
Bringing home the kids

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ABSTRACT. The destructive processes of colonization and assimilation of First Nations and Métis people in Canada has not come to an end rather, like a chameleon, these forms of oppression simply change their appearance and continue on. From the tragedy of Residential Schools, to the ravages of the Sixties Scoop, to the incremental devastation of family and community by the bureaucratic process of putting children “in-care”, the cumulative negative impacts of contact with Western society remain. In 2006, in a northern Alberta (Canada) First Nations community of 8000 people, approximately 150 children were “in-care” and living two hours away in a large urban centre with minimal contact with their home community. Community-based Children’s Services (Wahkohtowin) decided it was time to “Bring Home the Kids” – and staged an event designed to reconnect these children to their community. While it was acknowledged that a single event will not solve the problem of the number of children taken into care, it was felt that this opportunity to reconnect would help with the issues of anxious and disrupted attachment that many of the children (and the community) were experiencing – and would also help to increase community awareness of the number of children who are in care. Perhaps it would eventually lead to repatriation. It was a place to continue the process of healing. This is the story of that event.

Introduction

The trans-generational impact of Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop and recent Child Welfare practices has resulted in First Nations people who are struggling with identity, attachment, disconnection and the consequent high levels of destructive social and health problems associated with these issues. This historical separation, socialization, and assimilation tore children, families and communities apart.

Unfortunately, this process of colonization and assimilation is still occurring today. It is not uncommon for Canadian Indigenous children and youth to be placed into foster care, as the data from Farris-Manning and Zandstra (2003) reveals, approximately 40% of the 76,000 children and youth placed in foster care in Canada are First Nations or Métis. The act of removing children from their homes and communities, for protection, often results in experiences of disrupted and/or anxious attachment, as children’s ties to biological kinship can dissolve as they begin to adapt to a new family. Their re-identification and re-connection

with a community through past and present kinship relationships can benefit future generations of Indigenous people at many levels.

Research into kinship relationships of Indigenous people is needed in order to understand their diverse cultural needs and to restore balance and health into their lives. Further, research is an essential part of exploring the experience of First Nations children who have been placed in off-reserve foster homes.

The applied research project described in this article, “Bringing Home the Kids”, addressed these issues in the Spring of 2006 by providing 60 “in-care” children, their case-workers, and their foster parents the opportunity to reconnect with their families, extended family, and home community. In the following article, we explore concepts of attachment and kinship and then describe how the “Bringing Home the Kids” project contributed to mediating previous experiences of anxious and disrupted attachment in a First Nations context.

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Concepts of attachment, kinship and community

Attachment

Bowlby (cited in Waters & Cummings, 2000) provides the foundation of attachment theory. Attachment theory holds that infants form an attachment bond to their primary caregiver, using the caregiver as a secure base from which the infant explores their world. Ainsworth (1989) goes on to explain that from birth, infants are given behaviours that can support intimacy with their primary caregiver (i.e. crying to signal the caregiver that attention is needed).

Under healthy attachment circumstances, an infant has confidence that their caregivers will be available and responsive to their needs; the primary caregiver becomes a person of refuge and comfort. Schofield (2002) cites Bowlby 1969, George 1996, & Howe et al 1999, findings that reliable and responsive care from the primary caregiver are the foundations for loving relationships, and lead to the core attachment concept of felt security (p. 262). This is not to say that once an attachment bond is created, it cannot be broken. By removing the child from their primary caregiver, attachment can become disrupted. Marriage, parenting, caring for others and receiving care from others are all thought to be affected by attachment systems. Regardless of the situation, disrupted attachment can result in many complications.

Grigsby (1994) explains that either the threat or actual loss of the bond between the infant and primary caregiver can result in sorrow and stimulate anger (p. 270). In attachment theory, internal working models direct the interpretation and planning of the behaviours (Bretherton, 1990, p. 240), their function is to process and make sense of the relationship between infant and caregiver.

The necessity of promoting healthy attachment styles for children in care is clear, as disrupted attachment may cause issues in relationships such as sorrow and anger, throughout the foster care experience and possibly all future relationships. Children who experience disrupted attachment (an initial bond with a subsequent disruption) or anxious attachment (a partial bond with subsequent disruption of the attached relationship) display behaviours and attitudes that tend to derail social and interpersonal success in later years. Barnett and Vondra (1999), explain that

“attachments develop in the context of relationships...” (p. 6). While attachment disorders such as these can take years to resolve, it is important that attachment disordered children be given the chance to have their basic needs met and to feel cared for and safe.

