



Ontario Centre of Excellence
for Child and Youth
Mental Health

Working with Indigenous families: An engagement bundle for child and youth mental health agencies



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Introduction

In many Indigenous cultures, *bundles* play an important role in health and well-being. Physical bundles (i.e. a collection of sacred items that are important to a given person, such as eagle feathers, medicines, a pipe, etc.) are often carried by Indigenous peoples attending ceremony. Similarly, some Indigenous cultures believe that when a child is born they come into the world with a spiritual bundle which holds all of the gifts the Creator gave to them. Both physical and spiritual bundles serve the purpose of helping a person to engage with creation in a healthy and balanced way.

This *engagement bundle* is designed to provide you with high level, introductory information about how you may want to approach your work with Indigenous families. This bundle also directs you to additional resources that can help you engage with Indigenous families in meaningful and respectful ways.

Conceptualizing mental health and well-being

Indigenous definitions of well-being are holistic and include four elements: emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health. In an Indigenous context, healing begins with a person's spirit, as spiritual health forms the foundation on which all other aspects of health are balanced.¹ This model emphasizes an individual's responsibility in the process of being healthy, in that a healthy person can presumably attend to all aspects of health equally and achieve balance between them. This model also highlights an appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things, as kinship exists between immediate and extended family members, as well as friends, ancestors, animals, land, trees, plants, waters, spirits and all other parts of creation.^{2,3} According to Indigenous worldviews, the stronger these connections, the healthier a person and their community will be.⁴

¹ Linklater, R. (2004). *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.

² Linklater, 2014

³ Waldrum, J.B., Innis, R., Kaweski, M., & Redman, C. (2008). Building a Nation: Healing an Urban Context. In J.B. Waldrum (Ed.), *Aboriginal Healing in Canada: Studies in Therapeutic Meaning and Practice* (pp. 205-268). Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

⁴ Hart, M.A. (2002). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping*. Halifax: Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.



Understanding the history

In order to understand the relationship between Indigenous families and child and youth mental health agencies today, it is necessary to understand the historical context from which this relationship evolved. An extensive history of colonization exists in Canada, and includes actions such as residential schools and the widespread removal of Indigenous children from their families.

*Colonization involves the belief by a dominating group that their worldview is superior, coupled with the intention to legitimize this worldview however possible.
(Hart, 2002)*

Residential schools

Soon after Canada was established as a nation in 1867, the federal government partnered with churches to develop a residential school system for Indigenous children. The sole purpose of these schools was to separate First Nation, Inuit and Métis children from their families and communities in order to assimilate them into Euro-Canadian culture.⁵

Children living in residential schools were forbidden to speak their Indigenous language, practice ceremonies, share traditional stories or use traditional medicines. Physical, emotional and sexual abuse was commonplace. Many children died due to neglect or disease and were buried in unmarked graves.⁶ No less than 150,000 children were taken from their families over the course of more than a century.⁷

The trauma caused by these actions was extensive. Not only did children suffer, but so did their families and their communities. Children often lived in residential schools for years, so the transmission of culture, language and spirituality was severely disrupted and as a result, children were not prepared to return to their communities or traditional lifestyles. It also caused the loss of parenting skills as children experienced abuse more often than love.⁸

The Sixties Scoop

While many residential schools closed between the 1950s and the 1980s, Indigenous children continued to be removed from their homes based on the assumption that their families could not adequately care for them. As child welfare practices evolved, it was commonplace for children from Indigenous families to be apprehended for 'being poor'. Many non-Indigenous social workers believed that Indigenous

⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation*. Ottawa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2012). *Canada Aboriginal Peoples and Residential Schools: They Came for the Children*. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015

⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012



cultures and ways of life were detrimental to the healthy development of children.⁹ This period is known as the ‘Sixties Scoop’. The disproportionate removal of Indigenous children from their families is unfortunately a practice that continues today; this often stems from the high rates of poverty experienced in Indigenous communities, and other factors that are external to the child and out of the control of the family.^{10,11}

A path forward

Colonization initiatives had a significant negative intergenerational impact on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples. Today, Indigenous communities are working towards healing from the trauma. This involves re-establishing the traditional social structures (including education, health and governance systems) that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans, and resurrecting cultural practices that supported health in the past. So what does this mean for those who support Indigenous families?

Acknowledge the role of child and youth mental health agencies

Given the negative experiences that many Indigenous families have had with various child welfare agencies, it’s not surprising that there remains a deep-seated mistrust of Canadian institutions who claim to want to ‘help’. While child and youth mental health agencies genuinely want to provide supportive services, they are often surprised to find many Indigenous families and children skeptical (and sometimes suspicious) of their intentions.

In order for clinicians working within these agencies to understand the roots of this mistrust, it’s critical to acknowledge and understand the historical role of their profession in the colonization process. In doing so, agencies will be better equipped to engage and support Indigenous families and establish a new relationship founded on mutual respect and trust.

