



**THEY WERE
THERE FOR ME**

*Always
explore family
alternatives*

*I need a worker that's
straight up and
honest no matter
what!*

*Can't have
reconciliation without
de-colonizing services
and practices*

*I do trust my
worker and
foster parent and
feel they respect
me*

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto Reconciling the First Ten Years of Child Welfare

**Acknowledge the
power NCFST has
over families**

*Be part of the
community if you
want the community
to stop fighting you*

*You're not my
Mom!*

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Native Child and Family Services of Toronto: Reconciling the First Ten Years of Child Welfare

by

Dr. Suzanne L. Stewart

31 July 2016





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Acknowledgement

A Child Welfare Reconciliation Steering Committee (“Steering Committee”) guided this project, comprised of two Elders, Jacqui Lavalley and Andrew Wesley, and four staff from Native Child and Family Services of Toronto, Kenn Richard, Landy Anderson, David van Overdijk, and Yolanda McLeod. Dr. Suzanne Stewart, as author of this report, would like to acknowledge the support and input of the Steering Committee members for their on-going dedication and hard work. The committee members’ input was invaluable, as without them, this work would lack integrity as centered in Indigenous knowledges. *Chi miigwetch, mahsi cho*, thank you to these committed and caring Steering Committee members.





Preface

Kenn Richard, Executive Director

Almost 25 years ago noted Elders, community stakeholders, and the Board of Directors of the newly fledged Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) met at Stoney Lake for a three-day event. The event's purpose was to determine the mission of this new agency and to provide advice on moving it forward. With every word carefully considered, the following Mission Statement emerged from these talks:

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto strives to provide for a life of quality, well being, caring and healing for our children and families in the Toronto Native Community. It does this by creating a services model that is culture based respecting the values of Native people, the extended family, and the right to self-determination

(Native Child and Family Services of Toronto, 1990, p.1).

As to advise on moving it forward, the agency was encouraged to develop a new model, one compatible with that mission. **“Native Family Well Being in Urban Settings: A Culture Based Child and Family Services Model”** (1990), is a document, available on the NCFST website, that continues to guide us.

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Prior to opening our doors, the entire staff of the agency, some still employed with us today, entered a Sweat Lodge Ceremony and under the guidance of Elder Herb Nabigon asked for help in creating a new day for Child Welfare in Toronto. That, 25 years ago, was our beginning.

Currently, in this year of reconciliation we have taken upon ourselves a critical examination of our work. We have asked our clients, the people we actually work with and for, to participate in a reflective moment. Since receiving our designation as a children's aid society in 2004, we decided it was time to determine if we were behaving in a manner that respects our community and demonstrates that respect through sound culturally competent, safe, and accountable practices.

In addition, because our work must be, in accordance with our cultural base, both collaborative and inclusive of other Indigenous stakeholders, we further explored with our sister agencies how they have experienced our work and asked them how we could work better together toward improved outcomes for our families and children.

Both inquiries were put into the very capable hands of Dr. Suzanne Stewart, Psychologist and Professor of Indigenous Healing in Psychology at the University of Toronto, a well-known, credible and trusted member of the Indigenous community of Toronto. What follows is her report, with an explanation as to the process of creating its content.

This document and the commitments that emerge toward its conclusion represent our attempt to not only honour this year of reconciliation; it also compels us to walk the talk in terms what that truly means. I invite the community to read this, reflect on it, and join with us in helping to change Child Welfare and reshape its legacy in a way not to be mourned but instead, going forward, to be celebrated.



Message from Elder Jacqui Lavalley

As Anishinabeg (First Nations Persons) we keep hearing the words of the Old Ones; they say, “We cannot move forward as a People unless we look back to where we come from”. It took so many years to be in this time where we are encouraged to pick up all the Teachings that were left lying on the ground. Many of our Good Life Ways have been forgotten. It will be very hard to recapture the Old Ways because of the way these Teachings were torn from our lives. We do need to start right now to find the Traditional Teachers who are willing to start again. I personally thought that all the focus group circles were very beneficial to all involved. Right now we need to start finding the Traditional Teachers who are willing to start again, and this return to the Teachings is very much geared towards the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action. The focus group circles that NCFST held in this project were in response these Calls to Action and were beneficial to myself and other members of the community. It would be a good idea to continue to hold circles like this in the future with community involvement. G’chi Miigwech!

Message from Elder Andrew Wesley

The use of the Circle was great and each person that spoke told the truth, there was no right or wrong. Suzanne followed the Tradition of our People because to sit in a circle and talk is to share what is in your heart. The power of the circle allows the heart to be shared with each other. What we share with each other also heals each other. When we talk about our pain in the circle, it is distributed to the circle and we are free of the pain. We must all work in partnership with our members to ensure the safety and well being of the children. It was a great honour to be part of the team and thanks for the opportunity.





Executive Summary

Introduction

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) has been providing cultural and social supports to the Indigenous community since 1986, and in 2004 was legislated to provide Child Protection services to urban Indigenous families. Currently, NCFST has identified a need to solicit feedback from the community it serves due to a desire to follow best practices for the profession and to answer Calls to Action made by the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Final Report. This report shares a reconciliation process undertaken by NCFST. Child welfare reconciliation for NCFST is a process of inquiring to understand what has been done well and what the challenges have been in child welfare practices, and how to make changes to improve those practices. "Reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship...for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 6).

