

A Guide to Taking Your Family to a Powwow for the First Time

By Selena Mills, [They Roar](#)

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As an Indigenous parent, powwows are part of how we continue to reclaim our cultural practices. When I had my kids, I knew that I wanted to walk a journey with them that included experiencing joy, pride and memories made throughout the years in celebrating and honouring our rich and vibrant culture.

Most powwows are open to the public, although encountering any cultural experience for the first time can be overwhelming. Newcomers will see new dances, hear new songs, witness new cultural practices and hear new ideas on spiritual beliefs systems and values. So I also wanted to know how a newbie might respectfully visit, share in the fun and learn about our cultural and social celebrations — is there such a thing as powwow etiquette?

Here are some suggestions from Indigenous parents on getting the most out of your family's first powwow experience, as well as some insights into the role powwows play as an extension of our continuation and/or reclamation of our cultural practices.

1. Be open minded and don't be afraid to ask questions.

"The best part about attending a powwow is seeing old and new friends. Socializing and viewing vendors while the drums play in the background.... I want my son to know his culture and to be proud of where he comes from. To dance in the circle and have no judgement. To hang out with children his age while mommy dances to heal. I want him to look up to me and say, 'Wow that's my mom! She's a jingle dress dancer!'

A newbie needs to be open to spiritual connections and the values we believe in. It's OK to ask questions, we don't mind answering questions and ... we love telling stories. Observe a powwow more than once to actually get a sense of why we have these special celebratory ceremonies and the ideologies many of us believe in."

Roxanne Martin (Bezhik Anungo Kwe) One Star Woman – Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation/Serpent River FN – Eagle Clan

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2. Listen to the emcee and read the agenda to understand the protocol.

"Growing up in the 1970s and '80s along with many Indigenous community members living in the big city, it was a time when many were looking at ways to distinguish and establish our roots as Native people. There was a groundswell of reclaiming of who we are. Regalia and our colors came alive. I started to dance powwow at that time. The drum always brought the people together. So, when I had my own children, their father and I knew that they would have as much exposure to powwow and the big drum as possible. It was a special time because the powwow circle is a family. My children will always have that extended family.

Whether it's a traditional or competition powwow, it's a coming together of many nations and families. It's where our people can freely express what is in our hearts as Indigenous people and also support each other and our communities.... The meeting of old friends, being introduced to new ones. My children grew up being part of

powwows; they feel good hearing the songs, dancing and [are] comfortable in knowing who they are and where they come from.

To newbies, I would first watch and listen to the emcee, who will explain the protocol throughout the powwow, and also most powwows have some form of written information on their agenda for the day. If in doubt, ask either a dancer or powwow committee member (most will have event name tags or T-shirts).

I love seeing non-Indigenous people come up to dance in the intertribal part of powwows. The dance circle is a celebration and honoring of this way of life, and we are all part of the [Sacred Hoop](#)."

Luana Shirt-Harper – Waase-zhoomiingwenikwe (Light Smiling Woman) – Lynx Clan, Plains Cree

3. Powwows are about family and community, so kids are very welcome.

"It's a coming-together, that's why we call them omaamawi (Anishinaabe word we have for ourselves; our responsibility is in the gathering of people together in place). For us, it's the celebratory nature that is so important, rooted in culture, kids running around. It was neat to see my older son grow up from being one of those silly kids dancing sometimes ... to sitting at the fire with his uncle, learning those firekeeper teachings."

MJ LaPointe (Ishkenikeyaa) – Deer Clan – Ardoch Algonquin First Nation Band Member

4. Get out and dance during intertribals, and look for the longest food line (that's the one you want to stand in).

"For the kids, I believe powwows provide the visual stimulation they need to relate to the stories and teachings we tell them at home. They are one in several ways we expose them to their culture. To hear the heartbeat of the drum, hear the high notes of the singers and hear the feet and jingles of the dancers are all triggers for their sensory experience....

I also go for the food. I much prefer going to a less commercialized, or "traditional" powwow, because the foods are more local to the place, like sturgeon, moose, walleye, even seafood in the eastern powwows that I've been to. Another major reason I enjoy going to powwows though, is the sense of community. You see many friends, family and meet new people.... Like a big family BBQ or get together that doesn't happen too often.

For newcomers, I would advise them to ask questions. Stop and talk to people, go out and dance when they announce an intertribal, go stand around the drums and feel it hit your skin. Watch the people interact and the children play. Look for the longest line in the food area and stand in it (trust me). When they say everyone is welcome, they mean it. Get out there and enjoy!"

Justus Polson-Lahache Anishinabe – Long Point First Nation/Onkwehonwe – Kahnawake

5. Make sure you browse the wares of the craftspeople and vendors.

"Powwows are not ceremonial practices generally speaking — they are a cultural, celebratory gathering. We come for the feeling of growing as a community.... Yes, it's about dancing, singing and drumming, but it's also about seeing your community and your people in a good way. And because I do [Powwow Pitch](#), I see all of the vendors and the craftspeople selling their wares, and I see that as a huge opportunity for Anishinabeg people to grow and test their market before launching a business. There are so many good things happening at a powwow!

You want your children to have the same goodness you grew up with and I want my kids to have that. There's healing, laughter and community, and I want my children to be a part of that. Every year no matter how many we go to, I pack up my kids and we go and we celebrate and put our regalia on together and it's a fun way for them to learn some of their teachings. They have to listen to the elders when they are on the mic and they have to join the circle to learn and grow together.... The intertribals are my favourite part, the feeling of everyone being included makes me feel like I am part of a strong nation of many Indigenous people and tribes."

Sunshine Quem Tenasco – Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg

Upcoming powwows:

There is this great [powwow guide resource](#), continually updated schedule of powwows for all of Canada.



Selena Mills

Selena creates digital content, art, crafts, [shares stories](#), wrangles children, and cooks delicious food whenever and however she can. When the chaos permits, she looks for other parents to revel (and or kvetch) in motherhood with. A perpetual dabbler, she has been known to freelance as a personal development and wellness coach, artisan, brand designer and social media consultant. Clearly, she doesn't like rules, but she really likes kids and helping other women cultivate self-confidence and time to nurture themselves. She strives for this through food-education, healing, art, movement, love, respect and ferocity. Find Selena on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).