

2011

Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope Report: 2008-2011

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada



www.fncaringsociety.com



Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope Report, 2008–2011

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Author: Andrea Auger

Contributing Authors: Brenda Lewis and Dianna Mould

Editors: Cindy Blackstock, Jennifer King and Kate Muscat

Publication design: Leah Gryfe

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In Appreciation

The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (Caring Society) recognizes every person who has been engaged in the northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement.

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Executive Summary

In Canada, Aboriginal children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and the numbers continue to increase at an alarming rate. Main reasons for the rise in child removals include neglect, fuelled by poverty, poor housing and caregiver substance misuse and lack of funding for prevention and support services on-reserve. It is no surprise that an Aboriginal child is twice as likely as other Canadian children to enter the child welfare system. The crisis prompted the creation of community driven principles to reflect the best interests of Indigenous children and families in child welfare policies and practices. In 2005, Indigenous and non Indigenous child welfare leaders from North America collaborated to discuss future directions for their children. Their discussions served as a basis for *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma, 2006). Situated within a reconciliation framework of truth telling, acknowledging, restoring and relating, the Touchstones of Hope guiding principles include: Culture & Language, Holistic Approach, Structural Interventions, Self Determination and Non Discrimination. This report will draw upon an example of a current Touchstones of Hope reconciliation process to demonstrate a grassroots initiative that promotes successful outcomes for Indigenous children, youth, families and communities.

In 2008, First Nations child and family service agencies, First Nations communities and the Ministry for Children and Family Development in northern British Columbia were the first in Canada to engage in broad based child welfare reform guided by the Touchstones of Hope principles. The northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope movement is a collaboration of six First Nations child and family agencies and their communities, Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (the Caring Society). In order to promote the movement and entrench it in grassroots control, an advisory committee with both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal persons was formed. Community based facilitators were trained to work with leaders from communities and agencies to develop culturally driven visions of healthy children and families. The visions were captured during small group discussions at Touchstones of Hope community sessions. These sessions provided space for leaders to interpret and contextualize each of the Touchstone principles and develop practical next steps. Participatory Action Research (PAR) enabled participants to be a part of the research and to control of it. Following the community session, the hosting agency and communities examined central themes and prioritized next steps for which they would create an action plan. Agencies, communities and MCFD have been engaged in implementing next steps since the beginning of 2010. Additional evaluation tools are being explored to measure outcomes of this grassroots initiative. Other regions and organizations in Canada and the United States are now incorporating the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation framework into their child welfare policies and practices.

Introduction

The northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope is a grassroots controlled initiative toward reconciliation in Aboriginal¹ child welfare. “Touchstones of Hope” are guiding principles, interpreted within the distinct context of Aboriginal communities, forming the basis of a movement which aims at strengthening relationships between individuals engaged in child welfare. The overall goal of the reconciliation movement is to identify gaps in child welfare services and policies for Aboriginal children, to determine resources needed for improvements and to formulate, then implement next steps for a healthier Aboriginal population in the northern British Columbia region. It is hoped that collaboration will lead to a remodeling of the child welfare system so that it fosters Aboriginal cultures and values in order to ensure the success of all Aboriginal children, youth and families. This report describes, from the movement’s inception to its current status, the process and tools chosen by First Nations communities to implement the Touchstones principles into policy and practice governing child welfare. It further serves to explain evaluation and research tools used to elicit main themes arising from collaboration sessions.

Aboriginal children in Canada are dramatically over-represented in the child welfare system. It is estimated that there are between 22,500 and 28,000 First Nations children in the care of the Canadian child welfare system, three times the number of children who attended residential schools at the peak of their operation in the 1940s (Blackstock, 2003). The child welfare system has a long history of removing children from their families. Blackstock (2009) states that social workers often took Aboriginal children from their homes and placed them in residential schools; many children never returned home. The disproportionate rate of removals that took place between 1960 and the mid-1980s would eventually become known as the “60’s scoop.” In response to this crisis, First Nations began in the 1970s to assert control over child welfare in their communities. Although First Nations child and family service agencies were created to support First Nations communities, the number of children in child welfare care continues to rise. The Wen:de report (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2005), a study of child welfare in nine sample provinces, found the ratio of First Nations children placed into the child welfare system was 1:17. The ratio for non-Aboriginal children was 1: 200. Many of the challenges that arise for Aboriginal children and youth in the child welfare system relate to the lack of funding for culturally relevant programs and services on reserve.

The situation in Aboriginal child welfare prompted the creation of community driven principles to reflect the best interests of Indigenous children and families in child welfare policies and practices. In October of 2005, over 200 Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders involved in child welfare in North America assembled in Niagara Falls to establish a basis for re-defining

1 The term “Aboriginal” signifies the three Aboriginal groups in Canada as defined in the Constitution, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit. The term “Indigenous” refers to first peoples across the world. In reference to the northern BC Touchstones, this report will employ the term Aboriginal as well as First Nations. The child welfare agencies involved in this initiative serve First Nations peoples and communities however it cannot be discounted that they may also work with other Aboriginal peoples.

child welfare in ways that benefited Indigenous children and families. This consultative process resulted in the development of five Indigenous “touchstone” principles to guide research, practice and policy. These Touchstones of Hope principles are: Self Determination, Culture and Language, Holistic Response, Structural Interventions and Non-Discrimination. These principles are constitutional in nature meaning they are interpreted within the unique culture and context of each Indigenous nation thus avoiding a pan-Aboriginal approach. The Touchstones principles are situated within a four phase process of reconciliation:

- Truth telling – Open and honest dialogue regarding child welfare.
- Acknowledging – Affirming and learning from the past and embracing new possibilities.
- Restoring – Addressing the problems of the past and creating a better path for the future.
- Relating – Moving forward together in a respectful way along a new path.

Reconciliation in child welfare was viewed as essential to child welfare practice in Canada. In many cases, past relationships between those involved in child welfare were built on a foundation of mistrust. Further, child welfare practice in Canada is borne from the western colonial tradition and is inconsistent with Indigenous culture and way of life.

The Touchstone principles provide the framework for the document *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma, 2006). This document was produced in cooperation by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (the Caring Society), the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). The Touchstones philosophy encompasses more than Aboriginal awareness training or events; it is a movement toward Indigenous child welfare reform where the Touchstones, as given meaning by Indigenous communities, guide all decisions affecting Indigenous children.

Following the 2006 Touchstones document, community based curriculum, called *Touchstones for Leadership* was developed by Dr. Margaret Kovach. Its purpose was to further assist Aboriginal communities to interpret the Touchstone principles within their culture and context and engage in a reconciliation process at a community level.

As stated by Dr. Kovach (2008),

[The curriculum] is intended for individuals involved in leadership activities within child welfare. Leadership is defined broadly to mean those engaged in leadership at the cultural, community, institutional, governmental, and political level within Indigenous communities in the context of child welfare policy, practice and research. [It] is also aimed at Non-Indigenous leadership impacting Indigenous child welfare at the political and institutional levels.

The curriculum was published by the Caring Society and NICWA in 2008. The Caring Society participated in several initiatives to engage Aboriginal peoples in Canada in the Touchstones reconciliation movement. Train-the-trainer sessions were held to promote and entrench the

movement in grassroots control, prepare community based facilitators to work in communities, and develop culturally driven visions of healthy children and families. Through many Touchstones gatherings, the Caring Society was able to increase awareness of the Touchstones on a national level which led to interest from leadership working in Aboriginal child welfare in northern British Columbia.

SECTION I:

Beginnings: Northern BC Touchstones of Hope

According to the Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates (2010), “Aboriginal children in British Columbia are six times more likely to be taken into care than non-Aboriginal children and as of March 2010, represent 54% of the province’s in-care child population” (p. 7). With regard to the north specifically, the Ministry for Children and Family Development (n.d.) states:

The North Region encompasses the largest geographic area, more than one-half of the province’s landmass, with a relatively small population base. Service delivery is managed through one large urban center (Prince George), seven moderate sized urban centres (Quesnel, Terrace, Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, Kitimat, Mackenzie, and Prince Rupert), seven small urban communities (Ft. Nelson, Chetwynd, Vanderhoof, Houston, Fort St. James, Burns Lake, and Smithers) and a number of towns (Dease Lake, Masset, McBride, Stewart, New Hazelton, Hazelton, Queen Charlotte City, and Valemount) that service large rural areas.