In 2015 NCFST began planning a child welfare reconciliation inquiry project funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services modeled after *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* (Blackstock et al., 2006). *Touchstones of Hope* is a child welfare reconciliation framework that was developed by Indigenous communities and has four phases of reconciliation:



1. **Truth Telling** - Telling the story of child welfare as it has affected Indigenous children, youth and families.
2. **Acknowledging** - Learning from the past, seeing one another with new understanding, and recognizing the need to move forward on a new path.
3. **Restoring** - Doing what we can to redress the harm and making changes to ensure it does not happen again.
4. **Relating** - Working respectfully together to design, implement, and monitor the new child welfare system (p. 8).

These four phases provided concrete guidance for the process of reconciliation and the collection of information in this project. Regarding the process, this project sought to ask Indigenous community members to tell their stories (truth telling) about child welfare, provided a venue for acknowledging their stories. This report provides a plan for restoring practices to eliminate any potential for harm and identifying new ways of relating with clients and the overall community to maintain ongoing collaborations. Regarding collection of information for this report, NCFST clients who took part in the reconciliation process were invited to directly respond to questions about their ideas and experiences of child welfare with respect to each of these four phases.

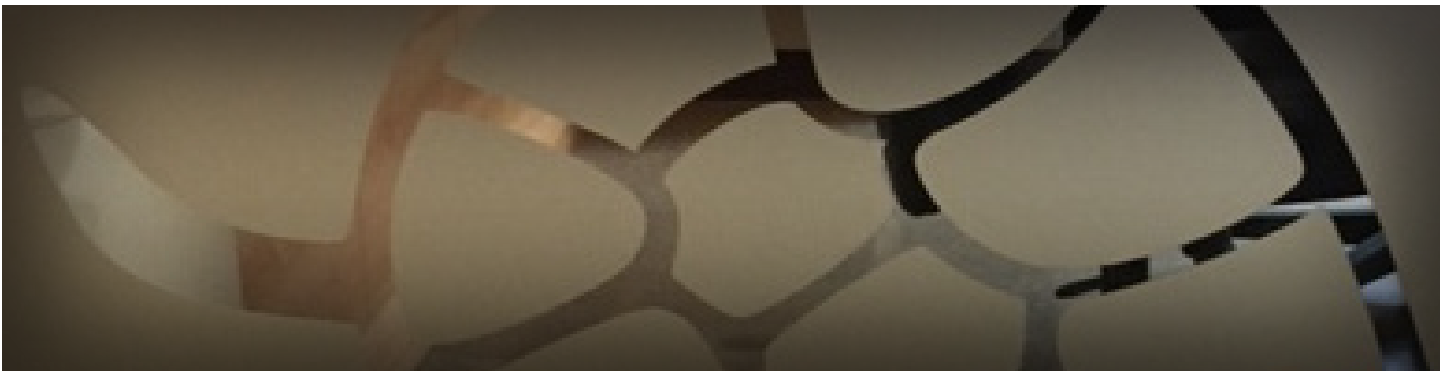


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The Touchstones of Hope (Blackstock et al., 2006) also has five guiding values that grounded the conceptual framework of this reconciliation project at NCFST:

1. **Self-Determination** - Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions that affect Indigenous children, youth, families and communities.
2. **Culture and Language** - Culture is ingrained in all child welfare theory, research, policy, and practice. There is no culturally neutral practice or practitioner.
3. **Holistic Approach** - Child welfare approaches that reflect the reality of the whole child preserve the continuity of relationships and recognize the child is shaped by her/his culture (including traditions, spirituality, and social customs), environment, social relationships, and specific abilities and traits.
4. **Structural Interventions** - Protecting the safety of children and youth must include resolving risk at the level of the child, family, and community. Without redress of structural risks, there is little chance that the number of Indigenous children and youth in care will be reduced.
5. **Non-Discrimination** - Indigenous children and youth receiving child welfare services should not receive inferior services because they are Indigenous (p. 10, 11).

These guiding principles were reflected in how the project was planned, carried out, and in how its results will be put into action. For example, the principle of Self-Determination was central to inviting current and former clients to make an informed choice about joining the project by honouring their autonomy in participation and giving them space to allow their voices to be heard, without judgment and in confidentiality, throughout the process.





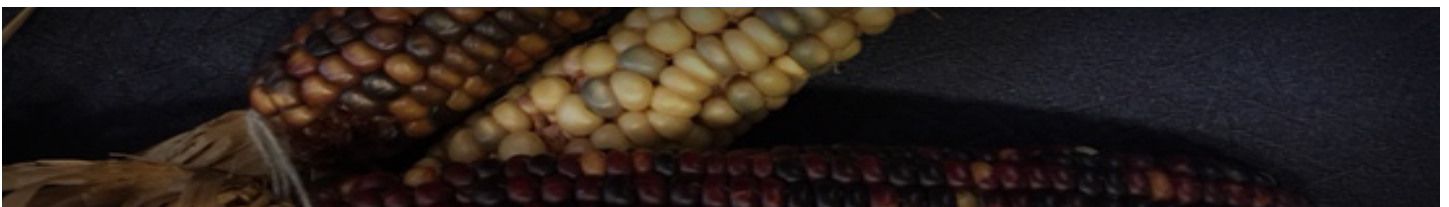
The objectives of this reconciliation project are, as per *The Touchstones of Hope* (Blackstock et al., 2006) framework:

- To acknowledge the past/current impact of child welfare involvement.
- To strengthen relationships within the Aboriginal service community with increased cooperation and collaboration.
- To receive advice from the Aboriginal community on how to improve our services.
- To create an improved and more accountable child welfare system with enhanced outcomes for those served (p. 4).

