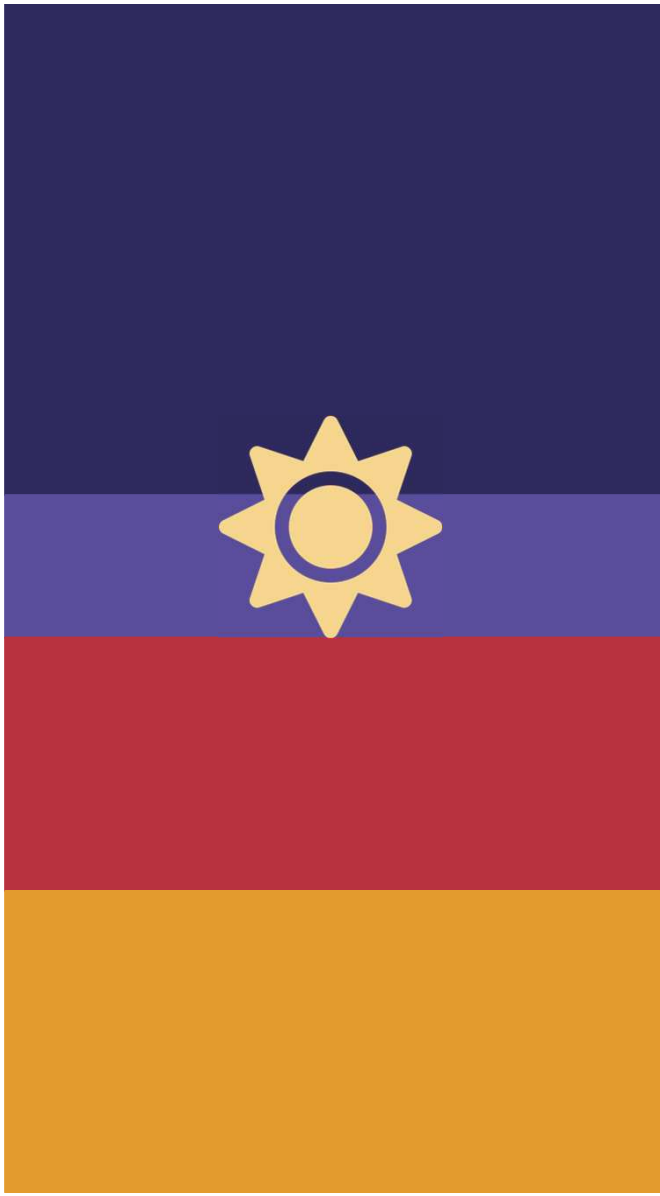
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CONVERGE RESEARCH POWER HOUR · OCTOBER 15, 2026

Integrating African Knowledge Systems into Mental Health Promotion for Black Children in Alberta

What Black children and parents tell us about where well-being lives



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With gratitude



Children and parents

The 44 children and parents who trusted us with their stories, drawings and paintings



Community partners

Community organizations and our project advisory committee who shaped the research



Funding

Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)

Research team

A QUESTION TO HOLD

What if mental health promotion for Black children started where children already find support?


A family meal


A friend who “gets it”


A church youth group


A paintbrush

Why this matters now

Growing and young

Black communities are among Canada's fastest-growing populations and are younger than the national average

Statistics Canada, 2024

Shaped by racism

Racism in schools is linked with depression, anxiety, stress and PTSD symptoms among Black youth

Cénat et al., 2025; Alumona et al., 2025

Hard-to-reach care

Cost, wait times, stigma and few culturally responsive providers limit access

Okusanya & Meyer, 2026; Salami et al., 2021

Crisis-first pathways

First contact with mental health systems often comes in crisis, not prevention

Citation to add

What has been missing

What we know

- Most qualitative research focuses on adolescents and young adults
- Children's experiences are often heard second-hand, through parents
- Racism, family, finances and community all shape Black youth mental health

What is missing

- Black children's own voices, including children as young as 7
- Strengths-based, culturally grounded approaches to promotion
- African knowledge systems in mental health promotion
- How informal and formal supports can work together

An African-centred lens on well-being

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Communal care

"It takes a village." Raising children is shared across kin, neighbours and faith communities



Relational personhood

Ubuntu: "I am because we are." Well-being lives in relationships, not only in the individual



Spirituality

Faith and prayer are woven into everyday coping, meaning and hope



Expressive traditions

Story, song, dance, food and art carry emotion, identity and knowledge



Intergenerational wisdom

Elders and parents pass on values; respect is central, and is being reworked across generations



Paired with intersectionality: attention to how age, race, culture, family position and power come together differently for each child.