Approximately 9% of the province’s youth population aged 0–19 reside in the North Region. There are approximately 51 First Nation Bands in the region; 16% of the population is aboriginal.

[...] The percentage of children in care in the North Region is high in comparison to other regions in the province and a significant proportion of child welfare work is dedicated to working with aboriginal children and their families (North Region Profile).

Child welfare in British Columbia, as in the rest of Canada, falls under provincial jurisdiction, and this legislation applies both on and off reserve. In BC specifically, there are 22 delegated First Nations child and family service agencies (MCFD, *Delegated child & family*). The majority of these agencies² are partially delegated (i.e. in charge of guardianship, family support, foster home recruitment) while the province, as represented by the Ministry for Children and Family Development, provides child protection services. The federal government, however, has responsibility for funding services on reserves. Since past relationships were strained, this arrangement requires significant collaboration between the Ministry, the federal government and the First Nations child and family service agencies.

Faced with a disproportionate rate of Aboriginal child removals in northern BC, delegates from the First Nations child and family services agencies in the region and the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) attended the 2005 gathering in Niagara Falls. After the session they were inspired to move forth together with a reconciliation movement in northern BC.

² There are nine fully delegated agencies in British Columbia meaning they have full child protection, including investigation and child removal. See Ministry for Children and Family Development. (n.d). *Delegated child & family service agencies*. Retrieved from http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/aboriginal/delegated/index.htm

Doing so, however, required grassroots driven and community owned process. Free and prior consent by First Nations to participate is critical, since imposing Touchstones would contradict the philosophy of the movement. Mindful of this, delegates who attended the Niagara gathering partnered with the Caring Society to gauge interest from other First Nations child and family service agencies and the province in launching a Touchstones of Hope movement in northern BC.

In the fall of 2008, a two-day regional information session was planned for leaders³ to raise awareness about the Touchstones of Hope and create a foundation for building healthier futures for First Nations children and families in the north. The conference planning committee included: First Nations representatives, staff from the First Nations child-welfare agencies in Northern BC, the MCFD and the Caring Society. Leaders from the north region were invited to attend the session to engage in conversations about child welfare and the existing and non-existing measures to ensure child safety. The session provided leaders with the opportunity to decide whether or not incorporating the Touchstones of Hope into practice and policy could be a viable way to help First Nations children and youth in child welfare.

Before the session, all participants were asked to “leave their titles at the door” in order to approach the conversation as an individual and promote the principle of truth telling. The structure of the regional session was designed to elicit short and long term plans that could be implemented within 5 to 10 years. Facilitators guided leaders in creating visions for safe and healthy children in northern British Columbia through interpretation of the Touchstones principles. This session was for demonstration purposes only—an opportunity for leaders to engage in a real life simulation of what could be expected if they chose to launch the Touchstones of Hope process in their communities.

After the session in Prince Rupert, six delegated child welfare agencies decided to implement the Touchstones of Hope movement in their communities. These agencies are: Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society, Carrier-Sekani Child and Family Services, Northwest Inter-Nation Family & Community Services Society, Nisga’a Child and Family Services and Haida Child and Family Services, Gitksan Child & Family Services Society. It was decided that the MCFD and the Caring Society would also participate in the northern BC Touchstones initiative to support the work and provide assistance as guided by the agencies and communities.

An official advisory committee was formed to guide the implementation of the movement in these six communities, promote the initiative and identify cross-cutting themes to inform legislative, funding and policy changes and development. In order to support consistency in the Touchstones movement, the advisory committee adopted the Touchstones of Hope principles and reconciliation process in its terms of reference. The movement is now recognized as the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope (www.northernbctouchstones.ca).

Given the large scope of work to be done, a staff member from one of the participating delegated agencies was seconded to the Ministry to coordinate the movement. The Touchstones of Hope coordinator for the north works with the advisory committee and the Touchstones coordinator at

³ Refer to above definition of leaders and leadership as described by Dr. Margaret Kovach (2008).

the Caring Society to plan community based events, conduct evaluation and develop promotional resources for the movement. Implementing the Touchstones involved several engagement opportunities including train-the-trainer sessions and community gatherings hosted by the First Nations agencies involved in the movement.

Train-the-trainer sessions were designed to create a network of trained facilitators who would guide Touchstones community sessions. The train-the-trainer approach adhered to the grassroots aspect of the Touchstones by inviting members of the participating communities and agencies to actively participate and control the process. At the community sessions, the facilitators worked with First Nations communities and their delegated agencies to interpret the Touchstones within the context of their distinct values and beliefs. Staff members from the Ministry also attended the community sessions to support the reconciliation process and share their visions for healthy Aboriginal children in the north. Communities permitted the sessions to be digitally recorded for the purpose of research. The participatory process of all leaders at the sessions stayed in line with the philosophy of Touchstones being community oriented.

After each community session, facilitators sent their written notes to the northern BC Touchstones coordinator who compiled them into one document. The coordinator would then meet with the advisory committee to review next steps and to develop an action plan for implementation. While the northern BC Touchstones of Hope movement continues to progress this report offers a look back at the work undertaken to date. Specifically, this document serves to:

- Explain each of the steps in the northern British Columbia Touchstones process.
- Provide tools and resources utilized in order to help put the Touchstones into context.
- Explain the evaluation and research utilized for this process.
- Report themes from across the Touchstones community sessions.
- Present future directions of this initiative.

SECTION II:

Starting a Reconciliation Journey

Building a social movement for change requires a solid foundation. Drawing on the experience in northern BC, this section outlines steps in starting a reconciliation process including ways to gauge interest from leaders in Indigenous child welfare and resources used to infuse learning about Touchstones. Even before those working in Indigenous child welfare decide they want to partake in a touchstones reconciliation process, it is essential to ascertain whether or not agencies and communities are ready for reconciliation work.

A. Factors for Success in Reconciliation

Communities and agencies in the northern British Columbia Touchstones initiative reached a point where they wanted to change current child welfare policies and practices to reflect the distinct needs of Aboriginal children and families. Experience coupled with participant feedback suggests that reconciliation in Indigenous child welfare is more likely to be achieved when certain factors exist:

- 1) **Community and agency involvement.** Communities in the northern BC initiative were represented by a First Nations child and family service agency and staff had established relationships with community members. The strong relationship between agencies and communities enabled plans to move forth since agencies were trusted to assist in coordinating and implementing Touchstones vision plans.
- 2) **Political stability and leadership.** Experience demonstrates that conflict within or between agencies and communities produces little success with reconciliation in child welfare since the best interests of children and families may be overlooked. Politically sound communities and agencies provide a solid foundation for children, youth and families and are usually represented by effective leadership. The agencies and communities involved in the northern BC Touchstones had influential leaders, both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal, who were willing to explore child welfare policies and practices best suited to the cultures and contexts of the communities.
- 3) **Government readiness.** Since government often controls policy making, all levels of government must be ready for change. Those working in government must be willing to listen and accept that Western ideologies of caring for children may not be the best way. Relationship building between First Nations communities and First Nations child welfare agencies and government is more likely to be successful when all parties are open to change.
- 4) **Collaboration.** Leaders want to engage in a process promoting collaboration between First Nations communities, agencies and government. They are equally invested in a long term process of meaningful change and have decided in an informed way that the Touchstones approach is a good option. Despite past conflicts, everyone works together for the best interest of Aboriginal children, youth and families.

In northern BC, First Nations agencies, communities, and the provincial government were ready for a different approach in child welfare. Where policy was concerned, the Ministry was prepared to step back as well as work collaboratively with their First Nations counterparts to find culturally relevant solutions for First Nations children. As a collective, all sides were willing to have courageous conversations and examine underlying challenges preventing safe and healthy Aboriginal communities.