Methodology

The first step in the process was to create a Child Welfare Reconciliation Steering Committee led by Dr. Suzanne Stewart and comprising the Executive Director, senior staff, and Indigenous Elders, to explain the project and gather input from NCFST staff and the broader community. This community consultation occurred at every step of the process and remained ongoing.

Working together under Dr. Stewart's leadership, the Steering Committee generated an overarching question to begin the reconciliation process: What supports, challenges, and barriers do Indigenous peoples experience with regard to child welfare services? This question was answered through a qualitative approach, using pre-existing surveys and newly developed focus groups.



Surveys

In spring 2016, NCFST administered surveys to 167 current and former NCFST child welfare clients, including 117 adults who are current/former clients and 50 youth in and/or from care¹ ages 14-20, and provided its data to Dr. Stewart for this project. NCFST developed these surveys based on a provincial child welfare Quality Assurance Network (Q-net)/ Performance Indicator Working Group questionnaire after consultative participation with NCFST's Board of Directors and Elders. NCFST staff provided those surveys to current and former clients with an objective of receiving feedback on services. The surveys' quantitative data is being used for program evaluation by NCFST and will not be included in this project, however the surveys also included four qualitative questions regarding current and former clients' experiences of child welfare services that are useful in informing this reconciliation process. The four short answer questions in the surveys asked about clients' general experiences and about culture in foster homes and in services:

1. What was helpful about Native Child and Family Services of Toronto's services?
2. What was not helpful about Native Child and Family Services of Toronto's services?
3. What would improve Native Child and Family Services of Toronto's services?
4. Was culture promoted in foster care and other alternative care arrangements for children and what were the barriers to culture? What cultural activities should be available?

Guided by Indigenous Knowledge principles, analysis of responses of the four qualitative questions on the surveys focused on Indigenous and bi-cultural values and priorities (Tuhwai-Smith, 1999; Stewart, 2009a), and used an inductive Indigenous Narrative Inquiry analysis procedure developed by Dr. Stewart (see Stewart, 2008, 2009b). Two different surveys were presented to two different client groups, adult current/former clients and youth ages 14-20 in/from care.

¹ Youth from care are former crown wards that are on special agreements with NCFST called Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY).



Focus Groups

In spring 2016, eight Indigenous Circle Focus Group interviews were conducted over six weeks with a total of 119 participants (27 social service workers from NCFST and sister agencies, and, and 75 adults with experiences in child welfare at NCFST, and 17 youth in/ from care ages 14-20²). There were about 20 participants in each group, with the exception of one group that had 4 participants. Each Indigenous Circle Focus Group was conducted over three hours and used an Indigenous narrative methodology (Stewart, Elliott, & Hyatt, 2015) based on a series of steps in which participants were asked questions about truth telling, acknowledging, restoring, and relating (as per *The Touchstones of Hope* framework) in terms of their experiences with child welfare at NCFST. Participants then collaboratively organized their responses, written onto sticky notes and mounted on the wall or a flipchart, into thematic categories to generate discussion and ideas with input from the Elders. Some of the participants' direct responses that were written by them on sticky notes are highlights in illustrations throughout this report. Indigenous narrative inquiry (Stewart, 2008, 2009b; Stewart, Reeves, & Beaulieu, 2014) to generate overarching metathemes from all participant responses. Field notes were taken during the Indigenous Circle Focus Groups. After the final group, the two Elders conducted a closing ceremony and feast, to which all participants from the eight groups were invited, and over 150 people attended. Preliminary key themes that had been identified based on all the Indigenous Circles focus group discussions were shared with participants at the closing ceremony. Observations and the field notes were reviewed and analyzed by Dr. Stewart and in consultation with the Steering Committee and provided context to the final results.

2 Current and former clients were invited to participate in the child welfare reconciliation focus groups. Current clients are: family service clients, parents of children on Customary Care Agreements, parents of children who are Crown Wards with access or children in care. Former clients are any clients who previously received services from the NCFST child welfare department. Youth in care includes two groups of ages 14-17 currently in case and 18-20 transitioning out of care on CCSY agreements

Summary of Findings

Surveys' Qualitative Results

Four qualitative questions showed that clients surveyed have a wide range of feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their overall experiences and with culture at NCFST. The following themes represent the responses to each question by all participants:

1. Regarding what was experienced as helpful at NCFST, themes were:

- For adults: Social support, Flexibility in programs, Holistic approach,
- For youth: Having a voice in their cases, Feeling supported, Culture camps, Youth programs, Staying connected to family, Sense of belonging with foster family, and Good workers.

Both adults and youth felt that good programming and respectful and dedicated workers represented their positive experiences. Connection to community and family and having their feelings heard were also strong positive experiences.





2. Regarding what was experienced as not helpful were themes regarding:

- For adults: Not being supported/trusted, Communication problems, Lack of cultural understanding, Feeling threatened, Lack of coordination in services, and Being judged.
- For youth: Feeling not heard, Lack of communication from workers, Feeling disempowered, Location of foster homes, Not enough youth activities, Not cared for/mistreated by foster parents, Disconnected from family, Treated unfairly, Disliked foster family, Feeling unsupported, and Bad workers.