Tap into existing community resources

Mainstream child and youth mental health agencies are increasingly aware of the central role that traditional ceremonies play in the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples and communities.

⁹ Tait, C., Henry, R., & Loewen Walker, R. (2013). Child Welfare: A social Determinant of Health for Canadian First Nations and Métis Children. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 11(1).

¹⁰ Allen, B & Smylie, J. (2015). *First Peoples, Second Class Treatment: The Role of Racism in the Health and Well-Being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada*. Toronto: The Wellesley Institute

¹¹ Blackstock, C. (2008). Reconciliation Means Not Saying Sorry Twice: Lessons from Child Welfare in Canada. In Brant Castellano, M., Archibald, L., & DeGagné, M. (Eds.), *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.



Despite this, however, many agencies still lack culturally-appropriate treatment options for Indigenous clients. This poses a unique challenge for non-Indigenous clinicians who work with and want to support Indigenous children and youth. How does one create opportunities for clients to engage in traditional ceremonies and interventions without cultural appropriation?

As agencies work towards better supporting Indigenous children and youth, it's important to draw upon existing community resources. Throughout Ontario, there are numerous Indigenous-specific services and service providers that agencies can engage to help clients access the traditional forms of healing that mainstream agencies may not be able to provide. This includes Indigenous-run housing agencies, friendship centres, health centres, cultural spaces and healing lodges. The willingness of an agency to reach out to these services will directly impact how well clients accessing their services will recover.

Use appropriate language

Indigenous or *Aboriginal* are terms used to describe a person who is First Nation, Inuit or Métis, which are culturally-diverse groups of people.

- There are over 600 **First Nation** communities in Canada, representing 12 linguistic groups and over 60 distinct languages spoken.¹²
- **Métis** communities share common traditions, histories, kinship systems and language but are different from one another based on their location throughout the Métis Homeland (the traditional Métis territory that encompasses northwestern Ontario, the Prairies and parts of British Columbia).¹³
- **Inuit** people live in four northern regions throughout Canada known as Inuvialuit (in the Northwest Territories), Nunatsiavut (in Labrador), Nunavik (in Quebec) and Nunavut.¹⁴

As the original peoples of North America, Indigenous peoples are considered separate from groups considered minorities within Canada (such as women, new Canadians, individuals who identify as LGBTQ2S (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning, 2-spirited) etc.) because Indigenous peoples have inherent rights to the land on which Canada is situated.

¹² Indigenous and Northern Affairs. (2016). First Nations people in Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1303134042666/1303134337338>

¹³ Métis National Council. (2016). Governance. Retrieved from <http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/governments>

¹⁴ Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. (2016). *Aboriginal Peoples and Communities: Inuit*. Retrieved from <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014187/1100100014191>



AVOID	USE
<p>Outdated and inappropriate terminology (i.e. terms imposed by settlers):</p> <p><i>Indian*</i>, <i>Halfbreed</i> or <i>Eskimo</i></p>	<p>Appropriate and respectful terminology (i.e. how Indigenous people are referred to today):</p> <p><i>First Nation</i>, <i>Inuit</i> or <i>Métis</i></p>
<p>Statements of ownership (e.g. “Canada’s Indigenous people are very diverse” or “our Indigenous people”):</p> <p>Indigenous people should never be referred to as the property of Canada</p>	<p>Culturally-specific terminology (i.e. how Indigenous people refer to themselves in their own languages):</p> <p><i>Anishinabek</i> (Ojibway), <i>Onkwehonwe</i> (Mohawk), <i>Nehiyaw</i> (Cree), <i>Michif</i> (Métis)</p>

* The term *Indian* is still used in a legal context by the Canadian government in legislation such as the Indian Act and the Constitution Act (e.g. Section 25(2) uses “Indian, Inuit and Métis people.”¹⁵). The Canadian government also divides this population into status (registered) and non-status (unregistered) categories. However, the term *Indian* should not be used unless speaking about specific legal documents, as many find it offensive.

The following terms should always be capitalized when referring to Indigenous peoples: *Aboriginal*, *Indigenous*, *First Nation*, *Inuit*, *Métis*, *Elder*, *Inuk*, *Michif*, *Anishinaabe* or *Ojibway*, *Nehiyaw* or *Cree*, *Haudenasaunee*, *Mohawk* and so on. As well, in the same way that the terms *English*, *French* and *Canadian* are capitalized, so should *Indigenous* and *Aboriginal* as they refer to nations of people and language groups.

Recognize alternate family structures

When family structures are discussed in a Canadian context, it is often assumed that the caretaking role belongs to a child’s mother and father. In contrast, parenting in an Indigenous context often occurs through the interaction that a child has with their extended family as much as it does with their parents.¹⁶ For example, traditionally, grandparents were often primarily responsible for raising a child as the child’s mother and father would be busy ensuring that the family had the resources necessary for survival.

