



**ALIGN**

Association of Community Services  
Together for Children and Families

# A JOURNEY TO INDIGENOUS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN ALBERTA



**YOUR  
JOURNEY  
BEGINS  
HERE**



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## Acknowledgements & Guiding Intentions

Our work was completed on the traditional meeting place and home of many Indigenous people across what is now known as Alberta. We are grateful for the opportunity to share, work, grow and learn together, and to explore our roles and responsibilities for truth and reconciliation. Beginning in early 2019, we hosted a series of in-person circle gatherings in what is now known as **Innisfail** as well as other locations across the province including **Moh-kíns-tsis/Elbow River/Calgary; Waskasoo seepee/Elk River/Red Deer** and **amiskwacîwâskahikan/Beaver Hills House/Edmonton**, shifting online with virtual meeting technology between May 2020 – present.

We were guided by the wisdom and teachings shared by **Dr. Reg Crowshoe** and **Rose Crowshoe** (Elders) and **Adrian Goulet** (cultural helper). Furthermore, the following people provided support and guidance as members of the Indigenous Cultural Understanding Advisory Group: **Bruce Armson** (UPCS and Co-Chair), **Rhonda Barraclough** (ALIGN), **Rebecca Chahine** (Vantage Community Services), **Beverly Keeshig-Soonias** (Elder and Co-Chair), **Arlene Oostenbrink** (Closer to Home), **Kirby Redwood** (Miskanawah and Co-Chair); and **Cheryl Whiskeyjack** (Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society). We adapted the Touchstones of Hope process developed by the **First Nations Caring Society** to host circle gatherings and collectively build a dream for the future.

We would like to acknowledge the stories and experiences shared by all those who participated in circle gatherings including **ALIGN members, agency staff, youth and others**.

A working group was tasked with facilitating conversations and sharing what we heard over time. Working group members included **Frank Shannon** (Haida Nation, cultural helper and facilitator), **Nicole McFadyen** (project lead), **Laurie McCaffrey** (consultant and writer), and **Damian Abrahams** (youth coordinator and digital media consultant).

**This report is written in English.** This comes with both strengths and limitations, and we had a great deal of conversation about the best way to proceed. We considered the possibility of including Indigenous words from a few Indigenous languages – such as Cree and Blackfoot – for some of the key concepts within this document. However, this led to further discussion and cautions around **not oversimplifying or implying that there is direct translation for words where there is not**. There are many differences and subtleties within Indigenous languages (e.g., more verbs than nouns), and a great number of diverse Indigenous languages. We chose to proceed, for now, with a written document in English. In addition, we are also preparing an interactive digital story to serve as the parallel for this written, English document. This may include more examples of oral practice and Indigenous languages.

The purpose of this document is to share what we learned about how to support Indigenous cultural understanding within Alberta agencies serving Indigenous children, youth and families.



## Guiding Intentions

Our intention was to create an ethical space to work together. We acknowledged the importance of honouring **the ethical space between Indigenous and western worldviews**. Our work was guided by the concept of parallels between Indigenous and western worldviews based on the teachings shared by Elder Dr. Reg Crowshoe (e.g., stories as natural laws parallel to western policies).

**Our process started with protocol to acknowledge** the involvement of Elders throughout all aspects of the journey. We sought guidance and prayers along the way regarding how to interpret and report what we were learning. We also shared the intention to **honour Indigenous lands** and Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, to understand **practice as ceremony**, and to **value oral practice and storytelling**.

We did not have a clear picture at the beginning of what the final products would look or sound like, but we were open to the journey and committed to learning together. It was our intention to share what we learned in both oral and written formats (including this written report). We worked from a foundation of trust, respect, authenticity and direction. We were **creative and open-minded** in our approach, not tied to a specific pre-determined outcome. We listened and shared what we heard, with an effort to connect what we know to what we do. We **considered existing knowledge and practice** within the agency sector, such as work responding to the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and becoming trauma-informed, as we collectively explored next steps toward improved Indigenous cultural understanding.

Our intention was to be as **inclusive as possible and to respect diversity**. Our approach was open to representatives across the province, considering all treaties and Métis settlements; however, we were not able to travel to or engage with every community. What we heard did not include every possible voice in the process, but rather a series of conversations with ALIGN members, agency staff, elders, knowledge keepers, youth and others. We hope that what we heard will be helpful as a starting off point for more discussion, learning and growth.

## Ongoing Journey: We are in constant motion

As we are finalizing this version of our written document, we also acknowledge that we are in constant motion and change. We are learning, growing and adapting, and expect this to be a living document that may change over time. Our relationships with Indigenous children, families and communities will continue to change.

With the recent federal *Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (formerly bill C92), children will be in the care of their own First Nations and not with Children's Services. We hope to help support agencies, families, DFNAs, Children's Services and Indigenous Governing Bodies to move forward with the federal act to transition children back to their nation's care. We hope that building increased Indigenous cultural understanding will help to support this transition.