How we listened

44 participants

24 Black children, ages 7 to 17

20 Black parents

Participatory action research

CIHR-funded; children, parents, community partners and an advisory committee involved across stages

Arts-based with younger children

Ages 7 to 13 interviewed in person with drawing and painting; ages 14 to 17 and parents via Zoom

November 2025 to March 2026

Semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim

Collaborative thematic analysis

Four team members coded in NVivo; intersectionality guided attention to variation

Ethics approval: University of Calgary CHREB (REB25-0329)

Three interconnected themes

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1

Family

A place of support, responsibility and regulation



2

Belonging

Affirmation across peer, cultural, faith and community worlds



3

Agency

Children actively sustaining their own well-being

Across all three: the same setting could both support and constrain a child. What mattered was recognition, trust, and room to be heard.

1. Family: everyday care is the first line of support

Talking it out

Conversation, affection and being listened to

Doing life together

Cooking, family meals, games, soccer with dad

Open doors, on purpose

Parents build daily check-ins and “open door” habits

More than provision

Not only “food, clothing, and shelter”: sometimes a child needs you “to listen” or “give me a hug”

> *Being around family, it's just like your comfort zone. They always make you feel safe. Your family's where you can, like, be yourself because they've known you your whole life.*

Ze, younger child

“The conversations do not have to be big or important. They are just daily check ins.” Parent

Family is also where respect and voice are negotiated

> *There's sometimes like aunties and uncles that will be like, 'Oh, it's your responsibility to take care of your siblings,' and I'm like, in my head... 'No, it's not.' ... But I don't, like, want to say that out loud because... it'll be, like, seen as disrespecting.*

Noms, younger child

Reworking inherited norms

Parents raised to be “seen and not heard” now say: “I encourage my children to speak up, even if I'm the one who is wrong”

Change is not linear

Parents question inherited practices while sometimes reproducing them, such as shouting

Tone matters to children

“Just be nice to me in general... not yelling” (younger child)

“Even though I'm not on African soil, we sort of make our own artificial African soil with people in the same community as you; in school, in church... at work, any gathering place.”

Siya, older child

Where children find belonging

Friendships

Friends who share background or experience: “Someone gets it”

Culture

Food, music, dance, festivals, dress and gatherings

Visible identity

“My hair is part of my identity... and the way I feel about myself”

Black-focused spaces

Black Student Associations, Black children's groups, cultural events

Faith communities

A church girls' group was “kind of like a support group”

Shared interests

Basketball, band, dance and Cadets build a support system

Parents also sought cultural events and Black families after a child faced microaggressions at school, so the child would know they were “not alone.”

Belonging is conditional: identity is not trust

When trust is present

"There are some things that I don't feel comfortable talking in person to the school counselor or my friends and parents about, but that I feel more comfortable expressing to my pastor, or just praying about."

Older child

When trust is absent

"There have been times in the past where the church has been judgmental... And then we just stay at the church because we don't have any other community... I never know who to trust and who not to trust."

Nat, older child

Colourism among Black peers

Parents unsure about confidentiality in church

Distance from family and home routines

3. Agency: children actively sustain their well-being

Making space

Going to their room, time alone, pausing heated talks

Creating

Drawing, painting, writing, dance, music, crochet

Praying

Prayer as a way to release and make sense of feelings

Organizing

Using a planner to manage competing demands

Choosing whom to trust

Sharing “parts” first, more as trust grows

Defining themselves

Rejecting stereotypes and pressure to code switch

“I don't have to act like them, because they're not me.”

“Being Black, there is nothing wrong with being Black.”

Older children, on stereotypes and racism

IN A CHILD'S WORDS AND COLOURS



She painted a sunset and explained that sunsets can be “really beautiful” even though people sometimes miss them, just as feelings can be overlooked or dismissed as “dramatic.”

“But they are beautiful… And so are emotions.”

Younger child (ages 7 to 13), arts-based interview

Arts-based methods let younger children say what words alone may not.

Agency has limits, and sometimes a cost

"...show that, as the only Black person, I can still succeed in the class."

Racialized pressure to prove competence

"...hold everything together."

Eldest children carrying family responsibility

"...just thug it out, and then hope, pray it goes away."

Enduring difficulties alone

"...my problems don't really matter."

After concerns were minimized

Whether children's actions led to change depended on whether adults and institutions listened and responded.

Why formal services sit at the edge

"I always had someone to talk to."

Child, on never using formal care

Available is not the same as usable.

- Trusted alternatives: family, faith leaders, familiar adults
- Preference for "a trusted adult that I have a relationship with" over a stranger
- Past experiences of having concerns minimized
- Cost and long wait times
- Difficulty finding culturally responsive providers
- Attending counselling but not yet ready to disclose

African knowledge systems are already at work

Principle	What we heard	Opportunity for mental health promotion
Communal care	Family meals, check-ins, aunties and uncles, church families	Family- and community-centred promotion that supports caregivers, not only children
Relational personhood	Belonging through being understood: “someone gets it”	Invest in culturally affirming spaces where children are recognized
Spirituality	Prayer and pastors as private, trusted support	Partner with faith leaders, with mental health literacy and confidentiality supports
Expressive traditions	Drawing, painting, writing, dance, music, hair, food	Arts-based and culturally expressive programming and assessment
Intergenerational wisdom	Parents reworking “seen and not heard”	Intergenerational dialogue that holds respect and children's voice together

An interpretive reading of the findings through an African-centred lens

What should we do differently?