All clients' responses to the questions seemed to represent negative experiences that often rested on communication problems, systemic child welfare problems regarding Indigenous cultures, feeling disempowered due to power imbalances with workers and the child welfare system, and individual difficulties in relationships with workers and foster families.



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3. Themes related to improving NCFST services included:

- For adults: Increasing family cultural activities, Need for increased collaboration with other agencies, Respecting diverse Indigenous cultures, Increasing Indigenous foster parents, More Elders.
- For youth: More independence, Important for children to be heard, More ceremonies, More culture camps, Importance of positive experiences in care, Treat foster children fairly, Stop using group homes, Less traumatic apprehensions, and Placing siblings together.

Both adults and youth surveyed had specific ideas on improvement for NCFST services. Mostly these improvements centred on culture in services, increasing collaborations across Indigenous communities, and equity and respect in client perceptions and experiences.

4. Themes regarding cultural activities were:

- For adults: Importance of all ceremonies, Importance of traditional teaching, Training staff in culture, Increasing access to culture, and Cultural based programs.
- For youth: Want more ceremonies, Naming ceremonies are vital, Identity is key, Want to work with Elders, and Need more culture camps.

Both youth and adults found culture to be crucially important in all aspects of service. Many youth felt that culture had been promoted in NCFST care, but some did not. Some adults felt the culture was not promoted enough in the homes and some felt that this was due to the lack of cultural knowledge of some NCFST workers and foster parents. Many adults also felt that culture had been well promoted in their homes. Cultural activities such as medicine teachings, powwow, and ceremonies like smudging with the four medicines, the sweat lodge, rites of passage, and others were all cited as vital.



Discussion of survey results

Overall both youth and adults cited similar strengths and problems in their experiences as NCFST child welfare clients, such as strengths in feeling supported, and problems due to communication and mistrust. There was overwhelming interest in Indigenous knowledges as important and being more developed in all services, for example, the Seven Grandfather teachings as important to cultural activities. Some youth were not sure what cultural activities should be offered; yet many were very clear and interested in culture.

The key difference in the overall survey responses between the two groups was that youth seemed to feel more optimistic about their experiences and creating positive experience for other children and youth. Some adults seemed to have strong opinions about the problems they had experienced and offered concrete ideas on how to resolve those. The surveys' results offered overarching messages of problems, strengths, and culture, with strong voices that may have come from the safety of possible anonymity that completing this survey might have provided, which was different from the way in which in-person information was solicited from those who attended and shared their stories and feedback in the focus groups.



Focus Group Results

Focus group results for the three participant groups (adult current/former clients, youth in/from care ages 14-20, and staff from NCFST and sister agencies) in all eight groups conducted included five overarching metathemes about the supports, challenges, and barriers Indigenous peoples face with regard to child welfare at NCFST:

1. Communication is an Issue at Multiple Levels
2. Culture is Extremely Important and Sometimes Lacking
3. Negative Experiences Regarding the Power Dynamic
4. Mental Health is an Important Factor
5. Positive Experiences With Workers and Programs





Figure 1 depicts *The Focus Group Metathemes* as they overlap each other. The figure of *The Focus Group Metathemes* illustrates the interactive nature of the metathemes and how they influence each other in the practice of child welfare social work at NCFST.

