemporary issues: for example, know the treaties or agreements relevant to that community, their experiences with child welfare or youth services (since MACY's work often intersects these areas), and any past dealings they have had with provincial authorities. Being informed shows respect and prevents asking insensitive questions about things you should already know. This preparation also involves learning about protocols; for example, some communities expect visitors to bring a small gift (such as tobacco, cloth, or tea), especially when asking for knowledge or guidance.

2. Reflect on Your Intentions, Role, and Biases

Before any engagement, critically reflect on why you are consulting with this community and how you are positioned. Be honest: is this consultation merely to "check a box" in a policy process, or are you genuinely committed to valuing their input? What power dynamics are at play (government agency vs. community, adult vs. youth, etc.)? Recognize that Indigenous participants may view MACY with caution due to historical colonial relationships and government ties. Engage in critical reflexivity by journaling or discussing with colleagues, questions like: "What assumptions am I bringing in about this community? How can I challenge those? In what ways might my cultural perspective be limited? How will I ensure I'm not imposing my agenda?" This reflective process is ongoing – not a one time activity. Such self-reflection is essential to avoid reproducing colonial habits. Importantly, humility is key: adopt the mindset of a learner. Going in with humility means being prepared to listen more than you speak, and to be taught by community members (including youth) about things you may not know.

3. Build Relationships and Trust Ahead of Formal Consultations

If time and circumstances allow, do not wait for a high-stakes meeting to make first contact. Relationship-building can start informally. This could mean attending a community event just to introduce yourself and show support, if you are invited or if it is open to the public. Remember that communities often get many requests from government agencies; taking the extra step to form a friendly connection first can set MACY apart as genuinely caring. Even a phone call or virtual chat to introduce the team or sending a letter ahead of time outlining the purpose of the consultation and inviting input on the agenda can help align expectations. Be patient if trust is slow to build – you might hear skepticism or past grievances. Do not get defensive. Instead, acknowledge those concerns. By showing you are listening even before the "official" meeting, you lay groundwork for a more open dialogue later.

4. Plan Logistically and Culturally for the Meeting

Thoughtful preparation includes the logistics with culture in mind. If the meeting is in person in the community, choose a venue that is comfortable and accessible for them (ideally on their territory or a place they suggest). Ensure you allocate enough time – consultations cannot be rushed. Plan for breaks, food, and possibly an opening or closing ceremony if the community wishes. Ask if they would like to start with a prayer, a song, or a smudge ceremony. Showing openness to these ceremonial elements is a sign of respect for Indigenous ways of doing things. Also, consider involving an Elder or cultural teacher to open the space. Prepare an honorarium if that is customary (most communities have a set protocol for offering a gift or stipend to Elders for their time and knowledge). If the engagement is virtual, adapt by still offering protocol (you might send a gift in advance or follow up with one). Make sure any materials you plan to share (e.g., documents, presentations) are not filled with jargon and are available in advance so people can review. If language might be a barrier, arrange for a translator or interpreter. In short, prepare in a way that centres the comfort and dignity of the community members, not just the convenience of MACY.

5. Consider Reciprocity and How to Support Conversations about What This Could Look Like

Before entering into any engagement, staff are encouraged to reflect on what they are offering to communities in return for their time, stories, and knowledge. Reciprocity is more than an honorarium – it is about building trust, creating shared value, and walking alongside communities in meaningful ways. This begins with asking what the community hopes to gain from the engagement and considering how MACY can offer support that aligns with its priorities. It may include knowledge sharing, capacity-building opportunities, or offering services that are of value to the community. Staff should also plan for how they will return what is learned in accessible, respectful ways and sustain relationships beyond the consultation itself. Preparing with reciprocity in mind ensures that our actions reflect care, responsibility, and a commitment to doing the work in a good way.

6. Prepare to be Flexible

Be ready to expect the unexpected and be flexible. Despite all the planning, communities may choose to take the conversation in a different direction than you anticipated – and that is okay. Your role is to support that and follow their lead. The pathway to relationship-building and consultation is not linear and easy. It might be important to return to the “work before the work” at different times to strengthen the relational foundations that you are building and maintaining. In practice, this means if new issues or misunderstandings arise, pause and address them. Being well-prepared will give you the confidence and awareness to navigate these situations respectfully.

Engaging Respectfully During Consultations

When the day of the consultation or meeting arrives, here's how MACY staff can accomplish this: engaging respectfully is about how you conduct yourself and facilitate the session in real time, ensuring that Indigenous participants feel heard, safe, and valued throughout.

