

Foreword

The child welfare system is rightfully the focus of close public scrutiny regarding how it protects children, and the supports given to families who may be struggling for a variety of reasons. In the Prairie context, the imposition of this system on Aboriginal families and communities has resulted in immense difficulty and distress for many, and attracted increased attention from scholars and practitioners.

Greater analysis and understanding, and particularly hearing the voices of Aboriginal children, youth and their families, have caused the paradigm of child welfare to slowly shift. Is the harm we are protecting children from perhaps the very harm society has created through its disempowerment, exclusion and forced removal of successive generations of Aboriginal children to denominational residential schools? What are the broader ecological factors that contribute to the conditions of potential harm to children? Is the child welfare system a response to this or a continuation of it?

We know most incidents of Aboriginal child maltreatment that are substantiated pertain to neglect and exposure to domestic violence; the roots of these concerns are in poverty, social exclusion, and limited social serving systems in Aboriginal communities (health, education and family justice systems).

It is only recently that the need to invest adequately in supports for better child development conditions has been considered as applicable in equal measure to Aboriginal communities and families. These essential supports include maternal-fetal support, early infant development, early childhood education, education, parenting instruction and other support programs. The lens is shifting in this system. Better examination of the inequities in social systems and the neglectful level of support to Aboriginal child serving agencies has caused many to rethink the policy framework for Aboriginal child safety, health and well-being.

Amidst this paradigm shift, or perhaps propelling it, is the *Reconciliation in Child Welfare Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* document, which is both ground-breaking and widely supported.

Touchstones calls for better systemic support for Aboriginal families, children and communities. It also highlights the need for greater recognition that when Aboriginal children enter the system of care, their outcomes may not end up being better than they may have been if they did not go into care. As well, the lack of stability of their placements and the disconnect they experience from their families and communities seriously compromise the outcomes for these children.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* reminds us that all children have the right to be safe, supported and educated. It also acknowledges that the right of indigenous children to be connected to their community is not only a component of their human right to development, it also provides for the sharing of culture from generation to generation.

Focusing on the human rights of the child, new examinations of the paradigm of child welfare, and better understandings of the impact of these systems on the lives and opportunities of those being served propels us in new directions in the Prairies.

There is much to be done. In some instances, the work seems more like arranging for a fleet of ambulances at a cliff-bottom, while waiting for people to fall, instead of doing something at the top of that cliff to prevent what is happening in the first place. This book, and the thoughtful work of the authors and editors in grappling with these issues, will contribute to better understandings and practice. From this, I am renewed with hope that the future will be so much better for my grandchildren than it was for the grandparents of my children. There is passion, action and strength in these essays that will resonate with experienced practitioners and newcomers to this area. I hope it will inspire even more scholarship, and shifts in practice to better respect Aboriginal peoples, cultures and traditions, and especially the children.

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