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The voice of child welfare in Ontario

Alexandra Michelle is the sixth grandchild to George Leck, Director of Information Services at OACAS and Louise Leck, Director of Education Services at OACAS

JOURNAL

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Message from the Executive Director

The dawn of another year brings the promise of new beginnings, resolutions and goal setting. We expect new opportunities and new challenges in 2007!

In 2006 we faced a public relations challenge that supersedes any that most organizations will ever need to manage. The leak and release of the Auditor General's report generated unrelenting media coverage, mostly in the GTA, which resulted in considerable damage to the reputation of all Children's Aid Societies and to the child welfare field. The attitude within government regarding accountability and funding for child welfare has hardened and we can expect close scrutiny of service delivery standards and spending decisions.

More than ever, we must work together to preserve the integrity and reputation of Children's Aid Societies and their leadership.

2006 was also a year of many successes! In June we partnered with Children's Mental Health Ontario to hold a successful conference. We held a two-day symposium on kinship care and another symposium on alternate dispute resolution. We re-developed the youth programme and now have regional youth initiatives in all zones. We completed the business process re-design for the Single Information System and advocated successfully for the Oracle Finance System to be integrated with the client information system. We continued to work closely with member agencies and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to implement the Transformation Agenda. The proclamation of Bill 210 on November signaled the beginning of a new era in child welfare with many new opportunities for flexible services designed to protect children and to empower families.

We began planning for the 2007/08 fiscal period with the recognition that there are unusual challenges and opportunities ahead. In 2007 we will be working on many new projects and initiatives as the ongoing work of daily advocacy, government relations, training delivery, communications, information management, and member outreach/support continues to meet the needs of our members.

We have just completed the second phase of a project to develop a shared service for the purchase and management of Outside Paid Resources (OPRs). Funds for the implementation are needed from members ($800,000) and the *OntarioBuys* Programme of the Ministry of Finance ($2.6 million). The Ministry of Finance has noted these costs and has indicated they will support the funding, pending submission of a successful business plan. The next step will be to collect enough letters of commitment to determine whether the next phase of the project will be feasible. This phase will involve another application, by OACAS, for funding from *OntarioBuys* and the development of a separate corporation that will be owned by the participating agencies. Once the corporation is developed, our role in this initiative will be complete.

This edition of the Journal contains articles related to aspects of the Transformation Agenda and to our priorities such as mediation, enhancing educational development in grade school children, the North-South Partnership for Children which is seeking to find ways to improve the lives of aboriginal children in the remote north, measuring outcomes and better understanding separated and divorced families. Perhaps these articles will help shine some light on the positive aspects of child welfare and encourage us as we embark on the journey ahead.

Jeanette Lewis

Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win - The North-South Partnership for Children: ᒪᒪᐤ ᔕᐧᐁᑭᑫᐧᐃᐣ ᑭᐧᐁᑎᓄᐠ ᒥᓇ ᔕᐧᐊᓄᐠ ᐧᐃᑕᓄᑭᒥᑐᐧᐃᐣ ᐊᐧᐊᔑᔕᐠ ᐅᒋ

Caring for Children in Remote First Nation Communities ᐁᑲᓇᐧᐁᓂᒪᔦᑭᐧᑕ ᐊᐧᐊᔑᔕᐠ ᑭᐧᐁᑎᓄ ᐃᐡᑯᓂᑲᓇᐣ ᑲᑕᔑᑫᐧᐊᐨ

> *Believe us when we say if we had the resources to make life better for our children, we would seek to realize our dreams for them. A poor life can lead to desolation, hopelessness, crime, loss of culture, loss of identity, and in many cases, suicide.*
>
> Noah Chapman, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug

Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win is the Oji-Cree name for the North-South Partnership which can be loosely translated to mean, "All working together to provide gifts for others in need." This phrase has a sacred and spiritual meaning that reflects a concept of giving without expectation of reward, return or recognition.

Context

The North-South Partnership for Children in Remote First Nation Communities represents the joining together of caring individuals and organizations with remote First Nation Chiefs and community leaders, Elders, youth and community members. The Partnership's goal is to work hand-in-hand to develop an expansive circle of caring that effectively addresses First Nations' aspirations for their children, youth and families.

A recent feature article in the Globe and Mail described the deplorable conditions for children and families in the communities of Webequie and Mishkeegogamang. The article, called "A Slap in the Face to All Canadians," also described how a team of international humanitarian aid experts was recently called in by these First Nations to conduct emergency comprehensive community assessments.

Building on a vision to engage the voluntary sector as partners with the First Nation communities, these community assessments are one of many strategies that the North-South Partnership is developing in response to the desperate needs for children up north.
Canada's Governor General Michaëlle Jean recently described the desperate state of northern Aboriginal communities as comparable to that of developing countries in Africa. In a January 25, 2007 speech in Calgary, Jean said, "Canadians can no longer ignore impoverished conditions within their own country. Let us admit, once and for all, that the developing world is closer than we think." She said:

> *"There is urgent work that needs to be done in our own backyard, and this work could be an example for the entire world. It should be part of making Canada a model global citizen. … We were born and we live in an affluent country just by sheer luck, and with this luck comes a responsibility - an absolute responsibility - to create opportunities for those with the greatest need".*[1]

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[1] http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2007/01/25/3451699-cp.html

Ontario's "backyard" is a huge and beautiful territory rich in natural resources of fish and game, minerals, forest products and hydroelectric power. Every day these resources are being exploited to serve Ontario's affluent society. According to Grand Chief Stan Beardy, the annual value of resources being extracted from Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory now exceeds $20 billion.[2] At the same time, the First Nation children and families in these remote communities within this territory live in conditions of desperate poverty.

The Treaties signed by Canada and the remote First Nations in the early 1900s were nation-to-nation agreements to share the resources of the land and the benefits of those resources for "as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow." However, the remote First Nation communities have long struggled to obtain government support for even basic levels of existence. In this context, the North-South Partnership is striving to help fill the huge unmet needs.

According to Chief Donny Morris of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug and Co-Chair of the Partnership Governance Circle, "The Partnership is not a political process. We are seeking to build a Caring Circle through which we can find more support for our children. We are beginning to see that there are agencies, organizations, individuals and businesses out there that are willing to help us."

"We are looking to create a 'United Way of the North', " said Michael Hardy, Executive Director of Tikinagan Child and Family Services. Most communities around the province have many United Way agencies, food banks, subsidized housing and community youth programmes. All of these services are missing in the remote First Nation communities. As we build more voluntary supports for children and families, we can expect to see reductions in the needs for child welfare services."

Community Conditions

Much of mainstream Ontario is unaware of just how desperate the needs are in the remote communities. With unemployment rates as high as 90 per cent, most every family lives far below the poverty line. Social assistance, the sole source of income for many, hardly stretches to meet basic needs in northern communities where essential grocery items cost three or four times their value in southern Ontario. As a result, some 54 percent of children report going hungry, and many are not adequately clothed for the harsh northern temperatures that drop down to minus 50º Celsius.

Most communities face severe housing shortages, with up to 20 people sharing accommodation in small two and three bedroom houses. Houses have not been built to withstand the harsh climate, and many are in dire need of repair. In some communities, most homes have serious mould problems. In Pikangikum, 90 per cent of housing units are not connected to running water and sewage services. Nineteen of the communities do not have safe drinking water. In many communities, hydro power generating systems are operating at or above capacity levels.

Education facilities and services are similarly inadequate. Two communities do not have a school facility, due to severe mould problems in one school and the loss of another by fire. In one community, the facility is so small and overcrowded that 200 children cannot attend school at all. Per capita funding for education services on the northern reserves is less than half of what is provided in provincially funded Ontario schools. As a result, schools lack basic necessities such as textbooks and libraries, and there are no special education services or technical trade programmes available. On average, children up north are three to four years behind the provincial grade level norms and one-third or more of the children have needs that could be identified as requiring special education if these services were available.

The long history of oppression, government dependency, and residential schools has stripped First Nations of so much of their traditional strength, culture, pride and dignity. Many children now live in unstable families, and rates of child protection issues are extremely high. For many youth, the traditional bonds with the Elders are broken and youth are growing up without a meaningful connection to their own culture. Rates of youth mental health issues, alcohol and drug abuse, and solvent abuse are very high and rates of suicide are up to 100 times the national average.

At the same time, the First Nations have clear aspirations, dreams and plans for the betterment of their communities.

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[2] From presentation to North-South Partnership meeting February 16, 2007; Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory includes those lands in Ontario north of the Arctic/Atlantic watershed

Many Elders still carry the traditional teachings. Community leaders are committed to rebuilding their communities. Chief Connie Gray-McKay of Mishkeegogamang believes that hope lies in restoring the health of families, teaching people to parent and providing them a decent place to live. "When you talk about what is the answer, we just want our resources to be the same as everybody else so we can provide adequate housing and adequate education."

This is the context in which the North-South Partnership was created.

History of the North-South Partnership

In 1998, Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County partnered with Tikinagan Child and Family Services to provide staffing support during a particularly difficult time. Since 2001, a group of volunteers called Friends of Tikinagan has been sending donations of clothing and sports equipment for distribution to the communities that Tikinagan serves.

For the past 10 years, the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy has had a special concern for the desperate needs of children and youth in the Tikinagan communities. In 2005, Kinark Child and Family Services began to provide clinical consultation and community development services to Wunnumin Lake in response to the growing problem of youth suicide.

In June 2006, 15 representatives from southern voluntary agencies met together with Chiefs, Elders, and community leaders in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, 400 km north of Sioux Lookout, to create the Partnership and build a development plan.

In September 2006, the Tikinagan Chiefs in Assembly passed a Resolution in support of the goals and efforts of the Partnership and acknowledging the support received to date.

Goal and Objectives

The collective goal of the Partnership is to learn from one another and to support the dreams and efforts of remote northern First Nation communities for their children. Partners are dedicated to following the lead of the First Nation leaders in identifying issues, priorities and potential solutions. The Partnership is developing a network of caring relationships that will create, support and strengthen short- and long-term solutions.

