



Alternatives North

Alternatives North Submission for NWT Child and Family Service Review

The invitation to participate in the review of NWT Child and Family Services explained “the social issues caused by alcohol and drug misuse, family violence, poverty, lack of housing and the effects of trauma may put children and families at risk and may require intervention by Child Protection and Family Services.”

Our submission will focus on helping to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the Indigenous families that are served by the program. We recognize that many NWT families are recovering from multi-generational trauma related to colonial impacts and support the need to help families heal and not be further divided.

The first step is to lay a strong foundation for resiliency by offering support to women during their pregnancies to promote healthy births and healthy infant development. This could mean assistance with nutrition, adequate income, information on pregnancy and birthing and the importance of early childhood education and care, smoking cessation programs, trauma-recovery programs that address alcohol and drug abuse, and decreasing stress for pregnant women. It also involves supporting women facing domestic violence by providing them with a safe home or place to go and offering healing programs for men who commit acts of violence. An innovative and comprehensive healing program for men who use violence in relationships was developed by the GNWT in partnership with community service providers. Unfortunately, it was shelved in favour of a scaled back version that was recently deemed to not meet the needs of this group.

The next step is to offer a safe and responsive environment for early childhood development. A child’s brain develops and grows most quickly during the first three years of life. The brain has around 100 billion cells at birth but they are not yet connected. However, 700-1000 new synapses (or connections) between

neurons develop every second during this time and form pathways.¹ There is then a period of pruning, making some brain pathways stronger and more efficient. A child's early experiences determine which circuits are reinforced and which are pruned through lack of use. So adequate nutrition, social interactions with responsive caregivers and lack of exposure to toxic experiences help a developing brain to function well under many circumstances.

Without going further into neurodevelopmental growth, let's discuss the role that stress can play. Supportive caregivers provide children with a powerful stress-protection mechanism. They help reduce a child's release of stress hormones and help the child develop their own capacity to cope with life stresses. While some stress is a normal experience for a child, learning to resolve that stress helps develop a resilience that serves them throughout their life. The Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University outlines that there are three types of stress: positive stress, tolerable stress and toxic stress. Positive stress is part of life and brings brief stress responses like increased heart rate and blood pressure and a mild increase in stress hormones. An example might be the response to getting a needle. Tolerable stress makes the body respond more because it comes from a more serious or longer lasting threat, such as loss of a loved one or being in an accident. But supportive relationships can help the child recover and adapt. Toxic stress occurs when:

“a child experiences major, frequent and/or prolonged adversity such as recurrent physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, repeated exposure to violence and accumulated burdens of family economic hardship – without adequate support or worse, where the adult is the source of both support and fear.”²

Toxic stress can actually hinder the normal development of the brain and cause the child to get stuck using a stress response of defensiveness and survival orientation for dealing with life. Imagine if you were dealing with life from the perspective of always being under attack. That is what it is like for a young child exposed to toxic stress. This reality demands that a positive environment be

¹ From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A science-based approach to building a more promising future for young children and families. Centre on the Developing Child; Harvard University. May 2016.

² Ibid

provided from the start, and more specifically, the elimination of the experience of toxic stress in a child's life.

This requires broad based programs that serve families, especially Indigenous families that have poor socioeconomic conditions working against them because systems across the North still often operate from a colonial framework.

Specifically, these are programs that provide key early support to enhance the opportunity for development of healthy family relationships of young families by addressing the stress and consequences of poverty, family violence, or poor lifestyle decisions. These consequences are known to commonly derive from the multigenerational impacts of the residential school program and traumatic cultural loss in the North.

Programs and early childhood intervention for the first three years of a child's life, additional services for children with special needs, and preschool programs are all important programs to meet children's needs. The Healthy Families Program offers a positive example of the work needed. It would be better if it was situated in community rather than in government. We support the geographic extension and increased support of this service across the NWT. Given the recent investment by the Federal government in early childhood programs, this is a prime time to get going in developing more early childhood programs and enhancing the ones that exists.

