

**Best Interests According to Whom?**

**How Anishinaabe People Impacted by the Manitoba Child Welfare System Define the Best  
Interests of the Child Principle**

by

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### **Abstract**

This research asked: “how do Anishinaabe people impacted by Manitoba child welfare systems define the best interests of the child principle.” Drawing from an anti-colonial lens and the Breath of Life Theory (Blackstock, 2009; 2011; 2019), and utilizing a conversational methodology (Kovach, 2009; 2019; 2021), eleven self-identified Anishinaabe people were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 20-63 and included former youth in care, parents, grandparents, and knowledge keepers impacted by child welfare in Manitoba. Analysis was conducted utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, et al., 2019). Results indicated that the best interests of Anishinaabe children must consider inawendawin (relationship), community, culture, aki (land), gikendaasowin (knowledge, building knowledge), hope and healing. Furthermore, the best interests of Anishinaabe children are inherently connected to their family and community. This research synthesizes the findings into a visual representation and calls for a complete move away from the child and family services system, including challenging the language of child welfare and stepping away from the current models of foster care as part of upholding an Anishinaabe system of caring for family and community. For social work, the research calls for critical learning and reflection in education and practice, and for social workers unwilling to do the work to understand Indigenous worldviews to step away from working with Indigenous people. For settler-colonial governments, the research calls for greater integration of departments, acknowledging that First Nation sovereignty extends beyond child welfare and that the best interest of Anishinaabe children is connected to other departments, such as land.

*Keywords:* Indigenous child welfare, child welfare, child and family services, best interests, First Nation, Anishinaabe, child welfare law, Indigenous law, breath of life theory, anti-colonial.

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to E., an Anishinaabe mother who I have had the joy of spending time with and learning from. In the face of overwhelming trauma, she continues to fight every day. I will always believe in her, and I hope that work such as that herein will support change so no one must struggle as she has.

I further dedicate this work to all the youth, colleagues, and families I have had the privilege of working with at Shawenim Abinoojii Inc. You have all shown me such a beautiful way of working, where love, humour, and determination drive us every day. *Miigwetch* for allowing me to be a part of your journeys.

And finally. I dedicate this to the participants, their families (past, present, and future), and their communities. Your participation in this work is meaningful and valued. I hope I have honoured your expectations and hopes.

### **Nimiigwechiwendam**

The ideas, stories, and research herein do not belong to me. Rather, I have been gifted the opportunity to engage with the Anishinaabe people who chose to participate and what I share here belongs to them. I further acknowledge that every participant came into this experience with *Odinaawemaaganiwa*, all their relations. As I sat across from participants, it was important to remember that behind them, unseen and perhaps unknown due to the history of colonialism, are the ancestors that make up the seven generations before. *Miigwetch* to the generations of people who nurtured the roots that participants stand upon today. I want to also acknowledge the communities that participants identified as being connected to.

***Berens River First Nation. Black River First Nation. Lake St. Martin First Nation. Little Grand Rapids First Nation. Mallard, Manitoba. O-Chi-Chak-Ko-Sipi (Crane River) First Nation. Peguis First Nation. Pine Creek First Nation. Sandy Bay First Nation.***

*Miigwetch* to Winona Keeper, Anishinaabe from Little Grand Rapids First Nation, for your help with the *Anishinaabemowin* throughout this thesis. You are an excellent teacher and I appreciate you. *Miigwetch* also to your mom and your Auntie Ogimaabikwe for the additional guidance they provided.

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## Chapter Bezhig (1)

### Introduction

Boozhoo, Aaniin. Brandy nindizhinikaaz. Thompson nindoonjii. Winnipeg indizhidaa. For the last five years, I have worked on the periphery of the child and family services (CFS) system. My work in a First Nations organization has given me but a small window into the experiences of Anishinaabe people navigating CFS. Through working with Anishinaabe youth and young adults impacted by child welfare, I have walked alongside many who have lost connection to their families, have not had opportunities for healing, and at times expressed a sense of powerlessness. Yet, I have also observed strength, fortitude, and great love in those with whom I work. Each of these families have deserved more than what they received through the legacies of trauma imposed by the child welfare system. Observing the intergenerational patterns of child welfare involvement, and the impact on Anishinaabe families, has brought me to critique what I view as one of the most well-known phrases in social work.

This research has sought to explore and redefine the “best interests of the child” doctrine (hereafter referred to as the doctrine) as it is understood by Anishinaabe families impacted by the child welfare system in Manitoba. As one of the foundational principles of Child and Family Services legislation in Manitoba (*the Child and Family Services Act*) and Canada (*Bill C-92*), I believe we must critically examine what this means, particularly for Indigenous peoples, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Truth & Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015; Fallon et al., 2021). I suggest that the “best interests of the child” doctrine has been foundational to modern child welfare legislation and practice, yet is individualistic and colonial in its implementation, contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care. By challenging the application of this doctrine and gaining the insight of Anishinaabe people

directly impacted by the system, I propose we may re-examine this principle, allowing us to make an informed decision about the child welfare legislation, standards, and practices impacting Anishinaabe families.

### **Purpose & Rational**

I have heard the “best interests of the child” doctrine used to validate actions by social workers and the legislation they draw upon, while subsequently using it to discredit the families of children brought into care. My observations have suggested the application of the doctrine is rooted in colonial concepts of individuality, supporting the separation of children from their family and community, and justifying investment into resources “for the child” at the neglect of investment into the healing of the child’s family and/or community. I theorize that due to current child welfare legislation being ideologically opposite from Indigenous worldviews, along with cultural bias in practice, the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care is perpetuated under the guise of the “best interests of the child.” I further suggest there is a lack of collaboration with families of children in care and a failure to understand their needs as being inherently connected to the best interests of their child. While I acknowledge the current changing context of child welfare, amid the ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, 2023), I caution we do not take for granted the “best interests of the child” principle as it stands. This research has worked with Anishinaabe people in Manitoba, with the intent to understand how they would re-envision the meaning of the best interests of the child, from an Anishinaabe perspective. I have been supported to focus this research with Anishinaabe people to prevent a pan-Indigenous approach, acknowledging the diversity of knowledges across the Indigenous Nations of Turtle Island. As First Nations in

Manitoba, and across Canada, engage in processes of child welfare transformation, I hope that this research will contribute towards positive change for Anishinaabe communities.

### **Self-Location**

The process of identifying self-location is part of being transparent about who I am and where I am from; it is expressing my purpose within this research, my cultural background, and addressing my relational responsibilities (Masching, 2014; Kovach, 2021). I hope that this will assist the reader to determine my intentions and feel connected to me as a writer.

As I mentioned in opening this work, I am from Thompson, Manitoba (Treaty 5 territory), where I was born to a Metis mother and Ukrainian father; most of my ancestry is Scottish, Ukrainian, Irish and Metis. I have grown up and currently live in Winnipeg, but the land of Northern Manitoba is my home. Although my mother and maternal grandparents are Metis, my family was not raised acknowledging this identity nor living this way. My family is deeply tied to the colonial history of Canada, colonizing these lands as far back as 1812, having settled around the Great Lakes. In my journey of figuring out who I am, I learned that my family gave up their homeland culture and identify simply as farmers. I have learned the intimate and direct way my family benefited from the Treaties, having settled in Treaty 4 territory only two years after this treaty was signed. I relay this piece of my identity in honesty and transparency, so we may begin to build a connection, as is so essential in the building of knowledge.

As a white social worker, I acknowledge that I have lived in this world with white privilege, I was raised and educated within a western worldview, and take part in a profession which has and continues to perpetuate oppressive and colonial practices (Hart & Rowe, 2014; Hart, 2009; Blackstock, 2009; Carlson, 2017). Through my journey I have challenged, and continue to challenge, the world and worldview in which I have grown. I have come to see the

world through a critical lens, believing that, as Kovach (2010) and Wilson (2008) have identified, there are various truths shaped by our engagements with this world. I have many teachers (within the university and outside), to thank for this ongoing learning.

Throughout the years, I have been gifted with opportunities to participate in ceremony and to learn from primarily Anishinaabe people, but also from Inninew and Metis people. I have come to understand many teachings as truth and as being in line with my own heart. Since graduating with my Bachelor of Social Work degree, I have worked in a First Nation organization with Anishinaabe youth and families impacted by CFS. Through my time in this role, I have encountered many parents who face the intergenerational impacts of the child welfare system. I have witnessed the grief mothers have faced saying goodbye to their children and the hopelessness of parents who feel powerless in the face of this colonial system. I am particularly inspired to do this research through the story of one mother, who wholeheartedly felt that it was the best interests of her child to stay in CFS care. She had come to believe that not she, her biological family, nor her community were better suited to meet the needs of her child. Furthermore, I have witnessed social workers who claim interventions as being in the best interests of a child, while completely negating the interests of the child's family. I have become frustrated at what I believe is a lack of consideration for family wellness and wholistic healing in the child welfare system.

In this research, I acknowledge my place as a listener and an organizer of ideas. The knowledge gained through this process is not my own, but rather a shared gift of many thoughts, experiences, and ideas. I hope I have navigated this journey in a way that honours the stories participants shared, while contributing towards positive change in an ever-changing landscape.

## Chapter Niizhin (2)

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Indigenous families in Canada are overrepresented in the Child Welfare system (Blackstock, 2009; Fallon et al., 2021; Truth & Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015; Trocme et al., 2019), a system rooted in colonial ideology imposed upon Indigenous families by state and actors thereof, such as social workers. This overrepresentation is connected to a long history of policies meant to assimilate Indigenous peoples (Bennett et al., 2005; Hart & Rowe, 2014; Helin, 2008). Child removal from Indigenous families is most prominently noted to have begun in the nineteenth century with the establishment of residential schools (Bennett et al., 2005; TRC, 2015; Trocme et al., 2019). In 1951, attributed in part to the advocacy of social workers, amendments to the *Indian Act* opened the door to an expansion of child welfare services into First Nation communities, notably with no additional funding (AJIC, 1999; Bennett et al., 2005). With changes to the *Indian Act* in 1951, provincial child welfare services imposed policies and practices, applying “white values” to First Nation communities, including the best interests of the child doctrine, in contradiction to First Nation worldviews (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 22; Kline, 1992).

By the 1960’s, the expansion of Indigenous child welfare services led to over twenty years of mass apprehensions known as the Sixties Scoop (AJIC; 1999; Bennett et al., 2005; Hart & Rowe, 2014, Trocme et al., 2019). This pattern has continued, evidenced in the overrepresentation we see today. This literature review will examine the social and legislative context of Indigenous child welfare in Canada and Manitoba. Specifically, I explore the origins, application, and applicability of the best interests of the child doctrine to Indigenous people in

Canada and Manitoba. I first contextualize current Indigenous child welfare in Manitoba and Canada. Following this, I present a summary of why the best interests of the child doctrine is problematic. This is presented first in the historical context of the doctrine, followed by examining the current legislative context and the issues raised related to this. I will conclude by examining Indigenous parenting, family, and kinship practices.

### **Contextualizing Indigenous Child Welfare in Manitoba and Canada**

Indigenous people, including First Nation, Metis, and Inuit, make up 4.9% of the population across Canada; in Manitoba, 10.5% of the population is First Nation and an additional 15.2% identify as Metis (Statistics Canada, 2017). Statistics for Inuit people in Manitoba were not available. Yet the number of Indigenous children in care vastly overshadows this. Since the early 2000's, the number of child maltreatment investigations has been increasing with an estimated 62,000 children in out-of-home placements across Canada on any given day (Trocme et al., 2019). In Manitoba, a province with one of the highest rates of out of home placements (Trocme et al., 2019), during the 2020-2021 fiscal year there were 9,850 children in the care of Child and Family Services, 91% of whom were Indigenous (Manitoba Families, 2021). This number does not include Own Home placements, non-paid care, nor the 1,093 youth aged 18-21 receiving an extension of services. Of these 1,093 youth, 988 were receiving services from Indigenous child welfare authorities (Manitoba Families, 2021).

While Indigenous children are vastly overrepresented in the child welfare system, there are unique circumstances to their involvement with the system. The First Nation/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (FN/CIS) indicated that First Nations children are 3-4 times more likely to be reported for maltreatment suspicions, with 14% of First Nations investigations resulting in out of home placements; only 4% of other investigations

resulted in out of home placements (Fallon et al., 2021). The primary reasons for families' involvement with child welfare were neglect at 44% of cases and intimate partner violence at 27%; First Nation families had an 8.5 times higher rate of substantiated cases of neglect compared to non-Indigenous families (Fallon et al., 2021). Notably, this data is specific to First Nations people. Yet, data such as this invites us to critically examine how and why decisions are being made. In particular, I question whose knowledge we are privileging in our decision-making processes and what factors are considered in assessing families. Indigenous families are more likely than non-Indigenous families to be facing complex needs such as mental health struggles, poverty, and inadequate housing (Fallon et al., 2021; TRC, 2015). While structural issues are correlated to the overrepresentation of First Nations children in care, theoretical approaches to Indigenous child welfare policy and practice are western in nature (Blackstock, 2009; Choate et al., 2019). If we understand structural issues as being directly related to colonialism, the adoption of western frameworks for intervention raises significant and ethical questions about how we are doing child welfare.

Instead of focusing an individualistic lens on the social issues Indigenous families face, I shift towards examining the role of state systems in perpetuating modern day colonialism. Alfred (2009) argues for problematizing the state and systems of the state. Thus, I argue against the colonial ideology that informs child welfare policy and practice, suggesting the state and state-imposed systems have no role in defining the wellbeing of Indigenous families. Indeed, state-imposed policies rooted in colonial ideology have long been a tool used in the push for assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Alfred, 2009; Hart & Rowe, 2014; Helin, 2008). Today, the child welfare system has been compared to a continuation of residential schools (Hart & Rowe, 2014; TRC, 2015). In this way, colonial policy continues to be a tool of assimilation.

Alfred (2009) argues that political and social institutions have been developed with the interests of the state in mind. Consequently, he states that decolonization requires a rejection of these institutions which “are the context of violence, dependency and discord in indigenous communities” (Alfred, 2009, p. 44). Social work, law, and government are perpetuating colonialism under the guise of child protection. If we acknowledge that Indigenous families are facing a range of struggles as a direct result of colonization, and these struggles lead to the imposition of the child welfare system, then we must question if child protection is the appropriate intervention or do we rather need to end the colonialism causing the struggles in the first place.

### **Why the “Best Interests of the Child” is Problematic**

The best interest of the child doctrine in child welfare has been called out as problematic for Indigenous people in Canada (AJIC, 1999; Choate et al., 2019; Kline, 1992; Monture, 1989; NIMMIWG, n.d.; Sinclair, 2016; TRC, 2015). Aboriginal child welfare workers in Australia, notably, have indicated similar struggles with state conceptualizations of the best interests of their children, noting a need to centre Aboriginal understandings of the principle (Long & Sephton, 2010). Scholars have called out child welfare and legal systems for applying the best interests of the child doctrine through a colonial lens, manifested as prioritizing Eurocentric worldviews or knowledges, demeaning the role of culture, and enacting discrimination through the doctrine (Choate et al., 2019; Kline, 1992; Monture, 1989; Sinclair, 2016). The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry – Child Welfare Initiative and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) indicated in their reports that the best interests of the child principle has been applied in a culturally biased way, contributing to family disruption and,

according to the NIMMIWG, the violence Indigenous families experience (AJIC, 1999; NIMMIWG, n.d.; TRC, 2015). Notably, The NIMMIWG Call to Justice 12.3 states:

We call upon all governments and Indigenous organizations to develop and apply a definition of “best interests of the child” based on distinct Indigenous perspectives, world views, needs, and priorities, including the perspective of Indigenous children and youth. The primary focus and objective of all child and family services agencies must be upholding and protecting the rights of the child through ensuring the health and well-being of children, their families, and communities, and family unification and reunification. (NIMMIWG, n.d., p. 194)

In the following sections, I explore the origins of the best interests of the child doctrine. This leads into an exploration of how the best interests of the child doctrine has come to impact Indigenous families in Manitoba.

### **Origins of the Doctrine & Implications in Manitoba Child Welfare**

The best interests of the child doctrine appears to have gained prominence with the United Nations 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which later led to the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the *Convention*), ratified by Canada in 1990 (Zermatten, 2010; United Nations Treaty Collection, 2021). The doctrine was included as a principle whereby anyone making decisions which would impact a child, positively or negatively, must consider the best interests of that child in both the short and long term (Zermatten, 2010). The *Convention* proposes the principle of the best interests of the child as being open to interpretation related to context of application, values, beliefs, culture, and individual or collective perspectives (Long & Sephton, 2010; Zermatten, 2010). Despite the emphasis on subjective interpretation, it

is said that cultural relativism/rights and the rights of parents cannot supersede the rights of the child (CRC, 2009; TRC, 2015; Zermatten, 2010).

Children's rights are not being debated; rather, I question the ability to assume the child's rights can be separate from the interests of their family or culture. The Breath of Life Theory explicitly calls for consideration of culture, as a person's culture defines their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs, which we must strive to balance (Blackstock, 2011). Assuming a child's best interests can be severed from that context privileges a knowledge framework that fails to see the world from an interconnected lens. While the *Convention* brought much change to how children are viewed, the framework upon which "the best interests of the child" is based is liberal in nature, assuming a rights-based, individualistic lens (Kline, 1992). This fails to examine our broader responsibilities and relations. Indeed, Knowledge Keeper, Sherry Copenace, Onigaming, Ontario, has shared that there is no word for the concept of "rights" in *Anishinaabemowin* (the Anishinaabe language); rather Anishinaabe people acknowledge shared responsibilities (personal communication, March 16, 2022). If we reframed the best interests of the Anishinaabe child then, we would further be required to consider responsibilities to the child and all their relations. Yet, there is a failure to consider societal responsibilities to parents or the inherent relations of the child. This individualistic lens is perpetuated in current interpretations of child welfare legislation.

Around the same time the best interests of the child doctrine gained international prominence, Manitoba was slowly adopting this doctrine into child welfare legislation. As previously mentioned, child welfare services expanded to First Nations people between the 1950's – 1960's. The 1953 *An Act Respecting the Welfare of Children* and the 1961 *An Act to Amend The Child Welfare Act* referred to the best interests of children only in terms of

apprehension and adoption, giving the legal system broad powers to adopt children out, without family consent. Notably, as previously mentioned, this was the time at which the Sixties Scoop began. The 1979 *An Act to Amend the Child Welfare Act* clause 1 (a.2) was the first legal definition of the “best interests of the child” in Manitoba child welfare legislation. This read:

(a-2) "best interests of the child" means the best interests of the child in the circumstances having regard, in addition to all other relevant considerations to (i) the mental, emotional and physical needs of the child and the appropriate care or treatment, or both, to meet such needs, (ii) the child's opportunity to have a parent-child relationship as a wanted and needed member within a family structure, (iii) the child's mental, emotional and physical stages of development, (iv) the effect upon the child of any disruption of the child's sense of continuity and need for permanency, (v) the merits and the risk of any plan proposed by the agency that would be caring for the child compared with the merits and the risk of the child returning to or remaining with his or her parents, (vi) the views and preferences of the child where such views and preferences are appropriate and can reasonably be ascertained, and (vii) the effect upon the child of any delay in the final disposition in the proceedings. (1979, Acts of the Legislature of the Province of Manitoba, p. 101)

This construction of the best interests of the child was written by the colonial state with the settler population in mind. At the time of this legislation racism and ongoing assimilation policies, alongside state assumptions that Indigenous children needed saving, intersected with existing legislation and was being used to support the mass removal of Indigenous children. While the best interest of the child doctrine is intended to protect children, the concept failed in every way to address the needs of Indigenous children and families. For instance, what exactly is considered the appropriate care or treatment when the lens being used to assess the situation is

one of racial stereotyping and discrimination? Other issues, such as how one assessed development, is further constructed through a settler lens, which fails to appropriately translate into the Indigenous context (Choate & Lindstrom, 2016).

In the late 1970's and early 1980's in Manitoba, recognition of the failure to provide appropriate services to Indigenous people, through reports such as the Kimelman Report, led to a multi-level government review and eventually to tri-partite agreements for the development of Indigenous led child welfare organizations (AJIC, 1999; Bennett et al., 2005). It was the Kimelman Report which called for consideration of cultural and linguistic background to be included as part of assessing the best interests of the child. By 1985, *The Child and Family Services Act* was amended, expanding the best interests of the child principle, section 2(1) of *The Act*, to include "cultural and linguistic heritage", although the adoption without consent was still included within this 1985 *Act*. Section 6(14) of the *Act* (1985) also referred to, for the first time, the ability of Manitoba to enter "Agreements with Indian band" for First Nations to provide their own services, yet Manitoba maintained the power to revoke this.

Throughout all this history, a review of the legislation demonstrates the dominance of colonial ideologies pertaining to individualism, control, and punishment. The very ideas written into child welfare law contributed to the ongoing assault against Indigenous families. As the system has slowly changed, this colonial power has persisted. For instance, while Manitoba began to enter into agreements with First Nation communities to lead their own child welfare services in the 1980's, Indigenous people off reserve continued to be served by non-Indigenous resources (Libesman, 2014). Devolution in 2002 created Indigenous child welfare Authorities, yet within the context of provincial legislation, overseen by a provincial minister, and without

increased resources (Libesman, 2014; Simchura-Jerome, 2006). These reforms are state led and remain power-over, evidenced in the ongoing assumed authority of the state.

### **Current Legislation in Manitoba and Canada**

Current Indigenous child welfare practice in Manitoba relies on several bodies of legislation, drafted with a stamp of approval by provincial or federal governments. In this section, I focus on *the Child and Family Services Act* (1985) and *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families* (2020) [Bill C-92]. While there are claims of consultation, collaboration, or acknowledgement of rights to self-determination in the writing of these laws (Libesman, 2014; Indigenous Services Canada [ISC], 2020), they remain colonial and paternalistic in nature. This is manifested in the writing and imposition of the laws and the claimed authority of the government, for example claiming to “allow” Indigenous Nations to make their own laws.

The best interests of the child definition in both pieces of legislation (see Appendix B) are essentially the same. Each includes reference to safety and security, consideration for the child’s preference, rights to culture and heritage, consideration for physical, emotional, and psychological needs, and consideration for the child’s relationship with their parents (The Child & Family Services Act, 1985; ISC, 2020). Bill C-92 adds consideration for the child’s relationship to community and Nation, as expressed in importance by the child (ISC, 2020). The fields of law and social work have accepted these definitions as truth. While I acknowledge there are practitioners, families, and communities challenging practices, the overpowering systems of the law, social work, and state remain rooted in an individualistic interpretation of these definitions. This is evidenced in how courts interpret the doctrine.

Court decisions pertaining to Indigenous families impacted by child welfare emphasize the individualistic and colonial interpretation of the doctrine. Precedent setting decisions have denied culture as being important, acknowledged culture but assumed any Indigenous Nation could meet the child's cultural needs, prioritized bonds/attachment, and stability in foster homes over culture and identity, or assumed that family and community interests were not in line with the child's (Choate et al., 2019; Kline, 1992; Sinclair, 2016). Kline (1992) for example, highlights how families or First Nations Bands, the governing entity of First Nation communities under the *Indian Act*, have presented evidence of the importance of culture and identity for Indigenous children, yet courts have rejected the evidence as not pertaining to the individual child. Thus, the individualistic nature of the principle is perpetuated through western interpretations of the doctrine. Monture in 1989 argued that court decisions "reinforce the status quo by applying standards and tests which are not culturally relevant" further stating this is a "form of racism" (Monture, 1989, p. 12). Thirty years later, Choate et al. (2019) argue that systemic racism through the court system continues- western frameworks are prioritized in assessing Indigenous families involved with child welfare, resulting in discriminatory outcomes for these families. Sinclair (2016) further questions the validity of non-Indigenous persons in the legal system interpreting and defining the best interests of Indigenous children. So long as there is involvement of a colonial judicial system, alongside failure within the judicial system to grasp and uphold Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being, Indigenous children will continue to be brought into care on discriminatory grounds.

While Bill C-92 has been praised as an opportunity to change the child welfare system, it remains a piece of legislation where the government claims to give Indigenous peoples rights, as opposed to ceasing to regulate in this area and acknowledging Indigenous Peoples inherent

sovereignty. While the preamble and purpose of Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families [the Act]* (2019), refers to the right to self-determination, and indeed these sections inform interpretation of law, the government maintains control over the ultimate implementation of the laws. For instance, Bill C-92 indicates that the best interest of an Indigenous child, as set out by the *Act*, can supersede Indigenous laws (ISC, 2020; Fallon et al., 2021). Indigenous Services Canada (2020), when explaining Bill C-92, repeatedly uses language that suggests authority over Indigenous Nations, despite stating Indigenous Nations may under the *Act* create their own legislation. While the intentions of the bill have been to acknowledge Indigenous peoples' right to oversee the wellbeing of their children (ISC, 2020), as Helin (2008) and Alfred (2009) state, intentions are irrelevant when colonialism remains the ideological basis of the initiative.

Notably, while the best interest of the child doctrine has been defined essentially the same as in the Manitoba *Child and Family Services Act* (1985), the interpretation of this through *the Act* (2019) does require consideration of factors laid out in the purpose and principles of the law, such as the aforementioned references to self-determination. Further, for instance, *the Act* (2019) states that the best interests of the child must be interpreted “in a manner consistent with a provision of a law of the Indigenous group, community or people to which the child belongs” (S.4). This suggests that the best interests of the child must be interpreted through the lens of the child's Indigenous community and based upon the sovereignty of that child's Indigenous community. Yet, if the government maintains the power to potentially influence the definition of the best interests of Indigenous children, this is questionable at best. Furthermore, I argue it is likely that if child welfare cases are determined through the state legal system, Bill C-92, including the best interests of the child, will be interpreted through the same settler-colonial lens

that has operated to date, particularly if the state refuses to uphold the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples to define their own best interests. Based on this, I argue we can challenge the knowledges used to interpret the doctrine and the power-over structures of both law and social work. The individualistic lens of the doctrine is so deeply entrenched in child welfare practice that it is rarely questioned. Alternatively, anti-colonialism argues that traditional knowledges of Indigenous people must be centred, and colonial system rejected (Hart, 2009; Simpson, 2004), a stance by which I wholeheartedly stand.

### **Anishinaabe Law**

Contrarily, Indigenous people have been actively implementing their laws across time, whether these have been written or not. In 2005, Grand Council Treaty #3 (GCT3) enacted their *Abinoojii Inakonigewin* (Child Care Law), based on Anishinaabe “traditional childcare practices,” and extensive community engagement (GCT3, 2023). This *Abinoojii Inakonigewin* was also intended to assist Treaty #3 communities with establishing local customary care codes, which Wabaseemoong Independent Nations (2017) did. The Wabaseemoong Independent Nations *Customary Care Code* became recognized under *Bill C-92* as of January 2021 (Wabaseemoong Independent Nations, n.d.). Notably, in the *Customary Care Code* the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations have expanded from just the best interests of the child, to also including the best interests of the First Nation (Wabaseemoong Independent Nations, 2017).

In Manitoba, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) has been drafting the *Bringing Our Children Home Act* which is a locally developed law to reclaim control of child and family welfare for First Nations children in Manitoba (AMC, 2018). At the time of writing this, the only time the *Act* refers to “best interests” is to address the sixties scoop, when Indigenous children were placed with non-Indigenous families, supposedly to address children’s “best interests”

(AMC, 2018, p. 23). On the contrary, this proposed legislation focuses greatly on spiritual and traditional law, holistic considerations, and wellness of children *and* families (AMC, 2018). In addition to this, effective January 2022, in response to *Bill C-92*, Peguis First Nation implemented the *Honouring our Children, Families, and Nation Act (HCFN Act)*. The *HCFN Act* does include a definition of the best interests of the child, comparable to existing definitions, although this is understood within a community and culturally based context. See Appendix B for full inclusion of the each of the various law's definition of the best interests of the child. Notably, Anishinaabe laws have entrenched understandings of how child, family, community, and cultural wellbeing are interconnected. The following section explores some of these worldviews.

### **Indigenous Understandings of Family**

While legislation is the driving force of the child welfare system today, Indigenous Nations have had their own child, family, and community wellness practices long before the colonial government decided to attack Indigenous people. Therefore, a key part of exploring this concept of “the best interests of the child” is developing a deeper understanding of traditional Indigenous family and community relations and wellness practices. The literature appears scarce in this regard. Therefore, I have expanded the focus of this review to include various Indigenous Nations, distinguishing specific Nations’ wherever possible.

### ***The Interconnectedness of Children & Family***

The best interest of the child from an Indigenous worldview is one that considers family, community, and cultural context (AJIC, 1999; Lindstrom & Choate, 2016; NIMMIWG, n.d.). This means finding solutions to the social issues related to child welfare involvement that addresses the wellbeing of communities, as inherently tied to the wellbeing of children (AJIC,

1999). Across the literature reviewed, common themes regarding Indigenous child rearing and family practices included: children are sacred, extended family is very important, culturally based knowledge and spirituality are central, modes of teaching and disciplining children are contrary to western ways, and different styles of attachment form related to these different childrearing ways (Castellano, 2002; Eni et al., 2009; Hand, 2006; Lindstrom & Choate, 2016; Muir & Bohr, 2019; Red Horse, 1997). Notably, Castellano (2002) states: “the extended family distributed responsibilities for care and nurture of its members over a large network of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Clan systems extended the networks of mutual obligation even further” (p. 16). She goes on to note that this notion of family and community remains “etched deep in the psyche of Aboriginal people” (p.16) today, regardless of if they are living urban or on reserve. In this way, if we think of children, we must understand them in relation not just to their biological but also their spiritual family (i.e., their clan). Indigenous family wellness has also been connected to the land (Castellano, 2002; Fncaringsociety, 2020; Lindstrom & Choate, 2016). Notably, all these points relate to the Breath of Life Theory (Blackstock, 2011). Indigenous children must be understood in the wholistic context of all their relations and land, across time and place.

Muir and Bohr (2019) as well as Lindstrom & Choate (2016) have argued that there is enough evidence to show Indigenous family practices are unique and thus western assessment models are flawed when applied to Indigenous families. Arguably then, child welfare legislation written in western frameworks is most certainly also flawed and, as the data on apprehension shows, is outright harmful. Indigenous people already know this. I hope that scholarly research such as this work here will help emphasize this knowledge, reminding colonial government

powers and non-Indigenous social workers to challenge whose knowledge is privileged. I will now review nation specific conceptualizations of family.

**Anishinaabe/Ojibwe.** In Peguis First Nation, an Anishinaabe/Cree community located in Manitoba, Peguis Child and Family Services operates Sun Lodge Village. In watching a video on the initiative, interviewees talked extensively about the role of engaging whole families, ceremony, and the land in their healing (Fncaringsociety, 2020). Interviewees shared that traditional laws and teachings are more powerful than any government law or policy; they stated that love would protect children, not the government or institutions (Fncaringsociety, 2020). Not once did the doctrine of the best interests of the child come up. Rather, discussions centred a wholistic and interconnected lens rooted in spirituality. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, workers, Elders, and many others were all included in this conversation. This demonstrates an emphasis not just on children but rather on the many relations connected to the children. While children are sacred (Fncaringsociety, 2020), it was clear that to meet their needs everyone needed to be a part of healing and building their culturally based identity.

Research by Hand (2006), comparing the perspectives of Ojibwe mothers (Ojibwe people being a nation of Anishinaabe people, according to Hele [2020] of Garden River First Nation) to non-Indigenous mothers in the United States, demonstrated different perspectives on the wellbeing of their children. Ojibwe mothers place greater emphasis on multi-generational and extended family supports, referencing both present and past relations; there was a communal sense of responsibility for children rooted in cultural practices (Hand, 2006). Notably, Hand (2006) argues that the United States *Indian Child Welfare Act* is written in a colonial way, contrary to the understandings of these mothers. Similar to what is observed in Canada.

