

ABORIGINAL CHILD WELFARE IN ONTARIO

A Short History

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November 24, 1999
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INTRODUCTION

Ontario's child welfare workers will likely meet Aboriginal people in the

course of their work, either as clients or fellow service providers. This section provides a brief history of Aboriginal people and the child welfare system. It assumes that child welfare workers need to know (i) who are Aboriginal people (ii) what government policies affect their lives (iii) what historical, social and economic realities have affected Aboriginal families and child rearing, and (iv) how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities have tried to protect children and increase opportunities for their well-being.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN ONTARIO: DEFINITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Almost 900,000 Aboriginal people live in Canada; 141,525 live in the province of Ontario. Aboriginal people comprise three broad categories - Indian, Metis, and Inuit. Ontario Aboriginals are mainly Indian (118,830) and Metis (22,790). Thirteen hundred Inuit live in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 1998).

Ontario's Aboriginal people live in different locations: 34,455 live on reserves or settlements. "Reserves" are lands historically established for Indian people by the federal government. Although many reserves are near cities, many are in distant parts of the province. Some are only accessible by air. "Settlements" are places identified by the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for statistical purposes, where a group of 10 or more Indian people live more or less permanently off-reserve, usually on Crown land (Statistics Canada, 1993). Unlike reserves, settlements are not lands set aside for Indian people. Aboriginal people have also migrated to cities. Over half now live off-reserve.

Depending on their specific heritage, Aboriginal children and families have varying cultural backgrounds, biographical experiences, issues and problems, and access to services and other resources. For example, of 21 Aboriginal languages across Canada, only four - Ojibway, Cree, Oji-Cree and Iroquoian languages - are spoken by large numbers in Ontario.

The Indian Act and Federal Statutory Definitions

Aboriginal people in Ontario, like those in the rest of Canada, are distinguished in terms of statutory definitions concerning who are Indians, Metis, and Inuit.

The Federal Indian Act, established in 1876, is the main legislation governing the administration of **Indians** and lands set aside for Indians.

In Ontario, 117,152 Registered Indians are band members. A **band** is a group of Indians for whom land has been set aside and money is held by the Crown. Of the 603 bands in Canada, 126 are in Ontario (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1992). Most are located on **reserves** - parcels of land set aside for the use and benefits of a band.

A **Registered or Status Indian** is recorded as an Indian in the Indian Register of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. "Treaty Indians" are registered Indians whose bands signed a treaty. The federal government recognizes legal obligations to Status Indians. For example, they have access to selective services and support for health, education, housing and other social services.

Not all Aboriginal people are Registered or Status Indians under the Indian Act. The ancestors of **Non-Status Indians** did not make agreements with the Crown and/or gave up or lost their Indian status (enfranchisement). In 1985, under Bill C - 31, new Indian Act legislation legally redefined who is, and is not Indian. The Act abolished the concept of enfranchisement, and enabled reinstatement of some (e.g. women who had married non-Status Indians) who had previously lost their Indian status.

Metis people are also not considered Registered Indians. Historically, the Metis lived in western Canada, but many now live in Ontario. Metis people have mixed European-Indian ancestry. In Ontario, they are mainly Indian and French. Like others in Canada, Ontario Metis argue that they are entitled to Aboriginal rights.

Few **Inuit** live in Ontario. Inuit ("people" in the Inuktitut language) live primarily in the Northwest Territories, Labrador and Quebec. The new Territory of Nunavut occupies the central and eastern portions of the North-West Territories, and is comprised of 85% Inuit people. In comparison to Indians and Metis, Inuit are less likely to appear in Ontario's child welfare system.

TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY LIFE, FAMILIES AND CHILD-REARING

Working with Ontario's Aboriginal people - Indians, Metis or Inuit - requires basic knowledge of and sensitivity to their cultural diversity, and the importance of traditional culture in the lives of many communities and families. Although many Aboriginal people are comfortable with non-Aboriginal values and lifestyles, many are also striving to recover traditional culture to strengthen their communities and families. Traditional practices (e.g. healing circles, sweat lodges, ceremonies) are increasingly used to prevent child maltreatment.

Cultural Diversity

Associated with language differences are many other cultural characteristics. Aboriginal communities across Ontario reflect differences in beliefs and values, spirituality, lifestyle, family arrangements and child-rearing preferences. Cultural diversity is also true in urban settings, where - as opportunities become available - more Aboriginal families are guided by traditional values. Many parents, for example, encourage stronger relations with elders (spiritual leaders), smudge (purify with burning sweet-grass), enrol their children in Aboriginal schools, participate in traditional ceremonies and gatherings, learn and expose their children to their language and traditions.