As stated in its Terms of Reference, the Objectives of the Partnership are:

- To share information and establish a foundation of knowledge and understanding about the needs, rights and entitlements of children, youth and families within remote northern communities;
- To identify, understand and build upon the strengths, capacities, values, goals and visions of First Nation communities for their children, youth and families;
- To build a network of relationships that promote caring and understanding between north and south; between those in need and those with access to resources; between those who have dreams for their children and those who want to help realize them, and between those who understand the difficult northern reality and those who are seeking to understand;
- To learn about and complement existing services and other supportive initiatives that are working to address needs in these communities;
- To take a lead role in providing information and education to voluntary organizations and the general public about the needs, values and goals of First Nation communities;
- To explore and assess ways and means for voluntary organizations, individuals, and the general public to respond in collaboration with First Nation leaders and communities;
- To make decisions and take leadership to mobilize resources to address identified needs; and
- To approach governments, voluntary agencies, foundations, service clubs, educational institutions and corporations, along with other potential contributors for the resources required to address identified needs.

Today, the Partnership Circle includes three Chiefs representing the 33 northern First Nations, Tikinagan Child and Family Services, the Office of Child and Family Services Advocacy, the Centre of Excellence for Children's Mental Health and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Save

The Children Canada, Voices for Children, OACAS, Ryerson University, UNICEF, Christian Horizons, Feed the Children Canada, Kinark Child and Family Services, Laidlaw Foundation, and Rotary District 4070. Many other organizations and individuals are contributing as members of the Supporting Circle within the Partnership.

Partnership Activities

Donations

The Partnership has been working to collect donations to meet basic needs. Over the past year, FTC Canada has shipped six tractor-trailer loads of food, clothing, and sports equipment up north. Samaritan's Purse provided 1,600 gifts for children last Christmas. Women from Wellington County provided 100 bags of knitted baby clothing, infant wear, toques and mitts, along with nearly 100 handmade quilts.

The Wellington South Rotary Club provided funding for a water purification system for the Pikangikum school. Other donors have provided funding for hockey equipment, shoes, indoor recreation equipment, and canoes and other equipment for land-based youth programmes.

Donated goods are shipped to Sioux Lookout from where Tikinagan Child and Family Services and Wasaya Airways distribute them to the remote communities. Tikinagan Mamow Oshki Pimagihowin Prevention Co-ordinators provide for distribution to families in need at the community level.

Community Assessments

At the invitation of First Nation Chiefs and co-ordinated by the North-South Partnership, a community assessment team spent a week in January 2007 meeting with Chiefs and Councils, community resource workers, community members, parents and youth in Webequie and Mishkeegogamang. First Nation leaders invited the assessments as a way to develop resources and create new hope for their communities.

The team of experts included representatives of Save the Children from the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada, as well as from the Ontario Office of Child and Family Services Advocacy, Tikinagan Child and Family Services, First Nation Chiefs and Elders, and community leaders, parents and youth. The Centre of Excellence for Children's Mental Health provided financial support.

The assessment team reviewed issues for children and families, housing and community infrastructure, education and recreation, and community participation. Over the coming weeks, the assessment team will be presenting its findings to the First Nations and completing its recommendations. In response, the Partnership and the First Nations will develop action plans designed to mobilize community resources and obtain support from Ontario's voluntary sector to address the identified needs.

The assessment team adapted a framework used by international aid agencies in response to emergencies in other countries, such as earthquakes, drought and famine. "We observed tremendous poverty up north. The living conditions were unacceptable and the vulnerability for children needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency," said assessment team leader Nicholas Finney of Save The Children UK, an expert in rapid emergency assessments.

"We saw the desperate conditions for children and families in these northern communities, and we were really taken aback. At the same time, we came to know many of the community leaders who are working so hard to improve conditions in their communities," said Alana Kapell of Save the Children Canada, one of the assessment project leaders.

At present, few non-governmental agencies provide support to remote First Nation communities. The community assessments will help to change that. "We also know that the people of Ontario and Canada are extremely generous in responding to needs around the world. Through the assessments, we want to generate support from the voluntary sector to support the remote First Nations in rebuilding their communities," said Kapell.

Identified Priorities

Preliminary findings from the assessments have highlighted priority needs in the following areas:

- Housing and community infrastructure
- Recreation and activity programmes for children and youth
- Education services, programmes and facilities

- Community healing
- Opportunities for youth and Elders to come together
- Land-based and cultural programmes for children and youth, and
- Community economic development.

The communities recognize the need for youth to be engaged in the rediscovery of their culture, the traditional teachings, the language, and land-based survival skills. As youth rediscover their Aboriginal identity and culture, they can once again move forward with pride as the next generation of leaders.

The Chiefs involved with the Partnership note that these findings are representative of the situation for the other communities throughout the territory.

The Partnership is now seeking to address immediate needs as well as to develop long-term solutions. Action groups have been created in the following areas:

- Basic Needs
- Youth-to-Youth Engagement
- Housing and Physical Infrastructure
- Children and Youth Programmes
- Clinical Support and Healing

The Partnership intends to co-ordinate the building of at least one house in Mishkeegogamang this summer, to develop summer children and youth programmes in three communities, to provide parenting programme resources, to develop a community leadership training programme, and to engage more partners in providing clinical resources to aid in the community healing process.

Making a Difference

Partnership activities have already made a big difference in small ways. In response to contributions of youth hockey equipment in Webequie, Chief Scott Jacob said in a thank you letter that "Your contribution to our community will touch the lives of many young athletes. We are overwhelmed by your generosity and can't begin to tell you how appreciative we are to know that people are willing to go to such great lengths to make a difference for the children of Webequie."

The Eenchokay Birchstick School in Pikangikum was similarly grateful for the reverse osmosis water treatment system provided through a Partnership donation. In a letter to the donors, the school's administration noted that:

> *Aski Nation. The infrastructure deficiencies in our community have led to such serious social problems as suicide. Many of the programmes and services we have wanted to implement in our school were impossible because of the 24/7 boil water advisory alert. Now, the water purification system that you funded will allow us not only to better meet the needs of our students but will also allow us to meet the community's water needs until the Ministry of Indian Affairs can find a long-term solution.*
>
> *The community of Pikangikum is very thankful for your generosity and for taking the time to make a significant difference. If we all work together we can definitely make a difference in improving the quality of life for all communities within the Nishnawbe*

It is important to understand what will make north-south partnerships successful. "In the past, we have seen outsiders come into our communities with good intentions, only to leave behind more broken promises. The most critical aspect of a helping partnership is having an attitude of humility and respect for a different culture, of being willing to listen and learn. This engagement must be framed by a process of reconciliation that acknowledges the lived experiences of colonization and support First Nations as the best decision maker and caregivers for First Nation children and youth."[3]

About the Author

Maurice Brubacher is former Executive Director of Guelph Wellington Family and Children's Services and has worked for many years to support Tikinagan Child and Family Services and other Native child welfare agencies. He is a founding member of Mamow She-way-gi-kay-win.

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[3] Coming Home: The Story of Tikinagan Child and Family Services, pg 231

In response to media publicity and the Partnership's website, many people have indicated an interest in providing support. The North-South Partnership is currently working to develop programmes and structures through which such support can be channeled.

The Partnership welcomes financial donations that will be used to address the most pressing needs. All donations are held in trust for Partnership priorities by Tikinagan Child and Family Services, and 100percent of all donations are directed toward meeting these needs. Tikinagan provides charitable receipts for income tax purposes.

Interested parties are also invited to find ways to educate themselves about First Nation issues, about Aboriginal cultures and traditions, and about the dynamics of the ongoing oppression and racism that are built into Canadian social, political and economic systems.

One contemporary source of information is Coming Home: The Story of Tikinagan Child and Family Services, published by Tikinagan Child and Family Services in 2006. According to Chief Donny Morris, "This work not only helps bring to light the challenges our First Nation people have endured in the past, and continue to endure, but it also illuminates the resilience of our people in continuing to strive for a better live, for our current and future generations, in the face of such hardship."

For more information, consult the following websites:
www.ComingHomeTikinagan.com
www.northwouthpartnership.com

Contact the Partnership at 1 800 263-2842 or at advocacy@northsouthpartnership.com

Outcomes Measurement Framework in Child Welfare

By Bruce Leslie

In January 2004 the OACAS published a Provincial Framework for Quality Assurance. This framework, developed and written by a small group of Quality Assurance professionals working in children's aid societies in Ontario, provided a much needed model and template for all CASs implementing Quality Assurance strategies, tools and systems into their organizations. The framework highlighted many innovative approaches to advancing child welfare services through Quality Assurance initiatives. One of these perspectives, relatively new to our field, is the measurement, analysis and use of outcomes.

While measurement is routinely conducted in our field, the focus at an aggregate level tends to be on inputs and resources (for example; budgets, staffing and per diems), processes (our staff activities related to meeting standards), and outputs (children admitted and clients served). We have a long way to go toward measuring outcomes, combining and integrating them into service and programme planning, and achieving their optimum potential for service delivery and positive results for children and families.

Definition of Outcome Measurement

For the purpose of this Framework, the measurement of outcomes has been operationalized as the following:

…the assessment of the impact, benefit or change as a result of participation in services.

Evidence based practice and accountability are two major forces supporting the advancement of outcome measurement. How can we credibly answer the question, "What is the evidence of your service effectiveness?" without having common outcome information? Furthermore, there are growing pressures on child welfare services to be more accountable. While the field and the public may agree on which indicators of success are necessary for the child welfare system, there is a growing urgency to develop methods of measuring our service impact on children and families at a local agency and provincial service level. This Framework looks to build on the foundation of clinically focused client outcomes addressed in casework and programme initiatives, supporting the creation of system level outcome indicators and system-wide aggregated outcomes relevant to organizational management and planning and, consequently, service development.

Whereas, front-line workers have for a long time identified individualized outcomes (with varying degrees of specificity) in their work with children and families, the field needs to develop methods that can aggregate this data collected from single cases so that programmes and approaches to specific service needs can be more fully understood, prior to policy development (i.e., Evidence Based Policies). This would allow the field to have a more complete picture of services, their effectiveness and successes, in addition to efficiency or cost related measures, with which we are more familiar. Outcome measurement is involved in and contributes to a core set of methods and techniques supporting the achievement of quality assurance, capacity building, and organizational development.