**Blackfoot.** In Lindstrom and Choate (2016) six Blackfoot Elders were interviewed. These Elders shared that in their Nation, family must be considered broadly with flexible roles and definitions. They emphasized that children are gifts who must be raised within their culture, community and family and caregiving for these children can be done by many people (Lindstrom & Choate, 2016). Here again, while children are emphasized as having special importance, this is nurtured by the many supports in their lives. The Elders further stated that healing must occur intergenerationally in their community and that reconnection to culture for children should be in relation to Elders (Lindstrom & Choate, 2016).

### **Summary of the Literature**

In summary, the literature has shown that the current child welfare system is failing Indigenous people. While initiatives such as devolution, Indigenous child welfare agencies, and legislation such as *Bill C-92* have claimed to be attempts to better the system for Indigenous families, these initiatives have simply passed on a colonial system. Furthermore, the child welfare system intersects with the colonial legal system, which fails to interpret the best interests of the child through an Indigenous lens. While the literature on Indigenous child and family perspectives is not abundant, the evidence does exist that Indigenous worldviews simply do not align with the child welfare system, including the principles upon which it is based. The best interests of the child doctrine has not been understood within a culturally contextualized way.

## Chapter Nisi (3)

### Methodology

#### Introduction to the Theory

The theories informing this research are anti-colonialism and the Breath of Life theory (Blackstock, 2011). I have chosen to focus this lens because I believe that when discussing the child welfare system, it is important to centre a lens which will enable the examination of alternatives outside the existing system, as opposed to system reform. Anti-colonialism is a critical and assertive stance against colonialism, while the Breath of Life theory centres an Indigenous worldview to frame assessment and action. The following section elaborates.

#### *Anti-colonialism*

Any discussion of the child welfare system in Canada requires an anti-colonial approach. While there is much literature on decolonization in social work practice, the language of decolonizing suggests the removal of colonial impacts on an existing system. Indeed, Blackstock (2019) notes that decolonization puts “the coloniser at the centre” (p. 856). Contrarily, anti-colonialism creates the space for completely new systems. Anti-colonialism is an explicit acknowledgement that colonialism is ongoing, involving the active rejection of ongoing colonialism in the political, social, and cultural realms, and a dismantling of colonial systems, structures, and knowledges (Hart, 2009). Anti-colonialism draws upon frameworks rooted in Indigenous worldviews or knowledges, rejecting the privileging of western knowledges which uphold colonial systems. As such, when working from an anticolonial perspective, Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being are centered (Hart, 2009). Drawing from an anti-colonial perspective, this research creates the space to challenge existing child welfare systems. Furthermore, this lens requires in-depth analyses of the knowledges that inform and maintain the

system, locating the system within its historical and cultural contexts. Consideration of the power dynamics imposed by the system further informed the research, as I seek to centre the voices of families.

According to Hart et al. (2017) anti-colonialism may be engaged by non-Indigenous people under the conditions of self-reflection, awareness to not reproduce oppressive dynamics, respect for Indigenous self-determination, and humility to be able to take the lead from Indigenous people. Supporting this, Carlson (2017) argues that non-Indigenous anti-colonial academics must push back “against colonial institutions, structures, practices, mentalities, and land theft” (p. 500). Carlson (2017) identifies the following principles of an anti-colonial research methodology:

1. Resistance to and subversion of settler colonialism
2. Relational and epistemic accountability to Indigenous Peoples
3. Land/place engagement and accountability
4. Egalitarian, participatory, and community-based methods
5. Reciprocity (previously identified by Wilson, 2008 & Kovach, 2009)
6. Self-determination, autonomy, and accountability
7. Social location and reflexivity
8. Wholism. (Carlson, 2017, p. 501-503)

By focusing anti-colonialism, I seek to acknowledge that the current child welfare system has failed Indigenous families. I argue that colonial ideas such as those about family, place, self-determination, and wholism (or lack thereof), have created disconnection and intergenerational trauma within Indigenous families, which is ongoing. Anti-colonialism has also informed my

own reflections throughout this research, as I reflect upon my connection to and engagement with these knowledges and systems.

### ***Breath of Life Theory***

The Breath of Life [BOL] theory (Blackstock, 2009; Blackstock, 2011; Blackstock, 2019) was developed in response to the failures of the child welfare system and western theoretical social work frameworks for Indigenous children and families. Blackstock (2011) presents the BOL theory rooted in First Nations ontology and the physics Theory of Everything. Drawing from the relational worldview principles originally conceptualized by Terry Cross (as referenced in Blackstock, 2011), Blackstock (2011) argues that when the relational principles are balanced within the community and cultural context, with consideration for the seven generations concept, that structural risks are alleviated. The relational principles are as follows:

1. Cognitive: self and community actualization, role, service, identity, and esteem
2. Physical: water, food, housing, safety, and security
3. Spiritual: spirituality and life purpose
4. Emotional: love, relationship, and belonging (Blackstock, 2011, p. 3).

The BOL theory posits that the world cannot be compartmentalized; we exist in relation to others and the natural world, across cosmos and time (Blackstock, 2011). The relational principles are located within a specific culture and context, further connected to expansive concepts of time and multiple realities (Blackstock, 2011). Blackstock (2019) later builds on the BOL theory drawing attention to further considerations for equity. Analyzing the child welfare system from this understanding centres consideration of children in direct connection to their families, ancestors, and First Nation. It expands understandings to examine the gaps within

placements. This perspective directly connects the “best interests of the child” to a broad perspective.

Blackstock (2019) calls on us to challenge our practice by drawing on an alternative, First Nations rooted theory. I suggest this is an embodiment of anti-colonialism which further requires critical reflection and thoughtful consideration in implementation. Engagement with the BOL requires consultation with and approval by Indigenous community members (Blackstock, 2011). It also requires me to centre Indigenous worldviews, examining and critiquing my own understandings along the way.

### **Research Question**

This research sought to understand how Anishinaabe people impacted by Manitoba child welfare systems define the best interests of the child principle. The question explored how Anishinaabe people themselves would define this principle, exploring similarities or differences to how the child welfare system imposes the doctrine. Thus, the research question was as follows: How do Anishinaabe people impacted by the Manitoba child welfare system define the best interests of their children?

### **Research Methods**

Prior to formally beginning the research process, I offered *asemaa* (tobacco) to the land located where the Red River meets Alfred Avenue (Nenookaasiins- 126 Alfred Avenue). At this location, the organization with whom I work converted a derelict building into housing for our Indigenous youth in and from Child and Family Services (CFS) care. The building was designed in consultation with Indigenous youth in the program, creating a sense of ownership over the initiative. It was also this location where in March 2021, the body of a young pregnant Anishinaabe woman was found. A building of disrepair, where life was so viciously disregarded,

this space began as a symbol of the colonization of Indigenous life and land. Yet it has since become a place of hope; the organization and families have reclaimed this place as a space of healing, where youth will come to grow in a journey forward. This space is rooted in Anishinaabe understandings, informed by our youth, leadership, and those within our organization. This location, with permission from the Executive Director, also provided space to conduct the research. As such, it was important for me to offer *asemaa* here to express gratitude for this opportunity, for the stories I would be trusted with, and to seek guidance as I set my intentions on the research journey.

After having opened the research in this way, I moved towards interviews, utilizing an Indigenous conversational method from the work of Margaret Kovach (2009; 2019; 2021). Kovach is a Nehiyaw and Saulteaux woman who speaks of the importance of story and the relational contexts as Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Kovach, 2021). Given that this research centres anti-colonialism and Indigenous knowledge, the methods of the research must be aligned with Indigenous ways. As a non-Indigenous person, I hesitated to engage Indigenous methodologies. Consultation with advisory council member Sherry Copenace (Anishinaabe of Treaty 3 Territory, personal communication, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022) supported the centring of Indigenous methods. Kovach (2021) further notes that it is the research question and the researcher's relationships which dictate whether one should use Indigenous methodologies, as opposed to identity. Thus, given the context of this research, I engaged interviews with a conversational method, centring the relational, co-creation of knowledge through story (Kovach, 2019, 2021).

A conversational approach to research acknowledges that each person has a role in the creation of knowledge, supported through relationship and reciprocal sharing (Kovach, 2019). It

requires being trusted as a researcher and meeting relational responsibilities (Kovach, 2019, 2021). While I created an interview guide (Appendix G) with prompting questions, a conversational method requires flexibility, acknowledging that both participant and researcher contribute to the process (Kovach, 2019). Rather than reading questions to participants, I kept in mind the topics I hoped we could discuss and often, through conversation, these topics arose naturally. Kovach (2021) states “When researchers use a story or conversational method, their task is to respond intuitively to the stories, to share as necessary their own understandings, and to be active listeners” (p.166). As such, interview guide was primarily referenced at the end of interviews, to ensure I had not forgotten anything. This method supported relational and ethical responsibilities. Furthermore, a conversational methodology includes reflection as part of the methodology (Kovach, 2019), which is aligned with anti-colonialism (Carlson, 2017).

### *Participant Characteristics*

For this research, I interviewed 11 people. Though I initially intended to speak with 12-15 people, recruitment proved difficult. Several participants expressed they had initial hesitancy regarding participating due to fears around having to retell some of the traumas experienced in the child welfare system. This likely affected recruitment on a broader level, resulting in some not reaching out at all. Furthermore, the consent process was identified as being colonial in nature, with one participant stating that the forms replicated their experiences growing up in the child welfare system.

Participants met eligibility criteria which included a) self-identified as Anishinaabe, b) over 18 years of age, and c) directly and/or indirectly impacted by the Manitoba Child and Family Services (CFS) system. Participants ranged in age from 20-63 years; I spoke with parents, grandparents, Knowledge Keepers, and youth. All participants were directly impacted

by the CFS system which may have included receiving services from the agency, having family who received services from the agency, and/or working in or alongside the CFS system.

Participants were invited to share how they identify, including where they are from. Seven participants identified as female and four as male. A limitation of this research will be the lack of representation from the Two-Spirit and gender diverse community.

Participants were given the option to have their identity remain confidential, or to be identified within the research (see Appendix E for consent forms). Kovach (2009) shares that the option to choose whether one is identified or not is important in Indigenous research, to allow people to retain ownership over their own “stories and truths” (p. 148), while also adhering to “collective protocol” (p. 148). In her second edition, Kovach (2021) further elaborates on the importance of Indigenous ownership over truths and knowledges. Giving participants the option to choose was important to ensure greater control over their stories. Of the eleven participants interviewed, ten consented to share their identity in various ways and one person requested to remain confidential; this person has been assigned a pseudonym and gender-neutral pronouns.

### ***Recruitment***

The first point of finding participants was sharing the research poster and information with those I know, both in person and via Facebook and LinkedIn. This acknowledges the importance of relationships as foundational to Indigenous methodologies (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021). Most participants were persons directly known to me or were referred by someone known to me. Having relationships with participants supported safety and trust throughout the research process. In addition, I shared the research poster with various Indigenous organizations to request permission to share recruitment posters, as well as directly to eight First Nation communities through my place of employment, as approved by our executive director and

board of directors. Potential participants were provided with a range of methods to contact me such as phone, text, email, and Facebook Messenger. Once potential participants made contact, I utilized the recruitment script (Appendix D) to review the research purpose and process, as well as confidentiality, consent (Appendix E), and other protocols. Participants were be asked to review and sign consent forms prior to conducting interviews.

### *Collection of Dibaajimowinan*

Before diving into this section, which would typically be called data collection, it is important to reflect upon the notion of calling the stories and gifts shared by participants data. I believe this terminology can be interpreted in a way that separates people from their stories, and in this way can be disrespectful. When people choose to share their knowledge, experiences, and stories with us, it is their lives they are choosing to share with us. Participants shared vulnerable stories, powerful stories, passionate values, and core pieces of their journey with me for the purpose of this research. It was important to me to reflect on how historically, researchers have taken Indigenous people's stories to gain data without giving back to Indigenous communities. This history separated people into units of data for the benefit of someone else. I wanted to shift towards terms which may help the readers and I remember that the data collected is indeed part of a person's life. As such, the word data is used sparsely in the following sections. Rather, I use the terms *dibaajimowinan* (stories) or the singular *dibaajimowin* (story). According to Winona Keeper (Anishinaabe, Little Grand Rapids, personal communication, July 29, 2023), *dibaajimowinan* is "to tell the truth of what is happening or happened."

### *Interviews*

*Dibaajimowinan* gathered through recorded interviews, which ranged from 30-100 minutes, are the foundation of this work. Most interviews lasted about one hour. Participants

were offered to choose the location, date, and time and I accommodated to the best of my ability. Most participants chose to meet with me in the Round Room at Nenookaasiins, although one chose a community location and another in their home.

To facilitate the interview process, I created a brief interview guide (Appendix G). Questions were based on concepts from the Breath of Life Theory (Blackstock, 2011) and research topic, and were only a guide to ensure participants had the freedom to share freely. The freedom to share openly in a conversational way is foundational to an Indigenous approach. Kovach (2009) notes that conversational interviews are more in line with Indigenous storytelling, further stating that “open-structured conversational method shows respect for the participant’s story and allows research participants greater control” (p. 124). The questions in the interview guide were a mix of descriptive and evaluative open-ended questions (deMarrais, 2004).

Prior to beginning the interview, participants were offered *asemaa* (tobacco). This sharing of *asemaa* acknowledges the sacred relationship we are engaging in (Kovach, 2009), creating a space of respect as well as acknowledging the teachings participants will be sharing with me as a learner and researcher. Participants were provided a gift card honorarium and a small gift at the start of the interview. *Mashkodewashk* (sage) was available throughout the interviews and participants were invited to smudge at the start or end of the interview. After smudging the recording was turned on. While the interview guide was present, many topics naturally came into the conversation. Following the interview, with recording off, participants were given the opportunity to debrief, ask questions, and/or smudge. Participants were invited to contact me should any questions, thoughts, or concerns arise. Two participants provided follow up comments, which have been included as part of analysis.

**Compensation.** All participants were offered, prior to the start of the interview as per Research Ethics Board standards, a \$50 honorarium, and a small gift for participation.

Participants who expressed interest in offering feedback on the final data, as part of the research validation process, were offered an additional \$25 honorarium to acknowledge their time and energy in the research process. To close the research, participants were invited to a Feast.

Participants were offered bus tickets to participate in this gathering though no additional compensation was provided for participation in the closure Feast. Consent forms addressed the issue of forfeiting anonymity to attend this gathering. Acknowledging that ceremony is a critical part of research with Indigenous people (Kovach, 2009), the Feast was an opportunity to close the research in ceremony. Furthermore, this ceremony helped ensure relational responsibilities were met, as required for conducting ethical research.

### *Journaling*

In line with the need for self-reflection as part of anti-colonialism and a conversational methodology (Hart et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009, 2019, 2021), I maintained a reflective journal in my University OneDrive account. Kovach (2009) notes that, unlike field notes, a journal is an opportunity to engage in more in-depth reflections (for example, recording dreams or emotions). My journaling allowed for documentation of research notes but was also a place to explore my place in this story sharing process (Kovach, 2009, 2019). Throughout the research process, these reflections help build self-awareness of power, colonialism, and my role within these systems. I also reflected on emotions, biases, and personal experiences. This is part of acknowledging the highly political and emotional work that occurs in relation to child welfare.

### ***Information Storage***

All hard copy files, such as handwritten notes and consent forms, have been kept in a locked cabinet in my personal workplace office. I am the only person with access to the locked cabinet. In the event I change employment, this will be moved to the office of my primary thesis advisor. Digital information, such as my research journal, audio recordings, and transcripts, have been stored in a personal, password protected computer, on my University of Manitoba OneDrive account. Audio recordings were recorded directly onto my personal, locked laptop and immediately transferred to OneDrive, then deleted from the computer.

### **DibaaJimowinan/Data Analysis**

#### ***Interpretation, Validation, and Feedback***

As I began the process of interpreting the stories of participants, prayer was important. I often began my work in prayer with a *migizigwan* (bald eagle feather), and this stayed present throughout the process. In fact, it is beside me as I write this now. When engaging in interpretation and analysis of the research, it was important to remain focused within a relational perspective, striving to avoid decontextualizing *dibaaJimowinan* (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This was essential throughout the process of revisiting participants stories, often bringing forth longer quotes that encompass a range of information and experiences. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed with assistance of the TRINT transcription program. When including quotes in the text, utterances including um, like, n'that, or yeah were removed where appropriate. If the utterance was a moment of pause in the conversation, it has been left.

Throughout the process of reviewing and interpreting transcripts, I utilized my research journal for documenting decisions, as recommended by van de Sande and Schwartz (2017). Once the *dibaaJimowinan* were transcribed, I proceeded with a reflexive thematic analysis [RTA].

RTA can be engaged with a range of theoretical perspectives and seeks to identify and interpret patterns within data, while acknowledging the researcher as an active participant in the creation of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Braun et al. (2019) particularly note the relevance of RTA for qualitative research. Furthermore, Kovach (2019, 2021) highlights thematic analysis as a tool aligned with Indigenous methodologies and research, although cautions again to ensure that stories remain intact. Throughout this process, I strived to uphold my responsibility for sharing and caring for the whole story of each participant.

### ***Reflexive Thematic Analysis***

Once transcribing was complete, I began the process of RTA based on the steps presented by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019):

1. Familiarizing self with data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

Utilizing these steps, I engaged both an inductive and deductive approach to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that an inductive analysis is “a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame” (p. 83). This is aligned with ideas by Wilson (2008), Blackstock (2011), and Kovach (2009) whereby the stories of participants must be wholly honoured within their unique context. This included identifying codes and themes drawn directly from participants, such as the theme of Education. Deductive analysis arose out of the questions, which were formed based upon the

Breath of Life Theory (Blackstock, 2011). While many of the themes came up naturally in participant conversations, because they were topics identified in the questions, there was a deductive component to analysis. For instance, land was an intended topic of conversation and emerged as a fully developed theme in later analysis.

Building on this, I engaged in a latent analysis which seeks to understand meaning beneath what is explicitly stated in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). While there were themes that were more semantic in nature (Braun et al., 2019), given the implicit nature of colonialism in modern society, a latent analysis supported engaging in an anti-colonial perspective. Keeping in mind the guidance that participant experiences should not be decontextualized, a high level of ethical standards and attention has been paid to this process. Beyond the context of colonial ethics, in analyzing participant stories I have focused on my responsibility to the relationships created with participants, under the guidance of *Gizhe-Manitou* and *nindinawemaaganog*.

### ***Interpretation***

As I became familiar with the participants *dibaaJimowinan*, I began the process of coding. Van de Sande and Schwartz (2017) explain first level coding as identifying “meaning units” (p. 158). I identified patterns, or recurring language, ideas, or experiences within the stories to identify the meaning units (Braun & Clarke, 2006; van de Sande & Schwartz, 2017). I utilized the NVivo program to assist with this process. During coding, I maintained surrounding narrative to avoid decontextualizing *dibaaJimowinan* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kovach, 2019), and regularly referenced back to the original full-length transcripts to confirm my understanding. Once all meaning units were identified, I assessed the meaning units in relation to one another to complete initial categorization and move to second level coding (van de Sande & Schwartz,

2017). Second level coding “is more abstract and involves data interpretation” (van de Sande & Schwartz, 2017). This stage leads into the development of themes, as noted in step three of Braun and Clarke (2006). From the categories established, I sought to identify themes and sub-themes, utilizing a thematic map as a visual and reflecting on decisions in my research journal (Braun & Clarke, 2006; van de Sande & Schwartz, 2017).

When seeking to understand the “best interests of the child” in Anishinaabe experiences, interpretation required deep thought and attention. Attention was paid to participant’s language, to help understand how participants have understood or made meaning of their experiences with this doctrine and the child welfare system. *Dibaajimowinan* were a point of interpretation for finding ideologies around how the participants define the best interests of their child, in relation or contrast to child welfare.

## **Validation**

### ***Indigenous Child Welfare Stakeholders Input on the Research Question***

In addition to consulting my advisory council, I reached out to colleagues to discuss my intentions. Mentors in my place of employment, an Anishinaabe First Nation organization, particularly supported the topic of this research. When I asked one colleague if I may be ‘making this up’ she replied that no, this topic is not just something that has come from ‘Brandy’s brain’. Rather it is something observed in our work.

### ***Member Checking***

**Participant Member Checking.** Feedback from research participants has been highlighted as a way of increasing research validity (Wilson, 2008). Nine of eleven participants agreed to receive their transcripts; three confirmed acceptances of their transcripts as presented. Two participants who shared terms in the language were consulted regarding spelling, one of

whom I met with for breakfast to better understand the meaning of the terms she shared. A three-page written summary was provided to participants along with thematic maps for each theme, providing both written and visual information. Seven participants received this via email, while three requested hard copies. Participant Jasmine and I met for coffee, where we spoke about the outcomes, and she supported what was shared. Participant DJ spoke with me in person, confirming his support for the research summary. I met with participant Florence for breakfast to discuss the themes, where she also indicated support for the themes presented.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations made during this research. First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that due to the sensitive nature of child and family services (CFS) policies and practice, ethical considerations must be made for participant's risk of experiencing emotional distress or re-traumatization. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (Government of Canada, 2018) identifies concern for welfare, defined through a wholistic and social welfare understanding, as a core principle of ethics. This requires ensuring participants are not exposed to unnecessary risk, ensuring informed consent and a balance between risk and benefit for participants (Government of Canada, 2018). This is expanded upon when considering the best interests of the child doctrine within Indigenous research where concern for welfare further considers cultural and community impacts (Government of Canada, 2018; Masching, 2014). This required careful consideration of the research question, the consent process, research activity settings, and overall research design. I worked with my advisors to ensure that the design of the research met ethical requirements. An additional strategy to ensure the research was done ethically included having information and resources available to support emotional and mental needs. This included having smudging medicines available, having a reference list of Indigenous

therapeutic or community resources (Appendix H) and offering to help participants access additional supports should they require this. In addition, I believe that ensuring the research was rooted in respectful relationships further mitigated risk.

The principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) are also an important ethical consideration (Schnarch, 2004). One way I address this is by ensuring that this research will be made available to any Indigenous person, organization, or Nation who requests it. I will also provide all participants the final research should they wish to access it. I have made a clear note that this knowledge is not mine. Rather, as a researcher I am an organizer of ideas. I acknowledge the stories and final research belongs to the Anishinaabe people who contributed, alongside all their relations.

Central to ethical research with Indigenous people is the importance of building relationships (Ferland et al., 2021; Kovach, 2009; Masching, 2014; Wilson, 2008;). The relationships built within Indigenous research may not reflect the traditional relationships developed in the research process (Ferland et al., 2021; Masching, 2014). As a social worker, I regularly challenge the idea of what professional relations look like as, I believe, the dominant idea of western professionalism is contrary to the relationships needed to practice good social work. I continued upholding this through the research process. One way this manifested within this research, for instance, was taking extra time with participants and being available to assist with resources and/or to discuss the research. Relationships must be built on trust, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kovach, 2009; Masching, 2014; Wilson, 2008). As a researcher, I was responsible for ensuring that all participants felt safe. I strived to create safety through being honest and transparent about the research, my identity, my intentions, and by offering the greatest flexibility possible to accommodate participants in this process. I acknowledged my

gratitude to participants verbally, as well as with a small gift and honorarium. I am further responsible for ensuring the research serves a greater purpose and demonstrating this to the community upon completion of the research. There are many ways that respect, reciprocity, and responsibility can be demonstrated in the research relationships, I have listed but a sample here. As Wilson (2008) points out, all knowledge is created in various types of relationship. Therefore, I believe all relationships must be honoured. Kovach (2009) builds on this stating that the importance of these relationships should inform the ethical considerations of the research process. In this way, I understand that relationships came first and foremost in this research process, informing how the research would unfold.

An additional ethical consideration is that of being a non-Indigenous researcher engaging in research with Indigenous people. Academic institutions are places of ongoing colonialism with Indigenous communities often being researched by non-Indigenous academics, using western approaches to the detriment of Indigenous communities (Ferland et al., 2021; Kovach, 2009). Schnarch (2004) notes that as part of honouring OCAP, Indigenous people must take the lead in research, including research conducted by non-Indigenous people. I sought my Indigenous advisors and mentors' feedback on the research design including vetting the research question and requesting validation of the research themes. Masching (2014) and Schnarch (2004) state that ethical research with Indigenous communities must be of relevance and benefit to the community. As a non-Indigenous person, I cannot make claim to what is of relevance or of benefit to any Indigenous person or community. Therefore, consultation with and recommendations from my advisors, mentors, and participants, as well as Indigenous-led literature, has been valued and upheld.

## Chapter Niiwin (4)

### Introduction to the Findings

This chapter brings us to the knowledges shared by participants. You will notice I refer to ‘us’ or ‘we’ as you read. Participants shared their stories not just for me as the researcher, but rather for “us” - you and I - to contribute to a collective learning; use of ‘us/we’ is how I identify myself as the narrator and you as the reader as being connected in a shared process of learning. It is with great gratitude, contemplation, and emotion that I spent time with the *dibaajimowinan* (stories) of participants. Participants were thoughtful and often passionate about sharing their experiences. Those who shared why they chose to participate identified the importance of sharing their stories as a method of personal healing and as a way of contributing positively to the future. Perhaps indicative of the importance of storytelling in Anishinaabe culture.

Here, I present the findings from the conversations I had with participants. This chapter begins with a discussion around participants experiences with the current child welfare system. While the focus of this research has been on identifying pathways forward, participant Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle shared about the importance of learning from the past. In our conversation about future generations, Wally stated:

I think, again, the easiest, best way, but the most impossible way it seems sometimes, is to try and learn from our mistakes. It's simple, easy in that, you look at the residential school era, you look at the 60's scoop era, you look at the child welfare system era today, and the mistakes we made within those three systems alone. And, you know, we continually do and continue that cycle of repeating all that harm that those systems did to our families, to our children, to our communities. And once we realize that, once, you know, we commit, you know, not to make those same mistakes, then maybe things

will change and hopefully things will change in a different way, for a better way maybe.

But I think that's where it needs to start.

Wally is sharing that for us to move forward, we must learn from the past, and that the systems of child apprehension have harmed families and communities, concerns that echoed throughout the conversations with participants. This informed the first theme, Participants Call Out the System, where prominent topics included experiences of trauma and mental harm, as well as how the system influenced perceptions of family. Following this, I move into part two of the chapter, discussing themes framing the best interests of Anishinaabe children, to carry us forward.

The theme *Inawendawin* is Medicine, is where participants identify the importance of relationships including the need to connect with family and a range of supports across the lifespan. Understanding that relationships build community moves us into the next theme of Community as a Blanket. Here participants identify and explore the diverse meanings of community, including the importance of the village in raising children, the role of leadership, and the influence of economic wellbeing. Within the context of a community culture develops, leading us to the next theme. In the theme of Culture, participants speak about the importance of identity, ceremony and spirituality, intergenerational connections, and the diverse cultures that may be a part of Anishinaabe children's identity. The next theme is *Aki*: It Just Makes Sense. While *Aki* (land) is tied to culture, it has been explored in its own theme based on the distinctly positive and visceral reactions by participants during these conversations. After this is the theme of *Gikendaasowin* (knowledge), where participants speak about the need for all ages to be supported to build knowledge pertaining to academia and life skills, healthy relationships, the impacts of colonization and their families, and the need to ensure helpers are also educated. The final theme to be discussed is Hope, Healing, and Opportunities for a New Way. Here

participants share discussions of hope and a desire for healing. It is also here that I explore both the positive and negative experiences of participants and their direct recommendations to help identify a new way forward for caring for Anishinaabe children and families.

At last, let us begin!

### **Findings Part One: Participants Call out the System**

*Dibaajimowinan* emerge from our experiences. When meeting with participants, although this research and our conversations were focused on identifying pathways forward, as previously stated the path forward can begin with learning from the past. While I do not want to focus on the flaws of the child and family services (CFS) system, participants concerns will not be overlooked. For example, issues with foster care were prominent in conversations, and an in-depth discussion of this will be explored in the theme on Opportunities for a New Way. In this way, the issues are called out by identifying ways forward. Yet it is important to also frame the current context of CFS, as identified by participants. In this section, I focus on the prominent issues of trauma and mental health identified by participants, and how the system has distorted perceptions of family.

#### **Trauma & Mental Health**

Eight participants spoke about trauma imposed by the Child and Family Services (CFS) system. Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe explained this very bluntly; when talking about how CFS has impacted her own life she stated “[t]here's one big word that I've learned that covers how I feel, and that word is trauma. [...] Traumatized.” The trauma imposed by the current CFS system, I argue, creates a barrier to the current system ever being one that can help families. This is evident when, despite all the attempted changes to the CFS system (see Chapter *Niizhin*), participants have shared that it still perpetuates trauma. For example,

participant Cassandra Sanderson was critical of the attempted Indigenization of CFS. While Indigenous CFS agencies are striving to incorporate ceremony, for example, Cassandra felt “there’s just so much trauma around CFS” and that having ceremony through CFS “feels like a Band-Aid for CFS, like ‘Oh, we’re sorry, here’s your, you know, your Sweatlodge.’” I have often heard the term “Band-Aid” in social services used to imply the work being done is important but does not address root causes. For Cassandra, CFS offering ceremony is an attempt to rectify harm caused by the system. Yet she went on to identify the trauma caused by CFS and expresses an overall sense of exhaustion:

I feel like Indigenous people in particular, they're so sick and tired of CFS. Like everyone is affected by it or, you know, somehow. And it's just like my story over and over again. Like kids are taken. They don't know where they're, the kids gone. They're just, everyone's told to not talk about it and police are involved and it's just (pause). I dunno.

Further demonstrating the trauma around the current system, participants repeatedly spoke to CFS being a continuation of residential schools. Drawing our attention to the harms imposed by residential schools (see Truth & Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015), encourages a deep reflection of how the current CFS system is impacting families. Given the increased awareness of residential schools, I believe society would not consider this something to be supported, yet settler colonial governments, CFS agencies, social service workers (which includes social workers), and others, continue to support the CFS system. Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman made this connection in her own life stating:

I had a really bad experience in care. [...] I see care as a very negative thing because [of] what happened to me and my friends. So, I feel like I'm very anti-, uhm, foster care. And I've said awful things. Like it's a modern-day residential schools because I feel like

they're just stealing kids from the family from a disproportionate amount. Like it's all Indigenous children mainly. And there's not that many Indigenous children in general in Canada. So, it's like, it's it just feels dark.

She went on to state:

I would like to say that that kids should be with their families. But with intergenerational trauma, especially with residential schools, I think that's a huge reason why I couldn't be with my family. Like they are unable to care for their children. And that's why I was taken away.

Jasmine has tied together the issues of intergenerational trauma spanning from the residential school era of her parents to her more recent experiences with CFS, which she feels emulates the residential school era. If society took participants' comparisons of their experiences with the CFS system to the system of residential schools seriously, we would be called to immediate action. Notably, this comparison is already made frequently in current public discourse. I argue that the failure to implement substantive change to CFS suggests this comparison, to date, has not been taken seriously. Sylvia builds on this, linking the disconnections imposed by residential schools, her experience, the experiences of youth today, and the impacts of CFS on mental health. Sylvia states:

I didn't cope very well. I was very suicidal. I had been to the hospital many times. I've been hospitalized a few times as a youngster because I was, I was always wanting to harm myself. And I see that, like that's the struggle that a lot of people, our young people today. [...] There was no family because I was taken away from my family. You know, that's no different than when the residential schools came in and what was happening there, that disconnect.

Participants have closely linked their experiences to the history of residential schools, implying a deep trauma in the CFS system that, I will argue in the next chapter, cannot be rectified within this current system. From explicitly stating that the system has caused trauma to comparing the system to residential schools, it is clear participants are seeing harm in the current system. These experiences of trauma have also impacted the mental health of participants.

Systemic trauma harms the mental health of children and youth in the CFS system. For instance, Hasey Owen stated she “would get so sad,” when her CFS workers said her family was “drinking all the time.” Her workers statement implied a blame upon the family, as opposed to having a trauma-informed discussion with Hasey about what may have contributed to drinking in her family. Furthermore, Hasey talked about “growing up thinking [she] was alone all the time,” related to disconnect from family and spirituality. Sadness and loneliness are factors known to contribute to depression and in this instance, the CFS system is identified as contributing to this risk for this participant. Another participant, Ma’iingan, had a long-term foster home and consistent social worker in their life, yet they still struggled. Ma’iingan shared:

I was still having troubles with drugs and alcohol. And (pause). Because of the way things were going in my life, I just felt like giving up. So, one day I [...] texted him and said, you know, I think I want to go to treatment and that I need treatment.