The traditional Aboriginal world-view and philosophy emerged from the tribal experience of survival in unpredictable environments. Aboriginal people believe in a strong interdependence between the environment, the people and spirituality. The organization of tribal societies promoted member support and mutual protection. For example, traditional Ojibway people valued wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth. Ideally, such values and accompanying lifestyles minimized self-destructive behaviour and aggression.

In traditional tribal societies, child-rearing norms and practices are consistent with the traditional holistic world-view and tribal family philosophy. For example:

- **Self-determination:** rather than preconceived milestones, parents respect the child's natural growth patterns which are seen as harmonious with the world around them.
- **Caring and protection of children's health:** parental respect for children is based on a belief that children are gifts from the Creator.
- **Education and personal development:** the ethic of non-interference emphasizes that children learn through observation rather than verbal teaching and parental prescriptions.
- **Community care:** child rearing is seen as the responsibility of parents

and the community at large, particularly extended family members and elders.

- **Customary adoption:** without formal adoption ceremonies, Ojibway adopt children with an understanding by all parties - based on their interests. Parental consent is required for small children, who are adopted by relatives or friends. Older children and adults either choose a home and ask to be adopted, or they are invited to do so by others.

FACTORS WEAKENING TRADITIONAL FAMILY LIFE AND PARENTING

Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child welfare system (Johnston, 1983; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1997). New child welfare workers should be aware of the historical and current conditions which have exposed Aboriginal families and communities to disorganization and stress, beginning with

European Contacts

European arrival in North America, the imposition of strange cultures and institutions, and the relationship between the dominant society and Aboriginal peoples - all have impacted parenting difficulties and child welfare issues in Aboriginal communities. An ethnocentric attitude brought to North America was that European ways were best, and that Aboriginal peoples simply needed to learn these new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. Over several generations, this attitude was the foundation of Canadian law. It contributed to the destruction of the traditional world-view, and the ways of living which reared, supported and protected children in healthy ways.

Aboriginal - Canada Relationships

Canadian governments established relationships of power and control over Aboriginal peoples, thus inhibiting opportunities for steady growth and cultural evolution. Several manifestations of these forces are relevant to children's care and well-being.

- **The reserve system** separated some Aboriginal people from their lands and traditional ways. For example, sedentary life-style and economic changes led to changes in traditional roles of men and women. Self-destruction and family violence subsequently emerged.
- **Laws** prohibiting expression of traditional spiritual ways and healing practices, undermined community cohesiveness and problem-solving.

"... Fundamental principles that had previously maintained

peaceful and balanced relationships were violated, severely impacting family relationships and structures as community members became pitted against one another over decision-making power and positions of control" (Maidman and Connors, 1999).

- The **imposition of governing systems** on reserve communities (e.g. Indian Act's mandatory elections) replaced principles and practices based on equality and consensus.
- From 1920 to the 1960s, laws required Status Indian children to attend culturally different **residential schools**, separating them from families and communities for as much as ten months a year.
- **Indian Act changes** in 1951 authorized provinces to extend services to reserves; this contributed to decisions by some provinces to apprehend many Aboriginal children, and place them in culturally alien foster or adoptive homes away from their communities and families.

Although all are significant, the residential school era has received enormous attention in historical analyses of Aboriginal child welfare. Canadian churches and the federal government both have apologized to Aboriginal people, publicly acknowledging the legacy of residential schools.

Residential Schools

Commencing in the 1600's, Jesuit missionaries targeted Aboriginal children for conversion to Christianity. First they removed them to France, then later established boarding schools. Early efforts became the foundation for a more systematic approach to assimilate Aboriginal people by the federal government, in partnership with religious institutions. As one author notes: "The residential school was the central institution of child welfare policy during the assimilation period" (Armitage, 1993).

Large industrial schools, funded by the federal government and operated by missionaries, removed children from the perceived detrimental influence of parents and Indian traditions. When parents initially resisted, amendments to the Indian Act in 1894 led to drastic measures, such as Indian agents forcing children to attend residential schools. However, federal government's educational and assimilation goals were not to be realized, leading to policy changes in 1910. These changes ushered in a simplified practical curriculum for return to reserve life (Armitage, 1993). Throughout these years, collaboration between church and state was close, as government funded and supported the churches' civilizing objectives.