In advancing a systems level outcome approach such as the “National Outcomes Matrix,” developed by Dr. Nico Trocmé and colleagues, and other frameworks recommended by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services Child Welfare Secretariat, and changes required to support their achievement, resources will be needed to further refine the measurement constructs applicable to agency operations and implement collection procedures. Sometimes the required data is available, but not electronically. Sometimes the desired data is not presently documented. One of the significant challenges in creating a front-line friendly organizational change supporting the measurement of outcomes is to minimize additional documentation requirements and maximize awareness of the positive service potential. Sizeable information technology resources will be needed to develop data collection systems, and considerable time and energy will be needed to meaningfully interpret the collective information. Quality improvements do not happen only as a result of the measurement process.

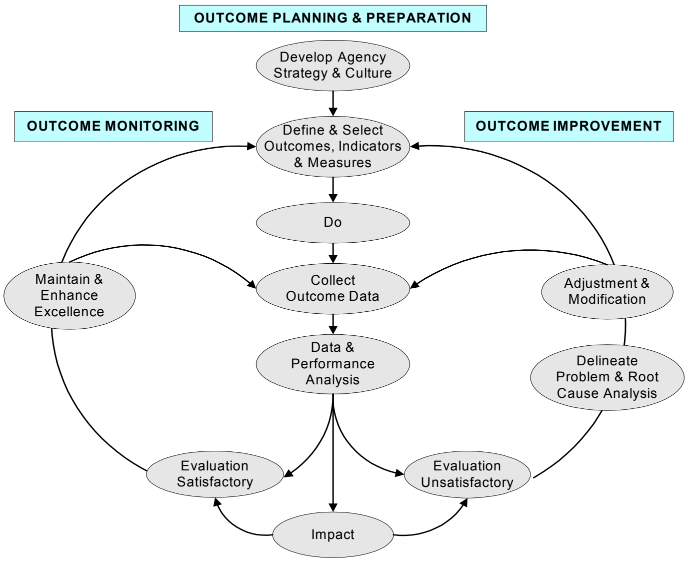
“Weighing the pig won’t make it fatter.”

As defined above, outcome measures track the impact or change for clients. At present we have few direct client produced measurements and rely on worker assessments. Another significant challenge will be to enable a high level of client involvement and collect client input directly from their perspective. Increased and structured client input is needed to ensure the more direct inclusion of the recipients of service in the defining of effective services, supplementing and complementing worker assessments, providing first hand data about the services that they have received, and recommending changes to service delivery based on their experiences.

The Outcome Measurement Cycle

The following diagram depicts the sequences of activities in the “Outcome Measurement Cycle” and is in part derived from the provincial “Quality Assurance Framework.” Common mechanisms underlie both approaches to organizational development and the core strategies will be described in this Framework’s chapters.

OUTCOME MEASUREMENT CYCLE


OUTCOME PLANNING & PREPARATION
Develop Agency Strategy & Culture
OUTCOME MONITORING
OUTCOME IMPROVEMENT
Define & Select Outcomes, Indicators & Measures
Do
Maintain & Enhance Excellence
Collect Outcome Data
Adjustment & Modification
Data & Performance Analysis
Delineate Problem & Root Cause Analysis
Evaluation Satisfactory
Evaluation Unsatisfactory
Impact

Connecting Outcome Dimensions:

In addition to the various operations to be outlined in the Framework, outcomes have a variety of dimensions and characteristics associated with them, some of which at times appear to be lacking cohesiveness. The following three key dimensions have been identified as significant points to consider in the measurement of outcomes and will be described in more detail in the chapters with a view to increasing an understanding of their connectedness and the importance of their relationships.

1. Front line staff…………Administration/Management
2. Client outcomes ………System level outcomes
3. Monitoring……………Causation

Key dimension 1 highlights that the same outcome related data can be collected and used for front-line or more administrative/management purposes; dimension 2 highlights that with reliable and valid measures, case data can be used for client outcome and/or system level reports; and, dimension 3 reflects two different uses of the data and the complexity of underlying collection methods. The "Causation" method of outcome data collection is developed to produce a greater understanding of outcomes in relation to their associated inputs, processes, and outputs, whereas outcome data that is only monitored in relation to desired levels does not reveal underlying supports and obstacles – or what caused the outcomes. All three dimensions have their valuable uses but can vary in their correct application and development.

Front-line staff collect the basic outcome data of interest. In their own work, clinical client outcomes are monitored and explored as to the effectiveness of interventions and, for now, documented in relatively unstructured plans of service and plans of care.

Organizations can aggregate such information revealing client outcome data for programmes and more system level outcome descriptions. The case level data that is presently available is often the least standardized and individualized for clients. To allow for the reliable aggregation of case data, more systematic categorization and common definition of measures is required, such as the use of Looking After Children tools.

If a programme or service is examined in detail as to its component parts (as revealed in logic models described in chapter 3), a study more related to an understanding of their causes is possible producing greater knowledge about effectiveness and efficiency. Each of these perspectives is more fully explained in the Framework chapters, which follow a progression of outcome measurement from case to programme and then a system level perspective.

The three dimensions above represent key related parts of the information collection and analysis procedures operating within child welfare services that are often seen as more disconnected. Present measurement practices do not easily support their integration and consequently different outcome data perspectives have evolved. Throughout the chapters of the Framework a greater cohesiveness is sought between front-line perspectives of service effectiveness and information that is more readily available at the organization and system level (Chapter 4). This cohesiveness is also reflected in the connections that are highlighted between other key components of the service (inputs, activities and outputs, for example) through a discussion of causation and logic models in Chapter 3. It is hoped that this will facilitate a cultural shift in support of an outcomes orientation.

Summary of Chapters

This Framework is presented in four chapters that cover a broad range of issues for agencies to consider during the initial stages when embarking on the measurement of child welfare outcomes.

Chapter 1 highlights and promotes outcome measurement from the important perspective of organizational culture in which collecting and using this data is supported throughout the organization.

Chapter 2 provides a conceptual and practical framework for agencies wanting to develop and implement a model in which outcomes are defined and data is collected in support of casework intervention.

Chapter 3 highlights the application of the framework in managing outcomes as part of programme evaluation.

Chapter 4 addresses the system level outcome indicators advanced in the Secretariat's Transformation Agenda and the Multi-Year Results Based Plan.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 reflect different perspectives and levels of data collection related to outcomes of interest in child welfare services. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for understanding outcomes. Chapter 3 builds on the client-focused dimension highlighted in Chapter 2 and integrates it with models of evaluating programmes. Chapter 4 moves the discussion of outcomes to an organizational and systems level dimensions. This Framework focuses on "outcome measurement" and the reader is referred elsewhere for more in-depth analysis, synthesis and reporting methods.

Conclusions

Outcome measurement supports accountability and the achievement of the best results for those involved with child welfare services. The present agency electronic information systems in child welfare have been guided by requests to show the merits of the service through inputs, activities and consequently outputs. In part, these dimensions of service have been selected to support funding requirements. At the case level, we have continued to focus on more case specific, qualitative, and outcome-oriented information, which has not been as easily aggregated to reveal agency and across agency perspectives.

Information that is measured and listened to is often seen as a driving force for programme and service change. Historically, two of the main drivers for child welfare services development and change have been finances and public/political influences. In part this situation has arisen due to the weight of these considerations and the limited availability of measured service characteristics. If there is credible outcome data measured within and across agencies, effectiveness and positive outcomes can more easily be promoted. Where unacceptable outcomes are identified, the relevant antecedent systemic and organizational perspectives can be examined to produce more evidence based service directions.

To date, outcome information at the organizational and system wide levels has been conceptually defined in relation to child welfare legislation leading to the identification of safety, well-being, permanence, and family and community support as the key constructs to measure in Ontario and Canada. A major guiding principle when these four variables were identified, however, was to use existing service data sets. This was an expedient solution to begin the process of building an outcome focus while limiting other front-line and organizational impacts. For the most part, this led to the creation of system level indicators of outcomes – information that is at least somewhat readily available and is conceptually linked to the outcomes of interest. As useful as this information is, it has limitations and we need to move on to collect better aggregate client-based outcome information, creating a broader evidence base for practice and policy development.

Such advancements will require the development of new information systems that will allow for the collection of client outcome descriptions, their aggregation, and linking with programme and population level data in a more direct and effective manner. Such an improved coherence of information will greatly enhance the meaning and impact of the measurement process. Input information will be linked to process activities, outputs and outcomes, producing a greater understanding of casework, programmes and services. Monitoring of outcomes alone has limited utility and more complex evaluation formats and data designs are required to provide a broader and sounder evidence base for new service directions. Resources and costs need to be factored in to the identification, collection, analysis and use of outcome measures to allow for the productive growth of this process leading to the anticipated added value. The Transformation Agenda will also help move the field to a more outcome-focused practice, especially through the development of the Multi-Year Results Based Plan and the creation of a Single Information System. These advancements are complementary and an improved SIS will allow for more client-focused information to be aggregated, informing quality assurance and planning that leads to improved service effectiveness.

Improved information will support the development of evidence based policies as well as programmes, leading to greater benefits for clients, community members and collateral service providers. There will be greater clarity of purpose and results, facilitating client engagement and accountability. Analysis of the outcome data will support the improvement of services and give greater recognition to the many successes in child welfare services.

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Child Protection Mediation in Ontario: Which Way Forward?

By Linda Crush

Child protection mediation (or CPM) involves the application of mediation techniques to resolve conflicts within the child welfare system. CPM has been gathering momentum in the United States and Canada and is now practised in numerous US states and in several provinces (including Nova Scotia, Alberta and British Columbia).[4] In Ontario, the experience with CPM has been limited to small-scale pilot projects such as the Toronto Demonstration Project in the 1990s and the London Mediation Project in 2003-4. CPM has also been practised for a number of years on a small scale in communities such as Barrie and Hamilton. The Toronto and London projects have formally evaluated the advantages and challenges of applying mediation to child protection.[5] Because of the rather limited experience with CPM in the Province, there is considerable uncertainty about whether and how it will work here. This article aims to provide child welfare providers with an overview of CPM and to highlight several issues which need to be addressed in order for mediation to achieve its potential.