## Introduction

### Toward the development of an Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework for agencies that serve Indigenous children, youth and families in Alberta

In June 2018, the provincial Ministry of Children's Services published an **Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework (ICUF)**. This framework, updated in early 2019, outlined learning expectations and training opportunities for employees at all levels across the Ministry including executive management and leadership, policy and program delivery, administrative support, engagement and stakeholder relations. It was envisioned that "the ICUF and its Learning and Development Pathway will increase knowledge and skills that will give staff a better understanding of Indigenous history, culture, challenges and resilience. This knowledge will affect behaviour, leading to more respectful and meaningful approaches as we serve Indigenous children, youth, families and communities." (Government of Alberta, 2019, p.12)

In early 2019, ALIGN began a journey toward developing something similar yet uniquely focused on supporting agency staff and service providers. A sub-committee of the ALIGN board was created to provide oversight to a project initially referred to as the **Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework for Agencies**.

A working group was tasked with hosting circle discussions and sharing what we heard over time. We weren't entirely sure what the final product(s) would look like; however, the purpose of our work was to create something useful for agency staff and service providers— to help support increased cultural understanding within Alberta agencies so that all Indigenous children living in Alberta can live in dignity and respect, supported by people with a deeper understanding of Indigenous worldviews, history and current reality.

Our work was grounded in an understanding that 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 Indigenous children are in the care of their family and community of origin. We know we aren't there yet. Currently, more than **two thirds** of children and youth receiving services in care are Indigenous (Government of Alberta, 2022).

Children removed from their family and community are dealing with trauma and grief caused by the loss of traditional community connections, natural supports and relationships. The historical lack of recognition of the impact of residential schools, and the rippling effect from first contact, are increasing issues such as continued over-representation of Indigenous people in the child welfare and justice systems, and disproportionate suicide rates. The rediscovery of children at former residential school sites and all those yet to be found is a real and painful reminder of what was lost, and the damage caused by the imposition of the western world view on Indigenous communities. We acknowledged these painful realities as we worked together with hopefulness for healing and renewal.

## Approach to Knowledge Gathering

### Touchstones of Hope

We adapted the Touchstones of Hope process developed by the First Nations Caring Society to engage in a series of circle gatherings with ALIGN members, elders, knowledge keepers, youth and agency staff across Alberta. The Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement “encourages grassroots approaches to caring for Indigenous children (Reconciliation in Child Welfare), respectful collaboration and work with Indigenous peoples (Reconciliation in Canada) and young people participating in reconciliation initiatives (Children and Youth + Reconciliation). The movement allows for respectful and meaningful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to occur.” (First Nations Caring Society, <https://fncaringsociety.com/touchstones-hope>)

In March 2019, the First Nations Caring Society facilitated a process with the ALIGN board and advisory members to begin a conversation about what the future could look like. We reflected on how agencies deliver services to children and families, the majority of whom are Indigenous, and considered what this looks like now (successes and challenges) and what it could look like in the future (creating a dream).

### Circle Gatherings

Between July 2019 and January 2020, ALIGN hosted a series of additional circle gatherings to help create a shared vision of Indigenous cultural understanding within Alberta agencies. There were three sessions with agency staff (one each in Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer between July and September 2019) and one session with youth (January 2020). We listened to and documented what we heard about what’s working well, what service providers still want to learn, and how we can help fill the gaps and build a dream together. Through this work, our intention was to co-create a set of guiding principles and a vision for the future, as well as practical examples that agencies can use, such as culturally appropriate assessment tools and experiential learning opportunities.

### Reflections on What We Heard

We have been working on creating this document (written) an interactive digital story (oral) as parallel ways of sharing knowledge. Over the past three years we have reflected, discussed, reviewed drafts, and discussed at length the unique meaning of words, phrases and concepts from different world views. We sought input from elders and knowledge keepers, read books, watched videos and had many insightful conversations. We collectively and concurrently experienced the trauma and uncertainty associated with the pandemic and the rediscovery of children at former residential school sites and those not yet found. Throughout this process we built relationship, growth and understanding, shared some frustrations as well as insights and a’ha moments. We were trying to create a resource, something that would be useful to help build increased Indigenous cultural understanding within Alberta agencies and learned in the process the most important resource we can build is the relationship with each other. We are all connected and working toward a future where all Indigenous children live in dignity and respect with their family and community of origin.

## Current Strengths and Challenges

Throughout our journey to produce this document (and other materials including stories and visuals) we gathered and shared ideas to help build Indigenous cultural understanding within agencies that serve Indigenous children, youth and families. We asked people to reflect on strengths and challenges related to how they were currently integrating Indigenous cultural understanding into practice. What was working well and what gaps or challenges remained?

