

Relationship Based Practice

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There is an African proverb which says:

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

The whole of child intervention services: Child and Family Services; Delegated First Nations; child and family serving agencies - in both the child intervention and prevention/ early intervention sectors; caregivers – foster parents/ kinship providers; and families – nuclear and extended who access services and support, are working in an amazing time of changing practice, shifting relationships and innovation. There are many initiatives (up to 45 and maybe more, within the province) impacting child intervention practice. These initiatives are not all being implemented at the same time or in the same way, within the various regions and the offices within the regions. There is much regional variation as to the timing and stages of implementation.

What they have in common is a goal of creating and maintaining better relationships between the systems, people working in organizations and the people accessing services and support. While all the initiatives have imposing and sometimes bureaucratic names, Dr. Ralph Boder, a professor in the University of Calgary, School of Social Work said we should stop using jargon and just call what we are doing “relationship based practice”. This makes sense to me as all of the evolving practices have common elements; are part of the on-going evolution to improve child intervention practice; are connected; complement each other; are moving in the same direction and are intended to support children and families to achieve better outcomes. To create new relationships or strengthen old relationships takes time: to get to know each other; to listen; to understand not only what is being said but also what is meant; to develop trust; to work in respectful and kind ways towards each other.

For some of us, it is important to understand how we got to the present. Within child intervention some of the major benchmarks have been: Alberta Response Model (ARM - 2001) shifted the focus of child intervention to a community-based approach and laid out a philosophical framework; the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2004) entrenched the goals in legislation; the Casework Practice Model (2006) provided the structure and tools which led to piloting Outcome Based Service Delivery (OBSD 2008), now in 14 sites within the province. While OBSD was initially introduced as a different funding model, it quickly became a different way of practicing - focusing upon Child and Family Services and Lead Agency staff working with families collaboratively, with flexibility and shared decision making to achieve the outcomes of:

1. Supporting vulnerable children to live successfully in the community
2. Children in temporary care will be reunited quickly with their family
3. Children in permanent care will be placed in permanent homes as quickly as possible
4. Youth will be transitioned to adulthood successfully and
5. Aboriginal children will live in culturally appropriate placements/ services

Since the introduction of OBSD, and particularly over the last few years, there have been many initiatives, some directly related and some not, that enhance: ease of access to government services; the building of new relationships and supporting positive relationships between people. While I will not come close to addressing all of them, some include:

- **Citizen Centered Integrated Service (CCIS)** is intended to provide Common Service Access (a single entry point) to 28 programs i.e. Disability Services, FSCD, AISH, Day Care Subsidy, Alberta Works, CI etc. which will be located in places that are easily accessible (similar to Service Canada centres for federal programs);

- **The Child Intervention Practice Framework (CIPF)** evolved out of OBSD to provide a common base of principles that everyone working within the sector could use as the base for decision making. The principles guide both the process and decisions being made in relation to children and their families:
 - **Aboriginal Experience** - First Nations, Métis and Inuit people have always had their own ways of ensuring that vulnerable members, including children, are safe and protected. We honour this by recognizing their expertise in matters concerning their children, youth and families.
 - **Preserve Family** - We believe children and youth should be safe, healthy and live with their families, therefore we focus on preserving and reuniting families and building on the capacity of extended family and communities to support children, youth and families.
 - **Strengths-Based** - Our approach is reflective, culturally responsive and strengths-based. Because all families have strengths and resources, we recognize and support the right and responsibility of parents to share in the decision-making process for them and their children.
 - **Connection** - Children and youth are supported to maintain relationships that are important to them, be connected to their own culture, practice their religious beliefs and, for those in care, have a plan for their care where they are included in the decision-making process.
 - **Collaboration** - We are child-focused and family-centred. We collaborate with families, community agencies, and other stakeholders in building positive, respectful partnerships across integrated multidisciplinary teams and providing individualized, flexible and timely services to support these efforts.
 - **Continuous Improvement** - We share and use information appropriately. Our approach is outcome-oriented and evidence-based therefore we support innovative practice, monitor our performance and strive for continuous improvement.
- Every region has been examining and exploring the question of how do we work differently and more effectively with **Aboriginal** (First Nations, Inuit and Metis) families. How do we move to a better understanding and practice of “wahkohtowin” - a term from the Cree language to describe the interconnectedness of all things. Most of us, unfortunately, are still in the very early stages of learning about the complexities involved not only of language but the impact of colonization, trauma and cultural confusion. Tanya Pace Crosschild, a very wise woman from Blackfoot country, described it as “having to be bilingual” – cross-culturally, we use English as the common language; but the meanings of the words and experiences as well as the interpretations are different. The fortunate part is that there are many skilled, knowledgeable and generous people willing to be our teachers:
 - There are two OBSD sites operating from Aboriginal perspectives, worldview and principles – **Kahkiyaw** (a partnership between Bent Arrow Healing Society and Boyle Street Community Services) in Edmonton and **Mahmawi-atoskiwin** (a partnership between Pathways Community Services, Enviro Wilderness Society and Big Brothers Big Sisters) in Calgary – both of which are leading the way in educating us on what an Aboriginal perspective means, the power of ceremony and respecting the boundaries (protocol);
 - Regions have created partnerships and programs that focus upon connecting with and re-examining their relationships with Aboriginal communities, Bands and extended families:
 - in the South Region there is a Tri Party Agreement entitled “**We All Come Home**”;
 - in the North Central CFS - **miyo ohpikinawasiwin**, a Cree phrase that loosely translates to “growing our children well,” is a unique outcomes-based service delivery model that encourages caseworkers, agencies and families to work more closely together and