The impetus for the introduction of CPM in Ontario lies primarily in its potential to reduce the costs of child welfare by providing an alternative to the judicial system. As child welfare costs have burgeoned in the province, the proven cost-savings potential of alternate forms of dispute resolution attracted increase government attention. In Ontario, Section 20.2(1) of the new Amendments to the Child and Family Services Act, states that if a child is or may be in need of protection under the Child and Family Services Act, a children's aid society shall consider whether a prescribed method of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) could assist in resolving any issue related to the child or a plan for the child's care. One of the prescribed ADR methods, which the Ministry of Children and Youth services is strongly backing, is Child Protection Mediation (CPM). The Ministry's stated desire is have Child Protection Mediation introduced across the Province as rapidly as possible.

To suggest that government's only reason for the introduction of mediation to Ontario's child welfare system is economic would be unfair. There is a considerable body of research that shows that child protection mediation, when properly designed and implemented, can be of considerable benefit to all parties involved in the child welfare system. Marvin Bernstein, for example, has enumerated as many as 16 separate advantages of the application of mediation to child protection.[6] These included cost-effectiveness, time savings, high settlement rates, greater compliance rates, participant empowerment, improved relations between agencies and families, and dispute resolution that is in the best interest of the child. Other authors have made similarly positive assessments of the benefits of CPM.[7]

Mediation as defined by Michael Noone "is a process in which an impartial third party called a mediator is invited to facilitate the resolution of a dispute by the self-determined agreement of the disputants. The mediator facilitates communication, focuses the parties on their interests and uses creative problem-solving techniques to enable the parties to reach their own agreement" [8] In the context of child welfare and the responsibilities of children's aid societies, it is necessary to understand exactly what kinds of issues are amenable to a mediated solution. Nowhere should child protection mediation be used to determine whether the findings of an agency are justified. The basic premise of any successful programme is that there is a relevant child protection issue and no immediate risk of harm for a child. The premise of CPM should always be how the child's best interest can be served by the child welfare agency, family unit and community resources. The issues that are most amenable to a mediated settlement include: conditions of voluntary agreement, supervision orders, sibling access, placement and supervision, Society wardship schedules. When CPM is successful it provides an agreement that ends the risk of harm to a child and ensures plans of care that are feasible, safe and have a built-in response to non-compliance.

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[4] L. Crush, "When Mediation Fails Child Protection: Lessons for the Future" ***The Canadian Journal of Family Law***, January 2007; L. Crush, AChild Protection Mediation: Should It Be Mandatory?@ *Solutions,* Spring 2006; L. Crush, AThe State of Child Protection Mediation in Canada@ *Canadian Family Law Quarterly,* Vol. 24.

[5] J. van Leeuwen & A. Cunningham, *Overview of the London Child Protection Mediation* (Project Co-Cordinator and Research Coordinator for the London Child Protection Mediation Project) 2004 [unpublished]; J. Wildgoose, & J. Maresca, *Mediating Child Protection Cases* (Waterloo: Fund for Dispute Resolution, 1994)

[6] M. Bernstein, "Child Protection Mediation: Its Time has Arrived" (1998) 16 *Canadian Family Law Quarterly* at 76-79.

[7] Hon. N. Flatters, AFamily/Child Judicial Dispute Resolution (JDR): An Overview of One Canadian Court=s Settlement Conference Approach to the Pretrial Resolution of Family and Child Welfare/Protection Matters@ (2003) 41(2) *Family Court Review*;
J. Maresca, AMediation in Child Protection: Facilitating the Resolution of Disputes@ (1995) LXXIV(3) *Child Welfare*; S. Palmer, AMediation in Child Protection Cases: An Alternative to the Adversary System@ (1989) LXXIV(3) *Child Welfare*; J. Pringle, *Evaluation of the Surrey Court Project: Facilitated Planning Meeting* (Vancouver: Raincoast Business Centre, 2003); G. Savoury, H. Beals & J. Parks, AMediation in Child Protection: Facilitating the Resolution of Dispute@ (1997) LXXIV(3) *Child Welfare*; See Wildgoose and Maresca above, note 1.

[8] M. Noone, *Essential Legal Skills, Mediation* (London: Cavendish Publishing Ltd., 1996)

The number of participants in a child protection mediation can vary considerably. At the minimum there will be the parent(s) and the social worker. There should also be provision for foster parents, representatives from service providers, custodial relatives and any other person that all the parties agree will be beneficial in resolving the dispute. In Canada and the United States there may also be representatives from First Nations communities if the child is Aboriginal or Native American.[9] In some instances, older children participate in the mediation process.[10] In many jurisdictions (though not, it appears, in Ontario), legal representatives of the parents, the child and the Society may also be present.[11]

If child protection mediation is to be a success in Ontario, past experience in other jurisdictions suggests that several things need to happen. First, the evidence suggests that the efficacy of child protection mediation is fundamentally scale-dependent. Large-scale programmes have the potential to conflict with the local realities of individual child welfare communities. Second, there needs to be a broad understanding amongst all stakeholders (including CAS staff, social workers, and legal counsel) of the nature of mediation and its relevance to child protection. Third, mediators have to be of very high standard and skill level. CPM is not a "more complicated" version of family mediation. High standards of professional background, training and related experience must be required of all child protection mediators. Fourth, child protection mediation should be voluntary and never compulsory. Any attempt to make mediation mandatory will compromise the effectiveness of the system. Finally, there needs to be a continuous process of monitoring and feedback to assess the efficacy of child protection mediation in particular communities. Each of these pre-requisites needs further elaboration.

First, with regard to the issue of scale, the Nova Scotia experience demonstrates that high level government involvement does not guarantee success.[12] Devised with the best of intentions, the Nova Scotia model was hierarchical in character and foisted upon the child welfare system. Had the programme started on a smaller scale and worked its way up through the child welfare agencies, many of the problems could have been pre-empted. Ontario needs a CPM model that is bottom-up rather than top-down. In a bottom-up system, local child welfare communities take the initiative, own the process and implement a model that meets local conditions and circumstances. The extent to which local child welfare communities own CPM will be a critical determinant of success. If local resistance builds, for whatever reason, then failure is almost guaranteed.

The second necessity is for a broad understanding and support for child protection mediation amongst those most affected by its introduction: CAS executives and staff, social workers, legal counsel and the clients of the CAS. This requires the investment of resources in training and education. Nnegotiation and mediation education is a must for all when CPM is being considered as an alternative dispute resolution option. Without an understanding of the mediation process, social workers have rightly asked if mediation will call into question their professional assessment of a case and have felt that their role as managers of the process would have to be relinquished.[13] Social worker concerns about child protection mediation have to be taken very seriously and addressed at the outset, otherwise they will be reluctant to make referrals and to participate in the process. Equally important is the legal community and the judiciary. Elsewhere, the legal community has opposed CPM on a number of grounds including concern about the value of mediation in dispute resolution and the qualifications and competency of mediators.

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[9] J. Shaw & N. Thoennes, *Child Protection Mediation and Dependency Mediation Programme Profiles* (Madison WI: Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 2002) at 32.

[10] N. Thoennes, *supra* note 33 at 185.

[11] American Bar Association, Resolution Adopted by the House of Delegates, August 9, 1995.

[12] Savoury et al., *supra* note 2.; S. Carruthers, *supra* note 81.

The third requirement is for experienced, adequately-trained and highly skilled mediators. The province needs to ensure that all mediators understand the complexities and challenges of child welfare. Knowing children's lives are at stake, child protection mediators must have substantive knowledge of the issues and processes, which has been formally examined and certified through a peer reviewed processes. Every major jurisdiction requires a professional background in social work, psychology or law, and prior experience as mediators before a candidate can be trained as a child protection mediator Accreditation standards for mediators need to be rigorous and of the highest calibre; most mediators would benefit from an internship or mentoring phase. The province needs to be careful that in rapidly rolling-out mediators, it does not compromise the standard of mediation training or the quality of mediators. If children's aid societies and their clients have no faith in the competency and experience of the mediator, the value of mediation will rightly be questioned.

Fourth, Ontario has avoided the mistake of certain other jurisdictions by making CPM voluntary rather than mandatory. A basic tenet of all forms of mediation is that the parties are free to choose to use or not to use mediation as an alterative forum for dispute resolution. Eminent scholars such as Laurence Boulle and Kathleen Kelly argue against mandatory mediation, noting "voluntarism is the foremost tenet of good mediation."[14] As Boulle and Kelly note: "The emphasis on the term *voluntary* in mediation is justified in terms of the alternative character of mediation, if mediation is not an optional process it would no longer constitute an alternative system of dispute resolution."[15] The basic premise of successful child protection mediation is voluntary participation in the process. Voluntariness has a direct link to the involvement and commitment of the parties involved. Mandating child protection workers, families and legal representatives into mediation may lead to impressive referral statistics. However, the true measure of any CPM should be participant satisfaction and compliance rates, not the number of cases going through the system, or in a worst cases scenario, recycling through the mediation and court system.

Finally, there needs to be a system of feedback and monitoring of the child protection mediation system in place from the outset. Most of the research on child protection mediation is now rather dated. One of the most successful CPM projects ever – the Colorado Child Protection Mediation Project of the 1980s – produced an impressive body of monitoring and research evidence that has subsequently informed the development of CPM programmes throughout Canada and the United States. The Florida system is often cited as a model for state or province-wide child protection. Here, too, research on the efficacy of the system has not been built into the process. No longitudinal studies of the Florida system with regard to such issues as (a) compliance rates, (b) decreases in stress for parents, children, and or child protection workers, and (c) whether cases that are mediated still end up in litigation. A responsive and adaptable child protection mediation programme should include a monitoring and feedback research component from the start. This is something that the Ontario government needs seriously to consider.

Mediation is poised to make a major impact on the child welfare system in Ontario. Wherever mediation has been introduced purely to save governments money, the cardinal principles of successful planning and implementation are often ignored. Stakeholders quickly lose faith in the value of mediation and in the competency of mediators. If Ontario is to successfully implement an effective and sustainable system, then the complexities and challenges of CPM, as articulated above, must be openly and honestly faced.

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[13] Ibid, at 117; Savoury *et al*, *supra* note 2 at 756.

[14] L. Boulle & K. Kelly, *Mediation Principles, Process, Practice*, (Toronto: Butterworths, 1998) at 17.