### Strengths

Examples of **current strengths / what was working well** within some agencies included the following:

- ✚ Participation in **experiential learning opportunities** (such as Allying with Indigenous Peoples, the practice of omanitew, and Allying with Indigenous Peoples, cultural solutions);
- ✚ Learning **how to seek meaningful Elder involvement** such as practicing how to respectfully approach an Elder, offer protocol and honorariums;
- ✚ Engaging in **parallel processes** such as starting a new program with a pipe ceremony and a written contract;
- ✚ Advocating for funding models, **policies and programs that support and honour Indigenous practices and worldview**. For example, some organizations were seeking out and only renting space that allows cultural practices (such as buildings that allow smudging);
- ✚ In some agencies, organizational leadership teams were created to respond to the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls for Action**;
- ✚ Others said they were focusing on **small, tangible actions** they could do within their own organization(s) to support and honour Indigenous ways of being.

### Challenges

Examples of **challenges** to integrating Indigenous cultural understanding into practice included the following:

- ✚ **workload**
- ✚ **organizational resistance** and pushback
- ✚ **inflexible policies and structures**
- ✚ **competition for funding** and/or lack of funding
- ✚ We also heard about a **history of lack of meaningful engagement** and unrealistic expectations such as assigning one Indigenous staff member to represent all Indigenous peoples.



## Building a Dream for the Future

In addition to current strengths and challenges, we also asked people to consider what the future could look like and how might we get there? The following dream statement emerged from what we heard during circle discussions and ongoing conversations with the Advisory Committee and working group members over time.

### All Indigenous children in Alberta will be safe and living in dignity and respect when:

- ✚ **Families stay together.** Indigenous children are in the care of their family and community of origin.
- ✚ **The system supports families to stay together.** There is more compensation, reduced barriers, and more support for kinship care.
- ✚ **There is action based on what we know.** We acknowledge and act based on what we know in response to the children rediscovered at former residential school sites including those in Kamloops, Cranbrook and Penelakut Island, Cowessess First Nation and so many more, and all other children yet to be found. We act on the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* and the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: Calls for Justice*. We act on the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. There are sufficient resources to support *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (formerly Bill C-92). The rights of children are respected.
- ✚ **Relationships are valued and nurtured.** There is connection to culture, family, community, land and environment.
- ✚ **We understand practice as ceremony that continues throughout ones' lifetime.** There are ongoing opportunities for integrating ceremony into practice by providing invitations/offerings for children, youth, families and staff to participate in ceremonies that will enhance spiritual growth and cultural knowledge.
- ✚ **We understand the impacts of colonization.** We understand the history of residential schools and the complexity of intergenerational trauma, the devastating loss of language and loss of ceremony due to legislation (many traditional ceremonies were outlawed), and the loss of traditional community connections and natural supports. We understand the impact of the Sixties Scoop and federal policies such as the *Indian Act, A Bill to Amend the Indian Act* (Bill C-31) and other policies.
- ✚ **We encourage the exploration of cultural diversity.** There is diversity within Indigenous communities with different histories across Turtle Island (North America), including different languages, songs, ceremonies, teachings, world views and ways of being.
- ✚ **There are sufficient resources, including funding, for cultural protocol and practices.** There is more support for trauma and mental health. Wellness is understood from an Indigenous perspective. Programs are developed and led by Indigenous community professionals.

- ✚ **Relevant programs and services are provided**, including those focused on prevention and early intervention. There is more collaboration between agencies and less competition for funding.
- ✚ **We acknowledge historical culture to help guide present day culture.** Communities continue to bring back ceremonies, songs and languages. Cultural ways of knowing, doing and being are integrated in educational systems.
- ✚ **There is community capacity to pass knowledge to existing community members.** There is an understanding of the natural resources within individuals. Communities move from survive to thrive. Historical knowledge is shared to help present day understanding.
- ✚ **We learn how to create ethical space to respectfully transfer knowledge between Indigenous and western world views** (including Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies).
- ✚ **All participants in the circle carry the same value and recognize each other as equals.**

## Emerging Categories and Principles

Throughout our work reflecting on what we heard during the circle gatherings, our working group brought forward summary notes and draft reports to document what was shared. We worked to explore 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.

This written document and the interactive digital story represent parallel ways to communicate and share knowledge, to be inclusive and respect diversity. This is meant as a launching off point for discussion, to generate new ideas. It is not intended to be a definitive guide and does not include every voice or perspective. We encourage you to think about where you are on the journey, what fits for you and your organization, what is missing or what could be added moving forward.

The purpose of this section is help facilitate dialogue between different worldviews. It is important to note that this does not account for the complexity and differences within each world view. It is intended as a tool to help guide discussion, learning and increased understanding. Even the very concept of *categories* or *principles* in this document reflects a western understanding based on the assumption that it's possible to compartmentalize and separate ideas. This contrasts with a holistic, interconnected worldview within Indigenous understanding. We have had many conversations about the inherent challenge in this task and this is still a work in progress. This is meant to generate conversation, **not oversimplify the complex issues.**

The following categories and principles emerged, and we discussed at length the differences and similarities of each from both Indigenous and western worldviews:

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

At times there seemed to be limited positives on the western side; however, our intention was not to pit the two against each other but rather to launch discussion about differences and similarities, parallels between Indigenous and western world views. Each of the above concepts are described more fully in the following section of this document. The principles are further described orally in the production of the interactive digital story.

