

Notes from the Table Conversations *Caring for Our Children: We Are in This Together Workshop*

Red Deer – October 21, 2014 - 65 participants
Camrose – October 28, 2014 - 43 participants

There is an African proverb which says:

“Regardless of a child's biological parent(s) its upbringing belongs to the community.”

Introduction

The Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF), the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA) and Central Region Child and Family Services (CFS) worked collaboratively to provide an opportunity for foster parents, kinship providers and agency staff to come together to hear about some of the initiatives being implemented in Central Region and to provide feedback as the changes.

Over 100 people participated in the two sessions (Red Deer and Camrose) and addressed the questions:

- What is working well?
- What are we worried about? and
- Where do we go from here?

Notes from the table conversations have been collected, sorted into themes and are now being sent out to all who participated.

We are in an amazing time of changing practice, shifting relationships and innovation. There are many initiatives (45 within the province) impacting child intervention practice, currently in different stages of implementation. These initiatives are part of the on-going evolution of child intervention; are connected; complement each other; are moving in the same direction and are intended to support children and families to achieve better outcomes. As the practice of child intervention changes, so do the relationships: between foster parent, kinship providers, agency, CFS and DFNA staff working with the children and their families.

It is important to note that many of the initiatives are only operational in some areas of the region (i.e. OBSD has been practiced in the South Zone for three years) and some (i.e. Signs of Safety) have just recently been adopted across the province. It will take time (up to 3-5 years and maybe longer) to implement all of the proposed initiatives and ensure that there is an alignment between policy and practice. Everyone (staff within CFS's, DFNA's, agencies and caregivers) working within the sector is being impacted and being asked to examine their practice, assumptions and relationships. The title of the workshop was very purposeful in that: “we are all in this together and have a responsibility to work towards creating the best outcomes possible for the children and families we come into contact through our work and in our communities”.

To create the changes we hope to achieve requires all of us to be committed to:

- working collaboratively in partnership with government, agencies and community,
- continuing to build and strengthening relationships with our partners and families,
- share information and

- be transparent as we move forward.

While there is much good work to be excited about, there is still much to be accomplished - as change, especially in large organizations, takes time, diligence and a huge amount of good will on the part of everyone. To quote David Tunney, Regional Director for Central Region: "The stars are aligning and I have never been more excited to be working in child intervention."

What is working well?

Change is happening!!! Passion!!!

Relationships are being strengthened:

- **Communication** with workers is improving: better listening to caregivers, children and youth
 - We are being heard, listened to and shown more respect
 - Feeling part of the team
 - More workers are spending face-to-face time with children (listening)
 - Explanations are being made to kids in terms that they understand
 - Workers are more forthcoming with information sharing
- **Collaboration** is improving between Ministries/ DFNA's, agencies and the community
 - Everyone's contribution is valued
 - There is a more open mindset - by everyone involved
 - Good working relationship with Bands
 - Meetings like this – sharing information and seeking input
 - Willingness to change and focus upon quality improvement
- **Working more closely with bio-family**
 - Family Group Conferencing
 - Empowering families – families and children are more engaged
 - More relationships, connections being found for family
 - Progress is being reviewed collaboratively
- Greater focus (requirement) on **connecting Aboriginal youth to their culture**
 - Foster parents value the importance of connecting Aboriginal children to their culture and are willing to do it
 - Connections with the band designates (creating better working relationship)
 - Aboriginal Resource Team
 - Opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture and world view are being provided
 - Access to resources, knowledge as to the history, world view, colonization
 - Many more cultural resources are now available

Transition planning for youth has improved in practice

- Less children coming into care, staying in care for shorter times and permanency being achieved (sooner and on-going)

Better Resources/Supports available for caregivers

- Education for foster parents has developed and grown over time
 - AFPA/AASCF has published a booklet entitled “*Transitioning from Care: A Guide for Caregivers*”
 - available on the AASCF website www.aascf.com and
 - AFPA web-site: www.afpaonline.com)
- Good agency support and resources are made available
 - Most of the workers are great
 - Foster parents are able to get their needs addressed - in the moment by the worker