[15] Boulle and Kelly *supra* note 102 at 17.

Anything else would betray our common goal of securing solutions that are in the best interests of the child.

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Unraveling The Label of "High Conflict": What Factors Really Count In Separated and Divorced Families? Part 1

By Michael Saini and Rachel Birnbaum

Introduction

Accurate and timely identification of children at risk of high conflict post separation/divorce is fundamental to effective practice on behalf of children by mental health workers, child custody assessors, child welfare agencies and the court. The negative impact of conflict on children has been well documented within the social science literature (Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2000) and has been found to be a more powerful predictor of children's maladjustment than the actual event of separation (Emery, 1994). While there is a clear and irrefutable link between the presence of domestic violence and the co-occurrence of child maltreatment mental, health professionals continue to struggle as to how to assist these children and families. Equally as significant, is that many of these cases take up a high proportion of child welfare services as each parent alleges child neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse against the other parent (Birnbaum, 2005).

This article is Part I of two parts that explores the term "high conflict" as a means to define disputing families before the court. Part I provides a comprehensive review of the social science literature to identify the factors that have contributed to the definition of high conflict and to children's emotional distress as a result of their parents' dispute before the court. What becomes apparent is the lack of a reliable and valid instrument that helps to differentiate the different levels of conflict with the goal of assisting children and families post separation and/or divorce.

Part II explores the results of the pilot study that identified the different levels of conflict based on the literature review. The instrument was piloted to empirically examine the reliability and validity of the various dimensions and severity of conflict and associated risk factors in interparental relationships post separation and/or divorce.

The term "high conflict" has been used as an umbrella term to describe parents who experience high rates of litigation and relitigation, high degrees of anger and distrust, verbal, physical and emotional abuse, and ongoing difficulty in communicating and cooperating about the needs of their children (Johnston 1994). In fact, most estimates of high conflict families are based on ongoing litigation rates post separation/divorce. Mnookin and Kornhauser (1979) note that less than 10 per cent of parents remain in high conflict as evidenced by on-going litigation. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) and Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, and Anderson (1989) also used ongoing litigation rates as a measure when they described that 10 per cent of families remain in high conflict situations.

The lack of empirical evidence to adequately define "high conflict" in the divorce literature has resulted in on-going debates about which factors should be considered when evaluating the presence of parental conflict. Birnbaum and Fidler (2005) and Kelly (2000) note that there are other factors that require analysis beyond the extent to which, or whether or not parents can communicate or cooperate that are relevant to the assessment and understanding of conflict.

Methodology of the Comprehensive Review

Searches in subject indexes for primary journal articles were performed in scholarly periodical university indexes including: PsychInfo; PsychArticles; Social Work Abstracts; UMI ProQuest Direct; Sociological Abstracts; Social Science

Citation Index; Ingenta and LexisNexus. Searches for fugitive articles (i.e. unpublished manuscripts, conference proceedings, topical bibliographies, and curriculum vitae's lists) were completed using internet search engines including: Google.com; Yahoo.ca; and Altavista.

All electronic searches included the primary term of *conflict* with multiple combinations and pairing schemes of the following secondary terms: *high; level; severity; parent*, interparental; famil*; risk assessment: risk; protection; welfare; divorce; separation, couple, ex*, parent*, substance (or medication or alcohol or drug), criminal, litigation (or court, or attorney or lawyer, or judge or law), support (extended or family), communication, negotiation, rigid, ang*(anger), hosti*(hostility),* and *preoccupation.* The search terms were expanded to include literature from other fields of study including child welfare, child protection; health; mental health; criminology; substance abuse; and family law. The rationale behind the approach is that children and families in conflict are often involved with multiple services (i.e. school social workers, police, child welfare, child and adult mental health services and the courts). There was no date range set in the present search. By expanding the search terms to include all forms of conflict, instead of a circumscribed search of "high conflict", the results have uncovered an expanded description of the possible characteristics of high conflict separation/divorce.

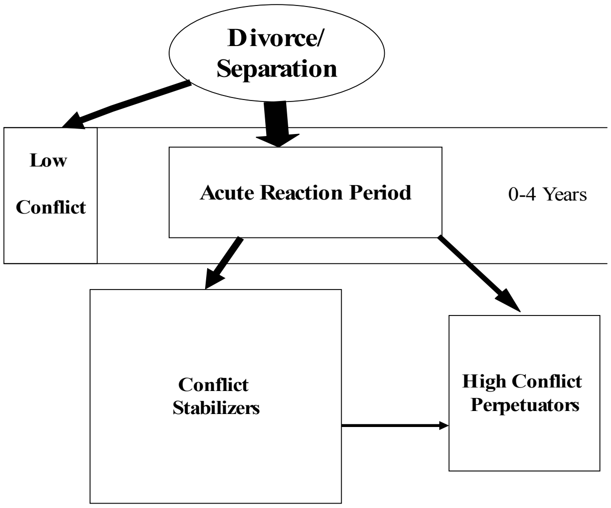
Empirically Based Factors of High Conflict

Conflict Pathways

Research indicates that the vast majority of separating and divorcing couples are able to work through their anger, disappointment and loss in a timely manner and establish healthy interpersonal relationships with others (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). However, approximately 20 percent to 40 percent of parental interactions are considered conflictual and are characterized by anger towards the ex-spouse (Erlanger, Chambliss, and Melli, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Johnston and Campbell, 1993).

Even though not all divorces are highly conflictual, researchers who have focused on the possibility of "good" divorces report that couples who manage to negotiate workable and friendly post-marital relations generally must overcome an initial hostile and conflictual relationship with their ex-spouse as depicted in Figure 1 (Hopper, 2001).

Figure 1: Conflict Pathways Based On the Literature



The presence of mental health problems:

Sbarra and Emery (2005) found a positive association between non-acceptance of co-parenting relationships with concurrent depression, suggesting that the presence of mental health problems is positively associated with on-going conflict between the parties. Rutter (2005) examined the link between conflict and depression. In his secondary analysis of the National Survey of Families and Household data he found that people in violent marriages are more depressed and less happy when they divorce suggesting an indication that these parents may be prone to continue their high levels of conflict post separation. Booth and Amato (2001) found that divorce was not negatively associated with psychological well being, but that divorce and conflict combined were associated with psychological well being.

Data from nine annual waves of the British Household Panel Survey indicate that 40 percent of separated/divorced individuals have elevated rates of mental health problems compared to those remaining married (Wade and Pevalin, 2004). They found that all groups transitioning out of marriage have a higher prevalence of poor mental health afterwards but for groups of higher conflict, poor mental health also precedes marital disruption, lending support to both social-causation and social-selection processes. Similarly, Renner and Leibestseder (2000) found in their correlational study of the relationship of personal conflict and clinical symptoms of mental health, that highly conflicted individuals and personal conflict represented a significant risk factor for developing clinical symptoms associated with mental health problems. Johnston and Campbell (1988) also found that two-thirds of 160 parents in a clinical study of high-conflict divorce were diagnosed as having personality disorders and one-fourth as having similar traits. Only two percent were diagnosed as psychotic.

The presence of substance use/abuse:
The research has found some links to substance abuse and conflict post-separation. For example, Johnston and Campbell (1988) found that one-fourth of 160 parents in a clinical sample had substance abuse problems. In a cross-sectional study of 1,669 mediation sessions conducted in family courts, a sample which included 93 percent of all disputes regarding custody and access mediated during a two-week period, Depner, Cannata and Simon (1992) found that parental concerns were raised about exposing the child to the other parent because of his or her substance abuse in 36 percent of the sample. However, it is not known if these allegations could have been substantiated, or if they signified each party's negative perceptions, hostility, and distrust of the other.

Criminal history of either parent:
The level of involvement with the police and/or the criminal justice system has been found to have some association to the level of conflict post separation as the involvement of criminal activity has adverse effects on parenting ability and on the ability to function in managing daily tasks. Haas, Farrington, Killias, and Sattar (2004) found that family conflict in both intact and separated families was one of the best predictors of delinquency and involvement with the criminal system. In addition, delinquency rates for disrupted families and intact but conflict-ridden families were found to be similar. Depner, Cannata & Simon (1992) found that parental concerns were raised about exposing the child to the other parent because of criminal activity in 7 percent of the sample. In another study, Kernic, Monary-Ernsdorff, Koepsell, and Holt (2005) found that from a Seattle sample of 2,796 couples with minor children petitioning for dissolution of marriage, 257 (10.7 percent) cases had police incidents or court orders indicating a preexisting history of male-perpetrated domestic violence. Group differences (substantiated versus non-substantiated violence) included greater prevalence of child abuse allegations, withholding other parent's access to child, kidnapping or threats of kidnapping, lack of compliance with court requirements, mental illness, and substance abuse problems. Sorensen (2003) completed secondary analysis of the National Youth Survey and found that well-bonded marriages to pro-social spouses reduce offending while marital failure increases it, and that these relationships are attributable to distinct social causation processes.

Patterns of conflict resolution and communication:
Parkinson (2000) studied the communication patterns of marital relationships and found that negative messages over the course of a high-conflict marital discussion resulted in a hostile-withdrawn couple interaction. In addition, it was demonstrated that when individuals are overwhelmed by anger and pain, their capacity for reason and logic diminishes. Forgas and Cromer (2004) examined affective influences on verbal communication strategies in conflict situations and found that affect and conflict severity had an interactive influence on avoidant behaviours. Specifically, negative affect produced significantly more evasiveness than positive affect, and these effects were greater in high than in low-conflict situations. Katz and Woodin (2002) also found that hostile couples showed a cumulative increase in negative messages over the course of a high-conflict marital discussion and hostile-withdrawn couples showed a cumulative increase in what they said and how they listened to the other over the course of the interaction. This is similar to Johnston and Roseby's (1997) findings that high-conflict parents are often identified as exhibiting ongoing difficulty in communicating about the care of their children two to three years following their separation.