## Ceremony

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>From an Indigenous perspective, ceremony is <b>integrated in everything</b>. It's not an add-on or checkbox. Everything starts and ends in ceremony. It is a way of knowing and understanding and requires ongoing practice. The physical, mental, spiritual and emotional are connected, not separate. There are protocols, responsibilities and teachings in the context of ceremony. Many ceremonies and traditional practices were <b>previously outlawed</b>, and ceremonies were lost. This has devastating impacts. Some traditional ceremonies are coming back in a period of renewal. Reconnecting to culture and ceremony is part of healing and basic human rights. Ceremony is traditionally <b>practiced on land</b> (away from technology). Many ceremonies are about renewal; things are constantly in motion. The concept of ceremony, from an Indigenous worldview, is not a noun. The authors of <i>ohpikinâwasowin/Growing a Child</i> describe the <b>action of "ceremonialing"</b>.</p> <p>Ceremonies, traditional practices and protocols <b>vary across communities</b>. There is no single Indigenous culture: ceremonies and traditions are different among different nations and bands.</p> <p><b>Medicine is involved in ceremony</b> (e.g., sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar and others are part of ceremonies with protocol around how to handle them). Which medicine is used by whom, when and where varies and is based on the relationship between people, nature and land. There is an <b>experiential foundation</b> of Indigenous spirituality not based on written texts. Songs, ceremonies, and medicines are to be passed in a right way, not given (e.g., not searched online and repeated without permission or protocol). It's very important to consult the elders in your territory to learn how to handle medicines in a respectful way. Remember it's okay to ask questions. Ask in the best way you know how.</p>	<p>From a western perspective, there tends to be more <b>separation between spiritual and secular</b>; however, there may also be ceremonial aspects to program delivery (e.g., program initiation, graduation, meeting rules and conventions) and there has been more acceptance of western based religious ceremonies, structures and institutions.</p> <p>Religious ceremonies tend to be affiliated with religious institutions; there are diverse ceremonies across different religions. There is <b>not one single western based approach to ceremony just as there is not one single Indigenous approach to ceremony</b>. There may also be differences between faith and organized religious practices. Indigenous people may also practice many different western religions (e.g., Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, and other religions).</p> <p>There is <b>more separation between western religion and western medicine</b>. There is a difference between Indigenous medicine and western pharmaceuticals. The origins of western pharmaceuticals first came from plants (e.g., aspirin, chemotherapy).</p> <p>Many world religions have a <b>written, text-based foundation</b> (e.g., Old Testament, Sanskrit) and prayer books (in contrast to oral practice).</p>

## Creation

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
Many Indigenous creation stories describe <b>land and responsibility as fellow spiritual beings</b> (not over-fishing, not over-picking berries and medicines, etc.).	There are <b>different creation stories</b> within a western worldview, such as the story of Adam and Eve, that have influenced cultural understanding.

## Natural Law and Relationships

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p><b>Stories are accepted as natural law.</b> Everything is about the <b>spiritual relationship</b> between humans, nature and each other. Words connote attachment and inclusion (e.g., a mother's sister is <i>little mother</i>). Asking "where are you from?" establishes connections between people, nature and land.</p> <p>There is a <b>collective view of the world</b>, with an interconnectedness of all beings (not just humans). Nature teaches about relationship with water, trees, and resources all around us. These relationships teach about attachment. We are never alone. We are always in reciprocal relationship with nature.</p>	<p>There is more <b>separation between personal and professional relationships</b>. In work settings, relationships are often based on networking and academic credentials, publications, or quantity of connections.</p> <p>The western world view tends to be more <b>hierarchical and individualistic</b> versus collective. This influences the nature of relationships. Relationships may be impacted by power differentials depending on professional status, colour, religion, sexuality, gender, and other characteristics.</p>

## Knowledge Transfer

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>There is no separation between knowing, doing and being. <b>Everything is connected</b>, including body, mind and spirit.</p> <p><b>Experiential learning</b> is fundamental. <b>Oral and land-based learning</b> are valued. It is necessary to observe animals and their interactions with the world (e.g., if an animal eats a specific plant, we know it's safe for us as well; if rabbits go white early in the fall, we know to prepare for snow).</p>	<p>Western understanding tends to <b>separate body, mind and spirit</b>. There is often separation between knowledge and action. There is an <b>emphasis on written documents</b>, policies and procedures.</p> <p><b>Academic, hierarchical, institutional learning</b> is often (though not always) prioritized over experiential learning.</p>