In this case Ma’iingan had talked about having a positive foster family experience and having had the same social worker for an extended period. Yet, Ma’iingan still struggled with addictions in their life, leading to a sense of wanting to give up. This raises the questions around the common assumption that stability in the lives of children and youth will prevent and address issues related to mental illness. This was not the case for Ma’iingan, thus supporting the importance of the themes which will follow, such as relationships and culture.

Some participants specifically identified that the harms they experienced due to CFS early in their lives continue to have a lasting impact their mental wellness. For example, DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa reflected on trauma he experienced in foster care, stating “it still hurts my feelings to this day.” Ali Bird talked about a specific memory in care which continues to influence his behaviour as an adult, stating that the incident “affects me, mentally.” I leave these quotes vague to protect participant’s privacy, yet the stories shared indicated that the participants early traumatic experiences have impacted their mental health over time.

We often hear the term ‘legacy of residential schools’, yet legacy implies something of the past; through the child welfare system, participants suggest the trauma of residential schools persists. It is not a legacy at all, rather a continuing experience that the Anishinaabe people I spoke with have identified. I believe this requires us to challenge the continuation of the child welfare system. Further to the trauma and mental health impacts, participants identified how the system has distorted perceptions of family, suggesting disruption to family persists as opposed to the claimed child and ‘family services’ the system so names itself.

### **Distorted Perceptions of Family**

Family is often assumed to be the context in which children grow. Yet a topic that became evident through participant conversations was how CFS distorted their perceptions of family. While those not impacted by CFS often live a life with certainty in their family, participants here did not have the same sense around their families. Consider the experience of Ali, who expresses a disconnection from his biological mother and an uncertainty of who to blame for his experiences with CFS, if anyone at all:

I don't know my mom, I used to hate her. I, now I have zero feelings towards her whatsoever. Like (pause), it's the whole I don't know what, what happened. I want to hate

her. I want to hate somebody. But I can't. I don't know who to point the finger at. [...] But growing up, you always heard about how a mother's love is indestructible. Nothing can change a mother's love. But then I see what happened with my mom and it's like, ha, something can fucking change that. But it's like, how come I have to believe the opposite of what most other people believe? Most people believe that most moms are like the mama bear. I don't ever, I won't ever see that because my mom was never like that. I never, ever had that connection.

Ali acknowledges his disconnection from his mother and contrasts his experience to what “most other people believe” regarding the role of mothers. Later, when asked if he felt CFS should have done more to support his sibling relationships Ali replied “[t]hat's a tough question because I don't know who should have done more. My parents or CFS. I don't know who did less. My parents or CFS.” He went on to speak about not seeking a connection with his siblings as an adult because of having grown up apart from them. Ali expresses a lack of clarity around who was responsible for connecting his family, and a lack of knowing if CFS did help his family or not. While CFS claims to take over guardianship of children in care while also providing services to family (hence the name Child and Family Services), Ali did not experience this.

Similarly, some participants talked about being left with unanswered questions around how the CFS system engaged their families. The disconnection from family left Crane Medicine Woman with questions and she became emotional when sharing:

I always wonder if the system didn't really bug my parents to see [me] very often, like I was forgotten. And I feel like the system should remind parents even if like, everybody, I know they're all going through something, [...]. Like, for me, I would have wanted that,

someone to [say] like, ‘K yeah, you still [have a] baby here, like you still have a chance to get your baby back.’

For Ali and Crane Medicine Woman, they are left with questions about their families and a sense of disconnect. Contrarily, participant Jasmine was clear she did not want contact with her family because to her “they don’t seem healthy.” She went on to elaborate: “I mean, [CFS] made them seem very dangerous [...] and so I don't know how much of my fear for them is real, or how much it was put on me.” Jasmine expresses both a sense of knowing she does not want to contact her family, but also doubts around the origins of these feelings as being her own or rooted in the narrative she was provided by CFS. Participants quoted here express uncertainties such as not knowing what happened, feeling forgotten, and questioning their own perceptions around family. These are examples of how the CFS system fails to connect families.

For all people, family represents our roots. These are the origins of where we come from and the stories of which we deserve to know. Yet the CFS system perpetuates a cycle of trauma and unknowing, creating disconnection reminiscent of, according to participants, the residential school era. Participant Sylvia, reflecting on her experiences in care compared to the state of the system today became passionate in talking about how CFS cannot replace families. To Sylvia CFS has created a worse state today for the youth. Sylvia stated:

I feel it's absolutely worse. [...] [Youth are] fending for themselves without even being, without even knowing how to take care of themselves. Because that system cannot do it. They never did. And it's, it doesn't replace the family, just absolutely, it definitely doesn't. And it doesn't, as long as it thinks, the system thinks, it's doing a good job, I would call bullshit. Because it's not. It's actually, if anything, I see today it's causing more damage to the young people that are, are still trying to figure out and find themselves.

Sylvia's quote speaks to the experiences of those quoted before her. Participants recently involved with CFS carry uncertain perceptions around family, and Sylvia calls out the system for its failed attempts to be the family that participants were removed from. This is a small bit of insight into the many ways participants called out the current CFS system. The trauma, harm, and disconnection imposed by the system is directly contrary to the themes herein, which are some of the ways that can better support the best interests of Anishinaabe children. For instance, our first theme of *Inawendiwin* is Medicine – or Relationship is Medicine – is a starting place to address some of the concerns discussed thus far.

### **Findings Part Two: Themes to Carry us Forward**

#### **Inawendiwin is Medicine.**

Sylvia was speaking about her experience working with mothers when she stated, “the baby medicine is so powerful.” She spoke passionately about caring for others and this conversation with Sylvia helped frame the thinking around this theme. *Inawendiwin* (relationship) is medicine. Connection with children is medicine. When I thought about Anishinaabe children and their connections in this way, I began to reflect upon how severing that connection, removing that *mashkiki* (medicine), could lead to or worsen mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical illness. This theme first introduces some core relational values and the influence of language, followed by discussing child/family relations, worker and child/family relations, the extension of caring into adulthood, and the importance of other role models and healthy supports.

Throughout conversation with participants, core values underlying relationships arose in participants' words. Participants shared about the importance of having compassion and love for others and providing nurturing to children. Yet in *Anishinaabemowin*, (the Anishinaabe

language) these concepts take on a depth of meaning which may be misaligned with the current CFS system. Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe provides an example in the following quote:

*Shawenim* means caring, nurturing. Clothing the child. *Shawenim*. And, and, you know, hey, let's, I'll paint you a picture. There's a child crying, and the mother, you could tell she's 'What should I do? What should I do?' Then the mother that's skilled or the auntie will come. And then we'll say "*Shawenim Abinoojii*," you know, take your child, and then she'll do it herself to show that mother what to do. She'll pick up the child. And soothe the child and check the child if they need to eat or, or use a washroom. Or maybe they have a toothache. Maybe they're... You know when my daughter was small, I would check her all over, put, look in her ear. Look in her mouth. You know, [*A-ga'-she-way-nee-ma-meeth-zhee-way-ee-goo* (spelling provided by participant)], showing my care. And the mother, 'I didn't know what to do.' We're not going to go in there and give her the eyebrow, frowning and scold her, you know. But just to show her, see how I did it, like that. Non-verbally. Yeah. And my mom used to do that to me. Yeah. She'll say, you know, you should check to see if she wants to eat or, my daughter when she was small. And so that's why we need that kinship help. So, it takes a village to raise a child, even any culture. I always say that.

Within her words, Florence is conveying values including compassion and action-based support for her relatives. She teaches us about love and nurturing for both the mother and child, demonstrated in the action of caring for the child's needs while showing the mother, without judgement. Through sharing that her mother taught her in this way, she is also demonstrating the importance of familial relationships for intergenerational learning. Sylvia, who does not carry the

language, shares a similar understanding of nurturing stating “[y]ou cannot nurture somebody without having some kind of contact. Whether it's even emotionally, physically, intellectually, however. You just can't.” Thus, Anishinaabe children need these nurturing, loving, compassionate and intimate relationships. Yet the CFS system is not meeting this need.

Florence went on to state at takes a village to raise a child, implying through this and her example that people must work together to care for children. Other participants talked similarly about responsibility for caring for others, even if the child was not their own, whether this was through social services work, or just being a member of a community. For instance, Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle shared his understanding of the best interests of Anishinaabe children as being tied to the concept of *Naga-gi-ang* (taking care) *ki-da-pinojii-min-un* (of our children) (spelling provided by participant), or ‘taking care of our children’:

Like that idea about [*Naga-gi-ang-ki-da-pinojii-min-un*], caring for our children, for example. I think to me anyway personally, like that, it implies a whole lot more than just caring for children, right. It's just a way of being with our children. I guess is a simple way of maybe saying that or translating that.

This tied to the values Florence identified, of communal and kinship care as a responsibility. Furthermore, Wally identifies the concept of caring as not just a feeling but also an action – “a way of being.” This suggests, comparable to the concept of nurturing, a deepened understanding of how a person demonstrates this to children. I went on to ask who Wally was speaking about in reference to ‘our children’. Wally replied:

All children. I always think about my Kookoo, for example, who raised me, which was my great-grandmother. And what I remember most about that experience was there was always children in our home, in her home, and later finding out that some of those

children I wasn't even related to. So, she looked after other children as well. But not only just from our own little community, but from other communities as well, maybe distant relatives or relationships that have been found through families. You know, but she always looked after children. It wasn't like she got paid for it directly. Maybe indirectly, maybe through food or whatever. But most times it was just her in caring for, for children. I think that's what I'm talking about when I say that. [*Naga-gi-ang* (taking care) *ki-da-pinojii-min-un* (of our children)]. So, it was everybody's responsibility. So, in that way she took it upon herself to be responsible, right, in the care of children. Including myself.

While Florence shared an example that demonstrated the values of action-based compassion and familial support and Sylvia further supported intimate nurturing for children, Wally brings our attention explicitly to the concept of responsibility for all children. For Wally, it was “everybody’s responsibility” to care for children; there is a core value in the sense of responsibility and showing deep care. Yet, in our discussions, Wally identified that the CFS system has taken away the opportunity for families and First Nation communities to meet their traditional roles and responsibilities related to caring for children. In talking about how the CFS system has impacted First Nations communities, Wally shared:

When we use systems that are very much come from a power-based way of control and making decisions for children. First thing we do is we take all that power away from, from the parents. When we step in and say, apprehend those children from that family. But secondly, we take away that power from those relatives, those relatives that are also important to that life of that child. Which is an extended family and so on. But then

thirdly, at the end of the day, we take power from the community as well, especially when we remove children from communities, as we see today.

Thus, relationships with family, and supporting or restoring community capacity to meet those relational responsibilities, can be understood as a key value underlying the importance of relationships.

In *Anishinaabemowin*, the depth of meaning behind words such as nurture and caring is understood more extensively than in English. When engaging in relationships, the CFS system and Anishinaabe people may be understanding the meaning of this, and the associated responsibilities, differently. Given that it is ideology and the meanings behind language that inform development and interpretation of legislation, it is critical to understand meaning behind the words being used in legislation, policy, and practice. This is also why it is important to understand some of the core values within relationships, as understood by Anishinaabe people, when exploring relationships as being in the best interest of Anishinaabe children. For example, this is demonstrated in the value of caring for others. Florence shared that “[c]aring in the word, that the way we understand. Caring is going that extra 20 miles. People say an extra mile. No, it’s more. Like from here to adulthood for the youth.” To Florence, caring is a lifelong responsibility, as opposed to the way the current CFS system cares- which is based on a range of factors such as youth age or CFS legal status. In the previous quote from Wally, he stated that caring is “a way of being with our children.” The CFS system says it cares, but how is it “being with” the children? It is beyond the scope of this research to fully explore the depth of values and how this relates to language. Rather, this discussion is intended to introduce the importance of considering language and values underlying the theme of relationships.

When the child welfare system severs Anishinaabe children's connections to their family and community often placing them in spaces that, as participants have noted, create trauma, it is an action contrary to the nurturing, caring relationships that participants here teach us about. When assessing and uplifting relationships in the best interests of Anishinaabe children, we must consider not only the existence of relationships, but also the underlying factors which create healthy relationships, such as relational roles and responsibilities and what it truly means to care for someone. This frames our next discussion on children's relationships with family.

### *Children's Relations with Family*

While it seems blatantly obvious that connections to family must be maintained, and indeed CFS claims to do this already, these connections need to be understood more deeply than simply contact among family. All participants spoke about relationships with families. While some of these comments were about the disconnect or wishing they knew more, most participants spoke about inherent connection. Participants identified that connection to family is about a deep knowledge of who you are as a person and how you engage with the world. Crane Medicine Woman demonstrated this when I asked her about the meaning of the best interests of Anishinaabe children. For Crane Medicine Woman, her child is a part of her, and she wants her child deeply involved in her life.

Like, I like the idea of the best interest of the child. [...] (pause). It's like, you know when people, like some moms, to be like, 'Hey, you know, I'm my own person too but I also have my little me.' I don't know, like, I don't like when people include me in their plans, but then they forget to include my baby and then, it'll just make me angry. I don't know. I just like. (pause). It's not just the child, it's like literal family. [...] Breaking that connection leads to a lot of trauma.

Crane Medicine Woman has identified that to her, the best interest of the child is “not just the child” but rather it is also about family. She identifies herself in relation to her child and wants inclusion of her child in her daily life, recognizing that if this connection were to break there would be significant trauma, contrary to the best interests of the child. Participant Hasey Owen shared a similar understanding of the connection between her and her child. When asked about how she defines the best interests of the child, Hasey replied:

I guess mine would now be for me to be there. And to be present. I feel like that's why I get so hard on myself when I slip. Because it's not really in the best interests for [my child].

While Hasey has identified that her health impacts her child's best interests and Crane Medicine Woman identified her child's best interests as being tied to family, two different ideas, both have articulated the connection between them as parents and their child's best interests. Their relationship to their child can be understood as more than just being present for one another; rather their relationship is also impacted by the health and wellbeing of parent and child in their daily lives. The current CFS model must support these connections in a preventative way. For children already in care, CFS supports occasional visits (sometimes) but has failed to do much other than this in terms of keeping children connected to parents.

Wally builds on the understanding of the connection between Anishinaabe child/parent by teaching us about the depth of connection between children and their familial roots:

Well to me it's all about coming back to our roots again. In the, the sentiment that we all have roots. On our father's side, and on our mother's side, and the community in which we grew up in. It's like a tree, right, a tree with roots and imagine that tree without any of those roots. A little wind will come n'that tree will fall down. And the same is true with

ancestral roots because those ancestral roots go deeper. And again, when our children are removed, those are affected, those roots are damaged, they are affected in some way or another. Especially when they're not connected, back to their family, back in their community, which often happens, unfortunately, when we remove children from the communities and bring them into urban settings in non-Indigenous homes for example. Ancestrally they lose those connections, or those connections are at least, at the minimum, effected in some way or another. So ancestral roots, I think are important. It's sort of like our DNA, right.

Thus, severing a connection between an Anishinaabe child and parent impacts the identity and wellness of both child and parent. Participant Dakota Waitowicz Headdress Woman perhaps stated it best when she said, “[k]eeping that connection and having them be heavily involved in their families is, I would think, the best interest.” Dakota goes on to advocate for families to maintain the power to make decisions in the lives of their children, even if the CFS system is involved:

So, I think that children should be heavily involved with their family members because they do have a say, whether it's good or bad. But I believe, like there's people in place to like, organize all of that. So even if it's like simple things like getting a haircut, what does a family suggest? Can they speak to their mom about this before anything happens? So many times, even the simple things just go under the radar.

The best interests of Anishinaabe children then are about supporting both child and family. Building on the importance of maintaining family connection, participants talked about family being a range of people including parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins and chosen family. The system currently focuses on children, with some emphasis on parents, but not

enough attention has been paid to the broader relationships, which take time and attention to support. Five participants also noted the importance of family connections for building skills and values. For instance, participants identified the passing on of values and skills such as relational responsibility, caring for/nurturing others, learning life skills, and attachment styles. This is demonstrated in the following quote from DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa. DJ disagreed with how the current system understands the best interests of Anishinaabe children, recognizing a gap in how CFS understands and connects families:

So, when they say the best interests of the child, I say it's a joke because at the end of the day if you have us in the system, we still need that bond [with family and supports] because sometimes I didn't know who my family was. They felt like strangers to me because I didn't see them on a regular basis. At same time too, [the CFS system] didn't believe in attachments the way we want our families to be nurtured and cherished and disciplined and loved and all that stuff. [...] So, when they say the best interests of the child, that's why I say ppht, yeah right. Whose best interest?

Thus, Anishinaabe children's best interests is tied to supporting the wellbeing of their family. Even in the event of a separation, such as apprehension, families must retain some decision-making power and children must continue to learn about and know their families. As DJ has suggested, the current CFS system has not supported families to know one another raising the question of "whose best interest" the CFS system has supported.

**Sobriety.** Four participants mentioned sobriety as an important part of family relationships. This included needing to have a sober adult in the child's life and/or leaving other family due to the lack of sobriety. I acknowledge that stereotypes and racism continue to exist in relation to Indigenous people and substance use and I include this section in the mindset of

understanding substance misuse is a symptom of the impacts of colonialism, trauma, and disconnection. For these participants, substance use of family members influenced their lives, including being used by CFS as justification for not being connected to or taught about their families. Supporting family healing and sobriety may help facilitate family connection. In the event substance misuse means families cannot be connected, but we think back to the quote from Wally about knowing one's roots, children still have the right to know their family stories.

Notice that sobriety is in reference to family, as opposed to solely parents. This came up in discussion with Crane Medicine Woman, who felt sobriety relates directly to how she understands a child's best interests:

I feel like everybody has their own opinions of like a child's best interest. And for me, that's just like making sure baby's safe, has a safe, sober adult around, or even just like someone that's willing to take the baby out of the environment that got the person sick.

I asked if this meant having a healthy adult in the child's life, to which Crane Medicine Woman replied, "wanting to get healthy." This suggests that for her, it is in the best interests of the child to have someone who is actively working towards being healthy and sober. Notably, this perception leaves space for the understanding the people may not be perfect in their sobriety and wellness. Rather there is a journey, a "working towards," that provides opportunity for helpers to offer support to families. Sobriety was also important for participant Ma'iingan. When asked about how they define the best interests of the child Ma'iingan shared:

I wish for my whole family was sober so that I could stay with them, and to grow up with my family. [...] My foster parents mentioned that my social worker said that if [I] want to see my mom, she's going to have to go to treatment. And, uh, so my mom she never did that, she never did. So, we thought like, I don't know, I guess she doesn't want to see us

because she's too busy drinking. And (pause) so, yeah, it was a really hard time. I mean, I would say they were trying to help, but I really don't know the full back story.

Ma'iingan was aware of their mother's drinking, but they never knew if CFS helped their mom; they weren't given the story, and this contributed to hurt for the participant. DJ also shared his reflections, acknowledging that the disconnect caused by not understanding his parent's behaviours harmed him as a child, similar to what Ma'iingan expressed. DJ identifies the gap in his life that stemmed from the lack of understanding around his parents, and how developing an understanding changed his perspective:

Because at the end of the day I always felt like there was something missing in my life. But I could never put two and two together because I was never this knowledgeable of where I was and where I am today, and how I can reflect back and look at things at a different perspective through a different lens and understand that it was not my parents' fault. Because they themselves too went through residential school. But I did not know that back then. So, I put a lot of blame on them for, for their drinking, their drugging, their adultery, leaving us home for weeks on end and doing whatever they're doing behind the scenes. But I did not know they were dealing with their own demons. And that's how they were dealing with their demons.

Thus, substance misuse can contribute to a disconnect between child and family. Yet I argue that systems of caring can help maintain the familial connection by recognizing that sobriety need not be perfect and/or by educating children on their family experiences, such as the impact of residential schools. Wherever possible, it is important to offer to help family members struggling with substance misuse. If this direction is not an option, helpers and supports must

support children to understand why these things are happening in their family. Addressing the concerns of substance misuse will help maintain critical family relationships.

### ***Relationships Between Children/Family and Workers***

In this section, I looked at what worked or was important for participants to understand what is needed in the worker/family/child relationship. Indeed, most participants felt that CFS workers and the system must support families, as opposed to solely children. Sylvia demonstrated this when critiquing the current system and its approach to families:

[W]hy did they bother changing their name? Because when I was in the system it was Children's Aid Society. So, when they changed it to Child and Family Services, where is the services for the family? Why? Why do you call them? Like, why do you guys call yourself that? Because you're not a service. You're strictly still child protection.

Relatedly, when DJ and I were speaking about the best interests of Anishinaabe children, DJ felt strongly that CFS workers must help parents. He stated:

[Claiming to work on the best interests of the child is] an insult to the ones that have been through the system. And we didn't see no best interests on our behalf. So how can you say that for the best interests of a child? So, when [workers] say that I say to them, if you want the best interests at heart for me, then work with us with our parents that you apprehended us from. And put us in homes that [organization] has in place, for our parents where they can, you know, learn how to cook, learn how to be a parent, do all of those parenting skills with them, and have someone there to support them, to monitor them, to whatever. They didn't offer that to us. So, at the end of the day, when they say the best interests of the child, they did more damage than good to us.

DJ and Sylvia felt CFS fails to properly support families. The system of care must move away from child protection towards being more family focused, providing caring services to entire families as opposed to solely or predominantly children. Particularly if we reflect back to, for instance, what Crane Medicine Woman and Hasey shared and the importance of the child's relationship to their family. Thus, CFS workers or other helpers and supports must also build relationships with the families of children.

Further to working with families, participants who had been in CFS care often identified how their own relationships with workers needed to improve. While it is important to consider the role of CFS workers in relation to families, it is difficult to conceptualize this when participants here identify the failure of workers to establish basic relationships with them already. For example, Hasey explained her relationship with her CFS worker as follows:

I feel like the only time I would ever see my workers when I was little was when they would come to tell me I'm not allowed to visit family. Or like come and tell me something. Or if they heard something from my [relatives], and they want to sit down and have a meeting about it. It was only if it was ever about something serious. It was never just to see me.

Drawing from the stories of participants, relationships between children and workers must be based on love and nurturing, believing children, and providing stability and consistency. Florence spoke to this when talking about attachments between child and worker:

[T]he child needs to see the worker. Like my one [relative] loves her social worker, but they took her away from my [relative]. And, and maybe there's some rule against attaching too close to someone. 'This can't happen.' No, it has to happen.

Yet, not having these meaningful relationships with CFS workers was prominent in participants stories. Participants who grew up in care often stated their workers did not know them, talk to them, or include them in decisions about their own lives. For instance, Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman shared:

Well, if the interests are in this child, I feel like there needs to be a focus and an understanding of that child. Because (pause), I was never spoken to. I didn't know what was ever happening. And that's the same with my [relatives].

Jasmine has drawn a connection between the need for a strengthened relationship as being in the best interests, yet also noting this did not happen for her or her family. Other participants build on this, talking about the harms of poor relationships with CFS workers. Ali shared:

[Workers need] [t]o stick it through. You want the parents to stick it through, you need to stick it through too. Like. But then if they're going to be a permanent ward, this kid, like, what affected me was not knowing who my social worker is half the time. Half the time I didn't even bother calling, because last week it was this person, this week it's that this person and they're not really doing anything because they're simply hanging on to it till this person gets off holidays. But then this person finds a better job over here. And then I'm the one still waiting. So, it's like I'm the one who just stops caring.

Ali went on to say:

Like some of the workers, they did come out of their way, and you know, let me know, but that's just irrelevant like again, like I was saying before, like it just, you shouldn't be leaving a permanent ward 'cause they build trust on trust issues. So, you build trust on someone that has trust issues, and then you leave'em that generates twice as much trust issues as when they started out. So, when you get another social worker and again, it's the

same thing. They're coming and their building trust off (pause) absolutely no trust. And then you break it, and then again, you wonder why most kids go out and they drink. They go and drink with their friends and do dumb shit. Well. It's 'cause their friends are in, some, a lot of their friends are in the exact same position. And they don't know that they're choosing to drink. It's, it's to them it's more better to drink with their friend than it is to deal with life. And you don't realize it until boom. Next thing you know, you're robbing a liquor store or trying to get drunk when you can't afford it. And it's, you got addiction problems then (pause). Yeah, its (pause). I feel like the mental angle and psychological angle that impacts children in care can be changed a lot. Little tiny things. Like just not leaving their kids.

Ali stated: "Little tiny things. Like just not leaving their kids." This is a powerful statement, for this is not a little thing at all. The CFS system removes children largely due to various forms of family instability yet is emulating this same instability in the relationships workers have with children. I question if the consequences of inconsistent, disconnected CFS workers may at times be worse than the instability children were apprehended from in the first place. Ali conveys that the unstable and inconsistent worker relationship directly impacted his mental health and says the relationship between children and their CFS workers needs to change.

Furthermore, Ali was not the only participant who referenced drinking in relation to the instability and inconsistency of workers in the lives of children in care. The poor relationship between CFS workers and children has visible impacts on children. DJ builds on Ali's statement, talking about how workers poor connection leads to a lack of knowledge about what is happening in children's lives:

Because at the end of the day, that's why you see a lot of these kids taking off drinking because they're probably exposed to, verbal abuse [in foster care]. Maybe even the bad touch abuse that we don't know about that they don't want to open up about. [...]. That's what these kids are going through. That's all they want to do is be able to go to somebody that they have a trusting, open relationship with. And they can't do that when the case worker keeps changing on them.

To provide the nurturing, caring, trusting relationship, supports must first provide that stability and consistency in a child's life. Notably one participant, Ma'iingan, did have a long-term CFS worker and identified this as a positive. Relating to the idea of a long-term support, Ali proposed "for a permanent ward to have a permanent social worker. Like someone that's going to be a caregiver like a mother, until they whatever. And that person shouldn't be able to just up and leave whenever things get better." I asked other participants about this, who agreed with the statement although felt it was not realistic. Yet the idea demonstrates the perception of a worker as someone who should be kin, "like a mother." While the CFS system claims to be legal guardians of children, it is a far cry from the kinship support children need. Sharing from her own experience and values, Florence talked about the care she would provide and thus expects of the CFS worker:

Like I told CFS one time, you want to keep my [relatives]. Well, I hope you tuck them in. I hope you hold them when they have a nightmare. I hope you remind them to brush their teeth and floss their teeth. These little things are very important because little things turn into what do you call them? Cavities. Cavities. Nobody wants cavities. I had cavities in my life and they're painful. So, stuff like little things are overlooked a lot. Lice. Too

much visiting. Bringing home little friends. You know, we watch out for things in every way as grandparents and Knowledge Keeper and mentor.

She went on to share an example of how a disconnected relationship with the CFS worker impacted the life of one of her relatives:

[S]he was on independent living but for her it's just two words. Those are not like implemented in her, in her brain, in her spirit. 'You know what girl? The worker should have said this money is for your rent. This money is where you live you help with, with it. You know, this money is for your clothes and this money is for your transportation.' And she used it as having fun money. And I saw it right there. Clear as crystal. The workers failed. Very big, fat F. F. They failed my [relative].

These are basic things we do for children, showing love and teaching them how to navigate the stages of their lives. The current system places these responsibilities on the foster homes or support staff. Yet it is the CFS worker who carries the most power and authority in the lives of children and families involved in the system. The perception from participants here shifts responsibilities in the sense that the worker/family/child relationship must be more stable, direct, and nurturing. Whomever is caring for Anishinaabe children, the person who has the power to make a difference in their lives, must do so in a stable, consistent, loving, trusting, nurturing way. Failing to build these relationships leaves youth feeling abandoned, as Cassandra Sanderson demonstrates from her own experience in care:

And then the social worker, she came to the home, and she was like, 'You're lying. You're you're lying. I met your [relative]. And [they're] sweet. You're lying.' She said that in front of me, the support worker, she was the supervisor, so my social worker, and [the] Child Advocate and my boyfriend at the times' mom. So, uhm, whatever. They put me in

independent living, and they just threw me in an apartment on [street name]. And I was told, 'Oh, you'll be okay. You're smart.' And that was it. Just left.

Cassandra also shows us the importance of believing youth, relating back to DJ who emphasized youth needing a worker they can have a “trusting and open relationship with”. For CFS workers to fully do the job of helping children and families, there must be trust which can only develop in the context of an ongoing relationship. This brings us back to the idea of a kinship-based model of care. Supporting previous participant comments, Hasey also felt that CFS workers need to provide care in a way one would with their own child, stating CFS workers should treat “all of the kids like the way you would treat yours.” When asked about what that meant, Hasey replied it was treating people “with kindness [...] basically come in different, say good morning, other stuff like that.”

Kinship-like relationships are needed from whomever is providing this support to Anishinaabe children. It is important to note that these relationships are not meant to replace family. Rather, it is the underlying value and intent of the relationship which must be adopted by everyone who is supporting the child and family. The intent and responsibility, for example, of an auntie or uncle, and how one would care for their relative. This type of relationship must extend beyond the child towards supporting the family unit. Furthermore, taking a kinship approach would require a recognition of the responsibility to provide care across the lifespan.

### ***Responsibility Doesn't End at 18***

Building on the importance of stable relationships between children, families, and their supports, four participants talked about children needing support into adulthood. Currently independent living programs exist, providing support up to the age of 21 if the CFS agency agrees to continue providing services to the youth. This support is not guaranteed and depends on

if the youth comply with the plans CFS puts in place. At the time in which I am writing this, there are also changes coming from the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal Ruling where certain Indigenous youth may be eligible to receive support up to age 26. The ability to access these supports depends on the legal status of the child in care (i.e., a “federal” or “provincial” ward). Power remains with the CFS agency. On the contrary, if support was provided from a perspective of kinship caring, as participants have identified is important, youth would receive support as long as it is needed. For instance, one participant stated they feel as though they are still learning at age 23. Another participant, aged 25, stated only now do they feel safe and comfortable living on their own. Sylvia provides a reflection from the perspective of a mother:

[B]ecause it's almost like there needs to be, and again, words just come to my head, but aftercare [...] it's almost like it needs to be in phases. It's, it's not like you can, 'Okay, you're just going to do this. But once you turn this age, we're going to cut you off' and that's the end of it, right? And then you just go like little birds, like kick them out of their nest and be like 'See ya! (laughing) Fly on your own!' I mean, even when I think of my own kids. When they were finally ready to go off on their own, I mean, I tried to give them as much skills as I could. But there are times too they didn't want to listen to me because it's like, 'What do you know, Mom? You don't know nothing'. Like okay. Yeah, sure, you can figure it out. And I would leave them to let them figure it out, because they also need to do that. They need to be able to build that independence so that they can make solid decisions for themselves and sound decisions. You know. But every one of my kids, after they moved out within, I think, within the first two years, they came back for a period of time. And which was okay! They were allowed to because I'm your mom.

I'm still like, I'm still here for you. [...] Again, that's not anything that an agency can ever give to a child. You know what I mean?

Sylvia raises several key points. First, she has raised the argument that CFS cannot provide the loving relationships children need. This will be discussed further in the next chapter. Second, she has demonstrated what is typical across Canada, in terms of development of youth and young adults. She has demonstrated the need for a safety net for youth, talking about aftercare in phases for youth from care, and having the ability to come back to their caregiver for support. This is currently inconsistently available to youth through the CFS system, if available at all.

From the perspective of a former youth in care, Cassandra talked about feeling abandoned by her workers, who assumed she could figure things out on her own as she transitioned to independent living. Cassandra still felt like she needed help figuring out how to live independently. She stated:

It's like, no, I need my... I'm a child! Hold my hands! Like I am, I can't do this. And you're, you think I'm better than I am. Like, I need. Help. I need somebody there, otherwise it's not going to get done.

