



ASK AN EXPERT

Providing culturally relevant, trauma-informed care to First Nations youth

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INTRODUCTION:

The terms “trauma-informed” and “culturally relevant” are often used in First Nations child welfare when talking about support for caregivers and children, but what do they mean in practice? Drawing on knowledge from my experiences being part of the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents (FAFP) and Teddy's Home, this information sheet explores the concepts of trauma-informed and culturally relevant practices as they relate to supporting caregivers of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit youth. Prior to its defunding by the British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development, the vision of FAFP from the onset was to provide support for non-Indigenous caregivers of Indigenous youth in care through training that informed and educated them about some of the many levels of trauma that the youth may experience. Such training included participation in cultural events, ceremonies and teaching by Elders and knowledge keepers, which benefitted both non-Indigenous and Indigenous caregivers.

It is important that, as much as possible, First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children remain with their families and communities in order to maintain a cultural connection. However, sometimes for a variety of reasons, it is difficult for some communities to support families and children who are affected by intergenerational trauma without using outside placements. After family or friends step forward to help, the additional caregivers required may reside at a distance from the community and may be non-Indigenous. FAFP found many non-Indigenous caregivers to be uninformed about the history of colonization and the residential school system or how to deal with the cultural component of their role.

This information sheet and accompanying podcast makes the case that all caregivers of Indigenous children and youth need to have at least a basic knowledge of the history of colonization in Canada, the effect of intergenerational trauma, and how to support cultural connections that are meaningful rather than tokenistic. Further, agencies have a responsibility to support caregivers in receiving this knowledge and they must be willing to integrate the knowledge into how they care for the children and youth.

The Big Three:

What do people need to know about culturally relevant and trauma-informed care?

- **Culturally relevant approaches require knowledge and training about colonization.** The majority of alternate caregivers who step forward are kind, caring and want to do what is

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needed to support the child or youth in their care. While the screening process is quite thorough, less, if any, attention is paid to what potential caregivers know about colonization in Canada and its impacts. This is a problem.

- Trauma-informed means awareness that trauma impacts the heart, mind, body, and spirit. The major impact that complex trauma has on the growth and development of the brain is clear. Trauma-informed care necessitates consideration of how trauma may be impacting not just the child but the family and community. While it is important to recognize the impact of trauma on the young person, a trauma-informed approach also recognizes that trauma does not *define* the young person.
- Cultural connection is an integral part of First Nations child and youth well-being. For various reasons, some youth in care may not have much knowledge about their community or culture. It is important to meet them where they are at, but to gently encourage a connection to culture to help instill a sense of belonging.

What's the evidence?

How do we know if culturally relevant and trauma-informed care really works for First Nations kids?

Caregivers, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, need to understand that history and intergenerational trauma is what they are encountering. Pre-contact, Indigenous peoples had complete societies and what is identified in many areas now as the medicine wheel, the four quarters: the spiritual, the mental, the emotional, and the physical. Without a proper basis of understanding of the way that intergenerational trauma impacts the young person's spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, caregivers cannot fulfill this important work.

Colonization attacked multiple areas of Indigenous life and resulted in the following consequences: illnesses that infected large populations of some bands; the outlawing of spiritual practices and the destruction of spiritual items, regalia and artifacts; the forced removal of peoples from traditional territories; and the enactment of government policies to "take the Indian out of the children". Caregivers must understand that watching a few movies, taking a youth to a pow wow or going to a local ceremony is not what we are referring to, when we talk about providing culturally relevant and trauma-informed care. Restoring the young person's connection to culture will take ongoing and sustained work. Below are some important considerations for child and family services agencies, would-be caregivers, and all who work with First Nations young people in care.

To start, agencies need to develop a resource list about for potential caregivers to read and study prior to their final clearance of acceptance. My recommendations are listed in the related resources section of this information sheet.

Additionally, when interviewing for caregivers there are a number of important factors to consider. For instance, as a most basic requirement, a caregiver must have an ethical moral base, they must be reliable, compassionate, patient, and able to assess and adapt. How does the potential caregiver respond when dealing with extreme situations? This piece is essential when it comes to their ability to provide trauma-informed care to the young person. It is crucial that caregivers are educated about the impacts of complex trauma that can result from experiences of colonization. The trauma of coming into care can compound the

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initial situation the youth has experienced, which may trigger certain behaviours, actions, and attitudes from the young person.

To put into perspective how complex trauma impacts a young person, often the youth has, what Dr. Chuck Geddes (2022) refers to as an “upside down” behavioural system. A mature brain, which Geddes likens to an inverted triangle, has a large logical brain, a somewhat smaller emotional and relational brain, and a small survival brain at the tip of the triangle. The youth who has experienced complex trauma has an “immature brain”, which can be likened to an upright triangle: a large bottom survival brain with a smaller emotional and relational brain, and a much smaller logical brain at the apex of the triangle. This indicates that quite often, the young person is in high survival mode and because the brain has not developed fully, acts according to the highest dominating response.