## Language

Oral culture	Written culture
<p>In oral culture, <b>stories are used to enhance understanding</b>. Stories connect us to the past, present and future. Stories evoke a spiritual dimension to being.</p> <p><b>Natural laws are oral</b>, not written.</p> <p>Indigenous <b>languages reflect the relationship</b> between humans, nature, and each other. Language continuously transforms and renews; it is not static. We are in the process of moving, in motion, in relationship. Indigenous languages include more verbs than nouns, describing movement more than things.</p> <p>The <b>loss of language</b> has devastating and persistent impacts.</p> <p>Languages have <b>adapted based on colonial structures and rules</b>.</p> <p>The <b>preservation of language</b> is important (e.g., understanding the importance of eagle feather protocol, advocating for legal recognition of oral descriptions in land claims and courts).</p>	<p><b>Written culture assigns more legitimacy and credibility to what is written down</b>. There is emphasis on documenting what happened.</p> <p>Laws, contracts, policies, and proposals are in <b>written form</b>.</p> <p>The English language consists of <b>more nouns</b> than verbs. Written culture emphasizes the written word and literal interpretations.</p> <p>Written language <b>establishes hierarchy and can reinforce power imbalances</b> (e.g., labels, colonial names, and word usage in describing relationships such as half-brother/half-sister versus brother or sister, or first cousin connoting hierarchical degree of prominence in relationship and family).</p>

## Wellbeing and Kindness

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>Wellbeing and kindness are important and interconnected concepts; for example, there is a spiritual understanding and connection between ceremony and kindness (Dr. Reg Crowshoe shared the story about the transferred right of kinship, as <b>kindness through the smudge</b>.)</p>	<p>Wellbeing and kindness are also important from a western perspective, though with potentially different meanings behind the concepts and words. It would be helpful to ask, within teams and organizations, <b>what does wellbeing and kindness mean to you?</b></p>

## Land and Environment

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>Land is sacred. We are in <b>relationship with land</b> and environment.</p> <p>Land is <b>as much spiritual as physical</b>. Land is a spirit we have a relationship with. There is no ownership of land. There's a geographical sacredness to land that people occupy, where their birthplace is, where their umbilical cord might be buried. We are in relationship with land and part of the environment, not separate. Everything is connected. Learning to be a good human in the world, in relationship with and part of the environment, is key.</p> <p>Tribal systems teach <b>natural boundaries</b> and to always acknowledge if you are a visitor to another territory.</p> <p>Land is <b>not something we can control</b>. We are in relationship together, without conflict over occupation or trying to deny others' access.</p> <p>There is emphasis on <b>balance</b> with all living things as part of the circle. For example, if we take medicine, we give medicine to thank the spirit of the plant and Mother Earth.</p>	<p>The Western approach to land and environment has historically focused <b>on real estate, land ownership, agricultural development, settlement and colonization</b>. There is a continuing struggle between economic value, care of the earth and environmental impact.</p> <p>There are people and organizations working to <b>bring awareness</b> to the relationship with land and environment (e.g., the David Suzuki Foundation, Sierra Club, environmental groups, etc.) and to advocate for taking care of the earth. This caretaker role contrasts with being in a reciprocal relationship with land. Western worldview tends to view land as something we live on for our own needs, rather than in relationship with.</p> <p><b>Maps are used to represent land</b>. Places are shown as symbols depicted on a map. This does not require being present or having a relationship with land.</p> <p>The <b>differences in world view regarding land</b> have many implications, including conflict regarding current land claims.</p>

## Traditional Parenting / Kinship

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>The <b>concept of family is interconnected and includes the whole community</b>, much broader than the nuclear family. For example, cousins are considered brothers and sisters.</p> <p>Being in <b>relationship with children enriches and teaches us</b>, and reminds us what we need to know about human beings. The child is not just an entity to be taken care of. They are spirits and teachers.</p> <p>Child development occurs through relationship. Brain development, social, physical, identity and spiritual development are all connected. There is a <b>holistic view of child development</b>, based on attachment and relationship.</p>	<p>Western child welfare legislation is based on a western understanding of family. <b>There is more emphasis on the immediate, nuclear family.</b> Decisions are made based on different world views and realities regarding how family is defined.</p> <p><b>Attachment theory and neuroscience research</b> reinforce the importance of attachment for healthy child development. Concepts such as “serve and return” help build understanding that it’s worth investing in connection. Attachment requires time, attention and closeness.</p>

## Role of the Child

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>All participants in the circle carry the same value and <b>recognize each other as equals</b>. The child is an equal part of the family and community.</p> <p>Children have <b>their own roles in ceremony</b>. Roles in ceremony change as we develop. Children are considered <b>sacred</b>. Children have a <b>reciprocal relationship</b> with everyone in the community depending on their stage of development. Their reciprocal relationship will change as children get older. Their relationships are based on the kinship system – that lets the child know who they are in relationship to the other person. We have an obligation to know all our relations. Part of that obligation is to know children in a good way, to know what their strengths are.</p> <p><b>Children are precious because of the oral tradition.</b> We need to have someone to pass things down to. The language dies if we don’t have children to transfer the language to.</p>	<p>Within western understanding, there tends to be a more <b>paternalistic approach</b> to the best interest of the child and family.</p> <p>Children are often taught to be independent. This is a symbol of separation versus attachment. It is <b>more individualistic and less communal</b>.</p> <p>Child welfare <b>language tends to be more deficit-based than strengths-based</b>. For example, “what’s wrong and how are we going to work on that?” It is hoped that this will slowly improve with more training on how to adopt a trauma-informed approach, asking “what happened” instead of “what’s wrong”, although there is still a lot to learn and do.</p>