- Calgary, Edmonton and Central Regions have created Aboriginal teams that are working to bridge some of the divides between Aboriginal communities and the mainstream organizations. Relationships are being strengthened and positive work is beginning to be seen.
- **Kinship** care is recognized as a better placement for many children needing “out of home” care and supports are being built in:
 - Old practices, fears and assumptions are being challenged. In the past, kinship placements were often the second or third placement, not the first. This is changing and there is much more emphasis and effort being put into finding “family”.
 - Unless a child is in immediate danger, it now an expectation that a family meeting (including extended family and sometimes community members) occur before apprehension or within 48 hours of an apprehension, as we know that the removal of a child from his/her home to that of a stranger is traumatic and has long-term impact. While the child may not remember the person who took him/her away from their familiar surroundings, they will remember being scared and not knowing what would happen to them. Workers are asking about family differently and more broadly i.e What about Dad, his family etc; accessing people who know by someone’s name where they come from, and building positive relationships with the Bands and Band Designates;
 - A Kinship telephone support line and translation services are either available, or in the works, to support kinship providers;
 - Memorandums of Understanding with police in Edmonton and Calgary and underway with the RCMP to speed up criminal record checks;
 - Policies and practices are being reviewed re: housing requirements
- **Family Group Conferencing (FGC) and Talking Circle (TC) Facilitation** skills are being learned by many working within the sector and circle processes are being used as an effective tool;
- Many excellent **resources** have been developed, are readily available and should be mandatory for everyone working within the sector:
 - Videos: **Home Fire** (with discussion guide) and available through Native Counselling Services of Alberta (www.ncsa.ca) and **Gently Whispering the Circle Back** (with discussion guide) from Blue Quills College (www.bluequills.ca);
 - A wide range of papers and videos are available from the Bear Paw: Legal Education and Resource Centre Library (www.ncsa.libguides.com) addressing everything from divorce to bullying to lateral violence etc;
 - The Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF) has a section of their web-site (www.aascf.com) devoted to Aboriginal resources – i.e. the paper entitled *Indigenous concepts and frameworks vital for human service workers: The practice of omanitew* by Drs. Leona Makokis and Ralph Boder with Sarah Friesen and the *Aboriginal Identity surveys* developed by FCSS Calgary.
- **Signs of Safety (SoS)** is a set of practice principles, processes and tools used to do the work of child intervention. SoS provides a focus upon: working with families in partnership to create workable safety plans for children and families; using the “voice” of children and family members; building support networks and developing strategies that address the questions:
 - What are we worried about?
 - What are the family strengths (as opposed to only looking at what is not working)?
 - Where do we go from here? and

- Who will do what?

This approach has worked well in many jurisdictions and is quickly being embraced across the province as it engages families and builds strong healthier relationships – between those providing service and support and those being impacted (children, families, caregivers and the paid professionals).