OBSD and Signs of Safety (SoS) working to keep families together

- More positive approach
- Training is being made available
- Collaborative plan is working – family and others are involved and build the plan
 - Better family involvement
 - Family mapping in safety planning; parents shown what support they have; parents shown how to figure out basic needs –job, housing
 - Everyone is included in meetings – 3 columns, using language so that everyone understands
 - Progress is reviewed
- Children’s voices are being heard
 - Children are being told why they are in care- before coming into care
 - Words and pictures
- Re-unification with grandma when mom is incarcerated

Positive changes in law/policy and practice

- Children’s First Act
- Review of Permanent Guardian Orders – parents can ask for a review
- Increased kinship placement as the first placement

Sensitivity to the needs of workshop participants

- Training offered in Camrose – use to have to travel to Red Deer
- Having lunch provided – cost of food and travel not covered

What are we worried about?

Building positive relationships

- Need more buy-in from everyone: regional staff, agencies and caregivers
- There is a long history **of mistrust** with child intervention on the part of many Aboriginal people.
 - How is the trust (different working relationship) going to be built

- High turnover of caseworkers/staff
 - Who really knows the child?
 - Lack of relationship between local staff/foster parents
- How much time it going to take to reach full implementation?
 - How do staff find the time to implement all these ideal initiatives?
 - Increased paperwork
 - Cost of community supports

Foster care is **not valued/ respected**:

- Inadequate funding to foster parents, kinship providers
 - Foster parents provide care to high needs children 24/7 without vacation, pensions or stress leave and are paid less per day than day homes, daycare or dog kenneling – this is completely unacceptable!!
 - Lack of respite
 - Losing foster care families
- Not seen as professionals - input is not sought nor valued
- Foster parents need more background information about the children placed:

Needs of foster families not recognized

- It is painful for the foster family when a child leaves their home (especially when (s)he has lived with them for a long time
 - Need to encourage on-going connection with foster family after the child leaves the foster home
- Biological children of foster parents need to be recognized as independent from their parents
 - May have their own needs and reactions to having foster children in their lives
 - May not be the same as those of the foster parents)

Consistency and flexibility

- Policies are interpreted differently in different regions/offices
- Inconsistent decisions

Access to **cultural supports/resources**

- Connecting children to their cultural background
 - How to ensure connections to their culture happen when the logistics/challenges of making the connections happen are difficult
 - How do we connect children to culturally appropriate resources:
 - Access to qualified elders
 - Specific and relevant practices from the band where the child is registered
 - Protocol
 - Lack of Aboriginal connections (each child to an elder; band designate)

Parents, families being kept “front and centre”

- Need for clear communication
 - Parents have said they have not seen the written plan
- Inconsistency in how we work with families
 - Some offices are working from an a OBSD/SoS model, some not
 - With the amount of time needed for meetings (OBSD/SoS) how will the caseworker know the child?
- How to improve the integration of foster and biological families

Children’s needs and behaviours

- Children do not know why they are in care
- Children that are coming into care have increased needs as more children are staying in the home
 - We are seeing many more young children with complex needs, exhibiting older behaviours
 - There may be a higher risk for children to stay at home- are the supports in place to mitigate the risk?
- Children are placed far from their parents are spending hours on the road travelling for visits with their family
- Length of time children spend in care
 - Timelines defined in the Act

Transitions:

- Making timely decisions so children are not left at risk while decisions are yet to be made by CFS, family, agency
 - Importance of making the appropriate placement initially to minimize placement breakdown or multiple placements (better initial matching)
 - Out of foster home transitions are not made with care - often done too quickly and need to slow down
 - Why are children moved so often??
 - Need to focus upon both reunification and the needs of the child
- Need for more supports – especially for older youths, PGO’s and those children who cannot be adopted
 - Permanency plans for PGO kids have not been communicated to the foster parents
 - Transitioning to adulthood is not starting early enough
 - Start at age 14 (not 15 or 16) and in more depth

Need more information/resources/supports/mentors

- As the needs of children become more complex, the required level of skill of foster parents will be more
- Shortage of resources – due to lack of staff; time needed to communicate/ collaborate; distances travelled

- Support systems are not in all kinship and adoption placements
 - Kinship –lacking in education
- Not enough FSCD services
- The fly in the room

Where do we go from here?