B. Advisory committee

Advisory committee members are active participants in the Touchstones process and serve as the decision makers. Prior to the Prince Rupert regional Touchstones session, a planning committee was established to plan the session. The committee was comprised of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members (60/40 split). Included were: Elders, community members, staff from participating First Nations child welfare agencies, MCFD and the Caring Society.

Committee member responsibilities included:

- Attending meetings by teleconference or in person
- Ensuring that the Touchstones process was community driven and that everyone involved had a voice
- Setting time goals for each step of the process and assigning tasks
- Assisting in planning and organizing
- Working with other collaborators to ensure the success of the movement

The planning committee organized and participated in the regional information session in Prince Rupert. In January of 2009, the formal Touchstones advisory committee was created with six of the participating First Nations child and family service agencies from the Prince Rupert session who wished to adopt the Touchstones of Hope guiding principles into their work. They set a timeline⁴ to accomplish steps in the initiative in order to implement the philosophy in the north. The advisory committee created a website (www.northernbctouchstones.ca) as well as quarterly newsletters that are available electronically.

C. Tools, Activities & Techniques

As a collective, the advisory committee selected numerous tools, activities and techniques to promote learning about Touchstones. These resources, including PATH, Chicken Soup, 7 Ways to Make a Difference and facilitation techniques, were used in Prince Rupert and laid the foundation for success in subsequent Touchstones of Hope gatherings.

⁴ See section III. Engagement, A. Timeline. p. 17.

1. PATH

PATH (Planning Alternatives to Tomorrows of Hope) is a participatory activity that presents “person-centered ways to build community” (O’Brien, Pearpoint, & Kahn, 2010). The PATH process was selected because it builds on First Nations traditions of oral history and welcomes participation by people of all literacy levels. It can also be used in First Nations languages, English or French. With PATH, large ideas are broken down into smaller parts.⁵ It is a “thinking outside the box” activity that permits participants to share their aspirations and envision a new reality for healthy Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities. With PATH, large ideas are broken down into smaller parts. The first step, the *Dream*, has two guidelines: it has to be possible within 10 years and it must be positive. The Dream is framed as a statement and lays the foundation for the rest of the activity. At northern BC Touchstones gatherings, the statement was: “Aboriginal children in northern British Columbia would be safe and living in dignity and respect if...” Participants are encouraged to share sounds, images, smells or anything else that contributes to the vision for Aboriginal children and families.

Indicators of the Dream, the second step of PATH, are a measure of the progress of the Dream; for example, if a Dream is to have more language speakers, an Indicator might be the presence of language schools. The third step, titled *Now*, presents the opportunity for individuals to voice what is or is not in place for healthy Aboriginal communities. *Enroll* is the fourth step; participants share who or what they would need in order to achieve the *Dream*. The fifth step is *Building Strength*. Participants contribute their thoughts on what is needed to sustain the *Dream* so it can be a long term initiative. The last step of the PATH, *Next Steps*, engages participants in creating achievable plans to attain their dreams for healthy children. PATH is an economical resource and also an effective planning tool to use with individuals of all ages and literacy levels. PATH facilitator guides are available to order from Inclusion Press by telephone 416-658-5363 or from their website <http://www.inclusion.com>.

2. Chicken Soup

Created by Terry Cross from NICWA, the Chicken Soup story challenges thinking by demonstrating how each individual possesses a unique worldview. The story is of a couple, Chicken Soup and VapoRub, who represent individuals in a loving relationship. When Chicken Soup becomes ill, VapoRub tries to provide their remedy and encroaches on Chicken Soup’s right to choose. The metaphor of chicken soup and VapoRub illustrates how a relationship could become such that an individual has good intentions to help the other and in doing so, imposes his or her values or beliefs. VapoRub symbolizes the individuals in Indigenous child welfare who have good intentions but work in a child welfare system set up to remove children from their home. This has been, and continues to be, detrimental for children and their families. In sum, this metaphor is used to illustrate the situation in child welfare and how good intentions often result in harm. Other metaphors and activities can also be used to make this point. The general idea is

⁵ For PATH diagram, refer to Appendix A, p. 37.

to help participants engage in critical reflection on how harmful behaviours can be disguised as morally good and what that means for families.

3. 7 Ways to Make a Difference

The Caring Society believes that First Nations children should have access to equitable funding for services on reserve such as child welfare, education and health care. Furthermore, the organization supports grassroots initiatives that recognize First Nations communities as decision makers for their children, youth and families. The Caring Society also encourages everyone to help make a difference and has created a campaign promoting grassroots social change movements called 7 Ways to Make a Difference for First Nations children, youth and families (www.fncaringsociety.com):

1. I Am a Witness – the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal
2. Jordan’s Principle
3. Shannen’s Dream
4. The Touchstones of Hope
5. Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People:
6. Many Hands One Dream:
7. Learn at www.fncaringsociety.com

These 7 Ways to Make a Difference are reflective of the Touchstones guiding principles (Self Determination, Culture and Language, Holistic Approach, Structural Interventions and Non Discrimination). At the northern BC Touchstones gatherings, I Am a Witness, Jordan’s Principle and Shannen’s Dream enhanced understanding of the touchstones principles and provided examples of reconciliation in action. A brief description of three of these campaigns is provided below.

In 2007, the Assembly of First Nations and the Caring Society filed a human rights complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal against the government of Canada. The complaint alleges that Canada discriminates against First Nations children living on reserve by providing them with less child welfare funding than received by children off reserve (www.fnwitness.ca). Jordan’s Principle is a child first principle to resolving jurisdictional disputes within and between federal and provincial/territorial governments regarding services for First Nations children living on reserve or Inuit children. Jordan’s Principle calls on the government of first contact to pay for the services for the child and ensures that all needs are met before entering into funding disagreements (www.jordansprinciple.ca). Shannen’s Dream was named in memory of Shannen Koostachin, a 15 year-old First Nations youth, who along with other youth from Attawapiskat First Nation, fought to have a proper school. Over 30 years ago, diesel fuel spilled into the ground beneath their elementary school. Although the school was closed over a decade ago, the students remain in “temporary” portables. After Shannen’s tragic passing in 2010, Shannen’s Dream was

launched to continue her dream for “safe and comfy” equitably funded schools in all First Nations communities (www.shannensdream.ca).

The structural challenges examined in the 7 Ways to Make a Difference reflect central themes from discussions in the northern BC gatherings including: poverty, poor housing and lack of funding for services such as education, child welfare and healthcare. By providing participants with examples like the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and Jordan’s Principle, participants have the opportunity to engage in meaningful change with regard to funding and jurisdictional barriers. Further, they can see that they have the capacity to help implement the *PATH Dream* (as explained above) and be a part of social change movement for Aboriginal families, children and youth.

4. Facilitation Techniques

The Caring Society recommends that, within any Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement, all events be guided by a team of presenters and facilitators. From the northern BC touchstones, experience has provided a variety of techniques that the Touchstones facilitators employed at the gatherings. The table below outlines various techniques utilized by facilitators.

Technique	Utilized for
Co-facilitation	PATH
“Grounder” ⁶	PATH
Direct Instruction	Delivering information to participants
Small Groups	Engaging all participants
Sharing Circles	Engaging all participants, closing a session
Oral (listening and hearing) exercises	PATH – visualization activity
Panel discussion	Large groups; different perspectives on one topic

⁶ See Section D. Victoria Provincial Forum (p. 17)

SECTION III:

Engagement

Providing space and time for relationship building in a reconciliation movement is essential. For this reason, the northern BC advisory committee planned and delivered various sessions for leaders from First Nations communities, First Nations child and family service agencies and MCFD to learn about the Touchstones, engage in reconciliation and commit to action. This section of the report will detail the Touchstones sessions that occurred since 2008.