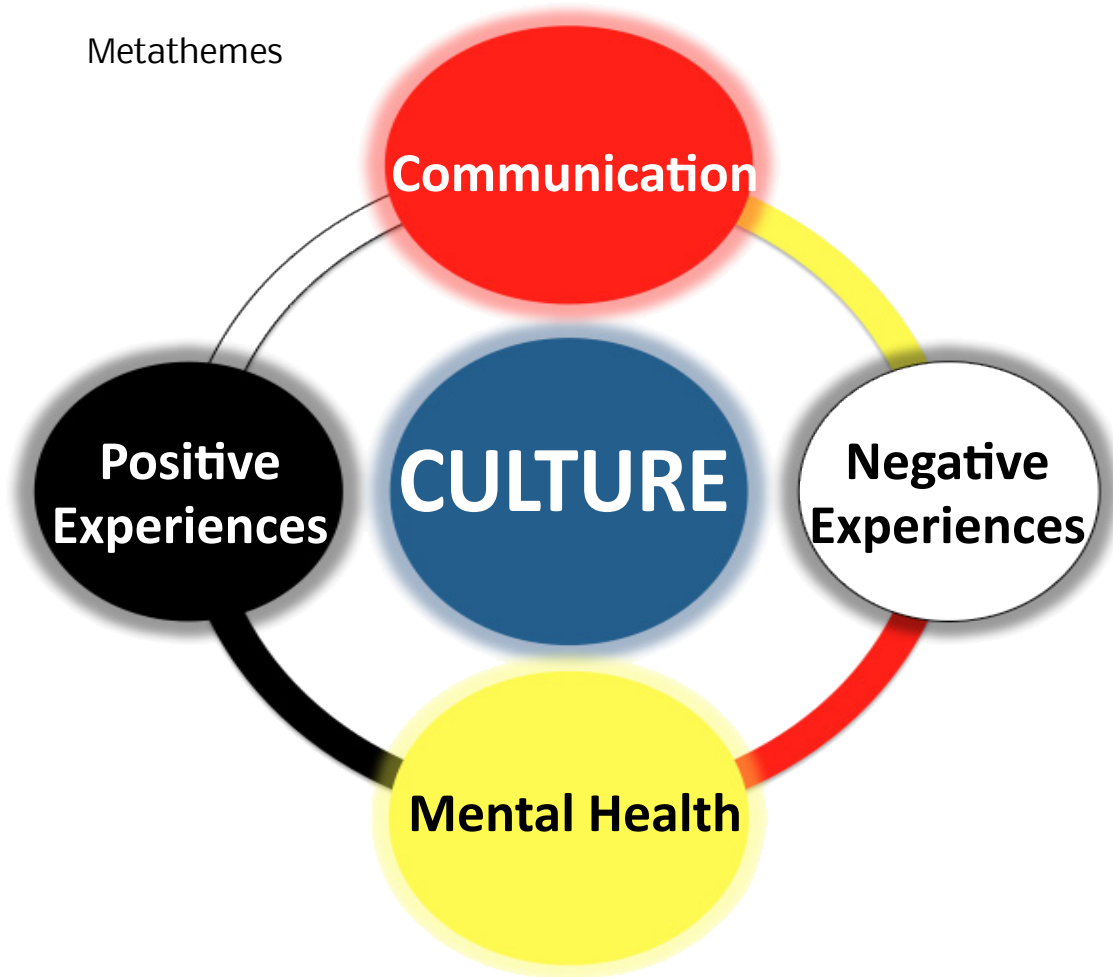


Figure 1. *The Focus Groups Metathemes*

1. Communication is an Issue at Multiple Levels

Generally, all participants groups identified that communication was a challenge at various levels, including between clients and workers, workers and supervisors and upper management, and from worker to worker across agencies. All participant groups felt that some workers sometimes communicated without trust and respect. Adult current/former clients often felt a lack of transparency by NCFST in how workers and staff communicated

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with them about their cases. Adult current/former clients felt that sometimes their own concerns were not listened to when they attempted to communicate with workers. For adult current/former clients and workers, communication within NCFST was cited as a problem that had negative impacts on clients. One adult current/former client stated,

I need more positive communication on my worker's part, build a relationship where he is civil and humane towards my family. Work together rather than against each other so that more positive outcomes and services for my children.

Both adult current/former clients and workers expressed that there was a lack of continuity in communication and service together at multiple levels (i.e., between clients and workers, between workers, and between NCFST and outside organizations), especially when other organizations act as a mediator with respect to this problem. Youth expressed that they sometimes felt that they did not understand what was going on regarding their cases and that they were not always given information such as why they were moving foster homes or why they could not live with their families. For example, one youth stated, "I need a worker that is straight up honest no matter WHAT!".

I need a worker that is straight up honest no matter WHAT!

I need more positive communication on my worker's part, build a relationship where he is civil and humane towards my family. Work together rather than against each other so that more positive outcomes and services for my children.




2. Culture is Extremely Important and Sometimes Lacking

Overall, culture was viewed as integral to NCFST at every level of the organization and services. All participant groups expressed some strongly positive experiences with regard to the cultural services they had received at NCFST but some also felt that these services were not always enough to fill the identity needs of all clients, for example, diversity of culture is not always addressed. Some adult current/former clients strongly felt that some workers lacked cultural competency and training at multiple levels such as mental health services and particularly in child welfare practices. Some adult current/former clients felt that workers were not respecting their cultural identities and practices. There was concern by workers from sister agencies and adult current/former clients regarding a lack of culture in foster homes, with a clear message that there were not enough Indigenous foster homes available for children in care. Youth also stated NCFST did not have enough Indigenous foster families or group homes for them. Youth stated that they were very interested in culture and that NCFST had often provided them with their first and only opportunities to explore their identities, such as through cultural camps, ceremonies, and workshops, and that they felt that this was helpful and positive.

Workers strongly felt that cultural authenticity for NCFST meant that cultural services at the agency must include the greater Indigenous Community of Toronto. Workers further felt that foster parents should have training and knowledge about Indigenous cultures and identities. Workers expressed that all workers at NCFST should receive training in Indigenous cultural practices. One worker from a sister agency said, “Whether or not a worker is Aboriginal they should have in depth knowledge of traditional First Nations Culture. There should be a mandatory course EVERY worker should have to take to give them this information in order to work there.” Further, workers felt that NCFST’s practices should be strongly centered in Indigenous teachings. For example, another worker stated, “Use the Seven Grandfather’s to do your job in servicing families.”

Whether or not a worker is Aboriginal they should have in depth knowledge of traditional First Nations Culture. There should be a mandatory course EVERY worker should have to take to give them this information in order to work there.

