

# **Growing Stronger Relationships: Sharing the Journey to Indigenous Cultural Understanding in Alberta**

**A User's Guide to Embarking on the Journey**

**February 2024**



**ALIGN**

**Association of Community Services**  
Together for Children and Families

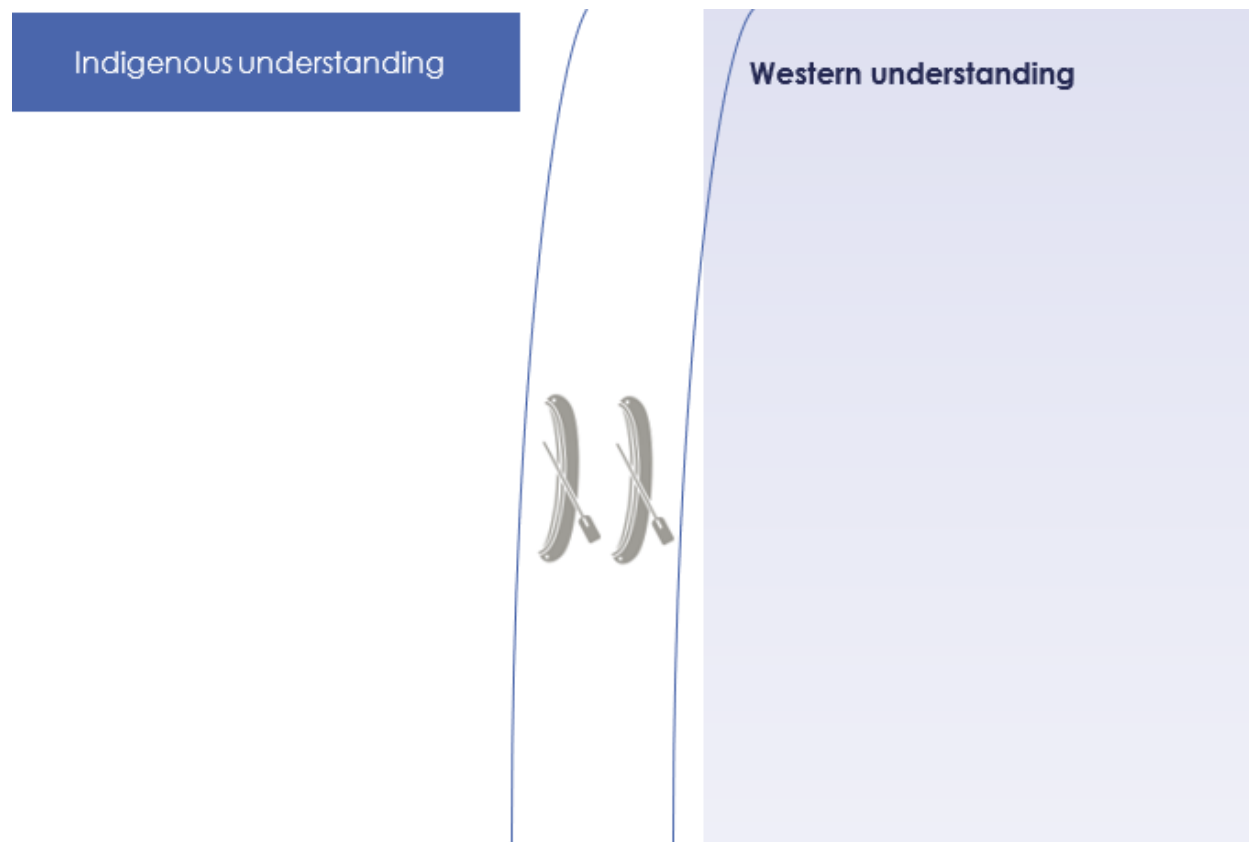
## Growing Stronger Relationships

With the guidance of Elders, knowledge keepers, youth, members of the Indigenous Advisory committee and others, ALIGN Association of Community Services (ALIGN) created an **interactive digital story** and a **written document** to help build Indigenous Cultural Understanding in Alberta.

We created these resources with the intention that they would be used by Alberta agency staff who work with Indigenous children, youth and families. Agency staff include a diverse mix of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

We invite you to join us on the journey, starting wherever you are in the process, and to grow your relationship with these materials. We hope that this will serve as a starting off point for **more discussion, learning and growth.**

We offer reflections about parallel understanding from Indigenous and western worldviews. Parallel understanding creates ethical space to respectfully transfer knowledge between two different world views. Imagine two canoes traveling respectfully side by side together, communicating not amalgamating during the journey. We recognize that this is a journey and not a static event. We are in constant motion. Some of us are just getting started on the journey. Others have been travelling down the river for a long time.