The effects of visitation on attachment

Extensive research has been conducted on the importance of visitation between foster families and biological families. Visitation can work to promote and heal issues of attachment between biological families and the child in care and to diminish the effects of anxious and disrupted attachment. Grigsby (1994) elaborates on the importance of visitation to attachment: when Children Services works with the foster care family and the biological family to arrange regular visitation, “children can feel more secure in their attachment” (p. 272). Supervised visitation can also become a situation where families (both biological and foster) can learn about each other’s “roles, hierarchies, alliances, relationships, boundaries, rules and beliefs” (Minuchin & Fisherman, cited in Lee & Stacks, 2004, p.4). McWey and Mullis (2004) posit that the effects of visitation on attachment may come from several sources, such as the frequency and consistency of visitation, as well as the length of time in care (p. 294). Findings of their study demonstrated that children with a higher number of placements and longer time in care were rated with having anxious or disrupted attachment. A direct positive relationship was found between children who displayed high attachment rates and consistent and frequent visitations by their biological parents (p. 297).

The effects of visitation on family reunification

When family reunification is the goal, regular visitation is crucial in creating or maintaining relationships between the child and the biological family (Hess, 1992, as cited in Grigsby, 1994). In Perkins and Ansay’s (1998) study on families who attended a supervised visitation centre (where biological and foster care families can visit in a supervised environment, where games, talking and sharing a meal are often present- similar to the “Bringing Home the Kids” project) it was found that 83% of referred families had at least one visit, with 33% of families continuing forward for ten or more visits (p. 255). Upon follow up,

42% of closed cases of the families who attended the supervised visitation centre resulted in reunification of the family; in contrast, only 29% of closed cases for families who did not participate in the supervised visitation centre resulted in reunification (p. 256).

Leathers' (2002) study provides valuable insight into the significance of the location where visitations occur. Leathers proposes that children whose visitations occur in their non-custodial mother's homes experience a mean of 18.9 more visits in six months than children who were visited in their foster homes (who received an average of 6.6 more visits than children that were visited in locations such as fast-food restaurants or agency offices (p.609-610)). In light of this information, efforts should be made to make visitations in a comfortable secure and familiar environment- for both the children and the parents. This finding gives credit to exploring the idea of returning children to their reserve community for reconnection. Regular and consistent visitation can work effectively to heal or create healthy attachment bonds and (if applicable) to achieve the goal of family reunification.

Historical background of kinship

A historical look at the initial destruction of kinship systems of Native people is examined by Rose Strelau (2005); she emphasizes the importance of social organization in kinship, "Native people organized their societies through kinship systems," which in turn determined their identities, rights and obligations (p. 266). She goes on to say that the prevailing view of the colonizer "did not differentiate among the different ways that Native people defined *family* and ordered their domestic lives" (p. 271). Strelau (2005) states that the decisions of the colonizers "dismissed the rights of Native parents to raise their own children all together, and [they] advocated that the federal government assume guardianship overall the Native youths" (p. 272). Her literature thoroughly addresses the destructive affects that allotment had on Native kinship and the creation of gender inequalities in society, but reaffirms that Native kinship relations have continued, which has allowed survival in spite of the allotment process, thereby supporting the strength of the kinship system (Strelau, 2005).

Kinship and community

Kinship and community can affect attachment. As discussed above, visitation can prove beneficial to attachment and the development of foster children. However, this statement also merits some understanding of kinship and community and how these factors may affect visitation. As Littner (cited in McWay & Mullis, p. 200) succinctly states, "For better or worse, [kinship relationships] are... roots to the past... support and foundation. When ... separated from them, he has lost a part of himself" (p. 293). When recognizing the impact kinship can have on children, the effect is great. Kinship care allows children to be introduced to people they know, helps build connections to family, enables the spread of the family identity, and guides the child's cultural and ethnic identity (CWLA, as cited in Scannapieco & Hegar, 1996). Kinship care can also provide a sense of self, sense of identity and self-esteem in children when taught their family's history and culture (CWLA, as cited in Hegar, 1993).

Not only does kinship play an important factor in visitation and attachment for children in care, but also ties to the community are essential. Ensuring that a foster child is introduced to its community, or that an existing sense of community is strengthened, should play a role in each foster child's life. Simply stated, "Familiarity contributes to stability as an experience. Nostalgic affection for the home place may provide a secure basis for exploring the world" (Jones as cited in Settles, 2001, p. 630). By reintroducing foster children to their home place (as in the case of the "Bringing Home the Kids" project) this provides the foundation for foster children to explore their self-identity. However, it is noted that a "home" does not necessarily have a geographical location but as Settles (2002) suggests home may be "...where one spends holidays or other ritual events" (p. 630). By this reasoning, it makes it possible for children to have two "homes": one with their foster care family, but also a "home" within their community of origin where, upon visitation, they are introduced to and can participate in ceremonies or rituals such as traditional feasts, sweat-lodges, powwows, dancing, and drumming.