## Programs and Structures

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p><b>New programs start with ceremony</b>, making relations, sharing and learning, asking for direction from Elders and knowledge keepers with protocol, and continuing the journey together.</p> <p>Programs focus on <b>what families need in their own voice</b>, not what we think they need.</p> <p>Indigenous approaches to program evaluation, including <b>oral evaluation and storytelling</b>, are recognized and valued.</p> <p>We are always looking at <b>the past-present-future</b>.</p> <p>Building set-up (structures) reflects and honours Indigenous worldview, including providing <b>ceremonial spaces</b>. Ideally, space for cultural practices would be located close to where Indigenous people are living.</p>	<p><b>New programs are often funded through contracts</b>, based on proposal writing and under the direction of advisory or steering committees. From a western understanding, programs based on best practice or evidence-based practice are highly regarded.</p> <p>New programs may emerge as a result of stakeholder engagement, community consultation or needs assessments. There are written policies, structures, insurance, risk management, and <b>organizational charts to govern overall program delivery</b>. Programs may be evaluated according to western standards (e.g., quantifiable change, checkboxes and indicators), although this is not always the case. There are growing examples of using qualitative approaches to program evaluation and increased valuing of storytelling.</p> <p>Western building set-up tends to favour <b>rectangle boardroom tables</b> over circles. We value the advice of Elders as parallel to consultants and academics and recognize they should be similarly honoured for their time and expertise.</p>

## Allyship

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>There may be differences in understanding of <b>what it means to be an ally</b> from an Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective. Experiential learning opportunities such as Allying with Indigenous Peoples may be helpful to build understanding, trust and relationships and develop meaningful allyship.</p>	<p>In some cases, there might be well intentioned non-Indigenous people that want to be allies but don't know where to start or may unintentionally cause further harm. Experiential learning opportunities such as Allying with Indigenous Peoples may be helpful to <b>build understanding, trust and relationships and develop meaningful allyship</b>.</p>

## Drum and Song

Indigenous understanding	Western understanding
<p>Drum and song are a sacred part of ceremony and have special meaning within Indigenous worldviews. Drums come from the heartbeat of Mother Earth and every nation has songs that have vibration.</p> <p>Our songs are the validation to rights and privileges in our oral systems. Drums help to create a vibration and connection to the spirit of the song. In a harmonious way the drumbeat and song work together to make connection to creation, to guide us in our sacred circles. Our sacred songs are earned through oral ceremonial processes and the songs remain unchanged by our societies and clans. Our ceremonial songs can be thousands of years old. We believe a sacred drum helps to make those connections between us and our grandfathers and grandmothers.</p>	<p>There may be different understanding of drum and song from a western perspective (e.g., may be used in entertainment, may also play a role in western ceremonies or traditions that differ from Indigenous understanding).</p>



## Further Exploration

There is some pressure for Indigenous programs to adapt to western standards and policies to navigate change; in contrast, we offer suggestions for how both Indigenous and western approaches can be integrated into practice. Rather than adhering primarily to western standards, also consider Indigenous understanding when developing contracts and delivering programs (including things that haven't been considered before).

The following table includes a list of potential ideas for agencies to explore. This is not meant as a complete or prescriptive list, but rather a launching off point for further exploration.

Category or Principle	Suggestions for agencies to consider
<b>Ceremony</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ <b>Facilitate ongoing opportunities for integrating ceremony into practice</b> by providing invitations/offerings for children, youth, families and staff to participate in ceremonies that will enhance spiritual growth and cultural knowledge.</li> <li>✚ <b>Include ceremonial spaces</b> in building set-up and design.</li> <li>✚ Learn how to <b>offer protocol</b>.</li> <li>✚ Include <b>financial support for ceremony</b> in program budgets.</li> </ul>
<b>Creation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ <b>Creation stories are fundamental</b> and provide insights into how we relate to the world. Seek to understand the meaning of different creation stories, from both Indigenous and western perspectives.</li> </ul>
<b>Natural Law/ Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Recognize the <b>importance of relationship</b> and what this means from an Indigenous perspective.</li> <li>✚ Practice <b>how to respectfully approach an Elder</b>. A relationship with an elder is not a contractual relationship.</li> <li>✚ Some western-based organizations are seeking guidance on how to build relationships with knowledge keepers and Elders, sometimes not knowing how to do that. Reach out and seek connections and advice moving forward (building on examples from agencies already doing this).</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge Transfer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Advocate for <b>funding models and policy</b> that supports and honours Indigenous world view.</li> <li>✚ Provide access to <b>experiential learning opportunities</b>, books, readings and videos to share knowledge.</li> <li>✚ Some opportunities are offered from an Indigenous world view and are more experiential and holistic (e.g., <i>Allying with Indigenous Peoples</i>, the practice of omanitew; <i>Allying with Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Solutions</i>).</li> </ul>