Continue to focus upon strengthening the building of relationships

- **Commitment** to keep key players at the table and involved with planning:
 - More collaboration
 - Reduce the amount of staff turnover – need for consistency
 - On-going evaluation, feedback and incorporating recommendations into practice
- Provide opportunities for open **communication** between Child and Family Service, DFNA's, agencies, foster parents and the community
 - On-going communication – between everyone
 - Listen to the children
 - Change our language i.e. not use the term "client"
 - Common understanding of terms i.e. permanence, collaboration etc.
 - Continue to have an open mind regarding feedback
- Foster the building of positive relationships **with the Aboriginal community**, Bands and Band Designates
 - Contact the Band before a child is apprehended (every time)
 - Involve the Band with family searches/placements
 - Provide culturally appropriate supports as soon as intervention begins
 - Provide regular support network meetings for children in temporary or permanent care to promote connections
- Support a better relationship **with foster parents**:
 - Increase information sharing i.e. information about the child
 - Seek foster parent/kinship provider input into:
 - Family meetings,
 - Service planning
 - Review of foster care and kinship care
 - Foster parents feel recognized and valued as the primary caregiver, not viewed as a paid babysitters
 - Foster parents to feel comfortable and know how to ask caseworkers the "hard questions"
 - Provide mentors and let foster parents know about outside supports that are available

Roll out OBSD and Signs of Safety everywhere

- Consistent yet flexible practice to be able to help each unique child/family

- All homes throughout Alberta to follow the same direction – too many differences region to region (re. Interpretation of policy)
 - Partnership, collaboration, strength based
 - Shift from “managing risk” to “increasing safety”
 - Words and pictures completed for every child in care - following apprehension and at time of placement
- Work to improve critical thinking and reflective supervision skills

Need for more training, sharing of resources and supports

- **Provide On-line training** programs for foster parents
 - Core training
 - Aboriginal resources
 - AASCF website www.aascf.com Resource Library/Aboriginal and
 - Native Counseling Services www.ncsa.ca Resource and Publications: ie. Home Fire video (*excellent overview of history and impact on the Aboriginal community*)
 - *A Summary of Significant Events in the Timeline of Colonization and the Ripple Effect of Impact*
- Training (**joint training**) is needed in the areas of:
 - New practices - Signs of Safety, OBSD, Child Intervention Practice Framework
 - Emotional well-being,
 - Mental health,
 - Behaviour management
 - More FASD training/programs for foster parents
- **Peer support/mentors**
 - All caregivers (foster parents, kinship providers and adoptive families) need the same resources and supports
 - Building of support networks (AFPA mentorship program)
 - AFPA is starting to help with kinship and adoptive homes
- **Build community supports**
 - Friendship centres, community kitchens
 - Funding for homes in the communities where children are from and
 - Some transitional homes in smaller communities
 - More funding for boy's/men's programming
 - Men and boys need to be included;
 - Support for fathers
 - More \$ for FSCD mileage

Transitions

- Better initial placement matches – to reduce the number of moves
 - Reduce the number inappropriate placements (crisis needing a placement – any placement)
 - Have more pre-placement visits
- Start transitioning youth to independent adulthood earlier

- Advocacy for youth in permanent care
- Kinship be considered for the first (not the 2nd or 3rd) placement
- Maintaining connections when children transition
 - Children should be able to maintain contact with foster parents once they leave the home,
 - Bio-family be able to maintain contact with foster parents
 - Foster parents often want to be able to maintain contact with children after they leave the foster home
 - Foster parents feel the loss of an important person in their life
- Do not hold meetings in schools – kids hate to be seen to be different