Supporting the point that youth need care into adulthood, Florence shared two concepts in her language: “*A-ga'-she-way-nee-ma-meeth-zhee-way-ee-goo* [spelling provided by participant], showing my care”, and “*shawenim abinoojii*” which means nurture the child. After the interview, I met with Florence to discuss these terms. She reiterated that these mean “loving/soothing/comforting/role modelling” (words directly from participant) from baby to child to adulthood. Florence emphasized these are vast terms encompassing support and love across the stages of life, as quoted earlier “from here to adulthood.” This contradicts the current CFS model of care.

These participants feel that supports must extend beyond age eighteen. Florence and Sylvia have demonstrated that to them, this is natural. When considering the best interests of Anishinaabe children then, it is important to remember that even youth and young adults are someone's child and caring for others may be something that is not defined by age.

### ***Role Models and Healthy Supports***

Most participants discussed healthy relationships or role models as being beneficial for their own wellbeing or the wellbeing of their children. This included having advocates, Action or Land-Based Therapists, Elders, persons through Band leadership (one person spoke of leadership hiring a wellness worker and another spoke of needing leadership to be positive role models), and friendships. It was important to understand that relationships extend beyond family, and this is directly related to the wellbeing of those impacted by CFS. For instance, Sylvia spoke broadly about how her supports helped change her views on what was possible for her life:

If you have the support, if you have the community, if you have people behind you, if you have your cheerleaders, as they call them sometimes, you, and just your go getters, the ones that are pushing you, not physically, but you know, nudging you like... 'This is the direction you need to go.' Hopefully like, the person or, you know you kind of stay on that track. But knowing that, I mean, for me, that's, that's basically how I even got into university. I had no idea. I had no plan that I would ever go into university. I never thought I would make it. Because, again, that's just the message that's put in your head. You're... Who are you? You're nobody.

Similarly, Jasmine talked about how having a key close friend helped her advocate for herself. She stated: "that was my, one of my only friends ever. And so, he was in foster care but in a different system. And that's, that's how I was educated on what I had and what I can do for

myself.” Ma’iingan, alternatively, had different types of therapists including an Action Therapist, Land-Based therapist, and a “one-on-one” therapist. For him, these supports helped his mental health and helped give him direction. Ma’iingan shared “[w]hen I’m feeling down or depressed or have a question, I always go to my therapist. I have more than just one.”

Furthermore, some discussions were around important relationships related to cultural mentorship, highlighting the connection between healthy role models and cultural identity. For example, for Florence, who describes herself as a Kookum, Knowledge Keeper, and mentor, mentoring youth is an important part of what she does:

I really felt her pain. And so, when I'm alone, I pray. I ask for guidance from the Creator. I ask him to help me with the words. It is kind of frustrating when English isn't my first language. But like I said, I'm building up my vocabulary. And so, now we have a relationship her and I. And I'm just a phone call away and. And I talked to a lot of young people, and sometimes I could tell they're not ready. And but I am a very person, persistent person. And, and sometimes someone says, ‘Why do you care?’ How do I answer that? I think (pause) there's no way to answer that. So, I say that's me.

Thus, in addition to familial relationships, Anishinaabe children benefit from a range of supports. Well-developed relationships with family, workers, and other supports, should span across time as opposed to being based on age. A wholistic approach for Anishinaabe children requires building their circle of support, which brings us to the topic of community.

### **Community as a Blanket**

The name for this theme comes from the Star Blanket Ceremony. In the Star Blanket Ceremony, a person is honoured while being surrounded by a community of people; it is a loving, humbling, and safe experience. The blanket in which the person is wrapped can be

understood as the community supporting them, those who are there for the person to honour and support them (Wally Chartrand, Anishinaabe from Mallard Manitoba, personal communication, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023). As I thought about the families impacted by child welfare, and everything participants shared, I imagined them in this ceremony. In this theme, we first explore the role of community in caring for Anishinaabe children. This is followed by the importance of community, wherever a child may be living. Participants spoke about both First Nation community as well as community where a child is living, and I will distinguish as such. This is followed then by discussing the role of First Nations leadership and closes by briefly exploring the multi-level influence of economic wellbeing.

### ***“It Takes a Village”***

Four participants explicitly used the phrase it takes a village/community to raise a child, bringing our attention back to the importance of the idea of a circle of support, referenced in the theme of relationships. The dominant societal structure is created around individualistic beliefs. Yet for these participants, there is a sense of need for community in relation to caring for Anishinaabe children. For example, Cassandra Sanderson identified the healing power of having her village here in Winnipeg, which to her fulfills a need she missed out on as a child:

It's, what do they say, like it takes a village to raise a child. Like it's, it's so important. And I see it a lot where I work now because we're just like inner city and we're just a bunch of like deadly aunties, just all together. And if you need something, anything at all, someone there will know or tell you or help you and drop anything for you. Like I was having a really rough day and I have all my coworkers surrounding me and they just lifted me up so fast and made me smile and positive. And it's just, it's so nice to have community. Community brings positivity and its foundation, you know, for, for the parts

that that I'm missing. [...] [Having community is] fulfilling the need of the family I don't have. So, it's, it's nice that way.

Building on the idea of a village as a healing support for children, Sylvia draws our attention to a spiritual importance of children and the responsibility in community caregiving. Sylvia acknowledged children as a gift from Creator that the village must care for:

It's almost like it really comes down to, this thought just came to my mind. So, I know obviously somebody is listening (laugh). But that word, it says, like it really takes a village to raise a child. And it really, really does. Like, if we look back. Prior to contact, that's exactly what happened. It wasn't just a nuclear family, right. It was like if there was a, you know, a grouping of Indigenous families, they all took care of each other. Nobody was ever without. You know, everybody had their role. Children, and which I see, like definitely I value in terms of today, and they always are, they're gifts that are given to us. And if we don't treat them right, they, they can be taken away, you know, whether it's through [CFS], or something else. Right?

Sylvia reflected on the pre-colonial context of community caregiving, and the “village” not only raising children but also families supporting one another. Notably, due to colonization as well as dominant ideologies around individualism, the village that participants say is needed is not often a reality today. In conversation with DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa after our interview, DJ felt that restoring community caregiving could be a solution to ending cultural genocide. DJ reflected upon his own experiences in care and how his First Nation community helped him:

I was homeless. So, I depended on the community to help me in my life journey. If I didn't have the community to fall back on, I probably would have ended up either in gangs or selling drugs and incarcerated or not with us no more. So, when I say it takes a

community to raise a child, it is true. Because at the end of the day, when I was bouncing around home to home, empty house, pop tent, shed, wherever I had to lay my head to sleep for the night, for a week or whatever it may be at that time, I could always reach out to the local community members for handouts, for gardens, food, whatever. Same time too they'd give me some work to do like cut their lawns so I could make a few bucks. So I could feed myself. Same time too family would take me in, but they have their own kids to raise so again, I would couch surf. So, at the end of the day, it takes a whole community to raise a child.

Thus, for DJ, as a child his First Nation community helped him, and he feels this is an important direction to return. Relatedly, Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle spoke at great length and depth about community caregiving, directly tying this to the best interests of Anishinaabe children. Reflecting on his childhood Wally remembers a time when everyone shared responsibility for the wellbeing of children:

But in essence, the whole community had the best interests of the child, right? And why I say that is, again, going back to my childhood, six, seven, eight years old or whatever, I could play anywhere in my community. And people watched me and even though I didn't know that they were watching me or didn't think they were watching me, but I was watched, as well as my friends that I hung around with, right. So that's again, that's I think that's really, truly having the child's best interest, right. When the whole community, recognizes their role, their responsibility in that way. But that's something I think, unfortunately, we've taken away not only from families or parents, but we're taking those roles and responsibilities away from communities and the system that we now use,

right, when it comes to the best interests of our children. So, I think in that way in that, we've kind of moved away. To a different direction.

For these participants, caring for children was the responsibility of many, and the village or community provided safety and security. Yet Wally has also identified that the current system has impacted the ability of communities to do this. He later shared:

But definitely that legislation, I think, has to be looked at and revised and changed whatever, and the empowerment issue also has to be looked at. You know, how do we keep a little bit of that power with the parents? How do we keep that power at the community level, when it comes to that decision making, when it comes to our children? So, there's that aspect as well too. But to me, all of it is possible, when I think about it. Maybe not in my generation. But maybe down the road, you know, but all of it is still possible.

Thus, Wally has identified legislation and the current CFS system needs to be revised to help restore the power of families and First Nation communities to care for their children from that communal perspective.

In this way, participants bring forward the need for consideration of the child's village, identifying the importance of community itself, as an entity of caring people. This is not only a benefit to the child, and potentially healing for adults, but also understood as a traditional responsibility in Anishinaabe community. In this section, participants spoke both about their First Nation communities as well as community in the urban context. This brings us to the next point, which helps us think about where a child lives and the multiple types of community one may need.

*Connecting to Community*

Participants spoke about both the importance of Anishinaabe children's First Nation community, as well as the importance of building community wherever the child lives. For five participants, the connection between an Anishinaabe child and their First Nation community was inherent. This was expressed through children reflecting their First Nation, identity being tied to the First Nation, or having a spiritual connection as demonstrated by Hasey Owen who stated: "I feel like in a way, I'm connected to back home because when I dream, I never dream of being in the city. I'm always back home." Further, Cassandra explained the influence of community in her statement: "kids are like they're their own people, but they're also a huge reflection of their family and their community. Like we, that's everything they know." While Cassandra did not specify if she was referencing urban or First Nation community, the intention is still that we understand the connection between a child and their community relations and supports. Dakota Woitowicz Headdress Woman builds on this. Dakota talked about how even if a youth living in an urban centre has never been to their First Nation, that they are still influenced by the First Nation community. Reflecting on her experience working with Indigenous youth in care, Dakota identified that when communities struggle, so do the youth:

So having a healthy community, you know, our youth here, they know they don't have a healthy community. And it's a, it's sometimes it's a joke to them. Sometimes it's like when they really get into it, they're sad about it. But then they're also living it, too, whether they been [in the First Nation] community or not. But that's where their family is and they (pause). I don't, I wouldn't want to say learn from it, but they're like, 'Oh they're, they're okay out [in the First Nation], essentially like, I can just do the same out here'.

In a sense, Dakota is identifying that youth are inherently connected to their community through family ties and that this manifests in their mental and physical engagement with the world. This supports Cassandra's idea that children reflect family and community. Wally speaks of a similar connection. He emphasized the importance of identity and the inherent connection to one's roots in First Nation communities. Reflecting on his own family ties to a First Nation outside of where he grew up, Wally shared:

Even though I've never set foot in that community. Even though I barely knew anybody from that community. But there's still a connection. That's what I mean. So definitely those ancestral roots are very important. Regardless [of] where we go in life, we all have those roots somewhere.

While Anishinaabe children are inherently connected to their First Nation community, participants also spoke about community being wherever a child lives, and the importance of supporting that community. Hasey expressed this in her comment "mostly everybody I have [they] are like supports, not really family, but they're like people that turn into family I guess." Hasey who, as previously quoted, identifies a spiritual connection to her First Nation community, also talks about the importance of the supports she has where she currently lives. Crane Medicine Woman builds on this, talking about her vision for her child to be supported in a culturally based way and engaged with the resources around her. She states:

I would want her to learn all that [traditional cultural] stuff so she can continue it on. Like even the berry fast. Even the family traditions or even just staying connected with programs, donating or even just being apart of, how do you say that? Volunteering. Like being a part of the community and showing her, yeah, you can just do it.

For these participants, engaging with supports and resources created a sense of family and possibility. In another example, Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman, who had never built a connection with her First Nation community, found community and a sense of togetherness as a young adult in Winnipeg:

As I matured and like, I, I'm 25 and I moved out when I was 19. And I've really tried to be in touch with my Indigenous culture. And I really do believe community is what's going to help us thrive. Like I would go to rallies on Selkirk and just where they were just, we would just get together as a community and be there for each other and listen to what's happening and then eat together. And then that's like, that's what we need.

Like Jasmine, Sylvia has also never been connected with her First Nation community. Sylvia expressed that being connected with the First Nation could provide children an additional layer of support, but she also shared the importance of building community where she lives:

It still comes across to me that if that child was, still had the support or some connections [to their First Nation], that it increases the probability that maybe they would still be stirred to be on the good path, you know. And again, it's not up for me to define it, but in terms of what might be defined within their community. So, I find I kind of struggle with that a little bit just again because I wasn't raised in the [First Nation] community. And community, I know it is very important. I know when you, when we look at it from, from that perspective, just from our worldview, community is absolutely important. But I was raised in the city, so. And for me, it's like the community is, my community is, I live in [city area]. That's my community.

To summarize this section, it is important to understand that meeting the best interest of Anishinaabe children requires ensuring the support of a community. This includes

acknowledging their inherent connection to their First Nation community, and building their supports and resources wherever they live, establishing connections that create a community for those not in their First Nation. As noted previously, participants feel the village is needed to best care for children and finding ways to move back towards a communal (as opposed to individualistic) model of care is important. For some participants, this requires the support of community leaders.

### *Community Leadership*

Six participants spoke about the importance of community leaders from their First Nation, the majority focusing on Chief and Council (C&C). For these participants, these leaders could support change for children, families, and communities. Wally explained the importance of community leaders very clearly, identifying various leaders as a driving force for change:

Collectively, I think if we were all to be on that same page, maybe things would change.

But we need our [First Nation C&C] leadership, right, we need our Kookums and Mooshums to be part of that. Helping to create that, to drive that, to guide us in that.

Yeah. But it's possible, I think anyway.

Community leaders discussed included community nominated Elders, healthy role models, *Kookums/Mooshums* (grandparents), and the general importance of listening to the voices of the First Nation community members. For example, Crane Medicine Woman shared about her relative who passed away, stating “[h]e also left a good impact on our community because he was a good role model. A good leader.” Whereas Dakota, in talking about engaging Elders to support C&C, talked about “a community nominated opinion on an Elder.”

When asked about the role of community in relation to Anishinaabe children’s best interests, Hasey talked about the importance of C&C. She stated “it would be like someone you

have to look up to. Like a good role model. Like the leaders, I dunno, they're usually not even out there in the community.” For Hasey, having a present C&C who can be role models impacts children and community members. I expand upon this in the following section.

**Chief and Council.** Participants who identified Chief and Council (C&C) as important spoke about the role of C&C in advocating for children and for resources, listening to community members, bridging resources and connections for community members, overseeing what happens with children in the community, being present, and being positive role models. In relation to child welfare, Dakota stated that “chief and councillors [role is] helping to keep children into the reserve if they're in the reserve. Or if they're off reserve helping how to find housing in the cities and to keep the families together.” Later in our discussion, when asked about the role of leadership in determining Anishinaabe children’s best interest, Dakota said:

I think they would have the biggest say. [...] Maybe there needs to be more money allocated to more people in that job description [helping children in CFS care]. To help with those concerns if that makes sense. Some... Maybe not like a Councillor, but maybe like. Hm, I guess that's rising from wellness workers or, I wouldn't say support workers, it just needs to be more like detailed and have a little bit more power, I guess. And I quotation the word power. To make those decisions and rules.

For Dakota, C&C have a role to play in supporting best interests of their children, on and off reserve. Though she is also suggesting that part of the leadership team includes someone focused on the wellness of their children. Relatedly, Wally emphasized the importance of C&C knowing where children are and having a say in their care if child welfare must be involved. Wally spoke about a model in Ontario where C&C has the final say in the care and placement of their

children, emphasizing the need to keep the care of children in the power of family and community. He noted that this is not happening in Manitoba:

In a lot of instance[s], in a lot of cases where children are growing up in non-Indigenous homes, for example, where in the community the leadership of the community level doesn't know exactly where their children are. So, in that sense I think again we take all that power from where it rightfully belongs. At the community level, at the family level. Currently, with Bill C-92, there are shifts in Manitoba with many First Nation communities indicating they will be taking over Child and Family Services. Perhaps these are signs of change, although it is uncertain how this will manifest at this time. Yet, this is a step in the right direction, according to participants here. In addition to reclaiming control over child and family services, there may be further role of C&C to bridge connections for those off-reserve.

**Chief and Council as a Bridge.** Several participants talked about feeling excluded from their First Nation community, though two participants talked about opportunities for C&C to help bridge these connections from the urban to First Nation communities. The feeling of being excluded from their First Nation arose particularly when children were brought into care in an urban context. For instance, one participant stated “[children] feel like they're shunned because they've been raised in mainstream.” Another participant said “I'm not a priority. If that makes sense. I essentially have been urbanized.” Yet another participant, who briefly did move back to their community, said “I always felt, like, out of place [in the First Nation].” Given the recognition of inherent connection to First Nation previously discussed, and the role of C&C in caring for children, I draw upon the ideas of two participants which suggest that C&C can also bridge this urban/First Nation connection.

Ideas brought forward to address this included C&C having urban gatherings and helping people on and off reserve access resources. For example, Cassandra stated “[t]he Chief needs to have like a newcomers meeting. Like, everyone come down and do a Sharing Circle. Circle Dance. [...] Like have a big barbecue or something like that, I feel like, an annual thing.”

Similarly, Dakota shared about the need to support urban community members:

[W]hat am I'm trying to say, bring that connection into Winnipeg and between the reserve. The most we get is a dinner once a year and like it's, there could be more because then... Maybe for like the education bringing them, bringing people in from the reserve or hiring people from the city to stay [and] to do [these] tasks which is applying for the scholarships, funding, um, job opportunities, food, health care, everything. So, anything. But just to bring it out here.

Given the already identified importance of community and the number of participants who feel Chief and Council have an important role in the best interests of children, finding opportunities to build these bridges can create opportunities for connection and belonging. Dakota later made the comment of having a “reserve away from the reserve system” but also acknowledged that, when it comes to capacity to provide resources and supports “money is always the issue,” which ties to the next sub-theme.

### ***Multi-Level Economic Wellbeing***

The topic of economic wellbeing arose around First Nation community level economic concerns, as well as personal or familial economic wellbeing. While these were often brief conversations, it is important to discuss this as it helps us understand that the wellbeing of Anishinaabe children is connected to family and community economic wellbeing as well.

For some participants who grew up in care personal skill development was important for their future. Given the high rates of issues such as poverty and homelessness Indigenous youth from care face, this is arguably an essential topic when planning for children's futures. One participant referred to life skills such as getting into school or building a resume as "basic necessities," which their program was helping them do. Similarly, when asked about what he would include if he were to write the best interests of the child guidelines, Ali Bird stated:

I think it should be about educating. Just educating, getting them the tools they need to live a proper life in society. Not even just the proper life, just be able to be a productive member of society. Like, doesn't matter where the family's from. Matters on whether or not they graduate. Like, it doesn't matter who their family is or their... some, some people have shitty relationships with their family. Some people don't. The idea of the whole family thing will work itself out in the end. The main goal should just be educating the kid. Allowing, letting the kid know that he isn't whatever his family wants. He, the world is open to him.

Ali, who had previously spoken about his own work and school experiences, valued the importance of youth knowing there are opportunities and being able to participate in something meaningful and personally directed. For him, this was one of the most important things.

At the familial level, some participants talked about how family poverty has been used against families in terms of child welfare involvement. Sylvia was speaking about her worldview and how that influences her perception of the best interests of the child when she provided the following example:

[I]f you have to use a drawer because you don't have the money for a crib yet, parents shouldn't be penalized for that. [...] But somebody else that doesn't have that thinking, in social work, it would be like, 'Oh, well you don't have a crib.'

At the community level, other participants spoke about community development and jobs for First Nation community members. For example, DJ emphasized the importance of First Nation communities engaging in long-term economic development planning, based on community consultation, stating this would also inspire the children:

So that way you get the kids all excited because now 'I'm going to stay in school and I'm gunna finish school and go to university and I'm gunna get my accounting or my business degree' or whatever. Because they know all these different jobs coming down the pipeline. So, if you properly plan and strategize and work together, then we're all going to benefit. And that's what I try to do throughout my lifetime.

While there is much room to further explore this sub-theme, I have briefly introduced the idea that individual, family, and community economic conditions are related. Wally demonstrated this as being particularly true for First Nation communities, and being directly related to how the CFS system operates. Wally stated:

For example, right. When you have a shortage of housing in communities, little to no economic opportunities for our people, and the living standards and so on. But in this, in the foster care system, you know, they're supposed to have this and that for that child, if they're going to foster that child. Meaning, the child gets their own bed, the child gets their own room, when you have a dozen or so people living in the same home, how do you make that happen right? So, it makes it impossible for us to look after our own. So, then our kids end up coming out of the community. Because, again, how can you meet

some of those standards? And then on top of that, the cost of living right, especially in our isolated communities. When that system only reimburses foster parents, care providers, whatever, X number of dollars for that care of that child. But when they go to the grocery store, and it costs twice as much to care for that child. So, all those things have to be kind of brought into play, right, when we look at, again, that system and the legislations and laws that come out of it. And how it is, how it translates into those services. At the end of the day. So, I was saying that I don't necessarily blame the workers themselves. I don't actually blame the agencies or the organizations that provide those services. But again, it all starts with the legislation. And until you see a significant and meaningful change within those laws, it will just keep continuing that cycle. Of our children being within that system.

Wally has perfectly drawn the connection between the individual, family, and community level economic wellbeing. Further, Wally helps us understand that the issue can be tied to the legislation, which frames the best interests of children. When considering the best interests of children, there is little to no consideration for overall economic wellbeing other than references to not use poverty against families (see Appendix B). There is no consideration for collective responsibility in supporting equitable economic development or ending poverty on a macro level, for instance. Yet here, when we see the connections between these various parts of the child's life, we can come to understand that supporting the best interests of Anishinaabe children means also enhancing family and community economic wellbeing. This is an idea that warrants further exploration and development.

## **Culture**

The theme of culture has been placed it after relationship and community based on the premise that culture develops in the context of relationship and community. This is supported by Mills (2020), Anishinaabe from Treaty three territory, who talks about Anishinaabe identity and belonging as being relational, tied to belonging, kinship, community, and Anishinaabe law. Participant comments about Indigenous children being placed in non-Indigenous homes and developing the culture of those with whom they lived further supports the role of relationship and community in influencing culture. For example, DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa stated “[Anishinaabe kids are] being influenced. Again, nooo discrimination against these newcomers that are taking in our kids. But for Peguis, for example, I see a lot of [Nationality] and [the kids are] in their language, their, their customs, all of that stuff.” Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman shared the experience of her relative who was raised in a Mennonite religious and cultural home; after the relative left that home, they struggled to adjust to life outside that cultural and religious context. Jasmine felt that if children are being placed in non-Indigenous homes “we need to think of colonization. We need to keep that in mind with what type of homes we're putting these children in.” Thus, culture develops in the context of relations.

This theme first explores the concept of identity, which is discussed in the sub-themes of ways of knowing, being, and doing, knowing history, and belonging. This leads into discussing ceremony and spirituality. Followed by exploring intergenerational connections and concluding with a brief discussion on diversity of cultures for children.

Participants acknowledged that there is increasing opportunity for connection to culture within the CFS system and its various arms (such as foster care or third-party resources), for example via ceremony or connection to Elders. Yet participants also demonstrate that culture is

more than ceremony, as social services so often focus. While the best interests of the child doctrine does require consideration of the child's culture, it does not lay out how one interprets this.

In the following quote from DJ, he emphasized sharing information with children and youth in care. He spoke about language, traditions, the First Nation community, history, and spirituality, while emphasizing children and youth's right to make their own decisions. I include this quote to introduce this theme because DJ helps us understand what is important to him when he thinks about his culture and how he feels this should be shared with youth. DJ stated:

Just put it out there. Like let them know where they come from. What community they come from, what's our languages, some of the traditions they did. Like the Sundance, whatever they do, Pow Wows, or whatever they do in their communities. Make them aware. And then at the end of the day, let them make the choice. Because that's what I tell all these kids. Ever since day one. Even before I came here, I always tell kids. You have a right to believe in the Bible or not to believe in the Bible. That's completely your choice. Okay. Same thing when it comes to, I said I don't believe in God, but I do believe in the Creator because I've been, we've been influenced by the, by, you know, the church. I said long before the church even came to our new lands, our people were doing quite well, respecting the land, respecting the spirits of everything. So, when I said to the youth, I don't believe in the Bible because it's been done by okay, by the church. Same time too, I said I feel the church is just one big gang because they could topple governments if they want to. I also said, if you ever go into a church, you notice how they got all this emeralds, diamonds, and all this fancy stuff. You go to our Sweatlodge, what is it?

Buckskin over a frame of wood. With some grandfathers in it, right? Simple. Giving our, doing our penance. Whatever, reaching out to our Creator.

DJ demonstrates that he values humility and respect. He is passionate about the importance of sharing information with the children and youth and allowing them to decide how they pursue their culture. This leads us to the sub-theme of Identity.

### *Identity*

The sub-theme of identity is under the umbrella of culture based on the reflection that identity develops within the broader context of a person's life. Who one understands themselves to be grows through their connections, including the cultural environment in which they grow. This was demonstrated in the opening quotes, where participants talked about taking on the cultural identity of the non-Indigenous people who raised them. Yet participants felt developing an understanding of their identity as Anishinaabe people is critical. This is evident in the following quote from Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle:

And at the end of the day, like I said, and this is what I think we, (pause) forget sometimes, even though we say the best interests of our children, is that our children have a right to know who they are, where it is that they come from. We don't meet those two needs, those two rights, if we don't meet them then we failed our children.

There are many components that build identity beyond what will be shared here. Below I focus on prominent themes shared by participants. This included having an Anishinaabe way of knowing/being/doing, understanding one's history, and building a sense of belonging.

**Ways of Knowing, Being, Doing.** Indigenous people have distinct knowledge systems, laws, and ways of engaging with the world. Throughout conversations, participants demonstrated ways of knowing, being and doing that were important to them, and how these ways have

influenced their lives. Some participants explicitly identified their values or their hopes for their lives and the future, tying this to their culture. For example, Ma'iingan shared that connecting to the land, ceremony, and his spirituality "helped me to realize this is my culture. And it's what I want to do, as [I am] growing up. Like going to Sweatlodges and going to a Sundance once." Ma'iingan had been connected to his culture which helped him build his identity and is influencing what he wants to do in his life. From a different perspective, DJ talked about the need for employers to consider seasonal activities. For DJ, the ability to pursue Anishinaabe traditions are an important part of life, providing a concrete example of how Anishinaabe ways of being and doing may be different from whitestream society. He stated:

[T]here's a lot of people that are, you know, traditional- hunting, gathering, rice picking, sweat[lodge]s, ceremony, whatever may be. So, if [...] you accommodate their requests to go and take part in the pow wow or sundance or whatever it may be. Then they'll come back!

For Ma'iingan and DJ these ways of engaging with the world are important to them and influence their daily lives (ex: what they wish to do for work and their futures). Similarly, Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe gave an example of lifestyle and values from her First Nation:

[L]ike when someone kills a moose in our reserve. 'Oh, good. We're going to get a roast. We're gunna get a bone for soup.' And somebody will want the tongue. My auntie used to ask for the intestines. She'll make stuffed intestines. And, oh, I'm just hungry talking about it.

For Florence, she talked about the importance of sharing in her First Nation, while also speaking to the appreciation of hunting and traditional foods; this is their way of being and doing. Notably,

Florence is not speaking of a long past tradition; this sharing of traditional foods still happens, although less commonly so in urban centres. These are part of her lifestyle and the lifestyle of many others, yet children and youth in CFS care are often disconnected from these opportunities.

Sometimes, participants spoke in ways that demonstrated implicit values. Dakota Woitowicz Headdress Woman was expressing concerns about the way CFS workers engage with parents. She shared her perspective of an alternative way of engaging with families:

And just think to yourself, okay, well, how can this mom get help by having her place a little bit cleaner. Maybe hire support worker to come in and specifically help the mom clean. Or create a like a, I don't know, an affordable cleaning agency, I dunno, something like that, to come in. I know all those tasks aren't free, but someone's always out there with a heart and if that makes sense, it's not always about money. And then not even just cleaning, but getting them up for school or helping the mom take her kids school, but not like, notepad and paper all the time. Just like be a friend, and I quotation the word friend, to the family, if that makes sense. The auntie that was, that needed to be there.

This quote shows a perspective of kinship, of a worker acting as an auntie, similar to discussions in the section on *Relationships Between Children/Family and Workers*. Dakota values helping a family with hands on support, demonstrating teachings such as Respect, Love, and as confirmed by Dakota later in this same conversation, humility. For Dakota, this is her way of knowing, her way of being, with families. This is contrary to the current system, which Dakota implies through her comment around not approaching the mom “notepad and paper all the time.” Relatedly, Sylvia also spoke about how her approach to families strayed from the CFS system:

I had applied with ANCR [All Nations Coordinated Response] and it was for a, probably not the greatest position but I figured, like I said, I was in one of these times where it's

like I want to create change, I want to make change, I want to help families. And it was a child abuse investigator. And so, I thought, okay, you know, I can do this. I can, even if it was for a period of time, because I thought well maybe a bit of experience. I lasted there nine days. And a big part of that was, again, for me, I didn't agree with their practices. I didn't agree with their policies. Like there was one [time]. We actually went out and I was just basically shadowing someone else and basically had gone out to an Indigenous family, a foster home, and they were talking to the foster parent about discipline and not that the person was like touching the child or anything like that. But I just thought like, you people really have no clue (pause) about Indigenous life. Period. And it was almost like at that moment like I had that epiphany. I just thought, I can't do this. I can't sit across (pause) from an Indigenous person, like me, and appear to, because the last thing I want to do is that I know it all or that I have power over them. Because that was also, in terms of when I went and got my social work degree, that I made a promise and I remember saying it to my aunt even. That I made a promise I would never, ever stand before somebody and exert power over them. Because that's not the kind of social worker I want to be.

Sylvia's understanding of child rearing was so different from the CFS approach that she left her job. She explicitly identified that her understanding differed from the system and further identified that her understanding of power in relationships is also different. She would have approached the needs of this family in a different way than the current system.

Building on this, Florence brings our attention to speaking about CFS workers helping Anishinaabe children or families, identifying a need for a better understanding of Anishinaabe values. She states:

And so, in a way, I have compassion on the [CFS] workers that they, they would maybe I would say every month, have a sensitivity of culture and that, uhm I'm trying to think in English here. To, to read on the values of the people they're watching. To learn their ways to, to go to a feast. We're very friendly people. And we like to congregate. We like visiting and and, of course, work is very important to us too. You know, and as we speak, my friend is guiding some young men with the help of two skilled hunters, to show the young men how to hunt, how to skin a deer, how to do it properly without making a mess. You know what I mean?

Florence identified Anishinaabe values and ways of engaging in the world are specific to her culture and suggested that workers must take action to learn these ways. She talked about how she and her friend engage in the world through gathering, relating, teaching, and practicing in land-based work. It is interesting to consider how the system would have to change in order to facilitate Florence's recommendations to learn Anishinaabe ways. For Florence, ensuring workers understand the children and families they are helping is important learning that needs to happen.

This section cannot dive into the full depth of Anishinaabe ways of knowing, being, and doing. The intention here is that we understand that a key part of culture and identity is how a person engages with the world. Anishinaabe participants here identified values and practices that shape their lives, including how they engage with others. Yet, the CFS system, and particularly existing legislation, fails to understand or consider this in their approach to children and families.

**History.** Nine participants identified that Anishinaabe children knowing their family history is an important part of knowing who they are. For participant Ali Bird, not having information on his family left him with questions about his life, identity, and family:

I don't know who I am. I don't know who my family is. I don't have any answers. I don't have anybody to call for answers. My file when I was in CFS, I was in the CFS during the transitional period. I started off in Winnipeg CFS or as people called "White CFS", and then the [First Nation] communities came forward, or I don't even know if it was the communities, or somebody came forward and said that they wanted the communities to manage their own children. I was still a child. It meant nothing to me. But I got shifted from Winnipeg to [CFS agency] and then my file is magically gone now. Because I, I had things happen to me in [CFS agency] that I remember every day, and as an adult, a responsible adult, I figured I'd look into that on my own, reached out to many different angles of [the CFS agency] trying to get a hold of my CFS [file]. I think I went to the top and I finally got back, about third time, that my file was not found. They could not place where my file was. And I was able to appeal the decision and go to court. But I figure if you can't find it now, how are you going to find it if court gets involved and if you do magically find it when court gets involved, then what are you hiding?