What is the legacy of residential schools for the parenting and caring for children? Recent research, testimonials from former students, and the Federal “Statement of Reconciliation” (1998) following the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples - all acknowledge the legacy of pain and distress that continues to impact Aboriginal communities. In some areas, more than 50 percent of Aboriginal children were forcibly away from their families, and were denied the opportunity to learn traditional parenting, values and other roles.

Aboriginal children attending residential schools were separated from their parents, and in some instances, lived separately from siblings. Unlike tribal communities, residential schools were hierarchical institutions, with controlling, oppressive forms of relationships. Residential schools - through such practices as sexual abuse and the inhibition of emotional expression - may have weakened the capacity for healthy sexual relationships (Beedie and Maidman, 1999). Finally, school rules and practices also undermined the development of healthy Aboriginal identity. Children were denied the right to speak their language and live according to their culture.

Recent research suggests that residential school experiences shaped the growth of Aboriginal children in ways which undermined their future success as parents, partners and community members (Beedie and Maidman, 1999). Many children of residential school survivors were raised in abusive, neglectful and generally dysfunctional family environments. They were raised by parents with limited parenting skills and knowledge. Parenting often took place in conflictual, violent, alcohol abusive families without male role models. Thus, a pattern of violence was passed onto the generations, along with low self-esteem, lack of Aboriginal pride and weakened respect for children and women.

These developmental factors combined with substandard teaching and curricula, ill-equipped the graduates to succeed in school or employment. Unemployment, poverty, gender difficulties, and low self-esteem -- all are fertile grounds for dysfunctional family relationships and child maltreatment.

To be sure, many children returned to reserve communities already troubled by limited job opportunities and unemployment, dysfunctional families, inadequate housing and alcohol abuse. Residential school experiences combined with community contexts to produce distressed lives for generations to come.

THE EARLY PERIOD OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES: 1950's - 70's

An important factor affecting Indian child welfare in Canada is an ongoing disagreement between the federal and some provincial governments concerning which level has the mandate to provide child welfare services on reserves. Over the years, each level of government has offered interpretations of the Indian Act to support their respective positions. One consequence is that child welfare

policies have been applied differently across Canada, and many families on some reserves have limited accessibility to the full range of provincial services.

This inequality of services was challenged by the Canadian Welfare Council, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers, in a 1947 presentation to a Special Federal Joint Committee. This prompted changes to the Indian Act (1951) which led to provincial health, welfare and education services on reserves.

The Ontario-Canada 1965 Memorandum

As indicated, the 1951 Indian Act amendment enabled the process of provincial service delivery to Status Indians. For Ontario, it wasn't until 1965 that federal funding supported this change. A bilateral agreement between Ontario and Canada, a "Memorandum Respecting Welfare Programs for Indians" authorized Ontario to recover 95 percent of costs from the federal government. This memorandum applied to Status Indians on reserves.

Services to Reserve Communities

The provision of provincial family services, child placement and adoption services to reserve communities proved to be very difficult. These communities lacked the counselling, support and foster care services available in urban areas. Also, workers lacked the familiarity with local cultures and conditions. Our knowledge of that period is aided by the beginnings of published literature on child welfare services to Aboriginal people, primarily from front-line workers, Board members and foster parents (Timpson, 1994). Issues related to accessibility, difficulties of finding appropriate adoptive and foster parents, and poor education were identified.

It was becoming apparent that, in Northern Ontario particularly, an emergency approach characterized child welfare. Without the family support skills, local resources, community experience and relationships, workers apprehended children at a point when family situations became most severe. This typical intervention of taking children into care for neglect and abandonment was reinforced by a "best interest of the child" principle. Conditions on reserves met criteria for apprehension.

Cross-Cultural Foster Placement and Adoption

Inconsistencies in data collection over time complicate trend analyses of child welfare statistics. Even so, it is generally believed that by the mid-1960s, there was a substantial increase in the number of Aboriginal children apprehended from their families and communities, and taken into care (Johnston, 1983). In Ontario, from 1977-1981, approximately 8% of children in care were Status

Indians, Non-Status Indians and Metis. In parts of Northern Ontario this figure rises to an estimated 85% in 1981 (Johnston, 1983). Where statistics on Aboriginal children in the general population are available, Aboriginal children were, and still are over-represented in the child welfare system (Federal-Provincial Working Group on Child and Family Services, 1998). Many children were taken away from their homes, communities and culture - in what became known as "the 60's scoop" (Johnston, 1983).