A. Timeline

October 2008	Prince Rupert Touchstones of Hope Leadership Gathering.
January 2009	Joint First Nation and MCFD Touchstone advisory committee developed.
March–April 2009	Creation of the website and launch of the quarterly newsletter
July 2009	Touchstones of Hope Train the trainer sessions in Prince George.
October 2009	MCFD Managers Retreat to envision the implementation of the Touchstones in the Ministry.
November 2009	MCFD Team Leader Meeting Community session in Fort St. James, BC with Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society.
February 2010	Community session in Prince George, BC with Carrier-Sekani Child and Family Services.
March 2010	Touchstones Provincial Forum in Victoria, BC.
April 2010	Community session in Terrace, BC with Northwest Inter-Nation Family & Community Services Society.
October 2010	Community session in Terrace, BC with Nisga’a Child and Family Services.
November 2010	Community session in Haida Gwaii, BC with Haida Child and Family Services.
March 2011	Completion of Touchstones of Hope Tool Kit.
August 2011	Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope report.
On-Going	Follow-up meetings with each of the agencies.
2012/2013	Report of full findings of themes from community sessions. Evaluation component to gauge Touchstones in action.

B. Prince Rupert Regional Session

In order to learn about the process and to determine if the Touchstones could work for their community or organization, leaders involved in First Nations child welfare activities were invited to a Touchstones of Hope regional session. From October 15–17, 2008, 120 leaders working with Aboriginal children, families and youth in child welfare in northern BC assembled for a two and a half day regional Touchstones session. It was primarily an information session to demonstrate what could be expected when engaging in a touchstones reconciliation process in First Nations communities. During the session, key note speakers gave presentations and small group sessions were held with touchstones facilitators. The facilitation team included individuals from the National Indian Child Welfare Association (USA), the Child Welfare League of America (USA), the Provincial Training & Practice Analyst team in Saskatchewan⁷ and the Caring Society. Participants at the session were invited by the planning committee because they demonstrated leadership qualities. There were Elders, youth, community members from First Nations, staff from the First Nations child and family service agencies and staff from MCFD.

To respect cultural protocol, Elders said prayers to open and close the day. The two and a half days flowed between key note presentations and small group guided discussions. The Caring Society provided contextual background information on the Touchstones of Hope and an approach to child welfare rooted in a reconciliation framework. Individuals working in child welfare in Canada and the United States presented their research on Indigenous children in the child welfare system. To illustrate what the Touchstones principles might look like “in action,” the Caring Society presented Jordan’s Principle and the importance of non discrimination for services and policies affecting Aboriginal children. Another presentation delved into poverty and poor housing; it focused on the importance of shifting child welfare to include structural issues since they are often the reason why disproportionate rates of Aboriginal children are in child welfare care. The final presentation provided leaders with additional ways to engage in reconciliation in their communities.

Leaders articulated thoughts on the Touchstones in one of six facilitated small discussion groups. The first step in the reconciliation process is truth telling and the conversations surrounding child welfare and children may be personal and challenging. The planning committee arranged the groups prior to the session to ensure all groups were evenly divided between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal participants. There was an Elder in every group as a support person. Everyone participating in the Prince Rupert session was asked to forget their job titles and to attend as an individual. The goal was to allow participants to express themselves in a respectful and meaningful way. During small group sessions, facilitators guided leaders through PATH to create a dream reality where all Aboriginal children and families in the north are healthy.

Another section focused on the Culture, Language and Holistic Approach Touchstones. Facilitators invited participants to think about the current worldview driving child welfare, the worldview needed to achieve the dream and how things could change to better achieve the

⁷ Trained facilitators from previous Caring Society work with the Touchstones of Hope.

dream. Self Determination was then illustrated through the chicken soup metaphor. Discussion addressed the levels and forms of self determination needed to achieve the dream, self determination in the current child welfare system and ways to change child welfare to include self determination. In the Structural Intervention Touchstone session, participants discussed existing and non existing structural supports and actions needed to make improvements. Discussion about Non Discrimination followed the key note address on Jordan’s Principle. Jordan’s story demonstrates what discrimination looks like, how it is rationalized and what can be done to respond to it. Jordan’s Principle evoked conversation about the current status of non discrimination in child welfare and how to move toward the dream.

At the end of each Touchstones session, participants are asked to fill out an evaluation of the event.⁸ The following are comments from participant evaluations from the Prince Rupert gathering:

“Would be awesome to bring Touchstones to each community of the delegated agencies and give them the empowerment to take care of their children.”

“The conference has enthused energy to start the process @ my home community even though it seems so hopeless @ the moment.”

“More Touchstones workshops in different parts of BC. One can’t learn from just one workshop.”

“Bring these sessions into communities. Can’t wait for the Youth Train the Trainers.”

“To keep on with the process and move into communities.”

“Very informative, practical, era changing ideas that I believe are going to make a difference for our children.”

“It was profound to experience the stories of the elders: courage, determination, honesty, humility and resilience.”

C. Train-the-trainer Sessions

The northern BC advisory committee chose train-the-trainer sessions as the approach in preparing community members to participate in Touchstones gatherings. From July 13–16, 2009, approximately 30 representatives from the child and family service agencies, youth, Elders and others from communities, and MCFD staff attended one of two Touchstones of Hope: Reconciliation in Indigenous Child Welfare train-the-trainer sessions. This training, delivered by the Caring Society, provided participants with tools to guide community sessions based on interpretations of the five Touchstone of Hope principles: Self-determination, Holistic Approach, Structural Interventions, Non Discrimination and Culture and Language. These two particular training sessions were the first sessions hosted within one region of a province and prepared individuals to guide community sessions.

⁸ To see evaluation questions, refer to Appendix B, pp. 38–39.

Throughout the two days, facilitators worked with participants to provide background information on Indigenous child welfare in Canada, to help them better understand the Touchstones of Hope and PATH activity, and to prepare them for facilitation and presentations.

Both sessions opened and closed with a prayer by an Elder. Training began with an introduction of the Touchstones then proceeded to background information about the need for reconciliation in child welfare. Participants learned about the factors driving a disproportionate rate of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children into the child welfare system. The facilitators used examples from the Caring Society's 7 Ways to Make a Difference to illustrate how Aboriginal peoples remain discriminated against. Further, they presented the links between systematic structural risk such as poverty and poor housing and the rise in Aboriginal children and youth in child welfare care. The examples used were the Canadian Human Rights Complaint and Jordan's Principle. The 7 Ways were utilized to illustrate approaches of inciting change at grassroots and national levels.

Participants shared their definitions of reconciliation in their own context of child welfare and learned more about reconciliation. The facilitators simulated the PATH process with participants who brainstormed their dreams for Aboriginal children in the north. There was a Touchstones scavenger hunt of the Touchstones for Leadership 5 module curriculum (www.fncaringsociety.com) to familiarize trainers with the curriculum and the five guiding Touchstones principles.

Another component of this training was to provide tips on public speaking and facilitation. Participants were given resources about speaking in front of groups as well as different avenues to facilitate group discussion.

During the final day of the training, participants put the information and the skills they learned into practice. With a partner or small group, participants chose a unit from one of the 5 module Touchstones curriculum. They worked on a presentation and delivered it to the group, with 7 minutes to present. The goal was to engage participants in planning a presentation for a limited amount of time and to enhance facilitation skills. The sessions closed with a talking circle, followed by a prayer by the Elder. This training created a facilitation network composed of individuals capable of facilitating Touchstones sessions in their community.

D. Victoria Provincial Forum

The northern BC movement toward reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare prompted interest from other parts of the province. The advisory committee worked with First Nations, First Nations child and family service agencies and other MCFD regions to host the Touchstones of Hope Provincial information forum in Victoria, B.C. From March 15–16, 2010, individuals working in British Columbia in Aboriginal child welfare attended the regional session. It was an opportunity to learn about the process of the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement. Leaders were invited to define the Touchstones within their own cultures and contexts and see if the process was fitting for their communities.

The facilitation team included Touchstones trainers from the CWLA, the Ministry of Social Services and Touchwood Child & Family Services in Saskatchewan, the Vancouver Island University, NICWA and the Caring Society.

Structured like the session in Prince Rupert, the two days combined large group presentations and small group brainstorming. The Caring Society introduced the Touchstones of Hope and spoke about the goals and format of the forum. Advisory committee members sat on a panel for a question and answer period regarding the northern BC Touchstones movement. A similar panel presentation was delivered by the facilitators from the USA and from Saskatchewan speaking about their experience with the Touchstones in their regions. There was a screening of *What Matters to Me* (Assembly of First Nations n.d.), a video produced by the Assembly of First Nations as an initiative under their “Make Poverty History” campaign. The video consists of interviews with Aboriginal children and youth from across Canada speaking of the experience of living on reserve.