For Ali, looking into his own history was something he felt would have given him answers as an adult. Yet the CFS system, despite it being his right to access his file, could not facilitate this for him, leaving him with unanswered questions about his own life story. Ali directly connects this lack of information to not knowing his identity. Building on this, when we were talking about families, history, and colonization, Dakota identified the importance of children knowing their past, also tying this to identity and healing. Dakota shared:

I, I think like what are those called, genealogies? Or family trees? I think those are really important, especially if they first come into care. Maybe when I was like preteen or teenager, I don't know, somewhere in where they're able to understand this history. Or

even as a child, but like said in the easier context. Because that is their history. Like that is who they are. Whether or not they lived that, that's what makes them, and essentially where they are in the, in the place at the time. And I think it gives them an easier time understanding why things happened the way it happened if that makes sense. And (pause) just like, just thinking of my own life. So just, it's sort of healing in a little way of knowing your history. Because then you become more understanding of things.

Dakota identified what others spoke about and what Ali, quoted above, never got to experience: that learning family history can be grounding and healing. Dakota further called on this to be done for children in care, as a tool to shift towards understanding, healing, and identity. DJ adds to this when talking about CFS worker relationships with youth and the importance of engaging with Elders in decision making around families and learning about Anishinaabe culture. DJ went on to emphasize that learning family history is part of breaking the cycle of CFS involvement.

He stated:

Because then you'll find out the family's history of what happened to them. And how that kid ended up in a system. So, you got to do some history on that. At the same time too, you're going to help the family heal. So, they're ready to take that kid back, or if they plan on having any more in the future. So, they don't get apprehended and put in the system.

That's the only way we're going to stop the cycle, is working together.

For DJ, learning family history was important for both the family and those working with the family. He calls on CFS workers to work alongside Elders and the family to do this work, in order to “stop the cycle” of CFS involvement. I recall being a social work student and having a professor emphasize the importance of family histories. Yet I have not seen this implemented in practice.

For participants, knowing family history is an important part of knowing how they've come to be in the world. Like what previous participants note, Crane Medicine Woman talks about the importance of family history as a way of understanding how people come to be in present day. She shared:

For me, it would definitely be important for our youth to know where they come from. Like, um. What their grandparents did, where they come from, you know, like how we were as a person. Like to pass on the characters or stuff like how you are as a person. For me, I didn't know much about my family at all, like on both ends. Which I didn't know until recently that my great-great grandma was, went to a residential school and so on. [When] I found that out, like it was already too late [to talk to her].

Crane Medicine Woman feels that knowing history is about understanding your family and who they are/were. She also demonstrates a yearning to understand the impacts of colonialism on her family, in speaking about her grandma. Notably, this relates to previous quotes shared by Wally, talking about the importance for Anishinaabe children to know their "roots." Through these participants, we can understand that knowing history for Anishinaabe children is part of having a sense of identity. This can further help build a sense of belonging.

**Belonging.** Having a sense of belonging was identified by a smaller group of people and was spoken about in the context of belonging alongside other people and in a First Nation.

Belonging, according to participant Wally, relates directly to personal wellness:

Because when we have identity, then we have a sense of belonging. We have a sense of belonging, a sense of knowing who we are. So, all those things I think will build up and they build us into maybe good human beings. If that's what we want to say. So, in that way, again, our families are important, our communities are important, especially for our

children. Because today, unfortunately, we have a lot of our children growing up not knowing who they are or where they come from and questioning who they are as Indigenous people. Feeling robbed, that they are not able to speak their language or don't know much about their family, or their culture, or their community, or whatever. So, all those things impact. They all impact self-esteem in terms of who we are as human beings. So, definitely those things will all have an impact, I think anyway.

Wally connects identity, belonging, personal values (“good human beings”) and wellness (“self-esteem”). Crane Medicine Woman made a similar statement, sharing that “for children, I feel the culture really gives that sense of belonging and gives those values and teachings.” It is important to note that identity and belonging are overlapping concepts. While I believe that perhaps social services are striving to help build identity, I also question if this is possible without feeling the safety that comes with a sense of belonging. Given the history and context of CFS, and the lack of safety and belonging within that system, I again challenge the possibility of this system ever being able to fully meet the needs of Anishinaabe children.

Florence also shared about the need for belonging, connecting this to friendship, family, and community. She shared stories from her own life, demonstrating that belonging develops in the context of relationships:

You know, each one of us, we want a sense of belonging. But even... You know, you have a best friend and then. And she has a friend and, and it's like, you know, let's do something together. And it rejuvenates you and you're refreshed and it's a girl's night out and stuff like that. And for the worker to show the children that she cares and to show, you know, we're going on a trip and we're going to take Grandma with us or mom, we're going to take them. We're going to go to the reserve and, you know, make an adventure.

Children like adventure. When I was a child, I loved adventure. And because, one day my Dad said we're going to go get wood for the winter. And we're pretty strong people.. my brothers, me and my sister and our little brothers. So, there was four brothers, two girls, and my mom and dad. We went and got wood and we hauled it all to the, the road and my cousin will come with a trailer and pick up the wood. And for me it was like, 'Oh, I love this.' We're in the fresh air. And seeing Dad and my brothers chopping down trees, they only used axes. They didn't use power, uh, power saws. And, and, you know, we were working together, we were doing it as a family. And, and then we took the load home, while my cousin drove that wood home. And then Mom would be inside the house making soup and bannock and. And then it was like, we're a family and I could never imagine one of my family to be taken away.

Florence shared how her own identity as a strong person who loves family and the outdoors, who values hard work and loved adventure, developed in the context of feeling like she belonged. She speaks initially about the importance of friendships, moving into speaking about family. This supports the idea that while belonging is needed to support identity, it must occur in relationship, a relationship that I argue likely cannot be built via the CFS system. Furthermore, Florence called for CFS workers to engage children and families in connecting to their First Nation community, referring to it as "adventure" but also as a way to show they care. This is again indicative of the importance of establishing safe relationships and supporting children to build that sense of belonging. Yet the current structure of the CFS system, for example the high caseloads, inhibits CFS workers from being able to engage in activities such as what Florence has recommended.

Participants have shown that sense of identity, as a component of culture, develops through distinct ways of knowing, being, and doing, knowing history, and establishing a sense of belonging. Further to these ideas, ceremony and spirituality are also key components of culture and identity.

### *Ceremony & Spirituality*

Participants show that ceremony and spirituality, related but sometimes separate concepts, provide a healing support for Anishinaabe people. Hasey Owen gives us a beautiful example, speaking about how spirituality could have helped her growing up. She shared:

I spent growing up thinking I was alone all the time when I never knew that I could just pray, you know, there was actually people around me that I can't see. But if I knew back then that I wasn't alone, I feel like it probably would have been easier for me.

Most participants spoke about spirituality and/or ceremony as being important. Another participant, when asked about spirituality or culture, spoke about engaging Elders and went on to speak about caring for children, suggesting an understanding of spirituality as related to how one cares for children. The current CFS system has, as previously mentioned, been working towards providing connection to spirituality for children and families impacted by the system. Jasmine shared her own observations on how CFS has changed in this way. She stated: “what I'm hearing with my younger [relatives] is they are going to some programs and learning about sweats and such. [...] So, I do see change in that aspect because that wasn't available to me.” Crane Medicine Woman made a similar observation stating: “I like [that] the system nowadays is trying to keep our youth in the cultural stuff like sweats, ceremonies and things like that.” Despite these steps in the CFS system, these connections are not always happening. Wally spoke about the

importance of considering children's family spiritual beliefs when bringing a child into the CFS system, identifying the impacts of not doing this:

I've known in the system where children were placed into homes that have very different belief values and systems in place. And our children are being corralled into that way of being which conflicts, I think, sometimes with their family's spirituality, their parent's spirituality. So, I think that impacts again those relationships. At the end of the day. So, it's like that whole idea about the residential school era, right, where our children came in there bringing a way of life, bringing what they had grown up with spiritually. And were told 'That's not nice, that's not good, that's devil worshipping, paganism,' whatever, and were punished because of that. And then therefore were introduced to and forced to comply with a new set of beliefs, a new set of spirituality, where it impacted again, because when they went back to their families, when they became of age, they became ashamed of their parent. Because their parents believe that other way, but now they had a new way of believing, of praying and so on. So again, we should have learned from that experience when it comes to the child welfare system today, when we're pairing our children with caregivers to ensure that, you know, that that's not interrupted, right, that that's not affected for that child. That would be in the best interest of the child, you would think. But again, we see it time and time again where children are placed in homes, learning a different faith, a different religion, from what they came from.

For participants, opportunity for ceremonial and spiritual supports are important, with Wally identifying this further than just attending ceremonies but rather also ensuring children are placed in spiritually aligned placements. Yet notably, several participants identified the impacts of trauma and colonization as creating a situation where children may not want to pursue

traditional ceremony or spirituality. For instance, Ma'iingan spoke about how ceremony has helped their healing. When asked if this is something that other Anishinaabe children should be offered they agreed but stated:

[A] lot of Indigenous kids I feel like they've been colonized. Well, like they've been away from their own culture and just like residential schools back in the past. Because most of the kids they're either, not being racist, but they're all in like white families. And they either make them go to church and make them believe that God's the only God and not others. They don't want them to believe in their own culture.

Ma'iingan identified what Wally also referenced- that children are still being indoctrinated into religious beliefs that are not aligned with Anishinaabe beliefs, and this impacts willingness to explore ceremony in their lives. Dakota also identified that youth may not be ready to explore their cultural spirituality. Yet she provides an expanded understanding of spirituality, acknowledging the importance of options for youth. Dakota stated:

Spirituality can also, it doesn't have to be religious. It can just be, I guess, emotional based. If that makes sense. It might not make sense...But I think that's important. Just asking them like where they stand. Where are they. Not asking if they believe in God or anything. More like bringing that in. And cultural. Not... and this sounds like a taboo or anything... But not (pause). Some kids or some youth don't want to be a part of their culture. And maybe that's just trauma based. But coming from myself, I didn't start connecting, really connecting, until the last couple years. And I grew up in culture. Like culture was, the Indigenous culture, was everything in my childhood. But I've never like, I don't know, maybe because it felt forced or something, but like I've never connected to it until recently. So, I don't know, just being open minded about that for kids in care.

Dakota identified that spirituality is important but there is a need for patience and open-mindedness with youth in care when it comes to culture and spirituality. Further, Dakota suggested exploring an expanded understanding of what spirituality can be, beyond ideas of ceremony or structured practices. Crane Medicine Woman builds on this, talking about how she finds spirituality in her daily life through hobbies or being with her daughter. She shared:

One of the things that I learned recently was to feed your spirit, you don't really have to go [to] ceremony or go to church and like that. It could be doing something you love, like going out with your family or even just having your own time doing a little hobby, stuff like that. Like, um, for me that's just relaxing, enjoying the little moments, even just like, I dunno, just chilling. [...] And enjoying the little things. Yeah. Like for me it was like, 'Oh I don't like waking up, Oh, why am I awake right now.' Now it's like 'Hey it's morning.' So, I'll go to my daughter and be like 'good morning!' With a different attitude and, yeah. It's how I feed my spirit now. Now, even before I go to bed, I'll do beading.

Even if Anishinaabe children are not yet ready to explore ceremony or traditional spirituality, participants show us that this quadrant of their wellness should still be supported. Spirituality in social work has historically been neglected. Yet what participants discuss here presents an opportunity for enhancing assessments and service-provision to consider spirituality in a range of ways for Anishinaabe children. Further, not only is spirituality a component of wellbeing, but some participants also made a connection between spirituality/ceremony and identity. Crane Medicine Woman speaking about being in the present moment, being aware of her mindset, and engaging hobbies that make her happy are things that support one to build their identity. Relatedly, Cassandra Sanderson spoke about her understanding that being connected to ceremony and spirituality meets a deep need while also building identity:

It's important. It makes, I don't know like. I don't know if it's just in our blood for it to feel important or have that need, but it fulfills a huge need. Like you don't, you don't think it would until you start doing ceremony, then you start to crave it and want more. It's like, 'Okay I want to know what my Spirit Name is. I need to do Sweats.' Like you start, like once you're introduced to it, you can start to feel like, okay, this is what I need to do. You know, I, I wish I had an Elder to talk to about this dream I had. And I think it needs to be, it's just, it's important to figure out who you are as a person and, yeah.

While Cassandra identified connection to ceremony and spirit as possibly 'in [her] blood', Hasey talked about it creating deep connection to identity and a sense of power. Hasey talked first about the importance of ensuring cultural and spiritual supports are available for children in care. When asked how she felt this would impact Anishinaabe children she replied:

Hasey: I feel it will help them more because they would know like who they truly are. I know, it's just, it's a weird feeling. Like, I don't know how to describe it.

Brandy: Yeah, well you said, 'knowing who we truly are.' What do you mean by that? Can you tell me more?

Hasey: Like. (pause). I don't know. We're very powerful people.

Hasey, like Cassandra, talked about how connecting to her spirituality and ceremony helped her build a sense of identity. Hasey further identified that this gave her a feeling of Anishinaabe people having a power that she could not describe. Interestingly, Ali, who does not identify as following any Indigenous ceremonial or spiritual ways, shared something similar, talking about a personal and universal sense of power through spirituality:

Like, we are the power. You look at the idea of God. That God creates, God destroys. That's literally what man does. Like, to the exact extent that we are God. Like we, I

believe in a higher power. I don't believe in a higher power in a sense where it's a being or it's a energy that controls us. But something makes the earth move. Spin. Something keeps it there. Something keeps the earth going around the sun. Something keeps the other planets going around us. And it's not God. We (pause), we all, what's the word to say. We all (pause) have felt this energy to the point where we try to put an answer to it, and we call it God and call it religion and call it whatever.

Ali identifies a belief that humans have a universal power within themselves and discusses the possibility of connection to a higher power. For Ali, he recognizes a higher power and reflects on how people are connected to broader forces in the world. For Ma'iingan and Hasey, they talk about being directly connected to ceremony and their spirituality as important practices. Whereas for Crane Medicine Woman, spirituality may even simply be connecting with herself (via hobbies) and her child. Thus, there are different ways to understand and meet spiritual needs.

Based on what participants shared, we can understand that ceremony and spirituality are important for a sense of feeling empowered and connected. For children and families who may not yet be ready to explore certain components of this there are other ways to support spiritual wellness. Doing so will help build identities, which is a right of Anishinaabe children as stated by Wally. Furthermore, as Dakota spoke about, openness to spirituality, ceremony, or culture can come with time and it is important to have the opportunity available to Anishinaabe children, youth, and families.

### ***Intergenerational Connections***

Participants talked about intergenerational connections (biologically related and otherwise) as important for support and learning. I have placed this under the theme of culture because the importance of intergenerational connections can be connected to worldviews and

beliefs about family and relationships. In the CFS system, it is typically the child who is the “client,” with additional considerations for the parents. There are efforts to find and connect with other relatives, but often this is to find a placement for the child or for the rare extended family visit. Yet Wally, as previously quoted, shared about the importance of familial and community connections for children as essential for identity and belonging. He talked about these connections as building self-esteem and pride in identity, linking this to opportunity for changes in how caring for Anishinaabe children is done. Wally gave the following example of how connections across generations can contribute to change:

Like I shared that story about those grandmothers circling that little baby in that delivery room and saying no to the system, standing up to the system. They made it possible. And again, because they had the determination, because they just didn't want to see that cycle. Something changed for that one mother, for that one child, for that family.

This example demonstrates how the support of intergenerational connection was a foundation for change, where grandmothers came forward to support a family outside the CFS system. In this example, the grandmothers took a stand against CFS involvement, suggesting that intergenerational connections have a space and role in replacing the current system. Wally did share that change will take time but emphasized that these connections can help lead to systems change.

Furthermore, Sylvia was responding to a question about connection to ancestors and past generations when she identified the importance of intergenerational learning. Sylvia shared:

[T]his is something that I wish I had, but in terms of today is having those aunties or those grandparents that have the knowledge or were able or are able to pass down that knowledge to (pause) to their own kids and to their grandkids and being able to, you

know what I mean? Just pass that along. It's like one of the terms I remember, one of the Elders I kind of attached myself to. That's how I call it (laughing). When I started to really kind of [want] to learn more and embrace culture and she, why this always stuck with me, it's like, Yeah, it makes sense. But at the time I remember her saying all the time that whoever, whoever is struggling, they'll continue to struggle until they stop, and they are in a place or a time when they're ready to pick up their medicine pouch, the medicine bag.

Sylvia expressed a longing for the various relatives and generations in her own life to have been able to share their knowledge with her, also noting that this is important for children today. She also shared the importance of connecting with an Elder herself, who was a non-biological intergenerational connection which supported her healing and learning. For Sylvia, there is an importance to the intergenerational connections including, Elders and relatives, to support learning. Later in our conversation, in discussing hope for youth, Sylvia herself talked about providing this same support to youth:

But it's almost like, that's where I just take others under my wing because it's like, you know what? That's what, what was given to me. That's what helped me on my (pause) steppingstones to wanting to be or become the person that I want to be.

Related to Sylvia's discussion about the Elder who helped her, DJ also emphasized the importance of connecting to Elders. DJ expands on this, bringing our attention to Elders as important for Anishinaabe people and non-Indigenous people:

[Elders are] [o]ur teachings, our history, everything! Because when I was going through the system, I never knew what an Elder was okay. [...] Now after working with Elders for x-amount of years, they bring so much to the table. Not just for just for us, but

for also for teaching non-Indigenous people too, to make them aware and mindful. And how to approach and how to engage and how to talk and how to communicate and what you could do to gain their trust and gain their respect and all that stuff. You know what I mean?

DJ's quote suggests that there is importance not only for Anishinaabe children, but also perhaps for their non-Indigenous supports to build these intergenerational relationships. While I caution that non-Indigenous social workers must not place responsibility for their own learning onto Indigenous people, it is also important to listen to the people who are impacted by our work, including Elders as recommended by DJ. Thus, CFS workers do have the responsibility to do this learning and there is a role for leadership from people such as Elders. These factors will enhance supports to be more aligned with what is in the best interests of Anishinaabe children.

While Sylvia and DJ spoke about intergenerational relationships as opportunities for learning, Hasey identified that it is important to understand that actions today influence generations past and future. I had asked Hasey if we should think about past and future generations as being connected to children today. She replied: "I think when we're thinking about today, it's also thinking about the past and the future. Well, I would think it matters anyway. Because what we do today effects tomorrow and yesterday." From Hasey's perspective our present moment is already connected to the past and future. The decisions we make for children impacted by CFS today can be thought about based on thinking about the past and thinking about the future. In this way, we may consider the best interests of Anishinaabe children in a relational way across time. The CFS system has failed to understand this, for understanding this would require greater consideration of what is or is not done in practice. An example of this failure comes through participants repeated comparisons of CFS to the residential schools. If the system

truly were considering intergenerational connections across time, making decisions today based on reflecting upon the past, CFS would not be emulating the residential school system but rather, as Wally pointed out, should have learned from it.

### *Diversity of Culture*

The idea of considering mixed cultural backgrounds arose with few participants. One participant spoke in depth about providing children the choice to learn about different cultures, whereas another spoke more specifically about helping kids learn about the different cultures that make up their identity. Another participant talked about Indigenous children connecting with Elders from their Nation (ex: Anishinaabe children connecting with Anishinaabe Elders), stating this connection would be “more connecting and grounding.” These participants suggest that connecting directly to one’s specific cultural identity is important, and this may include diversity. For instance, Jasmine shared:

When I started thinking about religion for myself, I think of it as a very open concept, and I feel like that's how CFS needs to teach children. Because even now that I see it, they're changing with my [relatives], they're kind of pushing only Aboriginal stuff on them now. Which is nice, they're trying to give them their culture. But it's like very aggressive and it's very, it's not like, it doesn't feel natural. And also, my [relatives] are not fully Aboriginal. [...] So, you're trying to tell them, you're trying to force their culture on them so they can be educated. You're completely disregarding any other culture they have.

As previously discussed, participants spoke about children growing into the cultural environment in which they grow. For example, speaking about culture and early childhood environments, DJ felt it is important to “catch them at [the development years],” and Sylvia

stated “they’re like a blank slate. You can give them anything. And obviously they’ll adapt to what’s happening there.” As a theme for further exploration, we can reflect upon how we might understand and integrate the different cultures that may be making up the identity of children in care, including considering their living environment in their development years.

### **Aki: It Just Makes Sense**

All participants spoke about *aki* (land) in a positive way, via various examples or contexts. For instance, some spoke of their personal connections with land whereas another participant spoke broadly of human relations to nature. Although most participants spoke directly about a connection between land and the best interests of Anishinaabe children. The following quote from Dakota Woitowicz Headdress Woman informed the title of this theme. Dakota was passionate about how nature impacts her, but also of its importance for youth today:

Because that's what a lot of people want to be connected to, is land, and is to be out in the nature. Especially like, it's just coming up more now. I mean, last time I was in a bush was a year ago. When I first started this job (laughing). That was my first time in, like, ever! Being out there. It was so fun. It was so like... It, it just made sense. I don't know if that makes sense. It just felt good. It felt right. And a lot of the time, that's what most of the youth want, is to be out there. Because they're learning what we were never taught. And it's just their, it's their time now to learn all those.

When participants and I talked about land, there was a visible, physical difference in their demeanor. Often, they smiled, and their eyes lit up. Some participants reflected on personal memories or brought forward hopes for the future. The tone of conversations became light and joyful; it was a moving experience. As such, while I acknowledge land is a critical part of culture, I highlight it as a standalone theme to help readers feel what participants felt and shared.

In this theme, I discuss the participants identification of their relationships with land. This is followed by exploring where engagement with land should occur, looking at urban or rural contexts.

### *Related to the Land*

I summarize this sub-theme as related to the land because it is based on participants discussions around connections with the land. One of the questions I asked was around how land relates to the best interests of Anishinaabe children, although this frequently arose naturally. Participants identified their relationship with land as healing, having a positive influence on emotion and overall wellbeing. For example, Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman shared a sense of inherent connection to land as an Indigenous person, stating:

I think, I do really think being an Indigenous person, you are connected to nature more.

And that's the only time I've ever felt peaceful was like, I loved going to camp because I was outside all the time and swimming and being outside. So, like, it's important to teach children that and how to like kayak and canoe and stuff like that.

Jasmine identified that for her nature helped bring calm to her life, encouraging us to consider this for future children as well. Notably, she was in CFS care when attending camp, drawing a direct connection between the importance of supporting this connection for children in care. Like Jasmine, Sylvia also talked about the healing connection she has with the land as an Indigenous woman. Sylvia found she can “just be” with the land as a source of learning and revitalizing for herself. She shared:

I kind of think of the big picture and this just, like I said, comes out of my own learning and my own exploration on where I fit in the matrix of life. And how I fit in terms of being an Indigenous woman. Being with, on, the land is probably one of the most

powerful learning environments that anybody can be in. [...] And again, it's almost that those reminders that, you know, if you start to steer off, it's like, 'Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute. No, no, no. You need to come back here.' So, it's knowing, even for me, when I'm feeling drained, it's like I need to go out to the bush. I need to just go up to land. And I don't do anything extravagant. It's just being. Just being.

Like the opening quote from Dakota, these participants find a healing connection with land. Hasey Owen echoed this stating that connecting with land is a “way to stay grounded.” She went on to say: “sometimes when I'm going through some things, I forget that you can just go out and be with nature. And like, what people used to do back in the day, just go outside.” During the interview with Sylvia, she had paused stating she was “just gunna grab a stone,” that she had “a Grandfather” with her. This was a present moment example of the grounding power of having a relationship with *Aki*.

Ma'iingan shared a similar sentiment stating “[outdoors] can just bring out the joy out of you, it can bring out happiness out of you. And I think it's really important for growing up as well as for any kid.” Ma'iingan also draws attention to the need for supporting this connection to land for children. Notably, land-based therapy and land-based programming is growing in the field of CFS, often connecting children and youth to land through a range of activities. Indeed, to Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe this is a natural way of teaching children. Florence shared:

And when we first heard about land-based knowledge, what in the world is that? And then they said, doing this and doing that. Oh, you mean teaching. That's what it means! When we were told what they do and they described it and it's like, why didn't you just say you're teaching?

Based on Florence's point, that land-based knowledge is a natural form of teaching, it seems that the direction to offer land-based therapy may be positive for youth. Yet Florence went on to call on CFS to incorporate land-based learning into policy, incorporating different learning at different ages. She then questioned the priorities of CFS:

You know, like as we speak, my [relatives] are taken to Las Vegas. What's in Las Vegas? I would have took them to a fishing trip with their foster parents, them and me. We could have went on a fishing trip. Go fishing. I could fry the fish. I know how to fry fish. Cook fish in a hundred ways. Yeah, we would have had more fun doing something like, I dunno how much they spent sending, allowing them to go to Las Vegas. So, things like that. It's like, like I know my grandparents would say 'We have that here, why go over there?'

Florence identified connecting with land as an opportunity for learning and building relationships. To her, land is a natural part of teaching children and youth; these connections and activities are essential for passing along knowledge, which is also something that Sylvia, in an earlier theme, yearned for in her own life. Further, Florence reflects on what her own ancestors, would think, demonstrating a reflection of land-based connections (i.e. people connecting to land and connecting to one another via the land) as an intergenerational value in her family.

For these participants, they have identified that connecting with land has a direct impact on their overall wellbeing. Comments such as "it felt right" by Dakota or "just being" by Sylvia suggest that being with the land is a natural connection for them. For others, their relationship with land evokes a positive emotional reaction, described as bringing joy, peace, and being a grounding experience. As such, when thinking about the best interests of Anishinaabe children, considering relationship to land is important. This will be explored more in the discussion.

Expanding our understanding, Ali Bird had a perspective of humans' connection to nature to a broader scale. He talked about how people are "trying to harness the clouds and the electricity within the environment" but also acknowledged "[i]t's not really ours to harness. It's the worlds." This comment acknowledges a lack of ownership over the *Aki*, contrary to dominant western ideologies. For Ali, instead of technological advances such as harnessing clouds or space exploration, he felt that people "should be trying to figure out our Earth." Ali's conversation demonstrated an understanding of humans as having no authority over *Aki* but also having a responsibility to learn about the Earth. He also expressed the importance of understanding the flow of nature. For example, in his discussion on cities in relation to nature Ali stated:

[W]e'll build our cities, this was all in a field at one point. Trees. This was a forest. This was the home to turtles, beavers, bears, coyotes, deer. And God forbid you see a coyote in its natural environment, all of a sudden, we have to kidnap it and take it outside the city and release it to somewhere. It has no idea where it is. It knows the river. It follows the river. But in order to protect our Chihuahuas, we get rid of the fucking coyote. Which is (laughing), that's how it is! Like, we're, we want to protect our chihuahuas from traveling coyotes that are just trying to make it through their life.

Ali shared an understanding of a humble relationship between people with the natural world. Using a word such as "kidnap" in reference to the coyote, he again showed an understanding of humans as not having the authority to control nature. Ali helps us to understand that not only do Anishinaabe children have a relationship with the land, but rather there are also higher-level relationships that can be considered, such as our responsibility to nature.

Overall, it is clear from participants stories that relationship with land is part of supporting the wellness of Anishinaabe children. The CFS system and the therapeutic

community in Winnipeg (action and land-based therapy) may be moving in this direction, yet there are opportunities for improvement. For example, as Florence discussed, the need to integrate this into policy and practice. Further consideration may be made for where and how children's relationship to land is being supported.

### *Land Relations in Urban/Rural Spaces*

When talking about land, I asked participants if the connection could be urban or if it needed to be outside the city. This question received mixed responses. For instance, Cassandra Sanderson visualized the urban/rural experiences during our conversation. In our conversation, I recall her joy was contagious; her discussion about land emanated as something very important to her. Here is a piece of the conversation we had:

**Cassandra:** I like the idea of going. I like, okay I like both. I like the urban context because it's more in the moment and less restricting for transportation, and all that. Out of the city is nice because you almost get that, that feeling like you're actually connecting and there's, you know, you're going to feel like you're in the middle of nowhere and there's no distractions. And it's almost, it can almost feel more meaningful, to know where to go out in the wild, in the country. And you know, how kids see it, right. Like it's, it's a big thing. It's a big deal. But then also to bring it back home and to walk around recognizing 'That's the cedar tree, like I know that's medicine'. Or you know, to protect the bunnies. All that stuff.

**Brandy:** Yeah. You're smiling lots when you're talking about land.

**Cassandra:** Yeah. Because I can kind of see it. Like it's, you know, and especially out, out in the wild. Like kids can just be loud and swing an ax or throw. Or just be stupid and funny and they can just let go. And I don't know. It's also super cute when they do it here.

And they, they, you know, make that effort to tell you like, 'That's a cedar tree'. Like, you know, it's nice.

Cassandra felt that connection to land can be urban or otherwise, although identified a certain power about being outside the urban context. Further, she acknowledged the role of land as a source of education and pride for children, something they can carry from that “wild” rural space into their lives in the urban context. Dakota’s perspective built on this, in that she feels a connection to land in an urban context can help youth who haven’t had opportunities to leave the city. She discussed the example of Nenookaasiins, mentioned in Chapter *Nisi*, which provides services to Indigenous youth impacted by CFS and is built on a riverbank, connected to trails and various green spaces in Winnipeg. Dakota felt spaces like this can open a door for youth who haven’t yet ‘known the feeling’ of connecting to *Aki* outside the urban context:

And again, majority of them haven't been out to their [First Nation] communities or seen that or have camped so. (Pause). To have that feeling without knowing that feeling. I think that's awakening for them and maybe it starts something. It's just a new path.

In this way, Anishinaabe youth in urban centres can be supported to connect to land, but it must be done in a very intentional way, such as building and creating resources in nature-rich spaces. Yet, some participants felt it very important for land connection to occur in rural spaces and/or within First Nation communities. For example, DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa shared about his own healing and connection to land but emphasized the need to be outside an urban setting. In talking about Anishinaabe youth impacted by CFS, he stated:

You can't really [connect with land] in an urban setting because we work with Indigenous youth. So as Indigenous peoples, we really don't live that urban life. A lot of people will make that transition sometime in their lifetime because of work, or family,

got [incarcerated], health, whatever it may be, for better education. But at the end of the day, we're land's people because we're the land's keepers.

Perhaps supporting this, Hasey talked about how when she moved to the city from her First Nation, her relationship with the land changed.

**Hasey:** Well, in my reserve, I, I was always like running around in the bush in the woods and stuff because I never wanted to be home. So that was my get away I guess. I would just go home before the sun goes down. And I was, I was never scared to like to run into bears or anything because I was in the bush. But now that I'm older, I kind of miss like how I used to just be out there. Now I'm scared of, like, all these bugs and everything.

**Brandy:** Yeah. It's weird how that happens. You're smiling lots when you talk about running around in the bush.

**Hasey:** Yeah, because I used to do it every day.

The connection to land outside the city, in particular to one's First Nation community, was important to Florence who reflected on her own experience growing up. She shared: "I felt like when I was outside, I felt free. I am with my family. My family loved me. And I love them. I'm where I belong." Thus, connection to land and to nature, whether learning about plants such as cedar, eating, visiting, playing, or finding peace, is clearly impactful for the Anishinaabe participants here. Connections to *Aki* should be supported wherever the child is living although for those in the urban context, supporting this connection beyond urban perimeters may enhance their wellbeing and overall sense of connection.