Category or Principle	Suggestions for agencies to consider
<b>Knowledge Transfer (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ There have been numerous written reports, policies, legislation and western documents intended to work toward reconciliation. The declarations and calls for action and justice have not been fully implemented. There is a disconnect between knowing and doing. We need to take action on what we know. There are some examples of striving to close this gap between knowing and doing, such as the introduction of Truth and Reconciliation Committees within agencies working toward implementing the Calls to Action, and training and experiential learning opportunities to help increase cultural understanding among agency staff and leadership.</li> </ul>
<b>Language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Recognize oral contracts as well as written documents, contracts and annual reporting (parallel practice).</li> <li>✚ Use Indigenous languages. Honour traditional names.</li> <li>✚ Recognize stories as natural law.</li> <li>✚ Advocate for the preservation of language.</li> <li>✚ Advocate for legal recognition of oral descriptions in land claims.</li> </ul>
<b>Wellbeing and Kindness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Acknowledge the meaning of wellbeing and kindness from both an Indigenous and western world view.</li> </ul>
<b>Land and Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ When considering how to offer meaningful land acknowledgements, asking Elders in your area may be more appropriate and helpful than internet searching. A land acknowledgement is not something that can be copied from another place; acknowledge the sacred relationship with land.</li> </ul>
<b>Traditional Parenting/ Kinship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Indigenous children have a right to live with their family and communities of origin, not in a system.</li> <li>✚ Honour traditional parenting and kinship (recognize beyond the nuclear family to include the whole community when searching for family).</li> </ul>
<b>Role of the Child</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Adapt child welfare language and practice to acknowledge the role of the child as an equal part of the circle.</li> <li>✚ Provide opportunities for children to have a meaningful voice.</li> </ul>
<b>Programs and Structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Include honorariums for Elders, recognize and value their expertise similar to academics and consultants.</li> <li>✚ Recognize Elder helpers/oskâpêwis as similar to research assistants</li> </ul>

Category or Principle	Suggestions for agencies to consider
<p><b>Programs and Structures (continued)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Provide space for cultural practices close to where Indigenous people are living.</li> <li>✚ Include Indigenous approaches to program evaluation including oral evaluation and storytelling.</li> <li>✚ Many programs and services delivered to Indigenous children, youth and families may be delivered within western building set-ups (board room tables, etc.); provide opportunities to adapt where possible to include both worldviews and include ceremonial spaces.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Allyship</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ There may be differences in understanding of <b>what it means to be an ally</b> from an Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective. Experiential learning opportunities such as Allying with Indigenous Peoples may be helpful to build understanding, trust and relationships and develop meaningful allyship.</li> <li>✚ Dr. Jody Carrington refers to the idea of “walking each other home”; this may be a helpful way of thinking about allyship as walking together.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Drum and Song</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Acknowledge the sacred meaning of drum and song within Indigenous worldviews. From an Indigenous perspective: Our songs are the validation to rights and privileges in our oral systems. Drums help to create a vibration and connection to the spirit of the song. In a harmonious way the drumbeat and song work together to make connection to creation, to guide us in our sacred circles. Our sacred songs are earned through oral ceremonial processes and the songs remain unchanged by our societies and clans. Our ceremonial songs can be thousands of years old. We believe a sacred drum helps to make those connections between us and our grandfathers and grandmothers.</li> </ul>

## Appendix A: References and Additional Resources

The following resources informed the development of this document and may provide insight into further learning opportunities, conversations, and action. Please note this is not an exhaustive list but rather a list of potential resources for further exploration.

### Agencies and Programs

Align Association of Community Services (2022). There is a comprehensive resource library available on the ALIGN website. There is information about awareness initiatives, covid and culture, drums, songs, dance and gatherings, elders and knowledge keepers, the federal act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children youth and families (C-92), grants, history and traditions, Indigenous child welfare, the Indian Act, language, land treaties, mental health, wellbeing and culture, training, truth and reconciliation, two spirit, and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. See the ALIGN website for access to these resources and additional information at <https://alignab.ca/indigenous-initiatives-resources/>

Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. Overview of cultural programs, accessed online at <https://bentarrow.ca/cultural-programs/>

Closer to Home – oral conversations and presentations about the organization’s approach to a cultural audit. <https://closetohome.com/about-us/>

First Nations Caring Society, Touchstones of Hope. <https://fncaringsociety.com/touchstones-hope>

Miskanawah. Guided by Indigenous teachings, Miskanawah offers evidence-informed, supportive services to people in the Calgary area as they strengthen their circles of self, family, community, and culture. Information online at <https://miskanawah.ca/>

### Books

Bastien, Betty (2004) Blackfoot Ways of Knowing. <https://press.ucalgary.ca/books/9781552381090/#:~:text=Blackfoot%20Ways%20of%20Knowing%20is,colonial%20displacement%20and%20cultural%20genocide.>