- While the **Prevention and Early Intervention Framework** has not yet been “signed-off”, its purpose is to provide guidelines for establishing a continuum of evidence-based prevention and early intervention services that easily interlink prevention/early intervention programming to child intervention programming. Instead of looking at a continuum as a straight line, it is more realistic to acknowledge that families may, at different times move in and out of accessing early intervention and child intervention services. It is the seamless access to service that is helpful – both before and after child intervention is involved. The **Relentless Connector** Program in Edmonton is an example of linking both sectors, in that an agency family support worker partners with the family to help them navigate government and community systems in order to better receive the support they need at a particular point in their lives.
- **Family Violence Hurts Everyone: A Framework to End Family Violence in Alberta** is guided by the *Social Policy Framework*, uses a whole government approach and works in partnership with other government initiatives and the community. It is recognized that family violence is closely linked to the work of child intervention and needs to be addressed at multiple levels, with all those involved (victims, perpetrators and the community). The five strategic priorities within the framework are to :
 - Strengthen efforts to prevent family violence across the lifespan;
 - Enhance services, supports and the Justice response for victims and offenders of family violence;
 - Partner and plan with Alberta’s diverse communities;
 - Promote family and community safety through policy, legislation and public engagement and
 - Evaluate, measure, and demonstrate success.
- There are many other initiatives underway that are impacting practice and how we are changing the relationships between people. I have chosen not to address or even list all of them as each agency and region has multiple programs addressing the changing nature of practice and relationship. Some include:
 - Working towards the better preparing and transitioning youth to adulthood:
 - SIL Change Lab in Edmonton,
 - The booklet entitled *Transitioning From Care - A Guide For Caregivers* has been developed by AASCF and Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA) and widely distributed;
 - Many elders, cultural resources and Band Designates are working with children and staff to help children answer the questions of: “Who am I?”, “How am I connected to family and community?”, “How do we positively re-connect children to family and community?”
 - Re-designing the group care sector from being “the last resort placement” to the best placement, at the right time to meet the needs of a particular youth, is a discussion that is on-going within the group care sector;
 - Meeting the needs of diverse populations (immigrants and refugees, people within the multicultural communities) are being addressed at many table and models are being developed i.e. *Levelling the Playing Field* – a project between the Multicultural Health Brokers, Edmonton Region and Alberta Human Services
 - There are multiple initiatives, throughout the province, addressing more effective ways to address and access mental health services and the support needed by children and families;
 - Support networks for staff, caregiver and children are expanding and opportunities to learn are being offered in many places :

- AFPA has created a Mentorship Program for foster parents and kinship providers,
- Mentors for children in care are being trained and beginning to work with children;
- Symposiums, training opportunities and workshops are now being regularly videoed and available (i.e. Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research (ACCFRC) <http://research4children.com> and AASCF
- Communities of practice are being created for staff – both in government and agencies
- Opportunities to learn about the changes in practice and how we need to re-think relationships are available and need to be sought out:
 - Human Services are in the process of changing their training for caseworkers;
 - Agencies are being offered opportunities to learn about the changing practices;
 - Foster parents, kinship providers and front-line agency workers have been invited to participate in a workshop that not only provides information about the changes but an opportunity to provide feedback to the region: *Working Together* in Calgary and *Caring for Our Children* in Central Region, with others scheduled into the spring of 2015. The videos, power points and Notes from the Table conversations are on the AASCF website (www.aascf.com)

One of the big outstanding issues, that much attention is being paid to, is the alignment of policy to practice from program to program: within the different departments of Human Services; between Human Services and other ministries (Health, Education and Justice); Human Services and the First Nations Delegated Agencies; and between government and agencies.

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. In the meantime, 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. While the work of change is hard, from my perspective, it is also very exciting, exhilarating and I do think that we have hit the "tipping point", where we cannot go back to "what was". The impact of the positive changes in practice and the focus upon establishing and maintaining positive relationships are already being felt within the sector, at many levels, and we are well on the way to a much more positive future.

All the effort, time and energy, needed to create relationship is worth it, as we know that the best indicator of success is the nature of the relationships between clients to worker; worker to worker and organization to organization! It is my wish and hope, that I can leave this work and honestly know that we are in a better place than when I entered it, many years ago

The key to all the work we do is: Relationship, Relationship, Relationship!!!