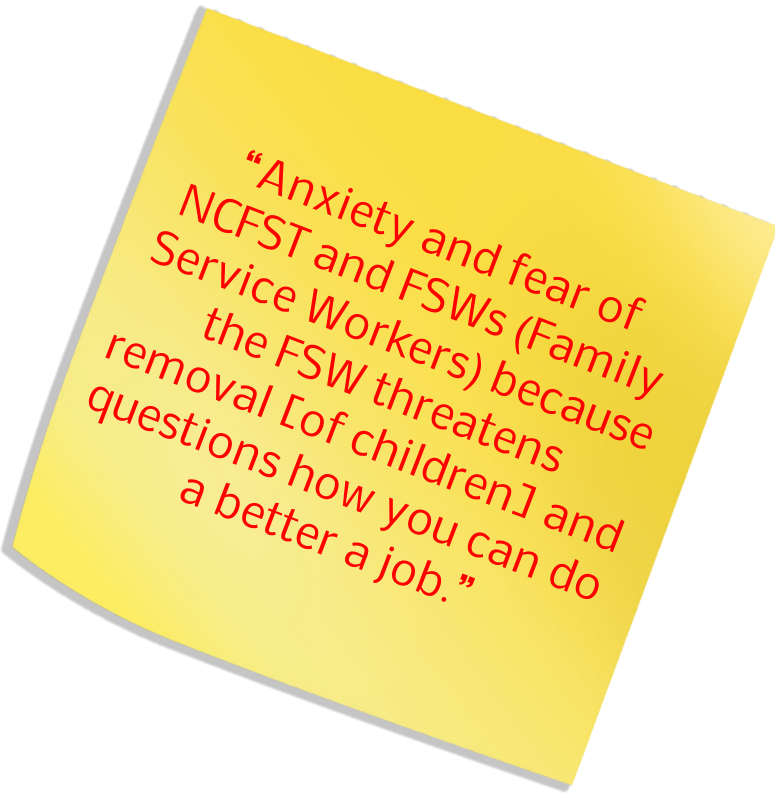


Use the Seven Grandfather's to do your job in servicing families.

3. Negative Experiences Regarding the Power Dynamic

All participant groups expressed some negative experiences with NCFST. Most of these experiences had to do with individual service and feeling disrespected by workers. Adult current/former clients stated that they often felt afraid and intimidated by their experiences with NCFST, and fearful that any interaction meant that their children would be taken away or that they were not a competent parent. One adult current/former client stated, “Anxiety and fear of NCFST and FSWs [Family Service Workers] because the FSW threatens removal [of children] and questions how you can do a better a job.” Another adult current/former client from

a sister agency stated, “Native Child makes me feel like I’m not good enough, just by having me as a client.” Youth expressed that they sometimes felt disempowered and disrespected by foster parents and workers. Workers from sister agencies felt that negative experiences were largely due to lack of collaboration from NCFST workers and a general lack of coordination of services between NCFST and other organizations. Workers also felt that that negative experiences sometimes occurred for clients due to miscommunications in the client-worker relationship and to the variability in the attitudes of workers regarding the power imbalance in the relationship. One worker stated, “There is a fine line between power and protection.”



“Anxiety and fear of NCFST and FSWs (Family Service Workers) because the FSW threatens removal [of children] and questions how you can do a better a job.”



Native Child makes me
feel like I'm not good
enough, just by having
me as a client.

All participant groups felt that mistrust was a major problem, with adult current/former clients feeling both mistrusted by workers and mistrustful of them. Youth cited feeling mistrustful of workers because their workers did not always provide them with information regarding their cases, such as why they could not be placed in care with siblings or why they had to move foster homes. Workers from sister agencies felt that they often had challenges building a trusting relationship with NCFST workers and that sometimes this was due to what was perceived as competition between agencies to service clients.

4. Mental Health is an Important Factor

Participants expressed that mental health is an important factor in terms of their experiences with NCFST due to historical and ongoing trauma and violence. Participants felt that how NCFST supports these problems influences the process and outcomes of their experiences in child welfare. For example, adult current/former clients felt that NCFST did not always take into account the mental health of parents or children as a factor in their cases or provide the appropriate services to support mental health. One adult current/former client stated, “You need more immediate supports for kids with mental health, behaviors, and identity issues”. Another adult current/former client said, “Workers could offer more support for parents with anxiety.” Worker participants expressed that mental health at NCFST should be viewed more through a cultural lens and that increasing collaboration with culturally based mental health services would benefit clients and reduce their reliance on child welfare supports. Further, workers cited mental health issues such as burnout and vicarious trauma as on going challenges for workers that should be addressed at a systems level by NCFST and in culturally based ways.

Offer talking circles instead of counseling (language used makes a big difference).

Workers could offer more support for parents with anxiety.

5. Positive Experiences with Workers and Programs

All participant groups expressed some positive experiences with NCFST. Many adult and youth clients had positive experiences, particularly with specific workers, and with cultural and program support services, such as counselling and mental health, childcare and early childhood development. Some adult current/former clients expressed gratitude for the support they had received in critical times of need in their lives and felt that the good programs and workers should be recognized as such, as they often went unrecognized and unrewarded. For example, an adult current/former client stated, “When a worker understands your struggles and gives you supports, it helps and makes things better.” Some adult current/former clients felt that they had a trusting relationship with their workers and that this was overwhelmingly helpful for them. One adult current/former client explained, “I trust Native Child because they kept their word to me and my sons.” Some of the adult current/former clients expressed having made great personal improvements in their lives, such as leaving abusive relationships or going to school or getting a job, due to the support and understanding received through NCFST.



Youth sometimes felt that their workers were trusting and supportive and gave them the cultural tools and support they needed to help them through transitions in care. Some youth felt that their workers respected them and believed in them, and this made them do better in school and make healthier choices in life, such as resist alcohol and drug use and go on to post-secondary studies. Workers from sister agencies expressed that specific NCFST workers often epitomized positive experiences for them and their clients who were involved in child welfare because the workers were honest, genuine, and supportive with clients. One worker participant from a sister agency stated, “I worked with a family and Family Service Worker that was working hard to keep a family together.”