In small group discussion, participants developed their visions for an improved child welfare system for Aboriginal children, youth and families. In Prince Rupert, each small group discussion focused on one of the Touchstones guiding principles and participants completed a PATH for each Touchstone guiding principle. In Victoria, each break out session focused on a step in the PATH rather than looking at the Touchstones separately. Looking at the Touchstones as a whole allowed the conversations between participants to flow more naturally.

For this session, the advisory committee suggested incorporating a “grounder” in every group to be a support person for the facilitators. This was an effective strategy since the grounder participated in PATH as well as provided assistance to the facilitators including helping facilitators accurately capture participant contributions, initiating discussion if the need arose and assisting with logistics and supplies.

After two days of building knowledge and sharing discussions, delegates were encouraged to bring the information back to their communities and organizations to gauge interest in moving forth with turning their visions into committed engagement and action.⁹

E. Preparation Sessions

Prior to beginning work on the community sessions, the advisory committee wanted leaders who would be attending the sessions to learn about the Touchstones and to have an idea of the session structure. With this in mind, the advisory committee planned a series of “pre-session” opportunities providing a safe and comfortable space to allow for collaboration and meaningful discussions to occur. It was important that participants understand the depth of the conversations that would take place at the community sessions. Given the need for communication and respect across cultures, special attention was given to ensuring those working at the MCFD had a good grounding in the history of child welfare for First Nations and the structural issues impacting communities.

⁹ Since the session in Victoria, other regions in BC have become engaged in conversations around reconciliation and how they can become part of the Touchstones movement. See www.northernbctouchstones.ca for further updates and information.

Before the community sessions occurred, the northern BC Touchstones coordinator consulted with staff from MCFD and the agencies. The pre-sessions prepared individuals for the sessions and stressed the importance of leaving titles at the door. The meetings also served as a precursor to the work on Non Discrimination by preparing participants to be aware of their own worldview and how that emerges in their work. Peggy McIntosh's *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (2004) was utilized to challenge participants' thinking about ethnic stereotypes and power dynamics between cultures and ethnicities. The sessions set the stage for respectful collaboration between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal participants in a safe environment.

The advisory committee hosted sessions for MCFD staff as educational opportunities to learn about Touchstones principles and more around Aboriginal culture and communities. From October 20–22, 2009, MCFD Managers participated in a retreat to learn more about each of the Touchstones from the Caring Society, the Touchstones coordinator for the north and the Manager for Collaborative Practice at MCFD. The session started with an Introduction of the Touchstones followed by Andree Cazabon's *Third World Canada* (2009) which documents, from First Nations children and youth's perspectives, the structural issues on reserve. The Caring Society further explained issues like poverty, poor housing and caregiver substance misuse by drawing from the past and using the example of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. An Elders Panel spoke as voices of experience and addressed Culture and Language, Holistic Approach and Self Determination. On the last day, there was a presentation on the Non Discrimination Touchstone with Jordan's Principle as an example of a non discrimination oriented change strategy in action. There were also team building activities which served to strengthen relationships between participants.

F. Community sessions

Indigenous communities are in the best position to decide what is best for their children and communities. In the northern BC Touchstones movement, the PATH process engaged community members to create their culturally specific vision of healthy families and children to focus the implementation of the Touchstones principles and reconciliation process in their communities. The community sessions advanced the reconciliation movement and enhanced child welfare knowledge for both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal leaders, First Nations child and family service agencies and MCFD. Community sessions also served as a place to share dreams for the children, youth and families and to create achievable plans to realize their dreams. The invitees, selected by the host First Nations child and family service agency in consultation with the advisory committee members, were people of all ages who were actively engaging in positive change in their community or would like to do so. An emphasis was placed on the inclusion of Elders, youth, parents, children and child and family serving professionals both within the community and outside of the community. Social workers, supervisors and child welfare policy and administrators from the community and from the province were also invited. The sessions were typically very well attended with approximately 35% participation of community members.

The facilitation team for the community sessions included the trained Touchstones facilitators (most of who had participated in the train-the-trainer sessions), advisory committee members and

the northern BC and Caring Society Touchstones coordinators. The facilitation team met a day prior to the community session to clarify roles and responsibilities. The facilitators also assisted in all other tasks as required such as registration or preparing break out rooms.

Each of the five community sessions were structured similar to the sessions in Prince Rupert and Victoria. Throughout the two-day sessions, each of the Touchstones of Hope – Culture and Language, Holistic Approach, Self Determination, Structural Interventions and Non Discrimination – was presented in the large group. Facilitators guided participants through small group discussions with the PATH to develop community specific interpretations of the Touchstones. Community sessions honoured cultural traditions of the hosting community. Elders assisted with opening and closing, formed the support network for participants and shared wisdom and stories.

The Touchstones guiding principles are intended to be translated differently across Nations and cultures making each session distinct. At the community sessions, plenary presentations differed from the Regional and Provincial sessions because speakers not only interpreted the Touchstones at a regional and national level but also at a community level. Plenary speakers included Elders and other community members, directors and staff from the child and family service agencies and staff from MCFD.

The following section will provide details about each of the community sessions.

1. Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society

The first community session occurred from November 25–26, 2009 in partnership with the Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society. This agency serves the Nak'azdli and Tl'azt'en Carrier Nations situated along Stuart Lake in Fort St. James, British Columbia. The Fort St. James community centre hosted and catered the session.

The northern BC and the Caring Society Touchstones coordinators delivered large group presentations on each of the Touchstones. They also explained PAR and its place in the session. An Elder from one of the local communities spoke about the experience of attending residential schools. After each presentation, participants divided into small groups to formulate their dream for the children, youth and families in their communities. The PATH sessions were structured like those in Prince Rupert with each Touchstone as a focus for discussion. The facilitation team built on questions raised in the Prince Rupert gathering by drawing upon the Chicken Soup metaphor, Jordan's Principle and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.

The following are comments from participant evaluations:

“I am really happy that we started this and work out our differences! Lots of work needed yet!”

“I have hope that I will see a tangible change in my life time. Is there an end to racist practices – I hope so!”

“Thank you for bringing all the different participants together to see the different perspectives, hear the stories and bringing focus back onto the children!”

“My eyes have been opened and I see what is happening today. I see the needs our children have. I need to be more educated in order to help. “

2. Carrier Sekani Family Services

Carrier Sekani Family Services (CSFS) is guided by the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council to deliver services to communities in north-central British Columbia consisting of Burns Lake, Cheslatta, Lake Babine, Nadleh Whut'en, Nee Tahi Buhn, Skin Tyee, Stella'ten, Saik'uz, Takla Lake, Wet'suwet'en and Yekooche. From February 11–12, 2010, Carrier-Sekani Family Services hosted their community session at the Civic Centre in Prince George, British Columbia.

Following the session with Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society, it was decided that the Touchstones of Hope would be presented by community members, advisory committee members or staff members from the First Nations agencies or MCFD whenever possible. A community member spoke about Culture, Language and Holistic Approach. The Executive Director of CSFS spoke to Self Determination and another staff member of CSFS gave a presentation on Structural Interventions. Lastly, a staff person from MCFD illustrated Non Discrimination through Jordan's Principle. Speakers interpreted the Touchstones guiding principles by using personal and professional examples from their lives. By inviting community members to deliver presentations, the grassroots aspect of the community sessions was honoured.

Throughout the two day session, there were approximately 150 community members and staff from both CSFS and MCFD who attended. Small groups were co-facilitated by youth, Elders, Touchstones trainers and Touchstones coordinators. Facilitators guided participants through the PATH activity to create their own vision for healthy children in their respective communities and in the region.

The evaluations provided the following insight into participants' perceptions of the process:

“The PATH process is excellent and focusing on the DREAM will help us arrive at a better future for children, youth, families and communities. Thank you for a wonderful opportunity and for bringing Touchstones to our work!”

“I enjoyed the key speakers and found what they had to say very honest, relevant and insightful!”