Here are key guidelines for respectful engagement, with examples:

1. Begin in a Good Way

- Acknowledge territory, relationships, and protocols

2. Listen Actively and Embrace Storytelling

- Be patient and flexible with time; relational engagement values the person over the task
- Use clear, respectful language and avoid jargon

3. Align Expectations and Be Transparent

- Never promise what you cannot deliver

4. Encourage Inclusive Participation

- Tactfully create room for all voices
- Recognize and respect different ways of communicating
- Validate contributions

5. Practice Cultural Sensitivity and Reciprocity in the Moment

- Follow the community's lead on protocol and ceremony and engage with these respectfully
- Acknowledge the time, wisdom, and emotional labour participants are offering

Above all, stay humble and adaptable. Engaging respectfully means embracing “diplomacy based on love,” as Dr. Leanne Simpson offers – treating the dialogue not as an argument to win, but as a relationship to foster with care and kindness. If you carry yourself with genuine respect, the community will recognize that, even if there are difficult conversations. This builds the trust needed for the next phases of the relationship.

Aligning Expectations and Establishing Shared Goals

A critical aspect of any consultation is making sure that MACY and those being engaged are on the same page about goals, processes, and outcomes. Misaligned expectations can lead to disappointment or mistrust. Therefore, it is important to explicitly align expectations early on (often during preparation and at the start of engagement) and continue checking in about them throughout.

Here's how MACY staff can do that:

1. Co-Develop the Purpose of Engagement

Rather than MACY unilaterally setting the agenda, involve the community in defining the purpose and scope of the consultation. This can be done by communicating ahead of time where you propose your intent but also ask for input. By doing so, you signal that this is their process too. When you collaboratively set the agenda, everyone's expectations become clearer. Document this agreed purpose; you can even write it at the top of the meeting agenda. Ensuring a shared understanding of purpose creates a partnership dynamic rather than a top-down consultation.

2. Explain What MACY Can and Cannot Do (Transparency about Roles)

MACY staff should be up front and consistent in messaging about the role and authority of the office. The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent office with the mandate to advise on children's rights and well-being; however, MACY does not itself have executive power to change laws or allocate funding. Explain this in plain terms to manage expectations. It is equally important to explain any follow-up process. If the consultation is to inform a report, tell them when that report is expected and how their input will be reflected. If there will be more meetings or a longer partnership, outline that too. Also clarify who will be present and their roles – if you have note-takers or observers, introduce them and why they are there (so people do not wonder who the silent note-taking person is).

3. Discuss Mutual Commitments

Aligning expectations is not just about what those being engaged expect of MACY, but also what MACY can expect from them in this work. By framing it as partnership, you invite them to take shared ownership of next steps.

4. Revisit Expectations During and After

Alignment is not a one-time checkbox; it should be revisited. During the engagement, periodically check in: “Is this discussion meeting your expectations so far? Is there anything else you want to make sure we cover?” This allows adjustment if needed. After the meeting, in the follow-up phase, reiterate what was agreed. Summarizing like this not only shows you listened, but it keeps expectations aligned moving forward.

By consciously aligning expectations, MACY staff support the consultation to become a mutually understood journey.

Carrying Forward Accountability And Continuous Responsibility

The final piece of this guide brings us to accountability – arguably the most crucial, as it ties together all the prior stages into real outcomes. From an Indigenous perspective, accountability is not just a bureaucratic checkbox; it is relational and reciprocal – you are answerable to the community for how you honour the knowledge and trust it has given you. In practical terms for MACY, carrying forward accountability means ensuring that the insights gained, and commitments made during consultations tangibly inform your work, and that you remain answerable to the communities over the long-term.

Here's how MACY staff can uphold deep accountability after the engagement and as part of an ongoing decolonial practice:

1. Internal Advocacy: Change Systems from Within

Carrying forward accountability is not just outward-facing to the community – it is also about what you do within MACY to honour what you have learned. It becomes the responsibility of MACY staff involved in the consultation to champion those changes within the organization. This kind of internal advocacy is often the toughest part, but it is crucial for decolonizing the work.

2. Continuous Learning and Improvement

Carry forward accountability by continuously learning from each engagement and improving your approach. Every community interaction will teach lessons – incorporate those into the next cycle of preparation and engagement. Create a culture in the MACY team of reflecting after each consultation (perhaps using the checklist in the next section) and identifying ways to do better. Share those lessons with colleagues and even with other agencies, setting an example of respectful engagement. This kind of reflexive practice closes the loop and brings us back us back to critical reflexivity. Being accountable includes being accountable to oneself as a practitioner – holding yourself responsible for personal growth in cultural safety and anti-colonial practice. By normalizing this, accountability is not an external pressure but an internal value.

