



Pandemic Impacts for Indigenous Children & Youth Within Canada: An Ethical Analysis

“Indigenous young people should be able to actively contribute to decisions concerning their well-being and the well-being of others that they care about, and not be treated as passive recipients of services” (p. 393).

1. What is the research about?

Indigenous children, youth, and families in Canada have experienced COVID-19 disparities that are compounded by the impracticality of self-isolation in rural communities, lack of access to clean water for handwashing, inadequate housing and health infrastructure, and limited testing availability. This article examines how **Indigenous communities in Canada have uniquely responded to COVID-19 challenges** despite these disproportionately high-risk factors and lack of equitable support from multiple systems and structures.

This research was designed to advance the work of Indigenous-focused policy while adhering to **Indigenous worldviews** (philosophies of life or conceptions of the world). While these worldviews are not monolithic, there are some commonalities amongst Nations, and they are often based on maintaining balance and harmony between the human and natural worlds.

2. Where did the research take place?

This article focuses on research about Indigenous experiences within Canada, with the understanding that many of the findings can be beneficial for understanding and engaging with Indigenous communities globally.

3. Who is this research about?

This ethical analysis is about **Indigenous youth in Canada**, centering their perspectives and experiences. However, the authors explicitly state that there are no Pan-Indigenous views on the stages of life and that the term ‘youth’ may differ from Western interpretations. Many Indigenous Nations use the Medicine Wheel to illustrate the life cycle; in some Indigenous teachings, such as Cree, the stages of life are connected to spiritual roles and responsibilities. Similarly, the construct of age is not linear. Adherence to chronological age, which is more prominent in the West, is considered a colonial by-product. When referring to youth, the authors use the contemporary age range of 18 to 30 years, as used by Canadian institutions.

4. How was the research done?

With an understanding that there are **significant gaps in the literature** when looking at Indigenous children and youth’s perspectives, the authors drew their findings from both **peer-reviewed research** and **grey literature**, such as social media, podcasts, and news reports.

The authors **analyzed data from these sources through the lens of three values foundational to many Indigenous worldviews**, which formed the basis for a working framework on Indigenous childhood ethics – “an initial step towards advancing our understanding of the ethical dimensions of the experiences of Indigenous young people” (p. 383):

i) The value of **interconnected relationships**, also known as **wâhkôhtowin** in Plains Cree, which refers to the interconnected nature of all relationships, systems of nature, and communities.

ii) The value of **holism**, which incorporates the traditional knowledge of the Medicine Wheel and its four quadrants, representing the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects of health.

iii) The value of **Indigenous-informed restorative justice** and how it can alleviate the strains of navigating systems of power for Indigenous people.

5. What are the key findings?

This ethical analysis identified how COVID-19 has affected Indigenous young people and how they have uniquely responded:

a) Maintaining Interconnectedness

In order to maintain interconnectedness, Indigenous communities have mobilized funding for on-the-land trips, made COVID-19 resources available in traditional languages, and started a #ProtectourElders movement to support one of the more vulnerable groups impacted by the pandemic. This has also required “creative and innovative solutions” (p. 388) to facilitate peer connection and engagement, and the amplification of young people’s voices.

b) Ensuring Culturally Attuned Supports & Services

Many Indigenous communities have advocated for more culturally attuned supports and services. Indigenous grassroots workers have collaborated with agencies to establish virtual counselling and access to traditional ceremony and medicines to cope with challenges associated with the pandemic.

c) Securing Inclusive Resources, Supports & Policies

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for more inclusive standards for data collection, increased funding for traditional Indigenous-based healing strategies, and social justice policies that look at the effects of the social determinants of health.

This analysis also demonstrated **the potential effectiveness of using a framework on Indigenous childhood ethics** in conducting research with Indigenous youth in order to authentically, meaningfully, and respectfully centre their experiences and perspectives.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This article seeks to amplify the voices of Indigenous children and youth who are often left out and further marginalized in research and policymaking. Youth workers and policymakers who are Indigenous and/or working with and alongside Indigenous children, youth, and communities can strive to incorporate this framework in their work. This research is important as it seeks to prioritize community-centered pandemic and epidemic responses. **Practitioners who state they have a commitment to reconciliation must advocate for equitable access to supports and services for Indigenous people.**

This research can also serve as an integral tool in future pandemic planning. The working framework on Indigenous childhood ethics states that **centering Indigenous voices is vital in addressing any social determinants of health**, and that policies that are designed to support Indigenous children and youth should **look at the values of interconnected relationships, holism, and Indigenous-informed restorative justice.**



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