Policy makers and funders

- Treat culturally affirming community spaces as mental health infrastructure
- Fund beyond clinic-centred models, with sustained (not pilot) funding

Health and social services

- Build trust before expecting disclosure; work alongside trusted adults
- Grow a culturally responsive workforce; reduce cost and wait barriers

Schools

- Respond meaningfully when children report racism
- Support Black Student Associations, accommodations, and access to activities

Faith and community organizations

- Strengthen confidentiality and mental health literacy
- Create peer spaces for children and support for parents

THE TAKEAWAY

Black children need environments where they are heard, recognized, able to belong, and able to act on what they understand and need.


Heard

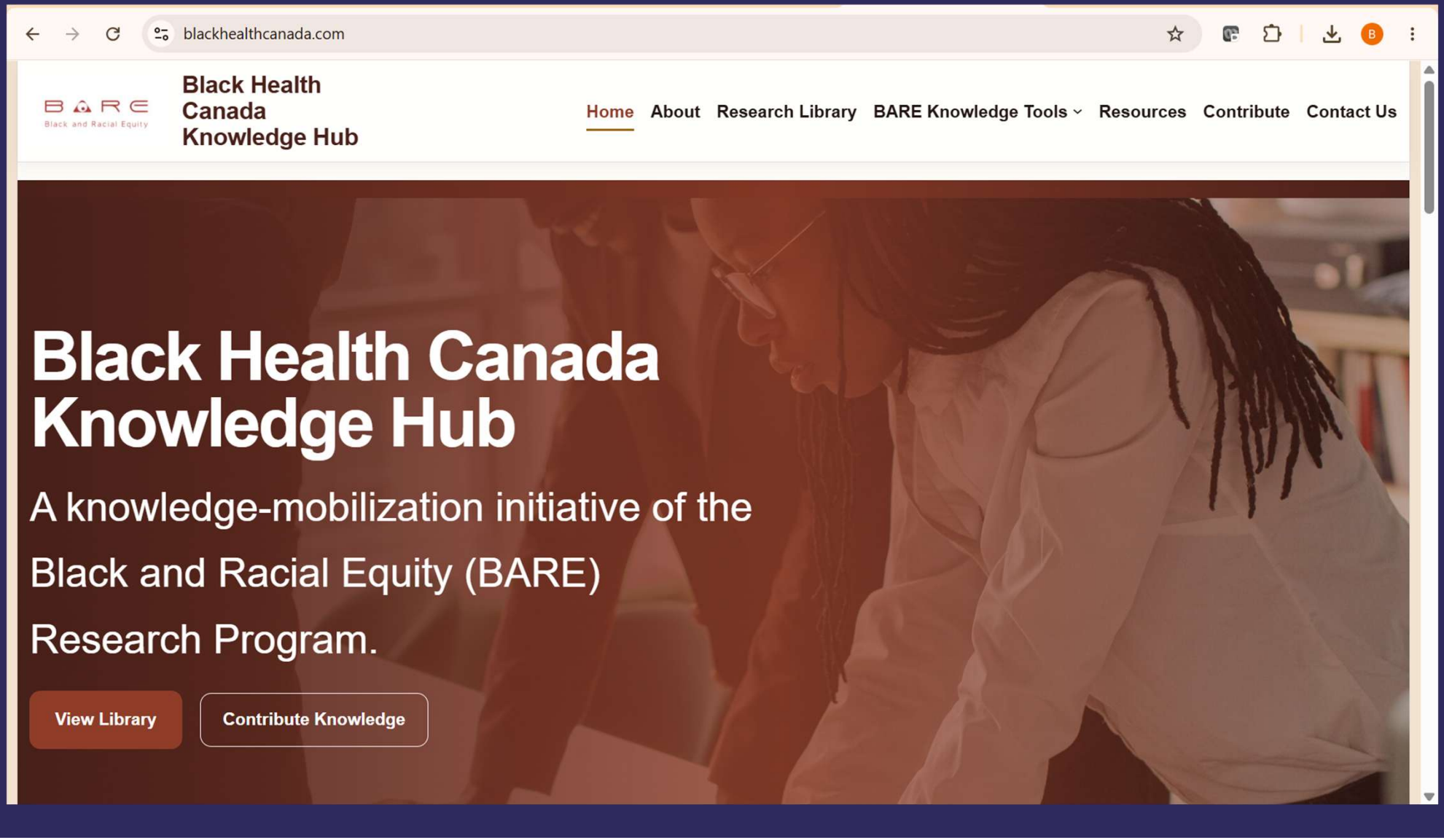

Recognized


Belonging


Able to act

Thank you · Ẹ ṣé

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