### **Gikendaasowin**

*Gikendaasowin* (knowledge) came up as important in various ways amongst all participants. *Gikendaasowin* is, in part, about wholistic learning and building knowledge,

including through experiencing and sharing. These conversations spanned all age groups, supporting various forms of *gikendaasowin* from early development into adulthood; often the same type of *gikendaasowin* was identified as needed for multiple age groups. As such, I have focused sub-themes based on the different types of knowledge, as opposed to certain demographics. First, I discuss academia and life skills, followed by the related topic of healthy relationships. This leads into discussing building *gikendaasowin* children have on family history and colonialism. I close with the need to educate helpers such as CFS workers or foster parents.

### *Academia and Life-Skills*

Nine participants spoke about academic and life skills education as being needed for children and/or parents. Indeed, to participant Ali Bird, academic education for youth was one of the most important things he felt that CFS must consider:

Say [the youth] decide, 'yeah, I'm all for family, but I'm all for myself, too'. It should be mandated that this kid has the access to whatever he wants to do. Whatever he or she wants to do. Whatever school they want to go to. It should be a case of not getting their mom to talk to them or their sister to talk to them, or brother or uncle, or bringing their family together, but giving them the tools they need to make these decisions on their own. Because I've made my decision on my own.

While academic education is a reference to the school system, life skills came up as the hands-on skills people need to get by, such as cooking or finding resources. For some participants they focused on schooling or life-skills education for children. As previously introduced, for Ali education is one of the most important things for youth in care, but education and training must be adaptable based on the needs and interests of youth. Ali stated: "Learn the kid and once you learn the kid, you can learn how that kid learns," bringing us back to the

importance of starting everything in relationship. Helpers can help children by understanding them. They can then build on this relationship, according to Ali, by exploring the opportunities that will meet children's needs. He went on to share:

So, like some kids they have, when they get to high school, they can have an academic high school, or they can go a trade high school. They can go on and fucking work a part time job through school as school. That's appealing. A lot of kids end up in the trade[s] through high school because they went to a high school like, say Tec Voc, and they got into the culinary school and now they're, they're working in a restaurant somewhere. Because the school was appealing to them. They weren't forced to go to an academic school. They were able to go to something they want to do. They were given an opportunity, and that opportunity helped them.

To Ali, educational opportunities to prepare children and youth for their futures was where he felt CFS should focus. Ma'iingan also emphasized going to school and life skills such as getting his license as important for him, having had his foster family help him with these things. Though he would agree with Ali that it must be youth-led, stating "it's more of what [youth] want, not what others want."

For Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe, teaching these life-skills can start early with children, something she feels CFS is failing to do. She talked about how she "was only eight years old and [her] mom taught [her] how to make bannock." Florence went on to discuss the importance of children learning skills such as cooking and cleaning to help them later in their life. Notably, this relates back to the theme on the importance of relationships with family; we must also reflect on the who is teaching the child and the relationships they share through this building of *gikendaasowin*. Adding to this, many participants spoke about providing

similar life skills support for parents. For example, Cassandra Sanderson identified that the current system expects parents to know certain life skills that they may not yet have learned:

They were basically saying, 'Oh, like if she wanted her kids back, she'd go out and get housing.' It's like, that's not how this works. Do you think she knows how? Like, look at her life. She's had two kids at like 16 or whatever it was. And do you, did you guys think about that? Like, she doesn't know how. And she, she just lost her [relative]. How do you how do you think she's managing right now? That's not (pause), like you're the social worker. You're supposed to be advocating for her and doing things, yeah, in her best interest. And you're not. You got me, somebody who doesn't even know her personally to tell you you're treating her wrong. Like that's sick.

Cassandra identified that CFS assumed this mother could go out and find housing, placing blame on the mother for not doing so when, from Cassandra's perspective, this is likely a skills-based issue. Notably, Cassandra speaks about CFS working in the mother's best interests, connecting back to previous themes, while saying the CFS worker should be advocating to help this mother. This suggests that to Cassandra, CFS should have parents' best interests in mind while acknowledging the need for the system to support parental skill development.

Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman felt similarly about the need to be supporting parents to learn life skills. She stated:

[T]he main issue is the parents don't know really how to be parents, and a lot of that is due to intergenerational trauma because they never saw a proper parent figure. So having a process for them to even learn these skills, like some people get pregnant and they don't even know how to cook. So, it's like just letting someone learn. And giving them the opportunity to be good parent.

Jasmine, like Cassandra, identified that CFS needs to support parents in learning life skills. She suggests that there needs to have leeway for learning parents, helping them learn and giving them “the opportunity” to still parent while learning. Though from the perspective of two participants who are parents, there was an expression of fear around asking CFS for help to build these skills, due to the punitive nature of the system. This arose when I asked Crane Medicine Woman about what she would emphasize if she were writing the best interests of the child laws. She focused on the need to support life and relational skill building in parents:

Just building that healthy connection with the parents. [CFS] Saying like ‘We're not here to take your baby. But just, we're here to help you get better and not, [...] not make it worse, but make it easier on you. Help you learn.’ Because, like I said, there's things that I haven't learned yet that I should have learned a long time ago. I feel like that goes for everybody. Even as a parent, for me, there's still things I still need to learn, like how to self-discipline myself. Like keeping up with cleaning, I need to figure that out before I, [my child] gets older and she catches on and tries to copy me what I'm doing because she's already so smart. She sees me doing laundry and she tries to do it herself. ‘That's mommy's job!’ [...] So just tryna make sure, like, for me personally, it's just. Making sure that parents know that (pause) it's not a bad thing, to reach out for help. But I feel like that's where a lot of parents are so scared to ask for help because it's like, fear of their kids being taken. And just, how do you say that, like [CFS has] no faith that they're able to learn, those skills.

Relating to this, Sylvia shared from her own experiences having a similar fear around the system, due to the skills she did or did not have when she had her own children:

And my worry was because of who I was, that there was a risk that they might take my child. And to me that, I still remember that very vividly, in the sense of looking at the kind of life or supports that you should have. In terms of having a child. And, of course, I didn't fit that right. I didn't, I wasn't married. You know, as I mentioned, I aged out of care. Just a number of stuff. It was just that kind of like, I didn't have my parents around. So, it was just, it was a genuine fear that that that's what I had. And with that child, it became like an automatic (pause) protection for me to do whatever I could to protect that child, my own child, so that nobody would take that child from me. And doing everything possible to unlearn, or try to unlearn, what I learned growing up in the family that I did, but also trying to learn how to be a good parent. Because again, those weren't things that, I didn't have any, I didn't have those skills to transfer over to when I became a parent. Thus, skills such as those obtained through the academic systems, daily life-skills like cleaning or cooking, finding a home, or parenting skills must be supported for children and parents. This needs to be done in a way that supports youth choice. Further, fears around the system and asking for help must be removed in order for parents to feel supported to learn skills they may not yet have had opportunities to build. These topics closely to the next sub-theme, which is healthy relationships.

### ***Healthy Relationships***

Having healthy relationships and relational skills are practical life skills, although several participants emphasized specifically the need to learn about healthy relationships. Cassandra raised this topic throughout our conversation, sharing that *gikendaasowin* on healthy relationships is critical for children, and it would have helped her growing up. She talked about how, as a child, she felt “brainwashed into thinking this was normal. It was our, it was our

worldview. This was normal. This is how all families were. They were abused, they were toxic. And you're not supposed to tell other people about what's going on." For her, learning about healthy relationships could have prevented trauma. She stated:

I just, I just really think, and it would have been a really big difference in my life if people took the time ongoing from my initial placement with my [relative], I was five. Like from that point on until whenever, to just have some somebody, you know, it didn't have to be like a familiar person, but somebody coming in and saying, 'This is what abuse is, this is healthy relationships. Let me take you out to eat and let's have a healthy conversation.' I think that would have really made a big difference on my life and I would have experienced a lot less trauma if somebody was just there educating me.

Cassandra, throughout our discussion, often focused on speaking about learning healthy relationships with family, including later speaking about the need to learn boundaries and how to identify "toxic behaviour." For Cassandra, educating children on healthy family relationships was directly related to how she defined the best interest of the child. Responding to a question around what the best interest of the child means to her she stated:

Like [CFS] just actually putting the effort into building a relationship. I feel like the system always talks about, 'Oh, rapport is essential,' and then, like you said, 'best interest of the child.' But they don't actually do that. They, they profile the kid and be like, 'They're smart or they're high needs.' And then they categorize them and then they just go whatever direction those categories fall under. So, but yeah, building a relationship to actually find out what the kid needs. Are they, give them a chance to disclose and, you know, educate them about what abuse is and what a healthy home is, because I didn't know.

While Cassandra emphasized learning healthy relationships is in the best interests of the child, Crane Medicine Woman felt that the best interest of the child is related to their parents learning these skills. She references traditional parenting classes to help parents learn these relational skills. After our interview Crane Medicine Woman emailed me, stating in part:

I feel, to look out for the child's best interest is to help their parent(s) get the help they need to learn what they were not taught (I love that they have traditional parenting available for people but not everyone knows about it). [H]elp the child's favorite person because taking them away from their mom or dad takes away a piece of them and it leads to a never-ending domino effect of drugs, alcohol, exploitation until someone breaks the cycle.

While Cassandra focused on educating children on healthy relationships with family, and Crane Medicine Woman spoke about parents, Dakota Woitowicz Headdress Woman spoke about youth in relation to each other. Dakota spoke about how male and female youth are relating in unhealthy ways, connecting this to overall struggles with their mental health. She went on to state:

Where's that relationship, where they learn what's safe and what's good? And I don't know. What teaches them everything other than their parental figures. And then that's not to put hate or anything or to disrespect parents of said children, youth, whatever, because they're learning too. But let's try to teach the children before we're saying the same thing about them [getting involved with the criminal justice system]. They're learning too.

Dakota felt that parents are learning and that peers are influential, and to prevent later harms we need to support the relational skills of children and youth, including in the context of their peers.

Crane Medicine Woman gave an example of how learning about peer relational skills impacted her own life when she stated:

Like even with conflict with other people, how my [relative] always taught me was like go fight it out. And I was never a fighter I was always like, 'Leave me alone I want to do my own thing.' Or 'I'm sorry if I wronged you in any way,' like that's how I've always been. My [other relative] actually taught me how to deal with that because she would always apologize to me even if she was in the wrong, even though she's the adult, she'd be like, 'Hey, I know I hurt your feelings, I'm sorry.' [...] So, I was like, that's where [I] learned not to [fight].

Having someone show her a new way to approach conflict helped Crane Medicine Woman learn how to engage with others in a way that is in line with her own heart (of not being a fighter). It moved her away from perpetuating harm through fighting, towards finding other ways to resolve conflict. Overall, the importance of learning relational skills is directly related to all people, children and parents alike. Participants suggest that parents need to be supported to learn about parenting and relating to their children, but children also need to learn about healthy relationships with their family and their peers.

### *Family History & Colonialism*

As has been touched upon in previous themes, developing an understanding of family and colonial history impacts children, families, and communities. Participants identified how not understanding the history of their families contributed to a lack of understanding in their own lives. Often this impacted them negatively. For example, Hasey Owen shared:

I never knew how much was taken from [Indigenous people], and I never like understood why, uhm, like our people drank and stuff. I always thought it was just my family. But I

never knew it was a lot of our people... Until I got older. I used to say I never wanted to be like that but I'm struggling right now, and I know that I'm going to keep trying. And I think that that's what I need, is more cultural stuff.

For Hasey, understanding how colonization has impacted Indigenous people helped her understand that it was not just her family struggling. Further, she felt that for her connecting to her culture is what was going to help her heal from the same struggles. Relatedly, DJ also struggled with a lack of understanding around his experiences as a child in care. DJ talked about not knowing his grandmother had been looking for him, “fighting for years” to get him out of CFS care. DJ related to this the current “identity crisis” with youth in care today and felt that knowing family history could help youth understand their current experiences. He stated:

Because I didn't know who I was as a kid going through all this [in CFS care]. I didn't understand what I was going through. And why am I being moved on to all these different places and meeting all these different, strange people and why do they abuse me in the way they are abusing me. I did not understand where I was and what the situation I was in.

Another participant, Sylvia, talked about how First Nation communities should have power over the CFS system, as part of challenging colonialism and “empowering the families” towards keeping their children. Sylvia went on to share:

Nobody is all of a sudden, going to be like, 'Oh, yeah no, I want my kids [in CFS] care, you know, I want my life to fall apart' or whatever's happening for them. I mean, if we [look at] it kind of like in the big, huge scope of things, we know that a lot of that comes out of colonization. Like even for me, when I started to really try to understand my own family, because like I said, I was a, there was a reason, there was many reasons why I

ended up in care, and in and out of care as a youngster. But finally, to the point where it's like becoming a permanent ward. And [it was] only when I was in my mid-forties, that I start[ed] to really try to understand my family. Like, why was, why was my family so broken? And I think kind of in a way it was, it was, I started to (pause) I wanted to understand more about myself in terms of being Anishinaabe and I had to, like I said, I had to learn so much. It was like, you might as well say I was a baby, being a new baby being raised within the culture. And that's kind of where I started at trying to love myself.

Sylvia shares that it was not until later into her adult life that she started to understand her own family and her Anishinaabe identity, directly connecting this to her sense of self-worth (loving herself). Relating to DJ and Hasey, not being knowing about their family or why they came into CFS care created a lack of knowing about their own lives. Not being able to understand or make meaning of one's own experiences in life, I argue, creates a sense of disconnect. Indeed, this is something that I have observed in practice. I spoke about with participant Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle about the anger many youth in care carry, related to their families. Wally shared:

[P]art of where, possibly, that anger comes from for some of our children is not being told the truth. Or not knowing, what truly happened and why they had to come into the system and why they were separated and why they were kept away from [family/First Nation]. And so on and so on. Some part of that anger, I think, a lot of times is not truly understanding our parents in terms of some of their traumas and their historical traumas that they've gone through in their own lives. And how they were raised and how that's impacted their parenting and so on. A lot of times our children today, our youth today, haven't been educated or made aware of some of that. So, some of that anger is geared towards their family and their parents because of not being aware of maybe what

transpired, what truly transpired, what got them to where they are. So, in that sense, I think, it's easy to, to, have somebody be at fault. And to blame somebody. And sometimes it's their, unfortunately, it's their parents, right, that they do blame. But again, I think when they are educated and made aware of some of those colonial impacts, that affected their families, their communities, and then at least they have a starting point, right, in terms of reconnecting possibly.

Wally's insight helps us understand that for youth in care, learning the impacts of colonialism may mitigate feelings of blame upon families. Perhaps this would also mitigate the isolation Hasey spoke of, in thinking it was only her family struggling, and the confusion DJ experienced in his own life as well. Indeed, Hasey talked about how if children learned more about the impacts of colonialism, it would help not just the kids but perhaps also the overall First Nation community:

I feel like we would probably have more people wanting to get help and change. Because being in the Rez [i.e., First Nation] it's like, it's hard because the way people live out there that's like normal to us. And when they do see change, they think that you're just trying to act better than them.

To support individual and family healing, it is important children are supported to learn about and understand their own experiences within the context of colonialism, and how it has impacted their families. I suggest that this includes the impacts of the CFS system on Indigenous families over time as well, as a key system of colonialism.

### ***Educate the Helpers***

Throughout interviews, many participants expressed concerns about the supports they received through CFS workers and foster care, with a large majority identifying foster parents as

an issue. Some participants mentioned an occasional positive experience with a CFS worker, yet their dialogue around the workers who did not support them far exceeded this. Stemming from these conversations, four participants identified the importance of better education for those working in the system. For instance, Dakota questioned the outdated training of CFS workers and the lack of required training for foster parents. She was speaking about how in her own work, she is trying to do things in a different way, stating:

In this job, you always have to keep up with knowledge. That's important, I think. That's another one, I guess, staying up to date. Because like I've dealt with some social workers and [their approach is] so old and so like, not with the times anymore.

The lack of updated approaches to practice, in Dakota's opinion, has not been aligned with the way she tries to do her work with youth in care. Dakota then went on to talk about foster homes, stating:

It's a lot easier. I don't know. Just. I (pause) it's easier to be a foster parent than to do all these things [referencing a previous discussion about becoming a social worker], but I think they should be the ones taking these trainings, taking these courses. I would say courses. Maybe not just book smart, but like getting involved in programing like that, I think that would be mandatory. If the kids are doing the programing, you should be able to do it too. And that's just so like, just that's, I don't know, in a way that's to prove that what you're, you're doing this for a good reason. And it's not just a cheque to you. Which is not a lot either. But you know, if you foster a bunch of kids, that sounds horrible, but then I guess it's a cheque. [...] I would think that this should be relevant to foster parents as well [as] guardians and anybody that's not a physical parent.

Relatedly, Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman in discussing the foster care system, social work, and kinship supports, reflected on the idea of certified foster care:

[Foster parents would] go through a program and, like, learn how to do all these things. And that sounds far more safer, like having a certified foster care. I know there's a process to becoming a foster parent, but it's not very good. Like, I've only heard horrible things. I never really heard [of] a good family. So, it's like having just, like having someone having to go to a two-year program and making sure they know how to do first aid and... Like almost like a group home environment and having like all these rules and regulations.

Jasmine echoes other participants in that there is a need for education for foster parents in a structured and strategic way. Notably, Jasmine is speaking of this in the context of the current system and compares foster homes to group homes, which are already heavily regulated homes. Her suggestion of certification would perhaps address concerns by DJ who stated there must be “better screening of house parents” as well as Dakota’s concerns around lack of training. Yet I would expand on this towards thinking about who children are placed with in the first place. I critically reflect upon the money that goes into foster families and wonder about redirecting this towards healing resources for family, community, and clan-based supports for children instead.

Participants here have felt that educating CFS workers and foster families is important to the wellbeing of Anishinaabe children in care. Because issues with foster care were such a prominent theme in discussions, this will be explored further in the next theme, under *Opportunities for a New Way*.

### **Hope, Healing, & Opportunities for a New Way**

Throughout conversations, many participants shared their concerns, traumatic experiences, and overall disdain for the current child welfare system in Manitoba. In this final theme, I have tried to capture some of these broader experiences and struggles the participants shared. This brings us full circle, back to the start of this chapter, where participants *Call out the System* but I move beyond calling out the issues towards identifying next steps. Often conversations with participants integrated important suggestions for moving forward. By examining participants stories about what did not work and their suggestions for the future, I present the final sub-themes of hope, healing, and opportunities for the future. In hope and healing, participants talked about their experiences and finding hope for youth today. Hope will be discussed as a foundational component of moving towards healing and change. Furthermore, participants comments suggest the relational responsibility of helpers to ensure parents impacted by CFS also experience a sense of hope. In opportunities for the future, I identify key issues participants spoke about that can be considered for future systems change. This includes discussing the need to fix the foster care system, the importance of lived experience, and exploring the possibility of moving away from the CFS system altogether.

#### ***Hope & Healing***

Hope, I argue, is as an impetus for change. Further, drawing from what some participants shared, hope may be considered a key precedent to support people in their healing journey. As Florence Sanderson Misko Kiithith-Wabigoon Ikwe stated, regarding Anishinaabe families and First Nation peoples: “once we are given in our hand that scepter of hope and scepter rebuilding, and we have the tools. Every one of us have tools. ‘Okay, [let’s] rebuild.’” As I’ve previously noted, throughout conversations there was an overarching ache related to how CFS had impacted

participants and their families. Yet there were also discussions of hope for youth, families, and the overall future for Anishinaabe people. I argue that it is this foundation of hope which will be critical in supporting healing and in changing the CFS system, or as Florence states, to “rebuild” the families and communities harmed by the CFS system.

For instance, Sylvia was reflecting on her own experiences with the CFS system, identifying a lack of nurturing and an indoctrination into Christian beliefs growing up in care. This led into a conversation around how connecting to her culture, becoming a parent, and having supportive relationships helped changed her life. Sylvia then discussed her hope for how the culture could help youth today. She stated:

I always have hope. [...] [W]hat comes to mind is just planting that seed. And maybe [the culture is] something that, you know, like I said, a young person just picks up on and it's like, 'Hey, you know, I really like this. I like the way this feels. I like being out on land. [...] I want to go to this Sweat. I want to go through the Rites of Passage that we all should have had.'

Sylvia, despite previously identifying large amounts of systemic issues with CFS, expressed hope that the “seed” of culture being planted with youth will help bring change for the future wellbeing of Anishinaabe people. Ma'iingan shared a concrete example of this from their own experiences, as a young person impacted by CFS. Ma'iingan, who has turned towards their culture, expressed their healing journey and their sense of hope as being related. They stated:

And with this generation now, or any generation, anybody could break the cycle. Like, for example, for me. From the past of what I heard...my Mom and Grandma and going on and on, is that we've all drank ourselves pretty much to death, right, because of what happened -because of trauma. And I feel that trauma passes on to generations. And for

me and all youth, for anybody, that has trauma I feel like (pause), and I feel like if they are using drugs or alcohol to help with that. Only you could break the cycle. And for example, with my family there's only a couple of us in my family tree that have broken the cycle and I'm going to be one of them.

Jasmine Harvey Golden Eagle Woman also expressed hope for youth today, tying this to healing that comes from learning. She and I were speaking about the role of family and community in relation to children's best interests when Jasmine talked about the "purity" of children as giving people a vision for the future; she feels we want children to have safety and supports, and we strive to prevent situations that have caused people like Jasmine herself harm (connecting, perhaps, back to quotes from Wally about 'learning from the past'). Jasmine stated:

I think the kid is just an example of all of it because it's just so pure. Like you want them to have a supportive community, you want them to have those things. I think especially if you come from a negative background, you see children as like, they can be safe. They can, they can not have to go through what I went through. So, I think that's why we look at children to refer to things like community and big things because we see them as being able to change what's, what happened.

Jasmine went on to talk about how youth today, compared to when she was in CFS care, are learning and healing, stating: "I can see [my relatives] are, like, the next generation because they're [in their teenage years]. I can already see that they're so much stronger than I was at that age." Jasmine then gave an example where the knowledge and understanding of her younger relatives prevented them from experiencing a trauma that she had experienced. Jasmine went on to state that because people are learning from the past "every generation, [gets] better," again implying a sense of hope. For change to happen, this sense of hope is essential.

Jasmine and Sylvia, in addition to identifying hope, also touched on the importance of previous themes such as connection to culture and education as key pieces of their sense of hope. Hasey Owen also spoke to this when talking about connection to culture and how this might impact children. She stated that because of the growth in connection to culture she “feel[s] like it's going to be so different, in ten years from now with all the babies that have been born.” Referring to young people impacted by CFS and the young parents successfully raising their children, amid the growing connections to culture Hasey has hope for the future.

Dakota Woitowicz Headdress Woman talked about the importance of thinking about the future of youth. She stated that the youth today “are going to be parents one day. One day. They're going to be grandparents one day.” Dakota tied this thought to preventing youth from experiencing trauma or conflict with the justice system. She went on to share:

And [prevention is] happening now and they always say seven generations before change happens. But I would think that whatever, whatever we're doing now, we can always do better. But it's going to help those kids five, six, seven years from now because those babies are going to end up somewhere. Hopefully not here [reference to program] because then you know, then we're doing something right. But it's preventing so much.

Dakota is passionate about prevention and supporting youth today. While acknowledging there is room to improve, Dakota also feels that what happens today matters for the future. Her sense of hope is evident in her thoughts about “doing something right” and “preventing so much” for these youth who will be future parents and grandparents. These comments, I feel, draw attention to the need to ensure youth themselves have hope for their futures; to support youth to become healthy parents and grandparents, helpers can support them to have hope such as what

participants here have expressed. Building off this, Sylvia brought forth her perspective as an Anishinaabe woman with lived experience and as a helper:

[T]here's times where I was able to identify myself in some of those moms. But you know, just in terms of the ones that were still in a, in a stage of struggling and it's like, you know what it's like. But you still see that spirit in there. It comes through so strong. But. But they don't see it. [...] It's, like I said, I think it's almost like just being able to plant that seed and sometimes just having to nurture it and water it all the time because it's not going to grow if you don't water it. It's just going to shrivel up and die. [...] [E]ven just observing, like watching plants, right? If you nurture them, you water them, then you feed it, you take care of them (pause). They flourish. And that's, that can, that's people. You have to feed people.

Sylvia draws a connection between human and plant life, the need for nurturing, and her belief in helpers' responsibility to support growth. Sylvia and Dakota bring our attention to the responsibility of helpers to foster hope as a means of working towards healing. This, I argue, encourages helpers to consider supporting hope as a relational responsibility in those with whom we work.

Thus far, conversations have focused on youth. While only one participant spoke explicitly about instilling hope in parents, many others spoke about relational approaches to engaging parents that I argue demonstrates that helpers need to ensure parents also remain hopeful. For example, Cassandra Sanderson shared an example where a father was running late for a family visit with his children in CFS care. She stated: "we want to trust dad, you know, we want dad to feel like he can talk to us." Cassandra acknowledges the need to support a relationship with the father based on trust and sharing. I argue this is an example of building

conditions to support hope. We can imagine the experience of the father who was penalized for running late, compared to a father who was approached with compassion. I argue these responses to the relationship between worker/parent create conditions to either hurt or encourage hope. This, again, is an example of the relational responsibility I argue helpers must meet with the people we are helping.

Adding to this, Hasey felt the CFS system should “try their best to keep [families] together.” Crane Medicine Women stated the same, going on to say, “the system should remind parents [about their children].” Hasey and Crane Medicine Woman identified the importance of parents and express an expectation that CFS workers to facilitate a connection between family/child. Having seen the hopelessness parents feel after having been separated from their children, these participants quotes are simple yet important examples of instilling hope. By encouraging families to find ways to be together, to think about their relationships amongst themselves (i.e., parents and children), helpers can mitigate the hopelessness that often comes with families being separated. These examples again support the suggestion in a relational responsibility, that the CFS system must do everything it can to ensure families remain connected, including, I argue, instilling that hope in parents.

In addition to hope and healing for youth and parents, Florence believes that Elders have a role to support hope, healing, and change. She states:

[M]y hope is to have more Elders step up to the plate, to walk along with the [CFS] workers. To guide them in restoring this this big, huge task [of fixing CFS]. And. And it is fixable. If I was younger, I would probably not have that much hope. But as I'm [growing] older, I have hope. I'm growing hope. And, and that's one thing I tell younger people, you know, I tell my grandchildren.

Florence expresses hope for CFS workers to better help families, hope that the system itself can be fixed, and identifies the importance of instilling hope in youth today. Thus, hope is not only an individual or relational factor, but also one required to ‘fix’ the CFS system.

Based on participants abilities to see change and their own hope for the future, we may consider the importance of supporting that hope in Anishinaabe children and their families as a key part of what it means to have their best interests at heart. Further, we can identify and reflect upon the responsibility of workers in supporting families to maintain hope. These actions will, I believe, help to also direct change for the future.

### *Opportunities for the Future*

This section brings chapter *niiwin* in a full circle. While the chapter opened with *Participants Call out the System*, this last sub-theme *Opportunities for the Future* also arises from the many concerns brought forth by participants. Indeed, participants have shared their journeys so we may draw upon their *dibaajimowinan* (stories) to guide change. Here I have focused on the key opportunities for change raised by participants, including the need to fix foster care, the importance of lived/shared experience, and exploring the possibility of moving away from the CFS system.

**Fix the Foster Care System.** Seven participants raised concerns about foster care placements. This included lack of training, instability in placements, persons fostering for the "paycheque," abuse, racism, and failure to align placements with Anishinaabe or Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Many of these issues have been spoken to in quotes throughout this chapter. Ali Bird spoke extensively about concerns with the foster care system. Sharing from his own experience, he stated:

And so, a lot of times when I would go to a new foster home and I heard the ‘We're your family now, we're here to help you.’ I was automatically out the door. Not like running, but mentally, you had lost me. Like that was the same lie the last ten people told me. Like (laughing) we're, yeah, thank you for your time. Tell me which holes are easy to make in the wall so I could get myself out of here. But it was like the repeated lie over and over again and again. That damage (pause), that damages a kid. Like if you hear the same thing over and over again. And then get abandoned over and over again. It angers you when someone feels the need to say that to you and you can't, like again as a kid, you don't realize it. But I realize it now. It's like I wish they would all just not have said that.

Ali shared about the repeated broken trust, instability of placements, and the harm this did to him as a child. Jasmine also spoke to this; talking about the experience of her friend, she stated:

This is the foster care, the interests of children and families. And then you [CFS] made a family, within foster care. So, you form this family and give [my friend] this support. But then you took it all away. All at once.

Several participants echoed concerns with the stability and reliability of foster homes, indicating that this is a persistent issue in the CFS system. To support the healthy development and wellbeing of children, this must be changed. One area to start focusing on changing may be the paid model of fostering.

There is a need to critically reflect upon and adapt the paid model of care. Participants repeatedly expressed concerns stating things such as: “you would open your home to have a kid come in and get extra money towards this kid and the kid would kind of be irrelevant as the extra money” (Ali Bird), or “we're just paying for their education, their beautiful homes, their vehicles, all that stuff. And they're not taking care of our kids” (DJ Spence Ochakoo Muskwa). Another

participant, Jasmine, stated: “[t]hese people were paid to be a safe home for me. These like, foster parents. And then they weren't a safe home for me. And then they're just, like, making money off that.” These participants who had grown up in care and/or worked with youth in care were acutely aware of the fact that foster homes were run by paid caregivers, directly identifying the homes as a source of income for the foster parents as opposed to a nurturing, familial place to grow and be cared for. Arguably, this is contrary to the intent of the current definitions of the best interests of the child. It is quite contrary to what participants in this research identified as important, and not at all aligned with the themes such as relationship or culture. Alternatively, Sylvia reflected on a potentially different model of care, stating:

I remember there was talk, and maybe it was just talk, but. Instead of taking, pulling the child out of the home, that they would take the parents out of the home and put supports into the home so that the child would stay in place. And stay consistent in some, in their environment. Instead of like, oh, you pull up to here, oh that placement fell apart. Now you're over here. Now you're over there. You know what I mean? Like, ‘cause I've been exposed to that as well, where it's just like, it, it does nothing. You don't form any kind of (pause). You don't form stability.

Stability, as Sylvia identifies, is an essential piece of healthy development. Ma’iingan’s experience is an example of this. They had the same foster home for fourteen years, stating: “they were really good, and I really liked them. And I consider them my mom and dad.”

Ma’iingan was the only participant with this experience but for them, this long-term foster home helped them build practical life skills, encouraged their education, and created a sense of family.

Based on participant feedback, adapting the model of care to address instability, and questioning the paid model of care will be important for moving forward. Further to this, in the

event foster care does not change, participants called for “better screening of house parents” (DJ) and, as discussed in the *Education* theme, better training for caregivers. Yet, as I will explore in the next chapter, foster care itself must be questioned overall.

**The Importance of Lived Experience.** Seven participants identified the importance of persons with lived experience and/or persons with shared identity being helpers or caregivers for children and youth. For these participants, it is important that Anishinaabe children are raised by people who will understand them. For instance, in talking about the current system, power dynamics, caregiving, and families, Sylvia stated: “what I might perceive as best interests of the child, I could tell you right now is so different from a lot of the social workers that I do work with or have worked with in the past.” Sylvia felt that even those who have the same training as her do not see things in the same way as her. Participant DJ felt the same. DJ talked about the importance of youth with lived experience taking on the roles of helpers. He stated:

We lived that life. We know what we went through with all these emotional challenges, moving from home to home, all that stuff, we know! We knew what kind of case plan we needed in place for ourself. We know the harm, self harm, that we tried to do with ourselves. So, by us growing, maturing and us being mentored, yeah, you know, we can certainly [improve some skills]. But at the end of the day, I say [to the youth] you yourselves will make the best case workers, as you yourselves lived the life.

DJ went on to confirm that he felt CFS should prioritize hiring Indigenous people with lived experience, stating:

[Y]ou know, the numbers of Indigenous children that are apprehended every year. Right. So, at the end of the day, our numbers supersede everyone else's right. So, at the end of the day, we need our own working with our own.

Relatedly, Crane Medicine Woman talked about the importance of lived experience as having influenced her perspective on life. She contrasted her experience and her friends' experience navigating CFS, stating: "I feel like for her to understand my point of view, she would have had to go through it, but she didn't."

