



ASK AN EXPERT

Parenting Capacity Assessments

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A central concern for child welfare professionals in Canada is the determination of a parent's capacity to care for his or her children when the child is at risk of harm. **Parenting Capacity Assessments (PCAs)** are an integral component of a child welfare practitioner's toolkit for evaluating parenting competence. They are utilized at various phases of child welfare cases and presented in court as part of expert testimony. In Ontario, PCAs are typically ordered by the Court at the request of a Children's Aid Society and involve the investigation and preparation of a report evaluating a parent's capacity to implement certain parenting skills or abilities.

However, there has been considerable debate among child welfare advocates, practitioners, legal professionals, and organizations surrounding the use of PCAs. Issues of concern include: the qualifications of those conducting the assessment (the "assessors"); the choice of assessment methods and tools; the content of assessments; and the weight assessments should be given when making decisions in the child's best interests. These concerns are even more pronounced when PCAs are applied to First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) families.

The Big Three:

What do First Nations need to know about parenting capacity assessments?

- Existing PCAs are based on Western philosophies of child-rearing, which are different from those of FNMI peoples. This is problematic as PCAs use an incorrect standard to assess the parenting capacity of a First Nations parent — a parent cannot be validly assessed in their role if the cultural standards used as a base of comparison are not relevant to them.
- Parenting assessments of FNMI populations have—and continue to—reinforce the colonial position of child protection in relation to FNMI populations. Applying assessment measures that do not reflect the family and cultural structures of FNMI peoples as well as the diversity and complexity across the many communities, bands, and reserves undermines the foundation upon which PCAs of FNMI peoples are based.
- By focusing on an ethnocentric view of what constitutes an acceptable form of parenting, PCAs distort the lens through which a parent is judged to be "good enough". In assessing parenting capacity, cultural differences in child-rearing practices can be ignored or misconstrued as risk factors, while protective factors, such as connection to culture and community, are not

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sufficiently appreciated. This is a critical concern for FNMI parents and families, as decisions informed by PCAs can have profound consequences.

First Nations Child & Family Caring Society

What's the evidence?

How do we know if parenting capacity assessments really work for First Nations kids?

There is wide variation in terms of assessment methods, tools, and processes for collecting information with a PCA. Four of the most common assessment methods include: checklists, observation, interviews and psychological tests. However, there is agreement in the literature that these tests are not always accurate and have not been properly validated.

Critics advise against using these tools in PCAs involving FNMI parents because they are grounded on White, Western, Christian notions of child rearing; are normed on non-FNMI populations; and yield categories that do not reflect First Nations perspectives of parenting. As a result, they may lead to incorrect assumptions about the child's level of risk.

In addition, many of the structural biases that contributed to the Indian Residential Schools and Sixties Scoop are still being incorporated, and to some extent enhanced with child welfare decision making tools such as PCAs. If practitioners and assessors are not sufficiently trained in cultural differences in child-rearing, Western parenting models could be particularly troubling, given that practitioners may hold stereotyped views of Indigenous families.

In summary, research indicates that existing PCAs are ineffective tools for the assessment of the parenting capacity of FNMI parents. This is attributed to several factors: the absence of FNMI cultural considerations; definitions of family and child-rearing that are based on Western, Euro-centric views; the use of culturally inappropriate psychometrics in the assessment process; inherent biases; and the continuation of a colonial child protection narrative that ignores intergenerational trauma and its impact on First Nations peoples.

Myth-busting:

What are the common misperceptions, practices, or assumptions regarding birth alerts and why should they be considered myths?

Assumption: *Parenting capacity refers to the ability to parent in a "good enough" manner long term. Assessing parenting capacity is a core child protection task.*

- **Reality:** Research suggests that the term lacks any formal, cohesive or commonly accepted definition or understanding.
 - Furthermore, both parenting and child development emerge and grow in a medium of culture, thus the definition of good parenting is highly dependent on the culture. One of the most common criticisms of child welfare decisions that involve FNMI peoples is the

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failure to acknowledge and address cultural considerations, particularly when assessing parenting competence.

Assumption: *PCAs are considered comprehensive evaluations in that they can be used to clearly identify a parent's ability to adequately care for children on an ongoing basis and include an objective measurement of the adult's parenting skills to optimally raise a child.*

- **Reality:** Some researchers suggest that the definition is largely a clinical judgement, open to interpretation. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the concept allows assessors to utilize their own personal conceptions of adequate parenting in the process of collecting relevant data required for a PCA.
 - This is problematic because it has become a widely accepted standard for the evaluation of parenting competence. At best, PCAs may enhance the fairness of child welfare decisions by providing an informed perspective, but at worst, they can contribute to inaccurate, biased, and/or irrelevant information that can actually impair the decision-making process.

Assumption: *Approaches and tools for assessing parenting capacity that are based on Western philosophies of family and child-rearing can be adequately applied to FNMI parents.*

- **Reality:** PCAs are not rooted in culturally relevant science with any consideration to FNMI knowledge, culture and practices. As a result, the same standards cannot be applied to the assessment of FNMI parents in a meaningful way.
 - Existing PCAs are based on a Euro-centric approach to understanding the family which defines family as nuclear units consisting of parent(s) and children. This is in stark contrast to family systems among many FNMI populations, which are often based on an extended family structure with a shared collective responsibility for children that includes the larger community. It is also important to note that family settings vary considerably across FNMI peoples in ways that reflect their distinct cultures, languages and diverse communities.

What works?

What are some key implications for child welfare policy and practice when it comes to parenting capacity assessments?

To address the limitations of PCAs, existing approaches to PCAs should be modified to incorporate culturally appropriate methodologies and tools, using a broader range of assessment parameters that consider First Nations values and worldviews. Importantly, FNMI peoples must be included in this process by participating in the formulation, evaluation and administration of PCAs. In addition to modifying existing PCA methods, alternative approaches should also be explored that draw on the knowledge and experiences of FNMI leaders, researchers, and other jurisdictions with significant Indigenous populations.

Finally, there is a need for enhanced education and training efforts for child welfare practitioners involved in conducting parenting capacity assessments. This should include a focus on understanding and

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acknowledging cultural differences in child-rearing philosophies to reduce racial bias on the part of assessors.

Additional resources:

Sistovaris, M., Fallon, B., Sajedinejad, S., Sansone, G. (2021). *Parenting Capacity Assessments and Indigenous*

Parents in Canada: Policy Brief. Toronto, Ontario: Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development, University of Toronto. Available at:

<https://socialwork.utoronto.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/Policy-Brief-PCAs-Jan12.pdf>

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