“Great opportunity to reflect and problem solve and also what things could and should look like in the future”

3. Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society

From April 7–8, 2010, approximately 100 participants gathered in Terrace, British Columbia for the Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCSS) Touchstones community session. NIFCSS serves Hartley Bay, Iskut, Kitamaat, Kitkatla, Kitselas, Kitsumkalum, Lax-kw'alaams, Metlakatla and Tahltan.

The two-day session explored the principles of the Touchstones of Hope through large group presentations on the Touchstones and small group discussion using PATH. After attending the Provincial session in Victoria, the advisory committee suggested the inclusion of a “grounder”¹⁰ in every group as a support person for the facilitators.

Each day opened and closed with a prayer from an Elder. The Touchstones coordinator from the Caring Society introduced the Touchstones of Hope and members from the advisory committee gave an overview of the northern BC Touchstones and the research. Throughout the two days, presenters spoke from their experiences and knowledge to give their interpretations of the Touchstones. The MCFD staff member who used Jordan’s Principle for Non Discrimination at the session with Carrier Sekani presented again at this session. An Elder shared personal stories to illustrate the Self-Determination Touchstone. There were also two panel presentations. First, NIFCSS staff spoke about the initiatives and programs at the agency. Second, two Elders shared their stories of their experiences at residential schools.

The following feedback was taken from participant evaluations from the session:

“I recommend that Touchstones be implemented and not just another thought or idea that is heard and not used. I feel that WHEN implemented that we allow people to be heard and to feel empowered. Pride and compassion need to be restored and Touchstones is the stepping stone to achieving these goals.”

“I felt that there was a good group of attendees from all ages, races and walks to help redefine Child Welfare services for and with First Nations.”

“This is a good idea; next problem would be making it a reality if you could do this... this would change the world for First Nations people everywhere. The next problem would be to find the right people to do it properly, but you have good staff. I just hope that they can train the next generation to take over.”

“This session participants were very diverse, discussions were very rich. Many communities were represented; community input was great, community ownership!”

“Enjoyed the small group discussions as it offered a comfortable setting to speak freely. Time frame is short [and] there is so much to share. However, the encouragement to continue to network beyond the conference is awesome.”

“This conversation should have taken place years ago. I enjoyed the process.”

“This is my second touchstones event. I feel more comfortable in participating and sharing my stories and experiences. We need to come together in unity to make the necessary changes for keeping our children safe AT HOME. Great work so far. Thank you to the Touchstones coordinators, managers for making this possible. THE TIME IS RIGHT!”

“The gathering was so unique, I really enjoyed this, and hope there will be more of this. I really am thrilled that we’ve all come a long way in voicing our opinions on what’s

¹⁰ A support person for facilitators.

best for our children. We are all working and striving for the BEST INTEREST OR OUR CHILDREN. Thank you come again God bless you.”

“This is research – It can inform both family and practice through narrative analyses. These are common themes and stories.”

4. Nisga’a Child & Family Services

October 6–7, 2010 was the fourth community session in the northern BC Touchstones movement with Nisga’a Child and Family Services in Terrace, British Columbia. The Nisga’a Child & Family Services works with communities of the Nisga’a Lisims Government comprised of Gingolx (Kincolith), Gitlakdamx, Lakalzap and Gitwinksihlkw. At the session, there were approximately 80 participants from Nisga’a Child and Family Services, Nisga’a citizens and MCFD staff. Three Elders and a community member fostered learning about Culture, Language and Holistic Approach. Staff from MCFD presented Non Discrimination and Structural Interventions. Having a grounder in every group was successful at the NIFCSS gathering so this technique was utilized for the Nisga’a session.

As a movement with fluidity, there were unexpected guest speakers at this session. A group of Elders and other community members from the Lax Kw’alaams Nation formed a group called the Grandmother’s group. They serve as a network of traditional knowledge holders and teachers for the community of Lax Kw’alaams and surroundings. They briefly attended the session to provide support and to share their story of how they came into being and ways in which they are involved in their communities. At the end of the session, the small groups reported back to the large group regarding their visions and plans for Nisga’a children and families. One of the next steps, recommended by several groups, was the formation of a grandmother’s group for the Nisga’a territory.

There were no evaluations for this event due to an administrative error.

5. Haida Child & Family Services Society

Haida Child & Family Services Society is located on Haida Gwaii, serving the Old Masset Village Council and the Skidegate Band. From November 2–3, 2010, Haida Child & Family Services held a Touchstones community session in Old Massett, British Columbia. There were approximately 40 participants: community members, staff from Haida Child and Family Services and MCFD staff. There were also two Native American guests from the United States interested in the Touchstones of Hope process.

The Culture, Language and Holistic Approach Touchstones presentation was given by an agency staff member who spoke to the importance of knowing family and cultural background. Ministry staff and the Touchstones coordinators presented the remaining Touchstones. Participants joined in small group discussion to complete their PATH for their vision of child safety in Haida territory. Reports to the large group were done in a large circle since the number of participants was fewer than in previous sessions. Each group presented parts of their PATH and next steps

that came out of their discussions. The ending circle encouraged open sharing. The following are quotes from participants regarding this session:

“What an experience! What an honour to be able to witness through the years the changes and what an honour to be here to witness this huge milestone not only in Child Welfare but for the healing of people and community!”

“Excellent to be in my home territory with my people to discuss such an important topic!”

“Invite more of the non-aboriginal agencies who are working with Aboriginal clients of all ages and who CARE!!”

“Follow-up meetings would be great to evaluate what actions we have taken to this process.”

G. Participatory Action Research (PAR)

One of the important aspects of the Touchstones initiative in northern BC is the participatory research to evaluate the overall impact of the Touchstones movement. Research regarding Aboriginal peoples has historically taken an ethnographical approach and been conducted “about” peoples rather than “with” them. For this reason, Dr. Michael Saini, a professor from the University of Toronto, adapted a research methodology in line with the philosophy of the touchstones reconciliation process to utilize at the northern BC Touchstones of Hope community sessions. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach that enables Aboriginal communities to conduct their own culturally relevant research and gives them ownership of the data collected. At the community sessions, PAR engaged all individuals including participants, facilitators and speakers. Dr. Saini consulted with the advisory committee and the following roles were assigned to the participants, facilitators, advisory committee members and Touchstones coordinators:

Participants

- Attend the two-day community session
- Participate in discussions with the PATH process
- Provide feedback about the community session

Facilitators

- Explain the research to participants
- Tape record small group session
- Submit notes about their own personal experience at the session (i.e. thoughts, feelings, impressions from their group)
- Type and send information from the PATH sheets

Touchstones advisory committee

- Obtain permission from communities to record sessions
- Provide feedback

- Assist Touchstones coordinators in planning
- Create action plan to achieve Next Steps

Touchstones coordinators¹¹

- Organize sessions with advisory committee
- Engage in activities and provide guidance to advisory committee
- Create final report to give back to the communities

Sessions were recorded with the permission of all communities and agencies to identify central themes. Recordings were inputted into a data analysis program and grouped into different categories.¹² In July of 2010, Dr. Saini, the Touchstones coordinators and members of the advisory committee conducted follow up visits with participants from three of the community sessions.¹³ There were several reasons for the visits. First, Dr. Saini shared results of the collected data. Second, he was able to obtain feedback from individuals who attended the community sessions. Third, he answered questions regarding the research, the findings and the common themes arising from the sessions. The report will be completed by the Caring Society and Dr. Saini in 2012. Once approved by the advisory committee, it will be given to the communities and agencies that participated in the sessions and posted on the northern BC Touchstones website. Since the information belongs to the communities, they decide on other ways to disseminate the report of central themes from their Touchstones sessions.

¹¹ The Touchstones coordinators also shared the role of the facilitators

¹² The next phases of the northern British Columbia Touchstones include: a report outlining central themes and a participatory process evaluation measuring short and long term outcomes for children, families and agencies.

¹³ The agencies were Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services, Carrier-Sekani Family Services and Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society.