**What do the resources include?** The interactive digital story includes a series of individual videos by Elders, knowledge keepers and others sharing the journey to Indigenous Cultural Understanding. The written document includes a template intended to guide conversations and build parallel understanding between Indigenous and western worldviews. We have shared reflections on the following 12 principles from the perception of both Indigenous and western worldviews:

- ✚ Ceremony
- ✚ Creation
- ✚ Natural law and relationships
- ✚ Knowledge Transfer
- ✚ Language
- ✚ Wellbeing and Kindness
- ✚ Land and Environment
- ✚ Traditional Parenting and Kinship
- ✚ Role of the Child
- ✚ Programs and Structures
- ✚ Allyship
- ✚ Drum and Song

The videos and written document are available on the ALIGN website at <https://alignab.ca/indigenous-cultural-understanding-in-alberta/>.

**How can we use these resources?** The resources we've created are intended to generate conversation to help increase Indigenous understanding within Alberta agencies.

There is no one "right" way embark on this journey. There are no magic answers. The strength is in our relationships and willingness to engage in open dialogue and reflection about how our worldview influences what we think, do and feel. For example, differences in world view have many implications including how we think about ceremony, land, relationships, parenting, and so much more. There is also tremendous diversity within worldviews. There are so many different teachings within Indigenous worldview; for example, different nations have different expectations around specific ceremonies. We would like to emphasize that our reflections are not meant to be prescriptive; they are **not** meant to suggest that there is only one way to do things. There are many ways to do things both within and across world views. Our reflections and tools are meant to guide discussions and open dialogue.

**Why is this important?** We know that more than **two thirds** of children within the child intervention system are Indigenous, a system based predominantly on a western worldview. The impact of removing Indigenous children from their families and communities persists today. There is intergenerational trauma from residential schools, colonization, systemic racism, the Sixties Scoop, ongoing child welfare involvement and so much more. Our dream is for a future where all Indigenous children live in dignity and respect with their family and community of origin. We know we aren't there yet.

## Ideas for how to use the interactive digital story and written document:

- ✚ Choose one or two principles of interest and watch the videos.
- ✚ Reflect on what the individuals have shared. What does this mean to you? How could this information be brought forward in your organization? Are there things we could do better to serve Indigenous children, youth and families, based on the ideas shared in the oral stories and written document?
- ✚ Share link to the videos (ALIGN website) with colleagues, friends, families.
- ✚ Share one or two videos during staff meetings. Invite reflection and feedback about what this means for you, your organization and how you work with Indigenous children, youth and families.
- ✚ Choose one or two principles and read the comparisons of similarities and differences between worldviews.
- ✚ Facilitate staff and individual reflection sessions and sharing circles. Collectively discuss: Are there things we can do differently in our organization to better integrate Indigenous cultural understanding, to create welcoming safe spaces for Indigenous children, youth and families? Have we considered opening and closing meetings with a prayer or other ceremonial aspect, sharing intentions for our work together, asking people to pray in their own way?
- ✚ Review sections of the written document as needed to help inspire conversations, reflection and growth.
- ✚ Use the reflection template provided at the end of the document. This can be completed individually or in groups (e.g., staff meetings, reflections, individual or group format). Choose one of the principles (for example: programs and structures). Where are we at? How do our programs reflect an understanding of Indigenous worldview? From a western worldview? What are the parallels between the two? What do we still want to learn or do differently? How can we get there?
- ✚ Consider how can we include Indigenous voices and worldview in structures, policy, bylaws, decision making framework, programs?

## Sample Reflection Questions

The following questions might be helpful to consider as you go through the written document and interactive digital story. They are offered as suggestions to guide and to inspire further conversations, not a prescriptive list of instructions.