I trust Native Child because they kept their word to me and my sons.

I automatically thought NCFST would take my children. Instead they helped me because I was truthful.

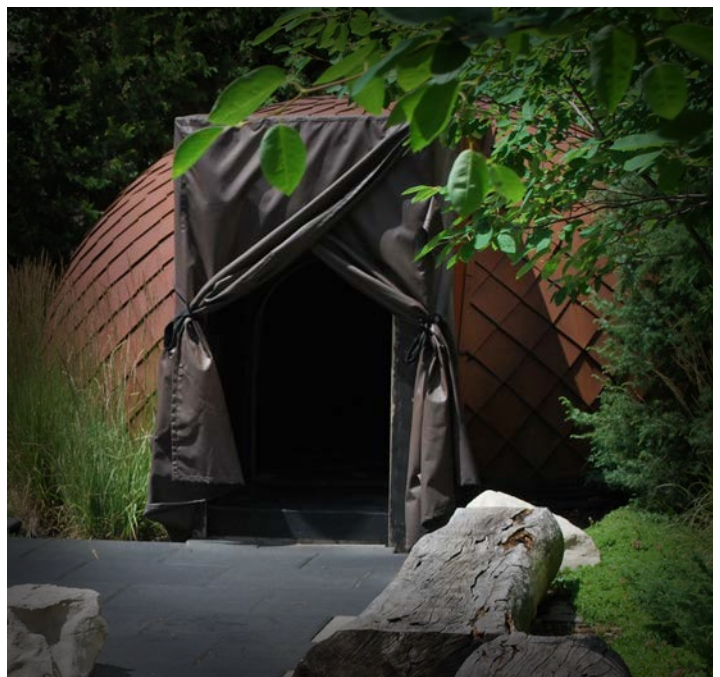
Discussion of focus group results

The Indigenous Circle Focus Groups results are consistent with the surveys' qualitative results. The focus group metathemes, like the survey's themes, illuminate a range of experiences from support to disempowerment, which varies depending on the context of a client's particular case. Another factor in how clients experienced service depended on where an individual was in terms of their cultural identity and their healing journey.

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For example, it seemed possible that in some cases where clients who had a clear sense of their cultural identity, and had also achieved some healing with respect to mental health and addictions, tended to have more positive experiences and constructive feedback in terms of their focus group responses. One thing that these differences in experience suggest is that more attention to cultural based mental health service might be helpful to provide in complex child welfare cases. Another significant aspect to the results is that focus group adult current/former clients expressed an underlying fear of oppression in many responses, which might be linked to that fact that many of those clients had open child welfare cases at the time of the focus groups. All of the metathemes suggest that many adult and youth client experiences originate from a strong emotion of fear and a power imbalance between workers and clients because NCFST holds the power of apprehension. For example, some focus group adult current/former clients stated that they were afraid to speak openly to their workers for fear of having their children removed from their homes or other serious repercussions.

Positive experiences were poignant in that they reflected the integrity of healthy relationships between clients and workers. What is meaningful about these positive experiences is that they provide evidence and some understanding of what it takes for culturally based services to be successful in terms of child protection; in other words, it takes trust, honesty, and genuineness on the part of workers and, to some degree, a willingness for clients to trust the process, which are complicated by personal and intergenerational traumas of child welfare, residential school, and other forms of colonization. Thus understanding what these results means rests not only on clarifying the problems as characterized by Western constructs of child protection but also identifying the strengths and solutions that are based in reclamation of Indigenous culture and community.





Recommendations

1. A protocol for communication within the agency and to outside agencies should be created, followed, and evaluated on an on-going basis.
2. A protocol for communication to clients about their rights and responsibilities should be created and be employed.
3. Ongoing feedback should be solicited from clients regarding their experiences with NCFST and actions taken, based on this feedback, to improve and refine services.
4. More attention needs to be paid to worker-client relationships to ensure trust and respect are mutually upheld. All workers and staff should receive training in cultural safety³ and use this approach in their practices.
5. An increase in traditional cultural services should be made, with policy changes made to reflect this increase.
6. Culture should be infused into all aspects of NCFST service, including child welfare, counselling, advocacy, education, and more.
7. Mental health services should be more integrative, responsive, and culturally based for all populations served.
8. NCFST should employ a best practise for child welfare and social services and an evaluation process that is grounded in a cultural framework.
9. NCFST must increase supports and programming to keep children and youth in care connected to their cultures, families, and communities.
10. NCFST should increase the number of Indigenous foster families and other alternate-care homes in Toronto.
11. Increased long-term support needs to be created for youth who are aging out of foster care.
12. NCFST should increase its collaborations with other organizations for all services.
13. NCFST should recognize individual and systemic injustices made as a child welfare organization to current and former clients.

³ Cultural safety originated in 1990 with Maori nurses in New Zealand. Culture safety moves beyond cultural sensitivity and competency in clinical practice to recognize the power imbalance in society and the politic decolonization and self-determination of Indigenous Peoples. Cultural safety means that service workers must create an environment for clients that is spiritually, emotionally, physically and socially safe, acknowledges the colonial context of each client, and must use empathy and collaboration that maintains client dignity (Brascoupe, 2009).