Several explanations have been offered for the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system in general (McKenzie and Hudson, in Armitage, 1993). Some believe that by apprehending Indian children, child welfare workers saved them from the poverty, unsanitary health conditions, poor housing and malnutrition of reserve life. However, for some communities, the long-term effects of apprehension on Indian children, families and communities were devastating. Some reserves lost almost a generation of children in the process.

Another perspective is that the apprehension of children and placement in non-Indian homes, was another aspect of the process of colonialization, which began with the arrival of Europeans. This involves, as we have seen, the devaluation of Aboriginal cultural customs and practices, and assignment of Aboriginal people to an inferior status in Canadian society. Essentially, the dominant society's child welfare practice was seen by many as an extension of the failed efforts to assimilate Aboriginal people through residential schooling (Armitage, 1995).

Historically, the legacy of the '60s scoop is clear. All over Ontario, and indeed in other parts of Canada, the lives of thousands of Aboriginal people were affected. Many Aboriginal people mistrust child welfare policy or practice which, as one option, apprehends children. Mistrust of the system is a fact of life for many child welfare workers, whether non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal, in which establishing a trusting relationship with clients is essential to good practice. One recent evaluation of an Aboriginal child and family service agency found that memories and attitudes associated with local CAS apprehensions severely hampered the acceptance of Aboriginal services within the community (Maidman, 1988). In the 60's the delivery of Provincial child welfare services to Indian reserves was primarily an emergency approach. Children were apprehended because, in the judgement of child protection workers, their lives were in danger. Without a balanced delivery of prevention services, it may be that children by this time had already suffered severe physical and emotional damage. Without follow-up available staff and services to families, problems were unlikely to subside and children were unable to return home. Emotional disturbance and other symptoms also made it unlikely that Aboriginal children would be adopted.

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN URBAN SETTINGS

Child welfare workers located in cities will quickly realize that Aboriginal child maltreatment is affected by many interwoven factors. By knowing conditions in which Aboriginal families live, workers will improve risk assessments and service decisions

Various sociol-economic conditions and problems facing urban Aboriginal people were identified in the 1980s by the Ontario Task Force on Native People in Urban Settings (Maidman, 1983). These still exist today (Royal Commission, 1997). Most if not all these conditions and problems have been identified in the general research literature as placing children at risk of maltreatment (Prilleltensky et al, 1999): Urban Aboriginal people seek employment or training with limited education, and struggle with inadequate housing, unemployment, alcohol abuse, discrimination or culture shock (Maidman, 1982; RCAP, 1997). The demographics of the urban population limit their opportunities, social supports and options. For example, in cities, Aboriginal people are dispersed, and are both permanent residents and transients.

Some urban Aboriginals live a traditional life-style; others are acculturated into the dominant society. Still others blend elements of traditional Aboriginal and urban values and lifestyle. Many have a strong sense of membership in Aboriginal community, others do not. Some live a "commuter" pattern of back-and-forth mobility between cities and reserves or rural communities. Some are broadly connected to the wider urban scene, including urban institutions. Many others have few such involvements. Many Aboriginal people have friends and relatives within the city, but those with child welfare - related problems are socially isolated. Poor, socially isolated single mothers are the core of urban services.

Urban Services

Starting in the mid-60's, a number of services for urban Aboriginals emerged across Canada (Royal Commission, 1997). In Ontario, services now respond to problems typically associated with child maltreatment, including alcohol abuse, family violence, inadequate health knowledge, housing, unemployment, parenting and family problems. Most, if not all, Aboriginal urban programs have traditional cultural content.

REVIEWS OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

During the 1960's, 70's and 80's several reviews of provincial child welfare services to Aboriginal people were completed. Cross-Canada reports and

reviews in other provinces, undoubtedly provided a context for Ontario developments.

The Hawthorne report (1966) was critical of service quality, and included recommendations for negotiations with Indian Bands and Tribal Councils. At that time, these recommendations were not implemented.

Justice Thomas Berger's Royal Commission on Family and Child Welfare Law (1976) in British Columbia recommended that Indian bands should be notified of all protection and adoption proceedings affecting children of Band members. As well, Justice Berger proposed that Indian families should be provided with adoption subsidies, allowing Indian children to be placed in their own communities (Armitage, 1993).

An Ontario review - by representatives of the federal and provincial government and Indian organizations in Ontario - assessed social services delivered to Indian children and families resulting from the 1965 Memorandum. It found that services were insufficient and poor, and that substantial structural changes were needed. One recommendation encouraged Indian control of the child welfare system (Technical Assistance and Planning Associates, 1979). The tripartite review stimulated Ontario's general support for an increased role for Indian communities in planning, administering and delivering child welfare services.