SECTION IV:

Moving Forward, Next Steps

A. Community Session Themes

This section will provide a general overview of the emergent themes from PATH discussions that took place at the five community sessions. Before delving into themes, there are two important aspects to note. First, small group PATH discussions were facilitated using two different methods. For the community sessions with Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society and Carrier Sekani Child and Family Services, each breakout session was devoted to a specific Touchstone. Questions pertaining to that Touchstone guided discussion through the PATH steps. At the community sessions with Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, Nisga'a Child and Family Services, and Haida Child and Family Services Society, there was a modified approach. Each break out session focused on a step in the PATH rather than looking at the Touchstones separately. Participants could contribute thoughts on any aspects of the touchstones. Looking at the Touchstones as a whole allowed the conversations between participants to flow more naturally.

Second, the framing statement to guide the PATH started as “Aboriginal children in northern British Columbia would be safe and living in dignity and respect if...” As the sessions progressed, many of the small groups changed their statement or put forth suggestions. One observation was that Aboriginal children are already safe and living in dignity and respect however other participants mentioned that it could not be stated that all children are living safely. Thus the word “all” was added at the beginning of the sentence. Another suggestion included changing the wording to be proactive and positive. By the end of the last session, the statement read “All Aboriginal children in northern British Columbia will be safe and living and dignity and respect when...” Despite the two adjustments to the approach, common themes emerged from the sessions.

Themes reflected all of the touchstones guiding principles: Culture and Language, Self Determination, Structural Interventions, Non Discrimination and Holistic Approach. As they were interpreted within the unique worldviews of the communities, organizations and individuals attending the sessions, the specific PATHs and community action plans varied. Despite the demographic and cultural differences, the themes across the five community sessions intersected.

The most prominent theme across the sessions was attention to the overall well being of children and families. Participants noted that all Aboriginal children and youth should have:

- Self-respect and self-esteem
- Respect for and from others
- Love
- Empowerment

In addition, leaders signaled the importance of positive role models as influences in the lives of their children and youth, including Elders, family members, extended family and social workers.

PATH sessions often centered on family and cohesion of family units. There was no compromise of child safety but rather the position of communities differed from current child welfare practice in how to best keep children safe. Communities generally opposed child removals except in the most extreme circumstances as they stressed the importance of a child growing up with family as fundamental to their proper development and well being. If parents are unable to safely care for their children, extended family or other members in the community should be permitted to be temporary guardians until the parents are healthy. Leaders in the sessions indicated that when children and youth are placed with families outside of the communities, they are often gone for prolonged periods of time and they lose familial and cultural ties.

The importance of culture in the process of reconciliation was apparent across all of the community sessions. Consistent with the holistic approach touchstone, participants specified that culture could not be defined as a ceremony or a tradition but rather as a way of life. In line with culture, leaders in the groups underlined the importance of Aboriginal languages since language is the essence of Aboriginal culture. They also pointed out that learning one's language permits the continuity of culture which has been significantly lost since the time of colonial contact. Participants stated that there needed to be more funding for resources aimed at creating more speakers of the distinct Aboriginal dialects. Overall it was felt that all children and youth should know where they come from, who their family is and their culture and language.

Elders were an integral part of every Touchstones gathering. They acted as support for participants at the gatherings and were often invited to share stories or teachings for plenary presentations. Their stories reinforced the Touchstones principles, especially culture and language. Many of the Elders attended residential school and they explained how their experiences resulted in significant intergenerational impacts evident in communities today.

The community visioning sessions enabled participants to share the challenges prohibiting the success of children and youth in their communities. The results reinforce studies regarding the underlying issues of the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system. The Wen:de report, for example, identifies neglect as the biggest factor driving First Nations children into care and that neglect is often a result of poverty, poor housing and caregiver substance misuse (FNCFCS, 2005). Each of these structural challenges was present in the community sessions. To that effect, equitable and culturally based funding for services for First Nations children, youth and families was a recurrent theme in the sessions. In fact, funding or money appeared consistently in the *Enroll* section of PATH (who or what is needed to achieve the Dream). Participants indicated the lack of funding or poorly structured funding made it difficult to meet community needs and was a challenge in all programs and services for First Nations children in all social services.

One of the areas lacking funding is Aboriginal education. Participants discussed the situation of education and how a lot of Aboriginal children and youth are not receiving equitable education services as other Canadian children. There were different scopes of learning mentioned, ranging from

cultural teachings to standardized education. Participants envisioned higher literacy and graduation rates and more culturally relevant programs and curriculum for Aboriginal children in the north.

Inequitable funding in healthcare was also a concern. There were many discussions around health and access to services for physical, spiritual, emotional and mental health. First and foremost, meeting basic human needs of children and families was identified as paramount. Leaders identified inadequacy of balanced and healthy lifestyles comprised of physical activity, affordable healthier foods, traditional foods, medical supplies, services and adequate clothing. Concerning mental health, participants signaled the lack of culturally appropriate programs specializing in addiction and treatment centers for caregivers and children and youth who were misusing substances as a result of the cycle of addiction. Health and equal access to health services was a dominant theme in the gatherings since many of the communities are remote and cannot access the services that other Canadians receive. These programs are especially important as many First Nations communities have high suicide rates due to a lack of programs available to children and youth in remote areas, such as sports or recreation. In regard to housing, participants emphasized the need for increased housing since a vast number of homes are overcrowded. They also flagged a need for safe homes that are mold-free and have proper sanitation and clean water.

This report merely touches upon emerging themes from the northern BC touchstones community sessions and the above mentioned themes are by no means an exhaustive list of ideas from the leaders at the sessions. A full report of findings based on Dr. Michael Saini's research methodology will be released in 2012.

B. Observations – Touchstones Sessions

The Touchstones of Hope process is not a series of events but a social movement for change and reconciliation in child welfare for Aboriginal children and their families. As such, openness and flexibility are required for success of the movement. As previously stated, communities represented by a First Nation child and family service agency and who were ready for a new approach to child welfare were the most receptive to the Touchstones of Hope. In addition, political stability between communities and the agencies is important. In many cases, previous difficulties have resulted in strained relationships between child welfare providers and communities. With the Touchstones process, all parties involved are ready to relate to one another by engaging in dialogue and relationship building to find the best solutions for children and youth.

With regards to funding this type of initiative, experience has proven that there needs to be flexibility, especially in regard to timelines. Building relationships, the foundation of reconciliation, is critical to success and requires a flexible process and timelines. Touchstones gatherings provide the physical and mental space bringing individuals together but it is difficult to predict whether or not collaboration will occur. Furthermore, unexpected events transpire in communities and it is not always an ideal time to host a reconciliation gathering. For example, many communities experience higher rates of tragedies such as suicides. Thus funding should allow for fluidity of a movement toward change.

The facilitation team was another central aspect of the Touchstones gatherings. These individuals served as guides for participants and became familiar faces behind the northern BC Touchstones. From the train-the-trainer sessions in Prince George, there were seven trainers who facilitated the Touchstones community sessions. An interesting development in this movement was the involvement of participants. Several of those who attended numerous gatherings became committed to the Touchstones. In turn, it was a natural progression for these individuals to be grounders, presenters or facilitators at subsequent sessions.

Interestingly, many of the decisions brought to the advisory committee resulted from discussions between facilitators. The facilitation team, including the grounders, would meet to debrief after each Touchstones session. Additional conversations and ideas materialized during time spent outside of the sessions, for example having meals or traveling together. This underlines the importance of the Touchstones as a movement and not an event. Relationship building within the Touchstones team created a strong rapport and thus an effective support network.

C. Action Plans

Key to the ongoing success of the Touchstones movement in the north has been the creation of an action plan addressing the Next Steps that came out of the PATH activities at each community session. After each agency hosted their community session, the Touchstones coordinator from the north assembled the PATH notes from each break out group into one document. From there, the hosting agency, individuals at the Touchstones session and others wanting to be engaged with next steps met to move the community plans forward.

The full day meetings were hosted by the delegated agency. The communities and First Nations child and family service agency made decisions regarding next steps. They were given the final PATH document in order to create an action plan that reflected the needs of the communities and agencies of the area. The groups chose one or more initiatives. Ministry staff also attended the follow up meetings as part of the planning team and to provide support for the plan.