Principles	Reflection questions
<p><b>Ceremony</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ What does the concept of ceremony mean from an Indigenous perspective? From a western perspective?</li> <li>✚ In our organization, do we offer opportunities for integrating ceremony into practice? Why or why not?</li> <li>✚ Are there invitations/offerings for children, youth, families and staff to participate in ceremonies that will enhance spiritual growth and cultural knowledge?</li> <li>✚ Do we include ceremonial space in building set-up and design? Do we have a space for sharing circles? Smudging? Other? Can we ask people to put devices away to be more present and mindful during some of our conversations? In what ways do we share intentions for how we want to work together before each meeting, project, initiative?</li> <li>✚ Do we know how to offer protocol to Elders when we ask them to join a program or speak at an event?</li> <li>✚ Do we include financial support for ceremony in program budgets?</li> <li>✚ Other thoughts about ceremony?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Creation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Who are we and how did we come to be in the world?</li> <li>✚ Different nations have different creation stories. What is our understanding of the meaning of different creation stories, from both Indigenous and western perspectives?</li> <li>✚ How can this understanding help us to better serve Indigenous children, youth and families?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Natural Law/ Relationships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Reflecting on our organization, how do we value relationships?</li> <li>✚ Do we understand the importance of relationship from an Indigenous perspective? What is our understanding of the concepts of “building relationships” or “building relatives”? What supports honour and respect the importance of building relationships?</li> <li>✚ Do we know how to respectfully approach an Elder? If we don’t know, where can we go to learn? Where can we start?</li> </ul>

Principles	Reflection questions
<p><b>Knowledge Transfer</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ How well do our funding models and policies support Indigenous world views?</li> <li>✚ What kinds of training, education and experiential learning opportunities have we taken? What else do we still want to learn?</li> <li>✚ What books, readings and videos have influenced our approaches? For example, have we read <i>21 things you may not know about the Indian Act</i>? Have we read <i>ohpikinâwasowin/Growing a Child: Implementing Indigenous Ways of Knowing with Indigenous Families</i>?</li> <li>✚ Have we read the TRC Calls to Action? Taken action on the calls?</li> <li>✚ Have we engaged in opportunities for experiential learning opportunities such as Allying with Indigenous peoples? Other opportunities?</li> <li>✚ Does our organization have an action plan, taking action toward implementing the Calls to Action?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Language</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Does our organization recognize oral contracts as well as written documents? What are the barriers? Ways to overcome barriers?</li> <li>✚ In what ways do we include Indigenous languages in our work with Indigenous children, youth and families?</li> <li>✚ In what ways do we honour traditional Indigenous names?</li> <li>✚ Do we include storytelling in our programs and evaluations?</li> <li>✚ Do we recognize stories as natural law?</li> <li>✚ Do we advocate for the preservation of language?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wellbeing and Kindness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Have we considered what is meant by terms such as “wellbeing and kindness?” and what these terms mean from both an Indigenous and western world view?</li> <li>✚ How might an understanding of wellbeing and kindness translate to how we work with Indigenous children, youth and families?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Land and Environment</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ How have we approached the concept of offering land acknowledgements? Is this something that happens regularly in our organization?</li> <li>✚ Have we connected with Elders in our area?</li> <li>✚ How have we thought about the sacred relationship with land?</li> <li>✚ Where do we come from? Where were we born and what is our relationship with land?</li> <li>✚ When we are a guest, do we acknowledge the first peoples of the land?</li> </ul>

Principles	Reflection questions
<b>Traditional Parenting/ Kinship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ How do our programs and policies support Indigenous children’s right to live with their family and communities of origin, not in a system? What is working well? What could be improved?</li> <li>✚ How can we better support children’s right to live with their family and communities of origin?</li> <li>✚ Do we honour traditional parenting and kinship?</li> <li>✚ When searching for family, do we recognize beyond the nuclear family to include the whole community?</li> <li>✚ What is our definition of “family” and how is this influenced by our worldview?</li> </ul>
<b>Role of the Child</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ How do we view the role of the child? Paternalistic or egalitarian view?</li> <li>✚ Is the child perceived as an equal part of the circle?</li> <li>✚ Are there opportunities for children to have a meaningful voice in our programs and systems?</li> </ul>
<b>Programs and Structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Do we include honorariums and appropriate financial compensation for Elders and knowledge keepers? How can we respectfully approach and invite an Elder to participate? Knowledge keeper? Cultural helpers? Others?</li> <li>✚ Do we recognize and value their expertise similar to academics and consultants?</li> <li>✚ Do we provide space for cultural practices close to where Indigenous people are living?</li> <li>✚ Do we include Indigenous approaches to program evaluation including oral evaluation and storytelling?</li> <li>✚ Do we provide welcoming spaces and structures (e.g., arranging seating in a circle, provide ceremonial space)?</li> <li>✚ How can our buildings make space for western and Indigenous worldviews (board rooms, sometimes in rectangles, sometimes in circle formats), etc.?</li> </ul>
<b>Allyship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ What does it mean to be an ally, from an Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective?</li> </ul>
<b>Drum and Song</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ What do we know about the sacred meaning of drum and song within an Indigenous worldview?</li> <li>✚ Have we included meaningful opportunities for drumming and song in our programs and services?</li> </ul>