The “Bringing Home the Kids” project

The “Bringing Home the Kids” project attempted to support the reconnection of children being held in care (away from their home community) with their families, extended families, and their own community through a one-day event of celebration and ceremony. Through the use of a variety of experiences and resources including kinship maps, photographs, cultural gifts, education, and ceremony the project sought to reconnect children, community, and family.

The Cree people have a relationship-based culture expressed primarily through the concepts of relational accountability and the Cree term “wahkohtowin”. “Wahkohtowin” translates roughly as “kinship” or “relationships” and contains a conceptual understanding of larger connection – to each other, to everything in creation, and includes previous ancestors and future generations. Connecting individuals as part of the community through the experience of “wahkohtowin” may help to heal experiences of disrupted attachment. It was important that the “Bringing Home the Kids” event include specific components that would address and ameliorate these children’s experiences of broken attachment. The following component provided an opportunity to identify, document and share specific kinship relations of community and family.

In preparation for the event, the project organizers, urban-based Children’s Services, and community-based wahkohtowin workers came together to create a culturally appropriate kinship map for every child and family involved with the event. It was acknowledged early on that “Geno-grams”, as taught in western-based social work education, carry a specific worldview of family relationships (often referred to as the “nuclear” family) and do not reflect the traditional understanding of the kinship connections and kinship patterns of many First Nations peoples. Consequently, the project team attempted to construct “kinship maps” for each child and family involved that accurately reflected traditional and historical relationships between family and community members.

These kinship maps proved to be an important component in a variety of areas. First, they encouraged a culturally appropriate understanding of family connections and

community relationships. Second, they enabled the project team to ensure that at least one individual represented on the kinship map was in attendance at the event in order to connect with the child and family involved. Third, as each child and/or family arrived at the event, they received a copy of their specific kinship map and were immediately connected with at least one person from their family. Finally, a photographer was standing by to take photographs of family members with the children. These photos were printed immediately and copies were given to the children and families. These visible and tangible connections to family and community provided an increased sense of attachment for each of the children involved.

In addition, the Wahkohtowin Society worked within the community to create and print two full-colour booklets for the event. The first “Awina Niya” (Who Am I), explored what it means to be Cree. It included traditional teachings about tipis, eagle feathers, language, kinship relations and the history of the community. The second booklet created was a Cree Colouring Book. Although similar in design to the colouring books which are familiar to many of us, this unique colouring book featured First Nations specific pictures, exercises, and language. For example, one page featured drawings of four traditional ceremonial dancers and asked the child to pick which picture was different from the others. Pictures were also captioned in the Cree language. It is interesting to note that even the choices of which pictures to include in a child’s colouring book can have long-term impacts on world view and culture.

Along with the kinship maps, the Colouring Books and the Awina Niya booklets, the children also received a backpack, a t-shirt with the Wahkohtowin logo, and a beaded eagle feather. As each child was presented with their gifts, the female elders at the end of the procession wrapped each child in a blanket and welcomed them into the community. In addition, there were two horse drawn wagons that gave children and their families the opportunity to travel around the community. The event concluded with traditional dancing (some of the children had the opportunity to dance for the first time, in full regalia) and a closing feast. Needless to say, the event had a very strong impact on everyone.

Each child was reintroduced to their community and had the opportunity to experience the positive aspects of the Native community and celebrate being Cree. Additionally, the community came together to reinforce the “wahkohtowin” kinship relationship they have with the children in care. The “Bringing Home the Kids” project was an example of the blending of social work theory and the practical application of that theory. In First Nations communities, understanding and action are not separated – if you understand the meaning of an issue, you are obligated to contribute towards and to be a part of the resolution of that issue.

Discussion

The benefits of supervised visitation have been discussed, as visitation promotes attachment bonds between children in care and their families. Frequent and consistent visitation was also found to be significant in positively affecting family reunification. The necessity of kinship and community was also discussed, as it is typically beneficial for children in care to be aware of their biological kinship, extended family and the community and culture into which they were born. The “Bringing Home the Kids” project engaged in opportunities to connect and reconnect children and to promote healthy attachment connections to family, extended family, and their community. The project was rooted in traditional teachings and social work theory and knowledge.

In the final evaluation, it was strongly felt by the various stakeholders that this event should be a yearly occurrence. The initial event was funded by a one-time partnership between Wahkohtowin (community-based First Nations Children’s Services), urban-based Children’s Services, and the First Nations Native Liaison Unit. Unfortunately, the cost of the event has subsequently become problematic, and determining which agency should be responsible for providing ongoing funding is a challenge. As is common in many areas of First Nations social, educational, and health programs, conflicts between community-based funding, provincial funding, and federal funding are difficult to resolve. As a consequence, many excellent projects such as this one have suffered a similar fate – leaving children, families and communities on their own.

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