Every Touchstones of Hope session was unique, as were the plans to move toward the *Dream*. The plans represented the needs and wants of the local First Nation community. Action plans have included the following:

- Development of a program to educate Ministry social workers to the culture of the communities they serve.
- Financial support for a linguist to research traditional languages of the area and create a plan to make learning the language available to children and adult community members.
- Ongoing meetings between agency and Ministry social workers to create improved coordinated services for families.
- The creation of child welfare education days to teach the communities about child welfare.

Action plans are most effective when there are completion dates for each of the tasks. It is important that progression toward goals is ongoing and can be reviewed at the next meeting. In northern BC, ongoing action plan meetings were scheduled for three month intervals. Meetings also served as a space to further develop relationships between the Ministry and community members who attended.

The combination of achieving the action plan goals while developing relationships creates what the northern BC Touchstones team refers to as “reconciling behaviours.” Over time, these reconciling behaviours lead to an ongoing process of “making it right” which embodies the spirit of reconciliation.

D. Touchstones of Hope Tool Kit

The success of the northern BC Touchstones reconciliation process inspired the creation of a Touchstones of Hope Tool Kit. In March of 2011, the Caring Society completed a comprehensive Tool Kit which guides individuals through a reconciliation process in order to realize visions for healthy Aboriginal children, youth and families. The Touchstones of Hope Tool Kit is divided into four main components: *Starting a Reconciliation Journey*, *Traveling the River*, *Grassroots Reconciliation* and *Learnings*. Each section introduces and explains the components needed to move forth with the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement.

The Caring Society firmly believes that communities are in the best position to decide what is best for their children and communities. *Starting a Reconciliation Journey* explains how to foster a grassroots approach through a Touchstones information session. This session provides space for leaders to learn about the Touchstones and to decide whether or not the process would be a fit for their community or organization. *Traveling the River* outlines the steps that will help diffuse information about the movement and the preparations needed to train individuals in facilitating Touchstones community sessions. Once measures have been taken to ensure the preparation work has been done, community sessions are hosted where trained Touchstones facilitators work with leaders to create community specific visions and next steps in order to support healthy children and families. The process of planning and delivering these sessions is described in the section *Grassroots Reconciliation*. The *Learnings* component provides evaluation and research models that engage communities. Documenting research not only allows participants to draw out common themes, but is also fundamental in informing and shaping policy and practice. For further information, visit www.fnccaringociety.com.

These documents are not designed for use by paid consultants or for profit businesses. The Touchstones of Hope Movement was created by the Caring Society, a national non-profit, in collaboration with Indigenous communities and was designed to be delivered at low cost. The Caring Society holds copyright over the materials and is explicit that paid consultants or businesses will not be granted permission to use the materials.

Conclusion

The Touchstones of Hope movement has diffused to other parts of British Columbia and around the world. Subsequently, other regions are exploring the possibility of incorporating the Touchstones of Hope into their work with First Nations children, youth and families. Interior BC hosted a regional session in June of 2011 (see www.northernbctouchstones.ca).

The agencies in the northern BC Touchstones movement have continued the work outlined in their action plans. Since the first community session in 2009, the agencies have reported fewer removals of First Nations children from their homes. Furthermore, meaningful discussion and collaboration opportunities between agencies, communities and MCFD have resulted in better outcomes for the children and communities.

The next phase of the research and evaluation aspects of this initiative includes two key components: data analysis and participatory evaluation. The compiled data from the community sessions will be put into a final report and given to the agencies, communities and MCFD. They will have complete research findings which they can use to inform others in the communities and in the agencies of the work. The evaluation process will continue with a participatory process for all of those involved in the community sessions. It will measure short and long term outcomes for children, youth, families and agencies. The evaluation will serve to inform others about the Touchstones process and inform policy makers of community needs when creating programs or policies.

Native American and Alaskan Native peoples are currently implementing the Touchstones of Hope movement using a different process in the United States and Indigenous peoples in Taiwan have invited Caring Society staff to share the Touchstones work so they can use it as a basis to develop child and family services in their country.

As seen in the northern BC Touchstones of Hope movement, reconciliation is not an event. Rather, reconciliation is a systemic long term movement which is carried forth through gatherings and follow up, moments between individuals, and most importantly, building and strengthening relationships.

Resources

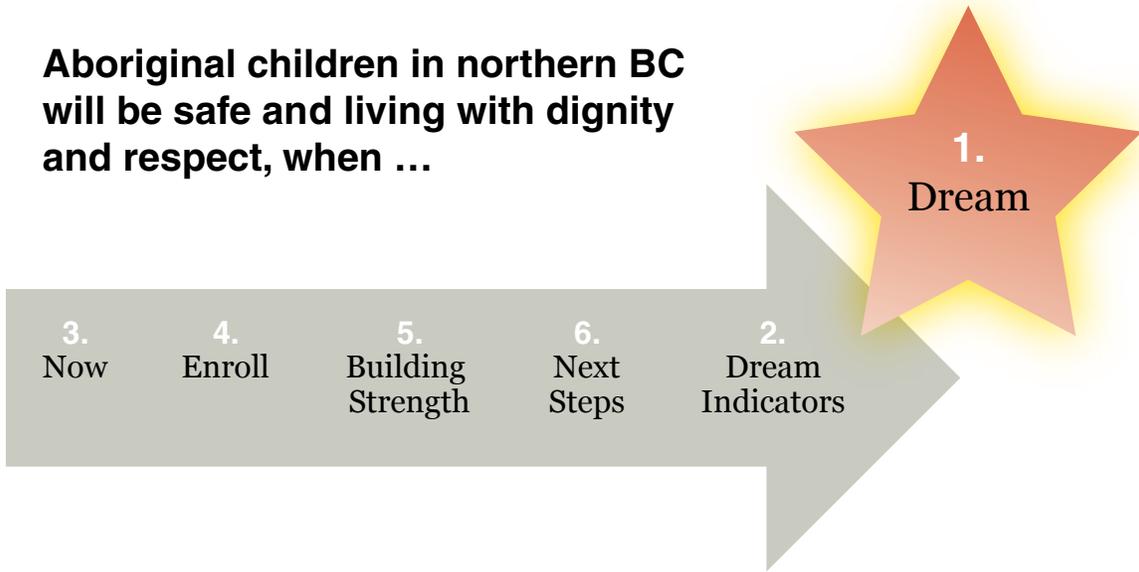
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APPENDIX A:

PATH Diagram

**Aboriginal children in northern BC
will be safe and living with dignity
and respect, when ...**



APPENDIX B:

Touchstones of Hope Scorecard Evaluation

Please complete the following evaluation form and return to the registration desk.

1. I learned something new about the perceptions of the history of child welfare and Aboriginal peoples that help me to better understand how I can support Aboriginal children and families.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

2. I have engaged in at least two conversation with other participants during the event (outside of the small group discussions) about the history and the way it shapes current practice with Aboriginal children, young people and families.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

3. Exploring the worldviews, values and beliefs that underlie the foundation of child welfare helped me to better understand what changes need to be made to better support the values and beliefs of Aboriginal children, young people and families in the child welfare system.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

4. I can describe what reconciliation in child welfare means and why it is important to the safety and well being of Aboriginal children, young people and families the child welfare system serves.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

5. The touchstones, if implemented, have the potential to create positive change in child welfare that would result in substantial benefits for all children in the child welfare system.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

6. I have built new relationships with other participants or event organizers to a degree where I would be comfortable contacting them post conference to continue the conversation about the touchstones and how to translate them into child welfare research, policy and practice.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

.....
7. I have identified at least two actions that I personally am willing to undertake to advance the movement to reshape child welfare in a way that better supports Aboriginal children, young people and families.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

.....
8. This is a new type of event where the values and beliefs of child welfare itself have been the focus instead of research, policy and practice. I can see the process and outcomes of this approach having benefit for non Aboriginal children, young people and families in the child welfare system as well.

1 (strongly agree) 2 (agree) 3 (do not agree) 4 (strongly disagree)

.....
9. We would warmly welcome any comments you wish to share about the gathering, your experience, or recommendations for future action.

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Thank you for your feedback!