Bacon and McKenzie (2004) administered surveys to 962 individuals to evaluate the impact of attending a post-separation parenting group. They found that cooperative and supportive behaviors between parents were strongly predictive of each other whereas cooperative parenting accounted for 51 percent of the difference in co-parental support. In addition, co-parental support accounted for 53 percent of the difference in cooperative parenting. McIntosh and Long (2005) surveyed 450 separated couples presenting with parenting-related matters, these parents in conflict had low qualities of co-parental relationship such as respect, admiration, cooperation, communication, shared values and decision-making, and enjoyment of parenting. Only eight percent of mothers and 12 percent of fathers reported a positive and healthy parenting alliance with their ex-partner. Similarly, Levite (2005) found poor communication, verbal abuse, couple violence and negative co-parenting were all related to each other.

The identification of blame for end of the couple relationship:

Levite (2005) proposed that there are higher levels of retaliation and reparation processes in high-conflict divorce. These dynamics create a circle of terror, retaliation, and failed reparation attempts that lead to even more terror, splitting and projection, ultimately resulting in an inability to reach resolution. Bonach (2005) examined the factors contributing to the quality of co-parenting post-separation and found that forgiveness was one of the strongest predictors of quality co-parenting. In a previous study, Bonach (2001) mailed surveys to 585 separated/divorced parents who had minor aged children attending a brief child-focused educational seminar. She found that when examining the two variables, blame of relationship and quality of relationship, between the parents there was a significant difference. In relationships where there was more blame being attributed there was less satisfaction in the co-parental relationship. A strong positive relationship was found between forgiveness and quality co-parenting.

Although there is evidence that suggests that both parents need to accept a balanced view of the end of the couple relationship, Friedman (2004) argues that this assumption that a high conflict couple are both responsible for the conflict simplifies the issue given that in reality one parent can be the main source of the ongoing conflict. In these cases, one parent can do nothing to create a cooperative, low-conflict relationship unless they give up their parental rights and leave the situation altogether.

The level of trust between the parents:

In Miller and Rempel's (2004) study, 81 couples participated in a laboratory problem-solving task. These couples were married or had been living together for at least two years. The couples were recruited through advertisements in community groups, married student housing units, and newspapers and were paid for their participation. The authors used a cross-sectional design by following up with the participants two years after completing the initial study. They found a reciprocal causal pattern by which partner-enhancing attributes predict changes in trust and trust predicts changes in partner-enhancing attributes. To measure the effects of trust within couple relationships, Zak, Gold, Ryckman and Lenney (1998) completed a cross-sectional study of 64 couple volunteers. They found that if couples believed that their partners' behaviours were predictable and dependable they had a higher level of trust with their partner. Conversely, if there was less predictability and dependability in the couple relationship they would experience more distress. As well, King (2002) used data from a 17-year longitudinal study of marital instability and found that higher levels of trust were dependent on the quality of the relationship and the previous level of conflict.

The level of equity regarding the division of assets:

In Bonach's (2005) study of factors contributing to quality co-parenting, emerging conflict issues between former partners were related to children and finances, specifically access to the children and child financial support. Statistical analysis indicated that satisfaction with financial child support arrangements was one of the strongest predictors of quality co-parenting. Robberts (2003) found that fathers were more likely not to have kept up with their child support payments because of the conflict with their ex-partner. The study found that as fathers improved their relationship with their ex-partners over the course of the programme, the rate of paying child support payments also improved. This is similar to Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, and Sheets' (1993) study that found higher conflict was related to non-payment of child support. Seltzer, McLanahan and Hanson (1997) also found from a national study of 1,625 families eligible for child support that fathers who paid child support during the past year were more likely to see their children than fathers who did not pay. Fathers who did not pay child support were somewhat more likely to experience high conflict than fathers who did pay child support.

Views of parenting responsibility:

Solomon (2005) reports that frequent conflicts in separated parents often revolve around the issue of overnight stays for the infant or toddler in the home of the other parent. Typically, one parent is anxious and resistant to overnight plans of the other parent because of fear that the other parent will not know how to care for the child. As a result the primary parent does not allow overnight access and this creates further conflict between them. Madden-Derdich, Leonard and Christopher (1999) found from a sample of 247 ex-partners that women's boundary ambiguity to their ex-partner was predicted by the reported parenting performance of the other parent and the degree of financial strain. The amount of conflict over parenting issues was significantly predicted by the amount of boundary ambiguity. The men in the study reported that the amount of conflict over parenting issues was significantly predicted by the amount of boundary ambiguity. In a subsequent study, Madden-Derdich and Leonard (2002) found that mothers were significantly less satisfied with the parenting behaviour of fathers than fathers were with parenting behaviours of the mothers. They also found that conflict was more pronounced when both mothers and fathers were less satisfied with the other parent's child-rearing skills. Another predictor of co-parental conflict for both mothers and fathers was agreement regarding mothers' willingness to accommodate changes in visitation schedules.

The level of emotional abuse between parents:

Forgas and Cromer (2004) found that emotional affect and conflict severity had an interactive influence on evasiveness and equivocation. That is, negative affect produced significantly more evasiveness than positive affect, and these effects were greater in high than in low-conflict situations. Johnston and Roseby (1997) also reported that verbal abuse is common among high-conflict parent interactions post-separation and divorce. In a comparison study of clinical and non-clinical samples, Barron (2001) found the clinical group had high levels of exposure to marital instability, more instances of family violence and more distant and rejecting experiences with parents when compared to the non-clinical group. The findings suggest differences in description of communication, frequency of communication, style of negotiation, resolution of custody and conflict in the prior year.

The level of physical abuse between parents:

In a sample of 64 separated parents, Ehrenberg (1996) found that mothers who were in disagreement with their ex-partners about parenting arrangements were significantly more likely to being physically abused (31.3 percent) by their partners than mothers who were able to negotiate parenting arrangements. Disagreeing mothers (68.8 percent) are significantly more likely than cooperating mothers (12.3 percent) to report feeling afraid of their ex-spouse. Depner, Cannata and Simon (1992) collected data on 1,669 mediation sessions conducted in family courts, a sample which included 93 percent of all disputes regarding custody and access mediated during a two-week period. This snapshot study was conducted by the Statewide Office of Family Court Services. In 65 percent of families, domestic violence was alleged by one or both parents within the mediation session.

Factors related to parent-child boundaries:

Spillane-Grieco (2000) and Johnston and Roseby (1997) suggest that factors affecting high conflict include parents include having difficulty focusing on their child's needs as separate from their own and the parents' inability to protect their child from their [parents] own emotional distress and anger from ongoing disputes with others. From the children's perspective, Stewart (2001) reports that children describe issues of high conflict to include: one parent refusing to speak with the other when children are picked up or dropped off; a parent refusing to open the door to the other parent; parents arguing violently in their presence; parents insisting that they carry verbal or written communications between homes about late support payments or missed visits; and parents physically assaulting each other in their presence.

Gagne, Drapeau and Henault (2005) report that parental alienation behaviours by either parent occur more often in cases of high conflict. The authors describe parental alienation as a child rejecting a previously loved parent under the influence of his of her other parent. Similarly, Deters (2003) reports that among high-conflict cases, some parents attempt to alienate their child(ren) from the other parent. Amato and Afifi (2006) examined the effects of marital discord and divorce on 632 young adult offsprings' feelings of being caught in the middle of their parents' disputes. The parents were divided into three groups: continuously married with low conflict, continuously married with high conflict and divorced (on average, the young adults experienced divorce 16 years prior to being interviewed). They found that children with parents in high-conflict marriages were more likely than children in low-conflict marriages and/or divorced families to feel caught between parents when questioned about how often their parents were competing for their affection. The results suggest that the level of conflict between parents is a better predictor of children feeling caught in the middle than the status of their parents' current relationship.

Complaints to child welfare agencies and/or the police regarding allegations of child abuse:

Trocmé and Bala (2005) conducted a national study of child welfare agencies in Canada, "The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-98)" and rated intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect investigated by child welfare services. They noted results from previous research on rates of intentional false allegations in custody and access disputes specifically ranged from four percent to 23 percent. Furthermore, they found in a sub-sample of custody and access disputes, that 15 percent of reports from non-custodial parents were classified as intentionally false reports, and only 2 percent of reports from custodial parents were classified as intentionally false. Johnston, Lee, Olesen and Walters (2005) examined allegations and substantiations of abuse in custody-disputing families and found that different kinds of allegations were raised against mothers compared with fathers. Mothers were more likely to make child sexual abuse allegations and drug abuse allegations against fathers, but neither of these types of abuse was substantiated at a higher rate. Mothers were also more likely to make allegations of alcohol abuse and domestic violence against fathers than the converse, and these allegations were likely to be substantiated at higher rates than the converse. In their study, the amount of substantiated family abuse of any kind was almost doubled for fathers (57 percent) compared to mothers (34 percent).

Involvement of professionals in the conflict to assist in resolution:

This review did not uncover empirical evidence to support the notion that the involvement of professionals is associated with levels of parental conflict. Friedman (2004) argues that conflict is embedded in and encouraged by the larger system, including extended family and friends, support groups with their own political agenda, therapists, and lawyers within the adversarial legal process. Tumus (2005) suggests that well-trained mental health professionals can play a significant role in achieving the children's wishes for the parents to stop fighting by developing the complete story, recognizing parental strengths, evaluating allegations of pathology, assessing a child's wishes and making recommendations that will minimize current and future conflicts. Deters (2003) suggests that professionals involved in parents' disputes can specifically target divorced families who manifest ongoing conflict and parental alienation. Boyan and Termini (2005) suggest that parent coordinators be ordered by the courts. This model offers a step-by-step approach to address several issues in high-conflict divorce. For example, relevant research is provided to the clients and issues of time sharing, the legal system, parental alienation and anger are discussed. Based on Johnston's (1994) research, she reports that high-conflict divorced parents have a relatively poor prognosis for developing cooperative co-parenting arrangements without a great deal of therapeutic intervention.

Number of court interventions related to child related conflicts:

Contested legal issues in conflict cases include: where the child lives; how the child is raised; how the parent spends money on the child; the time the ex-spouse spends with the child; and the ex-spouse's financial contributions to the child support (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998). Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan and Anderson (1989) note that 90 percent of custody matters are settled before the parents even reach the courts. Friedman (2004) suggests that when parents do litigate, the court process itself pits parents against each other, encourages polarized and positional thinking about each other, deficiencies of the other and discourages parental communication. Severson, Smith, Ortega and Pettus (2004) compared mediated and litigated outcomes post separation and found that child access issues consumed a disproportionate share of court resources. In Bonach's (2005) study of factors contributing to quality co-parenting, it was found that less hostile divorce proceedings was one of the strongest predictors of quality co-parenting. This is similar to Johnston and Roseby (1997) comments that high-conflict parents are often identified by high rates of litigation and relitigation. Sbarra and Emery (2005) compared participants in litigation versus mediation to resolve their disputes. They found that the litigation participants reported more conflict at follow-up.