For Florence, lived experience related to caring for Anishinaabe children from the perspective of shared identity. She felt that Elders should be supporting CFS and the children in care, and in the absence of healthy family, Indigenous children need care from other Indigenous people. She stated:

The system can be supported by elders. There's, there's a need for Elders to take the youth under their wings and to periodically visit with them. Because an elder commands respect without asking for it. The youth need a grandmother figure. And a grandfather figure. And that's why youth should have been thinking under the kinship rule by family and (pause). But I know in reality too, sometimes there's unhealthy family members that cannot do it. I know that the step next is to put them in homes for the time being and. The [CFS] workers should never get tired of looking for, for the people that can help, especially like our own taking care of our own. And if it's arranged by the worker, that that would really help the child. And then there's healing from there.

To Florence, shared identity and kinship is important. Sylvia shared a similar sentiment stating that if CFS is involved that children should be "embraced within workers that are from the same background." Shared understanding and experience of the world is a form of shared lived experience. Thus, lived experience may not only be having been in the CFS system, but also one of shared identity and experiences as an Anishinaabe person.

Wally Chartrand Soaring Eagle brings our perspective to consider the influence of lived or shared experience at the legislative level. He stated:

And then the other big piece to all of that is where [the law is] created, and who's creating those laws and, which directs and dictates how the services are to come out at the other end. I think it also has an impact. Or at least is detrimental, I think, in terms of how we do things when it comes to that [CFS] system, in that system. And I always think about, like you know, those politicians at that level. Again, today it's getting a little bit better in that we have a few more Indigenous people within that arena. But when these laws have been enacted or created its mostly non-Indigenous people that created these laws. Who have very little or no understanding of where our families are coming from, where communities are at. But also have little or no understanding in terms of those impacts when those decisions are made and how they're done. Right. How they impact that child. How they impact those families. At the end of the day how they impact the [First Nation] communities as well.

Lived experience or shared identity is not something we can educate CFS workers, foster parents, or any other helpers/supports on. Lived experience is valued in other realms of practice, such as addictions recovery. Yet the realm of child welfare remains one dominated by assumptions around professional credentials and valuing (or not valuing) certain types of knowledge. If the CFS system continues, this is something that must be reconsidered. Do the helpers have the experiential and cultural knowledge to best help the children? This is but one of many ways the system must be questioned.

**Questioning the System.** Several participants spoke about the need for a different system, beyond the current child welfare system. For instance, Dakota stated:

I understand the role of CFS. But I also understand the trauma and impacts they've brought on to Indigenous people, whether or not they're in it now to help. But eventually, eventually it's like dismantle the system, if that makes sense.

Dakota feels the current CFS system has brought forth too much harm and as such must be dismantled. Other participants expressed similar statements. Cassandra, in our conversation about ceremony, culture, and spirituality, talked about the lack of safety that exists within CFS and how this might impact a person's ability to participate in ceremony. She shared:

For CFS to make it okay to have, like (pause), ceremonies, I think they would have to make a lot of changes. Publicly. Like change the name, change, just change everything. I don't know. It would take a lot. I think it would be safer to, to keep it Indigenous based, through Indigenous organizations. You know, so many people would come to [organizations], that are, its community based. They know it, they trust it, they know they can get help. So, they would already automatically feel safe going to something as sacred as a ceremony.

For Cassandra, the current system may not be able to meet the spiritual/ceremonial needs of Anishinaabe children and families, unless CFS changed "everything." Like Dakota, Cassandra suggests a need to move away from CFS altogether. The trauma and harm, and the fears around CFS, persist in the present day lives of those impacted by and working in the system. Based on this, we can question the capacity of the existing Manitoba Child and Family Services model to adequately meet the needs of Anishinaabe children at all.

Beyond the service delivery itself, in conversation with Wally we discussed the role of legislation. When asked if he felt the phrase "best interests of the child" should continue to be part of legislation for Anishinaabe children and families, Wally replied:

(pause). No. No. Because then it's only [child] centric. And I think, like I said earlier, it's the best interest of the [First Nation] community. It's the best interests of that family. That child is part of that family. That child is part that community. So no, I wouldn't use it in that sense, best interest of the child, and, uhm, and I'm not sure what the right phrase or words might be, how do we choose, other than, you know, [Naga-gi-ang (taking care) ki-da-pinojii-min-un (of our children)- spelling provided by participant], looking after our children, right. When we look after our children, to me we're looking after their well-being. We're looking after their spirituality, their spiritual wellbeing, their physical, mental, social well-being, all those things combined. When we truly, truly look after our children. So maybe something similar to that. Or geared towards that maybe. But yeah, I think I would move away from child-centric in the sense of best interests of the child.

Some of the participants of this research brought forth explicit questions about the current system, based on the traumatic history imposed by the system, the flawed legislation, and the overall need for wholistic safety. Many others did not discuss this explicitly, yet clearly identified their concerns with the CFS system as it is (as demonstrated in previous themes).

Participants encourage us to open the door for a new way of supporting, caring for, and nurturing Anishinaabe children and families. Indeed, I will explore this further in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

The themes identified here contribute to a foundation for change. Through the *Dibaajimowinan (stories)* of participants, the best interest of Anishinaabe children can be understood as a concept that exists only in relation. These relations are more than just with other people, as explored in *Inawendawin is Medicine*. The best interests of Anishinaabe children also extends to their relations with community, culture, and *aki* (land). Further, the best interests of

Anishinaabe children are tied to building *gikendaasowin* (knowledge) within themselves, as well as their supports such as family or foster family. Bringing hope into the lives of youth and parents impacted by CFS will also be essential, providing a foundation for healing and for changing the system. Notably, participants often spoke within the context of the current CFS system. I hope to expand on what participants have shared to draw our attention towards expanding our vision, which includes abolishing the terminology of “Child and Family Services” altogether. In the next chapter, I explore the implications of these themes, encouraging us to broaden our perspectives and visions for the future.

## **Chapter Naanan (5)**

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

In this research, I sought to answer how Anishinaabe people impacted by the Manitoba child welfare system define the best interests of the child principle. The depth of this topic exceeds the research presented here, yet participants and I have initiated a conversation; I hope that we have provided information for Indigenous governments, Indigenous policy/law makers, helpers, and social workers to draw upon to best support Anishinaabe children and their families. In this chapter, I introduce a visual representation created to summarize the findings. Using this, I discuss the findings, in connection to the theory which informed this research. This is followed by recommendations for future policy and practice. I close by acknowledging the limitations of this research, with recommendations for future research.

#### **A Visual Representation & Discussion**

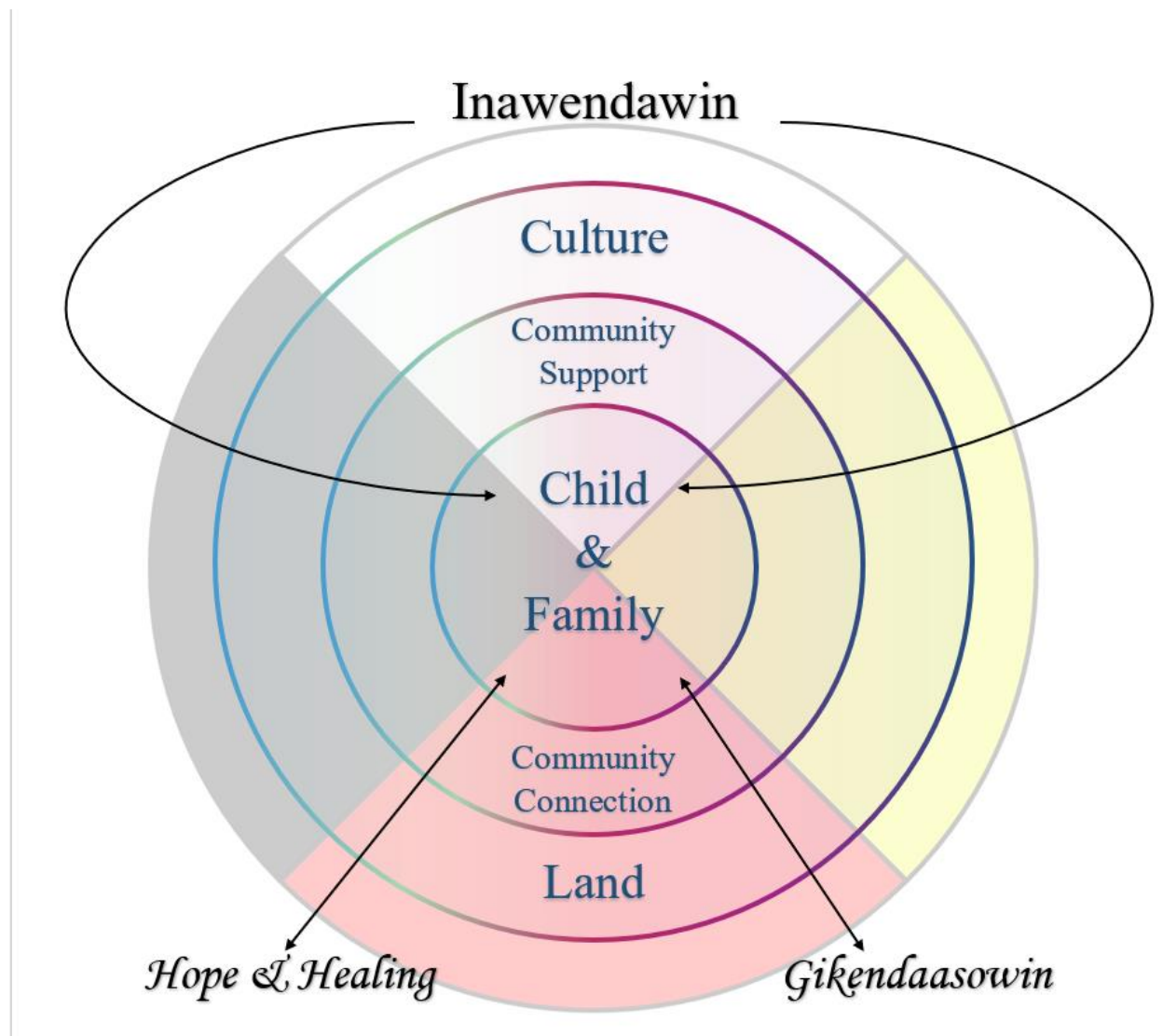
This research identified that the best interests of Anishinaabe children are not being met by current CFS policies and practices. To help synthesize the findings, I have created a visual representation, presented in figure 1. In understanding the visual, it is first important to recognize that every component of the visual is understood within the medicine wheel context and requires consideration for mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual pieces. This acknowledges the fact that, in varying ways, participants spoke about mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs for Anishinaabe children throughout our conversations. The inclusion of the medicine wheel provides greater context for assessing the best interests of Anishinaabe children.

Beginning in the centre circle, findings indicated that the best interests of Anishinaabe children are tied to their parents and family. Social work practice often talks about working in a child-centred way. I do not argue against the importance of uplifting the needs of children and I

acknowledge children are sacred. Yet I propose, based upon this research and supported by the literature (Hand, 2006; Muir & Bohr, 2019; Red Horse, 1997), that the interests of Anishinaabe child and family are inherently intertwined. Thus, the centre of the visual I present holds the child & family in the same circle. I argue that this will help move away from the “child centric” nature of the best interests of the child doctrine towards an understanding that is family centred.

Figure 1

*Best Interests of Anishinaabe Children, visual representation*



Moving outwards to the second circle, this research identified that for Anishinaabe children having a connection to their First Nation community is important, but also having a community of supports wherever they live is critical. Thus ‘community’ is understood as multi-faceted. Furthermore, by incorporating the medicine wheel, when assessing how community is tied to the best interests of Anishinaabe children, all quadrants of that medicine wheel must be considered. For instance, the medicine wheel supports us to consider participant Wally’s discussion about community physical infrastructure and the need for housing, for example. It expands assessments to acknowledge that Anishinaabe children’s best interests are tied to the overall wellbeing of their First Nation community or the community wherever they may live. This acknowledgement requires an understanding that First Nation community development, supports, and resources are related to the best interests of Anishinaabe children.

Surrounding children, their family, and community is the final circle encompassing culture and *Aki* (land). While culture and land were discussed as distinct themes, they share a space in the same circle as being related. In the Breath of Life theory, Blackstock (2011) argues that it is the cultural context in which the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical must be defined, supporting the importance of a distinct Anishinaabe understanding. Furthermore, participants identified how Anishinaabe children continue to be indoctrinated into cultures and beliefs not their own. Based on these two considerations, culture and land must be the priority context of community, family, and child. Participants identified factors critical for Anishinaabe children such as identity, history, spirituality, and intergenerational connections as part of culture. Participants further drew direct connections to land as healing and relational. Supporting this, Alfred (2009) argues for the “benefits of a reconnection to homeland and of “traditional” [quotations in original] indigenous land-based cultural practices” as essential for restoring First

Nation community wellbeing (p.44). Thus, when assessing all other factors, these must be understood within the cultural context, which includes relationships with land. It is also important to state that even among Anishinaabe First Nations, there are different cultural and land-based beliefs/practices. Thus, as Blackstock (2011) argues, the best interests of Anishinaabe children, in relation to culture, land, community, and family must be locally contextualized.

Above the concentric circles is *Inawendawin* (relationship) with wrapping arrows. The arrows wrapping, as opposed to flowing straight in, demonstrate that relationships are all encompassing. In this research, participants spoke of relationships among people, to land, to community, and more; relationship flowed across themes. *Inawendawin*, I suggest, is the overarching theme of this research and thus is represented as such in the visual. Indeed, relationship and working from the heart have been noted as parts of working in an anti-colonial way (Hart et al., 2017) and an Indigenist way (Hart, 2009). These factors suggest that changing relational dynamics will be a key part of moving away from the CFS system towards an Anishinaabe way of caring for children and families.

Lastly, you will note that outside the circles are the ideas of hope and healing and *gikendaasowin*. These are the things that I suggest, based on participant feedback, helpers may bring forward, when working towards identifying and supporting the best interests of Anishinaabe children. Yet I present the arrows as multi-directional. This is to acknowledge that those we serve will also contribute to our own lives; helping is a relational practice. With *inawendawin* being the overarching theme, drawing directly from the feedback from participants here, helpers must also understand our relational responsibilities beyond the “worker/client” dichotomy prevalent in social work practice. I expand on these ideas in the recommendations later in this chapter. See Appendix I for additional notes on this visual representation.

In many ways, the findings of this research are aligned with the theories that informed this work. In Blackstock's (2011) conceptualization of the Breath of Life [BOL] theory, relationships exist between the balance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life, across individual, family, community, and society; all factors are interconnected and imbalance in one area impacts all others. These relationships were reflected in findings of this research as well. Some of what participants in this research shared overlap with the BOL Theory's relational worldview principles (see Chapter *Nisi*), understood within the medicine wheel context. For example, within the emotional quadrant of the Breath of Life theory belonging and relationship (and connection to family/community) are important; in the cognitive quadrant identity and esteem are identified (Blackstock, 2011). This was echoed by participants here. Furthermore, the BOL theory acknowledges the importance of the seven generations principle (Blackstock, 2011). Participants here evidently connected their experiences today to those of the past, while also reflecting upon the future. Participants also indicated a strong need to understand history. This suggests that the best interests of Anishinaabe children are connected to the influence of generations across time, as well as the impacts of disconnection from the knowledge of familial and community experiences. As such, the best interests of Anishinaabe children are understood from a perspective of time aligned with the BOL theory.

While not everything in the BOL theory was discussed by participants, I believe that the BOL theory may contribute to further work to reconceptualize the best interests of the child from an Anishinaabe perspective. The BOL theory emphasizes changing practices to move towards balance; it theorizes that "structural risks affecting children's safety and well-being are alleviated when the relational worldview principles are in balance within the context and culture of the community" (Blackstock, 2011, p. 2). While the BOL theory provides a wholistic framework for

child welfare practice with Indigenous people, I propose that this theory may be considered when writing policies to inform practice as well.

### **Recommendations for A New Approach**

Child welfare is changing in Manitoba, and Canada. Yet given the extensive historical and present-day concerns related to the Manitoba child and family services system, I argue against attempting to change the existing system at all. Contrarily, in line with an anti-colonial approach (Hart, 2009) and participant Dakota's call to "dismantle the system," a new approach that centres Anishinaabe ways of knowing, being, and doing, including Anishinaabe law, must be started completely apart from the existing system with its colonial roots. The trauma of the current CFS system has longstanding history that I argue cannot be decolonized. Redefining the best interests of Anishinaabe children within First Nation community led law will be an essential part of creating an approach completely apart from the traumas of the current CFS system. Chapter *Niiwin*, the visual representation, and the discussion in this chapter are intended to provide considerations for Anishinaabe people, communities, and governments as First Nation communities begin to write their own laws. To further support this, I add the following considerations, based on feedback from participants in this research.

- 1) **Consider who are the helpers.** This research suggests that the best interests of Anishinaabe children can be supported by a range of helpers. CFS workers, CFS as a system, and colonial laws interpreted by a colonial justice system must no longer hold the power they have thus far. On the contrary, a more balanced system of caring can be developed. This includes:
  - a. Shifting away from the western "social worker/client" dichotomy and power dynamic, towards a more balanced approached which may include child and

family helpers as persons with lived experience, Elders, intergenerational connections, mentors, and more (as discussed in the findings of this research). This diversity of helpers will meet a range of needs for Anishinaabe children, while challenging the one-sided power of CFS.

- b. If systems of caring continue to assign one designated worker to Anishinaabe children, the relational dynamic must be changed. There may still be a role for social workers but with major adaptations. These relationships can shift away from the dominant “social worker/client” dichotomy, towards a more kinship and relational based model of caregiving. The professional knowledge of social work does not supersede the importance of relationships based on compassion, love, honesty, or rather, all the Seven Sacred Teachings. Social works practices and assumptions around professionalism, boundaries, and power may inhibit the relationships that participants in this research talked about needing. Furthermore, I suggest that having a degree in social work does not require one to be called a social worker and changing job titles can help challenge beliefs about one’s duties. One example of this is in the organization in which I work, where we have shifted towards referring to staff as Mooshums, Kookums, Aunties, and Schkaabe’s.
- c. The current foster care system must be abolished. Even with stable non-Indigenous foster placements, Indigenous children and youth in care face negative outcomes. Contrarily, funds should be reallocated towards biological families and First Nation communities. While I acknowledge that families and communities may need additional healing, as participants mentioned in this research, investing

in these families directly as opposed to non-Indigenous placements or placements outside of the Nation of the child, I believe, will help address these needs.

- i. Blackstock (2011) proposes that addressing the risks Indigenous children in care face requires addressing the structural risks and needs of First Nations, such as addressing poverty. Blackstock (2011) argues this is part of seeking balance and improving outcomes for Indigenous children.

Based on this research, I support this.

- 2) **Challenge the language of CFS.** While Manitoba First Nations are starting to establish their own CFS agencies, I propose that based on participants feedback the language of “child and family services” should not be used. Not only does this language carry the historical and contemporary trauma it has imposed, but I argue it also implies colonial relationship dynamics that are misaligned with the relationships participants in this research described.

- a. *Anishinaabemowin* (the Anishinaabe language) and traditional law already provide the direction for this. For example, language speakers in this research spoke about the depth of meaning behind the word caring, and what this means in *Anishinaabemowin*. Consider, for example, “Family Community Caring” as opposed to “Child and Family Services.” The terminology of family and community caring automatically integrates the child as part of the family, and the family as part of the community. Furthermore, use of the term caring brings in the relational responsibilities tied to the concept of caring from an Anishinaabe perspective. In addition, Anishinaabe people have their own traditional laws to draw upon. The Grand Council Treaty #3 *Abinoojii Inakonigewin* (GCT3, 2023)

provides a positive example of traditional law related to childcare (see appendix B for an excerpt of this legislation).

### **Recommendations for Federal & Provincial Governments**

This work has not been done to support settler-colonial federal and provincial governments. As such, I have limited recommendations for these entities. I do hope that this work can help non-Indigenous governments challenge their own assumed knowledges and authority. One further item I will note is that these governments must begin to move outside of the siloed way of thinking to understand that various government departments are related. While one area of federal government is publishing laws such as *Bill C-92*, claiming to acknowledge First Nations sovereignty and jurisdiction, I question what other areas of government such as those overseeing land “ownership” and land/environmental protection are doing to acknowledge the same. When the best interests of Anishinaabe children are understood as connected to land, then there must also be increased land sovereignty and protection, as well as expanded land reserved for First Nations. Yet the federal and provincial governments maintain substantial power over these domains. The overall relationship between Indigenous people and settler colonial governments must change, in all areas.

### **Recommendations for Social Work**

Social workers must take responsibility for our work. First, social work curriculum must explicitly identify the role of social work in Canada’s historical and ongoing colonization. Never should a social worker ever speak to a child about their parents the way participants indicated they had been spoken to. I believe that better education for social workers would increase understanding and compassion for Indigenous parents who have been impacted by colonization,

resulting in CFS involvement. At the time of writing, the Faculty of Social Work at this university is about to implement a revised curriculum; I am hopeful for the future of social work.

Secondly, I believe that non-Indigenous social workers who are not doing the work to learn about colonization in Canada, the culture of Indigenous people, and who just simply don't share the same values as Indigenous people, must stop pursuing work in Indigenous organizations. Participants here and the literature identified that there is a distinct difference in approaches to helping between western social work and Anishinaabe approaches. This is particularly important when working with Indigenous children. Participants here talked about how Anishinaabe children are growing up indoctrinated into cultural ways and beliefs that are not their own. Social workers must strive to not play a role in this any longer. Good intentions of social workers entering Indigenous organizations are not enough. As I have previously cited, intentions are irrelevant if the ideology underlying our work remains rooted in colonial worldviews (Helin, 2008; Alfred, 2009). There must be a commitment from social workers to take initiative to learn, in order to truly support reconciliation in practice. Often, I suggest, this will require the social work profession to challenge our own assumptions around our knowledges and power. I believe that what I have stated here support some previous recommendations from Hart and Rowe (2014), who provide a range of actions for the social work profession to better address the oppression we have participated in, benefited from, and maintained against Indigenous people. When it comes to the best interests of Anishinaabe children, I argue that non-Indigenous social workers must challenge our own knowledge and understandings or risk continuing to harm Anishinaabe, and all Indigenous, children.

## **Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research**

Research done in a respectful, mindful way allows stories to be told. Future research may take the opportunity to tell the story of CFS changes, observing how changes to policy, law, and systems impact the lives of Indigenous families and communities. While this research has sought to contribute to the start of change stories, here I identify several limitations and include recommendations for future research to consider.

### ***Need to Expand Participant Demographics***

**2SLGBTQ+ Inclusivity.** Future research in Indigenous child welfare should be designed to ensure inclusivity of our 2SLGBTQ+ relatives or be dedicated to exploring the needs of this community. I understand this is a significant gap of this research. The experiences and considerations for Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ youth are unique (Massinon, 2020) and warrant focused attention. No participants in this research identified themselves as belonging to the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

**Participant Ages.** The majority of participants in this work were youth (aged twenty-nine or younger). Speaking with more people in their adult and elder years would likely further enrich the stories gathered. There were some emerging differences in age groups, such as how participants talked about hope and the stages of healing they were at in their lives. Interviews that incorporate a wider range of ages may further flush out these differences. Related to ages, assessing participant stories from the perspective of Anishinaabe Stages of Life teachings may provide more culturally based, as opposed to age-based, analysis.

**Language Speakers.** Embedded with the Anishinaabe language are worldviews, teachings, and concepts that could open the door to further explore the best interests of Anishinaabe children. This research engaged two language speakers where some similarities

began to emerge. For example, both spoke of how an Anishinaabe understanding of what it means to care and providing caring for children differs from the current settler-colonial system understandings. Speaking with more language speakers could expand upon this.

### ***Participant Sample Size***

Participants in this research continued to bring forward new information even as I reached eleven interviews. Therefore, saturation was not reached in this study and speaking with a larger number of participants would, I believe, bring forward additional information on this topic. Previously noted recruitment issues must also be addressed (see Chapter *Nisi*).

### ***White Settler Bias***

I acknowledge that as a white settler, this limits my ability to fully assess the participant stories in an Anishinaabe perspective. Furthermore, it may be possible that this influenced recruitment as potential participants may have been more comfortable speaking with an Indigenous person. One language speaker who participated also noted that they prefer to speak in their language and having this option, I feel, could have enriched the stories they shared.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have proposed a visual representation of the research. From this, I have included a brief summary of key considerations from the for rewriting the best interest of the child principle from an Anishinaabe perspective. I acknowledge that the visual presented and recommendations included may be built upon by others who may choose to engage in this relational practice of learning, and I welcome others to expand on what participants and I have started here. Further, I have identified gaps and recommendations for further research.

**Chapter Ningodwaaso (6): Neiwebineodisgaogoodak**

A few weeks ago, as I walked through my office, I overheard a young mom say to her baby “look, it’s Auntie!” referring to another Indigenous staff member (who is not, I might add, related in any way). This young mother, who herself grew up in CFS care, built a close enough relationship with her support worker to trust her as an aunty. I listened as they each laughed together and visited, talking about their day and plans for the future. A relationship imbued with love. Last week, a youth formerly in CFS care visited her First Nation for the first time. This youth met a biological auntie she did not previously know and came home with stories about her family that no one had before connected her to. The smiles and laughter of both these young women are the medicine that I, as do all helpers, need to remember. These relationships and connections are pieces of what participants in this research have called for, and it is happening.

As First Nation communities reclaim jurisdiction and sovereignty, I believe that healing is possible. I am privileged to see it every day through moments such as those I have shared above. With humility, the social work profession has the opportunity to walk alongside First Nation communities on this journey of changing child welfare. Yet we must continue to challenge assumed truths, such as the best interests of the child doctrine. There are many ways of knowing, being, and doing. While this research concludes, there is still more to learn. Indeed, as Winona Keeper shared, “stories do not end, they are never finished” (Anishinaabe, Little Grand Rapids, personal communication, July 29, 2023). It is time to challenge colonial worldviews that are embedded in law, policy, and practice. Doing so will bring learning, growth, healing, and so much more not just to First Nations people, but rather to all of us. Relationships are medicine.

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## Appendix A: Anishinaabemowin References &amp; Glossary

Anishinaabemowin	English
Abinoojii	Child
A-ga'-she-way-nee-ma-meeth-zhee-way-ee-goo	Showing my care- provided by Florence Sanderson
Aki	Land
Anishinaabemowin	The Anishinaabe language
Asemaa	Tobacco, a sacred medicine
Bezhig	One
Dibaajimowin	Story (Ojibwe Peoples Dictionary); to tell the truth of what is happening or happened (Winona Keeper)
Dibaajimowinan	Stories
Gikendaasowin	Knowledge
Gizhe-Manitou	Kind & Benevolent Spirit; Creator
Inawendawin	Relationship
Mashkiki	Medicine
Mashkodewashk	Sage, a sacred medicine
Migizigwan	Bald Eagle Feather, a sacred item; part of a sacred bundle.
(Kitchi) Miigwetch	Great Thanks; Thank You
Naanan	Five
Naga-gi-ang-ki-da-pinojii-min-un	<i>Naga-gi-ang</i> (taking care) <i>ki-da-pinojii-min-un</i> (of our children) – provided by Wally Chartrand
Neiwebineodisgaogoodak	“This term is used after telling stories especially Adisookanan. My mother and aunty shared that stories don't end, they are never finished, so they didn't have a word for "the end" after stories were told. They would say "There is the partridges belly button hanging" but it sounds better in Ojibwe.” (Winona Keeper, Anishinaabe, Little Grand Rapids, personal communication, July 29, 2023)
Nimiigwechiwendam	I am thankful/grateful for
Niizhin	Two
Niiwin	Four
Nindinawemaaganog	All my relations
Ningodwaaso	Six
Nisi	Three
Odinaawemaaganiwa	All their relations
Shawenim	Nurture

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## Appendix B: Legal Definitions of the Best Interests of the Child

The following are direct excerpts of some of the legislation discussed herein, pertaining to the best interests of the child doctrine. These excerpts should be reviewed in the broader legislative context and are presented here as a point for quick reference and to support further research. The information below is current as of May 2023.

