

Practice Strategies for Lifelong Connections



The integration of the original 6 Practice Strategies and the philosophy and 4 strategies of Lifelong Connections has resulted in principle based practice approach called **Practice Strategies for Lifelong Connections**. The original 6 practice strategies focused on the “front end” of practice, specifically intake, assessment and decisions related to children coming into care. They embed family centered and strengths-based practice early into the assessment process through slowing down and critically thinking through decisions, involving parents as active partners and engaging extended family and natural supports early in the process of safety planning for children and youth.

As the implementation of the 6 original practice strategies continued, work began on integrating the Child Intervention Framework principles in the intervention phase of involvement. Evidence and research quickly demonstrated the importance of a focus on connections and the need for practice shifts that supported keeping children and youth connected to family, community and culture as well as reconnecting them where these ties had been severed through permanent guardianship orders.

The philosophy of the importance of connections and the four practice strategies that supported embedding this were titled *Lifelong Connections; Pathways to Interdependence*. Lifelong Connections believes identifying and maintaining meaningful connections through working collaboratively with families, children and youth and caregivers. It recognizes the importance of human connection and relationships within a family and community context, and is focused on the whole wellbeing of youth and children, which means reaching beyond concepts of legal permanence, placement or planning to include all areas of permanence; relational, physical and cultural as well as legal. These four areas of permanence have further evolved, through consultation with stakeholders, to become the 4 areas of connection, which along with their definitions have been a foundational piece of the Practice Strategies for Lifelong connections.

Engagement and Integration:

Engagement with staff was a critical aspect of developing the strategies and learning how best to implement the philosophy within all aspects of our work.

Creation of the *“Lifelong connections: Pathways to Interdependence”* document included several different elements such as a permanency literature review, jurisdictional scans regarding transitions practices, review of existing Calgary and Edmonton Permanency Frameworks and the Treaty 8 First Nations Practice Standards October 2015 and a facilitated, full-day session with DFNA, regional child intervention, and ministry representatives to discuss best practices for transitioning children and youth between placements.

In November 2016, implementation of Lifelong Connections: Pathways to Interdependence began through pilots in four regions across the province: North Central, Edmonton, Calgary, and South. These sites began identifying how the philosophy can be used in day-to-day practice.

Process to refresh the front end Practice Strategies booklet began in Spring 2017 with focus groups of frontline staff leading the changes. It became clear that these two pieces of work did not exist in isolation, so it made sense to merge them into one Booklet with philosophy, including the 4 areas of connection, tools, and prompts that promote critical thinking about decision making and a focus on connections; creating a consistent spectrum wide approach to safety, wellbeing and connections. Policy updates are also underway to embed the philosophy and tools into practice and reinforce their use.

The 10 strategies are:

- Supervisor Consults
- 3rd Person Consults
- Family/Natural Supports Meetings
- Immediate Kinship Placement
- Ongoing Kinship Placement
- Family Time
- Cultural and Spiritual Connection
- Formalized Connections
- Terminating Permanent Guardianship Orders
- Transition to Adulthood

Practice Strategies for Lifelong Connections assists staff by:

- Supporting staff, supervisors, and managers to slow down their thinking, challenge assumptions, and critically think about the unique needs of each family, child or youth they work with
- Ensuring stable and nurturing homes along with meaningful connections happen throughout our involvement when we practice collaboratively and engage family and natural supports.
- Recognizing that every child and youth have the fundamental right to belong securely to a family that honors their familial ties, culture and community connections.
- Recognizing that connection to culture, religious practices and spiritual beliefs are crucial to wellbeing.
- Provide strengthened practice approaches to the assessment of children in need of intervention that focuses on the definitions of danger versus risk
- Critically thinking about complicating factors and protective factors, which allows staff to recognize safety for a number of children or youth who can reunify with family.
- Recognizing that children and youth transition successfully when they have healthy connections to family and community, the opportunity to build life skills, have a strong identity including hopes, dreams and a high self-esteem.
- Outlining an explicit process and timeline for reconnection and reunification. This requires ongoing supports for 12 months prior to applying to terminate the PGO, with data suggesting that there is an increased need for support around the 7 month mark.

Practice Strategies for Lifelong Connections is being implemented province wide with training for all staff slated to begin in October 2018.

Family Finding, a model by Kevin Campbell is a complementary practice approach containing tools to assist staff in successfully identifying, engaging and maintaining connections. Training in the use of Family Finding is underway. Additionally Kevin Campbell is directly coaching and mentoring a cohort of staff to build internal capacity in use of his model.