
FOREWORD

Voices Discovering Each Other as They Rise From Canada's Fragmented Child Welfare System

I had the privilege in 1999 to become part of a proposal for funding a national Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW). In the original CECW proposal, we sought to overcome some of the barriers to developing a much needed national research and policy network. We started to reinforce an emerging bridge between the NGO sector and universities by establishing a solid partnership with the Child Welfare League of Canada. Subsequently, we teamed up with the Université de Montréal, to begin bridging the language divide. The emergence of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada brought a key new partner to the CECW in 2002. More recently, the CECW has had the opportunity to develop new partnerships to help broaden its geographic network. Through the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium we have been able to link with a number of rich and diverse initiatives from western Canada. In May 2007, we will help sponsor the first Atlantic Canada Child Welfare Forum, which will strengthen ties with the Atlantic provinces.

Such networks are essential in a country where the structure of child welfare is fundamentally fragmented. The provision of child welfare services is a provincial and territorial responsibility in Canada. For children with federally recognized Indian status, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs has funding responsibility, although services must be delivered under provincial/territorial legislation. In several provinces, the responsibility to look after vulnerable children is further delegated to local agencies. This structure has supported the development of a rich and varied service delivery system across more than 400 local child welfare authorities. While

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this decentralized structure can foster innovative initiatives adapted to local community needs, it also runs the risk of fragmentation and isolation. Fragmentation is evident at many levels. Standards for protecting and supporting vulnerable children and youth vary dramatically across the country. Many jurisdictions extend this protection to youth up to age 18, but others consider a 16-year-old who is physically or sexually assaulted not to be in need of special protection. Most child welfare services are funded to provide in-home support services and out-of-home care. For Aboriginal children, however, funding mechanisms favour out-of-home care. As a result, Aboriginal children are entering foster care at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal children.

While recognizing many of the challenges facing this fragmented service delivery system, *Putting a Human Face on Child Welfare: Voices from the Prairies* is first of all a celebration of the creative potential of community-based child welfare. Through *Putting a Human Face on Child Welfare: Voices from the Prairies*, the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium brings Prairie service providers and researchers together to share their experiences, linking them to service providers and researchers from the rest of Canada to learn about challenges and solutions emerging from child welfare in the Prairies. With the help of funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada's Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being program, the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare has been able to partner with the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium and similar initiatives to form a Canada-wide child welfare research, policy, and practice network. This networking provides a critical opportunity for members of the Canadian child welfare community to exchange their research and their experiences, and to build a shared knowledge base that transcends fragmentation to ensure that children across Canada have equal access to the most effective and culturally appropriate services possible.

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