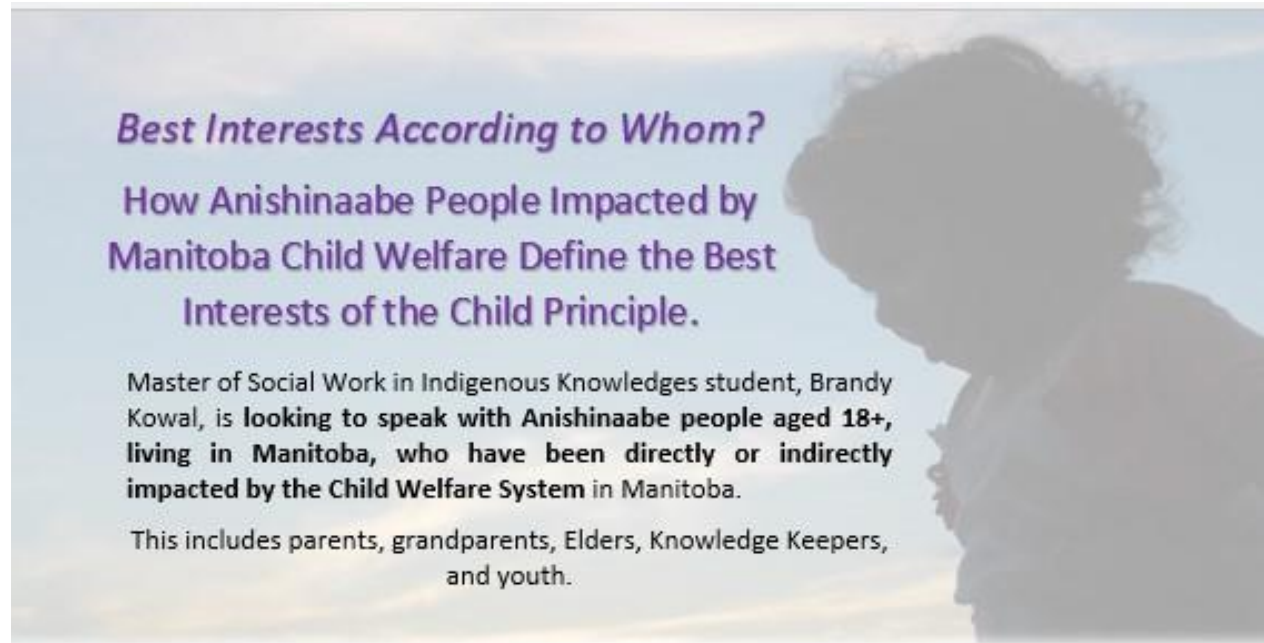
<p><b>Grand Council Treaty #3, Abinoojii Inakonigewin Law</b></p> <p>Grand Council Treaty #3 [GCT3]. (2005, May). Abinoojii Inakonigewin: (Child Care Law). As it appeared on 26 May 2023 online: <a href="http://gct3.ca/people/social/abinoojii-inakonigewin/abinoojii-inakonigewin-law/">http://gct3.ca/people/social/abinoojii-inakonigewin/abinoojii-inakonigewin-law/</a></p> <p><b>5. This Law gives effect to the following principles:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) This Law applies to parental responsibilities and to related responsibilities.</li> <li>b) This Law is based on Anishinaabe concepts of parental and other responsibilities for a child and not upon concepts of parental rights such as custody.</li> <li>c) A child exists in the cultural and social context of its family, which in turn exists in the cultural and social context of the extended family, clan, community and nation, and the best interests of the child require that its cultural and social context be support and protected.</li> <li>d) Access to fundamental attributes of Anishinaabe life, including Anishinaabe identity, language, cultural and society, is essential to the best interests of a child.</li> <li>e) Family services should support and strengthen the role of families in mental, physical, emotional and spiritual care of children.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Peguis First Nation, Manitoba</b> <i>Honouring our Children, Families and Nation Act.</i> (...), s. 6. As it appeared on 21 January, 2022 online: <a href="https://irp.cdn-website.com/8a5c0cb0/files/uploaded/2021-11-16%20-%20PFN%20HOCFNA%20%283%29.pdf">https://irp.cdn-website.com/8a5c0cb0/files/uploaded/2021-11-16%20-%20PFN%20HOCFNA%20%283%29.pdf</a></p> <p><b>6 PRINCIPLES AND MINIMUM STANDARDS OF PEGUIS CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES</b></p> <p><b>Best Interests of the Child</b></p> <p>6.1 This Act is to be interpreted and administered in accordance with the Best Interests of the Child, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) The Best Interests of the Child must be the paramount consideration in the decision-making process in the context of Child and Family Services in relation to the Child, and in the case of decision making relating to apprehension, the Best Interests of the Child must be the paramount consideration; and</li> <li>(b) Primary consideration must be given to the Child’s physical, emotional and psychological development, safety, security, well-being and the Child’s sense of continuity and need for permanency with the least possible disruption, as well as the importance of that Child having an ongoing relationship with the Child’s Family and the Peguis First Nation or people to which the Child belongs and of preserving that Child’s connection to culture, heritage and the First Nation’s traditional territory.</li> </ul> <p><b>Determining the Best Interests of the Child</b></p> <p>6.2 To determine the Best Interests of a Child, all factors related to the circumstances must be considered, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) The Child’s cultural, linguistic, spiritual and religious upbringing and heritage;</li> <li>(b) The Child’s needs, given the Child’s age, verbalization and stage of development, such as the Child’s need for stability;</li> </ul>
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<p>f) Prevention services should include a focus on the causes of molestation, abuse and abandonment.</p> <p>g) Child and family services should be delivered at the community level.</p> <p>h) Decisions affecting the life of a child must be free from intimidation, from political influence and from any influence that may be affected by conflict of interests.</p> <p>i) Healing of the people is essential to caring for children.</p> <p>6. This Law should be interpreted having regard to realities that may affect the best interests of a child, including:</p> <p>a) The effect of severing a child’s ties with fundamental attributes of Anishinaabe life may be as traumatic and long lasting as those of physical amputation.</p> <p>b) No life is free from risk, nor will it be.</p> <p>c) Living conditions affecting many Anishinaabe people may expose their children to higher risks than those of most other</p> <p>d) Standards that reduce certain risks but result in injury to a child’s identity or cultural supports may not be consistent with the best interests of the child.</p>	<p>(c) The nature and strength of the Child’s relationship with the Child’s Parent(s), Care Provider and any Family member who plays an important role in the Child’s life;</p> <p>(d) The importance to the Child of preserving the Child’s cultural identity and connections to the language and territory of the First Nation or people to which the Child belongs;</p> <p>(e) The Child’s views and preferences, giving due weight to the Child’s age and maturity, unless such views cannot be ascertained;</p> <p>(f) Any plans for the Child’s care, including care in accordance with the customs and traditions of the First Nation or people to which the Child belongs;</p> <p>(g) Any family violence and its impact on the Child, including whether the Child is directly or indirectly exposed to the family violence as well as the physical, emotional and psychological harm or risk of harm to the Child; and</p> <p>(h) Any civil or criminal proceeding, order, condition or measure that is relevant to the safety, security and well-being of the Child.</p>
<p><b>Manitoba Provincial Government</b></p> <p><i>The Child and Family Services Act</i>, RSM c. C80, s. 2(1), as it appeared on 25 May 2023 online:  <a href="https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/pdf.php?cap=c80">https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/pdf.php?cap=c80</a></p>	<p><b>Canadian Federal Government</b></p> <p><i>Bill C-92, An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families</i>, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, forty-second parliament, 2019, As it appeared 21 June, 2019 online:  <a href="https://www.parl.ca/Content/Bills/421/Government/C-92/C-92_4/C-92_4.PDF">https://www.parl.ca/Content/Bills/421/Government/C-92/C-92_4/C-92_4.PDF</a></p> <p><b>Best interests of Indigenous child</b></p>

<p><b>Best Interests</b></p> <p>2(1) The best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration of the director, an authority, an agency and a court in all proceedings under this Act affecting a child, other than proceedings to determine whether a child is in need of protection, and in determining best interests the child's safety and security shall be the primary considerations. After that, all other relevant matters shall be considered, including</p> <p>(a) the child's opportunity to have a parent-child relationship as a wanted and needed member within a family structure;</p> <p>(b) the mental, emotional, physical and educational needs of the child and the appropriate care or treatment, or both, to meet such needs;</p> <p>€ the child's mental, emotional and physical stage of development;</p> <p>(d) the child's sense of continuity and need for permanency with the least possible disruption;</p> <p>€ the merits and the risks of any plan proposed by the agency that would be caring for the child compared with the merits and the risks of the child returning to or remaining within the family;</p> <p>(f) the views and preferences of the child where they can reasonably be ascertained;</p> <p>(g) the effect upon the child of any delay in the final disposition of the proceedings; and</p> <p>(h) the child's cultural, linguistic, racial and religious heritage.</p>	<p>10 (1) The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in the making of decisions or the taking of actions in the context of the provision of child and family services in relation to an Indigenous child and, in the case of decisions or actions related to child apprehension, the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration.</p> <p><b>Primary consideration</b></p> <p>(2) When the factors referred to in subsection (3) are being considered, primary consideration must be given to the child's physical, emotional and psychological safety, security and well-being, as well as to the importance, for that child, of having an ongoing relationship with his or her family and with the Indigenous group, community or people to which he or she belongs and of preserving the child's connections to his or her culture.</p> <p><b>Factors to be considered</b></p> <p>(3) To determine the best interests of an Indigenous child, all factors related to the circumstances of the child must be considered, including</p> <p>(a) the child's cultural, linguistic, religious and spiritual upbringing and heritage;</p> <p>(b) the child's needs, given the child's age and stage of development, such as the child's need for stability;</p> <p>(c) the nature and strength of the child's relationship with his or her parent, the care provider and any member of his or her family who plays an important role in his or her life;</p> <p>(d) the importance to the child of preserving the child's cultural identity and connections to the language and territory of the Indigenous group, community or people to which the child belongs;</p> <p>(e) the child's views and preferences, giving due weight to the child's age and maturity, unless they cannot be ascertained;</p> <p>(f) any plans for the child's care, including care in accordance with the customs or traditions of the Indigenous group, community or people to which the child belongs;</p> <p>(g) any family violence and its impact on the child, including whether the child is directly or indirectly exposed to the family violence as well</p>
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	<p>as the physical, emotional and psychological harm or risk of harm to the child; and</p> <p>(h) any civil or criminal proceeding, order, condition, or measure that is relevant to the safety, security and well-being of the child.</p> <p><b>Consistency</b></p> <p>(4) Subsections (1) to (3) are to be construed in relation to an Indigenous child, to the extent that it is possible to do so, in a manner that is consistent with a provision of a law of the Indigenous group, community or people to which the child belongs.</p>
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## Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Poster



***Best Interests According to Whom?***  
**How Anishinaabe People Impacted by Manitoba Child Welfare Define the Best Interests of the Child Principle.**

Master of Social Work in Indigenous Knowledges student, Brandy Kowal, is **looking to speak with Anishinaabe people aged 18+, living in Manitoba, who have been directly or indirectly impacted by the Child Welfare System** in Manitoba.

This includes parents, grandparents, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth.

Participants will voluntarily participate in a 60–90-minute interview to explore the research question of “How do Anishinaabe people impacted by the Manitoba child welfare system define the best interests of their children”. The research will also seek to understand this principle through Anishinaabemowin, and language speakers are invited to self-identify when expressing interest in the research.

Participants will be offered a small honorarium gift card. Participants can withdraw from the study at any point in time.

This research relates to the MMIWG2S Call to Justice 12.3

“We call upon all governments and Indigenous organizations to develop and apply a definition of “best interests of the child” based on distinct Indigenous perspectives, world views, needs, and priorities, including the perspective of Indigenous children and youth. [...]”

If you are interested in participating or have questions, please contact the principal investigator **Brandy Kowal** at [kowalb@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:kowalb@myumanitoba.ca) on Facebook at “**[REDACTED]**” or text/phone **[REDACTED]**.

Research Supervisor  
 Dr. Mary Kate Dennis  
 Faculty of Social Work  
 University of Manitoba  
 William Norrie Centre  
 204-474-6871  
[Marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca)



**University  
 of Manitoba**

This research study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba Fort Garry Campus

## Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Script



**University  
of Manitoba**

Faculty of Social Work

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Telephone (204) 474-7050  
Fax (204) 474-7594  
Social\_Work@umanitoba.ca

### Participant Recruitment Script

**Research Title:** Best Interests According to Whom? How Anishinaabe People Impacted by Manitoba Child Welfare Define the Best Interests of the Child Principle

#### First contact Script for Interview

**Researcher:** Brandy Kowal

Hi, my name is Brandy Kowal and I'm a student in the Masters of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledges program at the University of Manitoba. I'm a settler from Thompson Manitoba, my mom is Metis and my dad is Ukrainian. I'm currently working on my thesis project and am doing research on the topic of the "best interests of the child" doctrine in child welfare. Specifically, I hope to understand how Anishinaabe families would define this principle. The study will centre the voices of Anishinaabe people and will contribute to challenging how child welfare laws are written and applied with Anishinaabe families.

I would love the opportunity to be able to discuss this research with you and the possibility of your participation in the research. I can provide detailed information on the research, answer any questions you might have, share the questions with you, and review the consent form. **(A) Is this something you would be interested in learning more about?** I can share more details now and we can meet to discuss further if you'd like.

#### **(A) If No:**

Thank you for your time. Please if you know anyone who may be interested in this research, feel free to share my contact information with them.

#### **(A) If Yes:**

Participating in the study includes a 60-90 minute recorded interview, which would later be transcribed for analysis. You would be invited to review your transcripts, review the results, and participate in a final wrap up feast at the end of the research. The feast is not a part of the data collection, but rather a way to close the research in a good way.

I know the topic of child welfare can be emotionally difficult to discuss so participants will be invited to smudge before, during, or after the interview, and I will also provide information on community resources. If you are uncomfortable at any time, you can decline to answer a question. You can also withdraw at any time.

**(B) If this is still something you think you'd be interested in, would you like to meet to review the forms together? Alternatively, I can email them to you for review.**

**(B) If Yes, meet in person:** When is a good time to meet? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**(B) If Yes, email:** What is your email address? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**(B) If No:** Thank you for your time and please if you know anyone who may be interested in this research, feel free to share my contact information with them.

Researcher Supervisor:

Mary Kate Dennis

Faculty of Social Work

University of Manitoba

William Norrie Centre

██████████

[marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca](mailto:marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca)

### **Social Media Post Script**

#### **Script for posting on social media accounts (personal Facebook, personal LinkedIn)**

I am officially going to be starting my Masters of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledges thesis research. The question I am wanting to ask is "how do Anishinaabe people impacted by the Manitoba Child Welfare system define the best interests of their children?" I am seeking to speak with Anishinaabe people living in Winnipeg over the age of 18, who've been impacted by the child welfare system in Manitoba.

This would be completely voluntary, and participants will be offered a small honorarium and gift. You would have the opportunity to ask questions or express any concerns before committing to anything. I hope to create a space and relationship that will be comfortable, and the interview is meant to be a conversation.

If you or someone you know may be interested, please contact me directly (contact info on poster). I would also be grateful if you can share this post!

**Appendix E: Participant Consent Forms**

Faculty of Social Work

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Telephone (204) 474-7050  
Fax (204) 474-7594  
Social\_Work@umanitoba.ca

**Research Title:** Best Interests According to Whom? How Anishinaabe People Impacted by Manitoba Child Welfare Define the Best Interests of the Child Principle.

**Researcher:** Brandy Kowal (Principal Investigator) & Master's Student  
Masters of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledges  
University of Manitoba, William Norrie Centre

[kowalb@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:kowalb@myumanitoba.ca)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Mary Kate Dennis, Assistant Professor & Interim Director MSW-IK Program  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

[marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca](mailto:marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca)

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

**Purpose of the Research**

This research will seek to better define what the “best interests of the child” means to Anishinaabe families involved with the child welfare system. The research will help us to understand how Anishinaabe families themselves would define the best interests of their children. This research strives to centre the voices of Anishinaabe parents, grandparents, and youth who have been impacted by the child welfare system.

This research will be able to be used to support Anishinaabe families and communities in advocating for their own systems of caregiving. The research may also be used to support policy and legislative changes for Anishinaabe families and communities.

This research is in line with Call to Justice # 12.3 of the National Inquiry for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which calls for a culturally based definition of the best interests of the child principle in child welfare.

**The Research Process**

Once you confirm you are interested in participating in the research, I will confirm you meet participant criteria, and we will proceed to schedule an interview. Interviews will be 60-90 minutes depending on how much you decide to share. The interview will be digitally recorded using an audio recording app on the researcher's laptop. This is required to transcribe your interview for data analysis. You can stop recording at any time although this will result in being withdrawn from the study.

After the interviews, I will be utilizing the TRINT transcription program to transcribe the interviews. Once interviews are transcribed, I will contact the company and they will be deleted from the TRINT program. I will reach out to you again to share your transcripts for feedback. Should you request any changes, corrections, or additions to your transcript, this will be honoured by the researcher and the updated transcript is what will be used for data analysis. When your transcripts is shared with you, you will be provided a timeline to respond with any feedback. In the event you do not respond, it will be assumed that you are in agreement with the transcripts as provided.

All participants will also be invited to a feast at the end of the study.

Do you understand and agree to the interview being recorded via an audio recording laptop app?

I understand and consent to this process:            Yes        No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Validation of the Research

As part of the research process, you will be invited to review a summary of the research. This will be 1-3 pages in length, explaining the findings. Your feedback on the summary will be included as part of validating, or confirming the truth of, the research.

Would you like to receive a summary of the research to participate in the research validation process?

I consent to participating in the research validation process:            Yes        No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Benefits

This research will strive to centre the voices of Anishinaabe parents, grandparents, and youth to be able to help contribute to the changes in the Child Welfare system in Manitoba. Participants experiences and voices will be helping to hopefully influence change in the Child and Family services system.

### Risks

The risks of participating in this research may include being emotionally triggered, due to trauma caused by the child welfare system and the emotions that may arise with this. Sage will be available to you before, during, and after the interview to smudge should you wish to do so. In addition, I will provide a list of resources such as counselling, cultural supports, and/or

advocacy resources to support you on your healing journey. You are also able to stop the interview at any time or can choose not to answer any questions.

### **Confidentiality**

Your interview will remain confidential, available to the researcher and research committee only (Dr. Mary Kate Dennis, Sherry Copenace, and Dr. Lorna Turnbull). All recordings, transcripts, handwritten notes, consent forms, or any other data collected as part of this research will remain locked in the personal, locked filing cabinet of the researcher. Data that is stored digitally, such as audio recordings of the interviews and interview transcriptions, will be stored in University of Manitoba secure online storage program, OneDrive. Wherever possible, files will be password protected, in addition to being stored on a locked computer. All data and research materials, including recordings, transcripts, and consent forms, will be kept for up to six years (to January 2029), at which point they will be destroyed.

If you choose to participate in this research, you can choose whether you would like your identity to remain confidential in the final report. If you choose to keep your identity confidential you will be assigned a participant ID which will be used to reference the information you share.

If you choose to be identified in the research, you can choose how you will be identified. You may choose to be identified by first name only, first and last name, and/or spirit name/Anishinaabe name; you may further choose to share your First Nation community or not. By choosing to be identified in the research, your story will be available to those who read this research.

**Would you like your identity to remain confidential, as part of participating in this research?**

**YES**

**NO**

If you've selected no, you are agreeing to be identified as a participant of this research. How would you like to be identified?

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### **Honorarium**

Participants will be offered a Walmart gift card honorarium of \$50 dollars for participating in the interview. This will be provided once the consent forms are signed, along with tobacco and a small gift. Participants are not required to accept the tobacco offering nor the gift; this is offered as part of acknowledging the gift you as a participant are providing to me as a researcher and all those who may benefit from this research. Should you choose to withdraw, you will still be offered the honorarium in full.

Participants who consent to provide feedback after reviewing the data summary will be provided an additional \$25 Walmart honorarium gift card.

Bus tickets will be provided to participate in any research related activities, including the interview and the feast.

If you are participating from your First Nation community, compensation may instead be a gift card to a local store or cash in amounts equal to what you would have received in Walmart gift cards. If you would still like a Walmart gift card instead, please let the researcher know.

### **Withdrawing from the Research**

You have the right to withdraw from the research at any point in time prior to the completion of data analysis. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions you are not comfortable or do not wish to answer. If you would like to withdraw from the research, please contact me by phone, email, or in person to let me know of your decision. You may request that any of your information be removed from the research at any point up until the end of the analysis period, which is anticipated January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023. This date may fluctuate depending on the recruitment and interview timelines. Should you request to remove your information, this information can be destroyed by the researcher or provided back to you.

### **Debriefing**

After the interview you will be invited to debrief with the digital recording turned off. You will be offered the opportunity to smudge should you wish to do so and will be welcomed to ask any questions you may have.

### **Sharing the Results**

Results of this study will be published in the thesis on the University of Manitoba MSpace online database, as well as possibly through conferences, workshops, academic journals, or at the request of First Nation communities. Prior to any publications, participants will be invited to provide feedback should they wish to do so. Prior to finalizing this research, a 1–3-page summary will also be provided to each participant for feedback. You should receive this by February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

If you would like a copy of your transcript and/or summary of the results from this study, please share your email, mailing address, or alternative option.

I would like to receive a copy of my transcript:      Yes      No

I would like to receive a summary of the results:      Yes      No

If you've selected yes to either of the above, please provide your email, your address, or an alternative option for how you would like to receive this information: \_\_\_\_\_

After the research is concluded, all participants are invited to participate in a feast where we can discuss the experience and close the research in a good way. Discussions from this feast will not be included as part of the research data.

If you do participate in the feast, you will be waiving the right to confidentiality. This means all other attendees will know you participated in this research, and they may be able to identify you in the research.

At the end of this study, we will hold a feast. I understand that by agreeing to attend, I am waiving my right to anonymity as other research participants will know who I am and know that I participated in this research. This does not change your decision to identify yourself or not in the research, as noted under the section on confidentiality, in this consent form.

Understanding this, I would like to attend the feast:      Yes      No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.**

**The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.**

**This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Officer at 204-474-7122 or [HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca).**

**A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

----- Provide for Signatures as Required -----

Participant's Name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix F: COVID-19 Information Sheet**

Faculty of Social Work

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Telephone (204) 474-7050  
Fax (204) 474-7594  
Social\_Work@umanitoba.ca

**COVID-19 Information Sheet**

**Research Title:** Best Interests According to Whom? How Anishinaabe People Impacted by Manitoba Child Welfare Define the Best Interests of the Child Principle.

**Researcher:** Brandy Kowal (Principal Investigator)  
Masters of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledges  
University of Manitoba, William Norrie Centre

[kowalb@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:kowalb@myumanitoba.ca)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Mary Kate Dennis  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

[marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca](mailto:marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca)

This document contains important information about in-person research during the COVID-19 public health crisis. COVID-19 (also called SARS-CoV2) is an illness caused by the coronavirus. Coronaviruses are most commonly spread from an infected person through: a) respiratory droplets when you cough or sneeze; b) close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands; or c) touching something with the virus on it, then touching your eyes, nose or mouth before washing your hands. If you feel that you are from a group that is more vulnerable to COVID-19 effects (e.g., senior (over the age of 60 years), immunocompromised), please discuss your participation with the research team before providing your consent. You are under no obligation to participate and can change your mind about participating in the research at any time and without consequence.

The University of Manitoba is committed to taking measures to protect the health and safety of their campuses and the wider community. We will follow University of Manitoba protocols which include:

- Research will take place in spaces where physical distancing can take place. Participant and/or researcher will wear a mask if requested by the participant or if required by the location. Interviews on university campuses will be required to wear 3-ply reusable or disposable masks.

- Prior to coming to the interview, you may be required to complete a Covid-19 screening questionnaire. If you answer yes to any of the questions, please contact the researcher to reschedule your interview. The researcher will also complete a Covid-19 screening questionnaire prior to the interview and will reschedule the interview if responding yes to any of the screening questions.
- Upon arriving for the interview, both researcher and interviewee will be provided hand sanitizer, to be brought by the researcher. If the interview is indoors, chairs/tables will be sanitized prior to and after the interview, by the researcher. If the interview is outdoors, seating will not be sanitized.
- You are asked to attend the interview alone. Accommodations can be made if necessary. Please let the researcher know ahead of time if you require someone to attend with you.

The University of Manitoba is closely watching the situation in Manitoba and may restrict in person research at any time. We will continue to keep you informed as to changes that may occur to this study. If you have questions regarding this study, measures we are taking to keep all parties safe, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to ask. You can contact any of the above-named researchers or the Human Ethics office at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca).

### Appendix G: Interview Guide

**Research Title:** Best Interests According to Whom? How Anishinaabe People Impacted by Manitoba Child Welfare Define the Best Interests of the Child Principle

**Researcher:** Brandy Kowal (Principal Investigator)  
Masters of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledges  
University of Manitoba, William Norrie Centre

[kowalb@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:kowalb@myumanitoba.ca)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Mary Kate Dennis  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

[marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca](mailto:marykate.dennis@umanitoba.ca)

#### Demographics Questionnaire

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

First Nation Community: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender identity: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been directly or indirectly impacted by the Child and Family Services System?

DIRECTLY

INDIRECTLY

Do you speak Anishinaabemowin?      YES      NO

#### Starting the Interview

Begin interview by explaining the process, including the right to refuse to answer any questions and the recording process. Offer to start the interview with a smudge. Pass tobacco and gift to participant. Begin recording device.

1. To start, please tell me a bit about yourself and what made you interested in participating in this research. Whatever you are comfortable sharing.

#### Understandings from Anishinaabemowin

If the research participant speaks their Anishinaabe language, the following will be asked. Confirm what Anishinaabe dialect the participant speaks.

2. Is there a word, phrase, or law in the language that relates to this best interests of the child principle?

**Interview Questions**

Explain that the following questions are about the participants perspectives and understandings and there are no wrong answers. All answers, ideas, and thoughts are welcome, and the participant can ask for a question to be repeated, skipped, or further explained.

3. When you think of the phrase “best interests of the child”, based on your understanding as an Anishinaabe person, what does this mean or include?
4. What is the importance of family and community in the wellbeing of Anishinaabe children?
5. Are the best interests of children tied to past and future generations? If so, how?
6. What is the importance of spirituality when it comes to Anishinaabe children?
7. What is the importance of land or place in the best interests of Anishinaabe children?
8. If you were going to write a law that CFS agencies had to follow, what would be the most important things we included for Anishinaabe children?

**Appendix H: Community Resources for Participants Info-sheet****Community Resources for Participants Info-sheet**

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**Child and Family Services Advocacy & Support Resources**

**First Nation Family Advocacy Office- FNFAO** advocates for First Nation families impacted by the CFS system. This includes working with parents, grandparents, or other family members with providing advocacy, healing supports, and programming.



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First Nations  
Family Advocate Office

200-286 Smith Street, Winnipeg

Phone: 204-957-8450 or 1-855-996-9989



**Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth-** Operating from the best interests of the child and separately from the government, the MACY office offers advocacy for children, youth, and young adults on individual matters.

Winnipeg Office: 346 Portage Avenue, 204-988-7440

Thompson Office: 300 Mystery Lake Road, 204-677-7270

Email: [info@manitobaadvocate.ca](mailto:info@manitobaadvocate.ca)

**Fearless R2W-** Fearless R2W is a non profit that serves parents working to reunify with their children and youth aging out of care. We provide opportunities for learning about child welfare in Manitoba, build community and provide advocacy when possible.

Email: [info@fearlessr2w.ca](mailto:info@fearlessr2w.ca)

Website: <https://fearlessr2w.ca/about-us>



**VOICES: Manitoba's Youth in Care Network-** provides support, encouragement, and advocacy to young people in and from care in Manitoba. VOICES offer's support and programming to youth in and from care aged 12-30 years old.

Phone: 204-982-4956

Email: [info@voices.mb.ca](mailto:info@voices.mb.ca)

Website: <https://voices.mb.ca/>

### **Culturally Based Healing Resources in Winnipeg**

**Mount Carmel Clinic:** Community Wellness Program provides culturally appropriate support to Indigenous people including advocacy, parenting/family supports, counselling, ceremony, Elder supports.

886 Main St

Phone: 204-589-9477

Email: [info@mountcarmel.ca](mailto:info@mountcarmel.ca)



**Wa-Say Healing Centre-** Wa-Say Healing Centre provides wholistic health and wellness services to primarily but not exclusively Residential School survivors and their families, including ceremony, counselling, and programming.

Phone: 204-774-6484

Email: [admin@wa-say.com](mailto:admin@wa-say.com)

**Canadian Mental Health Association-** CMHA Winnipeg has created a “mental health resource guide” that includes everything from housing and employment, to counselling and self-help resources.

You can access it here: [https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MHRG\\_ALL\\_2020.pdf](https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MHRG_ALL_2020.pdf) OR type into google “CMHA resource guide Winnipeg”.

### **Phone Based Counselling or Crisis Resources**

**First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line-** 24 hours national phone line to provided crisis intervention and counselling. Service can be requested in Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut.

Phone: 1-855-242-3310

**Klinic**- offers in person and phone services for crisis response and counselling including the suicide prevention and support line (1-877-435-7170), crisis line (1-888-322-3019), and the sexual assault crisis line (1-888-292-7565). Klinic also offers a variety of in person programming and services, including counselling.

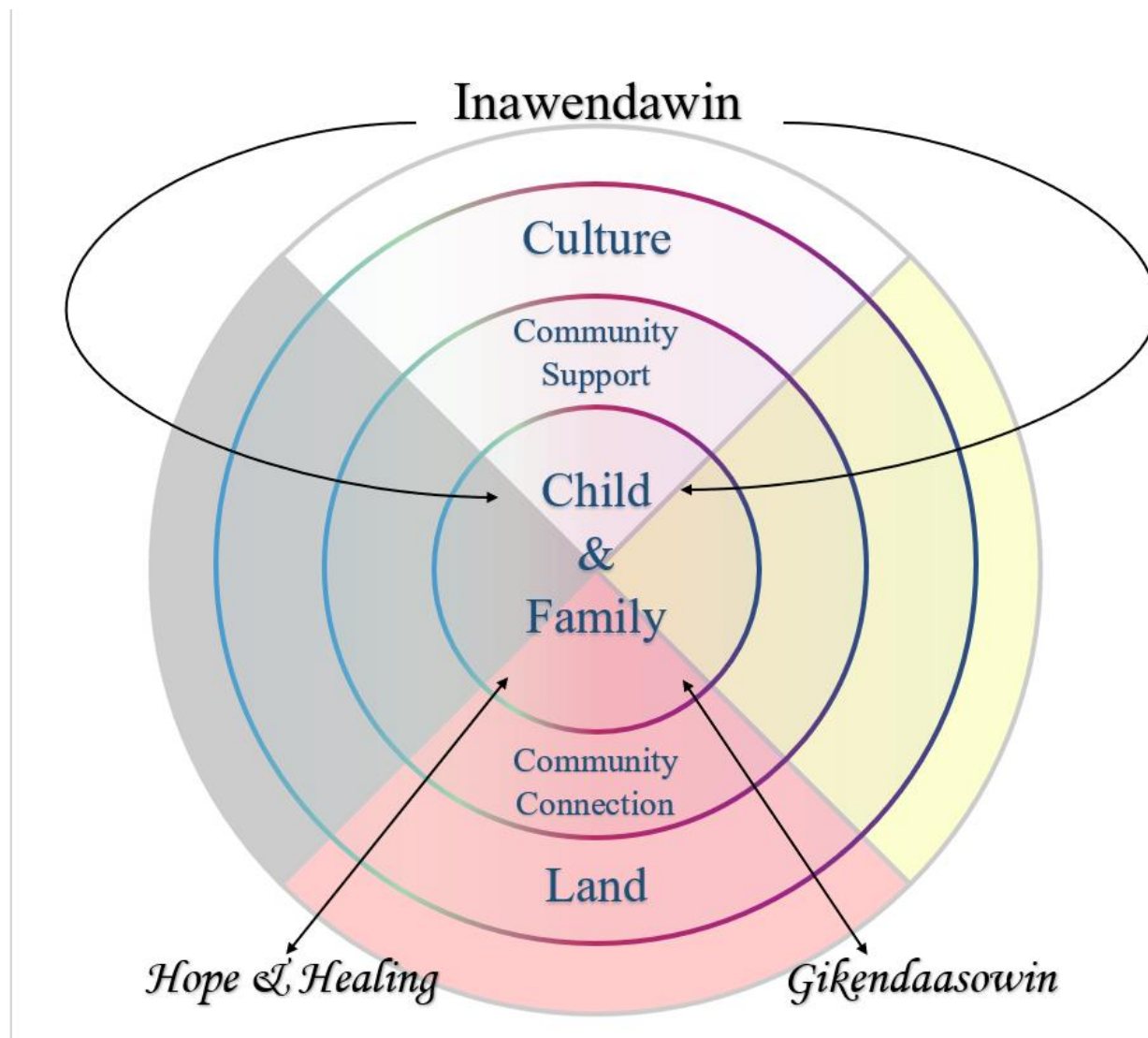


167 Sherbrook Street

Website: <https://klinik.mb.ca/crisis-support/>

Email: [klinik@klinik.mb.ca](mailto:klinik@klinik.mb.ca)

**Appendix I: Visual Representation of the Best Interests of Anishinaabe Children**



<p><b>Inawendawin</b></p> <p><i>Relationship encompasses all aspects of the lives of Anishinaabe children.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anishinaabe children are related to their family, community, land, culture, history.</li> <li>• Relationships are not defined by age or biological relation.</li> <li>• Relationships are a responsibility.</li> <li>• Each circle, each aspect of life, is interrelated with the next.</li> <li>• Relationships are medicine; relationships are healing.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Child &amp; Family</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is in the best interests of Anishinaabe children to understand that wellness of family impacts the wellness of children.</li> <li>• Family includes extended and chosen family.</li> </ul>

<p><i>Anishinaabe children are inherently connected with their parents and family.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even if children cannot be connected to their family, they have a right to know who they are and where they come from.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Support &amp; Connection</b></p> <p><i>Anishinaabe children &amp; family must be wrapped in community.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anishinaabe children need to know their First Nation community as part of knowing their roots.</li> <li>• “It takes a Village.” Anishinaabe children will benefit from having a community of supports, wherever they may live.</li> <li>• First Nation leadership has an important role to play in the lives of children from their communities.</li> <li>• Community support and connections exist within the context of community economic wellbeing. It is in the best interests of Anishinaabe children that their First Nation communities receive the adequate resources and supports for healing and wellbeing.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Culture and Aki (Land)</b></p> <p><i>Anishinaabe children, family, and community is uplifted by and within culture and land.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anishinaabe children have the right to know their identity as Anishinaabe people, including Anishinaabe ways of knowing/being/doing and history, and to have a sense of belonging as an Anishinaabe person.</li> <li>• Ceremony and spirituality can be vastly understood and will build the wellbeing of the child; these are essential, but options may be offered in the best interest of the Anishinaabe child.</li> <li>• Intergenerational connections, biological and otherwise, are an essential part of Anishinaabe relationships.</li> <li>• Anishinaabe children are related to the land, and it is in their best interest that this relationship is upheld and built upon.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The role of helpers</b></p> <p><i>Helpers may bring forward resources and opportunities to support the best interests of Anishinaabe children.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helpers must come with the intent of meeting relational responsibilities, not just to children but also to their family.</li> <li>• Helpers must strive to support building gikendaasowin; helpers must consider the education and knowledge-building needs/wants of Anishinaabe children and their families and support development of knowledge in best interests of Anishinaabe children.</li> <li>• Helpers must act in a way that intends to instill hope in families.</li> <li>• Helpers must encourage opportunities for wholistic healing.</li> </ul>