Use of external supports:

In the only known study that examined the use of external supports within high-conflict cases post-separation, Johnston and Campbell (1986) observed 80 divorcing families involved in disputes over the custody and care of the children and noted that "support" from extended kin and significant others is a misleading and fairly simplistic notion when it involves divorce-related problems. They report the double-edged nature of support was repeatedly observed, together with practical assistance and emotional encouragement often entailed criticism and interference. They note that in many cases, the support led to increased tension and escalation of conflict that was ultimately non-supportive and not constructive.

Conclusion:

Based on this review, a number of conclusions can be reached. First, it is imperative to focus on all factors associated with high conflict to improve timely and accurate identification of disputing separating and/or divorcing families. This timely identification would allow for early intervention with families based on different levels of conflict thereby reducing the associated risks to children. Second, by providing a common language associated with high conflict there would be a reduction in the extent to which multiple services (adult and children's mental health, child welfare, education, medical, police involvement and legal) are provided to these families to no avail. Third, having an empirically validated instrument that identifies different levels of conflict would assist mental health practitioners in targeting specific interventions. Fourth, an empirically validated instrument that examines different levels of conflict would also assist child custody and access assessors in targeting specific parenting arrangements. Fifth, differentiating types of conflict would also provide child welfare workers an opportunity to focus their limited resources on only those cases that are appropriate. The dire need to reduce the human and financial costs of high-conflict family dissolution makes the development and validation of a reliable and valid instrument to differentiate levels of conflict timely.

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Part II of this article will follow in the Spring issue of the Journal

On Enhancing Educational Development in Grade School

By Louise Legault

Why Is Education Important For Children Aged 5 to 9?

The early school performance of children, irrespective of their life circumstances, has direct short-term and long-term implications. The significance of the educational socialization that occurs in kindergarten to that of learning the basic skills required for reading and writing that takes place in grades 1 to 4 cannot be easily discounted. Together, the years between kindergarten and grade 4 form the basis upon which children build subsequent academic successes. Slight learning deficits evidenced in grade 1 can quickly build up to large learning deficits by grade 4. It is therefore not surprising that in the long-term, children who experience early academic success are more likely to pursue their education, find employment, and experience better mental and physical health (Doherty, 1997). The crucial importance of ensuring academic success is even more so for fostered children for whom there exists an abundance of findings highlighting poorer educational performance in comparison to their age-peers (e.g., Flynn et al., 2004; Mitic & Rimer, 2002).

How Do Foster Children Fare In School?

Children entering care tend to have more learning and language problems compared to their peers (Evans, 2001), in great part because educational neglect is a common component of child maltreatment (Helfer, 1987). Moreover, placement in foster care has been associated with regression in some physical and behavioural skills which can occur during adaptation to a new foster home (Dore and Eisner, 1993). The problem of arrested educational development is compounded by the current reality in Ontario's child welfare system. More often than not, Ministry requirements translate, into child welfare workers and agencies intervening with children on a crisis basis. The main thrust of services and interventions available is and has been on addressing deficiencies and pathologies. This situation leaves precious little time to attend to the educational needs of young children. Notwithstanding these system level challenges, recent research findings in child welfare have highlighted that not all fostered children experience educational difficulties (e.g., Flynn et al., 2004). Some children experience early academic success despite difficult life circumstances such as instability in their household arrangements. These latter children may be defined as educationally resilient and much can be learned from their experiences. Knowledge of the key factors associated with their academic success would be most useful to inform practitioners of potentially effective interventions and guide decision-makers of needed changes in policies and regulations so that such outcomes could become more likely for a greater number of fostered children.

What We Don't Know About The Educational Process.

One area that remains to be understood is the relative contribution of contextual factors to the educational performance of fostered children. That is, we need to better understand the effects of disruptions in the educational process that often occur during foster care placement (e.g., changes in school, teachers, etc.) relative to improvements in educational (e.g., stability in school attendance; tutoring) and home conditions (e.g., stability in placement; academic support) in regard to educational development.

Given the contextual reality of fostered children, the resilience framework is particularly useful to achieve a better understanding of factors linked to the educational development of this group of children. The systematic study of resilience among children emerged in the 1970s, in the wake of study findings underlining that many children were developing well despite important contextual challenges such as a dysfunctional biological family or poverty (Masten and Reed, 2002). Over the last three decades, a standard list of protective, resilience-promoting factors at the child, family, and community/environmental levels, has emerged from international research (Masten and Reed, 2002). Drawing from the resilience framework and educational research field, we established two main clusters of factors consistently linked to the educational development of young children: (a) child factors, such as gender and anxiety levels; and (b) family factors such as parental importance attributed to good grades and parental involvement in the child's education. It is this list of factors that we used in our analyses to achieve insights into the educational development of foster children, taking into consideration their unique life experiences. The list of factors investigated and an example of the question assessing the factor (when needed) are shown in the following Table.

Table 1. List of investigated factors linked to educational performance

	Factors (protective condition in parenthesis) Item example
Child	• Gender (female being protective factor) • Physical aggression (low frequency of physically aggressive behaviours) *Ex: How often would you say that he/she gets into many fights?* • **Anxiety** (low level of anxiety) *Ex: How often would you say that … feels miserable, unhappy, tearful, or distressed?* • **Hyperactivity / attention deficits** (low levels of hyperactivity and attention deficits) *Ex: How often would you say that … can't concentrate, can't pay attention for long?* • Happiness in school (happy to be in school) *Ex: With regard to how he/she feels about school, how often does he/she look forward to going to school?* • Memory (good memory) *Ex: How would you describe ...'s usual ability to remember things?* • **Problem solving skills** (good problem solving skills) *Ex: How would you describe ...'s usual ability to think and solve day-to-day problems?* • Absences from school (none or few absences from school) *Ex: During the previous school year, about how many days was ... absent from school for any reason?* • Changes in school (no or few changes in school) *Ex: Other than the natural progression through the school system, how many times (if any) has changed schools since birth?*
Family	• **Extra help outside of school** *Ex: Does ... receive any help or tutoring outside of school?* (tutors) • **Parental importance of good grades** (great importance attributed to good grades) *Ex: How important is it to you that ... have good grades in school?* • Supervised homework (supervision of homework) *Ex: How often do you check his/her homework or provide help with homework?* • Parental involvement in child's schooling (some involvement in education) *Ex: How often do you and ... talk about school work or behaviour in class?* • **Literacy activities** (literacy promoting activities done regularly) *Ex: Currently, how often do you or another adult read aloud to ... or listen to him/her read aloud (or--in the case of younger children--attempt to read aloud)?* • Number of caregivers (none or few changes in caregivers) • *Ex: How many changes in main caregivers has ... experienced since birth?*

The Aim of This Study

Our aim was to identify which of the factors investigated were most strongly associated to the educational performance of young children. To achieve this objective, we used information gathered on the Assessment and Action Records (AAR-C2; Flynn, Ghazal, and Legault, 2001) from the 2000-2001 and 2002-2003 data collection years.

Who Were Our Children?

Our sample consisted of 138 boys and 114 girls. Their mean age was 7.8 years and ranged from 4 to 10 years. The majority of these children were crown wards (82 percent), first admitted into care at age 4 (mean). The main reason for entering care included physical/sexual harm (23 percent), neglect (32 percent) or parental incapacity to take care of the physical or mental needs of the children (25 percent). Children experienced on average (mean) 3.8 negative life events (e.g., death of a parent, poverty) in addition to coming into care (range = 0 to 13; *SD* = 3.67). The majority of children lived in foster homes (95 percent) with a minority living in group homes (2.4 percent) or in other types of placement settings.

How Was Educational Performance Defined?

Foster parents were asked to evaluate the educational performance of their fostered child based on their knowledge of the child's school work and report cards during the current school year or, during the last school year he/she was enrolled in school. Four areas were assessed: reading, composition, mathematics, and overall educational performance. Foster parents chose the answer which best reflected their assessment of the child's educational performance on a scale ranging from very poorly or poorly to well or very well (see NOTE following the article on how data were analyzed).

What Did We Find?

The educational performance of fostered children in our sample was most strongly associated with better problem solving skills, low levels of hyperactivity/inattention, and access to help or tutoring outside of school. To a lesser extent, the children's educational performance was linked to lower levels of anxiety, more importance attributed to good grades by foster parents, and a greater number of literacy-promoting activities.

Child Factors and Response Patterns

Approximately half of the children evidenced little or no difficulty in thinking and solving day-to-day problems (56 percent). Another third showed some level of impairment (30 percent) and a little over a tenth (14 percent) evidenced a great deal of impairment in their ability to think and solve day-to-day problems. As for anxiety levels, approximately half of the children evidenced no anxiety problems (52 percent) with the remainder experiencing anxiety problems on occasion (48 percent). In terms of hyperactivity/inattention, about one-fifth of the children (18 percent) showed no such behaviours, half behaved sometimes in this way (52 percent), and one third often exhibited behavioural hyperactivity and inattention (30 percent).

Overall, the sample profile that emerges from the above response pattern indicates that about half of the children showed good psychological functioning. This is particularly the case in terms of anxiety levels and their ability to think and solve daily problems. However, about a third of the children performed poorly particularly in terms of behaviours indicative of hyperactivity/inattention problems and impairment in the children's ability to think and solve day-to-day problems. Children who scored high on hyperactivity/inattention, compared to children who scored low on this dimension, tended to be boys (64 percent; low hyperactivity group 50 percent boys), showed greater impaired thinking (28 percent; compared to seven percent in the low hyperactivity group), changed schools more often (2 times; compared to 1.7 in the low hyperactivity group), and had higher anxiety levels (mean = 1.7; compared to 1.4 for the low hyperactivity group). However, these two groups did not differ in terms of number of negative life events, number of caregivers since birth, and age.

