

Themes for Prince George – staff of Carrier Sekani

Re: practices that support working with Aboriginal families and communities

Relationships are fundamental to good practice – cannot do the work without having a relationship with family and community members

- Relationship is most important, more so than the paperwork.
- Comprehensive plan of care – never get them done. But if I can't write one from my head then have not done the most important thing, which is to create the relationship.
- MCFD is risk driven but not having a relationship is what creates the risk. Need to understand the connections between child, family, and community.
- Have to be willing to accept risk.
- Basic premise of inserting social workers into families is wrong. Part of our role – if we have to be there – is to aid the child and help the child based on whom he/she is connected to.
- Lots of time sit and tell my story – that is how I make connections. Had to go thru lot of abuse and addiction before decided time to get well, take on education, etc. Building relationships all the time now.
- Social workers go into home with soup; show family how to make soup, create relationship. Building trust; there is no trust of MCFD social worker. As a result of working together have brought children back to community.
- When first decided to work as social worker for our community everyone said I was nuts. Was given responsibility for investigations within the community. Told everyone that I might be investigating them; when first had to do that, people welcomed me because I had already told them my name. The community really trusted me.

Understanding/knowing the community, community protocols and traditional practices

- Community based practice is what should drive everything.
- Where you come from is really important. Every meeting/greeting starts with this.
- Knowing who to contact in the community – some have protocols on who to call; others it is more varied and informal – band and chief and council, family preservation worker, someone else in the community.
- Lake Babine nation follows the Clan system while Cheslatta follows the “pay out” system more than clan system.
- Traditionally families would gather together to feast when someone shot a moose.

Practice is guided by principles, is community driven, and has built-in accountability structures

- Basic principle – assume everyone doing best they can. Start from there.
- Traditionally social workers were there to help, not to disrupt families.
- Principles of practice that are –
 - holistic
 - aimed at keeping families together
- Concept of guardianship is foreign. Community is the guardian – then would not have provincial standards, would have community standards.
- Healthier community wants to hold people accountable.
- Accountability – usually it is the community and family who keep me accountable.
 - Becomes the connections
 - Guardianship workers as having power is an illusion. Never really worked.
 - Community really keeps you honest. Everyone knows what you are doing.
 - Let community work out how they want to do this.
 - All problems –mostly about not having enough money
 - Need to give the community the resources to help alleviate poverty.

Some examples -

Cheslatta – make decisions thru community meetings; 2 or 3 elders provide guidance to Chief and Council. In Cheslatta – get a lot of information because the social worker is also on the band council. So the council always puts her on anything to do with child welfare. Band council gets involved in decisions about Indigenous children if there is an investigation - then have to let Chief and Council know. They assign a person to accompany the SW so that there is a witness to ensure community and family rights and interests are respected.

Another model in Nezul Be Hunayeh –

- really utilize family support workers/family preservation workers. Work with women and children. Get involved with families through FG conference meetings.
- Have direct involvement
- Hold family meetings
- Family care workers go to court hearings so that MCFD social worker not making decisions on own.
- Elders have a say in whether social worker could be in room
- Common interest in best interest of the child

Creating a sense of hope and purpose and finding opportunities to work together

- Change has to come from community. For example: I was at a health conference a few weeks ago – did a performance from the Olympic games – they pulled community together, put aside differences, everyone pitched in to assist in creating and putting on

performance. Big message of hope; was good because for a long time feeling of helplessness – more drug and alcohol problems and violence coming out so good to see so many pulling together.

Engage the whole family/community in planning for children

- Focus is on best interest of the children. Sometimes was able to get the kids back with their dads. Gave the dads purpose and focus. More and more fathers are taking care of the children while the mother's working – getting dad's connected is good.
- Safety Plans – can be way of helping not to remove children. But puts pressure on the families that took in children in order to manage a safety plan
- Safety plan – can be for a community, not just an individual. Impossible to do a safety plan, if don't know who in community is safe. Put onus on family to find someone safe.

Re: practices that are barriers to supporting healthy families and communities

Imposition of standards that are unrealistic and not in keeping with Indigenous values and beliefs or with community realities

- Aboriginal foster homes – no one wants to become a designated foster home because as soon as they hear that they have to go through MCFD assessment and training and through a criminal record check – won't do it, they say no; so sad because we have lost good families and potential as a result.
- As guardianship worker – have teens on my caseload. Want to be in touch with their families. Good. But as a white social worker – to say "I need a criminal record check on everyone who is going to the house tonight". They say are you crazy? So then we have to figure out how to work together – despite what the standards say. That is a practical example of how the standards bump against the reality. So I have to transfer responsibility to the parents. Big risk though. Have to be comfortable that adults are going to watch out for the teen.
- MCFD – standard says as soon as elders over 60 can't look after young children. Impose other standards too, like have to eat fruit and veggies. Well I grew up on meat and berries. That is what is healthy for us, not drinking milk.
- Going back to be a social worker wasn't possible after getting my degree. Now have to follow code of ethics. Knew there were crowded houses, etc. – didn't dent my values – but very tough to enforce rules and standards when confronted with world of difference between their world and mine. Ends up being frustrating – have to abide by a system that won't fit.

Imposition of standards regarding the number of children per household

- Housing – big problem. Applying standards to the wrong world. For example – in house recently that had 14 people living there. Not enough housing in community to be able to adequately meet provincial standards. Impossible really.

Standards are too focused on “risk”; there needs to be new understanding of what the risk factors are, and how healing happens and risk is reduced

- Risk assessment – does not work. This is the western idea of whole person – defined by assessments. Have learned that it is about the journey that is unique – not so interested in creating standardized norms. First Nations are more about the individual journey.
- “Don’t poke in all the holes” – this is too much the focus of the current risk assessment tool and if you do poke in all the holes you are bound to find something.

Community expectations and practices that are at odds with those of MCFD can create additional stress or pressure on practitioners

- Standards say I have to meet with youth once a month. This is hard to manage due to caseload. The caseload size and workload – does not support the work.
- Networking – this was not part of my job within the MCFD. This is an expectation within Carrier Sekani. That is really different.

Political and decision-making structures that cause divisions

- Clan leaders make decisions but government deals with the chief and council – that causes divisions
- Made very clear that Hazelton very different from other communities. Have 62 clan houses. The people want the power to have decisions to be made by clans not by chief and council – that is white construct.

Difficulty of trying to reconnect children who have been away from their communities for so many years

- Very hard to get kids back after they leave their community but that should be the standard – kids should not be leaving their community. For ex. Was contacted by social worker from Sto’lo – had a kid aging out of care and had never been home to Cheslatta. We had a great welcome home ceremony.

When families/clans/communities are not healthy

- When child needs support – look at whole family. But sometimes the clan is not healthy

- Communities that are not healthy – might have disconnect with members. Might have to work with just some clan members. In healthier community there will be more relationships. That is why grandparents often caring for children.
- Healthy families are overloaded and unhealthy ones don't have any responsibilities. Lot of pressure especially in small community.
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Issues are more complicated now and more challenging

- Dealing with newer drugs now and FASD. This is very hard on the communities. Very complicated. Can't just say give that child to grandmother. Especially the FASD babies – they are so difficult for everyone. So it is a complicated subject. And each time new chief and council elected, then change comes along again.
- FASD really changes how to care for children.

Re: Additional Comments

Use of "traditional values: is in itself value laden. Indication of western thinking. Really are values associated with First Nations ways of being and thinking.

There are just different ways of perceiving and describing the world.