The GNWT may want to consider adopting the Nurturing the Seed program, a national Indigenous designed early mental health assessment and intervention program developed by Sick Kids Hospital in partnership with Indigenous communities across the country³. Child and Family Services may also consider adopting the Aboriginal Children's Health and Well-being Measure (ACHWM)⁴ designed by and for Indigenous youth and led by Laurentian University. It is a tablet-based wellness assessment tool for Indigenous children and youth that helps them talk about wellness while also screening for risk. It provides each child with an opportunity to access local support and services. Additionally, it combines

³ [The Infant and Early Mental Health Hub for Training, Resources, & Tools \(IEHMF Hub\) – Kids Brain Health Network – Réseau pour la santé du cerveau des enfants](#)

⁴ [Home - Welcome | ACHWM](#)

results across children to determine health within each community and inform local health service planning.

More targeted support is required for families with low levels of education and low income, conditions that put them at higher risk. This may be in the form of life skills training, parenting education and peer coaching by people with lived expertise, programs for infants and toddlers (and caregivers when possible), nutritional assistance, and programs that provide adequate income. Too many families have fallen into dysfunction in the face of trying to pay arrears and manage on inadequate incomes. Instead of having the stress from such situations lead to the removal of the child from the family home, support should be provided to the family to prevent it.

Early childhood programs play a key role, but must always recognize the heritage of the children. The Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework (IELCF) outlines that

“High-quality, culturally-specific and well-supported early learning and childcare (ELCC) programs, services and supports that are specifically designed for and with Indigenous families and communities will make a genuine difference in the early experiences of children. This, in turn, will support children’s development and life outcomes. High-quality Indigenous ELCC programming empowers young children with a strong sense of identity. It provides educational opportunities and school readiness and contributes to their overall health and wellness from early years into adulthood.”⁵

Early childhood programs can play a part in helping young children connect to their culture and heritage. Involving elders who can share stories, games and traditional language and practices is a good idea.

However, there are often barriers for families to participate in such programs. IELCF noted that

“Regardless of where families live, there are often social, economic and logistical realities that pose significant challenges in accessing Indigenous ELCC programs and services. Barriers identified through engagement include: an absence of culturally-appropriate facilities or programming; lack of transportation; lack of knowledge about available programming; intimidating or unclear bureaucracies and processes; providers’ lack of awareness of Indigenous cultures and families; as well as mental

⁵ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-early-learning/2018-framework.html>

health challenges, poverty, social isolation, and the loss of connection to Indigenous identity. These challenges need to be addressed and will rely on the continued work, collaboration and advocacy of all levels of government (including Indigenous governments), organizations, communities and individuals.”⁶

Our specific recommendations include:

- Expand the geographic coverage and financial resources of the Healthy Families Program and work with communities to offer the program to provide key early supports to families to avoid later consequences such as having to remove the child from the family.
- Explore adopting the Nurturing the Seed program and the Aboriginal Children's Health and Well-being Measure tool to provide mental health support to children at their earliest age and to address mental health and addictions among pre-teens and teens.
- Expand the availability of assistance for pregnant women for nutrition, adequate income, information on pregnancy and birthing, smoking cessation programs, trauma-recovery programs that address alcohol and drug use, and support for having a safe home or place to go. All of this would help decrease the stress for pregnant women.
- Increase the availability of programs that support parents of young children through coaching, toy lending libraries, and offering fun family activities that create *quality* experiences for young children and their parents.
- Ensure that *quality* early childhood programs that support Indigenous parents of children age 0-3 exist in all communities and are designed by and for Indigenous families.
- Decrease the cost of childcare by providing funding assistance to early childhood programs that allow an improved child-to-caregiver ratio. This should be possible given the recent increase in funding from the Federal government promising a \$10 per day rate.
- Add a supplement to Income Assistance for families with children age 0-3 years old.
- Ensure that removing a family from the Income Assistance program does not result in the removal of a child from a family.

⁶ Ibid

We thank you for your attention to our recommendations and look forward to reviewing your report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Suzette Montreuil". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and 'M'.

Suzette Montreuil
For Alternatives North