While there has been more education about trauma today, governments need to prioritize this learning for staff, social services, and caregivers in each province. Complex Trauma Resources¹, a B.C. agency, is one such resource that works with clients and provides courses in person and online.

Myth-busting:

What are the common misperceptions, practices, or assumptions regarding providing culturally based and trauma-informed care and why should they be considered myths?

Assumption: *When a child or youth is first placed in an outside home, sufficient intake information is available.*

Reality: This is often not the case for different reasons. Many times, especially when the removal is an urgent case, there is little-to-no family or medical history. Quite often, there is no Indigenous identification. Unless this is provided in a timely manner the caregivers may have a difficult start-up. This can delay or interrupt medical, dental, or therapy treatments, as well as connections to family and relatives. This change may compound existing trauma and may cause delays in the plan to return the youth to family or a permanent home.

Assumption: *The impacts of trauma are separate from diagnoses like ADHD, FASD, etc.*

Reality: Previous assessments may have already diagnosed the youth with FASD, ADHD or a combination of several diagnoses. Previously, caregivers were trained to deal with each disorder individually. This works in some cases but not all because the caregivers have not been aware of how the young person’s trauma affects their behaviours. A trauma-informed approach to caregiving necessarily involves an understanding that a young person who acts out is not doing so due to some personal defect, but because of the complex trauma that they have experienced over the course of their short life.

Dr. Chuck Geddes’ Complex Trauma Team has studied the research and developed a holistic approach that works with the child’s specific needs using the team’s Seven Development Domains². All cases involve the caregivers, families, and the community.

Assumption: *All that is needed when caring for youth in care is to provide a safe home, good nutrition, and love.*

¹ Complex Trauma Resources: <https://www.complexttrauma.ca/>

² Complex Trauma Resources – 7 Developmental Domains: <https://www.complexttrauma.ca/about/our-approach/>

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Reality: A safe home, nutritious food, and loving environment are the basics, but it is important to remember that for a number of reasons, many young people today have experienced trouble and trauma that is compounded by the experience of coming into care. The complexities are varied and many need interventions beyond the basics of a good placement. A combined approach of wrap-around support is often required. When all the individual workers involved with a child work in a collaborative manner, this will lead to a more positive outcome for the young person.

What works?

What are some key implications for child welfare policy and practice when it comes to the provision of culturally relevant, trauma-informed care?

From what I have seen during my time doing this work, all caregivers, regardless of ethnicity, must make a concerted effort to identify a cultural connection for the young person under the care. A successful placement will nurture cultural connection as an important part of the child's well-being. Hopefully family members and the community can help the caregiver navigate this road but if not, there are other avenues and directions that can be introduced. Unfortunately, too many Indigenous youth in care have little connection to their roots and need help reconnecting.

Some agencies practice a vision of cultural inclusivity with the young people in their care. Successful programming will have this vision from the onset; this is how Teddy's Homes operates. First, the intake team reviews the individual case the search for a home and caregivers begins. This placement will have to meet a number of criteria; location of the home in relation to school, family, therapy if required, recreation and anything else that is appropriate and necessary for the young person to thrive. The new youth in care is introduced to the name and how the agency operates and the names of the other occupied homes. Staff first explain the basic procedures and what the young person can expect. Over time, the young person comes to realize how the agency involves all members in an all-inclusive operation and that all staff are committed to providing a comprehensive experience.

At Teddy's Homes, the residents of all the homes meet at family night gatherings and with the support of the team's cultural workers, Elders and knowledge keepers are introduced to help the young person participate in cultural practices like ceremonies, canoeing, drumming, dancing, hunting, fishing, and sports. All staff, including office staff and management, are involved. Whenever appropriate, residents' families are invited to many functions as well. Sometimes the agency takes the young person on a trip to their Nation, even if it is not in the agency area, to help further restore their sense of identity and belonging. When the youth graduate or leave the agency, they are blanketed in a ceremony and are reminded they are always welcome back any time.

** Gary is a caring, skilled social worker with many years of experience working in multicultural and indigenous settings. Gary possesses that unique combination of training, skills, and compassion, to be seen as an expert in understanding trauma based on cultural inequities. He is the former Executive Director of the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents and since retirement is a key member of the management team of Teddy's Homes. Teddy's Homes is an innovative, very successful residential program in the Fraser Valley near Vancouver, where a strong culture-base compliments a gentle, best practise clinical base for children with complex trauma and other developmental needs. Visit teddyshomes.com to learn more.*