Nerburn, Kent (1994). Neither Wolf nor Dog [https://books.google.ca/books/about/Neither\\_Wolf\\_Nor\\_Dog.html?id=XRF5AAAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ca/books/about/Neither_Wolf_Nor_Dog.html?id=XRF5AAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)

Ross, Rupert (1996) Dancing with the Ghost: Exploring Aboriginal Reality [https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/product/9780143054269-item.html?s\\_campaign=go-SmartShop\\_Books\\_EN&gclid=CjwKCAjwkaSaBhA4EiwALBgQaAHD6JFQAPuKs6n1CQgCMNAB285BKV5wp\\_eMByMeDmHrVbLtzOxMMexoChMoQAvD\\_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/product/9780143054269-item.html?s_campaign=go-SmartShop_Books_EN&gclid=CjwKCAjwkaSaBhA4EiwALBgQaAHD6JFQAPuKs6n1CQgCMNAB285BKV5wp_eMByMeDmHrVbLtzOxMMexoChMoQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds)

Joseph, Bob (2019) 21 Things You May not know about the Indian Act. <https://www.ictinc.ca/books/21-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-indian-act>

Levine, Peter (1997) Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma. [https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/384924.Waking\\_the\\_Tiger](https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/384924.Waking_the_Tiger)

Makosis, Bodor, Calhoun and Tyler (2020). *ohpikinâwasowin / Growing a Child: Implementing Indigenous Ways of Knowing with Indigenous Families*.

<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/opihkinawasowinrowing-a-child>

McLeod, Darrel (2018). *Mamaskatch: A Cree Coming of Age* <https://douglas-mcintyre.com/products/9781771622004#:~:text=Growing%20up%20in%20the%20tiny,sisters%20endured%20in%20residential%20school.>

Wall Kimmerer, Robin (2015). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. <https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass>

## Declarations and Calls to Action

Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls – Final Report. Accessed online at [https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/\(report\)](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/(report))

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Accessed online at [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf) (Calls to Action)

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Accessed online at [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf) (Rights)

## Educational Videos and Posters

How worldview is reflected in language. Educational video available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K4qmXFoj2c&t=9s>

Lone Dog's Winter Coat: Keeping History Alive. Educational poster available online at [https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/poster\\_lone\\_dog\\_final.pdf](https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/poster_lone_dog_final.pdf) (poster)

Native Counselling Services of Alberta. *The journey home*. "Journey Home explores healing Indigenous children in the Canadian child welfare system. This powerful documentary provides an Indigenous community perspective on inter-generational trauma and its impacts on children and youth in government care. This Research-Based Documentary highlights community approaches to ensuring children are meaningfully connected to their culture, community and identity." Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=G-q4VepX4vU>

National Film Board of Canada, *Now is the time*. <https://www.nfb.ca/distribution/film/now-is-the-time>



## Experiential Learning Opportunities

Allying with Indigenous Peoples, the practice of omanitew – experiential learning opportunity developed by Dr. Leona Makosis and Dr. Ralph Bodor. More information available online at IRM Research and Evaluation <https://www.irminc.ca/training/>

Allying with Indigenous Peoples, cultural solutions 1.0 and 2.0 – experiential learning opportunity adapted from the practice of omanitew and further developed by Dr. Reg Crowshoe. <https://alignab.ca/events/category/align-training-events/>

Indigenous Corporate Training (founded in 2002 by Bob Joseph, 21 Things you may not know about the Indian Act). <https://www.ictinc.ca/training/indigenous-awareness>

## Government of Alberta

Government of Alberta, Ministry of Children's Services (2019). Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/d2642ef5-fa65-4117-8a44-d5b26c6aca04/resource/d1f3f3a5-20e9-4f2e-912c-c8cf1c1a397d/download/icuf-january-2019.pdf>

Government of Alberta, Child Intervention Information and Statistics Summary (2022). <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/de167286-500d-4cf8-bf01-0d08224eeadc/resource/34248a95-0488-4a88-9a74-ff6e5300c9f7/download/cs-child-intervention-information-and-statistics-summary-2022-2023-q1.pdf>

## Government of Canada

An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families. Government of Canada. Accessed online at <https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/F-11.73/index.html> (legislation)

Indian Act. Government of Canada. Accessed online at <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/> (legislation)

## Appendix B: Parallel Understanding Diagram

This image was developed as a template to help guide discussion and reflection, and to build parallel understanding between Indigenous and western world views as they relate to various principles previously described including ceremony, creation, natural law/relationships, knowledge transfer, language, wellbeing and kindness, land and environment, traditional parenting/kinship, role of the child, programs and structures, allyship, drum and song, and others. What is the current level of cultural understanding within your agency? What is working and what are the challenges? What else do you / your organization need to do? This is meant to generate conversation to work together toward a better future for children and families and to help increase Indigenous understanding within Alberta agencies.

