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## OPINION

# On Universal Children's Day, we must speak up, address child sexual abuse

By NATAN OBED NOV. 19, 2018

For too many years, suicide has been discussed at a level of abstraction, which has not helped focus prevention efforts. We owe it to our children to discuss the situation in all its complexity, writes Natan Obed, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, right, walks with Natan Obed, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, in Goose Bay, N.L., in 2017. Photograph courtesy of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

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Universal Children's Day, observed each year on Nov. 20, calls on us to respect the right of all children to grow up in safe, nurturing environments.

Nurturing healthy children is one of the six priorities in the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's national Inuit strategy for suicide prevention, which was launched in July 2016. On this day, I'd like to draw attention to the responsibility that all levels of government have to realize the promises we have made to all children: investing in the safety and well-being of children.

How can we call ourselves good people if we ignore the rights and needs of all children? Investments are the most cost-effective steps society can make to realize Inuit self-determination.

A significant number of Inuit who die by suicide have experienced child maltreatment or present symptoms that are associated with abuse and trauma. This burdens them with a suicide risk that can multiply throughout their lives each time they face additional risk factors. Child abuse and child neglect are condemned in Inuit society, as evidenced in our legends, which often link the treatment of orphans with the morality of those people who have the ability to care for them. Despite our cultural norms, and our overarching love for children, the prevalence of physical and sexual violence against children is disturbingly high in our communities.



Natan Obed, left, pictured in 2017 with Indigenous Services Minister Jane Philpott in Nain, Nunatsiavut, in Newfoundland and Labrador.

*Photograph courtesy of Rita Ann Dicker*

In the 2004 Nunavik Inuit Health Survey ([https://www.google.ca/search?q=2004+Nunavik+Inuit+Health+Survey&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=0ahUK Ewj d7KHE49neAhWSxIMKHQI6DDYQ\\_AUICSgA&biw=1920&bih=849&dpr=1](https://www.google.ca/search?q=2004+Nunavik+Inuit+Health+Survey&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=0ahUK Ewj d7KHE49neAhWSxIMKHQI6DDYQ_AUICSgA&biw=1920&bih=849&dpr=1)), a confidential questionnaire, nearly one-third of Inuit respondents reported that they experienced sexual touch during childhood. The prevalence of self-reported child sexual abuse is similarly high in Nunavut. Out of the 1,710 Inuit respondents to the community and personal wellness module of the 2007-2008 Inuit Health Survey, 41 per cent said they had experienced severe sexual abuse during childhood, which includes someone threatening to have sex with them or sexually attacking them. The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry has heard testimony from Inuit women who give awful truth to these figures, and also shows the links between abuse and a multitude of risks in life.

If we are to reduce suicidal behaviour, we have to identify and address risk factors that are uncomfortable to confront. For too many years, suicide has been discussed at a level of abstraction, which has not helped focus prevention efforts. We owe it to our children to discuss the situation in all its complexity, and to build community and governmental consensus to do whatever we can to create change. We must do this work in an Inuit-specific, evidence-based, and globally informed manner.

To this end, ITK is convening a forum of experts, beginning this week, to address the prevention of child-sexual abuse and trauma among Inuit in Canada. Aboriginal recording artist Susan Aglukark will deliver a keynote address, and we will hear from Inuit from across Inuit Nunangat and from Greenland who have taken concerted action to address child sexual abuse in recent years.

The strategy unites Inuit through a common understanding of what is putting Inuit at risk for suicide and what can be done to help identify and respond to suicide risk so that fewer people reach the point where they contemplate suicide. It envisions suicide prevention as a shared national, regional, and community-wide effort that transforms our collective knowledge, experience and research into action.

It also focuses on preventive factors. The optimal development of children in safe, nurturing environments is one of the most powerful factors in protecting against suicide risk. Creating social equity can relieve major stressors and provide a buffer against suicide risk for the entire community. This requires addressing the high rates of food insecurity, overcrowded housing, poor

educational outcomes, and high unemployment rates, as well as inadequate mental-health care.

By promoting a shared understanding of the context and underlying risk factors for suicide among Inuit, by providing policy guidance at the regional and national levels on evidence-based approaches to suicide prevention, and by identifying stakeholders and their specific roles in preventing suicide, our work aims to outline how various partners can effectively co-ordinate with one another to implement a more holistic approach to suicide prevention.

*Natan Obed is the president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national organization for Inuit in Canada.*



Ruth Kaviok, National Inuit Youth Council president; Rebecca Kudloo, president of the Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada; ITK president Natan Obed; and Nancy Karetak Lindell, former president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, pictured in Nain, Nunatsiavut, in 2017. Photograph courtesy of Rita Ann Dicker

*The Hill Times*

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