Child Factor Findings and What They Can Mean

A profile combining hyperactivity/inattention, high anxiety, and poor problem solving skills has been associated in past studies with highly stressful experiences. This is the case for fostered children who have experienced in the past, and often continue to do so once in care, numerous stressful life events (e.g., abuse, leaving birth home, living with strangers, changes in foster caregivers, etc.). Symptoms of hyperactivity/inattention, anxiety, and poor problem solving skills may reflect their current life situation rather than neurobiological imbalances. Changes in placement and the resulting need to acclimatize to new routines and caregivers may severely tax young children's ability to deal with the added demands of adapting to a new school. If this hypothesis is correct, better educational performance would be evidenced by children once they begin experiencing stability in foster care arrangements and by extension, stability in their place of schooling. Indeed, stable foster care arrangements and place of schooling have been strongly advocated by researchers (Burley and Halpern, 2001; Zetlin and Weinberg, 2004) and by fostered youths themselves (Alderman, 2003). Access to mental health professionals should also be prioritized for children experiencing severe emotional-behavioural difficulties since exhibiting problem-behaviours in school (e.g., aggression, anxiety, attention seeking, etc.) often result in suspensions, grade retention, or erroneous placement in special education classes (Zetlin and Weinberg, 2004). Even in the absence of problem-behaviours, children who experience psychological problems exemplified by anxiety, depression, and an inability to concentrate, all influence their ability to focus and do well in school (Aldgate et al., 1992). Lastly, formalizing the maintenance of ties with the biological family (where feasible) may also help improve children's educational performance since this aspect has been identified by fostered young people as a main source of distraction from schoolwork (Finkelstein et al., 2002).

Foster Parent Factors and Response Patterns

The majority of foster parents reported doing literacy-promoting activities with their fostered child a few times a week (64 percent) or on a daily basis (9 percent). A smaller proportion of foster parents reported doing no literacy activities to engaging in these behaviours only a few times a month. The majority of foster parents reported according no or very little importance to their foster child obtaining good grades at school (72 percent). Only a smaller proportion reported the child obtaining good grades at school as important or highly important to them (28 percent). In terms of tutoring outside of school, a good proportion of the children did not have any form of help or tutoring outside school (74 percent).

Foster parent factors and what it can mean

The above findings show that a fair proportion of foster parents provide the child with frequent occasions of reading for pleasure, access to and appreciation of books, and encouragement in writing (or pretending to write). Yet, improvements are needed in several areas. First, foster parents need to be made aware of the importance of reading and the joy of reading in the educational development of the children in their care. Children who become fluent readers at an early age have a greater likelihood of succeeding in school. In adulthood, literacy is still the first requirement of employers. It is also a crucial tool for independent learning and an important leisure skill. Secondly, foster parents need to be sensitized to the importance of having high yet realistic expectations of educational performance. Setting the bar at a lower level for educational performance translates into missed opportunities to encourage and convey to the child the importance of good grades. Third, help or tutoring outside of school should be made available to children who are struggling in school.

Limits of Our Findings

The small number of children on which our findings are based precludes us from drawing firm links between their educational performance and the factors identified as being significant. Three key considerations underline this statement. First, it is quite possible that other factors which were not tested are just as important if not more crucial to favouring educational performance. Second, our sample of children may not be representative of fostered children aged 5 to 9 in Ontario. A larger number of children, representative of fostered children in Ontario, is needed to increase our level of confidence in these findings. Third, our findings are the equivalent of a snapshot, a moment in time. Resilience is both an outcome and a process. As an outcome, academic success is defined as performance on par or exceeding that of same-age peers in the general population (e.g., NLSCY same-age peers) at specific points in time. As a process, not everyone demonstrates positive functioning at every moment of their life and across all spheres of their life (Masten and Powell, 2003). In other words, fostered children may at one moment succeed academically and at another moment do more poorly. Likewise, they may do quite well in certain subjects and require remedial work in others. More research —especially of a longitudinal nature—is required to gain better insights into the educational development of fostered children.

Conclusion

Schools are a key setting wherein resilience can be fostered. The feeling of belonging to a school community may yield crucial psychological and social value for a fostered child. A sense of belonging to a school (Gilligan, 2000) and feeling "normal" (i.e., doing the same thing as other children; Martin and Jackson, 2002) can enhance emotional well-being. Schools offer fostered children an alternate identity to that of being in care and offer a means to temporarily escape from past negative experiences and current difficulties. They are an environment wherein a diversified and long lasting social network may be created, one that goes beyond fostered peers facing similar difficulties. They provide fostered children with rich and diversified opportunities to develop interests in sports, arts, and pro-social activities (Gilligan, 1998). The importance of schooling experiences to resilience clearly indicates the need for child welfare agencies to develop a closer partnership with teachers. The school system is often uninformed as to the life circumstances of fostered children. Teachers need to be made aware of gaps in children's education such as times when school attendance was interrupted and the number of school changes since grade 1. Teachers also need quick access to children's individualized educational plan so that planned remedial actions may take place more quickly and efficiently (Finkelstein et al., 2002). Child welfare workers also must forge a closer alliance with foster parents. They must convey to foster parents that they play a key role in promoting children's educational performance particularly through literacy activities. Both must harbour high yet realistic aspirations/expectations for children's educational performance and ensure the child has access to the educational material and help outside school conducive to educational performance.

NOTE: Data were analyzed using a two-prong strategy. A two-step hierarchical regression model to statistically predict academic performance was first run. In step 1, child variables were entered into the equation predicting the outcome variable. In step 2, family variables were entered into the equation. The overall analytical strategy involved a series of stepwise multiple regressions with sequential trimming of statistically nonsignificant variables to arrive at the final solution. We then looked at the response pattern of factors retained in the final solution to inform practical implications.

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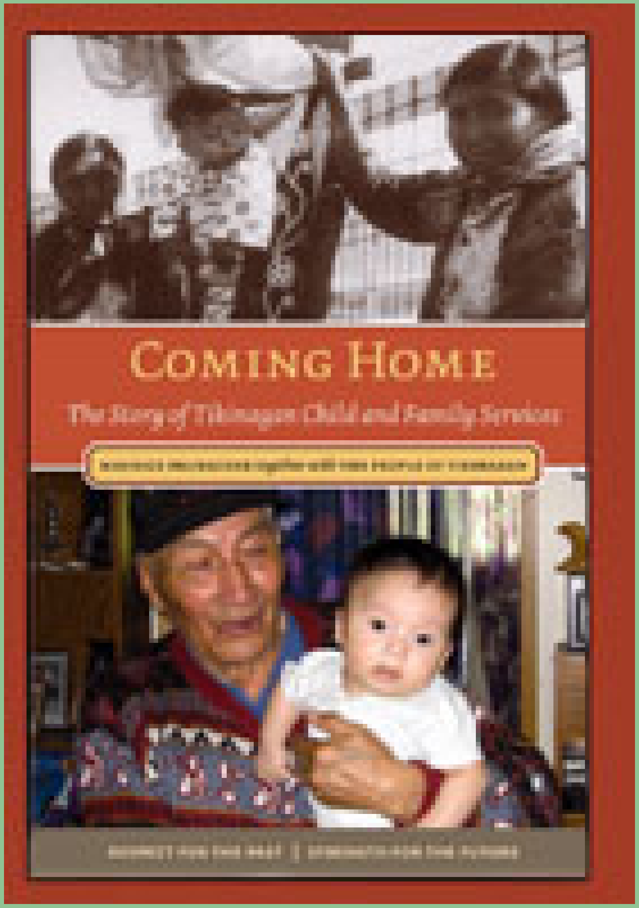
The Story of Tikinagan Child and Family Services: A Book Review

By Cindy Blackstock



For thousands of years before social work was founded, diverse First Nations communities across Canada relied on their traditional systems of care to ensure the safety and well being of their children and young people. Despite these systems of care proving effective across hundreds of generations, the Canadian and provincial governments imposed their own ways of caring for children on First Nations as part of an overall colonial policy. The results have been devastating – there are more First Nations children in care right now than at any time in history. As Dr. Brad McKenzie notes data from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada indicate that the numbers of Status Indian children in child welfare care increased 71.5 percent nationally between 1995 and 2001. The figures for Ontario were particularly discouraging showing an increase of 164 percent in the numbers of children in care during this same time period. Despite the fact that Ontario has the largest number of Aboriginal peoples in the country and the increasing evidence that First Nations child and family service agencies have better success than provincial systems in keeping First Nations children safely in their communities and connected to their culture, there are less First Nations child and family service agencies in Ontario than in any other province except Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island.

The Story of Tikinagan Child and Family Services is powerful testimony of the importance of restoring the responsibility of child welfare authority to First Nations in order to ensure improved outcomes for First Nations children. The book begins with a description of the traditional Nishnawbe-Aski values and ways of being that guided the care of their children across the millennia before identifying the multiple impacts of colonization on their children. This sets the stage for a description of how the Tikinagan Child and Family Services agency reaffirms the Nishnawbe-Aski community as the best decision makers for their children and privileges traditional ways of caring for children and keeping them safely at home. The gains achieved by Tikinagan have been remarkable in light of the fact that they have had to operate within provincial legislation that often fails to reflect the unique culture and context of Nishnawbe-Aski peoples and funding levels that do not reflect the high service needs of community members. The Story of Tikinagan lays out the principles of respectful partnership with government which will be necessary in order to jointly develop solutions to the jurisdiction and funding issues.

What is so inspiring about the Story of Tikinagan is that this is a child welfare system guided by well defined values, beliefs and a vision for children developed by the Nishnawbe-Aski peoples. This is not so much a story of how a First Nations child and family service agency is protecting First Nations children as it is about how a First Nations child and family service agency can act as an empowering agent for community to reclaim its responsibility and ability to care for and protect children. It sets the right example of what community engagement in child welfare can look like.

The other right example that Tikinagan sets is its own commitment to learning – it understands achieving the vision set out by community means that everyone, including the child welfare system, must be prepared to learn and change. By sharing this story, Tikinagan embodies the value of generosity held by the Nishnawbe-Aski peoples for generations – it is a chance for all of us to learn from their experience and to celebrate the resilience and strength of First Nations families and communities.

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