Indigenous family structures have broken down in many instances, because of colonization. Despite this however, the meaning of family in the context of raising a child persists.¹⁷ Today, when an Indigenous person speaks of their family, they are often referring to a great number of people than what may be

¹⁵ Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (UK), 1982, c 11.

¹⁶ Lafrance, J., & Collins, D. (2003). Residential Schools and Aboriginal Parenting: Voices of Parents. *Native Social Work Journal*, 4(1), 104-125.

¹⁷ Brant Castellano, M. (2002). *Aboriginal Family Trends: Extended Families, Nuclear Families, Families of the Heart*. Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family.



assumed by a non-Indigenous listener. Similarly, an Indigenous child may not identify with the typically-represented family model of children and parents. In order to best meet the needs of Indigenous families and youth, it's critical that service providers acknowledge these traditional understandings of family structure.

Build on traditional teachings about gender identity

The term *two-spirited* is used by many Indigenous peoples to refer to one's spirit as both male and female.¹⁸ Traditionally, those identifying as two-spirited often held integral roles within their communities (such as medicine people, leaders or intermediaries).¹⁹ Two-spirited people were often accepted, understood and highly valued for their ability to see through a perspective outside of traditional male and/or female gender roles.²⁰

The contemporary reality is very different. Many teachings surrounding the traditional roles of two-spirited peoples in Indigenous communities were not passed down by Elders, likely due to the impact of generations of children attending Christian-run schools.²¹ As a result, two-spirited children and youth aren't always taught that their difference is their gift, and instead are subject to discrimination by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples.²² This increases the risk factors faced by many Indigenous children and youth, and likely plays a role in the higher rates of suicide among Indigenous youth relative to non-Indigenous youth.²³ It's crucial to collaborate with Indigenous knowledge keepers who maintain traditional teachings on the role of two-spirited peoples.

Observe protocols

- **Territory acknowledgement:** It's always respectful to acknowledge the people whose traditional territory a meeting is taking place on. For instance, if a meeting is taking place in Thunder Bay, it would be respectful to begin by saying: "I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held in the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe people and the traditional homeland of the Métis Nation."
- **Traditional openings:** When meeting with an Indigenous community, it's considered respectful to make space on the agenda for a traditional opening by someone in the community. This may

¹⁸ Tafoya, T. (2003). Native Gay and Lesbian Issues: The Two-Spirited. In Garnets, L.D., & Kimmel, D. (Eds.), *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁹ Tafoya, 2003

²⁰ Tafoya, 2003

²¹ Cameron, M. (2005). Two-Spirited Aboriginal People: Continuing Cultural Appropriation by Non-Aboriginal Society. *Canadian Women's Studies Journal*, 24(2-3), 123-127.

²² Cameron, 2005

²³ National Aboriginal Health Organization. (2012). *Suicide Prevention and Two-Spirited People*. Ottawa: National Aboriginal Health Organization.



include lighting the qulliq (a type of oil lamp used by the Inuit), smudging, a drum song, prayer or story. Ask the community to identify someone who may want to provide an opening.

- **Gifts for Elders:** When inviting Elders to speak, it's customary to provide them with a gift (e.g. tobacco or tea). The gift is symbolic and serves as a way of making a request or giving thanks for their participation. It doesn't replace any honorarium or stipend they may also be receiving.

Next steps

In order to establish renewed trust and find ways to support Indigenous families and children on their path to wellness, child and youth mental health agencies must commit to ongoing and consistent efforts to engage Indigenous families in culturally-appropriate ways.

This engagement bundle is designed to introduce you to concepts and practices, and does not replace the multitude of tools and resources that have been developed by Indigenous researchers and practitioners in working with their communities. For more information, consult the following resources:

- The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (which closed in 2014) developed a number of resources designed to promote reconciliation and support Indigenous communities in building and reinforcing sustainable healing processes. [Aboriginal Healing in Canada: Studies in Therapeutic Meaning and Practice](#) and [From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools](#) are two such resources.
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established to guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. [Canada, Aboriginal Peoples and Residential Schools: They Came for the Children, What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation](#) and [Calls to Action](#) are just a few of the many resources available designed to inform and educate the public on the TRC's findings during its five-year mandate.
- [First Peoples, Second Class Treatment: The Role of Racism in the Health and Well-Being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada](#), developed by The Wellesley Institute, explores the role of racism in the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
- The National Aboriginal Health Organization offers a number of useful resources including [Suicide Prevention and Two-Spirited People](#), which describes the traditional conceptualization of gender identity, explores the increased risk that two-spirited people face and outlines how service providers can help young people.
- The [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#) (NYSHN) is an organization by and for Indigenous youth that works across issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice and is a great source of information on LGBTQ2S people.