Responses

Dr. Stewart consulted with NCFST regarding the results and recommendations. The following commitments to action were made by NCFST in direct response to the above recommendations.

Commitments

1. Through a formal process of community engagement, NCFST will develop a “Bill of Client Rights”, including children’s rights, based on cultural criteria and accountabilities, clear in articulation, and well promoted within the Indigenous community of Toronto.
2. In collaboration with a representative group of clients, NCFST will further develop a culturally based mechanism and related process that will provide redress to all who perceive their rights to have been abrogated.
3. In the spirit of collective responsibility NCFST will engage our sister Indigenous agencies in a collaborative process designed to create a case resolution and service planning process that will be inclusive of all service stakeholders and where the clients’ needs are paramount and individual service providers respected.
4. Through on going consultation with our Elders and traditional peoples NCFST will further develop culturally safe practices that honour the cultural needs of clients and contribute to the enhanced competence of the staff that serves them.
5. Within 24 months of the NCFST Board of Director’s approval of the Report, NCFST will hold a forum with stakeholders, clients, and staff to assess progress on the four commitments related above.





Conclusion

Child welfare is a tremendous weight carried by both social workers and the clients. Many feelings are evoked at various times in the process of social worker/client relations. When making an inquiry, one must consider the complexity of this relationship and not be too quick to draw definitive answers. Indigenous child welfare not only carries its own weight but also carries the burden of colonial practices that made the children disappear. What the results of this report mirror is undoubtedly influenced by that history and by the time and place in the service spectrum of the individual respondents. Overall, the results of this inquiry show a mixed experience that challenges NCFST to continually improve its approaches to service and to never waver whenever the safety and welfare of a child is at stake.

Child welfare in the home is not only about parents and children. In Indigenous communities it is about Elders, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, neighbours, teachers, and many other people. From this lens, child welfare is about spirit, heart, mind, and body. This reconciliation project emerged from a need to examine the supports and barriers experienced by NCFST clients with respect to child welfare with an objective to acknowledge past and current harms, strengthen relationships and collaborations with Indigenous communities, receive direction from NCFST clients on improving services, and to enhance culturally based child welfare services in an accountable and on going way.

Reconciling the First Ten Years of Child Welfare

Significant accomplishments have been made by NCFST since its outset as a child protection organization in 2004, yet there is much to be done. In general, NCFST needs to create more culturally based and integrated services, improve communication within, across and outside the agency, and reduce varying levels of client negative experiences and increase existing positive experiences and programs. The goal of this project was to initiate a process of reconciliation with current and former Indigenous clients of child welfare at NCFST, and in doing so, bring forth the voices of the community, to celebrate their strengths, and work to reduce NCFST service weaknesses. This process illuminated recommendations from its results, and responses from NCFST leadership, with hopes of continuing this process of reconciliation by articulating a commitment to strive for reducing negative impacts of child welfare on families, youth, and children, and choosing to work harder in centering spirit and respect as the cornerstone to all its relationships. Further, moving the acts of child welfare out of the office and into literal and metaphorical places of sacredness and ceremony remains a renewed long-term goal.





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Appendix A

Reconciliation Focus Group Questions and Protocols

1. Four questions are given to large group by rote (Maximum of 25 minutes per question).
 - a. We want participants to share truths about child welfare. What are the past and current harms experienced by Aboriginal children, youth, and families within child welfare?
 - b. We want to acknowledge Aboriginal culture and identity as central to child welfare. What are the Aboriginal culturally based values, principles, and identities that should guide child welfare practices?
 - c. We want to promote child and youth well being. How can child welfare practices restore respect and trust with Aboriginal children, youth, and families?
 - d. We want to want to committee to on going reconciliation through new ways of relating. How can child welfare work together with Aboriginal youth and families to continue to monitor and improve child welfare practices to be culturally based?
2. The large group is split to small groups of 4 to 6 people with a co-facilitator assigned to each small group to assist with answering the questions; each person brainstorms a list of silent ideas for each question. Each person puts 1 best ides on a sticky note and the facilitator collects it and puts it up on the wall.
 - a. A note-taker records in writing the process in notes, including the responses to all questions.
3. The facilitator reads aloud all the idea and asks all group members to add any more ideas of their brainstormed lists that may be missing from the list generated on the wall.
4. The facilitator posts 6 symbols up on the wall above the posted ideas and asks 2 people from the group to come up the wall of listed ideas and arrange all the posted ideas in similar groupings by meanings, which they assign under each symbol (Code/category).
5. The facilitator asks large group to name each category (theme) and rearrange each code to best fit.
 - a. The facilitator lists “Key Results Areas” (themes) on a large board or on a flip chart with large sticky notepaper.
 - b. The Key Results for each Question are places side by the side on a wall for all to view, after each question is answered in full.
 - c. Time permitting, review all Key Results for the four questions and identify any metathemes that emerge form the themes.



Appendix B

Survey

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST)

Adult & Youth Client Survey Excerpt

Qualitative Questions

1. What was the most helpful about NCFST's services?
2. What is not helpful about NCFST's services?
3. What would make NCFST's services better?
4. Is culture promoted in your home?
 - a. If yes how?
 - b. If NO, why not? What are the barriers?
 - c. What other cultural activities would you like us to plan for you?



JAIME M.

Report Design:

Lindsay Kretschmer | swoopinghawk@me.com

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto
30 College Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 1K2
(416) 969-8510
www.nativechild.org