ABORIGINAL SERVICES IN CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETIES

Initially, Ontario's child welfare services to Indian reserves was delivered primarily by non-Aboriginal child welfare workers. This was a difficult arrangement which generally was unacceptable to reserve communities. In addition to the crisis-oriented, apprehension practices, non-Aboriginal workers were unfamiliar with local reserve cultures or languages. As well, they were ill-equipped to engage community leaders and members, and were burdened with the mistrust legacy from the '60s. For these, and other reasons, children's aid societies close to reserve communities began to hire Aboriginal staff, and in some cases created Aboriginal (Native) Services departments.

This "specialized services model" had some advantages, but also several limitations. The limitations included the heavy workloads and burnout, the association of an entire program with one worker, high and conflicting expectations between agency and community, and the attention to symptoms rather than causal conditions within the community or society at large (Lee, 1983).

Where Aboriginals were represented on CAS Boards, or where decentralized CAS offices existed in Aboriginal communities, the cultural distance was reduced and services more closely reflected community needs. Even so, there were

limitations: isolation of Aboriginal Board members, strong influence by non-Aboriginal Board members, and loyalty conflicts between agency and community (Lee, 1983). Of greater historical importance, programs were still controlled from outside Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal communities began to have a stronger voice with the creation of

THE ONTARIO NATIVE CHILD WELFARE PREVENTION PROGRAM

New child welfare workers will liaise with Aboriginal family service staff, and may receive referrals from Aboriginal child and family service agencies. Some of these staff and agencies will have directly participated in, or even evolved from, Ontario's Native Child Welfare Prevention Program. Indeed, the modern prevention orientation and the community focus of such agencies is consistent with the philosophy, services and practice of the program.

To balance emergency intervention, Aboriginal political and service leaders began to argue for preventive service approaches. Prevention would respond to needs of communities and families before child maltreatment actually occurred. Ontario's Native Child Welfare Prevention Program was designed to meet this need, and in a sense marked a transition to a prevention era in Aboriginal child welfare.

At about the same time as the aforementioned tripartite review in Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services developed the Native Child Welfare Prevention Program. The tripartite review called for the development of community-based preventive child welfare services, in which Aboriginal people would contribute to program design, staffing, budget and evaluation (Technical Assistance and Planning Associates, 1979). In 1981, agreements were made with 8 CAS's and 21 Indian bands (Johnston, 1983).

Recognizing that Aboriginal people living on reserves had received a narrow range of services and confronted multiple major challenges, the program aimed to increase services to families and children. Further, it would include band councils in planning and service delivery. The program was a preventative service, delivered by Aboriginal people who were hired through a band-CAS partnership.

Prevention was designed to strengthen entire communities, respond to the needs of vulnerable people who may maltreat their children, and/or find temporary placements for children within the local community. Services included parent education to families and community members, self-help initiatives for vulnerable people, recreation, cross-community networking, family support, development of placement alternatives within communities, and the repatriation of children who had been lost to the community. Later, newly emerging Aboriginal-controlled

child welfare agencies often began by assuming administration of the Native Child Welfare Prevention Program.

ONTARIO CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES ACT

Replacing the Child Welfare Act, The Child and Family Services Act (1984) was a significant milestone in Aboriginal child welfare. The CFSA strengthened the provision of services to Aboriginal children and families, by recognizing cultural, religious and regional differences. Further, the Act states that, wherever possible, Indian and Native people should be entitled to provide their own child and family services, and that all services to Indian and native children and families should be provided in a manner that recognizes their culture, heritage and traditions and the concept of the extended family. As well, the Act made provisions for seeking exemptions from certain CFSA requirements.

Specific highlights of the CFSA include the following:

- Preservation of cultural identity became an additional criterion for determining the best interest of Indian or native children.
- Special provisions were now in place for relating to an Indian or native child's band or native community as a party in child protection proceedings.
- In the case of Society and Crown wardships, residential placements now gave priority to the child's extended family, band or native community, or another Indian or native family.
- Indian bands and native communities were now empowered to provide their own Indian or native child and family services, including "customary care" - the care of Indian or native children by persons who are not parents, according to child's band or community customs.

Finally, Part 10 authorized the Minister to designate communities as native communities, established agreements with bands and native communities for service provision, and designated Indian or native child and family services as mandated child protection societies.

In subsequent modules the CFSA and amendments to be proclaimed will be discussed. The most recent amendment retains Part 10 in its entirety.