Reflective Checklist: Before, During, and After Engagement

To assist MACY staff in staying true to the guide's principles, below is a reflective checklist of critical questions to ask yourself at each stage of the engagement process. Use this as a tool to self-audit your approach and ensure you are practicing reflexivity, respect, relational accountability, and responsibility throughout.

Before the Engagement (Preparation)

- **Intentions & Mindset:** Why am I engaging with this community? Am I approaching with a genuine heart and open mind, or do I have hidden agendas or assumptions? How can I centre the community's needs over my own?
- **Positionality & Bias:** What biases or preconceived notions might I have about this community or Indigenous Peoples in general? Have I reflected on my social position (e.g., as a settler, government worker, etc.) and how that influences my perspective? How will I ensure those biases do not interfere with truly listening?
- **Respectful Protocols:** Have I prepared to follow the community's protocols? Did I ask if an Elder should be invited or if I should bring a particular offering? Do I have gifts/honouraria ready if appropriate? Have I arranged the meeting place and time to respect participants' comfort (e.g., on their land, at a convenient time, with food and childcare if needed)?
- **Community Involvement in Planning:** Who did I involve in shaping this engagement? Have I communicated our proposed agenda and allowed them to modify it? Did I ask what success looks like for them? Are there community members co-facilitating or helping guide the process?
- **Team Preparation:** Is my team ready to engage respectfully? Have we discussed roles (who will speak, who will take notes) so that we do not inadvertently dominate? Are all team members versed in cultural safety and the core principles? What will we do if we hit a challenging moment – have we discussed how to handle it in line with our values?
- **Expectations & Promises:** What am I expecting from the community, and is that realistic and fair? Have I set up any expectations in my mind (like hoping they'll agree with a proposal) that I need to release to be able to truly listen? What am I implicitly promising them by this visit, and can I commit to that?
- **Reciprocity:** Have I asked the community what it hopes to gain from this engagement? Have I budgeted and planned for returning to the community with what we learn?

During the Engagement (Interaction)

- ❑ **Presence & Listening:** Am I fully present and attentive? Am I listening with respect, or am I internally formulating responses and rushing the conversation? Am I comfortable with any silence that arises, allowing people time to think or emotions to settle, or am I anxiously filling gaps?
- ❑ **Cultural Protocol:** Am I following the community's lead on protocol and ceremony? Did we properly acknowledge the territory and allow cultural openings?
- ❑ **Humility in Conversations:** How much am I talking versus listening? Am I ensuring community voices (especially Elders, youth, knowledge keepers) are heard more than my own? If I notice I have been speaking a lot, should I step back and invite others in? Am I okay not having all the answers?
- ❑ **Ethical Boundaries:** Am I hearing any confidential or sacred knowledge that requires special handling? If yes, have I acknowledged that and promised to keep it protected? Did I get permission to record or write down specific stories or quotes? Am I prepared to stop the meeting if something unethical is occurring?
- ❑ **Reciprocity:** Have I acknowledged the time, knowledge, and emotional labour people are offering? Have I asked participants if there are ways MACY can support or amplify community-led efforts?

After the Engagement (Follow-Up and Reflection)

- ❑ **Personal Reflection:** What did I learn from this engagement – about the community, about myself, and about the process? Take time to jot down or discuss: What surprised me? What moved me? Did I feel any discomfort, and why? How did the community receive me – were there moments of connection or tension? What would I do differently next time?
- ❑ **Team Debrief:** Have I debriefed with my team while it is fresh? Did we compare notes on what we heard and observed? Did we evaluate whether we upheld our core principles?
- ❑ **Follow-Up Actions:** What did I promise – explicitly or implicitly – and have I noted all follow-up tasks?
- ❑ **Community Verification:** How will I validate that I accurately understood their input? Plan how you'll share back a summary or draft to the community for feedback.
- ❑ **Reciprocity and Ongoing Relationship:** What is my plan to maintain the relationship? Can I offer anything else – a visit, support for an event, a learning session, or help connecting to others?
- ❑ **Accountability Check:** Am I prepared to be accountable for what comes next?

Using this checklist, MACY staff can cultivate a habit of deep reflection and continuous improvement. By systematically asking ourselves these questions, we hold ourselves to the high standard that our principles demand. This kind of self-interrogation and adaptation keeps us critically aware and aligned with our values at every phase. Over time, it will also document our journey – how each engagement teaches us to be better allies and advocates for Indigenous children and youth.



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