EMERGENCE OF ABORIGINAL CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES: THE BEGINNINGS OF COMMUNITY CONTROL

With increasing government and Canada-wide support for Aboriginal self-sufficiency and self-government, and with the strengthening of Aboriginal politics and leadership, the 1980's and '90s witnessed the development of Aboriginal child and family service agencies. To date five agencies have been designated as mandated child protection societies. Several other non-designated agencies provide child welfare prevention services.

In Ontario, emergence of these organizations was enabled by the 1984 Child and Family Services Act, but received impetus from several factors, including

- _ Evidence that main-stream child welfare methods had not worked well for Aboriginal people.
- _ The emergence of strong political, service and cultural leaders.
- _ Aboriginal education and confidence to develop and deliver child welfare services.
- _ Cultural revival and Aboriginal pride, including a belief that children - as the future - must be raised according to Aboriginal values and traditions within their own communities.

Many Aboriginal service organizations strive to adapt traditional culture in their organization, services and mode of delivery.

THE PRESENT: CURRENT REALITIES AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Possibly because of the continual over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (Federal-Provincial Working Group on Child and Family Services, 1998), child welfare services to Aboriginal communities shifted from an emergency-oriented child protection approach to prevention models addressing root causes of child maltreatment. Ontario's Native Child Welfare Prevention Program ushered in this perspective, which was continued by the various Aboriginal child and family service agencies. The late 1980s and 1990s continued this trend, with several federal and provincial prevention programs. These addressed the needs of maltreated children, and high risk parents, families and whole communities. Directly or indirectly Aboriginal prevention programs address several current realities of Aboriginal family life and parenting.

Current Realities Affecting Care of Children

Aboriginal communities and their leadership acknowledge that a complex web of historical, social and economic realities contributes to child maltreatment. To a greater or lesser degree, these realities have existed for years, as indicated in several government studies and the recent Royal Commission on Aboriginal people. In summary, these are **unemployment, poverty, community-wide social divisions, urban issues, family structural issues (e.g. single parenting), family problems (e.g. violence), parenting issues, substance abuse, physical health problems, and various problems of youth (e.g. drugs)**. Ontario's Metis people experience similar issues (Statistics Canada, 1993), along with problems of identity.

The Aboriginal Policy Framework (1996)

The Ontario government adopted The Aboriginal Policy Framework in 1996. The Framework recognizes the disproportionate socio-economic conditions in Aboriginal communities, and encourages Ontario ministries to continue to provide programs and services appropriate to Aboriginal people living on- and off-reserve. The goal of the Aboriginal Policy Framework is to help build the capacity within Aboriginal communities to develop stronger economies, become more self-reliant and exercise greater responsibility for their well-being". (Province of Ontario, 1996).

Prevention Programs

In recent years, Aboriginal communities are tackling child welfare issues through prevention programs targeting several influences on child maltreatment (Maidman and Connors, 1999).

Early child development programs, such as Better Beginnings, Better Futures, and Aboriginal Head Start, address the recreational, educational, safety, social

and cultural needs of high-risk Aboriginal children and their families. As well, these programs recognize the impact of family issues, by offering opportunities for parent participation and family support. In some communities, day care and early enrichment opportunities are available through the national First Nations/Inuit Child Care Initiative.

Programs for Aboriginal youth recognize that young people are tomorrow's parents. To help them prepare for parenting and other adult roles, prevention programs like Community Action Program for Children, help them learn parenting skills and knowledge, avoid boredom, interact with peers, learn the risks of alcohol and drug abuse, avoid sexually transmitted disease, and increase their educational opportunities.

In general, prevention programs for parents and whole families seek to reduce the risks or risk consequences possibly leading to child maltreatment. As well, they help build protective strengths by contributing to individual and family wellness. Specific preventive practices for adults include counselling, healing, parent education, self-help, family support, home visitations, advocacy and family healing lodges. They help to: (i) strengthen emotional lives (ii) improve physical health and self-care (iv) enhance problem-solving (v) develop parenting skills and knowledge (vi) change dysfunctional and healthy life-styles (vii) heal family relationships, and (viii) help families cope with stress.

Examples of prevention programs for adults include the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy, The Canada Pre-Natal Nutrition Program, The Community Action Program for Children, and the Aboriginal Healing Program. The latter specifically targets residence school survivors and their families.

In recent years, Ontario's Metis people also have developed prevention initiatives. Programs providing family support, for example, focus on strengthening family life.

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